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SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Vol. 2

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1959

New Long Complete Stories

Short Novels :

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The stolen alien spaceship was priceless, but the aliens had no intention of letting Rick Scott get away with it. Where hide it? (A sequel to "Shadow Of The Sword")

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Out of penal servitude into freedom—of a kind—Burke Halwell led his motley crew, to build a new world for their children.

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Cover painting illustrating "Children Of The Stars"

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Australian author Wynne Whiteford's exciting story "Shadow Of The Sword" which appeared in No. 6 obviously demanded a sequel, and here it is, specially written for SFA.

DISTANT DRUM

by WYNNE WHITEFORD

Illustrated by LEWIS

Chapter 1

Outside the airlock Scott stood motionless for a few seconds, looking out across the immense, chilling loneliness.

"Suit holding pressure?" queried the metallic voice in his helmet radio.

"Everything O.K."

With slow, controlled strides he began to walk. The only sounds were the rustle of his airtight suit, the half-heard crunch of his insulated boots on the snow that was not true snow, but frozen ammonia crystals. Over the western rim of the plain the sun was a ball of incandescent steel, shrunken to little more than a brilliant star by the two billion miles of distance, and to its right Neptune's great crescent thrust a scimitar of corroded bronze above the fang-like peaks.

He reached the long metal building, following its sloping wall until he came to the open doorway, with the lines of

footprints radiating from it. No—he had not let his imagination play a trick on him. They were there, just as he had first seen them. They were real.

He stooped, the tough fabric of his suit crumpling noisily in the lifeless stillness. He looked closely at one of the alien footprints, comparing the size and depth of the impression of the three widely splayed toes with the mark of his own foot alongside it. The creature that had made it must have been twice his weight, and it had walked with much longer strides. As he tried to visualize it he felt sweat trickling down his forehead and back. He grunted, then started as Bren's voice came again through the helmet-radio.

"Find anything new?"

"Not here. I'm going over to where the other ship was standing."

His long shadow strode before him across the ammonia-snow. He reached the blast-marks where the ship had landed, and here again he found many three-toed footprints. He had the nagging feeling that something was wrong. When he realized what it was his pulse thudded heavily in his ears. He pressed the call-button of his radio.

"Bren!"

"What is it?"

"Something here that doesn't add up. No take-off blast! Footprints everywhere, and the fin-marks where the ship rested. The blast would have wiped those clean."

"Then what happened?"

"Don't know. Looks as if the ship was simply—*lifted*."

For some seconds the radio was silent. "What are you going to do?"

He began to walk back. "Best thing to do is get out of here—fast."

He thought bleakly of the men who had vanished with the ships. Harlow, Sanin—where were they now?

As he walked he looked uneasily around the hard emptiness of the plain, at the far-off snarling pinnacles. The Milky Way was a bright arch across Triton's sky even in the wan daylight. He felt oddly naked and vulnerable under that ominous sky, and he was glad when the ceiling of the airlock shut it out.

The scavenging-blast whistled and roared about him to drive away the clinging traces of methane from the outside atmosphere, and then the air from within the ship came hissing

into the lock. Bren Galt's voice came through his radio : "Pressure equalizing in thirty seconds."

"Good." He thought suddenly of his first violent distaste at the idea of making a voyage with a woman—especially with a woman who had grown up in the fantastic gravitational field of the Jupiter Base—and he smiled slightly as he scanned through his gradual acceptance of her swift, clear-headed efficiency. At first, the idea had been hard to take. Now, his feelings were mixed.

As far as her capability was concerned, he wouldn't have changed her for any co-pilot he had ever worked with. Yet there was some tense, emotional factor in her temperament that made her unpredictable.

Her face was pale as she helped him strip off the space-suit in the control room. "This is something bigger than we can handle, isn't it?"

"It might be the biggest thing anyone has had to handle," he admitted. He waved his hand upward. "Analytically, I've always believed that there must be intelligent life elsewhere in the Universe. But I realize now that I've never really *felt* it. It's one thing to speculate on non-human intelligence somewhere in the Galaxy, but a different thing altogether when you see actual footprints of things you didn't dream could exist. Things with a technology that could pick up a space-ship as if it were a pebble."

With an irritable movement of her hand she brushed a lock of red-gold hair back from her forehead. "Our ship—before we had a chance to get it home. That could wreck the whole of the Jupiter project. Do you realize that?"

"Listen!" He couldn't stop the strain showing in his voice. "Let's get all this in focus. Right? The Federation *had* to use your ship to get out here, because nothing else had sufficient acceleration. Then, when we found this alien ship abandoned, the most important thing was to get it to Earth. The technology that's gone into this ship could put Earth forward thousands of years. The gravity-screens alone—they could revolutionize space-flight."

"I know. That's what I'm thinking of. Look!" She moved quickly in front of him, standing with her feet slightly apart, her green leatheroid tunic stretched tightly over the contours of her compactly muscular body. "Three generations. For three generations we've been building up a physique that can stand up to two-and-a-half times Earth gravity. Now

these gravity-screens could make it all a wasted effort. What would become of *us* ?”

“Are you suggesting I don’t take this ship to Earth, just to preserve the way of life of a few dozen people on Jupiter ?”

“Well—” She looked away, frowning. “Suppose we wait—”

“Wait ! Listen, we go back right now ! Before these things come looking for us. Sooner or later, they’re going to find Earth, and by that time we’re going to need our own fleet of ships like this.”

He walked across to the improvised chart-table. Whatever the alien owners of the ship had used to navigate, they had not needed a table. He began laying out his course on the charts, one in the plane of the ecliptic, the other in a plane at right angles to it. Bren moved to the far side of the table, watching him.

“You never listen to me, once you’ve made up your mind—do you ?”

He looked up at her. “In this case, there’s only one thing to do. I’m thinking of the Human Race as a whole.” He held out his hand. “Would you pass me that slip-stick ?”

She handed him the slide-rule without speaking. He finished his calculations, and she checked the figures, the red wings of hair swinging forward about her ears as she bent over the chart. When she was satisfied she merely nodded.

He switched on the main power-source, and activated the internal gravity-screen with their automatic compensators which balanced inertia-effects. He sat at the controls, while she took the seat beside him.

The takeoff in this ship still seemed unreal to him—none of the screaming roar of rockets, nothing of the crushing inertia that blurred, reddened, blacked-out his vision and forced the air from his lungs. Only an abrupt falling-away of the outside landscape in the vision screens, and the rapid darkening of the sky, the sinking of the horizon until Triton was no longer a landscape but a mottled globe dropping into the black abyss beneath them.

Using the superimposed scales on the vision-screens, he checked his bearings on the far-off Sun, burning against the darkness like the point of an electric arc and on the golden speck that was Saturn away at an angle of sixty-odd degrees. The compensating mechanism of the internal fields of the

ship was so close to perfection that he could feel only the barest suggestion of movement as he set the drive to full acceleration, which would bring them to a tenth of the speed of light by the mid-point of the journey.

He watched the large transparent globe which was the alien version of a three-dimensional radar-scope. Three points of light, representing Neptune, Triton and Nereid, moved steadily back from the central violet spark which indicated the position of the ship. As they crept slowly back, their movement lessened; the radial measurement of the sphere was calibrated on some kind of logarithmic scale, the base of which Scott hadn't yet figured out.

"We should make Earth in about twenty-five hours," he said.

Bren didn't answer. Her attention seemed to be rivetted on the transparent globe. Scott went over to the chart-table.

"Rick!" The urgency in her voice made him turn. She had moved quickly across to the globe, and as he joined her she pointed to a tiny spot of light on the rear surface of it. "*What's that?*"

"Something almost dead astern, almost at extreme range. Strange that I didn't notice it before."

"It wasn't there before. It wasn't there a minute ago."

They stood motionless, watching the fleck of light. Almost imperceptibly, it moved within the globe, sinking deeper within the rear surface.

"Could it be a defect in the instrument?" asked Bren. "After all, they're not perfect. Remember the generator that was broken?"

Scott shook his head. "Their electronic stuff is good—so good I'd trust it better than our own. If the globe shows something, there's something there, making an approach-run on Triton from somewhere further out in Space."

"What can we do?"

"Keep on going—at full acceleration."

Despite their continuous acceleration, the point of light remained in the radar-globe, moving gradually deeper within it with the change of diffraction-pattern projected from the globe's base. It became evident that the pursuing object was by-passing Triton, following exactly on their own course. Scott took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, considered his dwindling supply for a few seconds, then thoughtfully lit

one. He walked up and down the control-room a few times, staring at the green metal floor. Then he looked at Bren.

"You realize this puts us in a very awkward spot?"

She nodded, her eyes strangely dark.

"This thing—" he gestured to the rear of the ship, "could overhaul us before we reach Earth's orbit. We have no idea what weapons it might be carrying, or what their range might be. If it overtakes us in space, that could easily be the end of the line for us."

"Could we land on one of the asteroids?"

"We could ; but would that help?" Scott continued his pacing, looking from time to time at the globe. The point of light was now visibly closer in to the indicator marking the position of their own ship. He switched on the rear vision screen, but at full magnification it showed nothing but stars, a scattering of diamond-dust across black velvet.

In the forward screen, the Sun was still a distant spark of blue-white fire, hovering on the green wings of the corona. The turquoise speck of the Earth lay close to one side of it, and further out the bright spot of Jupiter, flanked by the four pin-points of its larger moons.

Scott made rough calculations on a pad, looking from time to time at the radar sphere. He stood for a long time looking at the view astern, trying to see movement among the countless dust-motes of light, the momentary shutting-off of one of them by the moving body that was drawing relentlessly closer to the ship.

"There's one way out," he said at last.

"What's that?"

"We could land at the Jupiter Base."

"But—why?"

He gestured towards the controls, the instrument banks. "We don't know much about the life-form that operates these ships. All we have to go on are their footprints, the shape of their doorways, the way they design their controls. But these points give you some vague picture of the type of body. Do they add up to your idea of a life-form that could stand heavy gravity?"

She glanced down at the dynamic compactness of her own body. "No. Wouldn't say for certain, but I don't think so."

"I'm not sure, either—but I think it's our best chance. If we landed on the Red Area, I don't think they could follow us down into the gravity-field."

"What about their screens?"

"They're only effective within their ship. Let's hope they have nothing to handle gravity outside it."

"But wait—what about you? Could you stand two-and-a-half-G?"

"I'll have to learn to stand it for a while. Your first settlers stood it, and they came from Earth."

"They were very carefully selected, and trained for a long time in centrifuges. Even then, they must have had a bad time compared with us. You weigh—what?—one-eighty pounds on Earth? That means you'll be carrying four hundred and fifty pounds of body-weight on Jupiter—and you can't turn the gravity off, remember, the way you can a centrifuge."

"I'd sooner risk the gravity than let this thing catch up with us in space. After all, as long as we get this ship down on the surface, it'll be available to our people to study it."

"Even if it kills you?"

"Yes."

He turned to the chart-table, studied the course, and checked their bearings again, then swung the ship with the gyros to bring it more steeply down towards the ecliptic, intersecting the orbit of Jupiter instead of the Earth's. The flecks of light in the radar globe swung slightly with the change, including the pin-point showing the position of the ship overtaking them, but after an astonishingly short space of time it became evident that their pursuer had also changed direction slightly to keep heading straight towards them.

"That was quick," commented Scott. "*Too* quick. They've got the thing flying on automatic, chasing us like a torpedo homing on a target."

"How far are they behind?"

"A long way, yet. Put it this way—they're gaining fast enough to be uncomfortably close by the time we get to Jupiter. We may make it, we may not; but nothing is going to happen for at least twenty hours, except that all the time we're getting closer to Jupiter and they're getting closer to us. I suggest you get some sleep. I'm going to need some afterwards, and by then we should be far enough along to predict how the race is likely to finish."

She looked at the calculations he had jotted on the pad. "Well, there's nothing to be gained by both of us staying

awake all the time watching these spots of light. May as well be fresh if there *is* any—trouble.”

She moved towards the compartment to the rear of the control-room, then stopped, looking at him. Unexpectedly, she smiled, and then she spun round on her heel and was gone.

Left alone, he found the time dragging interminably. His attention was drawn to the radar sphere as though by a kind of magnetism. The vision-screens still showed nothing astern but the distant stars, but Jupiter still appeared very far ahead.

The faint light-spots of some of the trans-Jovian asteroids were beginning to move through the sphere of the radar-range, and after an hour or so a thin strand of light appeared almost directly ahead of the ship—a shower of meteoric matter. The pin-point of light astern was still drawing inexorably closer. Scott lit another cigarette, and found that his hands were shaking slightly.

When he was satisfied that their course was just missing the meteor swarm, he tiptoed into the rear compartment and stood for a few moments looking down at Bren. She was sleeping on the makeshift bunk, her face surprisingly young and calm, her hair a loose mass of coppery waves. He felt sudden anger directed at the original planners of the Jupiter Project.

Had Bren Galt been born and raised on Earth, she would have been tall, slim, willowy. Scott felt anger at the way her body showed the effects of her environment, with the thickness of immense muscular development, the right arm super-humanly powerful, the left one ending bluntly at the elbow where the heating-wires of a space-suit had once failed. The plastic arm lay beside the bunk, the fixed clutching attitude of its fingers and thumb strangely predatory. He touched her. Her eyes opened dreamily, then widened.

“Have they caught up with us?”

He shook his head. “We’re passing a meteor swarm. Don’t worry it you feel me alter course slightly.”

With one of those lightning movements of her hand she caught both his, squeezing them gently between her fingers. “We *will* make it, won’t we?”

He nodded, forcing a calm confidence into his voice. “We’ll make it.”

She smiled, and was almost instantly asleep. He went quietly back to the control-room, checked again the bearing of the pursuing spot of light on the globe, then altered course slightly.

He was past the meteor swarm now, and he angled his course so that the swarm would lie directly between him and his pursuer. If the thing was homing on his ship automatically, like an unthinking torpedo, he might lead it right through the swarm. For a time, it seemed that his guess was right. Then, very slowly, the point of light diverged from the dead-astern position, swinging to one side to clear the swarm.

He had timed his passing of the meteors, and he noted carefully the time it took the pursuing ship to reach them. Four hours and forty minutes. So they were 280 minutes behind him at this point, but the distance he covered in an hour they covered in something less than fifty minutes—maybe forty-five.

Two hours later he passed an isolated fleck of light indicating some stray lump of rock away off in space, as far from his course as the Moon from Earth. He again timed the passing of the ship behind, but the distance was too great for accuracy. Still, his lead was now little more than three and a half hours.

It was going to be an uncomfortably close race. He was still figuring on the scratch-pad when Bren walked into the control-room, holding two bulbs of coffee in her hand. He took one, and they drank in silence while she looked at his calculations.

"Time for you to get some sleep," she said.

He pointed to the sphere. "If the light-spot gets to the inner shell of the sphere, call me."

"All right," she agreed.

As he lay down in the half-dark of the room behind the control-room he was uncomfortably aware of the inaccuracy of his knowledge of the ship's instruments, with their calibrations in unknown units in a set of mathematical symbols he still only partly understood.

He closed his eyes. Through his mind flowed a rapid succession of pictures. Pictures of the alien buildings on Triton, of the three-toed footprints in the ammonia-snow, of the giant doorways, the grotesque controls in the abandoned ship. What sort of body would use artifacts like those? And what sort of mind would operate such a body?

He tried to reconstruct the creatures mentally from his meagre data. The image of some gigantic birdlike thing floated before him for a moment, something like the extinct New Zealand moa, but he rejected it when he thought of the controls of the ship. His next experimental picture was a

being like a more evolved form of dinosaur—the kind of life-form that might have been the end-product of some alien evolution that had progressed along the lines of the Cretaceous Age reptiles of Earth, but for millions upon millions of years further, perhaps further than Man himself had come.

He tried to reconstruct their mentality, linking an intellectual brilliance maybe superior to Man's with the ruthless savagery of the Chalk Age carnivores, and for a time he felt a naked coldness. There was a concept there he didn't want to look at. Surely intelligence would modify the savagery. Look at Mankind . . .

Well, then *look* at Mankind.

A long look.

A *hard* look . . .

At last Scott fell asleep . . .

He awoke with the sensation that the floor was moving up beneath him like an elevator.

Chapter II

He rolled over, finding an unexpected difficulty in moving. It was some moments before he realized what had happened. The force of the ship's internal gravity-field had increased.

With considerable effort he sat up, leaning his shoulders against the wall. He heard Bren's footsteps coming from the direction of the control-room, quicker and heavier than normal, as though she were carrying a heavy load, although when she came into view he saw that she was carrying nothing. She stood alongside him.

"I thought we'd better get used to Jupiter's gravity in stages before we set down," she said. "I've stepped the field up to one and threequarter-G."

"Good idea," he said, trying to sound as if he meant it. His arm felt unexpectedly heavy as he lifted it to look at his watch, but when he saw the time he looked up at her sharply. "How close are they behind us?"

"It looks to me as if we'll just make it. We're nearly there—and so are they."

"Why didn't you wake me?"

"You needed the sleep. And what could you do, except watch spots of light getting closer to each other in the sphere? They've been slowly driving me crazy for hours."

He began to rise, slipping back at the first attempt through forgetting the gravity increase had brought his weight from 180 pounds to over 300. The girl stooped quickly and put her arm around his body, her hair brushing his face as she lifted him to his feet with a sudden straightening of her legs and back.

"Keep your back straight, and take short steps," she said. "Better lean on me until you get used to it."

"It's O.K. now. Let's have a look at the screens."

As they moved towards the control-room, he was amazed at the way in which the seventy-five percent increase in gravity limited him. Bren, used to a gravity field almost half as strong again, seemed unaffected. In fact, her movements seemed crisper and surer-footed than before. She walked at his left, her arm held tightly around his body so that she was taking part of his extra weight.

When he saw the radar-globe, Scott was shocked at the closeness of the white point of light to the violet spark showing the position of their own ship. In front of the central spark, though, other flecks of light showed a perfect little model of the system of Jupiter and its twelve satellites.

"I think we might make it," he said. "That is, if they haven't some kind of long-range weapon. I'll cut the deceleration for a while—it'll be better to kill our speed as late as possible."

The forward vision-screen showed the barred crescent of Jupiter, yellowish, with bands of darker reddish and bluish tints. In front of it was the smaller crescent of one of the main satellites — probably Callisto — sand-coloured and blotched with maroon, so close that he could see its apparent motion on the screen.

The internal gravity-screens compensated perfectly for the changes in deceleration as he cut their speed in successive steps. Here the pursuers were at a distinct advantage—they knew their ship, knew exactly how much deceleration their screens could nullify, so that they could slow up at the latest possible moment.

"Where's the Red Area?" he asked, looking at the bands slanting across the great crescent.

Bren looked at the screen, her brows knitted in a slight frown. "That notch in the crescent would be part of the South Tropical Disturbance. The Red Area would be round

the far side, towards the Sun. We'd have to make a quarter-orbit, unless we make an extra full circuit to line up our approach."

"We haven't time for that." Scott moved carefully across to the controls, sitting behind them. Bren stood beside him, looking at the rear vision screen, and suddenly she gave a sharp cry.

"Rick! I can see it!"

"Where?"

"There. See the string of stars running up from the Hyades—the part opposite Aldebaran? Watch the pattern, and pick the very faint one that's moving—"

"You're right. I've got it."

There was not much to see. Among the motionless dust and jewels on the black velvet darkness, one dust-mote slowly changed its position in relation to the ones near it. Was it imagination, or was it growing visibly larger? *Nearer?*

"Let's get the gravity back to Earth-normal," said Scott suddenly. "I want to be sure of my movements while we're setting down."

Bren altered the position of the small lever on the gravity control to the approximate 1-G mark they had painted on the scale of engraved alien numerals. Scott felt the oppressive weight lift from his body, and at the same time he was aware that a singing note had ceased in his ears. He stretched thankfully. Then, abruptly, he shouted, driving his fist into his palm.

"Of all the damn fools! Why didn't I think of it?"

"What?"

"The gravity screens!"

"What about them?"

"We've risked everything on the hunch that these things are light-gravity creatures. And we're wrong!"

"But they must be. From their build—"

"Are they? *Then why do the internal gravity-fields of this ship go up to 10 or 12-G?*"

For a long time she didn't say anything; the colour drained from her face and she looked tired. "You mean—we can't escape them by landing?"

"We'd lead them straight to your Base."

She looked silently at the striped crescent on the screen, running her hand up and down the dully gleaming plastic of

her left forearm as she did sometimes when thinking. When she turned back to Scott her expression had changed. "Maybe not. They'd still have to follow us through Jupiter's atmosphere."

He raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"Listen Rick, have you any idea what it's like down there? Masses of solidified light gases streaming round the planet in great bands, some as big as boulders, some the size of islands, of continents, all the way up to the things like the Red Area. The different bands travel at different speeds, and where some of the bands shear against others you get speed differences of 400 miles an hour. Can you picture the turbulence that sets up? It makes any Earth hurricane look like a breeze, and along some of the cleavage lines it goes on all the time."

"Do you know where to locate the lines where the bands shear against each other?"

"Of course."

"Then I'm going to land. Guide me down so that we enter the atmosphere near one of the lines of turbulence."

The flight down into Jupiter's atmosphere was the most chilling experience Scott had ever known. From a height of a thousand miles above the outer surface of the atmosphere, the vast distance of the horizon gave the effect of an infinite expanse of plain rather than the globe of a planet.

The atmosphere seemed to be a boiling mass of cloud, yellow-white beneath the ship, although away to the northward was a belt of dark slate-blue reaching away out of sight. Bren sat alongside him, tuning the radio to select the wave-band of the Jupiter Base. As yet they could hear no signal, despite the tremendous power of the station, for the speaker blared with a constant, crackling roar of static. Any radio communication was almost impossible here because of the inconceivable thunderstorms that raged forever along the friction-lanes between the planet's atmospheric belts.

Scott glanced at the radar-globe, and saw that the lower half of it was filled with a flicker of darting flashes of light.

"Look," he said. "If they can only use their radar to track us, we're safe. The thing's useless."

"Don't under-estimate them, Rick. I'm afraid they're rather bright boys."

He thought of the footprints, the doorways, his imagined mental picture of the aliens, and felt suddenly cold.

The darkness of space was abruptly lightened by an indigo veil that shut out all but the brighter stars. He eased the ship deeper into the vast atmosphere, until the Sun was a blaze of amber, levelling off above a layer of whitish clouds like ice-floes.

"Go through that cloud-layer," said Bren. "There's nothing solid for hundreds of miles down, yet."

His only choice was to trust her judgement completely. He dived the ship through layer after layer of cloud, through Titanic snowstorms of ammonia crystals that streamed eternally with a violence no Terrestrial storm had ever known.

He had no idea what had become of the pursuing ship. The sunlight down here was dimmed to a coppery twilight. Ahead, a weird light was reflected upward through the belts of gases from what appeared to be a solid landscape below. He dropped through another layer of blank, brilliant cloud, and found he was skimming over monstrous cliffs and chasms and ridges of white and copper-tinted rock.

Rock? There was no other word for it. On Earth, the elements of it would have been gases—mainly hydrogen. Here, a little above absolute zero, hydrogen was a hard, permanent solid.

"This is the place you call the Red Spot," said Bren. "A hundred-and-fifty million square miles of it. Add all the continents of Earth together, and this is still three times as big as all of them."

"Recognize where we are in relation to the Base?"

She laughed. "Recognize a spot in a hundred-and-fifty million square miles? Nobody knows all the Red Area. But keep on—I'll pick up a radio-beam eventually."

He kept on. On and on, over a thousand miles, five-thousand miles, ten-thousand miles of wild, impossible landscape, along gigantic valleys, over crevassed plateaux, between stabbing peaks eroded into fantastic shapes by the screaming gales that had never relented in their ferocious blast for a hundred million years.

"Rick! Bear to the left! I'm getting one of the beams."

He steered to the left, listening to the barely distinguishable intermittent note in the roaring, spitting radio. When the note changed, he veered right, following the continuous note of the landing-beam formed by the blending of the two intermittent signals.

They came out over a long, narrow valley walled by thousand foot cliffs of solid hydrogen. On top of one of the cliffs Scott saw the first man-made structure he had encountered in the whole terrifying landscape—a beacon or radar scanner mounted on a metal tripod mast.

Below, he made out a long metal platform jutting out from the right-hand cliff like an unfinished bridge. Near it were a few squat, domed buildings of bright metal, and where it met the cliff it seemed to enter a larger arched building partly embedded in the vertical face.

Under Bren's guidance, he took the ship carefully down over the bridge-like structure, nosing it towards the cliff, which sheered vertically above them in a thousand-foot wall. The sunlight was filtered to a reddish dusk by the tremendous depth of hydrogen above them.

A huge metal door slid open beneath the archway, and he eased the ship into an airlock perhaps two-hundred feet long. Bren had established verbal radio contact now with someone inside, and had identified herself. The great door closed, and after a time a green light showed at the far end of the lock. A second door slid open, and Scott moved the ship forward into a long, brightly-lit space with an arched, metallic roof, bringing it to rest on a floor that appeared to be made of some kind of cement. The second door also closed behind them.

"Is the air O.K. out there?" asked Scott.

"It's the air our people breathe all the time. Earth-normal pressure, content, temperature. But remember, Rick—it's two and a half-G outside."

"I'm not likely to forget that," he said.

After the air within the ship, the air of the Base was fresh as a sea breeze. Scott stood in the airlock, where the ship's controlled gravity-field still operated, looking out across the floor below.

A door opened in the metal wall, and a number of Jovians walked out towards the ship, all of them squat, broad men in differently coloured leatheroid tunics, moving with short, rapid steps, every movement tense and precise against the crushing gravity-field. On Earth, some of them might have weighed 200 pounds. Here, that meant 500 pounds. They kept rigidly erect, with the controlled movements of weight-lifters.

They wheeled an adjustable metal stairway against the ship. It had broad treads, with a very shallow rise between each step. Bren turned to Scott.

"Wait here until I get back," she told him. "There are some G-suits in the Base Stores that were used by the first settlers here. If you wear one of those you'll be able to move about fairly easily."

She went carefully down the stairway, and at the foot of it a group of the men surrounded her, eagerly questioning her. They all moved away towards the door, except two who remained looking curiously at the ship, and occasionally at Scott. At the door, Bren turned and waved, and as Scott waved in return he wondered how it felt to lift an arm and wave it against two and a half times the Earth's gravity. A moment later, they were gone.

He went back into the control-room, and increased the gravity within the ship to one and a half-G, then slightly higher. As he moved about experimentally, he was appalled by the thought of the continuous weight that would oppress him outside the ship.

When he returned to the airlock, there were forty or fifty people standing outside the ship—probably almost the full population of the Base. None of them stood higher than the level of Scott's shoulder, but all of them, men and women alike, had the same massive muscular development, even the chunky-looking children. They looked up at Scott with frank curiosity. One especially powerful-looking man stepped forward.

"I'm Mort," he announced in a booming voice, as though the name needed no further explanation. "Quite a ship you've got there. Why didn't we hear you had things like that?"

"It's a long story." Scott gestured towards the door through which Bren had gone. "Bren tells me you have some G-suits there. As soon as I can come out I'll tell you all about it."

Mort whirled round. "Tell them to hurry up that suit!" he shouted, and one of the other men went through the doorway.

A few minutes later, Bren and two other Jovians returned, carrying a number of suits apparently made of woven metal strands cemented in tough plastic. They climbed aboard, the

men staggering off-balance as they entered the relatively light gravity within the ship. They selected a suit closest to an accurate fit, and Scott climbed into it, lacing it so that it fitted tightly about his legs and the lower part of his body. He found that he could move easily enough, but when he cut the internal gravity-field completely off his heart thudded heavily with the effort of pumping blood against the unshielded pull of Jupiter.

Walking was a difficult matter—and dangerous. He was vividly aware that a fall against the floor would be something like the equivalent of falling off a twelve or fifteen foot wall on Earth. He went out of the airlock between Bren and one of the Jovian men, resting his arms across their shoulders. Carefully synchronizing their steps, they went down the shallow stairway.

On the ground, Scott found the man called Mort standing in front of him, square, blonde, aggressive-looking. Bren introduced them, and Mort seized his hand in a Herculean grip and shook it. He was the Administrative Director of the Base, and apparently its virtual dictator.

"Let's get this straight," he thundered. "Do we get this ship instead of the J4?"

"Let's go somewhere we can sit down and talk," countered Scott. "I'm not used to your gravity yet."

For a second or two Mort hesitated, then he gave an almost imperceptible nod. "Fair enough." He looked at some of the men around him. "Central Control," he said, and they began to move towards the door in the massive metal wall, which Scott saw now to be formed of heavy rolled sections of steel fitted together with the type of construction he had once seen in old English underground railroad tunnels on Earth, where the tunnels were metal tubes through soft clay.

They went along a tubular tunnel, coldly lit by a continuous light-strip along its ceiling, passing an open doorway through which came the smooth hum of powerful ventilation machinery. Scott's muscles ached, and the tunnel ahead of him seemed to sway before his blurring vision, the end of it stretching further away each time he looked at it, until he began watching the ground a few yards ahead. Every ten yards was a struggle, and the sweat poured down his body.

After the first hundred yards, the walk was a nightmare. Scott's surroundings were not very real to him until he found himself sitting in the domed circular room the Jovians called

Central Control, which apparently served as a council chamber. Nine of them including Bren and himself—six men and three women—sat at a long black plastic table with Mort at the head of it.

"Now," began Mort, his cold eyes on Scott. "Let's start with a few explanations. John and Bren Galt go to Earth to pick up a ship we've had built to our specifications. We get a badly relayed message that John is being held on Earth, and now you turn up in an entirely different ship. Why?"

"This ship we brought here was not built on Earth," said Scott.

"Then where else?" demanded Mort, as though he didn't believe him.

"I don't know. Not in this Solar System. It wasn't built by human beings—if you don't believe that, have a look at the way we've had to alter its controls to be able to use it. One of our expeditions found it abandoned on Triton, and we flew there in the J4, got the alien ship going, and brought it back."

"What happened to the J4?"

"We left it on Triton." Looking at the tense, suspicious faces around the table, Scott didn't see any wisdom in telling them right now that their ship had been taken away, presumably by the unknown race of aliens. "Right now, I want to get a message through to General Risdon, Strategic Command, Washington. It's absolutely vital that our experts have a look at this ship."

"Just a minute!" Mort slammed both palms on the table. "This isn't Earth! This ship doesn't leave here until you bring us back the J4."

Scott's head was spinning with the effect of the gravity. "Use your imagination, man! This is more important than one ship. There's a non-human race suddenly in the picture, with a technology ahead of ours by thousands of years—something Mankind has never had to contend with since the beginning of his history! And here we have one of their ships. Our one chance to catch up technically."

Mort's mouth tightened in a hard smile. "Earth's problems are not our problems," he said. "We don't owe Earth anything. One thing about the gravity down here—we can stay out of any war that's likely to happen."

Unexpectedly, Bren's voice cut in quietly after the thunder of Mort's. "I think he's right, Mort. We're all part of the human race—"

"Are you trying to take sides with this Earthy?" Mort's pale eyes blazed. "I should have known better than to let a woman go to pick up a ship from Earth. From now on, you stay at the Base! Time you were married to Karn—I'm not having any of our women leaving Base because some smooth-talking Earthy pitches them a pack of mush."

"I suggest we stick to the point," shouted Scott. Somewhere in the back of his mind he knew he should keep his temper under control, but the relentless pressure of the gravity had him half-dazed.

"To hell with what you suggest—" Mort broke off as the shrill note of a bell jangled through the air. With three quick strides, he reached a panel on the wall and snapped switches. A line of television screens lit up on the wall, showing the red-lit, wind-lashed wilderness outside the Base. And on one of the screens, dropping down past the face of the thousand-foot cliff walling the valley, was a long, spindle-shaped thing of green metal—a larger version of the alien ship from Triton. It hovered low above the ammonia-snow, motionless except for the regular flash of something spinning at the top of a short mast amidships.

A brilliant shaft of light from the mast swung towards the television camera. The screen blazed white, then instantly was dead.

Chapter III

Scott rose to his feet and moved across to stand beside Mort. "Where's that spot from here?" he asked.

Mort appeared to have completely forgotten their quarrel of less than a minute ago. "Five miles west along the valley." He turned to a map on one wall, indicating a point near the twisting line of the southern escarpment. Scott pointed to a differently coloured line, straighter, roughly parallel to the cliff a quarter to half a mile south of it.

"What's that? Track along the top of the plateau?"

"No. Tunnel running to the West Base. About level with the floor of the valley."

Mort cut in another television camera that showed a distant view of the ship, looking downward from high on the northern

wall of the valley. The thing seemed to be resting on the surface, close against the foot of the towering cliff. They watched it for some time in silence.

"Outline of the thing looks hazy," said Mort.

"They use a force-shield of some sort," Scott told him. "Meteor protection. I think it could turn aside a projectile."

"Could it stand a heat-beam? We use them in tunnelling through the solid hydrogen."

"It probably could. I wouldn't try anything like that. I don't know what these things look like, or how they think, but I've got a healthy respect for their technology." Scott indicated the cliff-face filling the upper part of the screen. "Unless we had some way of producing an avalanche—a big one. If we buried their ship under a fall of that solid hydrogen, the pressure might burn out their force-shield—or if it didn't burn it out it'd trap so much heat they wouldn't be able to keep running it without roasting."

"An avalanche?" Mort turned to the map, hands on hips, feet apart. Suddenly his bull-like voice boomed. "Hey, boys! Come here! This Earthy's got more brains than I thought."

He spun suddenly to face Scott. "An avalanche you want? We'll give the biggest avalanche you've ever seen. Look here!"

He turned again to the map. "See where the tunnel runs? Goes within a quarter of a mile of the escarpment. We can run some shafts out here, fast—this hydrogen melts like butter—and plant a line of blasting charges here, under this fault-line. Fire them by remote control, simultaneously, and you'd bring down a quarter of a mile of cliff, a thousand feet high, and hundreds of feet thick.

"Blow up one of our television towers, will they? For all they knew there could have been men in it. We'll see how their techniques stand up to a mountain on top of them."

"We'll have to make sure we get them the first time," Scott warned him. "You saw what happened to the TV tower."

"Sure. Quick on the trigger. That's what I didn't like. Nobody comes and throws his weight about here and gets away with it!"

Scott wasn't sure whether this last remark was partly directed at him, but he didn't make an issue of it. Mort went across to a telephone and began punching buttons and shouting orders into the receiver. Bren suddenly appeared at Scott's side, touching him on the elbow.

"My room is in Gallery K, Number 7," she said. "Call along there when you have time."

"I will—soon as I can," he promised.

He was amazed at the speed and energy with which all of them moved under the monstrous gravity. Mort was certainly an excellent organizer in an emergency. After a few minutes on the phone he crossed over to where Scott was standing by the map.

"I've sent five teams on tractors out along the tunnel," he said. "They'll start at this point, here, and strike tunnels to the right, at intervals of one hundred yards, until they reach the fault-plane. Then they'll plant their charges, with radio-detonators, and withdraw. When they're back in the Base, we'll blast simultaneously. That should bring five hundred yards of the escarpment down in one slide."

"How long will it take?"

"Hour, maybe. Let's hope the ship stays there."

"I'll see you here in an hour," said Scott.

"Right. Don't walk too far away from the Base." Mort gave a booming laugh, slapping Scott on the shoulder with a force that nearly overbalanced him.

As he left Central Control, Scott found that he was already moving a little more easily, sliding his feet on the smooth floor instead of spending unnecessary energy in lifting them, and controlling his balance more carefully. Gallery K was one of the newest extensions from the main tunnel that ran through the Base, and Number 7 was almost at the end of it. The ceiling of the gallery was just high enough to clear Scott's head, and he could feel the warmth of the single line of fluorescent tubing that threw a chill glare on the ice-white walls.

He hesitated in front of the green plastic door bearing the number "7," then pressed the buzzer-switch. He stood waiting, the incessant drag of the Jovian gravity growing heavier on him second by second. When the door slid open, it wasn't Bren who stood in the low-ceilinged passage within, but an older woman with black grey-streaked hair. She looked up at him curiously.

"You're the Earthy." It was a statement, not a question.

"I suppose you want to see Brenda?"

"Thanks."

"She mightn't want to. Gone to her room. She's been taken off flying. Goes into the labour pool tomorrow, and she doesn't like it."

"Why?"

"We have to use everyone here. Not like Earth. Oh, she'll settle down in a while."

"Will you tell her I'm here?"

Without replying, the woman turned and walked along the passage, disappearing through a lighted doorway. She returned after a few seconds.

"Come in. She'll be out in a minute."

Scott walked along the passage, his head almost brushing the ceiling, and turned in to a brightly lit lounge. He sat carefully on a low divan, his legs shaking as his weight came off them. The woman stood in front of him, her eyes just above the level of his.

"Find it hard to get about here, don't you?"

"Takes some adjustment," he admitted. He glanced around the compact lounge, at the bookshelves, the small projection-screen, the window opening into a hydroponics room with dense green vegetation under blazing sunlamps. As Bren walked quickly into the room he began to rise, but she stopped him with her hand on his shoulder.

"Don't get up. This is Elli, Rick. I'll be working with her tomorrow."

"Where?"

"In the labour pool. They don't waste time, here." Her smile was strained.

"It'll be good for her," said the older woman. "Space is no life for a woman—keeps her away from the other people of the Base."

Bren's lips were compressed in a firm line. She was wearing a turquoise wrap that made her look unexpectedly feminine. She had taken off the plastic arm, and as the left sleeve of the wrap fluttered in the ventilator draught she reached across and pushed it tightly into her pocket. Scott watched the quick, decisive movement of her hand.

"When I get that freighter," he said, "I'll be back for you."

Her eyes were steady. "Let's be realistic, Rick. What freighter could you land on Jupiter? Once you leave me here, I'll never have a chance to get away."

The shrill note of the door-buzzer made her turn. Elli went out along the passage, and a moment later Scott heard a deep voice booming Bren's name. A squat, dark-haired Jovian, no taller than Bren, but gigantically broad and powerful, bounded into the room.

"I've got you out of the labour pool," he shouted, "Got it all fixed with Mort!"

"Rick," said Bren, "this is Karn."

Karn shot Scott a quick sidelong glance, nodding almost interceptibly, then turned his attention immediately to Bren.

"Hear what I said? It's all fixed!"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

Karn gave a thunderous blast of laughter, moving forward in an incredibly swift leap and seizing her hand in both his. He looked across at Scott.

"How you like that? She says what do I mean?"

Elli came back into the room. "What's going on here?"

Karn spun to face her, still gripping Bren's hand, although she tried once to pull it away from him. Scott got carefully erect, appalled once again by the crushing weight of Jupiter's gravity.

"She's not going into the pool," Karn shouted exultantly to Elli. "Mort's okayed it—I'm marrying her."

"I'm sorry, Karn," Bren told him in an icy voice. "You're not."

"What you mean, you're not?" Karn grinned over his shoulder at Scott. "All the same, women."

Bren made another effort to withdraw her hand, then stood perfectly still. Scott moved carefully across to them, coldly aware that a fall under $2\frac{1}{2}$ -G could kill him.

"Let her go," he commanded.

Karn looked across at Elli. "Look what's talking."

Scott lifted his hands and sank his fingers into the iron-hard trapezius muscles, finding the Judo pinch-points and ramming his thumbs against Karn's collar-bones. The Jovian bared his teeth in a harsh screech of unexpected pain, releasing Bren as his hands became numb. He brought his arms up, crossing them and feeling his collar-bones, his eyes glaring insanely up into Scott's.

"What you do?" he snarled. "What's this to you, anyway? She's going to marry me!"

Scott, forgetting the extra gravity, shook his head, and instantly wished he hadn't. "You heard what she said: No!"

Karn whipped round to face Bren. "Better be sensible about this. Nearly everyone else at the Base is paired off." He turned and looked at Scott, his eyes wide with berserk fury. "Him! I'll kill him!"

"No!" screamed Bren.

Karn's body blurred into cyclonic movement. In an instant he was in front of Scott, arms wide to lift him and drop him, letting the two and a half Earth gravities do the rest. Scott, the emergency giving him speed and strength he didn't know he possessed, stabbed his left foot against Karn's right before it could take his weight, at the same time throwing his own body forward. With his left hand he pulled Karn's outflung arm further outward, at the same time thrusting his right hand against his shoulder.

Karn bellowed as he went off-balance, and with a lightning movement clutched at Scott to save himself. The floor came up like a slamming door, but Scott's fall was cushioned by Karn's body beneath him.

He got slowly to his feet, first rolling his weight back onto his haunches. Karn lay still, his eyes closed.

"Are you all right?"

Bren was alongside him, ignoring the sprawling figure on the floor as she checked Scott for any sign of injury.

"I'm okay," he said. "But what about him?"

"Better not move him until I get the medical team," said Elli. "He's not dead—that's one thing."

"Who is he?" asked Scott, turning to Bren.

"Oh, one of Mort's bright boys. I don't think Mort's going to like this. It means one man less in his team for quite a long time. He'll have to know, of course—you can't hide anything in a place like this." She grasped Scott's arm. "Thanks, Rick."

Elli began phoning the medical team. Scott gestured to the door. "I'm going to tell Mort about this, before he gets it second-hand."

"But he'll go berserk!"

"I doubt it. Attack is the best form of defence, isn't it?"

On his way back to the central control room, Scott felt slightly more confident in the grotesque environment. He found Mort standing in front of the line of vision-screens, and as he saw him coming the Jovian greeted him with an exultant shout.

"We're finished tunnelling, and they haven't moved their ship!" He pointed to one of the television screens on which the alien ship was in full view, still motionless except for the bright object spinning wickedly at the end of the short mast—

the projector of the heat-beam, or whatever the device was. "We're due to fire the blast as soon as all the tractors are back."

A telephone shrilled, and he picked it up, listening for a moment. "Right!" He shouted, looking across the room to three of his men. "*Fire her—now!*" He gripped Scott's shoulder, and swung him round, pointing at the screen showing a long-distance view of the ship from the opposite cliff-top.

The ship was little more than a spot on the screen, at the foot of the thousand-foot wall of almost vertical cliff. Suddenly, a full quarter of a mile of the whole escarpment seemed to shudder in a single gigantic convulsion, great cracks splitting the full height of it like jagged forks of lightning. An immense cloud of vapour and flying debris filled the floor of the valley, and the vast mass of the cliff toppled outward, dragged downward at fantastic acceleration by Jupiter's gravity. The sullen boom of the explosion reached the control room more than twenty seconds later, long after the first shock-wave had rocked the floor. One of the television screens went dead, and two others blinked. The echoes went on reverberating into the distance like muttering thunder.

"Now," said Mort. "That puts them in cold storage until we tunnel in to them."

"Better start right away," suggested Scott.

"Sure." Mort looked at the map for a time, then snapped a number of orders over the telephone. He looked up at Scott. "Take an hour, at least. Maybe two."

"Careful. When your machines get near it. Remember it's full of an oxygen atmosphere. Break through and mix that with the atmosphere outside—"

"I know." Mort made a gesture indicating an explosion. "Think we don't know our own planet?"

"By the way," said Scott. "I want to see you about a fellow called Karn."

"Better keep out of his way."

"We've met. He was bothering Bren Galt, and I told him to stop."

"Wonder he didn't kill you."

"He tried."

Mort's expression was unreadable. "What happened?"

"He attacked me. I had to throw him."

"You *what*?"

"Judo throw. He's in the infirmary now, I think."

Mort's eyes travelled over Scott's build. He opened his mouth to say something, then shut it like a trap, and it gave Scott an intense satisfaction to see him back away slightly, just enough to put him out of reach of the Earthman's long arms. "Better be careful with that stuff around here," he warned. He went over to the telephone again, punching a number and speaking with his lips close to the receiver. He waited for half a minute, grunted and put the phone down.

"This is bad," he said balefully. "Still unconscious. You can't come here and knock our boys around like that."

Scott looked him in the eyes without saying anything. It was Mort who was first to look away. But Scott had the feeling that he was on extremely thin ice.

Chapter IV

It was more than two hours before the first of the tunnelling machines broke through to the buried ship. The force-screen shielding the hull had either failed or been shut off when the ship had been buried, for the rock-hard solidified hydrogen was packed tightly against the metal surface.

Mort and his men handled the entire operation from Central Control, using remote-controlled tractors with television cameras and floodlights. One of these was placed close to the end of the tunnel driven through the solid hydrogen to the ship, while another, with drilling and cutting machines, was manoeuvred close against the metal surface of the hull.

As any mixture of the atmosphere within the ship with that outside it would be highly explosive, it was impossible to use flame-torches in cutting through the metal of the hull, so Mort resorted to a carbide-tipped rotary cutting-tool, run at high speed with a constant stream of coolant. The green metal of the hull was incredibly tough—tougher than high-grade titanium-steel—but the carbide ate slowly through it. Two of the cutting-tools had to be scrapped during the process, but at last the metal was penetrated.

"We'll wait for a while," said Mort. "The outside atmosphere will gradually seep in. Give them a chance to put suits on. No need to kill them now—we've got them like that!" He spread out his hand and closed it.

Scott remained with the Jovians at the television-screen, watching the view of the floodlit end of the tunnel. A vibrating

saw was inserted into the hole made by the rotary cutter, and slowly, very slowly, a wide circle was cut in the metal of the hull. At last, a five-foot disc of the metal was lifted aside, and the microphones attached to the tractors picked up its ringing clang as it fell to the ground.

"See anything inside?" asked Mort.

"Looks dark to me," replied Scott. "Switch the floodlight off for a moment—but be ready to bring it on again."

With the tunnel in darkness, they could see that the interior of the ship was not completely dark—a faint bluish light came from somewhere to the right of the hole, shining on a metal wall opposite. It threw sharp, irregular shadows of something outside of their field of view.

"What now?" asked Mort, looking at Scott.

"Can you get a camera inside?"

"Not for a long time. The tractors can't get in there, and it'd take too long to rig up a special machine."

Scott frowned at the screen. "I can't understand why they didn't do something about that thing cutting its way through their hull. Maybe none of them are alive."

"Damned if I'm going down there to find out. Could be anything in there."

They watched the darkened screen in silence for a long time, trying to see a pattern of meaning in the grotesque shadows on the wall within the ship.

"Stalemate," said Scott.

"Not quite. Time's on our side. They can't fly the thing away with that hole in the side of it, even if they get it out from under the avalanche. And we've got the roof of the tunnel mined in two places—fifty yards from the ship, and a quarter of a mile back."

"What was that?" Scott pointed at the screen.

"What?"

"One of those shadows inside! I'll swear it moved!"

They were both holding their breath as they watched. Next time the blue-lit shadow moved, there was no doubt. Scott had the impression of the distorted outline of something coming into the opening from the right.

"Light!" he shouted, but even as Mort was reaching for the switch of the floodlight the screen blazed in an instant of burning whiteness, then was dark. Mort yelled in fury.

"Something's knocked out the camera. Fire the blast in the tunnel!"

"Wait!" Scott held up his hand. "Have you another camera further back?"

"Yes."

"Then let's get a look at the thing that came out of the ship. Look—you have two charges of explosive in the tunnel—right?"

"That's right. About four hundred yards apart."

"Let him get past the first before you blow it. Seal him off from his ship, between the two charges. We want to know what we're up against, and one is better to deal with than a shipload."

Mort waited, looking questioningly at Scott, hand on the switch that would fire the first blast, his forehead glistening with sweat beneath the fluorescent lights. Scott nodded. Mort flicked two switches in succession. The microphones in the tunnel picked up a sharp explosion followed by a hollow roar.

"What happened?" asked Scott.

"Second charge didn't fire. The first blast might have wrecked its igniting-gear."

"Then this thing from the ship is still coming up the tunnel?"

Mort gestured. "One way or another. We don't know which way it'll turn when it reaches the main tunnel."

"This way," said Scott without hesitation. "The tractors will have left marks turning back towards the Base." He pointed to the map. "How far is that double bend in the tunnel from the Base?"

"Quarter of a mile from the end of the galleries. We bent the tunnel to avoid a fissure—forty-five degree bend left, then a hundred yards further on another forty-five degrees right again. Tunnel goes straight on from there."

"Have you some sort of blast-gun?"

"No. No need for things like that on Jupiter."

"How about a signal-rocket?"

Mort scratched his head. "We have rockets we use for shooting lines up cliffs, across crevasses, things like that. Any good to you?"

"Let me have a few. I want to go down the tunnel."

"You *what*?"

"The thing from the ship has five miles to come. I want to fix a trap for it at that double bend in the tunnel."

"I'll lend you a tractor, if you want to try it. But I'm not sending any of my men down with you."

"That's okay."

When he was seated on one of the Base's small caterpillar tractors, about to fit his space-helmet in position, Mort thrust out his hand. Scott gripped it.

"Pity you're not built to take heavy gravity," said Mort unexpectedly. "We could do with a guy like you around here."

Once the airlock doors of the tunnel had closed behind him, Scott realized that he was more completely alone, in one sense, than he would have been in space. The motor of the tractor whined eerily in the hollow emptiness. The smooth walls of the tunnel gleamed pallidly in the headlight for a hundred yards or so, but in the distance far ahead of him everything was black.

It seemed to take him an interminable time to reach the first bend in the tunnel. As the seconds slipped by, he became more and more acutely aware of the danger of the thing from the alien ship reaching the bend first, and several times he switched off the tractor's headlamp. Once he stopped the motor, staring into the blackness ahead and listening.

Reaching the bend, he dismounted from the tractor and peered carefully round the corner. A hundred yards away was the second bend. He walked carefully along, peering around the other corner. Was it his imagination?—or was there a faint spot of light far down the tunnel?

He set two of the rockets pointing down the tunnel, wired to fire simultaneously, and linked with a net of thin cables. Behind them he set up a small portable television camera. He melted some of the solid hydrogen from the wall, and spattered the rockets and camera with it so that they were soon frosted to the same colour as walls and floor.

When he looked up, his heart thudded audibly in the silence. Down the tunnel he could see a fluctuating speck of blue light. He moved around the corner as soon as possible, setting a blasting charge just beyond it. Then he retreated around the next bend, standing on the inner side of the curve where he would be safest from blast effects.

The sweat was streaming down his body within the suit. He peered into the small portable television receiver, picking up the view from the camera at the corner. In front of him he placed the two reels of wire linked to the rockets and the blasting charge, linking them quickly to a battery.

In the screen, he could see the light in the tunnel, much closer now. Moving, bluish, weird. The screen showed no detail beyond that starlike point of light, undulating as though someone was carrying it with long, regular strides. He thought of the seven-foot strides of the monstrous three-toed footprints on Triton. He imagined he could see a faint outline beyond the light, caught by reflection from the walls—the effect of a broad, compact body on long slender legs, but this didn't seem right for a creature that could move as easily as this on Jupiter. He was trying to get a better view when the screen flashed momentarily and was dead. At the same time, a peculiar whistling crash sent echoes booming along the tunnel. Flakes of hydrogen whipped round the corner on a swirling gust.

Whatever weapon the thing used, it had a deadly accuracy. Scott pressed the contact that fired the linked rockets.

He heard their hollow, screeching howl magnified enormously along the tunnel, then a metallic crash, and a change in the note of the rockets' scream. It went on and on, without getting any further away.

Scott moved closer to the corner, holding the contact of the blasting charge. The light of the burning rockets threw a vast, distorted shadow of something on the curved wall of the tunnel, something that moved. He was tempted to back around the corner and fire the blast immediately, but after he had delayed a few seconds he realized the moving thing was not coming any closer. He had the impression of something heaving up and down in the same place—of limbs flailing uselessly. Then the light and the sound of the rockets died simultaneously in silent darkness.

He waited a long time, exactly how long he didn't know, for he didn't dare take his eyes from the corner long enough to look at his watch. At last he risked a call on his radio. Mort's voice answered at once.

"What was that sound?"

"The rockets. The thing's hit, just past the far bend. I don't know how badly it's hurt."

"Where are you?"

"Just round the other corner. If I go away, I've got a quarter of a mile of straight tunnel before I have any cover."

"Can you get a look around the bend?"

"Too risky. It shot some kind of projectile or beam into the TV camera and blew it into a lump of melted metal. I'm not sticking my head into range of that."

"What can you do if it comes round the corner?"

"I planted a blasting charge behind the first corner—I can get back around the other one and fire it."

"Risky. Want help?"

"Can you send me another tractor with a TV camera?"

"Right. I'll put a remote-control set on it—you can take over when it reaches you."

Scott froze as he heard a sound down the tunnel—a dragging metallic sound. He backed to the corner behind him, feeling his way in the complete darkness with one hand on the wall, feeling the coldness of its surface even through the heated glove. There was no trace of the blue light. Suddenly he was aware of sound closer to him—and then a brilliant streak of fire, like lightning channelled in a straight path, missed his shoulder by a yard and blasted the wall behind him. He had the instantaneous, photographic imprint on his mind of a crouching, armoured figure, vaguely man-like. Then he was around the corner, stumbling back in the dark.

He pressed the blasting contacts, flattening against the inner wall of the curve, feeling the shock-wave through the solid wall an instant before the white, screaming gale whipped round on him. Something struck the wall of the tunnel on the curve, skittered round it, and fell almost at his feet. Then there was only a howling darkness, a cadence of raging echoes.

He stood perfectly motionless in the dark, his mouth dry. The last fragments of material loosened from the ceiling pattered to the floor, like the final raindrops of a dying storm, and then the silence was that of a tomb.

Was the alien conscious, somewhere there in the darkness, waiting for him to give away his position by a chance movement? After a few minutes the tension was almost unbearable.

Eventually he became aware of a pin-point of light back up the tunnel towards the Base—the second tractor coming towards him on remote control. He did not dare to use his radio to have it stopped—the movement might reveal him. Gradually, the darkness was dispelled by the approaching headlight.

The outlines of the sprawling, immobile figure at his feet began to take shape. The light gleamed faintly on something like armour. And then—

Scott bent forward. When the headlight of the tractor was within a hundred yards, there was no doubt whatsoever.

The thing lying on the ground before him was not alive. It had never been alive. It was some form of robot.

Back at the Base, Mort's electronics men took the robot to pieces with elaborate care, marking its parts with differently coloured spots of paint so that they could re-assemble it. Scott stood by as they dismantled the head, expecting to find some intricate electronic "brain," but all they found was a three-lens television camera of strange design. The two normally-placed "eyes" picked up light in something approximating the human range of wavelengths, while the single lens above them was apparently designed to "see" in infra-red light, giving in some circumstances visibility in darkness. Did the makers of the machine possess a third infra-red-sensitive eye of this type? Or was the device purely a technical addition, like a miner's headlamp?

Scott turned to where three other men were dismantling the metal torso, but again the results were disappointing. There was no machine "brain" there, either—simply a powerful ultra-short-wave transmitting and receiving radio, linked to electro-magnetic "muscles" which moved the body and permitted the hand-like instruments to grasp, lift, push pull, and twist in a series of complex but definitely limited movements. He had a feeling of anticlimax.

"No computing mechanism," said one of the electronics men. "Simply a remote-controlled handling-machine. The way I see it, some operator looks in a screen and sees what the cameras in the head pick up. Then he just punches controls to move the arms and legs."

Scott nodded, looking at Mort. "So the boys we want are still in the ship. This hasn't got us very far, has it?"

"Yes, it has," broke in the electronics man. "This thing, or any others like it, would be easy to disorganize with a jamming-wave." He pointed a slim screwdriver to the receiving and transmitting unit within the metal body. "This operates on binomial signals on a series of fixed frequencies. You could jam it simply by using a set of high-tension coils with contact-breakers."

"Can you fix up a gimmick to do that—fast?" asked Mort.

"Sure. Give me an hour. It'll be rough, but it'll work."

He didn't need the hour. The resulting device was rough, but it produced a jamming wave over a wide range of frequencies. Scott pointed to the black sphere within the body of the robot.

"See that? That's the power-source—there's a big one like it in the ship we flew here. If you could get that out, and hook it up to the coils, we could make this jamming unit of yours portable—with power enough to paralyse any robot within miles."

They did it, fitting the resulting combination of human and alien equipment into a box that could easily be carried.

"Anything strike you as strange about this?" asked Scott thoughtfully.

"Plenty." Mort gestured to include all the parts spread before them.

"I was thinking of this: With all the knowledge that's gone into building this machine, why did they leave it so vulnerable to a simple thing like our jamming-wave? Does it give you the impression the machine was never built for fighting purposes?"

"Yes. But what about *this*?" Mort indicated the heat-gun. It was a cylindrical metal device with a slender barrel and flared muzzle, thickened at the rear end and heavily insulated. "Anybody that makes a thing like that isn't playing."

Scott picked up the weapon, looking at the sliding rings around its thickened breech, engraved with graduated scales marked in those strange alien figures. "Is this where it was set?" he asked.

"Sure. We haven't touched it."

"I've learned their numerals. When he used this to melt the television camera he was only using it at a tenth full power."

"Then he could have blown a new tunnel half-way through the base?"

"Something like that. And whoever was using it is still down there in the ship. We're still in a very tight spot."

"I know it."

Scott looked steadily at Mort. "How do you feel now about getting a message through to Strategic Command?"

Mort hesitated, his eyes on Scott's. At last he nodded. "Okay, I'll get it relayed."

Still holding the heat gun, Scott picked up the radio-jammer.

"Where are you going?" asked Mort.

"Down to the ship," said Scott.

Chapter V

Scott took the heat-gun outside through one of the airlocks to experiment with it. The coppery half-light in the valley flickered incessantly with the glare of crimson lightning far above. Sheltered from the strident hurricane by a wing-wall near the lock, he fired a couple of short blasts from the gun, one of them—at half power—shattering the point of an eroded pinnacle five-hundred yards away. Satisfied, he returned to the relative stillness within the Base.

He loaded the equipment he needed on to a tractor, and drove it down the five miles of tunnels to the point where the blast had blocked the shaft driven through to the ship. With the jamming-wave broadcasting on a range of frequencies and the heat-gun ready, he used the tractor to clear the blockage between him and the ship.

When he broke through, his lights shone directly into the round hole torn in the hull. He dismounted from the tractor and walked carefully forward. There was no sound from within the ship. Any robots there would be immobilized by the wave from the coils, but he took no chances. For a long time he stood just outside of the hole. He had brought with him a mirror attached to a long metal rod, and he pushed this carefully in through the hole, turning it to gain a view of the interior of the ship.

What he saw didn't make much sense. The space inside was crammed with bizarre machinery of unknown purpose, lit by a lurid blue light from some diffuse source forward. He took his time, watching carefully for any sign of movement. When he turned the mirror towards the rear of the ship, he could see only a blank wall a few feet away, with a dark, menacing doorway.

Holding the gun in front of him, and setting the radio-jammer on the floor just inside the hole, he moved carefully into the ship. He set one of his hand-lamps on the floor, its brilliant white beam striking the rear wall and throwing a fair intensity of light right up the length of the ship. With his attention partly on the dark doorway he moved slowly forward between the grotesque machines. He passed a radar-sphere similar to the one in the other ship, with a black and white compass-globe near it.

Forward, he could now see that the bluish light was coming from a rectangular window in what might have been an airlock

door. The window was frosted slightly by condensation on its outer surface. Getting near enough to rub some of this away he could look through into a cube-shaped room, with a similar door on the far side, through which the blue-tinted light was streaming. This, too, was frosted, and he could dimly make out metallic surfaces beyond.

Suddenly a vague shadow moved within the lighted room.

Scott felt the chill of ice. No robot movement, that—it was the fluid motion of something alive.

He was still considering his best course when some faint sound behind him made him whirl. He looked fixedly at the black doorway in the rear wall, crouching behind one of the machines as he did so. The sound came again—in the helmet, he was unable to place its direction accurately. Holding the heat gun ready, he moved slowly down the length of the ship towards the point where he had entered.

He switched on his radio briefly, but no signal could have broken through the crashing scream of the jamming-wave from the coils. He lifted the gun as something moved outside the hole.

A transparent helmet appeared in the opening, with a mass of red-gold curls within. Bren, in her close-fitting black suit climbed into the ship. Scott switched off the jamming-wave.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded.

“What are you doing here alone?” she countered.

Before they could say anything else heavy, clanging steps sounded from the rear of the ship, and a tall, metallic form strode through the doorway. Scott switched on the coils, and the robot slid to a halt in mid-stride. With the heat-gun at low intensity, Scott blew the television-head into a spattering shower of molten metal and splintering crystal. A second stroke at one of the jointed metal legs brought the robot to the floor with a ringing crash.

Scott looked into Bren’s dilated eyes. “See?” he said, switching off the wave just long enough to talk, “it’s dangerous here. Keep close by me.”

She nodded. He led her up towards the forepart of the ship, to the frosted window in the airlock door through which the azure light was still streaming.

He operated a control that looked as though it might have opened the outer door of the airlock, but nothing happened—the master control must have been inside. He shone his hand-

lamp through the window at the second door. Again, a shadow moved in the lighted room beyond. Something vaguely manlike peered through the window. Scott held up the heat-gun, shining the hand-lamp on it, and gestured with it at the outer door of the lock.

His bluff worked more easily than he would have thought possible. Almost immediately, the outer door of the lock swung invitingly open. He looked at Bren, shaking his head. It had been *too* easy.

He found a loose piece of equipment and used it to wedge the outer door of the airlock so that it could not be closed, then stepped in and wiped away the frost-rime from the window of the inner door.

He was looking into a room filled with banks of instruments, lit by a blue-lined glow from a luminous ceiling. Three figures were within, almost—but not quite—human. Two of them lay prone on the metal floor, while the third stood in the centre of the room, looking towards him. He was as tall as Scott, but much slimmer, with a large, rounded head and pointed face, his body almost completely naked, with glistening white skin like the skin on the underside of a shark. The eyes were large, brilliant, with lemon-yellow iris and jet-black pupils that were vertically-slitted like a cat's, and the short blue-black hair grew down the centre of the high forehead in a sharp V.

For a time they looked at each other, the yellow eyes of the alien unwinking, compelling, as though he were trying to hypnotize Scott with his void, fixed stare. Then the rigidity of his bearing seemed to go out of him. He turned away, moving across to one of the control panels, reaching out a long hand with supple fingers and narrow, gleaming black nails towards the switches. Scott rapped on the window with the heat-gun and motioned him to keep away from the panel, but after a second's hesitation he turned a number of dials and snapped several switches. He turned again to face Scott, his head erect, his strange eyes wide and defiant. He took a couple of steps towards the door, then stood with his arms folded, looking at the Earthman. Quite suddenly, the life seemed to go out of his eyes, and his body fell headlong to the floor from its full height. Scott rapped again on the window, looking at the sprawled, unnatural attitude of the fallen figure.

It was as though the alien had simply died by an effort of will.

Scott went sadly back to the jamming-coils and switched them off. He pressed the call-button of his radio.

"What's happening?" came Mort's voice.

"It's all over. Three of them, that's all. And the last of them just died."

"How did you do it?"

"I didn't. I think they just gave up. Two were dead when I got to their control-room, and when the other one saw me through a window, holding one of their own heat-guns, it looked as if he just gave up. He operated some controls, but I guess he was just trying to activate the robots—with the wave going, nothing worked."

"You're sure there are no others there?"

"Sure. You can start excavating from outside."

"Okay. You have a look around the ship while the boys are digging their way in."

Scott stood for a long time peering in through the window at the three naked, recumbent figures. He shook his head slowly.

"What is it?" asked Bren.

"All the way through this business, I keep striking things that don't add up. Things that are just a little bit—" he spread out his hand and wavered it with a rocking movement, "—a little bit off-key."

"How do you mean?"

"These three. We don't know how far they've come, but it must be a distance we don't even begin to conceive—something that runs into light-years. They must have had a tremendous amount of courage, and fantastic equipment—not only to make the journey in the first place, but to follow us down into Jupiter's atmosphere. But why did they give up so suddenly as soon as they came face-to-face with us?"

"We might have looked like monsters to them."

"Not at all. Look at them. The general shape of the body isn't very different from ours; surprisingly like it, considering the different evolutionary lines behind them. No, it'd take more than different-looking eyes and skins to frighten a team like this. You saw that last fellow. Something simply frightened him to death."

Bren's expression was grave as she shook her head. "It didn't look like fear, to me. He looked almost—calm." She put her hand on Scott's arm. "I feel we've made a mistake. There was so much we might have learned from them—and they didn't look vicious, or dangerous—"

Scott silently held up the heat-gun, lifting one eyebrow as he looked at her. "You've seen this work. Remember, it was theirs."

"I know. I know." She shook her head angrily as though to clear away her confusion by physical effort.

Scott examined the airlock closely. There was a set of controls inside it. "I'm going to see if I can operate the lock from here," he said. "You wait outside in case I lock myself in."

"Wait out here alone?" She glanced down the empty ship, with its weird machinery. "No, thanks. I'm coming in with you. If we're locked in, the boys will get us out when they reach us."

He hesitated. "Okay, I can always burn out the lock with this heat-gun."

He freed the outer door of the lock, and closed it. The controls were sufficiently similar to those of the other ship for him to recognize them, and he operated the scavenging blast to clear out the hydrogen before letting the air from the cabin flow in. When the pressure was equalized, he was able to open the inner door.

It took a definite effort of will to step over the metal threshold into that still, blue-lit room, with the three bodies sprawled on the floor. As soon as he was within the room, Scott had the feeling that the floor had dropped from beneath him, and he gave a shout that reverberated in his helmet deafeningly as he flung out his arms to retain his balance.

"What happened?" asked Bren tensely.

Scott suddenly laughed—a laugh that almost got out of his control in the sudden easing of tension. "The gravity. The gravity-screens are working in here—it's less than Earth-normal, from the feel of it."

More cautiously, Bren moved in beside him. He touched the foot of one of the naked figures with his toe, then backed away.

"Take the gun," he said quietly to Bren.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know. Take the gun, and keep me covered."

She took the heat-gun, standing in the doorway. Carefully, Scott bent down and grasped the wrist of one of the bodies. It was supple, almost boneless in its flexibility. After a moment's hesitation, he stripped off one of his gloves and quickly gripped the wrist again.

There was pulse there—very faint, very slow, but as even as the beat of a metronome. He checked one of the others, then the third, then moved slowly back alongside Bren.

“Be careful,” he said in a low voice. “Very careful. There’s something here I don’t understand. They’re not dead.”

“You mean—shamming death?”

“You could call it that. Sort of catalepsy, maybe. But remember, we don’t know how their bodies work.” He felt suddenly angry, without knowing where the anger was directed. “If I had any sense, I should kill them while they’re lying there. But—I can’t.”

“I know you can’t,” she said, very quietly. “I’m glad.”

“Keep them covered with the gun, though. Don’t look away for a second.”

He checked the external air-pressure—about equal to a Terrestrial pressure at an altitude of six or seven thousand feet above sea-level according to the aneroid on his suit—and carefully lowered the pressure within his suit in stages until it equalized. At last, he removed his helmet, breathing the light, oxygen-rich air, which was dry, and at a temperature of maybe 90°.

He took the gun while Bren went through the same process, and then, one at a time, they stripped off the space-suits. All the time, at least one of them was watching the three figures.

They were taking it in turns to examine the complex apparatus in the control-room when a streak of light suddenly appeared on a black screen on the forward wall.

“They’re through with the excavators,” said Scott. “Those screens are vision-screens. They’re black only because the ship is buried.”

The streak of light widened into a fissure through which daylight filtered past the moving jaws of a bucket-excavator. Soon they could hear the sounds of the cutting jaws through the metal hull, sometimes punctuated by the clang of the actual contact of metal against metal.

Then, without warning, a new sound echoed through the ship—a rising crescendo of sound, like the hum of a giant motor gaining speed. Scott stared at one of the control panels, where needles were flickering into movement on dials. Abruptly, the black of the screens was lightened by a flash of electric blue, and a tremendous, hollow roar rang through the hull. The fissure of light shifted, widened.

"The force-screen!" shouted Scott. "The ship's moving!"

The buckets of the excavator were pushed back, tumbled aside. Sunlight blazed on the screens, and the towering cliffs came into view. Scott saw the excavator almost overturned, men moving quickly back. Then, at meteoric speed, the ship took off, flying slantingly upward on full automatic.

In an incredibly short time, it was above the boiling cloud-belts of Jupiter's atmosphere, out into the white-hot sunlight and black emptiness of space. The manual controls were dead, yet the sky wheeled on the vision-screens until the dense star-clouds and filmy nebulae of the Sagittarius region steadied directly ahead.

Then the screens simultaneously blanked-out.

"Rick!" screamed Bren. "Look!"

The transparent sphere of the radar-like instrument showed the entire Solar System receding at an appalling velocity. Within minutes, the outermost fringes of it were beyond range, and the sphere showed nothing.

The ship was not only out of their control—it was travelling at a speed no human device had ever approached.

They were on their way to the world of another star.

Chapter VI

How fast or how far the ship travelled, Scott had no means of measuring. The screens remained blank, the instruments on the panels dead. The three aliens sprawled in their cataleptic stillness, their shark-belly skin gleaming coldly under the harsh light.

With Bren's help, Scott carried the three bodies into the airlock. They were quite light—a hundred, maybe a hundred and ten pounds under Earth gravity—with a rubbery suppleness suggesting a framework of hard cartilage rather than bone. He disconnected the internal controls of the lock, so that the aliens would be unable to re-enter the control-room should they revive.

Time, on that journey, had little meaning. They were completely trapped in the ship, unable to do anything to halt its onward flight towards its unimaginable destination.

They were in no immediate danger. They found fresh water in the ship, and containers of compressed food which, despite

its revolting taste, proved sustaining enough. But all the time, at the back of their minds was the fear of what might happen at the journey's end. They didn't talk about it at first, but after a time they began putting it into words.

"Rick, has it occurred to you they're going to look on us as savages?"

"Savages? They'll probably classify us as animals, unless we put up a damned good show as soon as they make contact. Look at their equipment. There must be a million years of civilization behind it."

She moved close alongside him. "Whatever happens, don't let them separate us. I think I'd go mad if that happened."

He put his arm around her shoulders, but said nothing.

"I wonder what they did with Harlow and the others," she said after a while.

"Let's do the worrying when we get there," he said, wishing his complacency didn't sound so obviously synthetic.

From time to time he entered the airlock and checked the faint pulse in the aliens' bodies, which remained deep in their self-induced unconsciousness—a sort of consciously controlled hibernation.

He spent much of the time pacing up and down the cabin, four paces one way, four paces back. After the first chilling fear had passed away, Bren seemed to accept the situation more calmly than he did. It was she who suggested they use the heating-apparatus of their suits to warm their food, and she experimented with different combinations of the stuff until she achieved meals that were a little less unpalatable.

Scott made an attempt to shave with his pocket-knife, but ended it in a decision to let his beard grow. They both occupied part of the time with a programme of physical exercise, and for the rest of their waking hours they talked. Scott talked about his life on Earth and in Strategic Command, and she about her fantastic existence on Jupiter Base, and in the high-thrust rocket-ships. And again and again they found themselves discussing their future plans, always with the tacit assumption that somehow, *somehow*, they would get out of their present trap.

At last the high-speed drive snapped off with a ringing gong-like vibration throughout the ship, and the screens blazed again with the light of stars.

But what stars?

Not a single constellation was recognizable. Shutting off almost a third of the sky was a diffuse veil of glowing green gas, brightening in denser streaks and whorls where hot blue suns burned within it. It seemed to spread across the void for light-years, the heart of it split by a dark lane of opaque dust.

"Look down there," said Scott.

Below them swung a planet, one edge of it rimmed with a crescent of orange fire from a deep-coloured sun, the rest under the pallid, ghastly glare of the nebula with its chains of far-off blue stars. Three moons copied its weird pattern of light. The ship curved down towards the surface, and they could see that there were oceans on it and ragged continents and the dappled spattering of clouds.

As the atmosphere whistled and roared about the hull, Scott turned Bren to face him and put his hands on her shoulders. "This is it," he said quietly.

"I'm not going to say I'm not frightened," she said. Suddenly she put her arm around him and pulled his body tightly against hers, her head lowered. He ran his fingers through her bright, soft hair, looking over her head at the vision-screens. The descent of the ship was being carefully controlled, a fast, shallow dive across shimmering ocean, ending in an approach run on to what appeared to be a starport on a flat expanse of plain.

The touchdown was smooth, neat, perfect. The hum of the generators died away into an abysmal silence, a silence in which Scott could hear the sound of his own pulse. He reached up and shut off the ceiling lights so that his eyes could become better accustomed to the uncanny glare from outside, a glow far brighter than Terrestrial moonlight, throwing blurred multiple shadows like irregular floodlighting on some gigantic stage. Bren kept her head down, and he could feel her body trembling for a minute or two. Then, without warning, she looked up.

"I'll be all right, now," she said, and a brief squeeze of her arm almost drove the breath out of him. "It's crazy, but I feel safe with you—even here."

He tightened his grip on her shoulder reassuringly, then nodded towards the screens. "Look out there."

"Ships! But there must be hundreds of them."

"As far as you can see. But nothing moving."

"Some of them are colossal. Those great cylindrical things—they could fit a dozen of our ships inside them."

"I guess that's how they took away the J4 and the survey ship. But notice something else—away beyond the ships."

Along the horizon one edge of the sky was lightening in a band of sullen crimson, and against it in ebon silhouette lines of complex, intricate buildings spread as far as the light showed them. Some of the towers and domes gleamed in the lurid dawn with the sheen of bright metal.

A rapping sound made them whirl towards the airlock door. One of the aliens had revived. He peered through the transparent panel, and as they returned his stare he made a swift, flowing gesture with his hand.

"He wants us to open the lock," said Bren.

Scott pointed about the cabin, then waved his hand to indicate the outside atmosphere, picking up one of the space-suits and looking questioningly at the alien. The being tilted his head back with a slow half-closing of the catlike eyes—a gesture which might have been equivalent to the human shaking of the head—then moved his hand to indicate the atmosphere in the cabin, in the lock, and outside, with a rapid sweep to give the impression that all were the same.

Carefully, Scott valved a little of the outside air into the lock, then through into the cabin, breathing cautiously near the inlet-vent. The mixture of gases was the same—a little more rarefied, more oxygen-rich than Earth's, but breathable. He equalized pressures, then opened the inner door of the lock.

All three of the aliens were conscious, staring into the cabin with the silent watchfulness of stalking cats. With the heat-gun, Scott waved them against one wall of the lock.

"Walk through to the outside," he told Bren. "I'll follow you."

The yellow eyes followed her as she passed within three feet of them, and Scott noticed that the trio seemed to shrink against the wall as though in fear of physical violence. He strode through after her, closing both doors of the lock with the external controls. The three not-quite-human faces peered at him through the panel, their expression unreadable.

The air was fresh and cool, with a faint marine tang to it. They moved down the ship to the opening in the hull, and Scott picked up the box containing the jamming-coils. As they passed the sprawled figure of the wrecked robot, his attention caught the heat-gun it was holding. He removed it from the metal clamps and handed it to Bren, who looked at it doubtfully.

They stepped down to the hard ground, which appeared to be a limitless expanse of some kind of cement. The red glare of the dawn was brightening, but most of the light came from the nebula's green veils of frozen flame, and from two crimson moons in different phases. The only sound in the stillness was the mutter of surf on a distant beach.

"Someone guided the ship down," said Scott thoughtfully. "So they know we're here. Why no reception committee?"

"Why should they hurry?" Bren looked at him. "Rick, do you think it's wise to hold that gun in full view?"

"Maybe not." He slipped the compact little heat-gun into his pocket.

"Hold this." She handed him the other gun, and with a quick movement of her fingers opened a panel in the plastic forearm, taking a handkerchief from the cavity inside. She wrapped the gun in it and stowed it among other small belongings within the arm, and when she snapped the panel shut it was impossible to detect it.

"Look!" Scott pointed. The lighted strip of sky was now a volcanic red, lightening moment by moment, and even as they watched the broad crimson arc of the strange sun lifted angrily above the horizon. But against it, above the silhouetted buildings, a dark spot in the air grew steadily larger. Something was flying directly towards them.

Bren moved closer to his side, her actions very light and swift in the eighty-percent-Earth gravity. The flying thing came overhead, hovering, a flattened, fish-shaped aircraft without visible method of lift or propulsion, the lower part of it of metal, the top transparent. It sank vertically to the ground fifty feet away, a wide door sliding open in its nearer side.

Three figures emerged, like metallic giants in armour—the same type of remote-controlled robot the aliens had used aboard the ship. As they strode forward, Scott put his hand on the switch of the coils. He transmitted the jamming-wave for a fraction of a second, and the robots staggered in mid-stride, then came on. Scott kept his hand on the switch. The three machines came within a dozen feet of him, then halted, one of them waving an arm towards the aircraft.

"Keep close to me," said Scott. They walked across towards the open door in the side of the craft, and peered cautiously within. Almost the whole interior was a single ovoid compartment with a flat metal floor. Suddenly, Scott

had the impression that someone had spoken to him. There was no audible sound—just an impression of a mental sound, like a half-heard echo. He turned sharply to Bren.

“What happened then?”

“Did you get it too? I had the feeling someone told me to get in.”

Scott stared around the empty horizon. The robots stood immobile fifty feet away. They had not even turned around. He shrugged his shoulders.

“Guess the place is getting on my nerves. But why both of us at the same time?” From the door, he looked towards the front of the aircraft, then stepped up inside. “There’s nobody aboard.”

Bren sprang lightly up alongside him, and instantly the door slid shut. The ground dropped away and spun as the craft turned towards the city, and a moment later they were skimming across the level cement plain, above the scattered ships. Some kind of internal stasis-field destroyed all sense of movement.

Scott leaped to the front of the cabin, but as far as he could see there were no controls in the vehicle.

“My own fault,” he said. “I might have known they’d use remote control. Now they take us exactly where they want us.”

Bren was looking ahead. “That city,” she said. “It’s huge! But it looks deserted.”

She was right. The serrated skyline began to open out in a three-dimensional view as they sped closer, and soon they were gliding above a broad avenue lined with immense cliffs of buildings. The scale of the entire city was gigantic, its soaring towers and mighty wing-like landing platforms infinitely varied, with a rich vigor of design. But the avenue and the intersecting streets were carpeted with ripples of wind-blown sand.

“It’s been built around the spaceport as a centre,” Scott pointed out. “That suggest anything?”

“You mean—they had space-travel before they built it?”

He nodded. Here and there, collapsed structures lay sprawling in ruins, their metal bright and uncorroded, but matted with dark, vine-like vegetation. In one of the sheltered squares, a sea of sand was crossed by a pair of recent wheel-tracks, like those of a terrestrial automobile, but they saw no other sign of recent habitation.

"Bren, we've missed the show."

"What do you mean?"

"This has been a tremendous civilization—once. But a long time ago. We've missed the peak of it by thousands of years."

The aircraft passed over an immense overgrown park with lakes in it and small hills, then slanted down to a landing in an enormous open square, in front of a quarter-mile long building dominated by a massive colonnade with intricate carving eroded by centuries of wind-driven sand. The door slid silently open, and a faint humming sound within the aircraft ceased. The silence was a tangible presence.

They stepped out onto the rippled sand. A shallow flight of steps ran the full width of the building, and at the head of them a single robot stood like a metallic ant beneath the towering columns, one of its arms flashing in the blood-fed sunlight as it made a beckoning movement.

"Careful of their skins, these fellows," said Scott. "Still confronting us with their machinery."

He began to move towards the steps. Bren overtook him with a quick run, halting him with a numbing grip on his arm. "Rick, wait! It might be a trap."

"It's better to go to them than have them come for us." He glanced at the box containing the jamming-coils. "As long as they use their machines, we can always stop them with this. So let's go in—while we've still got surprise on our side."

They mounted the steps, passing between two of the mighty columns. The robot turned to face them, but did not follow. Leading into the building was a vista of successive archways spanning a great hall dimly lit by diffused red sunlight through a transparent but dusty ceiling.

Their footsteps echoed through an immense emptiness. Grotesque, gigantic statues brooded from the walls like monsters from an alien nightmare. The floor was sheathed in dust, except for a swept strip down the centre edged by the three-toed footprints of robots.

Halfway down the hall Scott stopped, restraining Bren with a hand on her shoulder. A small door had slid open at the far end of the hall, with golden light coming from beyond it. He drew the girl across to the side of the hall as a shadow darkened the door. A robot strode into view, followed by another, then

another. Five, ten, eighteen of them, marching as though part of a single machine.

The file came down the centre of the hall, their metal feet almost silent because of a resilient padding. The first few passed, and then the entire file halted, turned, and began moving in a circle to enclose Scott and Bren. She shrank closer to him, but when the circle was three-quarters complete he switched on the jamming-wave.

The effect was fantastic. Caught in mid-stride, the metal figures stood like an addition to the brooding lines of statues.

"Let's get out," said Bren.

"No! Let's go in! Right now—while we have them off-balance."

He took her arm and hurried her towards the door at the end of the hall. In an ante-room beyond, three more halted robots stood in ludicrous attitudes, and moving towards them were two of the slender alien beings similar to those in the ship. One had his attention on the nearest robot. The other saw Scott and Bren, and he spun to face them, his eyes dilating. He said something to the other—the first words Scott had heard one of them speak—a strange, subtle language like the rustle of wind through leaves.

The two of them backed towards the door through which they had come, but Scott sped towards them. He reached the door, almost within arm's length of them, holding the heat-gun out of sight behind his hip.

There were many of the aliens in the large room beyond the door—between twenty and thirty of them. All of them seemed almost paralysed by his appearance. Acting spontaneously, without time to plan, he stepped forward, standing inside the doorway with his feet apart. He heard Bren come in behind him.

The room was lit by a luminous golden haze near the high ceiling. Along one wall were what appeared to be control-panels, with small television-screens above them—probably the controls of robots. Red sunlight caught high, strange-shaped windows. His eyes swept round the motionless standing and sitting figures of the aliens.

He saw at once that there were differences in them, emphasised by difference in dress. Some were almost naked, and these were similar to the three on the ship. A smaller number, tending to be smaller in build, wore a short, plain type of dress—evidently the female counter part. Others, about half those

in the room, wore a long, hooded, cloak-like garment that showed only their large eyes, which looked vague and dreamy, regarding Scott with neither aggressiveness nor fear.

He thrust his hand towards his chest. "Rick Scott," he said with all the impressiveness he could command. But the aliens didn't seem particularly impressed. Several of the tall cloaked figures moved forward and stood looking at him, and again he had that curious feeling of someone speaking to him without audible sound.

One of the naked beings with the slit-pupil yellow eyes came forward beside the other group.

"Rick Scott," he said with an outlandish accent. He waved one of his slim, six-fingered hands towards his own body in an imitation of Scott's gesture. "Vahi."

Scott bowed slightly, and the alien duplicated his movement, adding a wave of both hands. "We speak?"

Scott was thunderstruck. It was English with a weird accent, but nevertheless it was English.

"Where did you learn to speak that?" he asked.

"From the Orlu."

"Who is the Orlu?"

"He come." Vahi nodded towards Scott's right hand, which he still held behind him, holding out his own hand. "Give gun. Not needed."

Scott shook his head, smiling. Vahi stayed with his hand extended, his eyes unwinking, compelling. Scott stared coldly back at him for a full minute. From time to time the alien blinked by flicking a translucent inner eyelid like that of an owl. At last he made a rolling movement of his head that might have been equivalent to a shrug of the shoulders, and turned his attention to Bren.

"Give gun," he said, holding out his hand with the same gesture he had used with Scott. The girl smiled innocently, holding her arms away from her sides. The alien looked from one arm to the other, then reached out and touched the left forearm. Looking down into her eyes, he rapped his fingers against the hollow plastic. "Give gun. Give small knife."

She jerked her arm away from him with a sudden twist of her body, and with a violent thrust of her hand sent him spinning back against the others standing behind him. Every one of the aliens seemed to tense, and so did Scott. A whisper of voices rustled through the room like a breeze through a forest. Vahi

did not move, but the black pupils of his eyes dilated until they almost covered the iris, like those of a cat about to spring.

"Wait," he said. "The Orlu come."

Scott felt the perspiration trickling down his back. Nobody moved. Bren stepped close to him.

"Rick, they must be able to read minds."

"Maybe he sees in different wavelengths—sees through plastic."

"But the knife ! It's a small folding knife. I thought of it when I thought of the gun."

Scott looked slowly about the room. There were twenty-seven of the aliens, and twenty-seven pairs of eyes regarded him and the girl with the fixed, void stare of a tiger's eyes.

"You know," he said quietly, "I think only some of them are telepathic. The ones with the cloaks. You notice it's the others, the naked ones, who speak now and then."

"Listen ! Can you hear something ?"

He became aware of a thin, whining sound, coming from somewhere far away. It changed in pitch and intensity, but gradually its source seemed to be coming nearer.

"Sounds like an electric runabout," he said.

"Like the one Professor Harlow had on Triton."

"Maybe it is. They must have brought the ships here—why not the car ?"

The sound stopped outside the building. After half a minute they heard footsteps coming down the great hall—neither the measured stride of a robot nor the gliding shuffle of one of the aliens. When the steps reached the doorway, Scott turned.

"Harlow !"

The archaeologist strode forward, grasping Scott by the hand. His gaunt figure looked tanned and fit, and he now wore a ragged white beard. He bowed formally to Bren.

"Excellent. I'm glad to meet you two again—I've been expecting you."

Scott had a fantastic sense of anti-climax. Here—halfway across the Galaxy for all he knew—the man was greeting them as casually as if they had called into his home on a Sunday afternoon drive on Earth. Harlow lifted his head and said something to the aliens in a fair copy of their hissing, rustling language.

Vahi moved forward and stood in front of Harlow. "People afraid," he said. "These two have guns."

Harlow dropped a hand on his shoulder with the aplomb of a patriarch. "They won't use them," he said. The alien seemed immediately satisfied, but as he glanced around the room Scott wasn't so sure of the feelings of the others.

"Come with me," said Harlow. He led them out of the room and down the echoing gloom of the great dusty hall, and when Scott glanced over his shoulder he saw that none of the aliens were following.

"I wonder what stopped their machines," mused Harlow as they passed the motionless robots.

"I jammed their signals with a high-frequency coil."

"Splendid. That would be magic to them. They know nothing of electricity."

Scott looked at him in sharp disbelief.

"It's a fact. They use these machines, but they couldn't repair one. But I'll explain when we get to my place."

Outside stood his four-seater runabout, as out-of-place among the Cyclopean buildings as a radio in a Babylonian tomb. They climbed aboard, and he drove across the wind-rippled sand of the great square, past carved facades of stone and metal and tangles of grotesque blue-leaved vegetation, along wide, desolate avenues where the red sunlight threw long shadows.

"What happened to the team from the survey ship?" asked Scott.

"They're here. They got an aircraft going, and Sanin's already explored half the planet. He's gone north for a few days. Ah, here we are."

He swung round a corner on rising ground. Ahead of them spread the flat immensity of the port, bordered by a white strip of beach where surf thundered beyond groves of blue casuarina-like trees. Almost the first thing that caught Scott's attention was the J4 and the Alliance survey ship, a few hundred yards away, not erect on their fins but lying on the ground. He turned to point them out to Bren, but she was staring with shining eyes at the sea. He followed her gaze.

"Rather like our Pacific," he said. "Down the islands."

"It's glorious." She didn't take her eyes away from the sand and the surging water. "We have no seas on Jupiter."

Scattered along the low headland were what appeared to be a number of private houses overlooking the beach, strikingly imaginative in their design, although some were choked with vine-like plants. Harlow swung the runabout to a stop beneath a wing-like veranda on a house that had been cleaned.

Within minutes, they were sitting in a large room with a single sweep of window around three sides, drinking coffee from the stores of one of the terrestrial ships.

"I'm helping these people re-establish themselves," said Harlow.

"*Helping them?*" Scott stared at him. "The biggest threat Mankind has ever had to face! *You're helping them!*"

"Threat?" Harlow waved his hand to include the city and the spaceport. "There's no threat here. Take the runabout, drive anywhere in the city. What will you find? Only a ghost of what this race once was."

He sipped his coffee. "Imagine all the buildings of New York deserted, and a handful of the remote descendants of the human race living in huts by the lakes in Central Park, none of them knowing how to operate the buses, the subways, the telephones. And none of them caring a damn. Got that picture?"

"Yes—but why? How?"

Harlow leaned back in his chair. "This race reached a level of development comparable with ours long ago—something like a hundred thousand years ago. I didn't arrive at that figure from their recorded history—that collapsed long ago—but Sanin made the estimate from some radioactive decay tests, and I see no reason to doubt it. They hit a peak higher than ours in some ways—they had empires that stretched from here almost to the Galactic Centre, with this merely an outlying colony. But then the collapse set in."

"What happened?" asked Bren.

"They took a wrong turn. They began communicating directly from mind to mind. Telepathy. It became common, then universal."

"But surely that was a step forward," objected Scott.

Harlow nodded slowly. "Every step forward has danger hidden within it. Remember, it was the massiveness and the armour of the dinosaurs that led to their extinction, the over-systematization of the Roman Empire that led to its collapse. And so, this direct mind-to-mind communication had within it a trap. A gigantic trap.

"Loss of individuality was one of the factors. For another—they no longer relied on written records. New art-forms flourished for a while, but science came to a dead-end. Any inventions after that were simple. You see why? For really intricate design, or for complex mathematical work, you need

drawings, specifications, written reports, analyses. Their science had already given them virtually everlasting machinery, so they didn't mind—but from then on it was all downhill, downhill for a thousand centuries."

"Yet they still navigate space," broke in Scott. "They still found *us*."

"Ah, yes. But listen! In fairly recent generations, more and more of these people have been born without the telepathic faculty. Throwbacks. Degenerates, by their standards. But when there were enough of these throwbacks, they developed a language. The old individuality, the old drive began to come back. It's taken some of them to the stars again, in machines built centuries ago from practically everlasting metals made of synthetic atoms.

"Getting back to the idea of future savages living in wigwams in Central Park, imagine such people learning to fly an airliner. They couldn't have built it, but given enough trial and error they could fly it. Right?"

"It's possible, I suppose."

"Not an exact analogy, but roughly that's what happened. They're children playing with complex machinery. No longer ahead of us, but far, far behind—in the midst of a tremendous, forgotten technology."

Scott looked out across the spaceport. "And it could be ours. It could take us to the farthest stars."

"Wait!" Harlow held up his hand. "Are you thinking of flying one of these ships to Earth, loaded with all the scientific data you can find here?" He shook his head. "Think a little further. Do you imagine Man is ready for it?"

"By now, they have one of these ships—the small one we found on Triton."

Harlow nodded towards the port. "Do you think those ships were built at the same time? Remember, they were made to last indefinitely. They represent stages of development spreading over thousands of years, and that ship on Triton was only a short-range craft. They took it there in a much larger ship, the one they used to bring us back with the J4 and Sanin's ship both on board. That's plenty for Man to have for the present—ships like that could take him to some of the nearer star-systems, a few light-years away."

"Eventually, they'll reach here," said Scott.

Harlow laughed, rising to his feet. "Haven't you figure where we are? That mass of green fire in the sky is the Lagoon Nebula—sixteen hundred parsecs from Earth! By the time Man reaches here, let's hope he knows what he's doing." He moved towards the door. "I'm going to radio Sanin. I'll see you later. By the way, we cleaned out some of the houses along the headland—take your pick." He waved as he went out.

Scott sat looking after him. "Sixteen hundred parsecs," he said in a flat voice. "Five thousand light-years!"

Bren sprang up gaily and seized him by the hand, pulling him to his feet. "Come on. Let's look at those houses."

The day was long and warm, with a fresh breeze off the sea. They explored some of the houses, moving the metallic and crystalline furniture about. They walked along the beach and discovered strange shells. He gave her her first lesson in swimming, the high salinity of the water making it surprisingly easy to float. They ate a meal which they made from food Harlow had got from the aliens. In the evening they climbed to the highest points of the headland and watched the pounding surf shimmering under two of the crimson moons.

"You know," she said, "I'd like to live here always."

He looked up at the sky. "Five thousand light-years from Earth. A United Earth! That's what we'd always hoped for. And the only thing that's united them is the threat of an invasion that will never come."

"I suppose they'll forget it in time."

"Forget?" Suddenly he slammed his clenched fist into his palm. "Bren! This race here on this planet! What was it they lacked, all through those centuries of decline?"

"Incentive?"

He shook his head. "They lacked an opponent!" He was all at once filled with enthusiasm again. "Suppose we make occasional journeys to the Solar System—intervals of a year or two. Just displaying one of these ships, enough to keep the idea of an unknown opponent alive! If we could recruit a few others, it's a project that could be kept up for centuries—a shadow opponent forever retreating across the Galaxy as Man advances!"

Her eyes were dark in the moonlight. "You're playing God again. And yet—it sounds fun. So much more fun than a freight run."

—Wynne Whiteford



Clifford Reed, a South African born in Durban, came to London nine years ago primarily for the education of his son. He is an engineer by profession but has been writing short stories for many years, recently turning to the science fiction field in which he has been interested ever since he can remember.

CHILDREN OF THE STARS

by CLIFFORD C. REED

Illustrated by LEWIS

Chapter I

The President of Mars shook his head. "Barring a miracle," he answered, "we'll be at war with Venus within a year."

"What about Earth?" the Minister of Justice demanded. "She could make those damned fools on Venus see sense."

The President laid his hand on a despatch before him. "This is a transcription," he told them. "'The Council of Earth regrets the strained position which has developed between Mars and Venus, and hopes that a solution acceptable to both parties will speedily be found. It would be contrary to the established principles of Earth to intervene in a disagreement

between two sovereign members of the Union, but she remains ready to offer her services, as a mediator, should this be desired.' ”

The Minister of Defence exploded. “ Damn her principles!” he flared. “ It’s Earth’s *duty* to intervene. She knows Mars can’t stand against Venus.”

The President shrugged. “ It’s either stand,” he replied, “ or be stood on.”

The Minister of Justice coughed. “ Since the odds are weighted against us,” he ventured, “ anything we do to reduce those odds, however slight, must strengthen our chances.”

The President sighed. “ No one,” he answered, “ would dare to dispute your logic.”

The Minister flushed at his colleagues’ laughter. Nevertheless he persisted. “ I have a suggestion,” he told them. “ The numbers are small, perhaps trifling. But, in proportion to our population, they are large.”

“ Come to the point, man,” the Minister of Defence snapped.

“ Venus sympathisers. If war comes we cannot afford to tie up men to guard against the danger of sabotage.”

The Minister of Propaganda raised his eyebrows. “ What are you suggesting? That we get rid of them?” He drew his finger across his throat. “ We’d lose all outside sympathy ourselves if we did anything so mad as that.”

“ I *don’t* mean that!” The proposer glared. “ I am suggesting that we round them up, now, and ship them out.”

“ Where?” The President was interested.

“ Outside the Solar system. Isolate them. Together with any other individuals we’d be better off without.”

The Minister of Defence looked round the table. “ It’d mean losing two ships. I’m against that. Even temporarily. Better than that—charter two interstellar freighters. One to set down equipment, one to follow with the prisoners. Expensive, but, we’d be insuring against trouble makers who could do untold damage.” He turned to the President for a decision.

The President nodded.

The prisoner with the big nose and the long, narrow head shifted in his place. He recognised the ship growing steadily larger on the screen as the tender closed the distance between them. He should know her, he reflected bitterly. He’d got his mate’s ticket on the *Martian Enterprise*. As a free man. Now that she’d been converted to a prison transport he was going

aboard her again. As a convict. He shuddered, unable to control himself, understanding properly, for the first time, how his situation had altered. He was no longer Captain Burke Halwell. He was a number, M.V. 29, a caged animal. To be locked away, and ordered about, and disposed of. To be handled as one handled a wild beast, for the rest of his life, because it was not safe to handle him in any other fashion. Because of the "M.V." stencilled on his prison clothing—Murderer ; Violent !

"Not quite the same as the last time you took off, eh ?" the short, gross man to whom he was chained whispered.

Slowly Halwell turned his head, looking down at Marth. Slowly he nodded. "Not quite the same for you either," he said.

Ex-Artificer Marth's small eyes blinked. His small lips pursed. "Not like the next time will be, either, Mister," he breathed.

Halwell's mouth twisted. "'Next time' meaning the next world ?"

Marth smiled. It was not a pleasant smile. There was a threat in it, and viciousness, but what struck Halwell most was the confidence. "We'll talk about it again," the small man told him, then turned his head away.

The tender's engines stopped, and they drifted towards the *Martian Enterprise*. The freighter's cables shot out towards them, the magnetic grips clanged against the tender's outer plates, and they were drawn forward. Within a few minutes the two vessels were locked together, port to port, and the warder in the tender was marshalling his charges.

"Each pair forward when I call their names," he instructed. "Don't try leaving your gear behind. You'll be the one to suffer if you do. The only way you'll get out of this trip is to drop dead now." A crew member behind him undogged the lock, revealing a similar opening in the flank of the *Martian Enterprise*. "Ready," the warder warned. He dropped his eyes to the list he carried. "Colla," he called. "Birtz."

Reluctantly two convicts moved forward, each dragging a bag in his free hand. They squeezed through the port of the tender and disappeared inside the ship.

"Hurry," the warder yelled. "Next two. Halwell and Marth."

They were through into their new quarters, were waved forward by armed guards clustered about the lock.

Halwell grunted. The after hold in which they stood had been transformed into a spider web of galleries and cages, welded and bolted to span the entire hold, and stretch fore and aft along it. Instinctively he began working out how many trips the tender must make to where the *Martian Enterprise* swung in her orbit before this hold was filled. At least five. And what about the other hold? Was that also to be crammed?

But he was given no time to stand and wonder. "Up that ladder," a guard barked. "Get on with it."

They climbed. They slipped the loops of the bags over their free wrists, and gripped the rails. Their hands linked by the chain clawed at the rungs. They heaved themselves up to the landing.

"Keep going," another guard rasped. "You're not here for a rest."

Cursing, they obeyed. Somehow they got up the second flight, leaned against the rail. A warder on this level pushed Marth roughly. "On to the end," he snapped. "Into that last cage." He slapped the club he carried against the rails. "Unless you want to feel this," he hinted. He drove them on. The last cage held the two men, Colla and Birtz, who had been first out of the tender.

"Four rats in each cage," the guard announced. "Get in!" He put a thick hand on Halwell's back, and heaved. Tapped Marth's elbow with his club, hustled them in. As they turned, raging, he swung the door. Metal rang on metal, and a spring locked clicked. The guard moved back to the stair to await the next pair.

"Someday—!" Colla snarled.

Marth smiled. "You look like the sort that'd have the nerve," he said ingratiatingly. "Maybe you'd be interested if I told you I had an idea about that?"

Halwell dropped down on the nearest bunk. It was all right for Marth to bluff himself. But the way the authorities had arranged everything didn't hold out much hope of escape. Here they were in the pens, and the guards had not yet removed the chains. No, there wasn't any hope. Suppose they did attack a warder. There were other warders, all with guns. They would only make their position worse.

He sat staring at his feet, forcing himself to face the truth. There was only one person to blame for his present position, and that was himself. Because he hadn't been able to stay

swindled. Because he'd had to go demanding his share, and, when that was refused, and Lewin's partners had got tough, he'd had to be tougher. He'd pulled his own gun.

That was what had told most against him at the trial ; he'd gone armed to confront the man who had cheated him.

His memory played the incidents like a video screen—the scuffle, the shots. One partner sliding down the wall near the window, clutching at the frame, fighting to keep on his feet, and failing. The second partner, after Lewin himself went down, turning in the doorway to fire, turning too slowly. Lewin's new wife, Ella, standing, enormous eyed, clutching her robe around her, saying nothing.

She'd said plenty afterwards, Burke Halwell reflected grimly. In court. When the prosecution came up with the idea that she'd paid Halwell to force the issue, and had charged her as well. Because she and Halwell had known each other before. The prosecution had dug up a lot about her past, and his, and the jury hadn't found the prosecution's theory far-fetched. They had convicted both the defendants.

Where was Ella now ? He shook his head. What did that matter ? There wasn't anything either of them could do to wipe out the judgment. The only thing they could do was to endure it.

Later, a month out from Mars, he found it harder to be so philosophical.

"Not long to go now," he heard Marth whisper.

Halwell turned his head. Colla and Birtz, the two Venus sympathisers, were listening eagerly to the fat man.

Halwell's hand came up, clamping on Marth's wrist. "Are you just playing your mouth ?" he grated. "Or have you really got something ?"

Marth stared back coldly. "If you've come out of your coma at last," he answered, "then I've got something. Do what I say, *when* I say, and we've got the ship."

"How ?" Halwell demanded. He leaned towards the fat man. "They won't give it to you just by sitting up and begging."

Marth stiffened. Involuntarily Halwell tensed. He must have been blind not to see that Marth was not normal ; was eaten up with vanity. It probably went deeper than that. It probably amounted to a mania. In which case Marth could be dangerous. Not only to the guards. But to anyone whom he felt had slighted him.

"Forget the crack," Halwell said quickly. "If you've got a plan, you can count on me."

He waited, watching the fury die out of the pig-like eyes, to be replaced by calculation. "We've got to count on you," Marth conceded. "Because you're the only man, once we take over, who can bring us where we want to go."

Out of the corner of his eye Halwell noticed how Colla's heavy face drooped as Marth spoke. Halwell guessed the reason. He had come across men of Colla's stamp before. Marth, he thought, had probably promised Colla the task of "persuading" their navigator once the break-out succeeded. Colla's face showed how much he was disappointed now that Halwell declared he would not need "persuasion."

Halwell did not let any of this show. But he vowed he would not turn his back on Colla in the future. Meanwhile he looked at Marth. "How many of us are you needing?" he asked.

Birtz, bulky, dark, more brawn than brain, grunted. "You're the last," he replied. "The ones next door, and us. That's enough . . ."

The ex-captain looked past him into the next pen. In that cell were two Venus supporters, Balk and Jon; a giant named Jonson, convicted of smuggling, and a lean, smiling man by the name of Hengsey who had been an agent of a vice ring on Mars.

"How do we do it?" he asked, and listened as Marth explained.

The moment came three days after the *Martian Enterprise* had exchanged signals with the first supply ship now on its way back to Mars. When it was the turn of the occupants of the two cells to collect up the eating dishes. The three duty guards were relaxed. The eight convicts moved with the utensils, stacking them by the ladders, whence they would be moved to where the cooks waited. After which the eight would return to their cells, and be locked away. The three warders leaned back on the rails, perfunctorily watching the dish carriers.

On the ladder leading down from the top level Halwell pretended to slip. Birtz swore, grabbed frantically at him, hung on. The guard beside them, the guard on the level below, the last guard on the floor of the hold, all three had their attention caught, and held. For as long as was needed for them to be taken from behind, each with a convict imprisoning his arms, each with a convict's merciless fingers about his throat. For just as long as was needed to make sure they would never raise the alarm.

Three guards—three guns, three clubs. Marth, Colla, and Balk had the guns. Birtz and Halwell, recovering from their trapeze act, coming last to the floor, were still unarmed. There was awed silence from the other prisoners. Marth turned, lifted his gun, then laid a finger to his lips. The prisoners understood. Their turn would come when the shock troops came back. They settled back to wait, gloating.

"The engine room," Marth rasped. He led the way. The others trod at his heels. There were other guards to be taken first. Half a dozen of them, eating a meal before they relieved those on duty. They did not finish their meal. And now all the prisoners of the band were armed.

The assault had developed in silence. If they could take this part of the ship, Halwell thought, without the bridge being alerted, they had an even chance. They would have a position from which to bargain. Halwell's hope mounted. Ahead of him, Marth leaped through to their objective.

In that instant, all Halwell's doubts came back. For Marth was firing, Colla was firing, and Balk. As Halwell reached the scene the alarms screamed. He cursed. Marth had thrown away the advantage of surprise. The one advantage they must have since they were outnumbered. Was Marth crazy?

But the small man was at the controls, viciously dragging the body of one of the victims from his place. His fat fingers darted forward, pushed a switch. Then, all haste gone, he turned about, and looked at his followers, and smiled.

Halwell grunted. He had to hand it to the little swine. He'd actuated the airtight bulkheads, and locked them. If they could not go on to capture the rest of the ship, no more could the bridge come back to counter what they had accomplished. For the moment it was a deadlock.

The inter-com crackled. "This is the captain," it announced. "Before any lives are lost I wish to speak to the leader of the men who are attempting to break out. Answer me, please. Who are you?"

"You'll never know," Marth laughed. His hand went out, selected another switch, and pulled it over. "As from now!" he finished.

Halwell's forward lunge was too late. The switch was over before he realised what Marth was intending. "That's murder," he snarled. "There wasn't any need for that."

Marth stared back. His face was shining, his small eyes glittered. "So," he commented. "You're squeamish, eh?" He lifted his gun, centring it on Halwell's chest. "You don't like my way of doing things."

"Doing what?" Jonson asked. "What did you do?"

Marth smirked. "I opened the vents," he answered. "That is standard procedure when a ship has touched down on the apron. To allow any foul air to escape." He nodded to Jonson. "Only, since we're in space, there isn't any air outside. Just a vacuum. A big, big vacuum. That makes the process quicker."

"Must have pulled the air out like a flash." Hengsey licked his lips. "Those guys in that part of the ship—they're dead. Just like that."

"Unless they're still holding their breath," Marth agreed, "they're dead." His face was exultant. "I said I would take this ship. I have taken it. Without loss to ourselves. Some of you maybe thought I could not do that. So now you know better. Some of you, maybe, like our pilot, don't like the way I did it."

Colla laid a hand on Halwell's shoulder. "Shall I work him over?" he begged. "Make him learn who's boss, eh?"

Marth nodded graciously. "Just enough," he agreed. "We need him in good shape, remember."

Colla chuckled. He swung Halwell all the way round, outside the group, so that he himself was between the objector and Marth. "Now," he said.

Abruptly his face changed. He saw the gun in Halwell's grip. He saw nothing else. Before anyone could intervene, Halwell, hard faced, his stomach tight with rage, fired again. The shell flung Marth back, laid him sprawling. He should have been dead, but his vitality was too great. He glared up, his face a mixture of hate and disbelief. Deliberately Halwell finished him off.

He stood, half crouching, not looking down at the two he had killed. "The crazy fool!" He flung the words at the others, daring them to argue. "For what he did, if they ever catch up with us, we'll all pay. To the limit. There isn't a court anywhere, war or no war, that wouldn't order us executed." He set his lips. "If the operator on the bridge had time to get a message out, and I'm betting he had enough time, there isn't one spot in the Solar System that isn't too hot for every one of us after this."

Hengsey grunted. "If that means we can't go back, can't hide out somewhere, that leaves only one place. Outside the System." His voice dropped. "How about that?" he asked Halwell. "What chance is there of finding a world for ourselves?"

Halwell shrugged.

"If there might be such a place," Hengsey persisted, "could you get us there in one piece?"

The men waited for Halwell's answer.

"I can try," he told them. "Provided we can raise a crew. A crew that'll obey orders."

He stepped back, slid the gun in his belt, eyed them sardonically. "It's not the safest thing to try," he warned. "A faster-than-light drive ship isn't designed to land. It's built to orbit to operate with tenders. The same way they brought us aboard."

"But—it can be done?" Jonson probed.

Halwell nodded. "It's been done. Of necessity. Using the auxiliary engines only." He rubbed his chin. "Call it a reasonable chance. But don't put it any higher than that."

Hengsey grinned. "For me, that's better than being executed if we tried hiding out somewhere in the Trinity." He looked at the others. "Anyone feel differently?" he asked. When no one spoke Hengsey smiled again. "Looks like you're elected," he said to Halwell. He paused. "Captain," he added.

Burke Halwell's gaze moved from one to another. Finally he nodded. His hand went out, and pushed back the switch which Marth had thrown.

Chapter II

Four hours later the new captain's subordinates came together on the bridge where Burke waited. Now the *Martian Enterprise* moved on an altered course; a course which would take them ever further from the chance of interception.

"We know the worst," he told his officers. "The operator *did* get a message through. Enough of one to make sure that Mars knows we've got away. Which knocks out the idea of picking up the stores that have been dumped."

"We can't risk that?" Jonson queried. "Nip in. Nip out. We could handle any guards that were there, I'd say. The only

thing that could hit us would be a cruiser, and there won't be any of those. Mars won't pull a combat ship out of her line just for us. Not with a war starting."

Burke shook his head. "It isn't starting," he corrected. "They beamed the news just before you came up. The war's off."

He was watching the three Venus sympathisers. His hand lay next his gun. He looked at them with level eyes. "So it isn't going to pay you to start another battle," he told them. "To force us to make for Venus. Where you'd be political heroes." He shook his head. "Where you *would* have been political heroes," he amended. "It's different now. With peace settled you're escaped prisoners and murderers on Venus as well as Mars. You're in this as deeply as the rest of us."

Hengsey's wide mouth twisted. He looked at Jonson, who nodded. "Just one nice, happy family," Hengsey commented. He dropped down on the nearest couch. "I'll admit I'll sleep easier for that news," he confessed. "You guys not having a good reason now for cutting our throats."

But Burke saw how Hengsey's hand stayed close to his gun; that Jonson, also, had not relaxed.

"If that's straight—?" the good-looking, smooth faced Jon questioned.

The speaker crackled. "Attention all ships. Freighter *Martian Enterprise*, converted to penal transport, believed in hands of escaped convicts. All shipping warned lookout and report." The bearings that followed were corrections from the report of their sister ship.

"They won't get us on those," Burke reassured them. He stared at Jon. "Well?" he challenged.

"Looks like you're right," Balk answered, and Jon echoed this opinion. Only Birtz, sombre, black bearded, did not answer. Burke did not press him. Either Birtz would come round, or he would not. There were more urgent worries.

By the end of what would normally have been one watch a scratch crew had been got together; had, somehow, been given some idea of their duties. There were, a dismayed Burke found, only a pitiful handful of the five hundred aboard whom he could use. Few of those convicted of crime had ever qualified in a trade. Which should not have surprised him. Not many men who had mastered a calling turned to crime.

Criminals were generally those who lacked the fibre needed to endure the discipline of training. The best he could discover were no more than handymen. Of necessity he had been forced to impress the Venus contingent; select from this group all those with any mechanical or technical skill. It was going to be a tough trip, he told himself.

The biggest problem, as he saw it, would be to control those whom he could not set to work. The logical place for them was the cells, but he could not keep them under lock and key. Unfortunately. For there was no knowing what damage idleness and boredom might not generate among those whose instincts were opposed to authority in any shape or form.

He felt a sneaking sympathy for the government on Mars which had lightened its burden at his expense. Particularly, he thought wryly, by their putting women on the same ship.

It was only after he had accepted the command, when they were making their way forward, later, that he had realised what he had let himself in for.

In that moment of acceptance he had faced up to certain difficulties. He could navigate. But he was not an engineer. He had no more than a nodding acquaintance with the engines. The first, most compelling need was for men to staff this section. He had sent Jonson and Balk to find such men.

"They'll be going crazy in the cells," he told them. "But make them listen before you open up. Make them understand we're on our own. We're a sitting duck for any warship or interplanetary customs craft unless we get away from this area. So, unless they want to find themselves back under guard, they'd better come up with some workers."

If they had not had the good fortune to find a man like Levy among the prisoners, Burke reflected, they might just as well have given up there and then. But the thin, lank-haired Levy, coming into the engine room for the first time, at the head of those Jonson and Balk had found, had not looked like a pressed man. His eyes had moved about intelligently, and, observing this, Burke had lifted a finger. "Know anything about engines?" he had asked.

Levy's heavy lids drooped. "Do I get fired if we blow up?" he countered.

Burke liked this. "It'll keep you from being bored," he suggested.

"You've got a point," Levy admitted. He looked at Burke. "You taking over?" he asked. Burke nodded. "Captain,

weren't you? Before this happened?" Burke nodded again. Levy grunted. "If you're ready to risk it—!" he said.

In this way, for better or worse, Burke had got his crew.

Leaving Levy organising his squad, he had gone forward.

As he had expected, he had had to get tough with the excitement-crazy released prisoners. He had had to threaten to shoot any who left the hold without prior permission from him. He had appointed Jonson to maintain discipline throughout the ship, and Jonson, eyeing the crowd with grim promise, had made no demur about accepting this responsibility. The convicts had looked at Burke like wolves, but they had not dared defy the guns the party carried. Resentfully they made way for the group to pass through into the next hold.

There, involuntarily, the party had halted. At the sight of the cages imprisoning the women. Women who clung to the bars, staring out at them with a fearful, pent-up frenzy which until now, they had been terrified to reveal.

But now, now they could see their deliverers, control vanished. They went mad together, laughing, shrieking thrusting their arms between the bars, in a bedlam of piercing sound. The rescuers froze.

Burke waited. Until they fell silent, uneasy before his bleak, impassive silence. Then he spoke.

"This ship has changed hands," he told them. "But—we are still in danger. Unless we can get away from here fast. The best way you can help is by staying where you are." He checked the immediate howl of protest. "The cells will be opened. But, no one is to leave this hold. If I find one of you interfering with the crew, in any way, back you all go under lock and key. If you understand that, the doors will be opened. For as long as you remember what I have just said."

He gave them no chance to protest. "Mr. Hengsey," he barked.

"Captain?" Hengsey responded.

"See to that. Post a guard at each exit to see that my orders are carried out. Report to the bridge when that is done."

He turned to move on. Then halted. He recognised a woman in one of the cages. She, too, stood gripping the bars. But there was no wild delight on her face. Only anger. Directed at him. He looked back at her, noting the change

in her appearance. It was not only the absence of glamorous clothes, of delicately applied make-up, of blending perfectly with an expensive, desirable background. There were lines on her face that had not been there three months before. Yet, at the same time, there was a greater resemblance to the Ella he had known five years ago. Before she had started on the life which was to make her a millionaire's wife, and a woman convicted of plotting her husband's death so that she could inherit his estate.

On the strength of that resemblance he beckoned Birtz forward. "Open that cage," he ordered.

He addressed Ella. "If I remember correctly," he said coldly, "you were a qualified calculator, first grade. How much do you remember of that work?"

"Everything," she answered curtly. "Why?"

"There's only one navigator," he answered. "As Captain, I have enough to keep me busy. With some training you could be helpful. We'd all have a better chance of coming out of this alive."

Her mouth twisted. "Is it worth it?" she asked.

Burke's mouth tautened. "When you quit feeling sorry for yourself," he snapped, "you'll learn the answer to that." He jerked his head. "You can pick up your gear, and come along, or you can be the only one to stay in your cage." He paused. "Well?"

She glared. For one moment she seemed about to defy him. Until she saw Birtz's hand go out to slam the door, and she bent swiftly, and lifted her bag.

She fell in beside the good looking Jon, and the procession continued. As far as the bulkhead leading to the bridge. Burke cut Levy in on the inter-com. "Red light on the compartment indicator panel," he said. "Switch to green."

As the steel door slid sideways he looked down at Ella. "You stay here."

He tapped Balk's arm. "Get a squad," he instructed. He forced himself to keep his voice flat. He had known some of the men who had been manning the bridge when Marth had done what he did. "Pick those with strong stomachs," he finished. "There's some cleaning up to be done."

The girl beside him gasped, understanding suddenly what had taken place in the section she was not to enter. She shrank away, looking at them with horror.

Burke shook his head. "Not our doing," he told her. His face was grim. "The swine who did it, before anyone could stop him, is dead."

She waited, until Balk brought men back, and they all went through. She waited, for what seemed to her an eternity, until the men returned. She kept her face turned aside, not looking at their faces, until Jonson, his bearded face pale, touched her arm. "Captain says to come," he muttered.

Now, four hours later, looking round at them all, hearing the Venus contingent admit the common interest, Burke felt weariness bearing heavily on him. It had been a hard day. A long, hard day. With the certainty of a harder day to come. When the freedom which they seemed to have gained was brought into focus. By the fact that there was no real freedom for them until they had made planetfall on a liveable world. They might have to go on for months, always with the chance that some Interplanetary unit might intercept them. And destroy them if they did not surrender the instant they were challenged.

They must live with that danger. They must live with themselves until that danger was past. There was no saying how long the waiting would last.

He put this to the others. "We can't afford any quarrels. That means the men and the women must be kept apart. It's your job to make that stick. I agree it's hard. But it's better than the trouble that'd start if they mixed."

Making his daily tour of inspection, weighing up every gain in the shape of one man or another performing his work with something better than perfunctory obedience, Burke felt hope grow. Trying with a patience unnatural to him to instil into each man that pride in his calling which a volunteer would have naturally. He did not find this approach easy. He had to drive himself, force himself to treat shortcomings as something to be corrected gently.

"Janus," Ella called him after one occasion.

"Meaning?" he queried.

"The two-faced god."

"I know the allusion," Burke answered. "But how does it apply?"

"Because you're a different person in space. You're harder. More like a machine."

He shrugged. "I have to be." He nodded. "Space is like the sea. We took our traditions from the sea. It's a similar calling. On land, you can afford to be careless. At sea, and in space, if you're careless, you're generally dead as a result. Or someone else is."

She put out her hand. "Don't start imagining I'm criticising," she said. "It's your job, being captain. Your responsibility. I'm glad it's not mine. But, if your attitude to these others provokes resentment, then—resistance, and they destroy you, I shall suffer also. We all shall. Since there's no one to take your place. So, for the sake of my own neck, I'm telling you how I see it. That these folk are not machines. They're not volunteers. In other words, it might be wise to let the crew know that, compared with everyone else, they're your favourites."

It was not surprising, Burke thought, that Ella had risen so high. She had the most practical brain of any person he had ever met.

There was one man, however, who defeated all his efforts, who's expression never showed less than a closed-up, embattled suspicion.

"Someday," Hengsey observed after one of their meetings broke up, "Birtz is going to decide he's tired of co-operating."

Jonson grunted. "Maybe we shouldn't wait for him to make up his mind." He jerked his thumb. "Put him outside, an' let him try walking back to Venus."

"If your brain was as strong as your muscle," Ella commented tartly, "you'd be the biggest genius who ever lived. Don't you know there're some who reckon it's Birtz who should be running this outfit? Do you want to buy trouble?"

"You mean, not to push things?" Jonson looked at her with admiration. "Is that right?"

"Not unless Birtz does," Burke agreed.

"Not unless he's *going* to," Hengsey amended. "No sense in giving him the first break."

"Now I know," Jonson rumbled amiably. He went out.

Hengsey sighed. "He tries hard, Jonson does," he complained. "Always making out he's dumb. Which he isn't. Jonson, before the law got next to him that last time, was always two jumps ahead. They faked the charge they put him away on." He stood up. "It's time I did some circulating also," he said.

Ella and Burke sat on after Hengsey had gone.

"When we get wherever we're going," Ella said suddenly, "what happens then?"

"Settle down," he answered. "A lot will depend on how soon we find somewhere. If it's within the next few days, we can afford to be particular. Longer than that, we'll have to start economising. I've delayed doing that. But I can't delay much longer. Not more than another month, or we'll have to take whatever comes our way."

"Food?" Ella asked.

"Check," Burke confirmed. He smiled grimly. "They calculated how long the run should last; added for contingencies. Since we've not stuck to the route they plotted we've got to stretch the stores."

"What about yeast?"

He shrugged. "We *can* supplement. Yes. But, only up to a point. With interstellar drive they don't reckon on the emergency ration needing to be too large. By the time the crew are down to eating synthetic food the rescuers should be only a biscuit throw from them."

"Only for us," the girl reminded him, "there aren't any rescuers."

Burke smiled. "Check again," he agreed. "Provided our luck holds. Not that there's any reason why it shouldn't. I've put us on as illogical a course as I knew how." He reached out a lazy arm for the ship's manifest. "Mars hasn't done us badly. Seed. Clothing. Two half-tracks. Some fuel. We've lost the machinery and tools that were on the first ship. But, unless conditions are extreme, we should make out."

"On what level?" Ella's voice was strangely crisp.

He shrugged. "Whatever we can achieve," he answered.

She boiled over at his words. "You smug fool!" she stormed. "I suppose you see yourself as an empire builder. A twenty-second century Robinson Crusoe." She leaned towards him, her fists clenched. "You don't think how other people might feel about it, do you? The people you've landed in this mess. Who can't ever go back to a decent life because you like killing."

He did not answer. Only looked at her.

"It's all very well to say Marth did it. But you were there. You could have stopped him. But you didn't. You let him do it, and then you used that as an excuse for more

killing. That's how I'm here. Because of you and your mad need to prove you're a tiger. You're not satisfied unless everybody shows they're in awe of you." She crouched, as though expecting him to strike her; as though daring him to strike her. "But I'm not frightened of you, do you hear? You've already done the worst thing you could do to me. You've taken away all that I ever worked and struggled and lied and cheated to get. And you can take your empire, and your smaller killers, and yourself, and you can all go to Hell together. And the sooner the better."

She finished, staring at him, waiting for him to act.

But he did not move, did nothing. Except, "You'd better turn in," he said. "It's my watch."

She moved past him after a moment. He heard her choke, heard her stumble. Then he heard her door slide open, and slide back.

Chapter III

Throughout that watch he threw no more than an occasional glance at the instruments. For the most part he sat asking himself where he had failed. It was easy enough to claim that it was Ella who had proved herself interested in one thing only—her own well being. That was true. Yet, five years earlier, had he been other than he was, might she not have behaved differently? She had not suggested this. It was his own mind that was asking this question, and he did not know the answer.

The only thing he did know was that his own feelings toward her were stronger than they had ever been. That was ironic. There was nothing to stop him from taking her. For the rest of their lives they must remain linked together in exile, she hating him, and he, because of some inner compunction, unable to force her.

He made himself put his personal problem aside. He was the captain. A captain had no right to personal worry. What he must do was to go over, for the hundredth time, the situation as it affected everybody.

What aggravated the problem was the existence of two factions. For him, and the others like him, there could be no return. But the minds of Balk and Jon and Birtz, and their supporters, would never relinquish Venus. Only one thing held them from forcing the issue—their lack of a navigator.

But there was no knowing if this safety margin would endure. It only needed one neurotic, terrified at the picture of this speck in the immensity of space travelling further and further from the known, inhabited trinity of Earth, Mars, and Venus, it only needed this one person's nerve to crack. And their speck in space would be converted into a hell in which men and women raved and fought, each against his neighbour.

In short, he did not have a month. He did not have any time at all. They must find a world soon, or perish.

He did not notice Ella's return. Now, when she touched his shoulder, he started. "The computer," Ella said. There was a note in her voice that jerked him into complete wakefulness. He came up from his seat in one fast movement, and took her place before the instrument.

"It could be," he said slowly after a little while. "It—could—be." He turned his head. "We'll run the tests," he said.

At the end of the third day there was no doubt left in his mind. This world would do. It would have to do.

It was larger than Mars, not so big as Earth. Swinging round a star in company with half a dozen other planets. It was closer to its parent than Earth was to Sol, moving faster in its orbit, revolving faster on its own axis. It had a high mineral content, disproportionate to its size. It would be hot. Very hot by day; by night they would not freeze.

"Death Valley," Hengsey commented. "Add a slice of Amazon basin, and a chunk of the Rockies. Wash it down with the biggest part of the Pacific."

"What's wrong with you?" Jonson challenged. "Home-sick?"

"It—could be nice," Ella admitted slowly.

"It's liveable," Burke pointed out. "That's the main thing." He did not add that they would probably live faster, die earlier than they would have done on Earth. There was no gain in looking on the black side. "We can make out here," he said.

"If we land safely," Balk reminded them.

Hengsey's head came round. "Maybe you'd like to get off an' see whether we make it," he suggested. "Maybe we can find you an asteroid to park on until you're sure it's safe. A nice, yellow one, maybe?"

"Break that up," Burke rapped. "We haven't got time for that. You all know how we're fixed."

"What about Venus?" Birtz demanded.

Burke shook his head. "With what they'd pin on us—for what Marth did—I say there's no going back."

"Also," Jonson's eyes were cold, "those who stay won't want anyone to go back. In case they were made to talk. So that back on the Trinity they'd know where we were holed up."

Abruptly Birtz spun round, crashed out, was gone.

Swiftly Jon put out his hands. "If I may suggest—?" he said.

"Well?" Burke challenged.

"It might be better not to notice him," Jon argued. "He will come round." He shrugged. "Some natures are like that. Putting off reality. Until the moment comes when it cannot be put off any longer. So—they say and do things which are foolish." He looked round at the others. "There is nothing he can do on his own. Eventually he will see that."

Burke did not answer directly. Instead—"We'll start moving to orbit in ten minutes," he warned. "Get everybody strapped down."

He was rushing things deliberately, committing the ship before trouble could start. With everyone strapped down there could be no attempt at interference.

They went swiftly. All except Hengsey. Who moved across to one of the bridge positions. Ella, sparing him a glance, observed that the straps across his body were not buckled, that his gun lay loosely in his hand, trained on the entrance.

Gravely he winked at her.

Five minutes were gone. Seven. At the end of the eighth minute she heard a sound. She twisted as far as the straps around her permitted. Cried out in alarm.

Birtz was in the entrance, his gun levelled. Behind him were others. "We don't land," Birtz yelled.

There was a flame, a roar. Hengsey's gun was hammering. Birtz swayed. His gun exploded twice, the shells striking on the instrument panel, showering fragments over the bridge. Birtz fell. There were screams behind him, men struck by some of Hengsey's shots.

"Here we go." Burke's voice, booming from the amplifier, warning everybody, was inexorable. Still twisted against the straps, Ella saw Hengsey's gun fall abandoned as his hands whipped to the webbing, snapping the buckles.

Pressure dragged at her. Desperately, before her back broke, she squirmed into position, let the seat and the straps take the strain her body could never withstand. Something plummeted past her, struck the wall before her, something trailing limbs that jerked and flopped with every shuddering beat of the *Martian Enterprise*. She forced her eyes away, focussed them on the instruments. She saw gaps on the panel where Birtz's aimless missiles had struck between her and Burke.

The ship checked, shook and quivered. Then, slowly, as Burke's fingers crawled on the studs, firing a new pattern, the pressure eased.

"First lap," Burke said over the broadcast.

Ella swallowed, lessening the pain in her temples.

The world, seen in the camera screen, was nearer. It filled the whole screen. The blackness with which they had lived for weeks was gone. Illogically she wished it back. In space, barring infinitesimal chance, one was safe. Only in take-off and in landing was there danger. Even with a trained crew and perfectly functioning instruments. Instruments! She turned her head, seeking reassurance from the man beside her.

He knew what was in her mind. Before she could speak he spared a finger to touch one key, cutting off the broadcast, isolating them from any listener. "We'll play it by ear," he said and smiled. He held the smile, demanding silently that she should smile also, pledge herself not to panic.

Then, when she did this, he nodded once more, and reversed the switch. "Going in," he told the ship. "Everything under control."

Once more the straps tautened. Obediently she held on to her nerve. Forcing herself not to betray to the five hundred odd persons aboard, helpless in their bunks, the odds the *Martian Enterprise* was daring so rashly. Who did not know that their chances of survival had been lessened still further by a fool's wild shooting. One man, with a novice to help, was attempting to do the work of half a dozen. That was bad enough. But Birtz, dying, had made it worse. The shots he had fired had missed them. But it could well be that those shots would make a safe landing impossible. Perhaps Birtz had predeceased them only by a small margin of time.

Everything depended on Burke's judgment. The camera screen and the compensating gyro were undamaged. But the radar controls and the altimeter had both been shattered.

"Brother, I sure hope there's no wax in those ears!" She heard the fervent mutter from where Hengsey lay, and felt an insane laughter bubble up inside her. Saw a momentary grin on Burke's face, and blessed Hengsey for lifting the tension at that particular moment. Then Burke's fingers moved, and she gave all her attention to the instruments that still functioned.

She gave the pilot what little help she could. A jerky reading here, a warning, barely in time, there. Grimly his fingers writhed and stabbed in desperate, vicious lunges; fighting, adapting, manoeuvring, clawing the thickening atmosphere, sliding the *Martian Enterprise* down the spiral.

It was the lack of instruments which beat them. Which took the ship, against all that a tiring Burke and a haggard Ella could do, and slammed it down in flame and buckling, tearing fins. Miraculously, while beams and girders sprang, and steel ripped like linen, the massive holding down bolts of the engines did not shear. The engines still gouted out their flame, although around them men died, were squashed and maimed by other equipment torn loose and hurled with insensate force.

The *Martian Enterprise* leaned. Leaned further. Began to swing. Half crazy with fear, Burke slammed his fist in a last appeal on the keys, and held her. Slowly, very slowly, she came back. He forced his reeling brain to stay the course, slewing the ship's base round. Until resistance grew, and she tilted once again. Only now this was the answer he wanted, and he brought her back smoothly. Now, if the ground below held firm, she would stand. In half tones, in pastel shades of pressure, he eased the engine's fury down. So that it bellowed, vent by vent, one degree less raucously with every touch. Until, ages later, it died.

Half sprawling, half leaning across the controls, he dragged the intercom closer. "Levy?" he breathed. "Levy!"

"What's left of me," Levy's voice croaked.

"Close down. Altogether. In case she blows. Fast!"

"Done."

Burke sighed. Blood was running from the corner of his mouth. Painfully he slewed about, saw Ella's one hand pluck feebly at the buckle of the webbing, saw, past her, Hengsey's head lift. Satisfied, he let himself slide back, let go all holds, knew nothing more.

The odyssey was over.

Chapter IV

Burke waited for them to come to the point. They had asked for this meeting, and he had agreed to hear what they had to say. Although he grudged the time that would be lost while they talked. When there was so much that needed to be done.

He stared out through the door of the room in which they sat. Which was living quarters for him, and office, and meeting place combined. Stared out at the other houses, seeing them not as homes, as shelters, as places of assignation, but as units of man-hours.

Building those houses was the first job they had tackled. He had not been able to avoid this. After months of living in a steel drum, without privacy, the idea of a house, set solidly on ground, amounted to an obsession with nearly every member of the community. They had cut down the trees within a half mile radius, as far as the forest itself, and had built. Simply. Without ornament. Plain, utilitarian boxes. But, to those who built them, smoothing the wood with loving fingers, they were proof of their deliverance from the metal womb of the spaceship.

He had not been able to stand out against them on this. But he had refused to release any of the crew for this work. Nor had he spared them to his lieutenants in any of the tasks they had taken over. Despite the logical arguments each had advanced regarding their need for skilled workers. Give his officers credit that they had done well. Give Balk credit for organising hunters to provide them with meat. Give Hengsey credit for driving the herds into corrals, for practical experiments to determine which species would yield most milk, hair, and hide. Give Jon credit for clearing the land, sewing their seed store, and experimenting with the indigenous vegetation. All these were urgent works, since the rations were all consumed, and the ship's synthetic plant had not survived the crash. All these tasks demanded labourers lest the community starve. But—not *his* men. Someone must take the long term view. Someone must remember that the future was as important as the present. So, because he needed the crew to salvage every piece of machinery which *had* survived the landing he had been adamant about this.

He did not see how he could have acted differently in view of the severity of the landing, and the losses they had suffered

from that. Dismiss the main drive. For all practical purposes that never had counted. Hyperspeed meant nothing to men anchored on solid earth and rock. It was the denial of the auxiliary engines that was robbing them of two centuries, that was setting them back into what, so far as they were concerned, was a *primaeval* past. In which, unprepared and soft, they must survive. And not only survive, but start climbing.

They would never do that if they yielded to the demands of muscle power, no matter how desperate such needs. When it came down to that he must put the machines first. Biology could be relied on to give them an increased supply of muscles over the years, but firm action now was what was needed if the future was to hold any promise.

The atomic engines of the auxiliary drive had also furnished heat for turbines. Those turbines would not serve them again. Along with other valuable equipment.

It was the engines, though, which they missed most.

"It might be safe," Burke had said to Levy. "But—it might not. We're none of us qualified to investigate. There's no knowing what that landing could have done. So we'll keep the shut down rods where they are."

"Means no juice," Levy reminded him.

"There's the river," Burke answered.

Levy nodded. "With some rapids laid on. I'll start getting everything stripped down. Move them down there."

"They'll have to be bedded down," Burke warned.

"Such corns we're going to have," Levy commented.

That was where he should be at this moment, Burke fumed. Down where Levy and his men laboured at the harnessing of the river's force for the transformers and motors. Cannibalising the machines they had to provide parts for machines they must have. If they were to survive. More than that. If they were to gain a position from which they could advance. As he was determined they would do.

Hengsey's voice interrupted his thoughts. "Three months," Hengsey said, "And everybody's had enough."

"If that's true," Burke countered, "then it's you who are letting them down. You know how small a margin we've got. If you haven't made them understand that—"

"No," Hengsey denied. "They know. But—there's limits. They're not machines. They need a break."

"Maybe they'd like to go away somewhere," Burke snapped. "Where it's easy. Where everything's laid on for them." He stared at them with bitter anger.

"Burke," Ella said.

Hengsey put his hand on her shoulder. "Let me," he said. He leaned forward. "Look," he grated. "I'll give it to you straight. Either you ease up, or you'll blow up." His eyes were cold. "And if that happens," he warned, "you won't have anybody to catch you when you come down."

There was such certainty in Hengsey's tone that Burke knew he must give way. Nevertheless, "As bad as that?" he asked.

"As bad as that," Hengsey agreed. The others nodded. Hengsey, seeing his point taken, continued in a milder voice. "We've been on this lump of dirt three months. For all that time you've driven everybody like dogs. We've run up a fence in case of trouble. We've built. We've dug. We've made out like we're settlers on the frontier, an' we've not eased our backs even sleeping, an' the whole bunch, men and women, haven't got enough energy left to enjoy a session at the tamest joint back on Mars. Even if it was free."

"So?"

"So we say give 'em a break. Make like this isn't a frontier. Tell 'em it's the Garden of Eden." He looked out at the rugged country, the bare settlement against wooded hills, with the rust-streaked *Martian Enterprise* dominating everything. Looked at the drab-clothed figures moving about their tasks, and spat. "Some Eden!" he snorted. Then shrugged. "Anyway, that's my word. Call it Eden, and let everybody play Adam an' Eve." His mouth twisted. "With the fuss *that'll* start they'll have enough to carry 'em over the next three months."

"All right," Burke said. He pushed back his seat, and walked across to the door, stood in silence while the others sat waiting.

He came back, stood looking at them.

"I haven't mentioned this before," he said deliberately. "But, if you haven't worked it out for yourselves you ought to have done. So far as we are concerned, this *is* Eden."

Balk leaped up. "Say that plain!" he shouted.

"We're stuck," Burke answered. "The ship won't ever lift again," he shrugged. "If there were repair shops, with heavy equipment, it could be made whole. But, with what we've got,

it won't. We're here to stay. Unless another ship comes this way, and spots us. Is that plain enough? We're here, we can't leave, and we've got to make the best of it."

"You swine!" Balk snarled. "You've known this, you've kept it quiet. Listening to us talk of getting back to Venus. And all the time you've been laughing. Making everybody slave, letting them think it's only temporary, and all the time—!" He ceased speaking, took a step forward.

Jonson's huge hand flung him aside. "You gone mad?" the giant growled. "What else should he do? Tell everybody we're finished? So they don't do nothing except sit around and whine! An' then expect them to start building. You crazy, Balk? Or just mean? What other way could he play it?"

Burke warmed at this defence. He wondered how far the others would go along with Jonson, how reasonable he could expect them to be.

"Sooner or later," he said, "people have got to know. Sooner, the way I see it, we'd not have done all we have done. We've saved a lot. We can hope to build on that. We've got to build on it. We're in this together. Fight, quarrel, and we put ourselves back. All of us." He looked at them. "What's it to be?"

"For me," Jon answered, "it makes sense. The ship's out," He shrugged. "It's out." He spread out his hands. "But—that's me only. The others, after they've got used to the idea, I think they'll feel the same."

"Tell them now," Ella urged. "They've a right to know. You can't let them go on believing. And hoping. Then disappoint them. You haven't the right to keep them in the dark now. For the sake of a few more houses, or fields, or other things they'll make with a better spirit when they know what these things mean."

"Make a holiday," Hengsey urged. "Get 'em relaxed. Extra rations. Whatever juice we've got. Then tell 'em. There'll be tears. Maybe some sore talk. But, what the hell! The milk's spilled. Maybe we can still find a few drops in some other can."

Going his rounds forty-eight hours later Burke noted the changed atmosphere. With some, the change-over from uncertainty, after the first disillusion, had brought relief. These ones, as he passed, looked at him with new faces, meeting the

challenge of a new future. While others affected not to see him as he passed.

"Mostly," Hengsey's voice drifted from close behind him, "it's the Venusians. The way some of 'em see it, they've been cheated. Back on Mars the government jumped them before they were set. Then we voted it wasn't safe to land on Venus. With us having guns that vote stuck. They can't hurt Mars. So maybe they'll work up to taking it out on you."

Burke was doubtful. "A split means trouble for everyone," he protested. "They can see that. They'd suffer also."

Hengsey sniffed. "Some people like trouble," he retorted. "Especially if they can tell themselves it's come about because of someone else." He fingered his lip. "To-morrow, when the elections come," he said, "you might find that Balk's got himself elected in your place."

"Why not Jon?" Burke asked.

Hengsey chuckled. "Not Jon," he corrected. "He's too smooth. The going isn't soft enough for him to want to give the orders. He'll stay back an' let some other mug dodge any rocks that are flying." He yawned. "Like I do," he finished.

Burke grunted. "If I get mine," he asked curiously, "who've you got lined up as my successor? Jonson?"

"I'm hoping it doesn't get that far," Hengsey grinned. "Although it'd be simpler on account of Jonson living in the same world as the rest of us. But, you're quicker at carving up the opposition than he is. So, you can count on me to swing those I can your way. And I won't expect any gratitude for doing that." He winked. "There not being anything here yet worth claiming payment for favours."

Next morning Burke waited until he heard Ella's door open. Then called her as she passed. He thought she turned reluctantly. Looking upon her he felt sorrow that this should be so. But there was nothing he could do about that. They were two people who saw life from different angles. He kept his voice to a matter of fact tone. "Have you got a large pocket in those pants?" he asked.

"For what?"

He held out a gun. "If it's needed," he told her, "it'll be needed fast. Don't pile all your belongings on top of it."

She slid the weapon under her jacket. "How long is it going to be like this?" she asked. "Before we settle down, and live like ordinary people?"

He shook his head. "Ask me that in ten years time," he answered.

She turned her head, looking out through the door. "Ten years," she echoed. He heard the pain in her voice. "Ten years," she said again. "Here! For what? To live like beasts. Sinking all the time. The weakest getting killed. Life getting harder always. Things wearing out. Things we can't replace. Like we'll wear out. Growing older and uglier—"

"Not uglier," Burke protested.

She swung round. "Yes!" she blazed. "Uglier! Uglier! We are. Because we've become savages. We've gone back to the jungle."

"Not everyone," Burke denied. He took her shoulders. "Look," he pleaded. "On the ship. Coming down. You were scared, but you stuck it. I'm asking you to stick now. To believe in the new world we've got to build. So we won't *be* like animals. So our children won't." He shook her gently. "Can you do that?" he begged. "Will you? I know you can. But—will you?"

She stared at him. After a while her mouth twisted wryly. "I must be crazy," she announced. "You give me a gun, and then tell me it's not a jungle, and I believe you." He said nothing, and, after a moment she laughed, shaking back her hair. "What a politician you're turning into," she said.

Burke flushed. "You mean I'm putting on an act?"

"Not you," Ella answered. "Me." She smiled. "You wouldn't understand," she told him. She moved towards the door, smiling as though at some secret jest, looked back at him. "Come on, father of the people," she said gaily. "Let's go see if Hengsey's got the votes loaded the way he wants it."

Burke blinked. He did not understand. The sudden change in her left him gasping. Then, on top of that, her revelation that she knew more of Hengsey's methods than Burke himself

"How"—he began.

But Ella had stepped over the threshold, and he had no option but to follow. Until he caught her up, and then she fell back slightly, forcing him to lead the way to the space where the voting was to take place.

He sensed the tension in the crowd as he advanced. It would not take much to start trouble. But, if a riot did start, his gun, with Ella's in support, could enforce a truce.

"Balk's putting up," Jonson greeted him. He shrugged. "Could be he'll make it. If there're enough Venusians who don't like taking orders."

Burke nodded. Things didn't look too good. Yet Jonson's attitude belied his gloomy words. Why was that? Was Jonson making the mistake of judging Balk on what they knew of his background? A counter hand, on his own admission, grudging the position of more successful men, who had soaked up the temptation to engage in subversive work for the quick prize successful treachery offered. A weak man, and vain, and, because both weak and vain, a pig-headed man. Such a man would soon fritter away all that community had worked to salvage. After which he would blame others for the loss. If he were elected. People *might* be foolish enough to vote him in.

"Give him a month," Jonson rumbled, "an' we'd all be in the muck."

"Couldn't we compromise?" Ella asked.

"No," Burke answered. "Balk's right on that point. It's got to be one man. Until we're solid."

Jonson shrugged. Under the big man's beard Burke saw that his mouth was twitching. What the devil was there for Jonson to laugh at, Burke wondered irritably.

Jon and Hengsey came away from the crowd. "Ready," they announced.

"Where's Balk?" Burke snapped. "He should be here."

Grinning, Hengsey lifted his arm. They looked where he pointed. Involuntarily each gasped. Then began to laugh. Balk had taken up his position on the landing stage of the ship, withdrawn, superior, all set for the announcement which would confirm his position as leader.

"Could be," Hengsey breathed admiringly, "that someone's sold him the idea that people like to look up to their leader." He looked at Jonson with admiration. "How long did it take to plant the idea?" he asked.

"It's cruel," Ella protested. But she could not disguise her amusement at the sight of Balk, ridiculous in his isolation.

"Maybe," Hengsey conceded. "But—" He waved at the crowd, only a few of whom had drifted away to take their stand below Balk, "it works."

The girl nodded. Nearly every face in the crowd wore a broad grin.

"Look at Jon," Hengsey whispered in Burke's ear. "You can read his mind, eh?" Burke nodded. The man's mask was down. "He knows it won't help to give Balk his head now. But, what Jonson's done is to show Balk up for a fool. Which

doesn't help Jon because he's got a use for Balk. When we know just how good a life we can make. Or how bad. When we're down to rock bottom. Before things start on the upgrade. That's when Jon'll want to push him. So that, as things get better, people'll forget who put the foundations down, an' only remember the improvements came with the new bosses." He chuckled. "After which he'll get rid of Mister Balk."

"It could be," Burke hinted, "that someone might beat him to that. Someone who can read the way his mind works."

"It could be," Hengsey agreed pleasantly. "Except that I'd rather it was someone else who's name was up in lights. On account of my sleeping easier that way."

Burke grunted. "I'll remember to keep it safe for you," he said.

Beside them Jonson growled. "Me," he told Hengsey, "I don't play it that way. If I'm for someone, I don't rat." He eyed Hengsey with menace. "You're good," he said. "You're quicker'n me. Maybe you'd beat me to it. But, if I get the idea you're going to rat, I won't let that stop me trying."

Hengsey smiled. "I'll try not to worry you," he promised.

He turned back to Burke. "Might be a good idea," he suggested, "to show Jon he's appreciated for not coming out behind Balk. Make him Postmaster or Inspector of Taxes. Something like that."

Chapter V

That night, alone, Burke went over what they had thrashed out. For policy's sake Balk was still included in the Council. The man had been difficult, stunned by the destruction of his dream, and only too ready to take offence. It had been Ella who had found the way to appease him.

In the Council he had been obstructive. He would not agree that they must hold themselves in, that they should not disperse to suit individual inclinations.

Then Ella had brought up the matter of their position on this world to which they were committed. They did not know enough about it. Now that the first emergency defences were complete they should set about increasing their knowledge. Now they could afford to explore farther afield. Indeed, they could not afford not to do so. Since Balk was the advocate of

moving to more hospitable country, was he not the logical leader of such an expedition? Let men be selected to accompany him, each instructed to concentrate on one particular requirement.

Only Burke had not liked this proposal. But he had not been able to veto it. Nor object to Balk's demand that he should pick the men who were to go with him. It had been settled on that basis.

Had he been equally weak, Burke wondered, in the departments he had given to Jon and Hengsey? For food could be a weapon. Jon was to take control of crops. Hengsey had the task of starting herds of the local beasts. There should be enough work in each job to keep any ordinary man from plotting. But, against that, it provided these two with a common interest.

Jonson was the only one he felt he could trust. Someone must be responsible for defence and the preservation of order. If it had not been that there was more vital work for him to do Burke would have held this position for himself. But, since he could not spare himself for that, it was fortunate that Jonson was there to stand between the community and dissension.

Which left Ella. What was he to do with her? How far would she go with what he believed was for the community's good? He shook his head. Before the meeting he would have said that she was with them all the way. Yet the manner in which she had put forward the proposal which found favour with Balk reminded Burke too much of the Ella on Mars. The girl who was out to get to the top, and who was not squeamish about the steps she took to get there.

There was no doubt about her shrewdness. If Balk won out at any future date he would remember that it was Ella who had supported him. Come to that, Burke decided, it would not perhaps matter who won the leadership. Whoever it was would find that Ella's post made her his right hand. For the job which she had suggested for herself, which was, indeed, the logical work for her, Burke had had to allow. She was to organise the women. In the end, that might become the most important post of all. So that, whatever happened, whoever took over, Ella had made sure that she would stay on top.

He lay back wearily. How long could he hold this set-up together? Long enough to ensure that the foundations were secure? Or would he be powerless to avert the opposite, the ever increasing descent of the road back to barbarism? What

lever could he use to compel the warning elements to work in harmony ?

Over the next few weeks he had to admit that he had not found much to encourage him.

Both Jon and Hengsey had the same report to make. Jon's crops were growing. The climate was good. But the soil was shallow, and the yield would not be what was hoped. The *Martian Enterprise* had come down in magnificent scenery, high hills and tremendous rock formations, ideal country for a geologist. But, from a farmer's point of view, unrewarding. If they were to have anything better than a meagre return there was only one answer. They must move to the valleys, fifty miles away.

Hengsey's beasts underlined the same fact. The ones they had rounded up, had driven to the settlement, and penned, had all lost weight.

"Tough eating," Hengsey had pointed out. "An' not much milk."

Burke had leaned on the fence, studying the herds. Nature, while it created untold different forms in seeking the best suited to an environment, was also consistent. These beasts were not greatly dissimilar to the cattle and goats of Earth. Casually, to hide his discomfort at Hengsey's conclusion, he remarked on this.

"Their stomachs work the same way, too," Hengsey retorted. He refused to be diverted. "They do better where there's better eating."

It all added up to one thing. Burke must agree to some dispersing of the population. But, he swore to himself, he would do that only so far as necessity compelled. Not one step farther. "How many men will you need to work the herds?" he demanded.

Under pressure Hengsey agreed that twelve men could hold the herds. But he would not go below this number. "An' we'll want more later," he warned. "When we've got more land fenced." He sucked at his teeth. "That's just to play nursemaid. There's fences to be put up. An' buildings. Houses. Sheds. On top of that—you've got to have transport. Getting the meat back here. Let alone the milk."

Altogether, cutting it fine, paring Hengsey down to a minimum, he had to promise him another twenty men.

Burke was doing sums in his head. To get the greatest benefit from the animals, they should pasture them fifty miles away. They had two half-tracks, and a limited amount of fuel. On proper roads, with light loads over return trips of a hundred miles, that fuel would last how long? Over rough country, carrying loads to feed five hundred, how much sooner would the fuel be finished?

"You'll have to do the best you can closer to the camp," he said. He stared at Hengsey. "This isn't a charity home. Everybody'll have to realise that. They'll have to eat their meat tough and like it."

Hengsey was unperturbed. "You're the one who's deciding," he answered.

Was there a warning in that reply? A reminder that if the going became too difficult, the blame would be laid at his door? Burke shrugged angrily. *Let them blame him!* He must do what he judged was in their best interests. If that meant his personal downfall, he would have to endure that. So long as he held the reins he would work to make the future safe. For as long as they let him.

"Settle on the best area you can," he told Hengsey. "You'll get your fences and your buildings as soon as you decide where you want them. Provided it's close."

With Jon and his needs it was the same problem. Only on a larger scale. Crops demanded more workers than beasts. Hengsey's need for thirty workers was a trifle compared to Jon's estimated two hundred.

"If you can suggest how we can do it on less," he said smoothly, "I'll be pleased. Because we can't spare that number. *I know that as well as you do, Captain Halwell.*" His manner was in direct contradiction to Hengsey's challenging provocation. "But, here, we just can't grow enough to feed everyone." He frowned, staring down at the stony ground. "If only we'd come down in a better place," he said ruefully.

"We didn't," Burke snapped, and cursed himself for showing he had taken that comment as criticism. It probably *was* criticism, although Jon was quick to disclaim any such suggestion. There was nothing Burke could do but accept his assurances. Not unless he was prepared to force a quarrel. One in which he would appear the aggressor.

To avoid such an appearance he was forced to concede more than he knew was wise ; promise Jon more help than the community could properly spare.

Angry with himself for having been outgeneralled he cut the discussion short. Already most of the morning was gone, and he had not visited the project on which much of his hope was centred. He would not be delayed any longer. He saw Ella approaching, and hurried away. Before she could intercept him with another demand, no doubt essential, but which meant draining off some more of his precious labour force.

That was what they all wanted. They did not see the settlement as a whole, but only the needs of their own departments. If all their requirements were granted it would soon squander the power they had as a whole body. Like taking the water supply, and deliberately spilling it out in order to play with the resultant mud.

He stopped in his tracks. A possible solution to the demands of both Hengsey and Jon had occurred to him. He stared at the settlement, lifted his eyes in the direction of the proposed fields, estimating levels and distances. It could work. Of course it would work. How was it he had not thought of it before ? When it had been staring him in the face all the time.

He started off once more. He threaded his way down the slope until he came to where his own selected specialists laboured on both banks of the river.

Levy saw him coming, and straightened. "She'll work," he announced cheerfully, and the men around grinned. He ran an eye over the structure they had built across the rapids ; the paddles, the belts running from the shaft turned from one of the columns of the after hold, the pulleys, the generators, and the motors. "Could've done with some more cable," he said, "but there wasn't another inch left to strip." He took a battered tin from his pocket, offered Burke one of his home-cured cigars. "It make your eyes water," he said apologetically, "but it smokes." He showered sparks on Burke's and his own cigar, hung his own smouldering cylinder from his lower lips. "Start her ?" he asked expectantly.

"Suppose," Burke delayed, "suppose we didn't use this for lighting a night shift ? Suppose we used it to work pumps ? To lift the water up to the town level ?"

Levy blinked. "Somebody thirsty ?" he asked.

"The ground is," Burke explained. "Where we want to grow things. My idea is, lift the water up, then run it to where it's needed." Levy nodded. "We'll have to dig ditches," Burke said. "Pipes'd be better, but that will come later. We can't make ten miles of pipes quickly enough."

Levy nodded. He got the picture. The river, below this point dropped away in cascades through knife-like canyons. It was not possible to divert it. But, where they stood, it could be tapped. On the settlement side the land sloped more gently. Take the water there, if necessary build terraces, and, next year—!

"Could be we can work it," Levy agreed. He stretched. "I'll go look at the air pumps in the ship. Maybe it won't be too hard to convert 'em. Even for us amateurs." He looked down at his hands, broken and roughened with the unaccustomed work. "Reckon it's lucky we're not going back," he said. "The way my fingers are now, the first pocket I tried to pick, it'd be like setting off an alarm."

Burke grinned. Then, as they turned to climb back towards the ship, his smile died. Balk was back, was coming down the slope, leading the men he had taken into the wild land over the mountains.

"Oi gevalt!" Levy exploded. "The return from the Promised Land!" He pointed a derisory finger at Balk, at the roughly cured cape of fur draped from the man's shoulders. "That's a nice line of goods you're travelling in, mister," Levy yelled. "But how do you keep the moths out?"

Levy's squad, naked to the waist under the hot sky, hooted with mirth, added their ribald comments.

Balk, his triumphal entrance ruined, was white. His hand moved to his belt. "If you swine want trouble—!" he mouthed.

Burke took two long strides, fronted Balk sternly. "Don't make more of a fool of yourself than you already are," he snapped. He looked at the other with disgust. "Can't you take ribbing?" he asked, "without getting mad?"

Balk snarled at him. "Don't you start," he bawled. "I know your style. Making a fool of anyone who won't lick your boots. Sitting back, and taking it easy. Because you're scared to strike out. Because the only thing you know how to do is to drive one of your tin cans, and you're lost if you go more than two steps away from it. Even though it's no use now you've crashed it."

On the crest people were gathering, attracted by Balk's loud ranting. Burke saw Ella. Then Hengsey. Then Jon. He saw also the first sign of movement among the men who had gone out under Balk's leadership. He moved in. Before Balk went too far. He caught Balk's wrist, twisted it, forced him to drop his gun. Levy swooped on it, backed away.

"No shooting," Burke gasped. He shifted his feet, and swung. Balk went down, and lay still. Burke stepped over him, fronting Balk's supporters. "Let's not have any more trouble," he warned. His own wrist was bent, warning them clearly that he meant to enforce his edict, with his gun, if they did not heed his appeal.

Jonson came thundering down the slope, rumbling menace. He ploughed into Balk's men from behind, shoving them roughly. They wavered, gave way, backing up the hill. Levy's squad, abandoning their work, poured up in support of their foreman. Sullenly the scowling explorers let themselves be driven off.

The three Council members moved down to where Balk was getting to his feet.

"Did you have to do that?" Ella asked Burke.

He did not answer. He had acted under the compulsion of danger, to quell revolt before it erupted. By so doing he must appear as the aggressor. Would Balk have gone so far as to use the gun he had drawn on a man with bare hands? Perhaps. Perhaps not. Burke shrugged. What was done was done. If it brought out into the open what they had all tried to persuade themselves they could gloss over—that there was an absolute conflict of interests—that might be the best solution. If the breach could not be healed, let them face up to that now. Let each faction know exactly how it stood, what assets it had. Not go on, as they were, only to discover later that those things on which they had counted were not theirs to command.

"If you've got anything to say," he challenged Balk, "say it now. Without trying to make out you're the only one who's doing anything."

But Balk, nursing his jaw, refused to answer. Only held out his hand to Levy, demanding his gun.

"Let him have it," Burke said. His voice was deadly with menace. "I'll watch him."

He stood ready. But Balk only pushed the weapon into his holster, and turned, and went away up the slope.

"What did he find?" Jon broke the silence.

"He didn't say," Burke snapped. Trust Jon not to miss that trick. Making it clear that the explorer had not been given any chance to report on what he had discovered.

Levy sniffed. "He found himself a fur coat," he said loudly, and there was laughter from around the group.

"He got it dusty," someone yelled, and there were more comments, and more laughter.

Satisfied, Levy walked off grinning.

"He must have found *something*," Jon persisted irritably.

Burke shrugged.

"We have to know," Jon insisted.

Ella touched his arm. "Maybe we can get him to tell *us*," she suggested.

Jon looked at Burke.

"Why not?" Burke could not avoid showing his annoyance.

"Maybe he'll cry on your shoulder," he sneered.

He scowled as Ella and Jon climbed the hill, heads close together. Why must she always take the other side, he asked himself bitterly?

"Botched it!" Hengsey's angry complaint brought him back. "Needling him was good. But, when the fool went for his gun, why didn't you finish him? Instead of slapping him down." He spat disgustedly.

"If you don't like what I did—" Burke began.

Hengsey cut him short. "In a church meeting it'd be fine," he said. "But not here." There was an angry flush on his face. "The way *he'll* tell it, you didn't want anyone to hear him. Just beat him up. Then you and Jonson crowded the ones who would have seen it fair. With Levy and his mob to help you. So that there'll be those who'll reckon that you won't stand for anything except what it suits you."

"All I want," Burke said slowly, "is to give us a proper chance. So that we've got a future. Not slide back to living in caves."

"There's lots you don't see." Hengsey shook his head. "The trouble with you," he commented, "is that you've got a one-track mind."

Burke's temper boiled over. "We'll test that," he grated. "To-night. All of you. We'll take a vote. Either I keep the job. In which case you, and Ella, and Jon, and that fool Balk can all shut up. Or one of you take over."

"Is that how you want it?" Hengsey's face was wooden, his eyes hidden under heavy lids.

"That's how I want it," Burke confirmed.

Hengsey nodded. "I'll tell 'em," he said. "What they'll say—?" He shrugged, and went.

Levy's men were watching, saying nothing. But it was clear they were uneasy. Things did not look good when those they had elected fought and quarrelled openly.

Burke knew he must not leave them in this state. But he refused to appear to plead.

"When Levy gets back," he said, "we're going to try something." He invited them to gather round. "If we can use the pumps we can lead water from here to where its needed. So we can grow more food, and graze more meat, without having those things farther away than is convenient."

Levy, returning, found them all discussing the project with animation. There was enthusiasm. This group was bound together by a common calling—the control of power. The plant the one-time freighter carried for minor repairs was their armoury. The others could herd, and dig, and demand miracles which they could not encompass for themselves. It was this group which must say yea or nay to their less well-endowed fellows.

Chapter VI

Hengsey, coming back in the early evening, drew Burke aside. "It's better'n I expected," he reported. "There's plenty who grouse that you're too high an' mighty. But most of 'em who say they still don't fancy the idea of leaving home, in spite of Balk's talk about how good the living'll be where he's been." He sucked his teeth. "If Ella can keep the women sweet you ought to stay in the saddle. Unless Jon switches."

"Where's Ella now?" Burke asked.

Hengsey shook his head. "Last I saw, she was talking with Balk."

Burke's mouth hardened. "Let's go," he said. He went back to Levy. "I'll be back later," he told the lank-haired man. "Unless you want to call it a day?"

"Is there a new video release showing?" Levy enquired. There were chuckles from his gang. "I guess we'll stay," Levy said.

Burke followed Hengsey. "Where've you arranged it for?"

"Your place," Hengsey answered. "As soon as we get there. The others'll be waiting."

They had only a little way to go. The huts began fifty yards back from the crest. They reached these, and went on in the growing darkness. Each man was busy with his own calculations, walked in silence. The sudden explosion of a gun jerked them to a halt.

A bulky figure tumbled out through the door of Burke's hut ahead of them, hit the ground, and rolled for cover, the earth exploding around him. Jonson! That meant Balk had opened hostilities. But—was Jon behind him? Was Ella?

They dived together to join Jonson. The giant twisted.

"Halwell," Burke identified himself hastily. "Who's inside?"

"Balk," Jonson answered. He shoved his gun forward. "An' Jon."

"Tell!" Hengsey urged. "Fast!"

"When I came in he had his gun out. He told me sit down an' shut up. Jon's there, not saying anything. I ask Balk what he's playing at. He waves his gun. I can see he's going to let me have it. The way it was I couldn't take him. So I ducked."

"Ella?" Burke snarled.

"She wasn't there." Jonson triggered a shot. "Do we take him now?"

"No." Burke brought his own gun up. "You both pull out. Get your squad together. Get the spare guns in the ship. Pass them to Levy and his men. Now get."

He started firing, covering their withdrawal. He fired at intervals. If he could keep Balk penned down—! But, a moment later he came under fire from the side. He wriggled back, clawing his way to shelter round the corner.

He'd got to move fast. Before they outflanked him. He shot forward, skidded round another corner, then moved off fast, keeping in the shadows. He did not make straight for the ship, but came to it on a curving path, wary as any hunted animal.

Hengsey had been right all along, he accused himself as he went. He should have killed Balk. This attack was clearly no impromptu business. The one comforting thought was that Balk's following could not be numerous. Otherwise he would not have resorted to attacking without warning. Since this

gave him no opportunity for posturing before a weaker foe. Numerically, then, Balk might well be at a disadvantage. Offsetting that, he had the advantage of surprise, of striking where he chose before Burke could concentrate against him. It might be enough to give him victory.

He was almost at the ship when a fusillade of shots tore the silence that had clamped down after his getaway. Burke froze. That firing came from the direction of the river. What did that mean? Jonson had not had time to gather his squad, to lead them to the rendezvous, and arm Levy's men. Who, then, was shooting? And at whom? He broke cover, charging for the ship.

From the lower platform came stabs of light. Shells screamed past above his head, striking behind him. The ship was giving him covering fire. Then he was in the shadows at its base.

"All right?" Jonson's voice demanded.

"Yes," Burke panted.

"Hengsey's took half," Jonson reported. "He's working left round the fence. If we go right we'll have Balk bottled."

"Levy?"

"Ready to go now." Jonson whistled, and the two men he had posted on the platform slid down to join them. "Set," he reported.

Burke led the group at a trot. Silence had come back, dangerous silence. They might be moving into an ambush. They had to risk that. They needed Levy's men. They did not know how Balk planned to use the forces he had. Their best chance lay in speed, gathering and organising before Balk expected them to be ready to hit back.

They came to where the ground fell away. Below them they heard movement, stifled moans, harsh, frightening gasps.

"Every second man stays," Burke whispered. "Watch the open ground. The rest of us go down."

He went first, gun thrust forward. When he could distinguish the structure spanning the rapids he sank down, crouching behind a boulder. "Levy," he called. "Halwell here."

After a moment, doubtfully, "Captain?"

"Yes," he answered. "Who's that?"

"Lenkov, captain. Is it safe now?"

"It's safe." Burke's lips were dry.

There were scuffling noises. Dark shadows moved, grew taller, came closer, hesitating. One here. One there.

"It was the Venusians. We'd heard shooting. We didn't know what we should do. Then some people started coming down. We were all together. Levy called out, asked what was happening. They opened up on us."

"Levy?"

"He was out in front. They couldn't have missed him."

Out of the forty who had been in the ravine he had five able to walk. He must leave the others. Because Balk must be stopped before he could do any more mad-dog killing.

"Get back up top," he snarled. "We're going to do some hunting ourselves."

He heard their furious, growling answer. Then they were scrambling up the slope, only five men stronger instead of forty.

"Spread out," he ordered. "We're going through the place."

He set Jonson with half a dozen to act as rearguard, signalled the advance. The line moved forward. As they did flames shot up ahead, far ahead. About where the last line of huts would be, the huts nearest to the gate. That, then, was what Balk had planned; to force them to abandon the settlement. Punctuating the sound of the fires came shots. Hengsey was striking back.

There was no holding the men. Burke did not try. They stormed towards the enemy, feet pounding, feet slamming. To get at the killers!

They came, gasping, cursing, flinging themselves down, under fire. There were men across the open space, backing towards the gate, firing at them. There were other men, over on the left, Hengsey's men. They opened up themselves. The enemy, reeling, falling under this new storm, abandoned the fight, broke for the darkness of the nearby woods. Out of which came screaming missiles, covering their withdrawal. At Burke's side Lenkov whimpered, coughed, then slid flat.

Burke was aiming at the flashes in the darkness. Others were doing the same. Gradually these flashes lessened. Now there was only an occasional shot from outside the fence. Then nothing.

Silence came back once more.

"Jonson?" Burke called.

"Here," Jonson answered.

"Stay here. Keep under cover. Until I've seen Hengsey."

"Make it one jump," Jonson advised.

Burke took this advice, covered the last few yards diving.

"Captain," Hengsey's voice. Hengsey himself, head turned to watch the darkness, coming down more insistently as the flames of the burning huts died away. "Jon's thrown in with Balk," Hengsey said. There was a note of satisfaction in his voice. Jon had at last declared himself. On the other side. Burke read Hengsey's mind. Now there need be no compunction in destroying the one man who's rivalry he feared. "Reckon Balk forced his hand. But, he's still trying to play safe. His mob was outside the gate when Balk's lot started the fires."

"How many of them?"

"I didn't count." Hengsey spat. "I'd say not so many. Maybe a hundred, hundred and fifty."

That number could do a lot of damage. If they were handled properly.

"We'll have to go after them," Burke muttered.

"Now?"

"Later. But, so we're in the woods before dawn."

He drew his forces back to better cover. Jonson came padding to where Burke and Hengsey debated, heard what Burke planned, approved this.

"What about the rest of the folk?" Jonson asked.

"Make them stay inside. Find Ella. Get her to keep them quiet. Until we've rounded up this gang."

"Ella's out there," Hengsey said.

"No!" Burke turned, quivering.

"Yes." Hengsey's voice was dead.

"She's—on Balk's side?"

"Two men with her, hurrying her along. Too far off to say if she was willing or not."

Burke was still, fighting to keep calm, to think, to plan. Then—"What I said stands," he told them.

Jonson's hand dragged him round. "You say that about your girl? Let that bastard have her! Because you're afraid of the dark."

Burke's gun nudged the giant's stomach. "One more word," he said furiously. "Just one, Jonson."

Jonson took a step back. "All right" he answered. His teeth gleamed. "But, after this is over, if anything's happened

to Ella, anything bad, you and me'll talk about this some more."

They stood for one moment, facing each other.

"You fool!" Burke exploded. He pushed his gun back in his belt. "Do you think I'm not going after her?" He seized the giant's jacket, shook him, flung him back. "You goddam fool!" he said.

Hengsey laughed.

"Listen," Burke told them. "Here's what you've got to do."

"You're not wanting to give yourself much of a chance," Hengsey commented when Burke finished. He held up his hand. "I'm not arguing," he said. "I'm not asking for what you gave this lump here. I'm just talking."

Burke grunted. "Pick half a dozen men. They're to open up in five minutes. Making out they're nervous. If there're any watchers it'll make them keep their heads down. Under cover of that you take your squads out. The rest as we've agreed."

"Luck," Johnson grunted. He thumped Burke's back.

"You'll need it," Hengsey said.

He moved from them towards the gate, keeping low. When the diversion began he was ready, angling out across the roughly cleared ground, gained the shelter of the woods without challenge. Melted in among the trees. When the slope began he set himself to climb it silently. Until he judged he was high enough to take breath.

Below, the settlement formed a pattern of dark blocks on a bare board, without sign of movement. Without sign of life now that the firing he had ordered had stopped. There were men and women in those huts, behind barred doors, waiting uneasily for what the day might bring. As there were men and women in the woods. Whom he must find before day came.

It was logical to assume that Balk would lead his followers along the way he had himself travelled. He would camp as far from the settlement as possible, but, in the dark, trying to convoy people who did not know the route, he would not be able to travel far.

He began to move again, still climbing. If there were guards they would be watching where the going was easiest. They would be listening for the approach of an army. He hoped that any sound he made would be ascribed to an animal. Trusting

to this he made the best speed possible. Until, topping a ridge, he saw the red glow of fires, and smiled grimly. Those fires were a mistake. An overconfident Balk would pay for them. Among other things. He looked up at the sky. He reckoned he had about two hours. He started along the ridge.

When he finally threaded his way between the trees of the valley floor a faint light was softening the sky. The fires had died, were only heaps of embers. He crouched, seeking Balk among the swathed forms. Where was the man? Which was he? The enemy would be stirring soon, and Balk must be dead before then. Where—was—Balk?

He saw Ella. Then Jon. Then, at last, Balk. They were a little apart from the others, on the very edge of the forest.

He drifted through the concealing vegetation. Until he judged he was level with his quarry. Then, very slowly, he stole forward. When he could distinguish their words he halted, crouching down.

"Is that wise?" Jon was asking. "The way you suggest, we lose everything. The tools, the machines—"

"Machines! Tools! Don't keep harping on those. It's land we need, Jon. Game. Those old women, huddling round their machines, what can they do? When their machines wear out where'll they be then? They'll starve. While we'll be getting stronger, living like kings. With everything we need under our hands. I tell you, once we're on the other side, you won't complain about what we've done."

"I still think—"

"Don't!" Balk rasped. "I know what I'm talking about. You don't. And that's all there is to it. As these others here know."

"I see," Jon answered. He sounded tired.

Peering through the bushes Burke saw Jon's face, saw the wary look on it. If Balk were not so eaten up with vanity he would never have believed that he could overrule Jon for long. Fortunately for the settlement he had believed this, had acted on it. Had struck too soon.

Balk stood up also. "You'd better see to the lookouts," he instructed. "Find out if they've seen anything." He laughed. "Not that they're likely to. That swine Halwell's too yellow to have followed us."

Jon nodded, walked away between the sleeping figures.

Burke waited until Jon faded from sight, then stood up also.

"As for you—!" Balk said. He bent over Ella, pulling her up. "If you're wise, you'll also know what's good for you. Unless you want to be handled like I handled your boy friend's men."

"Like I'm handling you." Burke's voice slashed through Balk's gloating, spun him round, shocked and incredulous, for one moment too stunned to call out.

As he turned he met Burke's knife driving forward, and he died on his feet. Wide eyed, Ella watched him go down.

"If you voted to come with him—?" Burke said stiffly.

She let the blanket slip from around her shoulders, and he saw her bound wrists. "I voted," she answered. "But he said it didn't count."

Burke nodded gravely. His knife sawed at the cord confining her hands, parted it, and he slid the blade back in its sheath. He stooped, picked up her blanket, and draped it across Balk's body. "We've got to move fast," he said, and drew the girl back into the bushes behind them.

Once he judged they were out of earshot he broke into a trot, retracing the route by which he had come. "We've got to get high," he told Ella. "Before they get a chance to trail us."

"I'll climb anything," she answered fervently.

He grinned, his arm going round her shoulders. "When we get back," he said, "there's something I want to say to you."

She returned his look evenly. "I want to hear," she answered.

He led the way. The going was not difficult, merely arduous. But she did not complain. Finally Burke stopped, looked up at the sky. "Any time now," he muttered.

On the heels of his words they heard the shots; two from one side of the valley, three from the other. "They're in position!" Burke exclaimed.

They peered down through a screen of branches. On the floor of the valley the enemy were scattering, the men snatching up their weapons, pushing the women to cover ahead of them.

"Balk!" a voice boomed from along the ridge on which Burke and Ella stood.

There were none of the enemy left in the open now. Except for one who lay not heeding the sound and the confusion.

"We want to talk," Jonson's voice pealed. "Where's Balk?"

Nothing moved. The light was bright, exposing the rebels' abandoned gear, the ashes of the fires, and the one figure lying, silently contemptuous of the fear which gripped the valley.

"Wake that guy," Jonson yelled. "Ask *him* where Balk's gone."

Burke's teeth gleamed. Jonson was building up the tension like an artist. There wasn't anyone who did not know that that prostrate figure was not sleeping.

"Wake him," Jonson yelled again. "We won't shoot."

One of the enemy accepted the invitation, ventured out of cover, stooped, peering up at the ridge. Moved towards the body.

The man's hand went out—nervously. He plucked at the shoulder—paused. There was no response. He hesitated still. Abruptly he made up his mind, grabbed, and heaved. Then he was gone, diving through the bushes. Balk's face stared up at the sky.

"I don't think they'll fight," Burke whispered. "Jon's had his lesson. We should be able to settle down in peace after this. With safeguards, of course."

She nodded, then grabbed his arm. "Look !"

Someone was moving below them, coming out from the trees, walking out into the open.

"Jon !" she whispered.

"He's got nerve," Burke admitted.

"I'm here to talk," Jon called.

On the other side of the valley Hengsey's lean form showed itself. "About what ?" he asked.

Jon's arms hung limply at his sides. His one time smooth face was haggard. Burke felt a twinge of sympathy for the man. None of what had happened had been Jon's inspiration. He had been compelled to it, forced into joining with Balk by his own supporters. Now, discredited along with the man who had brought them to disaster, he must ask for terms from Hengsey, sardonic on the skyline. "With Balk dead," Jon began, "there's nobody here who wants trouble. The rest of us—"

Hengsey's laughter cut him short. "Do you think we're fools ?" Hengsey jeered. "Do you think we'll turn our backs after this ? So you can give the rest of us what you gave Levy ? When it suits you to do it."

Jon was still.

Hengsey raised his arm, pointing on. Towards the gap in the hills. "That's your way," he called. "Either you take it, or

we'll finish the job here and now."

Ella turned her head, looked at Burke. "That's not what you said," she whispered.

"No," he answered. His mouth twisted. "That's Hengsey and Jonson. Hengsey said I didn't live in the same world. *He* knows we're here. He's telling me also that he and Jonson and the rest of the men won't stand for any weakness. That I can go on planning, and giving the orders, provided that they agree with them." He looked at her bitterly. "You were right about the jungle," he said.

"Ten minutes," Hengsey called. "We'll hold off that long. If you're not moving by then we open up."

Ella touched Burke's arm. "You tried," she said. "You had to try. You're not responsible for more than that."

"So long as you understand," he replied.

"I do now," she told him. She pointed. "They're moving," she breathed.

On either side of the valley below figures were moving. Venturing dubiously into the open, looking up at the slopes where the guns lay concealed. When nothing happened they moved faster. Now they were all out, snatching up their possessions, bundling them, fastening the bundles. Clearly, by the size of their goods, this exodus had been planned ahead. There was further proof of this when men drove out the beasts they had held tethered in the undergrowth. Speedily the bundles were lifted up, were strapped on to the backs of the beasts.

"Better start," Hengsey's voice urged. "And don't make any mistakes. Don't change your minds. We're watching for that. We'll be watching all the way until you're on the other side."

The procession began, threading along the valley floor.

Burke's eyes were for Jon only. Someone had brought him a mount, and he rode at the rear of the party with two or three of his followers. He rode, not looking up, not looking sideways. That was how Burke would remember him always, as one drained of effort, emptied of hope.

He heard movement close by. Turning, he saw Jonson and some of his men moving along the ridge, coming closer. He stood up. Jonson saw him, saw Ella, strode up to them, grinning broadly.

"If your fellow hadn't got you away," he greeted her, "there's none of that lot down there'd be on their feet now."

Ella shuddered at the giant's ferocity. "It was Balk who was the main one," she protested.

"They're all Balks," Jonson grunted. "Smaller editions. Makes you wonder what their kids'll be like. And *their* kids." He turned to Burke, half defiantly, nevertheless, quite inexorable. "We're all set to see 'em off properly," he reported. "Make sure they do cross."

Burke nodded, and Jonson trod away, following his men.

"Now?" Ella asked.

"Now we go back," Burke replied. "The rest of the folk don't know what's happened. They'll be worrying. There's the mess to be cleaned up. There's new men and women to be trained for new jobs. We've lost some who're going to be hard to replace. Some, maybe, who'll never be replaced." He took her arm linked it in his as they walked. "In a way, we'll have gained. In spite of the cost. The ones who've stayed will be those who do believe in what we've got to do. People who believe in the future. If we've got the courage to keep on. To live, and bring up our children with the same idea."

"Children?" Ella asked.

"We need children," Burke answered. He did not look at her. "Most of the women will want children." He hesitated. "I suppose?"

"I want yours," Ella told him.

"You do!" he cried.

They both halted.

Ella put her hands on his arms. "Of course I do," she said. "Because I love you."

"I love you," Burke muttered.

"Yes," she said. "We've been in love a long time. Ever since we first met. Only then we spoiled it. We were greedy. Both of us, taking only what we, personally, wanted. Giving nothing."

"We've changed," Burke said. "I know I have. Particularly since the landing." He smiled wryly. "I didn't know I could. I didn't want to."

"We've both changed," Ella agreed.

"You're more beautiful now," Burke marvelled.

She met him as eagerly as he.

Afterwards, they walked hand in hand. Every now and again Burke's head would turn, to stare at her, to shake his head, while Ella laughed at him. And now and again, her head also turned, and she looked, and sighed, and Burke would grin. So that, every so often, they must stop.

It was a long walk, and the happiest they had ever known.

Chapter VII

Forty years later he recalled that day. Standing over Ella's grave. Looking at Ella's children and his children, looking down at their children. Lifting his eyes again to look across the grave at Jonson and at Hengsey, and their families. Looking out further at the four thousand faces of the men and women and children who had assembled to say 'good-bye' to Mother Ella.

" 'Mother Ella' " he thought. " 'Mother Ella' !"

That was how they thought of her. As the one person to whom everyone could go, sure of a sympathetic hearing. In her own way, even more of a rallying point for the life they had built than he, the Governor ; than Jonson, who commanded their levies ; than Hengsey, who organised the community for every project the Council considered necessary.

How long had she been 'Mother Ella' he wondered ?

"We've grown old," he thought with surprise. "Without noticing it."

He swung his head, considering the town that had grown up around the settlement, around the tall, red needle of the *Martian Enterprise*. He smiled at that rust-covered hulk. One would never think that that hollow spire, so *fixed*, so much an integral part of the landscape, had once been alive, hurtling through space.

He looked down at his hands, that were today twisted and crippled. They were not now the tools of a man who rode the dark. They were the hands of a labourer, an aging, earth-bound labourer. He nodded gently. He did not regret that. He had made a better success of life as a labourer than he had made in the calling he had originally chosen.

But—would that success last ?

His eyes marked a group in the throng coalescing almost automatically. His lips thinned. He knew every member of that group. He had cause to know them. Instinct, developed by experience of years of successive conflicts, warned him that another struggle was coming fast. One that might well sweep away all they had worked to achieve. A bid for the leadership. For a new Council. For new ideas, for progress, for freedom from ideals that might have been logical on the worlds from which the old ones came, but were only a stumbling block on Sumedin.

That was how the members of this group spoke.

He had no reason to doubt their sincerity. Very likely, if the positions had been reversed, he would have felt as they did. but that did not alter the fact that, in their zeal, they might very well push the future farther away.

How close were they to acting? That was what he should know if he was to be successful in preserving what he and Ella had believed in for their people. His narrowed eyes raked the group, probing for an indication. But their bronzed young faces were masks. They had themselves well under control, he admitted.

Or, was it that they had become another race, correspondingly harder to read? Physically, they were of another race, typical third generation people. It was amazing how nature worked, adapting an intruding species to a strange environment. To counteract the drag of Sumedin their frames were lighter. Their teeth were wider apart, their eyes deeper set against the fierce light. Their night vision was keener also, as it would have to be on a world where there was no moon. He would swear to it that they were different psychologically also. That, perhaps, worked to his advantage to-day. If he found them difficult to gauge, might that not be equally true in reverse?

He would soon know. One way or another. If what he had planned went as he wanted, the community would have a chance of developing naturally. Without the setbacks which would certainly occur from a forward drive begun too suddenly, too soon. If he could snatch the initiative, and, without their appreciating it, give them a course to follow which would see them safely on their way.

It was ironic that both he and they wanted the same thing. That each wished to impose their views on the other as to how this should be achieved. Well, that was nothing new. It was just another proof that he was growing old. "Your old men shall dream dreams" he recalled, "and your young men shall see visions."

"What did you say?" one of his sons asked.

He shook his head. "Synthesis," he said. He spoke the word clearly, his voice carrying in the quiet, saw the pre-arranged movements this code word was intended to initiate. Saw his fellow Councillors stiffen, before each turned, their hands going under their jackets. As the hands of certain men he believed he could rely on moved also.

He saw the incredulous faces of the group, the anger in them. That he should seize this occasion where they, out of respect for her memory, had held their hands. At the way in which they had made things easy for him. By coming together so that they could be surrounded as they were now. By men loyal to the Council, all armed, watching them in readiness. He saw, also, the fear in each individual face that here was their finish.

He moved forward. Jonson and Hengsey moved with him, flanking him. Until he halted, towering over the opposition. He smiled a grim smile. "Did you reckon that the Council had grown deaf and blind as well as weak?" he demanded. "Did you calculate that you could plot to take over, and the Council would be afraid to act?"

He made an impatient, contemptuous gesture when they remained silent, turned away from them, facing the hushed onlookers. "Some of you," he accused, "knew what these men planned. To throw out the Council you have, and make themselves the leaders." He paused. "Some of you," he went on, "would have stood behind them in that. Shall I ask the ones who were brave in whispers to speak loudly now?"

There was no response to his challenge. He had not expected that there would be any response; had counted on there not being any. He saw Hengsey smile, heard Jonson laugh beside him, and waited. And still there was no response. He marvelled at this. For it was clear to his eye that Hengsey's smile was not more than a slack leer. His ear noted the thin note in Jonson's laugh that in the old days had boomed. What was there in the three of them, three old men, which could still hold their enemies in check? Surely they could see that the Council's force was spent; that the threat was empty?

But, so long as this respect held, he must use it. For the future—for Ella's faith and his obsession in the future of this people. In spite of the forces which did not see things as he saw them.

"Hit 'em," Hengsey's voice muttered. "Finish 'em!"

"One of them is your grandson," Burke reminded him.

Hengsey snarled. "I've got others. That aren't rats. I can spare him."

"What about you?" Burke turned his head the other way.

"It's your hand," Jonson answered. "You saw this coming. You've called. I'll back your play."

"Blind?" Burke probed.

"I've done *that* before," Jonson answered. He snorted. "I'm still here."

Burke nodded ; turned back to Hengsey. "Well?"

Hengsey spat, smearing the resulting dribble on his chin with the back of his hand. "You've got some crazy idea," he complained. "It sticks out."

"If I said I thought they were right—?"

"Right!" Hengsey shrilled. "Right!"

"Wait," Jonson rumbled. "Let Burke finish."

"I'll make it fast," Burke promised. He swallowed. What he was doing now was the hardest thing he had ever done ; was in direct conflict with the will to fight which had driven him all his life. But which he must deny to-day if he sincerely meant what he had always claimed. "I say it's time we quit. Because, with us running things, they aren't going forward. Because of us. We're only trying to hark back to what was natural to our environment. Which isn't theirs. This is theirs. They can build on it. We can't. If we're honest, we'll admit there's nothing more we can teach them." He looked at the two faces of his friends. "Speaking personally," he said, "I'm empty."

Coldly Hengsey stared back at him. Deliberately he lifted his arm, indicating their surroundings. "You got your eyes shut?" he asked. "With what we've done all round us. That they couldn't have worked out for themselves. Agriculture, breeding, mechanics, hygiene."

"From what we *remembered*," Jonson cut in unexpectedly. "We didn't find out anything. Burke's right on that. You got to go on. Not think back." He grunted. "When we're dead, Hengsey, what then? How far'll they get, thinking back? To something that never was real for them?" He waited. When Hengsey only muttered inaudibly the giant smiled at Burke. "It's still your call," he said.

"And you'll back it?" Burke asked.

"We'll both back it," Jonson promised.

Afterwards, when the crowd was drifting away, wondering what life was going to be like after to-morrow when they must elect a new Council from amongst themselves, disputing already in their various interpretations of Burke's words, the three stayed behind.

The light would be gone soon, and the dark would come down. Each of the three was asking himself the same question. For how long would the dark last? How many generations

must pass before this people stood with a foot on the ladder back into space?

"When the time comes," Burke thought, "they won't remember that we ever existed." He felt a wind cold on his back, and shivered. But only momentarily. "It won't matter," he reminded himself. "When that time comes, we'll be justified. Whether we are remembered personally or not. It's the now that counts. What we've done to-day is as right as we know how. We've nursed them while it was needed. We've no right to try to live their lives for them. Not once the time comes for them to stand on their own feet."

"The chimney corner," Hengsey grumbled. "The wooden plate and spoon, an' people waiting for you to hurry up an' die." He looked at the other two. "Three grandpops," he jeered. "Running down. How's it feel to you?"

Jonson shrugged. "It comes to everybody." His eyes followed the people filtering away among the buildings of Shiptoun. "It'll come to them. And their kids."

"Wherever they are," Burke added.

Jonson chuckled. "Maybe that'll include the Trinity. Some day."

"Among the stars," Burke murmured. "Anywhere among the stars. We hope."

Hengsey blinked, his expression unusually mild. "Wish 'em luck," he finished.

Burke laughed. He put his two hands on their shoulders, urging them forward. "Come on, you dreamers," he commanded. "It's time we went."

"What?"

"You try to outsmart the other fellow. The first time you beat him you did it one way. Next time you've got to have something different. If you haven't, he beats you."

Hengsey opened his mouth, then closed it. Finally, "You mean, if you can't think up something new, he'll be ready for what you did before, an' he'll have the answer to it." He looked at Burke. "What you're saying is—we haven't got anything new?"

"Have we?" Burke asked. He spread out his hands. "I haven't. I'm empty."

"Yes," Jonson echoed. "I never thought about that before. I guess maybe it's true. So far as fighting goes, there isn't anything new I can show 'em." His mouth twitched. "Looks like I didn't know it, but there's things maybe these kids could

teach me. Only I wouldn't listen." His voice was sombre. "Maybe, if the Jonners came now, an' I was giving the orders, the Jonners'd win." He turned to Hengsey. "He's sold me," he said.

Hengsey was still, gazing out over the countryside. "When we came," he said at last, "it didn't look much different from the way it does now. More trees. No roads. Except for the houses we've built, an' the land we've fenced, it's not much different. Nothing that a small earthquake couldn't wipe out, an' leave things like they was before we got here."

"We've done more than that," Burke comforted. "We've laid a foundation. Maybe, on this, our kids'll build something big. Maybe even go back. Or anyway, find out how. There's no reason why not. And, if they do, we'll have done something towards that." He smiled at his two old friends. "I don't suppose, when that time comes round, that there'll be anything left to remind them that we ever existed. That won't matter to us. The thing is that we've done what we had to do. Maybe we made more mistakes doing it than we had to do. I guess we did. I don't suppose that'll count. Not by the time they're ready to ride back up into space."

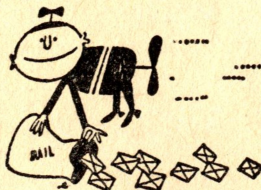
"Wish 'em luck," Jonson rumbled. He heaved himself up, stood looking at the other two. "That's settled then," he said. "We quit. To-morrow they vote themselves a new Council. Is that right?"

"The chimney corner," Hengsey said. "Where's my bowl, and see you mash it properly." He spat, and wiped his chin. "Three granpops," he jeered. But he stood up also.

Burke rose last. His hands came up, and lay on their shoulders as they stood looking out over their town. "Thanks," he said. "For everything. Not just from me. Not just from Ella. But from all these folk, and all the ones who're going to come after them."

He pressed his hands harder against them, urging them forward. "Come on, you empire builders," he commanded. "It's time we went."

—Clifford C. Reed



THE READERS' SPACE

Dear John,

I have been reading *Science Fiction Adventures* since issue No. 1 appeared, and quite frankly was originally very disappointed. The stories were of the worst possible type—but I persevered, hoping for an improvement. Then, with No. 6—a transformation! With this first British issue (no longer an American reprint) the quality of the stories improved very considerably and with the current issue (No. 7) the stories reached what I would have previously thought to be unattainable heights for this magazine.

The lead story in No. 7 ("Occupation Warrior") by James White kept a fast pace and held my enthralled attention until the very end. "The Sun Creator" by Nelson Sherwood had a good ending—the theme was very original.

All in all a good issue and I hope to read stories of a similar quality in future issues of *Science Fiction Adventures*.

Peter Singleton,
Burnley, Lancashire.

(*This current issue should please you even more, Peter. Wynne Whiteford's sequel to "Shadow Of The Sword" in No. 6 is another great story and we couldn't resist wrecking our original line-up to place this story earlier than intended. For that reason you may find future schedules changed from 'as advertised'—but all those listed stories will appear as and when we can fit them in.—Ed*).

Dear Sir,

I was pleased to note that *Science Fiction Adventures* has now ceased to be a reprint of an American magazine.

I have been a reader of *New Worlds* and *Science Fantasy* since publication commenced and have always felt that they are better reading than their American counterparts.

I have read two or three copies of *Science Fiction Adventures* and thought that not only do they suit American taste better than British, but are of a far lower standard.

I hope that the change in editorship will mean it's being brought up to the same high standard as your two other publications.

J. E. Marriage,
Stock, Essex.

(We have every intention of bringing SFA up to the high standard of our other two magazines, Mr. Marriage, and hope that you will agree with us that we have made a reasonable start in the last three issues.—Ed).

Dear Sir,

Please extend to Editor Carnell my congratulations on yet another top line magazine. *Science Fiction Adventures* in my opinion fills a big gap admirably. The type of story is a contrast and supplementary to *New Worlds* and *Science Fantasy*. In my humble opinion "Wasp" by Eric Frank Russel in *New Worlds* was one of the best stories published anywhere in recent years. If you can continue to publish stories in your publications of the class of the "Chalice" series, "The Bones of Shosun" and the "Troon" series you need never doubt that your efforts are equal to anything published in any country.

R. S. Walmsley,
Auckland, New Zealand.

(Many thanks for the compliments, Mr. Walmsley. We intend to go on striving to obtain good material for all three magazines—and expect to obtain it !—Ed).

Dear Mr. Carnell,

Science Fiction Adventures No. 6 was terrible all round. The science in all the stories, particularly the first one, was shot to pot.

Take the writing off the front—the paintings were crushed enough as it was.

Keep on reprinting American stories.

Let's have more editorial, book reviews and articles. Page after page of blank type is so boring, so please, *please*, give us some decent and plentiful abstract interior art and some illustrated articles.

Stories on the whole are good and improving ; no argument here. Can you get some more Russell and (if humanly possible) Clarke. Thanks for a good magazine.

G. M. Webb, Ealing, London, W.5.

(We have an idea that some of the above remarks were meant for New Worlds and not SFA—we pointed this problem out in a recent editorial. Anyhow—any more for the art controversy? This one has been going round and round for several years but most readers are too violently divided and we are refraining (editorially) from entering the lists. Meanwhile—Clarke appears in the current Science Fantasy with a long novelette entitled “The Songs Of Distant Earth.”—Ed).

Dear Sir,

This is to express my appreciation of your three magazines. I myself think that *Science Fiction Adventures* is the best and I especially enjoyed “The Slave,” “Chalice of Death,” “Secret of the Green Invaders,” “Earth Shall Live Again,” “The World Otalmi Made” and “Vengeance of the Space Armadas.” I think Harry Harrison is one of your best writers. When are we going to see more of his stuff?

Here’s wishing you as much success with future issues.

M. North, St. Mary Cray, Kent.

(Harry Harrison had the lead story—“I See You”—in New Worlds No. 83 (May) in case you missed it. Our top authors get spread around the three Nova magazines quite a bit, depending upon the type of plot they produce. There is a different editorial policy for each of our magazines, you know.—Ed).

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