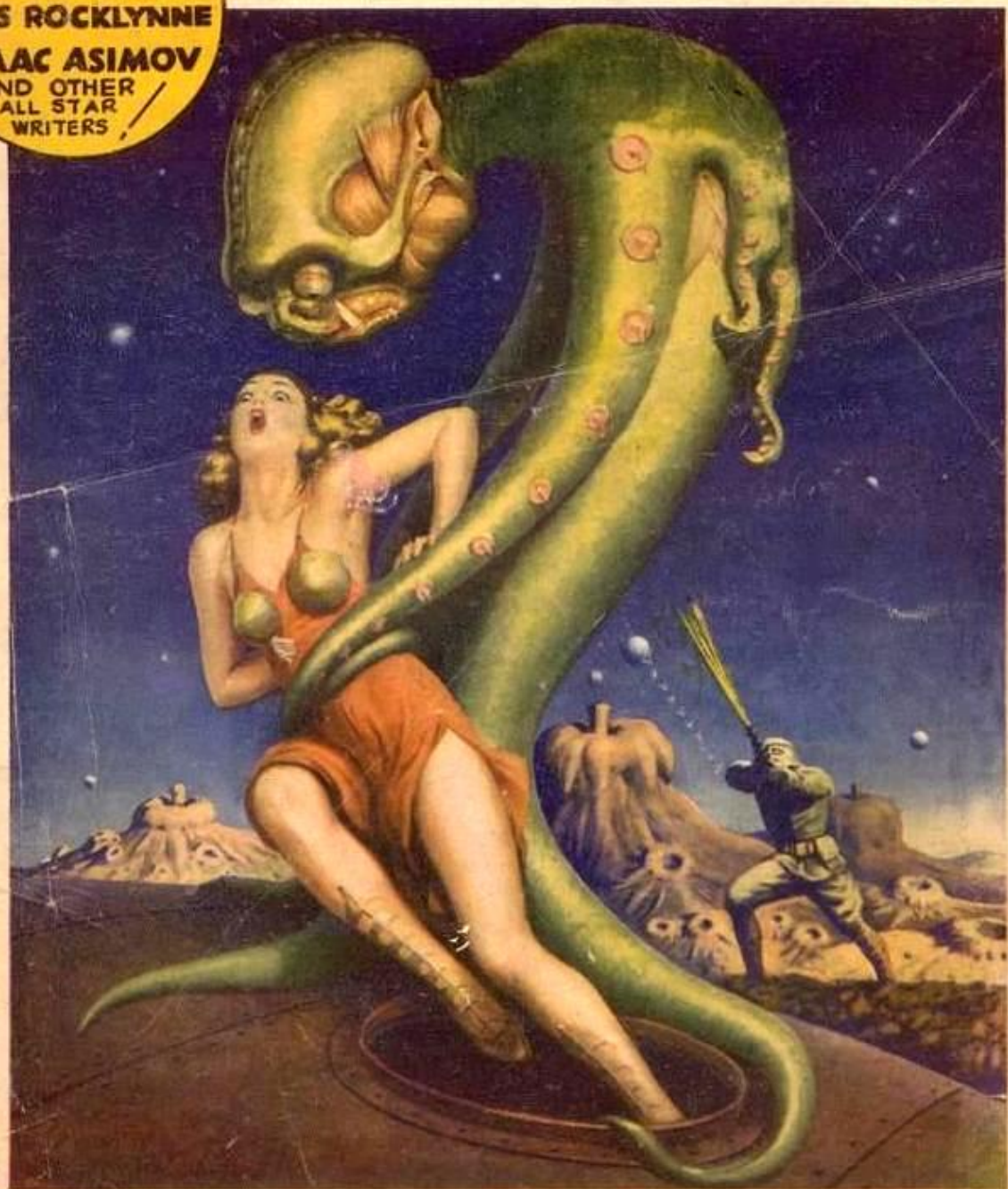


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# Tops in

# SCIENCE FICTION

SPRING 1953

Volume 1 Number 1



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Editor

## TOPS IN SCIENCE FICTION

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# CITADEL OF LOST SHIPS

A NOVELET By LEIGH BRACKETT

Romany was an asteroid of fused space-hulks. A cavern for the Solar System gypsies. And to Romany came Campbell, space rover, to find this last cinder of freedom had become a secret slave-world.

**R**OY CAMPBELL woke painfully. His body made a blind, instinctive lunge for the control panel, and it was only when his hands struck the smooth, hard mud of the wall that he realized he wasn't in his ship any longer, and that the Space-guard wasn't chasing him, their guns hammering death.

He leaned against the wall, the perspiration thick on his heavy chest, his eyes wide and remembering. He could feel again, as though the running fight were still happening, the bucking of his sleek Fitz-Sothorn beneath the calm control of his hands. He could remember the pencil rays lashing through the night, searching for him, seek-



ing his life. He could recall the tiny prayer that lingered in his memory, as he fought so skillfully, so dangerously, to evade the relentless pursuer.

Then there was a hazy period, when a blasting cannon had twisted his ship like a wind-tossed leaf, and his head had smashed cruelly against the control panel. And then the slinking minutes when he had raced for safety—and then the sodden hours when sleep was the only thing in the Universe that he craved.

He sank back on the hide-frame cot with something between a laugh and a curse. He was sweating, and his wiry body twitched. He found a cigarette, lit it on the second try and sat still, listening to his heartbeats slow down.

He began to wonder, then, what had wakened him.

It was night, the deep indigo night of Venus. Beyond the open hut door, Campbell could see the *liba*-trees swaying a little in the hot, slow breeze. It seemed as though the whole night swayed, like a dark blue veil.

For a long time he didn't hear anything but the far-off screaming of some swamp-beast on the kill. Then, sharp and cruel against the blue silence, a drum began to beat.

It made Campbell's heart jerk. The sound wasn't loud, but it had a tight, hard quality of savagery, something as primal as the swamp and as alien, no matter how long a man lived with it.

The drumming stopped. The second, perhaps the third, ritual prelude. The first must have wakened him. Campbell stared with narrow dark eyes at the doorway.

He'd been with the Kraylens only two days this time, and he'd slept most of that. Now he realized, that in spite of his exhaustion, he had sensed something wrong in the village.

Something was wrong, very wrong, when the drum beat that way in the sticky night.

He pulled on his short, black spaceman's boots and went out of the hut. No one moved in the village. Thatch rustled softly in the slow wind, and that was the only sign of life.

Campbell turned into a path under the whispering *liba*-trees. He wore nothing but

the tight black pants of his space garb, and the hot wind lay on his skin like soft hands. He filled his lungs with it. It smelled of warm still water and green, growing things, and . . .

Freedom. Above all, *freedom*. This was one place where a man could still stand on his legs and feel human.

The drumming started again, like a man's angry heart beating out of the indigo night. This time it didn't stop. Campbell shivered. The trees parted presently, showing a round dark hummock.

It was lit by the hot flare of burning *liba* pods. Sweet oily smoke curled up into the branches. There was a sullen glint of water through the trees, but there were closer glints, brighter, fiercer, more deadly.

The glinting eyes of men, silent men, standing in a circle around the hummock.

There was a little man crouched on the mound in the center. His skin had the blue-whiteness of skim milk. He wore a kilt of iridescent scales. His face was subtly reptilian, broad across the cheek-bones and pointed below.

A crest of brilliant feathers—they weren't really feathers, but that was as close as Campbell could get—started just above his brow ridges and ran clean down his spine to the waist. They were standing erect now, glowing in the firelight.

He nursed a drum between his knees. It stopped being just a drum when he touched it. It was his own heart, singing and throbbing with the hate in it.

Campbell stopped short of the circle. His nerves, still tight from his near-fatal brush with the Spaceguard, stung with little flaring pains. He'd never seen anything like this before.

The little man rocked slightly, looking up into the smoke. His eyes were half closed. The drum was part of him and part of the indigo night. It was part of Campbell, beating in his blood.

It was the heart of the swamp, sobbing with hate and a towering anger that was as naked and simple as Adam on the morning of Creation.

CAMPBELL must have made some involuntary motion, because a man standing at the edge of the hummock turned his



head and saw him. He was tall and slender, and his crest was pure white, a sign of age.

He turned and came to Campbell, looking at him with opalescent eyes. The fire-light laid the Earthman's dark face in sharp relief, the lean hard angles, the high-bridged nose that had been broken and not set straight, the bitter mouth.

Campbell said, in pure liquid Venusian, "What is it, Father?"

The Kraylen's eyes dropped to the Earthman's naked breast. There was black hair on it, and underneath the hair ran twisting, intricate lines of silver and deep blue, tattooed with exquisite skill.

The old man's white crest nodded. Campbell turned and went back down the path. The wind and the *liba*-trees, the hot blue night beat with the anger and the hate of the little man with the drum.

Neither spoke until they were back in the hut. Campbell lit a smoky lamp. The old Kraylen drew a long, slow breath.

"My almost-son," he said, "this is the last time I can give you refuge. When you are able, you must go and return no more."

Campbell stared at him. "But, Father! Why?"

The old man spread long blue-white hands. His voice was heavy.

"Because we, the Kraylens, shall have ceased to be."

Campbell didn't say anything for a minute. He sat down on the hide-frame cot and ran his fingers through his black hair.

"Tell me, Father," he said quietly, grimly.

The Kraylen's white crest rippled in the lamplight. "It is not your fight."

Campbell got up. "Look. You've saved my neck more times than I can count. You've accepted me as one of your own. I've been happier here than any—well, skip that. But don't say it isn't my fight."

The pale, triangular old face smiled. But the white crest shook.

"No. There is really no fight. Only death. We're a dying tribe, a mere scrap of old Venus. What matter if we die now—or later?"

Campbell lit a cigarette with quick, sharp motions. His voice was hard. "Tell me, Father. All, and quick."

Opalescent eyes met his. "It is better not."

"I said, 'tell me!'"

"Very well." The old man sighed. "You would hear, after all. You remember the frontier town of Lhi?"

"Remember it!" Campbell's white teeth flashed. "Every dirty stone in it, from the pumping conduits on up. Best place on three planets to fence the hot stuff."

He broke off, suddenly embarrassed. The Kraylen said gently:

"That is your affair, my son. You've been away a long time. Lhi has changed. The Terra-Venusian Coalition Government has taken it for the administration center of Tehara Province."

Campbell's eyes, at mention of the Coalition Government, acquired a hot, hard brightness. He said, "Go on."

The old man's face was cut from marble, his voice stiff and distant.

"There have been men in the swamps. Now word has been sent us. It seems there is coal here, and oil, and certain minerals that men prize. They will drain the swamps for many miles, and work them."

Campbell let smoke out of his lungs, very slowly. "Yeah? And what becomes of you?"

The Kraylen turned away and stood framed in the indigo square of the doorway. The distant drum sobbed and shouted. It was hot, and yet the sweat turned cold on Campbell's body.

The old man's voice was distant and throbbing and full of anger, like the drum. Campbell had to strain to hear it.

"They will take us and place us in camps in the great cities. Small groups of us, so that we are divided and split. Many people will pay to see us, the strange remnants of old Venus. They will pay for our skills in the curing of *lesben*-skins and the writing of quaint music, and tattooing. We will grow rich."

Campbell dropped the cigarette and ground it on the dirt floor. Knotted veins stood out on his forehead, and his face was cruel. The old man whispered:

"We will die first."

IT WAS a long time since anyone had spoken. The drumming had stopped, but the echo of it throbbed in Campbell's pulses. He looked at his spread, sinewy hands on his knees and swallowed because



the veins of his neck were swollen and hurting.

Presently, he said, "Couldn't you go further back into the swamps?"

The old Kraylen spoke without moving. He still stood in the doorway, watching the trees sway in the slow wind.

"The Nahali live there. Besides, there is no clean water and no earth for crops. We are not lizard eaters."

"I've seen it happen," said Campbell somberly. "On Earth, and Mars, and Mercury, and the moons of Jupiter and Saturn. Little people driven from their homes, robbed of their way of life, exploited and killed for the idiots in the trade centers. Little people who didn't care about progress, and making money. Little people who only wanted to live, and breathe, and be let alone."

He got up in a swift savage rush and hurled a gourd of water crashing into a corner and sat down again. He was shivering. The old Kraylen turned.

"Little people like you, my son?"

Campbell shrugged. "Maybe. We'd worked our farm for three hundred years. My father didn't want to sell. They condemned it anyhow. It's under water now, and the dam runs a hell of a big bunch of factories."

"I'm sorry."

Campbell looked up, and his face softened. "I've never understood," he said. "You people are the most law-abiding citizens I ever met. You don't like strangers. And yet I blunder in here, hot on the lam and ugly as a swamp-dragon, and you . . ."

He stopped. It was probably the excitement that was making his throat knot up like that. The smoke from the lamp stung his eyes. He blinked and bent to trim it.

"You were wounded, my son, and in trouble. Your quarrel with the police was none of ours. We would have helped anyone. And then, while you had fever and your guard was down, you showed that more than your body needed help. We gave you what we could."

"Yeah," said Campbell huskily. He didn't say it, but he knew well enough that what the Kraylens had given him had kept him from blowing his top completely.

Now the Kraylens were going the way of

the others, straws swept before the great broom of Progress. Nothing could stop it. Earth's empire surged out across the planets, building, bartering, crashing across time and custom and race to make money and the shining steel cage of efficiency.

A cage wherein a sheep could live happily enough, well-fed and opulent. But Campbell wasn't a sheep. He'd tried it, and he couldn't bleat in time. So he was a wolf, now, alone and worrying the flock.

Soon there wasn't going to be a place in the Solar System where a man could stand on his own feet and breathe.

He felt stifled. He got up and stood in the doorway, watching the trees stir in the hot indigo gloom. The trees would go. Wells and mines, slag and soot and clattering machinery, and men in sweat-stained shirts laboring night and day to get, to grow, to produce.

Campbell's mouth twisted, bitter and sardonic. He said softly:

"Heaven help the unconstructive! They'll need it."

The old Kraylen murmured, "What happened to those others, my son?"

Campbell's lean shoulders twitched. "Some of them died. Some of them submitted. The rest . . ."

He turned, so suddenly that the old man flinched. Campbell's dark eyes had a hot light in them, and his face was sharply alive.

"The rest," he said evenly, "went to Romany."

HE TALKED, then. Urgently, pacing the hut in nervous catlike strides, trying to remember things he had heard and not been very much interested in at the time. When he was through, the Kraylen said:

"It would be better. Infinitely better. But—" He spread his long pale hands, and his white crest drooped. "But there is no time. Government men will come within three days to take us—that was the time set. And since we will not go . . ."

Campbell thought of the things that had happened to other rebellious tribes. He felt sick. But he made his voice steady.

"We'll hope it's time, Father. Romany is in an orbit around Venus now—I nearly crashed it coming in. I'm going to try, any-



how. If I don't—well, stall as long as you can."

Remembering the drum and the way the men had looked, he didn't think that would be long. He pulled on a loose shirt of green spider-silk, slung the belt of his heavy needle-gun over one shoulder, and picked up his black tunic.

He put his hand on the Kraylen's shoulder and smiled. "We'll take care of it, Father."

The old man's opalescent eyes were shadowed. "I wish I could stop you. It's hopeless for us, and you are—*hot* is that the word?"

Campbell grinned. "Hot," he said, "is the word. Blistering! The Coalition gets awfully mad when someone pulls their own hi-jacking stunt on them. But I'm used to it. I've been playing the game a good many years. They've never caught me yet though they've come mighty close."

It was beginning to get light outside. The old man said quietly, "The gods go with you, my son."

Campbell went out, thinking he'd need them. It was odd how space brought back the old, the ancient feelings—the fear and the worship of all the gods that be.

It was full day when he reached his hidden ship—a sleek, souped-up Fitts-Sothern that had the legs of almost anything in space. He paused briefly by the airlock, looking at the sultry green of *liba*-trees under a pearl-gray sky, the white mist lapping around his narrow waist.

He spent a long time over his charts, feeding numbers to the calculators. When he got a set-up that suited him, he took the Fitts-Sothern up on purring 'copters, angling out over the deep swamps. He felt better, with the ship under his hands.

The Planetary Patrol blanket was thin over the deep swamps, but it was vigilant. Campbell's nerves were tight. They got tighter as he came closer to the place where he was going to have to begin his loop over to the night side.

He was just reaching for the rocket switch when the little red light started to flash on the indicator panel.

Somebody had a detector beam on him. And he was morally certain that the somebody was flying a Patrol boat.

## II

THERE was one thing about the Venusian atmosphere. You couldn't see through it, even with infra-beams, at very long range. The intensity needle showed the Patrol ship still far off, probably not suspicious yet, although stray craft were rare over the swamps.

In a minute the copper would be calling for information, with his mass-detectors giving the Fitts-Sothern a massage. Campbell didn't think he'd wait. He slammed in the drive rockets, holding them down till the tubes warmed. Even held down, they had plenty.

The Fitts-Sothern climbed in a whipping spiral. The red light wavered, died, glowed again. The copper was pretty good with his beam. Campbell fed in more juice.

The red light died again. But the Patrol boat had all its beams out now, spread like a fish net. The Fitts-Sothern struck another, lost it, struck again, and this time she didn't break out.

Campbell felt the sudden racking jar all through him. "Tractor beams," he said. "You think so, buddy?"

The drive jets were really warming now. He shot it to them. The Fitts-Sothern hung for a fractional instant, her triple-braced hull shuddering so that Campbell's teeth rang together.

Then she broke, blasting up right through the netted beams. Campbell jockeyed his port and starboard steering jets. The ship leaped and skittered wildly. The copper didn't have time to focus full power on her anywhere, and low power to the Fitts-Sothern was a nuisance and nothing more.

Campbell went up over the Patrol ship, veered off in the opposite direction from the one he intended to follow, hung in a tight spiral until he was sure he was clean, and then dived again.

The Patrol boat wasn't expecting him to come back. The pilot was concentrating on where Campbell had gone, not where he had been. Campbell grinned, opened full throttle, and went skittering over the curve of the planet to meet the night shadow rushing toward him.

He didn't meet any more ships. He was way off the trade lanes, and moving so fast



that only blind luck could tag him. He hoped the Patrol was hunting for him in force, back where they'd lost him. He hoped they'd hunt a long time.

Presently he climbed, on slowed and muffled jets, out of the atmosphere. His black ship melted indistinguishably into the black shadow of the planet. He slowed still more, just balancing the Venus-drag, and crawled out toward a spot marked on his astrogation chart.

An Outer Patrol boat went by, too far off to bother about. Campbell lit a cigarette with nervous hands. It was only a quarter smoked when the object he'd been waiting for loomed up in space.

His infra-beam showed it clearly. A round, plate-shaped mass about a mile in diameter, built of three tiers of spaceships. Hulks, ancient, rusty, pitted things that had died and not been decently buried, welded together in a solid mass by lengths of pipe let into their carcasses.

Before, when he had seen it, Campbell had been in too much of a hurry to do more than curse it for getting in his way. Now he thought it was the most desolate, Godforsaken mass of junk that had ever made him wonder why people bothered to live at all.

He touched the throttle, tempted to go back to the swamps. Then he thought of what was going to happen back there, and took his hand away.

"Hell!" he said. "I might as well look inside."

He didn't know anything about the internal set-up of Romany—what made it tick, and how. He knew Romany didn't love the Coalition, but whether they would run to harboring criminals was another thing.

It wouldn't be strange if they had been given pictures of Roy Campbell and told to watch for him. Thinking of the size of the reward for him, Campbell wished he were not quite so famous.

Romany reminded him of an old-fashioned circular mouse-trap. Once inside, it wouldn't be easy to get out.

"Of all the platinum-plated saps!" he snarled suddenly. "Why am I sticking my neck out for a bunch of semi-human swamp-crawlers, anyhow?"

He didn't answer that. The leading edge of Romany knifed toward him. There were

lights in some of the hulks, mostly in the top layer. Campbell reached for the radio.

He had to contact the big shots. No one else could give him what he needed. To do that, he had to walk right up to the front door and announce himself. After that . . .

The manual listed the wave-length he wanted. He juggled the dials and verniers, wishing his hands wouldn't sweat.

"Spaceship *Black Star* calling Romany. Calling Romany . . ."

His screen flashed, flickered, and cleared. "Romany acknowledging. Who are you and what do you want?"

CAMPBELL'S screen showed him a youngish man—a Taxil, he thought, from some Mercurian backwater. He was ebony-black and handsome, and he looked as though the sight of Campbell affected him like stale beer.

Campbell said, "Cordial guy, aren't you? I'm Thomas Black, trader out of Terra, and I want to come aboard."

"That requires permission."

"Yeah? Okay. Connect me with the boss."

The Taxil now looked as though he smelled something that had been dead a long time. "Possibly you mean Eran Mak, the Chief Councillor?"

"Possibly," admitted Campbell, "I do." If the rest of the gypsies were anything like this one, they sure had a hate on for outsiders.

Well, he didn't blame them. The screen blurred. It stayed that way while Campbell smoked three cigarettes and exhausted his excellent vocabulary. Then it cleared abruptly.

Eran Mak sounded Martian, but the man pictured on the screen was no Martian. He was an Earthman, with a face like a wedge of granite and a frame that was all gaunt bones and thrusting angles.

His hair was thin, pale-red and fuzzy. His mouth was thin. Even his eyes were thin, close slits of pale blue with no lashes. Campbell disliked him instantly.

"I'm Tredrick," said the Earthman. His voice was thin, with a sound in it like someone walking on cold gravel. "Terran Overchief. Why do you wish to land, Mister Black?"



"I bring a message from the Kraylen people of Venus. They need help."

Tredrick's eyes became, if possible, thinner and more pale.

"Help?"

"Yes. Help." Campbell was struck by a sudden suspicion, something he caught flickering across Tredrick's granite features when he said "Kraylen." He went on, slowly, "The Coalition is moving in on them. I understand you people of Romany help in cases like that."

There was a small, tight silence.

"I'm sorry," said Tredrick. "There is nothing we can do."

Campbell's dark face tightened. "Why not? You helped the Shenyat people on Ganymede and the Drylanders on Mars. That's what Romany is, isn't it—a refuge for people like that?"

"As a *latnik*, there's a lot you don't know. At this time, we cannot help anyone. Sorry, Black. Please clear ship."

The screen went dead. Campbell stared at it with sultry eyes. Sorry. The hell you're sorry. What gives here, anyway?

He thrust out an angry hand to the transmitter. And then, quite suddenly, the Taxil was looking at him out of the screen.

The hostile look was gone. Anger replaced it, but not anger at Campbell. The Taxil said, in a low, rapid voice:

"You're not lying about coming from the Kraylens?"

"No. No, I'm not lying." He opened his shirt to show the tattoo.

"The dirty scut! Mister Black, clear ship, and then make contact with one of the outer hulks on the lowest tier. You'll find emergency hatchways in some of the pipes. Come inside, and wait."

His dark eyes had a savage glitter. "There are some of us, Mister Black, who still consider Romany a refuge!"

CAMPBELL cleared ship. His nerves were singing in little tight jerks. He'd stepped into something here. Something big and ugly. There had been a certain ring in the Taxil's voice.

The thin, gravelly Mr. Tredrick had something on his mind, too. Something important, about Kraylens. Why Kraylens, of all the unimportant people on Venus?

Trouble on Romany. Romany the gypsy world, the Solar System's stepchild. Strictly a family affair. What business did a Public Enemy with a low number and a high valuation have mixing into that?

Then he thought of the drum beating in the indigo night, and an old man watching *liba-trees* stir in a slow, hot wind.

Roy Campbell called himself a short, bitter name, and sighed, and reached lean brown hands for the controls. Presently, in the infra-field, he made out an ancient Krub freighter on the edge of the lowest level, connected to companion wrecks by sections of twelve-foot pipe. There was a hatch in one of the pipes, with a hand-wheel.

The Fitts-Sothorn glided with exquisite daintiness to the pipe, touched it gently, threw out her magnetic grapples and suction flanges, and hung there. The airlock exactly covered the hatchway.

Campbell got up. He was sweating and as edgy as a tomcat on the prowl. With great care he buckled his heavy gun around his narrow hips. Then he went into the airlock.

He checked grapples and flanges with inordinate thoroughness. The hatch-wheel jutted inside. He picked up a spanner and turned it, not touching the frigid metal.

There was a crude barrel-lock beyond. Campbell ran his tongue once over dry lips, shrugged, and climbed in.

He got through into a space that was black as the Coalsack. The air was thin and biting cold. Campbell shivered in his silk shirt. He laid his hand on his gun butt and took two cautious steps away from the bulge of the lock, wishing to hell he were some place else.

Cold green light exploded out of nowhere behind him. He half turned, his gun blurring into his palm. But he had no chance to fire it.

Something whipped down across the nerve-center in the side of his neck. His body simply faded out of existence. He fell on his face and lay there, struggling with all his might to move and achieving only a faint twitching of the muscles.

He knew vaguely that someone rolled him over. He blinked up into the green light, and heard a man's deep, soft voice



say from the darkness behind it:

"What made you think you could get away with it?"

Campbell tried three times before he could speak. "With what?"

"Spying. Does Tredrick think we're children?"

"I wouldn't know." It was easier to speak this time. His body was beginning to fade in again, like something on a television screen. He tried to close his hand. It didn't work very well, but it didn't matter. His gun was gone.

Something moved across the light. A man's body, a huge, supple, muscular thing the color of dark bronze. It knelt with a terrible tigerish ease beside Campbell, the bosses on its leather kilt making a clinking noise. There was a jeweled gorget of reddish metal around the base of its throat. The stones had a wicked glitter.

The deep, soft voice said, "Who are you?"

Campbell tried to force the returning life faster through his body. The man's face was in shadow. Campbell looked up with sultry, furious eyes and achieved a definite motion toward getting up.

The kneeling giant put out his right arm. The green light burned on it. Campbell's eyes followed it down toward his throat. His face became a harsh, irregular mask cut from dark wood.

The arm was heavily, beautifully muscled. But where the hand should have been there was a leather harness and a hook of polished Martian bronze.

CAMPBELL knew what had struck him. The thin, hard curve of that hook, more potent than the edge of any hand.

The point pricked his throat, just over the pulse on the left side. The man said softly:

"Lie still, little man, and answer."

Campbell lay still. There was nothing else to do. He said, "I'm Thomas Black, if that helps. Who are you?"

"What did Tredrick tell you to do?"

"To get the hell out. What gives with you?" If that Taxil was spreading the word about him, he'd better hurry. Campbell decided to take a chance. The guy with the hook didn't seem to love Tredrick.

"The black boy in the radio room told me to come aboard and wait. Seems he's sore at Tredrick, too. So am I. That makes us all pals, doesn't it?"

"You lie, little man." The deep voice was quietly certain. "You were sent to spy. Answer!"

The point of the hook put the exclamation point on that word. Campbell winced away. He wished the lug wouldn't call him "little man." He wouldn't remember ever having felt more hopelessly scared.

He said, "Damn your eyes, I'm not lying. Check with the Taxil. He'll tell you."

"And betray him to Tredrick? You're clumsy, little man."

The hook bit deeper. Campbell's neck began to bleed. He felt all right again otherwise. He wondered whether he'd have a chance of kicking the man in the stomach before his throat was torn out. He tried to drew farther away, but the pipe wall wouldn't give.

A woman's voice spoke then, quite suddenly, from beyond the green light. Campbell jumped. He hadn't even thought about anyone else being there. Now it was obvious that someone was holding the light.

The voice said, "Wait, Marah. Zard is calling me now."

It was a clear, low voice. It had music in it. Campbell would have loved it if it had croaked, but as it was it made his nerves prick with sheer ecstasy.

The hook lifted out of the hole it had made, but it didn't go away. Campbell raised his head a little. The lower edge of the green light spilled across a pair of sandalled feet. The bare white legs above them were as beautiful as the voice, in the same strong clear way.

There was a long silence. Marah, the man with the hook, turned his face partly into the light. It was oblong and scarred and hard as beaten bronze. The eyes in it were smoky ember, set aslant under a tumbled crest of tawny hair.

After a long time the woman spoke again. Her voice was different this time. It was angry, and the anger made it sing and throb like the Kraylen's drum.

"The Earthman is telling the truth, Marah. Zard sent him. He's here about the Kraylens."



The big man—a Martian Drylander, Campbell thought, from somewhere around Kesh—got up, fast. "The Kraylens!"

"He asked for help, and Tredrick sent him away." The light moved closer. "But that's not all, Marah. Tredrick has found out about—us. Old Ekla talked. They're waiting for us at the ship!"

## III

MARAH turned. His eyes had a greenish, feral glint like those of a lion on the kill. He said, "I'm sorry, little man."

Campbell was on his feet, now, and reasonably steady. "Think nothing of it," he said dourly. "A natural mistake." He looked at the hook and mopped the blood from his neck, and felt sick. He added, "The name's Black. Thomas Black."

"It wouldn't be Campbell?" asked the woman's voice. "Roy Campbell?"

He squinted into the light, not saying anything. The woman said, "You are Roy Campbell. The Spaceguard was here not long ago, hunting for you. They left your picture."

He shrugged. "All right. I'm Roy Campbell."

"That," said Marah softly, "helps a lot!" He could have meant it any way. His hook made a small, savage flash in the green light.

"There's trouble here on Romany. Civil war. Men are going to be killed before it's over—perhaps now. Where's your place in it?"

"How do I know? The Coalition is moving in on the Kraylens. I owe them something. So I came here for help. Help! Yeah."

"You'll get it," said the woman. "You'll get it, somehow, if any of us live."

Campbell raised his dark brows. "What goes on here, anyhow?"

The woman's low voice sang and throbbed against the pipe walls. "A long time ago there were a few ships. Old ships, crowded with people who had no homes. Little, drifting people who made a living selling their odd handicrafts in the spaceports, who were cursed as a menace to navigation and distrusted as thieves. Perhaps they were thieves. They were also cold, and

hungry, and resentful.

"After a while the ships began to band together. It was easier that way—they could share food and fuel, and talk, and exchange ideas. Space wasn't so lonely. More and more ships drifted in. Pretty soon there were a lot of them. A new world, almost."

"They called it Romany, after the wandering people of Earth, because they were gypsies, too, in their own way."

"They clung to their own ways of life. They traded with the noisy, trampling people on the planets they had been driven away from because they had to. But they hated them, and were hated, just as gypsies always are."

"It wasn't an easy life, but they were free in it. They could stand anything, as long as they were free. And always, anywhere in the Solar System, wherever some little lost tribe was being swallowed up and needed help, ships from Romany went to help them."

Her voice dropped. Campbell thought again of the Kraylen's drum, singing its anger in the indigo night.

"That was the creed of Romany," she whispered. "Always to help, always to be a refuge for the little people who couldn't adjust themselves to progress, who only wanted to die in dignity and peace. And now . . ."

"And now," said Marah somberly, "there is civil war."

CAMPBELL drew a long, unsteady breath. The woman's voice throbbed in him, and his throat was tight. He said "Tredrick?"

Marah nodded. "Tredrick. But it's more than that. If it were only Tredrick, it wouldn't be so bad."

He ran the curve of his hook over his scarred chin, and his eyes burned like candle flames.

"Romany is growing old, and soft. That's the real trouble. Decay. Otherwise, Tredrick would have been kicked into space long ago. There are old men in the Council, Campbell. They think more of comfort than they do of—well . . ."

"Yeah. I know. What's Tredrick's angle?"

"I don't know. He's a strange man—



you can't get a grip on him. Sometimes I think he's working for the Coalition."

Campbell scowled. "Could be. You gypsies have a lot of wild talents and some unique skills—I've met some of 'em. The man that controlled them would be sitting pretty. The Coalition would like it, too."

The woman said bitterly, "And they could always exhibit us. Tours, at so much a head. So quaint—a cross-section of a lost world!"

"Tredrick's the strong man," Marah went on. "Eran Mak is Chief Councillor, but he does as Tredrick tells him. The idea is that if Romany settled down and stops getting into trouble with the Planetary Coalitions, we can have regular orbits, regular trade, and so on."

"In other words," said Campbell dryly, "stop being Romany."

"You understand. A pet freak, a tourist attraction, a fat source of revenue." Again the savage flash of the hook. "A damned circus!"

"And Tredrick, I take it, has decided that you're endangering the future of Romany by rebellion, and put the finger on you."

"Exactly." Marah's yellow eyes were bright and hard, meeting Campbell's.

Campbell thought about the Fitts-Sothern outside, and all the lonely reaches of space where he could go. There were lots of Coalition ships to rob, a few plague-spots left to spend the loot in. All he had to do was walk out.

But there was a woman's voice, with a note in it like a singing, angry drum. There was an old man's voice, murmuring, "Little people like you, my son?"

It was funny, how a guy could be alone and not know he minded it, and then suddenly walk in on perfect strangers and not be alone any more—alone inside, that is—and know that he *had* minded it like hell.

It had been that way with the Kraylens. It was that way now. Campbell shrugged. "I'll stick around."

He added irritably, "Sister, will you for Pete's sake get that light out of my eyes?"

She moved it, shining it down. "The name's Moore. Stella Moore."

He grinned. "Sorry. So you do have a face, after all."

It wasn't beautiful. It was pale and heart-shaped, framed in a mass of unruly red-gold hair. There were long, gray eyes under dark-gold brows that had never been plucked, and a red, sullen mouth.

Her teeth were white and uneven, when she smiled. He liked them. The red of her sullen lips was their own. She wore a short tunic the color of Tokay grapes, and the body under it was long and clean-cut. Her arms and throat had the whiteness of pearl.

Marah said quietly, "Contact Zard. Tell him to throw the PA system wide open and say we're taking the ship, now, to get the Kraylens!"

STELLA stood absolutely still. Her gray eyes took on an eerie, remote look, and Campbell shivered slightly. He'd seen telepathy often enough in the System's backwaters, but it never seemed normal.

Presently she said, "It's done," and became human again. The green light went out. "Power," she explained. "Besides, we don't need it. Give me your hand, Mister Campbell."

He did, with absolutely no aversion. "My friends," he said, "generally call me Roy." She laughed, and they started off, moving with quick sureness in the black, icy darkness.

The ship, it seemed, was up on the second level, on the edge of the living quarters. Down here was all the machinery that kept Romany alive—heat, light, water, air, and cooling systems—and a lot of storage hulks.

The third tier was a vast hydroponic farm, growing the grain and fruit and vegetables that fed the Romany thousands.

Stumbling through pipes and dismantled hulks that smelled of sacking and dried vegetables and oil, Campbell filled in the gaps.

The leaders of the rebel element had held a meeting down here, in secret. Marah and the girl had been coming from it when Campbell blundered into them. The decision had been to rescue the Kraylens no matter what happened.

They'd known about the Kraylens long before Campbell had. Gypsies trading in Lhi had brought word. Now the Kraylens were a symbol over which two points of



view were clashing in deadly earnest.

Remembering Tredrick's thin, harsh face, Campbell wondered uneasily how many of them *would* live to take that ship away.

He became aware gradually of a broken, rhythmic tap and clank transmitted along the metal walls.

"Hammers," said Stella softly. "Hammers and riveters and welders, fighting rust and age to keep Romany alive. There's no scrap of this world that wasn't discarded as junk, and reclaimed by us."

Her voice dropped. "Including the people."

Campbell said, "They're scrapping some beautiful things these days."

She knew what he meant. She even laughed a little. "I was born on Romany. There are a lot of Earth people who have no place at home."

"I know." Campbell remembered his father's farm, with blue cold water over the fields instead of sky. "And Tredrick?"

"He was born here, too. But the taint is in him . . ." She caught her breath in a sudden sharp cry. "Marah! Marah, it's Zard!"

They stopped. A pulse began to beat under Campbell's jaw. Stella whispered, "He's gone. I felt him call, and now he's gone. He was trying to warn us."

Marah said grimly, "Tredrick's got him, then. Probably knocked him out while he was trying to escape from the radio room."

"He was frightened," said Stella quietly. "Tredrick has done something. He wanted to warn us."

Marah grunted. "Have your gun ready, Campbell. We go up, now."

THEY went up a wooden ladder. It was suddenly getting hot. Campbell guessed that Romany was in the sun again. The Martian opened a door at the top, very, very slowly.

A young, vibrant voice sang out, "All clear!" They piled out of the doorway. Four or five husky young Paniki barbarians from Venus stood grinning beside two bound and slumbering Earthmen.

Campbell stared past them. The air was still and hot, hung with veils of steamy mist. There was mossy earth dotted with warm pools. There were *liba*-trees, sultry

green under a pearly light that was still brightening out of indigo gloom.

A slow, hot breath of wind stirred the mist and *liba*-trees. It smelt of warm still water and growing things, and—freedom.

Campbell drew a long breath. His eyes stung and the veins in his neck hurt. He knew it was a dead hulk, with an iron sky above the pearl-gray mist. But it smelt of freedom.

He said, "What are we waiting for?"

Marah laughed, and the young Venusian laughed. Barbarians, going to fight and laughing about it. Stella's gray eyes held a sultry flame, and her lips were blood-orange and trembling.

Campbell kissed them. He laughed, too, softly, and said, "Okay, Gypsy. Let's go."

They went, through the seven hulks of the Venusian Quarter. Because of the Kraylens, most of the Venusians were with the rebels, but even so there were angry voices raised, and fists, and a few weapons, and some blood got spilled.

More tow-headed young men joined them, and squat little upland nomads who could talk to animals, and three four-armed, serpentine crawlers from the Lohari swamps.

They came presently to a huge dismantled Hoyt freighter on the edge of the Venusian Quarter. There were piles of goods waiting lading through the row of airlocks into smaller trading ships. Marah stopped, his gorget shooting wicked jeweled sparks in the sunlight that seared in through half-shuttered ports, and the others flowed in behind him.

They were on a narrow gallery about halfway up the inner wall. Campbell looked down. There were people on the ladders and the two balcony levels below. A sullen, ugly mob of people from Earth, from Venus, from Mars and Mercury and the moons of Jupiter and Saturn.

Men and near-men and sheer monstrosities, silent and watching in the hot light. Here a crest of scarlet antennae burning there the sinuous flash of a scaled back and beyond that the slow ominous weaving of light-black tentacles.

A creature like a huge blue spider with a child's face let out a shrill unearthly scream. "Traitor! Traitor!"



The whole packed mass on the ladders and the galleries stirred like a weird tapestry caught in a gust of wind. The rushing whisper of their movement, their breathing, and their anger sang across Campbell's nerves in points of fire.

Anger. Anger in the Kraylen's drum and Stella's voice and Marah's yellow eyes. Anger like the sunlight, hot and primal. The anger of little men flogged into greatness.

A voice spoke from across the deck below, cold, clear, without the faintest tremor.

"We want no trouble. Return to your quarters quietly."

"The Kraylens!"

The name came thundering out of all those angry throats, beating down against the gaunt, erect figure standing in the forefront of a circle of Earthmen guarding the locks with ready guns.

Tredrick's thin, red head never stirred from its poised erectness. "The Kraylens are out of your hands, now. They harbored a dangerous criminal, and they are now being imprisoned in Lhi to answer for it."

Roy Campbell gripped the iron railing in front of him. It seemed to him that he could see, across all that space, the cold, bright flame of satisfaction in Tredrick's eyes.

The thin, calm voice slid across his eardrums with the cruel impersonality of a surgeon's knife.

"That criminal, Roy Campell, is now on Romany. The Spaceguard is on its way here now. For the sake of the safety of your families, for the future of Romany, I advise no one to hide him or help him escape."

#### IV

CAMPBELL stood still, not moving or speaking, his hard, dark face lined and dead, like old wood. From a great distance he heard Marah's smothered, furious curse, the quick catch of Stella's breath, the sullen breathing and stirring of the mob that was no longer sure what it wanted to do.

But all he could see was the pale, kind face of an old man smiling in the warm, blue night, and the dirty, sordid stones of Lhi.

A voice spoke, from beside the circle of armed men. Campbell heard it with some part of his brain. An old voice, dry and rustling, possessed of great dignity and great pain.

"My children," it said. "Have patience. Have faith that we, your leaders, have the good of Romany at heart."

Campbell looked with dead, dark eyes at the speaker, standing beside Tredrick. A small man in a robe of white fur. A Martian from one of the Polar Cities, frail, black-eyed, grave, and gently strong.

"Remember the cold, the hunger, the uncertainty we have endured. We have a chance now for security and peace. Let there be no trouble, now or when the Spaceguard comes. Return to your quarters quietly."

"Trouble!" Marah's voice roared out across the hot, still air. Every face down there below turned up toward the balcony. Campbell saw Tredrick start, and speak to one of the guards. The guard went out, not too fast. Campbell swore under his breath, and his brain began to tick over again, swift and hard.

Marah thundered on, a bronze Titan in the sultry glare. His gorget, his yellow eyes, the bosses on his kilt held points of angry flame.

"You, Eran Mak, a Martian! Have you forgotten Kesh, and Balakar, and the Wells of Tamboina? Can you crawl to the Coalition like a *sindar* for the sake of the bones they throw you? You, Tredrick! You've sold us out. Since when have *latniks* been called to meddle in Romany's affairs?"

Tredrick's cold voice was quite steady. "The Kraylens are beyond reach, Marah. A revolt will get you nothing. Do you want blood on your hands? Do you want to get us all wiped out?"

"My hand," said Marah softly. His hook made a burning, vicious arc in the hot light. "If there's blood on this, the Coalition spilled it when their Frontier Marshal lopped my sword-hand for raising it against him."

The mob stirred and muttered. And Campbell said swiftly, "Tredrick's right. But there's still a chance, if you want to take it."

Stella Moore put a hand on Marah's arm. "How?"



Tredrick was still pretending he hadn't seen Campbell, pretending there weren't men crawling through dark tunnels to trap him.

"It'll mean trouble. It may mean death or imprisonment. It's a million-to-one shot. You'd better give me up and forget it."

The point of Marah's hook pricked under his jaw. "Speak quickly, little man!"

"Okay. Tell 'em to behave. Then get me out of here, fast!"

TREDRICK'S men knew their way around. A lot of gypsies, moreover, who weren't with Tredrick, joined the hunt for the *latnik*. They didn't want trouble with the Spaceguard.

Campbell stumbled through a maze of dark and stifling passages, holding Stella's hand and thinking of the Spaceguard ships sweeping closer. They were almost caught a dozen times, trying to get across Romany to the Fitts-Sothorn.

The hunt seemed to be an outlet for the pent feelings of Romany. Campbell decided he would never go hunting again. And then, just above where his ship lay, they stepped into a trap.

They were in the Saturnian Quarter, in the hulk devoted to refugees from Titan. There were coolers working here. There was snow on the barren rocks, glimmering in weird light like a dark rainbow.

"The caves," said Stella Moore. "The Baraki."

There was an echoing clamor of voices all around them, footsteps clattering over metal and icy rock. They ran, breathing hard. There were some low cliffs, and a ledge, and then caves with queer blue-violet fires burning in them.

Creatures sat at the cave mouths. They were small, vaguely anthropoid, dead white, and unpleasantly rubbery. They were quite naked, and their single eyes were phosphorescent. Marah knelt.

"Little Fathers, we ask shelter in the name of freedom."

The shouts and the footsteps were closer. There was sweat on Campbell's forehead. One of the white things nodded slightly.

"No disturbance," it whispered. "We will have no disturbance of our thoughts. You may shelter, to stop this ugly noise."

"Thank you, Little Father." Marah plunged into the cave, with the others on his heels. Campbell snarled, "They'll come and take us!"

Stella's sullen lips smiled wolfishly. "No. Watch."

The cave, the violet fire were suddenly gone. There was a queer darkness, a small electric shiver across Campbell's skin. He started, and the girl whispered:

"Telekinesis. They've built a wall of force around us. On the outside it seems to be rock like the cave wall."

Marah moved, the bosses on his kilt clinking slightly. "When the swine are gone, there's a trap in this hulk leading down to the pipe where your ship is. Now tell us your plan."

Campbell made a short, bitter laugh. "Plan, hell. It's a gamble on a fixed wheel, and you're fools if you play it."

"And if we don't?"

"I'm going anyway. The Kraylens—well, I owe them something."

"Tell us the plan."

He did, in rapid nervous sentences, crouched behind the shielding wall of thought from those alien brains. Marah laughed softly.

"By the gods, little man, you should have been a Keshi!"

"I can think of a lot of things I should have been," said Campbell dourly. "Hey, there goes our wall."

It hadn't been more than four minutes. Long enough for them to look and go away again. There might still be time, before the Spaceguard came.

There was, just. The getaway couldn't have been more perfectly timed. Campbell grinned, feeding power into his jets with exquisite skill.

He didn't have a Chinaman's chance. He thought probably the gypsies had less than that of coming through. But the Kraylens weren't going to rot in the slave-pens of Lhi because of Roy Campbell.

Not while Roy Campbell was alive to think about it. And that, of course, might not be long.

He sent the Fitts-Sothorn shooting toward the night side of Venus, in full view and still throttled down. The Spaceguard ships, nine fast patrol boats, took out after



him, giving Romany the go-by. No use stopping there. No mistaking that lean, black ship, or whose hands were on the controls.

Campbell stroked the firing keys, and the Fitts-Sothorn purred under him like a cat. Just for a second he couldn't see clearly.

"I'm sorry, old girl," he said. "But that's how it has to be."

IT WAS a beautiful chase. The Guard ships pulled every trick they knew, and they knew plenty. Campbell hunched over the keys, sweating, his dark face set in a grin that held no mirth. Only his hands moved, with nervous, delicate speed.

It was the ship that did it. They slapped tractors on her, and she broke them. They tried to encircle her, and she walked away from them. That slight edge of power, that narrow margin of speed, pulled Roy Campbell away from what looked like instant, easy capture.

He got into the shadow, and then the Spaceguard began to get scared as well as angry. They stopped trying to capture him. They unlimbered their blasters and went to work.

Campbell was breathing hard now, through his teeth. His dark skin was oiled with sweat, pulled tight over the bones and the ridges of muscle and the knotted veins. Deliberately, he slowed a little.

A bolt flamed past the starboard ports. He slowed still more, and veered the slightest bit. The Fitts-Sothorn was alive under his hands.

He didn't speak when the next bolt struck her. Not even to curse. He didn't know he was crying until he tasted the salt on his lips. He got up out of the pilot's seat, and then he said one word:

"Judas!"

The follow-up of the first shot blasted the control panel. It knocked him back across the cockpit, seared and scorched from the fusing metal. He got up, somehow, and down the passage to the lock compartment. There was a lot of blood running from his cheek, but he didn't care.

He could feel the ship dying under him. The timers were shot. She was running away in a crazy, blind spiral, racking her plates apart.

He climbed into his vac-suit. It was a special one, black even to the helmet, with a super-powerful harness-rocket with a jet illegally baffled. He hoped his hands weren't too badly burned.

The ship checked brutally, flinging him hard into the bulkhead. Tractors! He clawed toward the lock, an animal whimper in his throat. He hoped he wasn't going to be sick inside the helmet.

The panel opened. Air blasted him out, into jet-black space. The tiny spearing flame of the harness-rocket flickered briefly and died, unnoticed among the trailing fires of the derelict.

Campbell lay quite still in the blackened suit. The Spaceguard ships flared by, playing the Fitts-Sothorn like a tarpon on the lines of their tractor beams. Campbell closed his eyes and cursed them, slowly and without expression, until the tightness in his throat choked him off.

He let them get a long way off. Then he pressed the plunger of the rocket, heading down for the night-shrouded swamps of Tehara Province.

He retained no very clear memory of the trip. Once, when he was quite low, a space-ship blazed by over him, heading toward Lhi. There were still about eight hours' darkness over the swamps.

He landed, eventually, in a clearing he was pretty sure only he knew about. He'd used it before when he'd had stuff to fence in Lhi and wasn't sure who owned the town at the time. He'd learned to be careful about those things.

There was a ship there now, a smallish trader of the inter-lunar type. He stared at it, not really believing it was there. Then, just in time, he got the helmet off.

When the world stopped turning over, he was lying with his head in Stella Moore's lap. She had changed her tunic for plain spaceman's black, and it made her face look whiter and lovelier in its frame of black hair. Her lips were still sullen, and still red.

Campbell sat up and kissed them. He felt much better. Not good, but he thought he'd live. Stella laughed and said, "Well! You're recovering."

He said, "Sister, you're good medicine for anything." A hand which he recognized as Marah's materialized out of the indigo



gloom. It had a flask in it. Campbell accepted it gladly. Presently the icy deadness around his stomach thawed out and he could see things better.

He got up, rather unsteadily, and fumbled for a cigarette. His shirt had been mostly blown and charred off of him and his hands hurt like hell. Stella gave him a smoke and a light. He sucked it in gratefully and said: "Okay, crew. Are we all ready?"

They were.

CAMPBELL led off. He drained the flask and was pleased to find himself firing on all jets again. He felt empty and relaxed and ready for anything. He hoped the liquor wouldn't wear off too soon.

There was a path threaded through the hummocks, the bogs and potholes and reeds and *liba*-trees. Only Campbell, who had made it, could have followed it. Remembering his blind stumbling in the mazes of Romany, he felt pleased about that. He said, rather smugly: "Be careful not to slip. How'd you fix the getaway?"

Marah made a grim little laugh. "Romany was a madhouse, hunting for you. Some of the hot-headed boys started minor wars over policy on top of that. Tredrick had to use most of his men to keep order. Besides, of course, he thought we were beaten on the Kraylen question."

"There were only four men guarding the locks," said Stella. "Marah and a couple of the Paniki boys took care of them."

Campbell remembered the spaceship flashing toward Lhi. He told them about it. "Could be Tredrick, coming to supervise our defeat in person." Defeat! It was because he was a little tight, of course, but he didn't think anyone could defeat him this night. He laughed.

Something rippled out of the indigo night to answer his laughter. Something so infinitely sweet and soft that it made him want to cry, and then shocked him with the deep and iron power in it. Campbell looked back over his shoulder. He thought:

"Me, hell. These are the guys who'll do it, if it's done."

Stella was behind him. Beyond her was a thin, small man with four arms. He wore no clothing but his own white fur and his

head was crowned with feathery antennae. Even in the blue night the antennae and the man's eyes burned living scarlet.

He came from Callisto and he carried in his four hands a thing vaguely like a harp, only the strings were double banked. It was the harp that had spoken. Campbell hoped it would never speak against him.

Marah brought up the rear, swinging along with no regard for the burden he bore. Over his naked shoulder, Campbell could see the still white face of the Baraki from Titan, the Little Father who had saved them from the hunters. There were tentacles around Marah's big body like white ropes.

Four gypsies and a Public Enemy. Five little people against the Terro-Venusian Coalition. It didn't make sense.

A hot, slow wind stirred the *liba*-trees. Campbell breathed it in, and grinned. "What does?" he wondered, and stooped to part a tangle of branches. There was a stone-lined tunnel beyond.

"Here we go, children." He took Stella's hand in his left. Because it was Stella's he didn't mind the way it hurt. In his right, he held his gun.

## V

HE led them, quickly and quietly, along the disused branch of an old drainage system that he had used so often as a private entrance. Presently they dropped to a lower level and the conduit system proper.

When the rains were on, the drains would be running full. Now they were only pumping seepage. They waded in pitch darkness, by-passed a pumping station through a side tunnel once used for cold storage by one of Lhi's cautious business men, and then found steep, slippery steps going up.

"Careful," whispered Campbell. He stopped them on a narrow ledge and stood listening. The Callistan murmured, with faint amusement:

"There is no one beyond."

Antennae over ears, Campbell grinned and found a hidden spring. "Lhi is full of these things," he said. "The boys used to keep their little wars going just for fun, and every smart guy had several bolt holes."

They emerged in a very deep, very dark cellar. It was utterly still. Campbell felt



a little sad. He could remember when Martian Mak's was the busiest thieves' market in Lhi, and a man could hear the fighting even here. He smiled bitterly and led the way upstairs.

Presently they looked down on the main gate, the main square, and the slave pens of Lhi. The surrounding streets were empty, the buildings mostly dark. The Coalition had certainly cleaned up when it took over the town.

Campbell pointed. "Reception committee. Tredrick radioed, anyway. One'll get you twenty he followed it up in person."

The gate was floodlighted over a wide area and there were a lot of tough-looking men with heavy-duty needle guns. In this day of anaesthetic charges you could do a lot of effective shooting without doing permanent damage. There were more lights and more men by the slave pens.

Campbell couldn't see much over the high stone walls of the pens. Vague movement, the occasional flash of a brilliant crest. He had known the Kraylens would be there. It was the only place in Lhi where you could imprison a lot of people and be sure of keeping them.

Campbell's dark face was cruel. "Okay," he said. "Let's go."

**D**OWN the stone steps to the entrance. Stella's quick breathing in the hot darkness, the rhythmic clink of the bosses on Marah's kilt. Campbell saw the eyes of the Callistan harper, glowing red and angry.

Stella opened the heavy steel-sheathed door. Quietly, slowly. The Baraki whispered, "Put me down."

Marah set him gently on the stone floor. He folded in upon himself, tentacles around white, rubbery flesh. His single eye burned with a cold phosphorescence.

He whispered, "Now."

The Callistan harper went to the door. Reflected light painted him briefly, white fur and scarlet crest and outlandish harp, and the glowing, angry eyes.

He vanished. Out of nowhere the harp began to sing.

Through the partly opened door Campbell had a clear view of the square and the gate. In all that glare of light on empty stone nothing moved. And yet the music

rippled out.

The guards. Campbell could see the startled glitter of their eyeballs in the light. There was nothing to shoot at. The harping was part of the night, as all-enveloping and intangible.

Campbell shivered. A pulse beat like a trip-hammer under his jaw. Stella's voice came to him, a faint breath out of the darkness.

"The Baraki is shielding him with thought. A wall of force that turns the light."

The edge of the faint light touched her cheek, the blackness of her hair. Marah crouched beyond her, motionless. His hook glinted dully, curved and cruel.

They were getting only the feeble backwash of the harping. The Callistan was aiming his music outward, Campbell felt it sweep and tremble, blend with the hot slow wind and the indigo sky.

It was some trick of vibrations, some diabolical thrusting of notes against the brain like fingers, to press and control. Something about the double-banked strings thrumming against each other under the cunning of four skilled hands. But it was like witchcraft.

"The Harp of Dagda," whispered Stella Moore, and the Irish music in her voice was older than time.

Somewhere outside a man cursed, thickly like one drugged with sleep and afraid of it. A gun went off with a sharp slapping sound. Some of the guards had fallen down.

The harp sang louder, throbbing along the grey stones. It was the slow wind, the heat, the deep blue night. It was sleep.

The floodlights blazed on empty stone, and the guards slept.

The Baraki sighed and shivered and closed his eye. Campbell saw the Callistan harper standing in the middle of the square, his scarlet crest erect, striking the last thrumming note.

Campbell straightened, catching his breath in a ragged sob. Marah picked up the Baraki. He was limp, like a tired child. Stella's eyes were glistening and strange. Campbell went out ahead of them.

It was a long way across the square, in the silence and the glaring lights. Campbell thought the harp was a nice weapon. It



didn't attract attention because everyone who heard it slept.

He flung back the three heavy bars of the slave gate. The pain of his burned hands jarred him out of the queer mood the harping and his Celtic blood had put on him. He began to think again.

"Hurry!" he snarled at the Kraylens. "Hurry up!" They came pouring out of the gate. Men, women with babies, little children. Their crests burned in the sullen glare.

Campbell pointed to Marah. "Follow him." They recognized him, tried to speak, but he cursed them on. And then an old man said,

"My son."

Campbell looked at him, and then down at the stones. "For Heaven's sake, Father, hurry." A hand touched his shoulder gently. He looked up again, and grinned. He couldn't see anything. "Get the hell on, will you?" Somebody found the switch and the nearer lights went out.

The hand pressed his shoulder, and was gone. He shook his head savagely. The Kraylens were running now, toward the house. And then, suddenly, Marah yelled.

Men were running into the square. Eight or ten of them, the bodyguard of the burly grey-haired man who led them. Beside the grey-haired man was Tredrick, Overchief of the Terran Quarter of Romany.

THEY were startled. They hadn't been expecting this. Campbell's battle-trained eye saw that. Probably they had been making a routine tour of inspection and just stumbled onto the crashout.

Campbell fired, from the hip. Anaesthetic needles sprayed into the close-packed group. Two of them went down. The rest scattered, dropping flat. Campbell wished there had been time to kill the gate lights.

He bent over and began to run, guarding the rear of the Kraylens' line. Stella, in the cover of the doorway, was laying down a methodical wall of needles. Campbell grinned.

Some of the Kraylens caught it and had to be carried. That slowed things down. Campbell's gun clicked empty. He shoved in another clip, cursing his burned fingers. A charge sang by him, close enough to stir his hair. He fired again, blanketing the

whole sector where the men lay. He wished he could blow Tredrick's head off.

The Kraylens were vanishing into the house. Marah and the Callistan had gone ahead, leading them. Campbell groaned. Speed was what they needed. Speed. A child, separated from his mother in the rush, knelt on the stones and shrieked. Campbell picked him up and ran on.

Enemy fire was slackening. Stella was doing all right. The last of the Kraylens shoved through the door. Campbell bounded up the steps. Stella got up off her belly and smiled at him. Her eyes shone. They were halfway through the door when the cold voice said behind them:

"There are lethal needles in my gun. You had better stop."

Campbell turned slowly. His face was wooden. Tredrick stood at the bottom of the steps. He must have crawled around the edge of the square, where the shadows were thick under the walls.

"Drop your gun, Campbell. And you, Stella Moore."

Campbell dropped it. Tredrick might be bluffing about those needles. But a Mickey at this stage of the game would be just as fatal. Stella's gun clattered beside him. She didn't say anything, but her face was coldly murderous.

Tredrick said evenly, "You might as well call them back, Campbell. You led them in, but you're not going to lead them out."

It was funny, Campbell thought, how a man's voice could be so cold when his eyes had fire in them. He said sullenly:

"Okay, Tredrick. You win. But what's the big idea behind this?"

Tredrick's face might have been cut from granite, except for the feral eyes. "I was born on Romany. I froze and starved in those rotten hulks. I hated it. I hated the darkness, the loneliness, the uncertainty. But when I said I hated it, I got a beating."

"Everybody else thought it was worth it. I didn't. They talked about freedom, but Romany was a prison to me. I wanted to grow, and I was stifled inside it. Then I got an idea."

"If I could rule Romany and make a treaty with the Coalition, I'd have money and power. And I could fix it so no more kids would be brought up that way, cold



and hungry and scared.

"Marah opposed me, and then the Kraylens became an issue." Tredrick smiled, but there was no mirth or softness in it. "It's a good thing. The Coalition can take care of Marah and you others who were mixed up in this. My way is clear."

Stella Moore said softly between her teeth. "They'll never forgive you for turning Romany people over to the *latniks*. There'll be war."

Tredrick nodded soberly. "No great change is made without bloodshed. I'm sorry for that. But Romany will be happier."

"We don't ask to be happy. We only ask to be free."

Campbell said wearily, "Stella, take the kid, will you?" He held out the little Kraylen, droopy and quiet now. She looked at him in quick alarm. His feet were spread but not steady, his head sunk forward.

She took the child, Campbell's knees sagged. One seared arm in a tattered green sleeve came up to cover his face. The other groped blindly along the wall. He dropped, rather slowly, to his knees.

The groping hand fell across the gun by Stella's foot. In one quick sweep of motion Campbell got it, threw it, and followed it with his own body.

THE gun missed, but it came close enough to Tredrick's face to make him move his head. The involuntary muscular contraction of his whole body spoiled his aim. The charge went past Campbell into the wall.

They crashed down together on the stones. Campbell gripped Tredrick's wrist, knew he couldn't hold it, let go with one hand and slashed backward with his elbow at Tredrick's face.

The gun let off again, harmlessly. Tredrick groaned. His arm was weaker. Campbell thrashed over and got his knee on it. Tredrick's other fist was savaging his already tortured body.

Campbell brought his fist down into Tredrick's face. He did it twice, and wept and cursed because he was suddenly too weak to lift his arm again. Tredrick was bleeding, but far from out. His gun was coming up again. He didn't have much play, but enough.

Campbell set his teeth. He couldn't even

see Tredrick, but he swung again. He never knew whether he connected or not.

Something thrummed past his head. He couldn't say he heard it. It was more like feeling. But it was something deadly, and strange. Tredrick didn't make a sound. Campbell knew suddenly that he was dead.

He got up, very slow, shaking and cold. The Callistan harper stood in the doorway. He was lowering his hands, and his eyes were living coals. He didn't say anything. Neither did Stella. But she laughed, and the child stirred and whimpered in her arms.

Campbell went to her. She looked at him with queer eyes and whispered, "I called him with my mind. I knew he'd come."

He took her face in his two hands. "Listen, Stella. You've got to lead them back. You've got to touch my mind with yours and let me guide you that way, back to the ship."

Her eyes widened sharply. "But you can come. He's dead. You're free now."

"No." He could feel her throat quiver under his hands. Her blood was beating. So was his. He said harshly:

"You fool, do you think they'll let you get away with this? You're tackling the Coalition. They can't afford to look silly. They've got to have a scapegoat, something to save face!"

"Romany, so far, is beyond planetary control. Slap your tractors on her, tow her out. Clear out to Saturn if you have to. Nobody saw the Callistan. Nobody saw anybody but me and the Kraylens and an unidentifiable somebody up here on the porch. Nobody, that is, but Tredrick, and he won't talk. Do you understand?"

She did, but she was still rebellious. Her sullen lips were angry, her eyes bright with tears and challenging. "But you, Roy!"

He took his hands away. "Damn you, woman! If I hide out on Romany I bring you into Spaceguard jurisdiction. I'll be trapped, and Romany's last chance to stay free will be gone."

She said stubbornly, "But you can get away. There are ships."

"Oh, sure. But the Kraylens are there. You can't hide them. The Coalition will search Romany. They'll ask questions. I tell



you they've got to have a goat!"

He was really weak, now. He hoped he could hold out. He hoped he wouldn't do anything disgraceful. He turned away from her, looking out at the square. Some of the guards were beginning to stir.

"Will you go?" he said.

She put her hand on him. "Roy . . ."

He jerked away. His dark face was set and cruel. "Do you have to make it harder? Do you think I want to rot on Phobos in their stinking mines, with shackles on my feet?" He swung around, challenging her with savage eyes.

"How else do you think Romany is going to stay free? You can't go on playing cat and mouse with the big shots this way. They're getting sick of it. They'll pass laws and tie you down. Somebody's got to spread Romany all over the Solar System. Somebody's got to pull a publicity campaign that'll make the great public sit up and think. If public opinion's with you, you're safe."

He smiled. "I'm big news, sister. I'm Roy Campbell. I can splash your lousy little mess of tin cans all over with glamour, so the public won't let a hair of your little head be hurt.

"And now will you for my sake go?"

SHE wasn't crying. Her gray eyes had lights in them. "You're wonderful, Roy."

He was ashamed, then. "In my racket you don't expect to get away with it forever. Besides, I'm an old dog. I know my way around. I have a little dough saved up. I won't be in for long."

"I hope not," she said. "Oh, Roy, it's so stupid! Why do Earthmen have to change everything they lay their hands on?"

He looked at Tredrick, lying on the stones.

His voice came slow and sombre:

"They're building, Stella. When they're finished they'll have a big, strong, prosperous world extending all across the planets, and the people who belong to that world will be happy.

"But before you can build you have to grade and level, destroy the things that get in your way. We're the things—the tree-stumps and the rocks that grew one way and can't be changed.

"They're building, Stella. They're growing. You can't stop that. In the end, it'll be a good thing, I suppose. But right now, for us . . ."

He broke off. He thrust her roughly inside and locked the steel-sheathed door. "You've got to go now."

It was dark, and hot. The Kraylen child whimpered. He could feel Stella close to him. He found her lips and kissed them.

His voice became a longing whisper. "I'll be back!" he promised.

*In the current*

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# THE LAST MARTIAN

By RAYMOND VAN HOUTEN

The great pumps of Mars were grinding to a stop.  
Unless the strange being from space-flung Gamtl  
could get their sacred machinery going  
the once-mighty planet would die.

PEETN drew his cloak more firmly about his furry shoulders as the sun began to sink through the Martian sky and the wind throbbed a deeper note in the gathering darkness. He stood gazing silently as the fading light painted the sky in sombre colors, preparing to disappear for another night of screaming wind and penetrating sub-zero cold.

He watched until the twilight deepened to purple and then stalked laboriously into the wind, up the gentle slope toward the little hollow where he went each night.

His tall, articulated form strode across the dusty plain. By the time he had reached the foot of the bank the sky was totally blank, except for the stars, and he could barely propel himself forward against the raging world-wide currents of atmosphere. The last few yards he crawled on his belly-plates. He tumbled into the central hollow and lay exhausted, his lungs sucking in and out—

The cry of a Martian *odlat* would not be audible to human ears, but the screech which emanated within an inch of Peetn's ear-cupolas sent paralyzing waves of terror washing to the tip of his spiny tail. He skirled in agony as inch-long teeth crunched savagely into his shoulder, and the *odlat*, startled, let go. Peetn's tentacles shot beneath the flapping folds of his cloak and the night-dark was shattered in a hissing blaze of light. The headless corpse of the *odlat* thudded to the ground. Black reaction smote Peetn a blow somewhere inside, and the Martian lost consciousness.

It was after midnight that he awoke to the agonizing throb of his poisoned shoulder. His faculties returned somewhat, and he crawled painfully over to a little niche

in the rocks, where he kept his scant stores. Extracting a few pieces of twisted root which had a slight medicinal quality, he plugged the holes left by the *odlat's* fangs. Soon, under the soporific influence of the whining wind, he dropped off into a feverish, agitated sleep.

The Martian awoke just before noon of the next day and found that the crude poultices he had applied to his wounds had been more effective than he had expected. The shoulder still hurt, but with the gentle ache of healing tissues rather than the savage bite of newly torn nerves. The effect of the *odlat* poison had worn off, and outside of a slight weakness and dizziness, Peetn felt nothing amiss in his interior. He slowly unwound from where he lay and stretched to his full height.

The body of the *odlat* lay where it had fallen the night before, headless and beginning to stiffen. The dominant race of Mars could use little of this altogether useless and dangerous beast, namely the ears and eyeballs, and if the animal were not too old, the tail. This fierce old reprobate was entirely worthless therefore, and Peetn dragged it out into the desert and threw it into a pit. It could not be left lying near his hollow to draw other *odlats* to the spot.

He returned from his errand and prepared for another day at his appointed duties.

The routine of caring for a Martian water-station is neither complicated nor arduous, being hardly more than a daily inspection tour. No Martian alive understood the methods or mechanisms which drew and pumped water from the massive ice-cap into the pool of the colony; no one could alter the flow of liquid through the pipes,







or shut it off, for the valves had long ago corroded into their seats. Even the inspection was a mere gesture.

PEETN always started his rounds in the underground pump room, partly because most of the machinery was there, but mostly because of a subconscious certainty that there something was wrong. Somehow, the conglomeration of squeaks, hisses, and shudders suggested things that shouldn't be. Day after day he had gone over the maze of pipes and cylinders, looking for a dreaded break, but always he found everything the way he had left it the night before. He couldn't know of oilless bearings burning slowly out during the centuries. The Martian artificers had built for incredible durability in that long-gone age of Martian glory, but they had not anticipated the mining of the last drop of oil or the last flake of graphite, which had occurred millenniums before Peetn's time.

Once again he began to go over the machinery which he didn't vaguely understand. In the center of the floor squatted a huge, inscrutable mass of metal from which plumed the beginning of all the pipes. Peetn traced with his sight organs the spidery lengths of hard, gray tubing to where they disappeared into the housings of the chugging pumps. It was the pumps which emitted the disturbing noises most of all. Peetn stuck his head close and listened to the discords in their tune. It sounded like rasping, like two raw bones being rubbed together under the flesh. He shook his bald head sadly and let his tentacle-tips flicker lightly over the smooth metal. As long as they didn't stop—

He watched the four bulky pipes crawl along the floor and up the wall, where they pushed through the ceiling into the valve-house above. He glanced over the gauges, meaningless to him, but still faithfully recording the surge of water passing through the pipes. It had lessened by about four-fifths since this station had been in operation, but nobody noticed the difference. Those that had seen the greater flow were less than dust these ages past.

He trudged back up the stairs counting them mechanically, and was in the outer air again. The change from semi-darkness

to light brought his multiple eyelids winking shut, screening his sight. He squinted toward the southern horizon, seeing nothing but wastes.

What was that?

From the tail of his eye he thought he saw a flash of light far out toward the west, but although he gazed at the spot for several minutes, it did not repeat. Dismissing it as a result of the glare, he stopped and entered the valve-house, which stood in the shadow of the towering reservoir.

He finished his useless routine, touching gently the same things and looking in the same places as every day, and came outside.

This time it was unmistakable. Something flashed in the sunlight out in the desert to the west, a piece of polished metal or glass. Or a weapon. Somebody was on the desert!

He was immediately prompted to run atop the knoll, whistle and wave his tentacles so that they would not miss him, but some primal caution held him back until reason took hold of his chaotic mind.

Out there was either a friend or an enemy. If it were a friend, it could only be his relief, and he wasn't due for another three years. Besides, he would be coming from the south. Therefore, it was an enemy, some members of another colony coming to raid the water station!

Bending low, he raced up the hill and threw himself into the central hollow, facing west. He drew from its holster the flash gun, which had killed the *odlat*, and cradled it beside him. His eyes strained on their stalks across the western wastes, ready for the first hint of suspicious movement.

Intra-mural war had again broken out on Mars! It disturbed Peetn to have the first responsibility fall on him, but recollecting the tales that the oldsters used to tell him, he was a little proud too. The little band of water-station defenders had been heroes in those days of the past, not useless, forgotten automatons. There had been a real and vital reason for their bitter existence in the north. Peetn's presence, up till now, had been a formality.

For a long time he lay sweeping the desert before him, waiting for another glimpse of his attackers, until suddenly he realized that another night was near. The sky had



already begun to edge toward the dark end of the spectrum, and the light was lessening visibly. Peetn grew uneasy as the shadow of the box-like reservoir left its source and began a sinister march to the horizon behind him. The rising nightwind sent cold *odlat*-tongues up and down his spindly back, and although he knew that no living thing could stand on the open desert during a Martian night, the coming of darkness brought fear rather than a sense of security.

THE dusky sun touched the western plains and the wind howled higher in anticipation of the darkness. Abruptly, from out of the dull glare in the west, a figure, small from distance, moved. Peetn's limbs and tentacles tensed as he watched, and amazement riveted his gaze.

That small, chunky, ballooning figure was no Martian!

Carried onward by the wind, staggering weakly on its thick legs, the figure came on, weaving from side to side, blundering over the bare rock and hard-packed sand.

Peetn made no move to lift the projector as the thing came within range. Possibly the sight of this apparition had driven all thought of it from his mind; or possibly his analytical subconscious had reasoned that all the menace of the unknown attacker had vanished, since this was obviously no raiding Martians from another colony.

Whatever it was, it seemed in no way belligerent. In fact, Peetn guessed that the creature was in trouble, possibly dying. It made no effort to hold back against the driving wind, as he would have done, and the erratic course which it followed bespoke numbed faculties.

The strange figure passed Peetn's hillcrest hollow a few rods to the north and brought up with a thud against the sheer side of the reservoir, where it toppled limply over and lay still on the ground. Banks of sand began to accumulate against the windward sides of the bloated legs and body.

Peetn hesitated only long enough to jam the flash pistol back into its holster, where it would be safe from the blasting sand, before he scuttled, bent double, toward the mysterious intruder's prone body. The

thought that it was a corpse flashed through the Martian's mind, but the chance that a living being lay in travail decided him in favor of the risk.

He was down on his tentacles and knees when he reached the reservoir wall, and he burrowed down behind the inert form for a moment before attempting the more arduous trip back with the dead weight dragging behind. He found to his surprise that it was covered by a case of metal!

Inch by inch, minute by minute, he conquered the two-score feet back to the small safety of his hilltop. Keeping the limp form between himself and the wind, he strained against the uphill drag until finally he topped the crest and slid down into the familiar haven. Dizzy from exertion and gulping air and sand indiscriminately, he relaxed on the fringes of oblivion while the Martian wind bawled in Jovian defeat.

Returning vigor brought renewed interest in his prize of war, and he raised himself on his bony knees, peering breathlessly into the transparent faceplate of the metal suit. Nausea, fear, and amazement flooded his brain at the sight of the alien face which returned his stare with sightless open eyes. It was the face of a Martian nightmare; square, with jutting chin-bone; straight long nose, pierced under the lobes by wide slits; hideous blue eyes with single skin-like lids; and a mouth—a long, gaping crack rimmed with soft red flesh and filled with gleaming teeth, like a carnivorous beast's!

And that mouth breathed! It was not dead!

Peetn's tentacles fumbled with the unfamiliar drawcatch of the creature's locked faceplate, until with a grating of sand crystals between metal, it slid out, and he lifted the glass off. A puff of evil-smelling vapor flew into the Martian's face, and he recoiled.

The awful face beneath writhed, and a low groan from the pulpy lips made Peetn's eye-sacs pale in terror. He watched fascinated as the returning light of consciousness slowly dissolved the glaze over the bluish eyes. One metal-clad hand raised feebly to the open face-plate and then dropped like lead as if the owner had used the last bit of energy in his storm-beaten body for the effort. The monstrosity lay panting for breath and making murmuring sounds. Peetn bent



closer to listen, submerging his revulsion with curiosity.

"Water! Water!" it was saying over and over.

A wave of deep compassion engulfed Peetn's twin hearts as he looked into that twisted face beneath its mat of stiff bristly black fur. He realized instantly that this thing was suffering, probably from lack of the things which kept it alive. He closed the faceplate again to keep out the whirling sand and rummaged out the last of his *merrl* root and a small quantity of water, on the chance that his food might be suitable to the alien tastes of this being.

An avid light sparkled in the cloudy eyes as Peetn held the food and water close, and in a spasmodic burst of energy it grasped the metal container and splashed the precious fluid into its sucking mouth. Peetn averted his eye-stalks from the horrible, yet pitiful sight. The *merrl* root was snatched from his tentacle and crammed between the red lips with revolting smacking sounds and gasps of pleasure.

Strength seemed to flow back into the stranger, and he assayed to sit up. He slumped into Peetn's supporting tentacles with a weak grin and closed his eyes, dropping immediately into a deep sleep.

Peetn laid the inert figure back on the ground and gazed fascinated at the face, now relaxed in repose. From whence had this stranger come? Mars could never have spawned such a creature! This was a being from another world, maybe from *Gamtl* itself! Peetn thrilled at the thought as he lay down to a food-and-water-less bed.

LONG, long ago the savants had predicted the death of Mars, the gradual wasting away of its ability to support life, until finally the last Martian would die alone. They pointed with eagerness and envy in their telescopes at the soft green sphere of the third planet, picturing it as the Martian Eden, teeming with life-giving food and water.

Space ships were built. There was not nearly enough room for the entire population of Mars abroad, so it was agreed that they should act as ferries, shuttling back and forth until Mars was evacuated.

The first contingent departed one day on

the long trek to another world, and the people left behind waited with renewed hope for their turn to go. Hope turned to uneasiness as a second fleet of ships rocketed toward Paradise, many years after the first ones should have returned. A third and fourth fleet followed at ever-lengthening intervals, and with ever-lessening numbers, but all vanished into obscurity with the same finality.

Weakening civilization soon could no longer strain the necessary resources from the perishing planet to send another fleet; *Gamtl*, the lush, life-choked pleasure-laden Paradise, became a myth of the past, and then even the myth became dim and half-remembered.

Life was a sodden series of hungry days and frigid nights. The energies of each individual were strictly circumscribed to activities designed to give his colony one more day, one more hour of life. Birth, when it was allowed at all, was limited to the replacement of necessary personnel to carry on the food gathering of the community. All contact, outside of occasional meetings between scouts searching for new patches of *merrl* bushes, was lost between the colonies, which had settled on the dust-covered sites of the ancient cities because of the trickle of water which still issued from the massive pipes. Even the sporadic raids made on the water stations were abandoned, and as the danger of attack lessened, small and smaller numbers of guards were spared from the duties of procuring *merrl* from the desert wastes, until finally only one made the food-and-water-less trip into the northern steppes of the polar region. Every fifth year another was sent to relieve him, but the oldest man in the colony could not remember when one had returned. What privation, what utter loneliness these martyrs endured would never be known. What acts of heroism they might perform would go forever unsung.

Peetn had been very young when he had set out for the far north and five years of Martian hell at the water station, but the two years that had passed so far had left him a dead-hearted, middle-aged Martian. Wrinkles had appeared on his eye-sacs, and his fur had become sparse and gray. His mind, too, had turned gray, had withered



from watching too many sunsets. He came to feel inside that he would never see his colony again, just like the others.

IN SPITE of his activity the day before, Peetn was up and about early the next morning and went into the desert for *merri*. Before he left, however, he placed the metal container half-full of water beside the still-sleeping figure in the metal suit. An intermittent buzzing sound issuing from its mouth startled him, and he opened the faceplate. The sonorous sound stopped abruptly with a snort, and the stranger mumbled a few words and squirmed in his sleep. Peetn hastily but softly closed the lid and ambled off into the sea of rock and sand.

When he returned, his visitor was standing shakily on his feet, watching him stilt across the plain toward him. Peetn emptied his pockets of the succulent *merri* he had gathered and faced the stranger with a whistle of greeting, extending a friendly tentacle. It was grasped by the prehensile tip of the creature's queer tentacle and gently oscillated up and down. Peetn interpreted the gesture as meaning friendship and enthusiastically entered into the spirit of it, pumping the thick arm up and down until the being cried out. The Martian, noticing that his companion's eyes were fastened on the *merri* root which he had brought, snatched up one of the tubers and offered it to him.

They broke their fast in genial camaraderie, this decadent Martian and his un-Martian visitant, so utterly divergent in form, so different in many ways. But such is the yearning of loneliness and bewilderment that all this was forgotten.

Peetn was about to leave on his daily inspection when a gentle hand restrained him. The stranger was making sounds at him, meaningless and unfamiliar, but it was apparent that he wanted Peetn to stay and listen. So the Martian stayed and listened solemnly, strange thoughts milling through his head.

"I know you're not going to understand a word of this," his companion was saying, "But I'm going to tell it to you, anyway—just for luck. My name is Harrison Clark, late of San Francisco, U. S. A., Earth. I cracked up, like a damn fool, in the first

rocket to reach Mars about two hundred miles out there in the desert. My food and water gave out, and the air inside my ship was getting bad, so I crawled into my can and started out, looking for God knows what! I was about done when you must have found me, for I don't remember anything for a long time back. You saved my life, and now I want to do something for you. Got any lawns you want mowed, or houses I can haunt? I'll bet I'm quite a fright in these parts!" He grinned broadly.

Peetn listened gravely to this address, and when it was over, he extended a tentacle and shook hands.

"I get it, pal!" laughed Harry Clark. "We're friends no matter what I look like. You'd be a sixteen-cylinder haunt back on Earth yourself!"

Peetn disengaged his tentacle-tip and strode off down the slope to the subterranean entrance of the pump room. Clark hesitated a moment and then followed, more slowly because of his wasted strength. Peetn turned and waited for him at the head of the steps, and they entered the cavern together.

Clark could not see for a few minutes in the gloom, and he stood still, while Peetn, with his more adaptable sight organs, moved about with ease in the familiar surroundings. The multiple noises which rebounded in the enclosed space beat through the Earthman's open faceplate, betraying the secret of the darkly looming masses.

"Machinery," he said softly.

Peetn went through his customary routine, conscious of the stranger's eyes watching his every move, and conscious also of a pitying wonder in them. They quit the underground room, Peetn gently tugging Clark away from the four gauges which measured the water-flow through the monster pipes, and entered the valve-house.

Peetn's tentacles caressed the valve-wheels and giant housings reverently—and uselessly—while the stranger once again watched with interest. Peetn was suddenly startled by a gusty, explosive sound from the alien.

"What a hell of a mechanic you are!" laughed the Earthman. "I don't believe you know the first thing about all this, and yet you're obviously the caretaker around here. The pumps down there are in a bad way,



Why don't you oil them?"

Peetn stuck out his tentacles and they shook hands.

"Yeah, we're pals, but I still think you're a bust. Look," he walked over to one of the valve wheels and grasped it by the rim, "there's hardly a trickle going through the pipes. Why don't you open her up, like this—" The valve creaked protestingly and moved a fraction of an inch under the Earthman's effort. Gauges on the wall quivered slightly and advanced an imperceptible amount along their calibrated scales.

Peetn went suddenly berserk. He lashed out with his tentacles and caught Harrison Clark's straining figure about the waist, flinging him across the narrow room with a metallic clangor. He stood over the cowering figure, his tentacles poised threateningly. This creature was meddling with the machinery!

"Hey, wait a minute!" shouted the shaken Earthman, raising himself on an elbow and looking up into the inscrutable face of the Martian. "I'm not trying to hurt anything! Sorry, if I've done anything wrong. Here, shake hands!"

He extended his hand and reluctantly the Martian took it.

They went back to the little hollow, Clark limping a bit from his fall. Peetn enclosed himself in a shell of reticence after the episode in the valve-house, and it was only by dint of hard labor that the Earthman was able to coax him out of it.

THE days went by, and sandwiched between them were the Martian nights with their savage fury. Slowly the two mismatched companions evolved a crude method of making themselves understood to each other, and a dawning comprehension of the incredible state of Martian life came to Harry Clark. He spent much time in wandering about the water station, and slowly he pieced together the puzzle. He knew that it was water which was contained in the pipes almost the first day he had been there. The intake pipes burrowed under the ground toward the north direction of the ice cap, while the outlets stretched away to the south to an unknown destination. This, then, must be some kind of intermediary, where the ice of the polar cap was trans-

formed into water and then pumped south to someplace where it was needed. Examination of the huge machine in the center of the pump cavern convinced him that this must be where the ice was turned into water. How the ice was transported over the five hundred miles from the polar cap he could not discover. Water came out, however, so ice must go in.

The pumps carried the water up into the high-sided reservoir, from where it started its journey south after passing through the main valves.

But something was missing. Where did the trickle of water go? Why was it so small? Why had the Martian gone off the deep end when he had tried to increase the volume of water flowing through the pipes? He made up his mind to worm the answers out of Peetn at the first opportunity.

Peetn's mind was in a turmoil as he grubbed in the desert sands at the base of the stubby, tree-like plant. He mechanically pulled up the bulbous roots, tearing them loose, but always leaving enough of a stem so that a new one would grow back on, but his thoughts were upon what the stranger had made known to him by the diagram he had drawn in the sand. This being was from Gamtl! Gamtl, the mythical Eden, the planet to which legend told all good Martians would go some day. Some day, it was said, the ghostly ships of space would return, and all Mars would be happy again. This monstrosity claimed to have come from there. Could this be the time of resurrection which Mars was promised by the old myth? How could this thick-tentacled, hideous-faced being bring Mars back to its old lost glory?

Such were Peetn's thoughts as he approached the water station with his pockets half full of *merri*. The now familiar figure of the being from Gamtl stood atop the knoll beckoning to him.

They shook hands solemnly after Peetn had dumped his load of food, and the stranger drew Peetn over to a patch of cleared sand. Bending down, he drew with his finger a crude diagram of the water-station, pointing to it, and then to the reservoir, pump-cavern, and the valve-house, indicating each in the sand in turn. He then drew a line from the pump-cavern north-



ward, and connected it to a large scrawl which Peetn decided was supposed to represent the ice-cap. He nodded his head in a gesture which he had learned from the Earthman, indicating that he understood, and that the diagram was right.

Clark then drew a line from the valve-house south. By means of much pointing and insistent signs, the Martian finally discovered that he wished to know where it led, and what was at the end.

Peetn jack-knifed his gangly legs and sank to his knees. The tip of his tentacles traced a picture in the sand. It looked like a series of small circles interlinked by little curved lines. Peetn pointed to himself, then at the circles. Then he made eighty-two little dashes in the sand.

The Earthman understood immediately. So that was it! This water-station supplied a colony of eighty-two Martians with drinking water, vital to their existence! They must live very far south near the equator, in the warmest zone of the planet, where food and heat were more abundant. Of course! And Beany was shipped up here as watchman. Clark looked with new respect at the Martian, thinking of the soul-deadening loneliness he must have known. He certainly wasn't much good as a mechanic; why, he couldn't even have known that the flow of water could be increased by opening those valves wider! Naturally, he had thought that Clark had tried to sabotage the plant when he had laid hands on the machinery. Those pumps—it was a wonder that they hadn't frozen stiff long before this.

Harrison Clark made up his mind.

Next morning when Peetn arose, the man from Gamtl was gone. So was a three-day supply of *merri* and water.

IT WAS eight days later when the Martian emerged from the valve-house and saw the tiny figure come trudging out of the west. It was the alien, and behind him dragged a curious object, a black, cylinder-like affair trundling along on four wheels and pulled by a rope in the stranger's hands. Peetn stalked out to meet him and after they had shaken hands, he curled a few tentacles about the rope and together they pulled the mysterious object into the water-station. Peetn watched with his curiosity aroused as

Clark heaved and grunted the thing down the thirty-one steps into the underground pump room, talking all the while.

"You know what this is, Beany, old boy?" he said. "It's oil—for the pumps. It'll take the squeaks out of 'em for a while anyway. It won't last forever, but before it's gone, maybe you and I can figure out something else. Lucky I had this barrel left on the ship. There!" He stood up and dusted off his hands. "If we can get those pumps to stop chattering, we can open up the valves and let a *real* head of water through to your pals. Be afraid to do it with the things in this condition."

He unscrewed the cap and peered in, sniffing. He turned to the Martian with a broad grin.

"About three-quarters full," he announced, marking the level on the outside of the drum with his hand.

Peetn, deciding that the mystery had progressed just about far enough for his Martian tastes, stilted over and inserted his tube-like proboscis into the hole left by the screw cap, and inhaled. He straightened up abruptly and whistled, tears dropping from his yellow, sac-like eyes.

Clark laughed excitedly. "That's oil, you Beanpole! We're going to rebuild Mars with that drum! You poor guys must have had a hell of a time living in this hole," he continued, becoming serious and pensive and indicating the desert with a wave of his hand. "It would take one of you a lifetime to find food enough to live that long. Your civilization has sunk right down to rock bottom, but I think we're going to change all that." He shook his head doubtfully. "It's according to how long we can make this oil last. Those machines which your ancestors made are the real McCoy, all right, but God knows how long they've been pounding away dry as a bone. The oil might pour out of every crack as fast as we pour it in. Well," he finished, shrugging his shoulders, "there's only one way of finding out!"

Carefully, lest he spill a drop of the priceless fluid, he filled a water container with the lubricant.

"Keep your tentacles crossed!" he shot at Peetn, who looked down upon him from his superior height as the Earthman slowly poured the contents of his container into



the oil-cup on the main bearing of No. 1 pump. He allowed the dregs to drain into the capacious pocket and bent with hands on knees, looking for signs of a leak below.

Peetn followed his every move tensely, wondering whether or not to force a halt to this tampering with the vital machines, but somehow he trusted this monster from Gamtl. He seemed to know what he was about, and there *was* a chance that after he was through the disturbing noises in the machines would be gone. So he watched and waited, always on the alert to prevent any outright damage. He couldn't see, anyway, how pouring some of that evil-smelling stuff into those little cups would change anything.

And then suddenly, the song of the pumps changed! The thumping and creaking lessened to an almost imperceptible amount as a tiny ring of oil appeared around the periphery of the bearing. The pump rose to a new level of activity, the parts whirling and plunging at a greater speed. Peetn thrilled in surprise.

His interest increased ten-fold as Clark filled the cups on the other three pumps in turn. Each one's voice dropped from a shout to a whisper, and all chugged with more vigor under the relaxing influence of the lubricating oil. Peetn trembled all over as he noted that the protesting groans which had worried him so were gone. This was unbelievable! This stranger from Gamtl was indeed a friend!

"Our work isn't done, Beany," said Clark, as he dumped what was left of the oil back into the drum and wiped his hands in the sand. "The really important part is yet to come. This is just preparing; now we've got to knock those rusty valves loose from their eye-teeth!"

He screwed the barrel-cap back into place and, followed by Peetn whose animation was visibly increased over his usual lethargic, fatalistic state, he trod the stairs into the open air.

The Earthman gave a preliminary tug or two at the valve-wheels, and then muttered under his breath. Peetn scowled inwardly. It was not good, tampering with the machines. Then the Martian went all weak and fluttery inside as the stranger picked up a short metal bar which had been lying in a

dusty corner and began banging on the tops of the machines! He was upon Clark like a flash, and the tendons in the Earthman's arms cracked agonizingly as the Martian giant wrested the bar away from him in mid-blow. Clark relaxed as the tense tableau threatened to continue for a protracted length of time.

"Look, Beany," he said pleadingly. "I'm only trying to jar the rust loose inside. Gimme back that thing and let me alone. I know what I'm doing."

The Martian, of course, didn't understand a word, and he stood toying with the length of metal rod, his yellow eyes blank and inscrutable. Then with a sudden gesture, he handed it back to Clark and extended a tentacle.

"He trusts me!" gasped the Earthman as he pumped the furry limb up and down enthusiastically.

Using the bar as a lever, he twisted the spoked wheel around several turns, watching the meters on the wall as the valve grated wider and wider. The indicator crept up and up, revealing the increased flow to Clark's anxious eyes. The noise from the pumps below drifting through the open archway thundered with new energy to catch up with the added drain on their powers. Trembling with triumph, he disentangled the bar from the spokes and turned the handle on the petcock from which Peetn drained their drinking water every morning. A stout stream as thick as his thumb splattered to the ground with a heavenly gurgling sound. Peetn's knees must have given way at the sight, for he folded up and sat down on the floor ungently, his eyes glued to that stream of life which issued from the pipette.

SEVERAL weeks later, Harry Clark stood by with an amused grin on his face as Peetn tweedled excitedly to the three Martians who had come stilting out of the south the evening before. The whistling of the Martians was less than gibberish to him, but he got the idea from the various tentacle-wavings and yellow-eyed stares in his direction that Peetn was giving them the dirt about himself.

"The monster is from Gamtl, the Paradise of the old legend," he was whistling.



"Many days ago the wind blew him into the water-station, sick and dying from lack of life essentials. He was clad in the strange metal suit which you still see upon him. He is a very strange and alien being. It seems inexplicable, but I believe that he understands more about them than we for whom they exist. Well, one day in the valve-house, he laid tentacles on one of the machines, and I had to pull him bodily away from it. His interest did not carry him quite so far as that in succeeding days, but about a week later I arose in the morning to find him gone!

"His return, which I didn't expect, was the queerest sight I ever saw. He came across the desert at about midday, from the direction he first came, dragging behind him a cylindrical object which I later found to be hollow and filled with a very amazing liquid. He took this container down into the cavern of the chugging machines and unscrewed a small circular section in the top. I smelled its contents; it smelled like the juice of the *merri* plant when it was crushed, a very unpleasant odor.

"Well, he poured some of it into the chugging machines, and the noises which they had been making—stopped! It was the most amazing thing I have ever experienced. He seemed to wield some un-Martian control over them!

"Then he did a thing which makes me shudder to recount! He picked up a bar of metal half as long as my tentacle and began belaboring the machines from which I had pulled him a few weeks before! Quickly I stopped him, but something, perhaps the memory of how he had quieted the chugging machines, told me that this being could be trusted, and that he knew what he was doing. I—I took an awful chance. I squirm inside when I think of what might have happened if my trust in this Gamtilian had been misplaced. I gave him back the bar and allowed him to continue!

"He stopped banging before he broke anything, and then he did a peculiar thing. He turned the outer edge of the round machines in there," Peetn indicated the valve-house, "so that the whole top moved around itself. Then the miracle happened."

"Yes, go on," twittered the other one ex-

citedly. "What did he do?"

Peetn paused for a moment to gather weight, and then proceeded solemnly. "He opened the little machine from which I draw my drinking water, and a stream shot forth as thick as my tentacle and spattered all about the room!" He allowed himself to exaggerate. "An unbelievable quantity of water poured out in the short space of time that I watched it."

The newcomers seemed slightly disappointed at the tale Peetn told, expecting to hear about gigantic super-Martian operations by the stranger from Gamtl, the Martian spirit-world.

"Why that's just about what happened down at the colony, about the water, I mean," said one of them. "All of a sudden a flood came gushing out of the supply pipe and overflowed the pool and spreading out over the surrounding desert. A funny thing, too, was the way that the *merri* plants grew where the water had spread. When we left, our colony had a full fifteen days' stock, and all of it was gathered within a five-minute walk of the caves!"

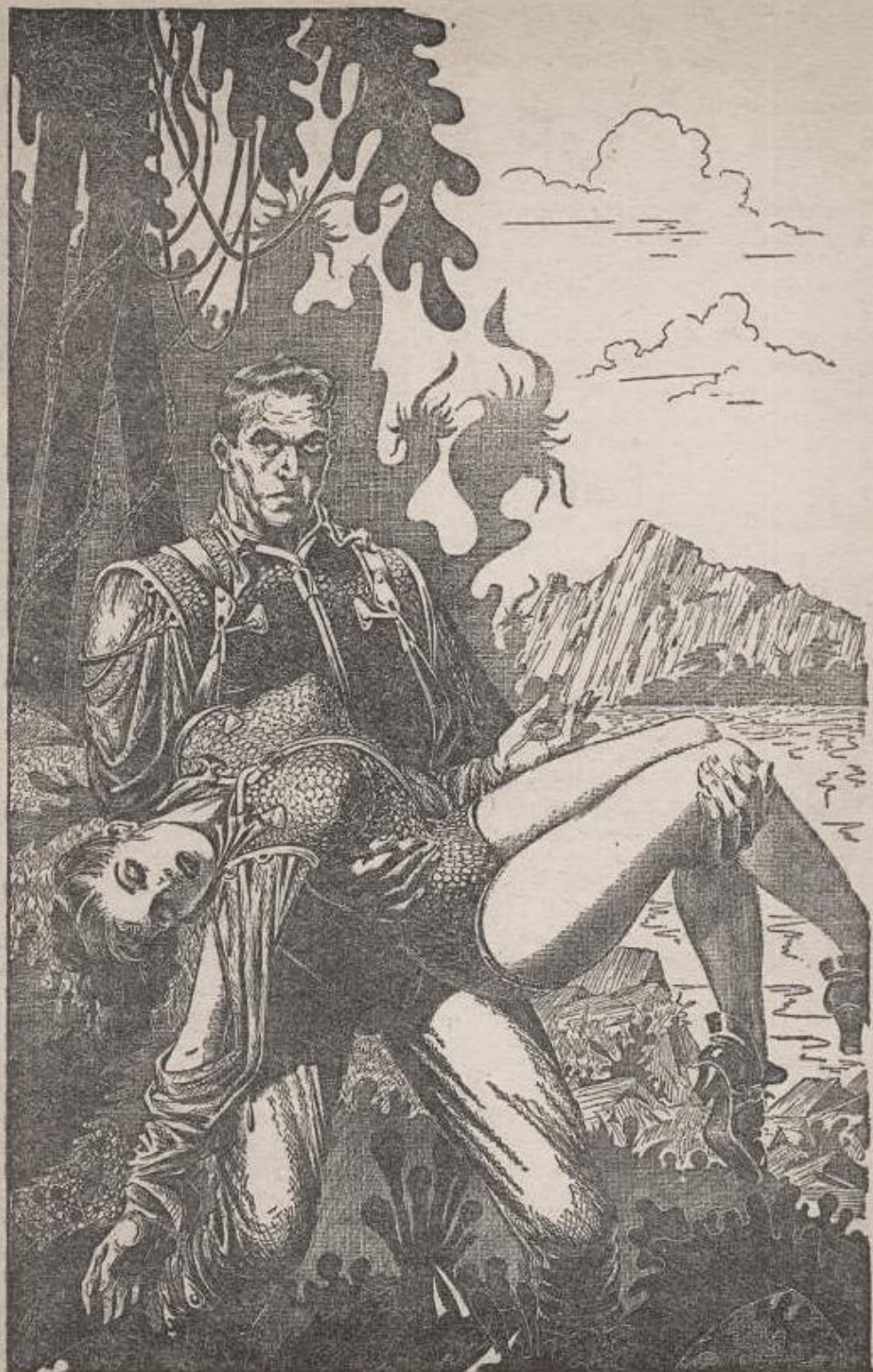
Peetn had a faraway look in his usually inexpressive, yellow eyes. A quiver was noticeable in his whistle as he replied.

"Can this be the fulfilment of the old legend of Gamtl?"

Harrison Clark, for the first time since he had crashed on the Martian desert in the rocket, did not dream so longingly of Earth as he lay in the little hollow he had come to know as home. He had work to do here. A feeling of mingled exultation and determination had possessed him when Peetn had shown him the liquid which resulted from crushing *merri*. It was a very heavy and durable vegetable oil, quite capable of continuing the job of lubricating the machinery after his petroleum was gone. Mars could be reawakened with it; the task was his.

A sense of warmth and friendship suffused him, in spite of the frigid wind which blew all around, as he thought of the Martian monsters which lay sleeping beside him. They were *his* people now! For when Peetn had stopped whistling to them, one by one they had filed past, and every damn one had shaken his hand!





A STORY OF SQUATTER'S RIGHTS...



# CASTAWAYS OF EROS

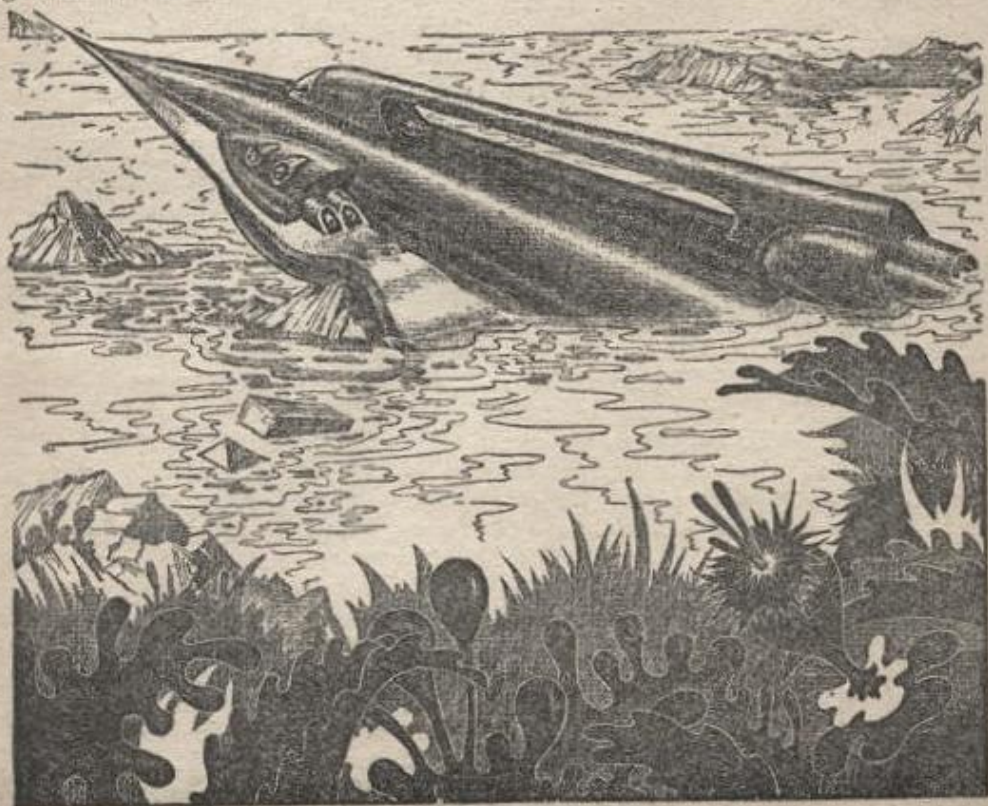
NOVELET By NELSON BOND

Eros was a lovely space-isle. Tangled woods. Pale seas. But Eros had its terrors, too, terrors of a forgotten frontier. Merely to exist, the wrecked Mosleys had to dig deep into their fighting Terran sub-memories.

**B**OBBY couldn't help wishing Pop would stand up just a little bit straighter. Not that he was ashamed of Pop; it wasn't that at all. It was just that the Patrolman stood so straight, his shoulders broad and firm. Standing beside him made Pop look sort of thin and puny; his chest caved in like he was carrying a heavy weight on his shoulders.

That was from studying things through a microscope. Anyhow, decided Bobby with a fierce loyalty, that S.S.P. man probably wouldn't even know what to look for if somebody put a microscope in front of him. Even if he was big and sturdy and broad-shouldered in his space blues.

Mom said, "Bobby, what *are* you muttering about? Do stop fidgeting!" Bobby said,



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"Yessum," and glared at Moira, as if she, in some obscure way, were to blame for his having been reprimanded right out here in the middle of Long Island Spaceport, where everybody could hear and laugh at him. But Moira, studying the handsome S.S.P. man surreptitiously, did not notice. Dick was fixing something in the ship. Eleanor stood quietly beside Mom, crooning softly to The Pooch so it wouldn't be scared by the thunderous blast of rocket motors. Grampaw Moseley had buttonholed an embarrassed young ensign, was complaining to him in loud and certain terms that modern astronavigation practices were, "Rank bellywash, Mister, and a dad-ratted disgrace!"

The Patrolman said, "Your name, please, Sir?"

"Robert Emmet O'Brien Moseley," said Pop.

"Occupation?"

"Research physicist, formerly. Now about to become a land-grant settler."

"Age of self and party . . . former residence . . ."

Overhead, the sky was blue and thin-clear as a bowl of skimmed milk; its vastness limned in sharp relief, to the west and north, the mighty spans and arches, the fairy domes and flying buttresses of Great New York. The spacedrome fed a hundred ducts of flight; from one field lifted air locals, giddy, colored motes with gyroscopes aspin. From another, a West Coast stratoliner surged upward to lose itself in thin, dim heights.

Vast cradles by the Sound were the nests to which a flock of interplanetary craft made homeward flight. Luggers and barges and cruisers. Bobby saw, with sudden excitement, the sharp, starred prow of the Solar Space Patrol man-o'-war.

Here, in this field, the GSC's—the General Spacecraft Cradles. From one of which, as soon as Pop got clearance, their ship would take off. Their ship! Bobby felt an eager quickening of his pulse; his stomach was aswarm with a host of butterflies. *Their ship!*

The space officer said, "I think that takes care of everything, Dr. Moseley. I presume you understand the land-grant laws and obligations?"

"Yes, Lieutenant."

"Very well, then—" Space-red hands made official motions with a hand-stamp and pen. "Your clearance. And my very best wishes, Sir."

"Thank you," said Pop quietly. He turned. "That's all. Ready, Mother? Eleanor? Moira?"

Bobby bounded forward. "Can I push the button, can I, Pop. When we start, can I?"

DICK was waiting before the open lock of the *Cuchulainn*. Dick could do anything, everything at once. He took The Pooch into the circle of his left arm, helped his mother aboard, said, "Shut up, kid, you're enough to wake the dead. Watch that guard-panel, Elly. Papers all set, Pop?" And he tickled The Pooch's dimpled cheek with an oily finger. "You act just like your mama," he said irrelevantly, and the baby gurgled. Eleanor cried, "Dick—those dirty hands!"

"Everything is in order, Richard," said Pop.

"Good. You folks go in and strap down. I'll seal. Here comes the cradle-monkey now."

Pop said, "Come along, Robert," and the others went inside. Bobby waited, though, to see the cradle-monkey, the man under whose orders spacecraft lifted grays. The cradle-monkey was a dour man with gnarled legs and arms and temper. He looked at the *Cuchulainn* and sniffed; then at Dick.

"Family crate, huh?"

"That's right."

"Well, f'r goddlemighty' sakes, don't try to blast off with y'r side jets burnin'. Take a seven-point-nineteen readin' on y'r Akka gauge, stern rockets only!"

"Comets to you, butt-hoister!" grinned Dick. "I've had eight years on the spider run. I can lift this can."

"Oh, a rocketeer?" There was new, grudging respect in the groundman's tone. "Well, how was I t' know? Y'ought t' see what some o' them jaloupi-jockeys do to my cradles—burn 'em black! Oh, well—" He backed away from the ship.

"Clean ether!" said Dick. He closed the lock. Its seal-brace slid into place, wheezing



asthmatically. Bobby's ears rang suddenly with the mild compression of air; when he swallowed, they were all right again. Dick saw him. "What are you doing here, kid? Didn't I hear Pop tell you to come below?"

Bobby said, "I'm not a kid, I'm almost sixteen."

"Just old enough," promised Dick, "to get your seat warmed if you don't do what you're told. Remember, you're a sailor on a spaceship now. Pop's the Skipper, and I'm First Mate. If you don't obey orders, it's mutiny, and—"

"I'm obeying," said Bobby hastily. He followed his brother down the corridor, up the ramp, to the bridge. "Can I push the button when we take off, huh, Dick?"

After his high expectations, it wasn't such a great thrill. Dick set the stops and dials, told him which button to press. "When I give the word, kid." Of course, he got to sit in the pilot's bucket-chair, which was something. Moira and Eleanor and Mom had to lie down in acceleration hammocks while Pop and Dick sat in observation seats. He waited, all ears and nerves, as the slow seconds sloughed away. Pop set the hypos running; their faint, dull throb was a magic sound in the silence.

Then there came a signal from outside. Dick's hand rose in understanding response; fell again. "Now!"

**B**OBBY jabbed the button in frantic haste. Suddenly the silence was shattered by a thunderous detonation. There was a massive hand pressing him back into the soft, yielding leather of his chair; the chair retreated on oiled channels, pneumatic compensators hissing faintly, absorbing the shock. Across the room a faulty hammock-hinge squeaked rustily.

Then it was over as quickly as it had begun, and he could breathe again, and Dick was lurching across the turret on feet that wobbled queerly because up was down and top was bottom and everything was funny and mixed up.

Dick cut in the artificial grays, checked the meter dials with a hurried glance, smiled.

"Dead on it! Want to check, Skipper?"

But Pop was standing by the observation pane, eyeing an Earth already ball-like in

the vastness of space. Earth, dwindling with each passing moment. Bobby moved to his side and watched; Moira, too, and Eleanor and Mom, and even Dick.

Pop touched Mom's hand. He said, "Martha—I'm not sure this is fair to you and the children. Perhaps it isn't right that I should force my dream on all of you. The world we have known and loved lies behind us. Before us lies only uncertainty . . ."

Mom sort of sniffed and reached for a handkerchief. She turned her back to Pop for a minute, and when she turned around again her eyes were red and angry-looking. She said, "You want to go on, don't you, Rob?"

Pop nodded. "But I'm thinking of you, Martha."

"Of me!" Mom snorted indignantly. "Hear him talk! I never heard such nonsense in my life. Of course I want to go on. No, never mind that! Richard, isn't there a kitchen on this boat?"

"A galley, Mom. Below."

"Galley . . . kitchen . . . what's the difference? You two girls come with me. I'll warrant these men are starving. I am!"

**A**FTER that, things became so normal as to be almost disappointing. From his eager reading of such magazines as *Martian Tales* and *Cosmic Fiction Weekly*, Bobby had conceived void-travel to be one long, momentous chain of adventure. A super-thrilling serial, punctuated by interludes with space-pirates, narrow brushes with meteors, sabotage, treachery—hair-raising, heroic and horrifying.

There was nothing like that to disturb the calm and peaceful journey of the *Cuchulainn*. Oh, it was enjoyable to stare through the observation panes at the flame-dotted pall of space—until Pop tried to turn his curious interest into educational channels; it was exciting, too, to probe through the corridor recesses of their floating home—except that Dick issued strict orders that nothing must be touched, that he must not enter certain chambers, that he mustn't push his nose into things that didn't concern kids—

Which offended Bobby, who was sixteen Or, anyway, fifteen and three-quarters.



So they ate and they slept and they ate again. And Pop and Dick spelled each other at the control banks. Moira spent endless hours with comb and mirror, devising elaborate hair-dos which—Bobby reminded her with impudent shrewdness—were so much wasted energy, since they were settling in a place where nobody could see them. And Mom bustled about in the galley, performing miracles with flour and stuff, and in the recreation room, Eleanor minded The Pooch, and lost innumerable games of cribbage to Grampaw Moseley who cheated outrageously and groused, between hands, about the dad-blame nonsensical way Dick was handling the ship.

And somehow three Earth days sped by, and they were nearing their destination. The tiny planetoid, Eros.

Pop said, "You deserve a great deal of credit, son, for your fine work in rehabilitating the *Cuchulainn*. It has performed beautifully. You are a good spaceman."

Dick flushed. "She's a good ship, Pop, even if she is thirty years old. Some of these old, hand-fashioned jobs are better than the flash junk they're turning off the belts nowadays. You've checked the declension and trajectory?"

"Yes. We should come within landing radius in just a few hours. Cut drives at 19.04.22 precisely and make such minor course alterations as are necessary, set brakes." Pop smiled happily. "We're very fortunate, son. A mere fifteen million miles. It's not often Eros is so near Earth."

"Don't I know it? It's almost a hundred million at perihelion. But that's not the lucky part. You sure had to pull strings to get the government land grant to Eros. What a plum! Atmosphere . . . water . . . vegetable life . . . all on a hunk of dirt fifty-seven miles in diameter. Frankly, I don't get it! Eros must have terrific mass to have the attributes of a full-sized planet."

"It does, Richard. A neutronium core."

"Neutronium!" Dick gasped. "Why don't people tell me these things? Roaring craters, Pop, we're rich! Bloated plutocrats!"

"Not so fast, son. Eventually, perhaps; not today. First we must establish our claims, justify our right to own Eros. That means work, plenty of hard work. After that, we might be able to consider a mining

operation. What's that?"

Bobby jumped. It was Mom's voice. But her cry was not one of fear, it was one of excitement.

"Rob, look! Off to the—the left, or the port, or whatever you call it! Is that our new home?"

Bobby did not need to hear Pop's reply to know that it was. His swift intake of breath was enough, the shine in his eyes as he peered out the observation port.

"Eros!" he said.

It looked all right to Bobby. A nice, clean little sphere, spinning lazily before their eyes like a top someone had set in motion, then gone away and forgotten. Silver and green and rusty brown, all still faintly blued by distance. The warm rays of old Sol reflected gaily, giddily, from seas that covered half the planetoid's surface, and mountains cut long, jagged shadows into sheltered plains beneath them. It was, thought Bobby, not a bad looking little place. But not anything to get all dewy-eyed about, like Pop was.

Dick said softly, "All right, Pop. Let's check and get ready to set 'er down . . ."

## II

IT WAS not Dick's fault. It was just a tough break that no one had expected, planned for, guarded against. The planetoid was there beneath them; they would land on it. It was as simple as that.

Only it wasn't. Nor did they have any warning that the problem was more complex until it was too late to change their plans, too late to halt the irrevocable movements of a grounding spaceship. Dick should have known, of course. He was a spaceman; he had served two tricks on the Earth-Venus-Mars run. But all those planets were large; Eros was just a mote. A spinning top . . .

Anyway, it was after the final coordinates had been plotted, the last bank control unchangeably set, the rockets cut, that they saw the curved knife-edge of black slicing up over Eros' rim. For a long moment Dick stared at it, a look of angry chagrin in his eyes.

"Well, blast me for an Earth-lubbing idiot! Do you see that, Pop?"



Pop looked like he had shared Dick's persimmon.

"The night-line. We forgot to consider the diurnal revolution."

"And now we've got to land in the dark. On strange terrain. Arragh! I should have my head examined. I've got a plugged tube somewhere!"

Grampaw Moseley hobbled in, appraised the situation with his incomparable ability to detect something amiss. He snorted and rattled his cane on the floor.

"They's absolutely nothin'," he informed the walls, "to this hereditation stuff. Elst why should my own son an' his son be so dag-nabbed stoopid?"

"What can't be cured," said Pop mildly, "'must be endured.' We have the forward search-beams, son. They will help to some extent."

That was sheer optimism. As they neared the planet its gravitational attraction seized them tighter and tighter until they were completely under its compulsion. Dusk swept down upon them, the sunlight dulled, faded, grayed. Then as the ship nosed downward, suddenly all was black. The yellow beam of the search stabbed reluctant shadows, bringing rocky crags and rounded tors into swift, terrifying relief.

Dick snapped, "Into your hammocks, everyone! Don't worry. This crate will stand a lot of bust-up. It's tough. A little bit of luck—"

But there was perspiration on his forehead, and his fingers played over the control banks like frightened moths.

There was no further need for the artificial grays. Eros exerted, strangely, incredibly, an attractive power almost as potent as Earth's. Dick cut off the grays, then the hypos. As the last machine-created sound died away from the cabin, Bobby heard the high scream of atmosphere, raging and tearing at the *Cuchulainn* with angry fingers.

Through howling Bedlam they tumbled dizzily and for moments that were ages long. While Dick labored frantically at the controls, while Moira watched with bated breath, Mom said nothing, but her hand sought Pop's; Eleanor cradled The Pooch closer to her. Grampaw scowled.

And then, suddenly—

"Hold tight! We're grounding!" cried Dick.

And instinctively Bobby braced himself for a shock. But there was only a shuddering jar, a lessening of the roar that beat upon their eardrums, a dull, flat thud. A sodden, heavy grinding and the groan of metal forward. Then a false nausea momentarily assailed him. Because for the first time in days the *Cuchulainn* was completely motionless.

Dick grinned shakily. "Well!" he said. "Well!"

Pop unbuckled his safety belt, climbed gingerly out of his hammock, moved to the port, slid back its lock-plate. Bobby said, "Can you see anything, Pop? Can you?" And Mom, who could read Pop's expressions like a book, said, "What is it, Rob?"

Pop stroked his chin. He said, "Well, we've landed safely, Richard. But I'm afraid we've—er—selected a wet landing field. We seem to be under water!"

His hazard was verified immediately. Indisputably. For from the crack beneath the door leading from the control turret to the prow-chambers of the ship, came a dark trickle that spread and puddled and stained and gurgled. Water!

Dick cried, "Hey, this is bad! We'd better get out of here—"

HE LEAPED to his controls. Once more the plaintive hum of the hypatomics droned through the cabin, gears ground and clashed as the motors caught, something forward exploded dully, distantly. The ship rocked and trembled, but did not move. Again Dick tried to jet the fore-rockets. Again, and yet again.

And on the fourth essay, there ran through the ship a violent shudder, broken metal grated shrilly from forward, and the water began bubbling and churning through the crack. Deeper and swifter, Dick cut motors and turned, his face an angry mask.

"We can't get loose. The entire nose must be stove in! We're leaking like a sieve. Look, everybody—get into your bulgers. We'll get out through the airlock!"

Mom cried, "But—but our supplies, Dick! What are we going to do for food, clothing, furniture—?"

"We'll worry about that later. Right



now we've got to think of ourselves. That—aboy, Bobby! Thanks for getting 'em out. You girls remember how to climb into 'em? Eleanor—you take that oversized one. That's right. There's room for you and The Pooch—

The water was almost ankle deep in the control room by the time they had all donned spacesuits. Bloated figures in fabricoid bulgers, they followed Dick to the airlock. It was weird, and a little bit frightening, but to Bobby it was thrilling, too. This was the sort of thing you read stories about. Escape from a flooding ship . . .

They had time—or took time—to gather together a few precious belongings. Eleanor packed a carrier with baby food for The Pooch, Mom a bundle of provisions hastily swept from the galley bins; Pop remembered the medical kit and the tool-box, Grampaw was laden down with blankets and clothing, Dick burdened himself and Bobby with armloads of such things as he saw and forevisioned need for.

At the lock, Dick issued final instructions.

"The air in the bulgers will carry you right to the surface. We'll gather there, count noses, and decide on our next move. Pop, you go first to lead the way, then Mom, and Eleanor, Grampaw—"

Thus, from the heart of the doomed *Cuchulainn*, they fled. The airlock was small. There was room for but one at a time. The water was waist—no, breast-deep—by the time all were gone save Bobby and Dick. Bobby, whose imagination had already assigned him the command of the foundering ship, wanted to uphold the ancient traditions by being the last to leave. But Dick had other ideas. He shoved Bobby—not too gently—into the lock. Then there was water, black, solid, forbidding, about him. And the outer door opening.

He stepped forward. And floated upward, feeling an uneasy, quibbly feeling in his stomach. Almost immediately a hard something *clanged!* against his impervite helmet; it was a lead-soled bulger boot; then he was bobbing and tossing on shallow black wavelets beside the others.

Above him was a blue-black, star-gemmed sky; off to his right, not distant, was a rising smudge that must be the main-

land. A dark blob popped out of the water. Dick.

Dick's voice was metallic through the audios of the space-helmet. "All here, Pop? Everybody all right? Swell! Let's strike out for the shore, there. Stick together, now. It isn't far."

Pop said, "The ship, Richard?"

"We'll find it again. I floated up a marking buoy. That round thing over there isn't Grampaw."

Grampaw's voice was raucous, belligerent. "You bet y'r boots it ain't! I'm on my way to terry firmy. The last one ashore's a sissy!"

Swimming in a bulger, Bobby found, was silly. Like paddling a big, warm, safe rubber rowboat. The stars winked at him, the soft waves explored his face-plate with curious, white fingers of spray. Pretty soon there was sand scraping his boots . . . a long, smooth beach with rolling hills beyond.

IN THE sudden scarlet of dawn, it was impossible to believe the night had even been frightening. Throughout the night; the Moseley clan huddled together there on the beach, waiting, silent, wondering. But when the sun burst over the horizon like a clamoring, brazen gong, they looked upon this land which was their new home—and found it good.

The night did not last long. But Pop had told them it would not.

"Eros rotates on its axis," he explained, "in about ten hours, forty minutes, Earth time measurement. Therefore we shall have 'days' and 'nights' of five hours; short dawns or twilights. This will vary somewhat, you understand, with the change of seasons."

Dick asked, "Isn't that a remarkably slow rotation? For such a tiny planet, I mean? After all, Eros is only one hundred and eighty odd miles in circumference—"

"Eros has many peculiarities. Some of them we have discussed before. It approaches Earth nearer than any other celestial body, excepting Luna and an occasional meteor or comet. When first discovered by Witt, in 1898, the world of science marveled at finding a true planetoid with such an uncommon orbit. At perihelion it comes



far within the orbit of Mars; at aphelion it is far outside.

"During its near approach in 1900-01, Eros was seen to vary in brightness at intervals of five hours and fifteen or twenty minutes. At that time, a few of the more imaginative astronomers offered the suggestion that this variation might be caused by diurnal rotation. After 1931, though, the planetoid fled from Earth. It was not until 1975, the period of its next approach, that the Ronaldson-Chenwith expedition visited it and determined the old presumption to be correct."

"We're not the first men to visit Eros, then?"

"Not at all. It was investigated early in the days of spaceflight. Two research foundations, the Royal Cosmographic Society and the Interplanetary Service, sent expeditions here. During the Black Douglass period of terrorism, the S.S.P. set up a brief military occupation. The Galactic Metals Corporation at one time attempted to establish mining operations here, but the Bureau refused them permission, for under the Space-code of '08, it was agreed by the Triune that all asteroids should be settled under land-grant law.

"That is why," concluded Pop, "we are here now. As long as I can remember, it has been my dream to take a land-grant colony for my very own. Long years ago I decided that Eros should be my settlement. As you have said, Richard, it necessitated the pulling of many strings. Eros is a wealthy little planet; the man who earns it wins a rich prize. More than that, though—" Pop lifted his face to the skies, now blue with hazy morning. There was something terribly bright and proud in his eyes. "More than that, there is the desire to carve a home out of the wilderness. To be able to one day say, 'Here is my home that I have molded into beauty with my own hands.' Do you know what I mean, son? In this workaday world of ours there are no more Earthly frontiers for us to dare, as did our forefathers. But still within us all stirs the deep, instinctive longing to hew a new home from virgin land—"

His words dwindled into silence, and, inexplicably, Bobby felt awed. It was Grampaw Moseley who burst the queer

moment into a thousand spluttering fragments.

"Talkin' about hewin'," he said, "S'posen we hew us a few vittles? Hey?"

Dick roused himself.

"Right you are, Grampaw," he said. "You can remove your bulgers. I've tested the air; it's fine and warm, just as the report said. Moira, while Mom and Eleanor are fixing breakfast, suppose you lay out our blankets and spare clothing to dry? Grampaw, get a fire going. Pop and Bobby and I will get some wood."

Thus Eros greeted its new masters, and the Moseleys faced morning in their new Eden.

### III

GRAMPAW MOSELEY wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. There were no napkins, which suited him fine.

"It warn't," he said, "a bad meal. But it warn't a fust-class un, neither. Them synthos an' concentrates ain't got no more flavor than—"

Bobby agreed with him. Syntho ham wasn't too bad. It had a nice, meaty taste. And syntho coffee tasted pretty much like the real thing. But those syntho eggs tasted like nothing under the sun except just plain, awful syntho eggs.

Four Eros days—the equivalent of forty-two Earth hours or so—had passed since their crash landing. In that short time, much had been done to make their beach camp-site comfortable. All members of the family were waiting now for Dick to return.

Pop said seriously, "I'm afraid you'll have to eat them and like them for a little while, Father. We can't get fresh foods until we're settled; we can't settle until— Ah! Here comes Dick!"

"I'll eat 'em," grumbled Grampaw, "but be durned if I'll like 'em. What'd you l'arn, Dicky-boy?"

Dick removed his helmet, unzipped himself from his bulger, shook his head.

"It looks worse every time I go back. I may not be able to get in the airlock again if the ship keeps on settling. The whole prow split wide open when we hit, the ship is full of water. The flour and



sugar and things like that are ruined. I managed to get a few more things out, though. Some tools, guns, wire—stuff like that.

"How about the hypatomic?"

"Let him eat, Rob," said Mom. "He's hungry."

"I can eat and talk at the same time, Mom. I think I can get the hypatomic out. I'd better, anyhow. If we're ever going to raise the ship, we'll need power. And atomic power is the only kind we can get in this wilderness." And he shook his head. "But we can't do it in a day or a week. It will take time."

"Time," said Pop easily, "is the one commodity with which we are over-supplied." He thought for a minute. "If that's the way it is, we might as well move."

"Move?" demanded Grampaw. "What's the matter with the place we're at?"

"For one thing, it's too exposed. An open beach is no place for a permanent habitation. So far we've been very lucky. We've had no storms. But for a permanent camp-site, we must select a spot further inland. A fertile place, where we can start crops. A place with fresh, running water, natural shelter against cold and wind and rain—"

"What'll we do?" grinned Dick. "Flip a coin?"

"No. Happily, there is a spot like that within an easy walk of here. I discovered it yesterday while studying the terrain." Pop took a stick, scratched a rude drawing on the sand before him. "This is the coastline. We landed on the west coast of this inlet. The land we see across there, that low, flat land, I judge to be delta islands. Due south of us is a fine, fresh-water river, watering fertile valleys to either side. There, I think, we should build."

Dick nodded.

"Fish from the sea, vegetables from our own farm—is there any game, Pop?"

"That I don't know. We haven't seen any. Yet."

"We'll find out. Will this place you speak of be close enough to let me continue working on the *Cuchulainn*? Yes? Well, that's that. When do we start?"

"Why not now? There's nothing to keep us here."

THEY packed their meager belongings while Dick finished his meal; the sun was high when they left the beach. They followed the shore line southward, the ground rising steadily before them. And before evening, they came to a rolling vale through which a sparkling river meandered lazily to the sea.

Small wonders unfolded before their eyes. Marching along, they had discovered that there was game on Eros. Not quite Earthly, of course—but that was not to be expected. There was one small, furry beast about the size of a rabbit, only its color was vivid leaf-green. Once, as they passed a wooded glen, a pale, fawnlike creature stole from the glade, watched them with soft, curious eyes. Another time they all started violently as the familiar siren of a Patrol monitor screamed raucously from above them; they looked up to see an irate, orange and jade-green bird glaring down at them.

And of course there were insects—

"There would have to be insects," Pop said. "There could be no fruitful vegetable life without insects. Plants need bees and crawling ants—or their equivalent—to carry the pollen from one flower to another."

They chose a site on the riverside, a half mile or so from above, and overlooking the sea. They selected it because a spring of pure, bubbling water was nearby, because the woodlands dwindled away into lush fields. And Pop said,

"This is it. We'll build our home on yonder knoll. And who knows—" Again there grew that strange look in his eyes. "Who knows but that it may be the shoot from which, a time hence, there may spring many cabins, then finer homes, and buildings, and mansions, until at last there is a great, brave city here on this port by the delta—"

"That's it, Pop!" said Dick suddenly. "There's the name for our settlement. Delta Port!"

SO, SWIFTLY, sped the next weeks, and Bobby was not able, afterward, to tell where they had gone. Time lightens labor; labor hastens time. But fleeing hours left in their wake tangible evidence of their passage—a change, a growth in Delta Port.



One of Pop's first moves had been an attempted reorganization of their work-hours on an Eros basis.

"We cannot here," he explained, "try to maintain our Earthly habit of sleeping through night hours, working during the day. Therefore—"

And he laid out for them an intricate and elaborate "nine day week" he had devised; broken into alternate sleep-and-labor, meal-and-recreation periods. It was an ingenious system. But—

It didn't work.

Despite previous habits, after a short time men and women, old and young alike, found themselves growing drowsy as dusk crept in. There was a general quickening of life's tempo to meet the conditions prevalent on Eros; the familiar "three meals a day" ceased to have meaning; the old habit of sleeping eight hours at one stretch became anomalous under a sky which waxed and waned from brightness to dark in that length of time. Imperceptibly at first, then more and more openly, all found themselves working into a new routine. A design for living under which they tumbled into bed for four hours of darkness, slept suddenly and heartily, woke again, pursued a half dozen hours of work or play, then napped once more.

It seemed the most natural thing in the world. And Pop, never satisfied until he could explain such things, finally found an answer.

"I remember, now, that 'way back in the early years of the Twentieth Century a group of psychologists from one of the American universities tried an experiment. They put two men in a sealed, walled, soundproof room which was neither dark nor light, but was kept constantly a dull, twilight gray.

"They gave the men—who all their lives had lived on the accepted Early standard—instructions to sleep when they felt drowsy, eat whenever they felt the desire to do so. After an exceptionally short time, the life-habits of these human guinea pigs altered remarkably. They began eating not thrice a way, but at intervals ranging from every three to six hours.

"As for sleeping, the experimenters found it natural to cat-nap for four hour

stretches rather than sustain strength on one, long, tiresome eight hour sleep-period.

"This experiment was duplicated in 1987, under John Carberry of Columbia, with identical results. The research doctors were forced to the conclusion that Man is, on Earth, responsive to the conditions under which he must live. That is, he has adapted himself to Earth's phenomena. But could his body attain its natural and normal, uninhibited desires, it would live *precisely as we here on Eros are living!* At a wake-sleep pace of alternate four and six hours!"

IT WAS just like Pop to get excited about a problem of that nature when there were so many other things crying to be done. But Bobby was surprised, from time to time, to discover that in a pinch Pop could bob up with an answer to a stumping question quite unrelated to the field of empiric science.

It was Pop who, when Dick was having trouble making their minute supply of nails and braces do for the construction of the cabin, offered the suggestion that the joists be joined by hollowing. It worked. End logs dove-tailed beautifully; the cabin walls stood firmer and looked neater than if laboriously spliced together with metal.

It was Pop, too, who did something about the plate problem. Unable to bring the plastics with them in their hasty flight from the sunken *Cuchulainn*, the Moseley family had made rude shift first with large flat, washed leaves, then with shells taken from the beach, at last with wooden slabs planed down by Grampaw.

Pop, annoyed with these slovenly substitutes, spent several hours wandering by the shore, through the hills, up the river; finally returned one afternoon triumphantly bearing a lump of grayish mud as large as his head. Ignoring all caustic queries and comments, he set about molding this into a plate—and after much fingering, succeeded in flattening it into a recognizable shape.

It seemed to bother him not a whit that the finished product was deckle-edged and wobbly. He set it out in the sun to dry; a day later carried it triumphantly to the table and demanded his meal be served in it.

"Pottery!" he said. "From a fine clay



bed up Erin River!"

Then he placed his pottery plate on the table with firm hands, and at that imperceptible jar, it promptly fell into five pieces!

But a beginning had been made, and curiously enough it was Moira who became interested in this obscure art of ceramics. The Moseleys continued to eat from wooden slabs for some weeks, while Moira begrimed her fingers with mud that invariably turned to crisp, fragile clay—and then one day she completed a bowl made of substance from which all sand-grains and small pebbles had been painstakingly sieved, and which had been allowed to dry slowly under damp grass. And *this* time it did not crack. Within a fortnight, a complete set of crockery made its appearance in the culinary department.

At which point Dick began talking vaguely about the construction of a kiln, and Moira started thinking about the possibilities of decorating her proud young chinaware.

So the weeks passed, and it was surprising how much had been accomplished, and how complete and happy life could be, even without the infinitude of small comforts to which they had once been accustomed, and which, on Earth, they had expected and accepted unthinkingly.

There was no *teleo* to entertain them, but somehow nobody seemed to miss its raucous, glowing presence in the living room; not even Bobby whose greatest interest in life had once been the nightly adventures of *The Red Patrolman*, transmitted through the courtesy of United Syntho Cereals. Grampaw Moseley made music with a battered banjo he had salvaged from the *Cuchulainn*; they all sang, and sometimes they danced, too. That was what Moira liked; she'd fix herself all up real pretty and dance and dance, even though her partners were Dick and Pop, who didn't dance the modern swoop-steps very well, and Bobby, who pretended to dislike it very thoroughly, but thought it was kind of fun.

GRAMPAW carved a cribbage set, too; they played it, and chess, and card games during storms that kept them house-bound. Dick, in occasional hours of leisure, cleared a fair athletic field outside. They

had a quoits' run, a badminton court (a little uneven, but nobody minded) and a shuffleboard plane; also a fine sand-pit for The Pooch.

Pop had planned the house with his usual mathematical forevision. From its first two rooms, built with an eye to offering swift shelter, soon spread wings. Before long it had four separate bedrooms, a kitchen, a dining-nook, and the living or meeting room, which Grampaw called the "git-together" room. There was also a cisterned refreshing room, and another would be added as soon as Dick devised a method of supplying the house with fresh, running water.

Meanwhile, Mom and Eleanor and Grampaw Moseley were to be thanked for the steady improvement in their menu.

Grampaw had early set out his farm; it was a sight to see him hobbling up and down the neat even rows, weeding his springing crops, swearing at insect interlopers. Luckily the sealed containers of seeds had not suffered the fate of Mom's lamented sugar and flour supply; the Moseleys had already nibbled tentatively at stubby radishes, tiny, crumpled leaves of lettuce—and in another month or so there would be more substantial root and fruit stocks. Potatoes, parsnips, beans, turnips, beets, tomatoes, corn, salsify, onions.

And wheat! That was the crop most tenderly watched, most hopefully awaited. Wheat meant bread; bread was life. And the wheat was rippling up in soft, green wave-lets.

Meanwhile, Eros itself supplied many—if unusual!—foodstuffs. Every member of the family watched, carefully, the eating habits of Erosian small-life; adapted to their own diet the fruits, seeds, berries, eaten by native animals, and avoided those things which, no matter how luscious to look on, the birds and beasts eschewed. Some day, when Pop's laboratory equipment could be brought from the sunken ship, they would find out about these questionable foods. But for now, it was best to be on the safe side.

Artificial light remained a problem. There were tiny search batteries in their bulgers, but they used these only in cases of necessity; they had no oil for lamps even if they had owned lamps. Eleanor made a few fat,



greasy, ill-shapen candles out of renderings, but these spluttered and dripped and lasted but a short time. Aboard the *Cucbulainn* were all sorts of books, telling how to make candies properly. But these were, by now, water-soaked and illegible.

So they contrived to get by with little illumination, looking forward to the day when Dick should succeed in raising the hypatomic motor from the ship. Then they would have all the light and heat and power they wanted. All from a cupful of water, or a handful of sand swept up from the beach.

And all was peaceful and quiet. Until one day there came a startled shout from the fields, the sound of excited footsteps, and Grampaw came hobbling into the house yelling, "Where's m' gun? Marthy, drad-rat it, where'd y' put m' gun?"

Dick grinned and winked at the others and asked, "What's the matter, Grampaw? The moles getting into your garden?" And chuckled as Grampaw grabbed up his pierce-gun and hobbled away. Chuckled, that is, until the old man's answer came floating back over his shoulder.

"Moles be durned! It's hooman-bein's, that's what it is. In-trudin' on our property!"

Then Dick roared, "Hey, Grampaw, wait! Put that gun down! Don't try to—Come on, everyone!"

They all went tumbling from the house. And it was exactly as Grampaw had said. Approaching Delta Port, some on foot, some astride animals curiously horselike save that they had six legs and long, shaggy hair, came a tiny group of men and women. Six in number.

Their leader was a man of Pop's age, a baldish man, heavy-set and capable looking. Beside him rode a thin, tired looking woman of forty-odd. Next came a short, pudgy, white-haired man; then, herding beside him two youngsters, a boy of Bobby's age and a girl slightly younger, came the last member of the party. A slim, tall young man with a mop of cinnamon-colored hair.

The two groups, one nearing the house, one emerging from it, saw each other at practically the same time. For a moment, no one spoke on either side. Dick had taken the gun from Grampaw's hands, had suc-

cessfully concealed it. And now Pop broke the silence.

"Greetings, strangers!" he cried heartily. "You're plenty welcome to Delta Port!"

Then came the shockingly unexpected reply, from the leader of the newcomers.

"Greetings yourself, Mister! And what in tarnation thunder are you doing on my land?"

#### IV

GRAMPAW MOSELEY was a man of action. He groped for the rifle swinging loosely in Dick's grasp. He said, "Gimme! Minute I set eyes on that fat ol' popin-jay I knew—"

Dick said, "Hush, Grampaw!" and looked at Pop. Pop looked baffled. He watched speechlessly as the caravan drew up beside them, the members dismounted from their odd beasts of burden. Then he said, hesitantly, "There seems to be some misunderstanding here, stranger. Allow me to introduce myself and my family. I am Robert Moseley. This is my father, my wife, my son and his wife and child, my other children—"

The heavy-set man made no offer to shake hands. He grunted, "Meetcha! I'm Sam Wilkes. This is my wife, my dad, my kids." He stared at the house, the cultivated fields. A look of grudging respect was in his eyes; there was a touch of envy, too. "Been doin' all right for yourself, ain't you? For a squatter!"

Pop said slowly, "Squatter, sir? I'm afraid there's some mistake. This property—as a matter of fact, this entire planetoid—is mine under Earth land-grant law. Now, if you will be kind enough to explain your presence—"

"Yours!" Sam Wilkes' ruddy countenance darkened with outrage. "Earth land-grant! Bessie, where'd I put that—Oh, here it is! Take a look at this, Mr. Moseley!"

He slapped a strip of parchment into Pop's hand, and Pop unfolded it carefully. Dick looked over his shoulder. One of the curious, six-legged beasts skittered nervously and Bobby started. The rusty-thatched boy who had dismounted from it grinned impishly. He said, "What's the matter, skinny, you scared of him?"



Bobby said, "Of course not!" and watched the animal from the corner of one eye. "What is it?"

"A gooldak. We brought it here from home. Fastest thing on legs. What's your name?"

"Bobby. What's yours? And what do you mean—home?"

"Sam. They call me Junior. Why, home is Mars, of course. Where'd you think?"

That word was being echoed now by Dick.

"Mars! This is a land-grant charter issued by the Martian government! But—but—Pop, show him yours!"

"Don't do nothin' of the sort, son!" chirped Grampaw belligerently. "That there scrip o' his'n is prob'ly fake! Don't explain nothin' to 'em. Jist tell 'em to git!"

The roly-poly father of Sam Wilkes turned a querulous eye on Grampaw.

"Who's the antique?" he demanded throatily. "Sounds to me like one of them big-talkin', poor-scrappin' Earth soldiers I fit in the Upland Rebellion."

"Upland Rebellion!" howled Grampaw. "Was *you* one o' the rebels we chased from the deserts to the Pole? I might of knowed it! Gimme that gun, Dick—"

"Please, Grampaw!" begged Dick. He looked at Wilkes. "My father was right, Mr. Wilkes. There is a dreadful mistake here. Apparently the Colonial offices of Earth and Mars have disagreed on the ownership of this planetoid; your government has issued a land-grant on it, and so has ours."

"Asteroids," said Wilkes, "are Martian. Their very orbits prove—"

"I beg your pardon," interrupted Pop firmly. "Eros' orbit is between Earth and Mars at this moment. It is a part of Earth's empire."

"Is it true," Bobby asked Junior, wide-eyed, "that pirate gangs hide in the Martian deserts? I heard—"

"Shucks, no! We used to live in East Redlands, they wasn't no pirates anywheres about. Were you ever in Chicago, Skinny? Is it true there's a building there two miles high?"

"Two and a half," said Bobby complacently. "And it covers six city blocks. And my name's not 'Skinny'."

"—you'll notice," Wilkes was grunting,

"my grant is dated prior to yours. Therefore Eros is mine, no matter which government's claim is soundest. That's Intergalactic law."

"You seem to forget," Dick pointed out, "that we've established a permanent settlement. As travelers, you may be considered itinerant explorers with only the privileges of a study party. We will extend to you the courtesies of Eros for the legal three months, but after that time—"

"You'll extend to us!" Wilkes' face was flame-red. "Why, for a lead credit, I'd—"

"Sock 'im, Dick!" yelled Grampaw excitedly. "Don't let 'im git away with that talk! Sock 'im!"

"Nobody," rumbled a deep, pleasant voice, "is going to sock anybody." The tall, elder son of Sam Wilkes ranged himself beside his father. Bobby noted with sudden approval that the young man's bronzed forearms were corded; there was a crisp, firm set to his lips; he looked like a man who could handle himself equally well in a ball-room or a brawl. He said "Send the women away, Mr. Moseley. I think we men can settle this matter."

MOIRA stepped forward, confronted the young redhead boldly. "And who are *you* to be giving orders to us? Maybe Martians treat their women like cattle, but Earthmen—"

"That will do, daughter," said Pop. And he nodded. "But that's not a bad idea, Wilkes. There is no reason why we should not be able to settle this question in a friendly manner. Mrs. Wilkes, if you and your daughter would accept our hospitality, I'm sure Martha can find you a cup of tea. Wilkes, if you and your son would care to sit down with us, we can—Bobby, run and get some water for the Wilkes' horses. If they are horses?" he added dubiously.

"Gooldaks!" sniffed Junior Wilkes disdainfully. "I'll help you, Skinny. What's the matter with that sister of yours? She looks like an unbaked cookie."

"Yeah? Then why does your brother keep staring at her all the time? Come on—" Bobby strained desperately for a suitable term; culled his resources, came up triumphantly. "Come on, Stinky!"

When they had watered and fed the



gooldaks, Junior wanted to see around the farm. Bobby showed him, while the other boy marveled wistfully.

"You folks struck it lucky. This is the best part of the whole planet. . . . I mean of what we've seen so far. We got here a couple weeks before you did, and we've traveled a couple hundred miles looking for a good location. Boy, it sure was awful where we cracked up! Dad named it Little Hell, because it's so hot and sandy and terrible. No fresh water. One big hot, salt lake, Red mountains and desert land. All oxides, Red said—he's my brother. He's smart."

"So's mine," said Bobby. "Are Martians people?"

"What do you mean? Of course they're people. Same as you. Men that left Earth because there was too darn much fighting and stuff. And of course Earth tried to claim Mars as a colony, but Mars won its fight for independence."

"Earth just let 'em go free," scoffed Bobby. "They didn't want any dried-up old planet, anyhow!"

"No? Then why did they—Hey! What's that?"

"Quoits. Know how?"

"Do I! I can beat you!"

"Huh!" said Bobby. He glanced at the house, but no one was paying any attention to them. Pop and Dick were deep in conversation with the Wilkes, father and son. The two old men were aside on one corner of the porch rubbing salt in old wounds, re-fighting the battles of Mercador's Canal and High Plateau, re-surveying the campaigns that had led to Martian independence and a better understanding between the blue and red planets. Eleanor and Mom were preparing dinner; Moira had disappeared. A thin and lonely figure stood on the steps looking at Bobby and Junior. Junior called, "Hey, Ginger—come on down if you want to." She came.

Bobby said, "What did you call her for?"

"What's the matter? You 'fraid a girl can lick you playing games?"

"Huh!" said Bobby again. There was something sissy about playing games with fourteen-year-old girls. It didn't help much that Ginger, with skinny-armed, keen-eyed accuracy succeeded in beating both himself

and her brother in two games of quoits and one of shuffleboard before the dinner-gong rang.

Dinner was a truculent experience. Conversation had done absolutely nothing to clarify the issue. Both parties were sincere in their conviction of ownership to Eros. Pop based his claim on the establishment of a permanent base at Delta Port; Wilkes insisted that priority of arrival was his proof of occupancy.

"So one of us," insisted Wilkes, "has got to leave. And since *we* can't—"

"Can't?"

"Our ship crashed," explained Red Wilkes, watching Moira, "on landing. It is a total wreck."

BOBBY thought, glumly, that Moira was a total wreck, too. He had held hopes for Moira. Since their arrival on Eros she had turned into a pretty nice guy; cheerful, willing to work, fresh-looking. Now, for some obscure reason, she had piled her hair up on top of her head, put powder on her face and red stuff on her mouth. She wore a dress instead of pants, and she was mincing and prissing around like a prize horse. No doubt she thought she was being fetching.

"So," continued Wilkes, since *we* can't leave, your family must."

And Dick laughed out loud.

"Checkmate!" he said.

"What?"

"We've wasted time," said Dick, "trying to decide which family must leave. The truth is, neither of us can! Because, you see, we cracked up in landing, also. Our ship lies out there four fathoms deep in Delta Sound!" He rose. "So that's that, folks. And I'm afraid, Mr. Wilkes, that under the present circumstances, *your* family will be the one to ultimately depart from Eros."

"Ours? Why?"

"Because of the internationally recognized laws of squatters' rights. You must know the requirements a settler has to fulfill in order to establish claim to land? He must declare his purpose of settling upon leaving the parent planet—"

"We did that," said Red Wilkes, "before we left."

"I know. And four months later he will



be visited by an inspection ship of the S.S.P.—"

"We know that, too."

"—upon the arrival of which," Dick continued, "he must show advancement in the following colonization projects: (a) Establishment of a power plant or unit; (b) construction of a suitable dwelling or dwellings; (c) satisfactory advancement of natural resources, including farms, fisheries or other means of livelihood and sustenance—"

"Get to the point!" growled Wilkes.

"Immediately. And with pleasure. You see, my dear sir, as you have told us, you left Mars even *before* we left Earth. But whereas we have turned our time to good account, constructing the comforts, which you now see about you, your family has squandered precious weeks wandering over the face of Eros seeking a favorable location.

"If I am not mistaken, the Solar Space Patrol's inspection is only six short weeks in the offing. And judging from our experience, you cannot possibly satisfy the requirements of the land-grant code in that short space of time. I remind you that the planting of a garden would, in itself, spell an end to your ambitions."

Sam Wilkes was on his feet, choking with rage.

"That there law is nonsense, Moseley! The land law allows us a full year to establish a settlement—"

"Ah, yes! The land law. But you forget that these are unusual circumstances. Two families with equally valid rights have claimed Eros. Land law is overruled, and the law of squatters' dominion comes into effect.

"So, I'm very sorry for you, Wilkes. But I hope we can be friendly neighbors for the short time you *remain* here with us on Eros."

**W**ILKES was a statue of dismay. The rigidity of him melted enough to let him turn slowly to his son.

"Is—is that right, Red?"

And the younger Wilkes nodded.

"I'm afraid it is, Dad."

Sam Wilkes brought his fist down on the table. The hand-made crockery danced and trembled.

"Then, by Gad! I'll have no more of this

talk or no more phoney hospitality. Bessie, Ginger, Papa—come on! We're getting out of here! We've got work to do!"

Pop said slowly, "I'm sorry, Wilkes. But—"

"Sorry! Bah!"

"And just where," cackled Grampaw, loving it, "might y' be goin'?"

"Not far. Right across the river. You can't claim all of this fertile valley—yet! And you haven't cleared that ground."

He stomped to the door; turned there for one, final warning.

"—and I advise you Moseleys to keep off our land, too! We're goin' to be mighty busy provin' our right to own this planet. I understand there's pests around these parts that are darn disturbin'; I'd hate to make a mistake and shoot any skunks by accident. Come on, Mama!"

Bessie Wilkes looked at Mom. Her worn, tired features sagged piteously. She wet her lips. "Mrs. Moseley—"

Mom said, "Rob, don't you think you're being a little harsh, maybe?"

But there was a streak of granite in Pop, too. And he was angry; white-angry as only a tried Irishman can be. He said in a cold and level voice, "I think, Mother, you should get Mrs. Wilkes' wraps."

And they left. Ginger Wilkes turned to stick out her tongue at Bobby as they got on their gooldaks and rode toward the river. And Junior made a gesture which Bobby returned in kind. But Red Wilkes didn't even look back. So there was no good reason why Moira should have suddenly burst into tears and gone to her own room. . . .

## V

**I**T WAS DICK who brought home the bad news. Two Eros days had passed since the Wilkes took their angry departure from the Moseley home. In those two days, an unhappy atmosphere had settled down over the house at Delta Port. Moira said little or nothing. Mom just moped around the house. The Pooch got indigestion and cried interminably; even Grampaw Moseley was grumpier than usual. Bobby tried to forget the depression by playing quoits. He gave it up as a bad job. It wasn't any fun playing by yourself, and Dick and Pop were



too busy to play with him. If only—

But comets to Junior Wilkes! And Ginger, too!

At dinner time, Dick came into the house slowly, a thoughtful look in his eyes. When they were seated he said, suddenly, "Have any of you seen the Wilkeses lately?"

Grampaw said "I seen Old Man Wilkes. He was pitchforkin' land down by our south forty, oney on the opposite side o' the river. Fat ol' sinner. I chucked a rock at 'im!"

Bobby looked interested.

"You hit him, Grampaw?"

"I don't never miss. In the right leg."

"I bet he hollered."

Grampaw sucked his upper plate fiercely. "Nary a holler, durn him! He jist pulled up his pants-leg and made a face at me. De-crepit ol' fool's got a wooden leg!"

Pop said, "Why did you ask, Richard?"

"I was wondering if any of you had noticed what I did."

"What do you mean?"

Dick started to answer, stopped, rose. "Come," he said. "It's dark. I'll show you."

They followed him out to the porch. From there the Wilkes settlement could not ordinarily be seen. Which is why, as they stood there, one and all gasped astonishment

The thick, black Erosian night lay heavy about them everywhere except in the direction of the Wilkes' new home. There it was light; startlingly, dazzlingly, brilliantly gay and bright! Like a great white dawn on the river's edge.

"Power!" cried Pop. "Atomic power! They must have a hypatomic!"

"They never said they hadn't. They told us their spaceship cracked up; we just took it for granted that since we hadn't been able to salvage our hypatomic, neither could they."

Bobby said wonderingly, "Gee, Pop, it looks like at home, doesn't it? I forgot lights were so bright."

Pop said, "I'm afraid we've underestimated our competitors, son. If they have power, they can accomplish all we have, and more! And in one-tenth the time."

"That's just," said Dick slowly, "what I'm afraid of. There's only one answer to this challenge. I've got to get our hypatomic from the *Cuchulainn*. And quickly."

"But you said—"

"I know what I said. But I also know what they can do. In three days they can have a house . . . a fine, big, plastic house that will make our hand-hewn log cabin look like a cowshed. They'll have electricity, fuel, running water, all the things we've had to do without. When the inspectors see their house and compare it with ours—Mom—get me my bulger. I'm leaving for the north shore."

"Tonight, Richard?"

"Immediately."

Pop said, "And Bobby and I will go with you."

THEY were there before morning. The shore looked much as Bobby remembered it, except that now there was a raft there; the craft which Dick had used to float out to the sunken ship on previous visits. The three of them boarded this, paddled out to the bobbing buoy that marked the *Cuchulainn's* watery resting-place.

Dick donned his bulger, weighted his boots, and went below. The sun rose higher in the east. After a while, green wavelets rolled and Dick was up again.

"It's no use, Pop. It's like I said. The ship has continued to settle; the airlock is jammed tight against the bottom. I can't get in any more."

Pop said, "And I suppose there's no way to attach a drag to the ship, work it loose?"

"It would take more power than we have." Gloomily.

And then Bobby remembered, suddenly. He said, "Hey, Dick—!"

"Never mind, kid. Help me off with this suit."

"But listen, Dick, I read a story once—"

"Do what your brother asks, Robert."

"Will you let me finish, Pop? Listen, Dick, in this story a rocketeer got locked out of his spaceship. So he unfastened the stern-braces and got in through the rocket jet!"

"He . . . did . . . what?"

"Unfastened the stern-braces—"

"I heard you!" Dick's face had suddenly lighted. "Great day in the morning, Pop—I bet it'll work! Hand me that jack-wrench . . . that's the one! So long!"



And he was under water again. This time he stayed under for more than an hour. He bobbed up, finally, while Pop and Bobby were having sandwiches. Pop said, "How's it going, Richard?"

"Give me a fresh capsule," demanded Dick. He took the oxy-tainer, replenished his supply pack, disappeared. A long time passed. Too long a time. Bobby began to feel apprehensive. He didn't say anything, though, because he knew Pop was feeling the same way. And then—

"There he is!" said Pop. And sure enough, Dick was coming up out of the water slowly. Terribly slowly. Bobby saw why. It was because he was weighted by a square box held in his arms. A familiar square box. The hypatomic motor of the *Cuchulainn*!

"Got it!" gasped Dick. "Easy, now . . . it's heavy. I hope it'll work. It's been under water so doggoned long—"

Joyfully, they lugged it all the way back to Delta Port. It was sleep-time when they got there, but they were too excited to sleep. By fire- and candle-light, Dick worked on the salvaged power unit, patching, wiring, repairing. And at dawn he had it hooked up. He raised his head gleefully.

"Get ready, folks! Here's the blow that smashes the hopes of the Wilkes clan. Behold—*light*!"

And he closed a switch. There was a throbbing hum, a glow, a moment of bright, joyous, welcome light. Then an angry growl from deep in the bowels of the atomic box. And a sudden, blinding flash of blue light—

Darkness! And from the darkness, Pop's voice.

"Ruined! It was under water too long, son. Too long!"

"Too long," echoed Dick dolefully.

IT WAS Grampaw Moseley who revived their dejected spirits. When they had rested, he came to them, pounding his cane on the floor, snarling at them with unexpected vigor.

"You young uns gimme a pain! Robert, I'm ashamed o' ye. An' you, too, Dicky-boy! Actin' like we was licked just because a silly-lookin' little old box won't act up right.

"We was gettin' along fine here without no atomic motor, wasn't we? Buildin' a friendly, comfortable community? Well, why can't we go on livin' like we was? We'll solve the heat an' light problem some other way, that's all!"

Pop said, "I know, Father. But in time? After all, when the inspectors come—"

"Inspectors my foot! They's one thing we got that the dad-blamed Wilkeses can't git with all their heat an' free power an' hot-an'-cold runnin' water, ain't they?"

"Wh-what's that?"

"Vittles! One o' the requirements is the settler's got to git him a garden growin', ain't it? Well, we got one. An' the Wilkeses ain't. An', dag-nab it, they ain't goin' to grow wheat an' tomateys an' butter-beans out of a metal box! So stop belly-achin' and git back to work, the two of ye!"

His words were harsh, but the bitter medicine cured the ill. There was truth in what he said. So, putting behind them all dreams of motorized accomplishment, the Moseley family once more returned to the task of making complete and comfortable their home at Delta Port.

Dick tackled once more the problem of running water for their home. This time he solved it with the aid of Grampaw's capable cooperation. A huge tank, set into the eaves, stored the water. A hand-pump drew it from the stream. An old, hollow brass doorknob, pierced with drill-holes, secured to the end of the 'fresher pipe, made an excellent spray for the shower.

Grampaw worked his farm ferociously; Mom and Eleanor and Moira spent hours in the kitchen, jarring and preserving the produce he was now harvesting. Bobby's chores piled up till it seemed he had scarcely any time left for playing. He was enjoying himself, though. It was fun feeling that his efforts were helping toward putting the Wilkeses where they belonged.

Moira seemed to be thriving on this pioneer life, too. She had developed a sudden love for the country; even after a hard day's work she would set out, almost every evening, for a tramp about the countryside. She didn't show very good sense about it, though, for like as not she'd go out all bedoodled up in a dress and high-heeled shoes, and come back flushed and excited and



hardly caring that she was ruining her best clothes.

Once Bobby decided to go walking with her, but she slipped away before he could announce his intention. He lost her down by the river-bank, and since an hour of sun and dusk remained, decided to go swimming. He had been in the water but a few minutes when the brush parted and there was Junior Wilkes.

"Hello," said Junior.

"Hello, yourself," said Bobby.

Junior said, "I'm looking for Red."

"Well, he's not here," Bobby continued paddling. The brush crackled and he thought Stinky had gone. He looked up, suddenly feeling loneliness close in upon him. But the other boy was still there. He was hesitantly fumbling at his shirt-buttons. Bobby said, "You can come in if you want to. I guess this river don't belong to nobody."

THEY swam together for quite a while, neither wanting to break the silence. It would be, thought Bobby vaguely, an act of disloyalty. To Pop and Dick and the family. Of course, if Junior spoke first. . . .

When they were dressing, each on his own side of the river, Junior spoke. He said, "You ever play quoits any more?"

"All the time," said Bobby airily. He hadn't laid a hand on the quoits since that afternoon. "We have a lot of fun," he said.

"Well, so do we," said Junior. He added, "Anyway, I can have your quoits' run after you leave Eros. My Dad said so."

"Don't hold your breath waiting," snorted Bobby. "I guess I'll be living in your big house after you go away."

"It's a nicer house than yours!"

"Did I say it wasn't?" Bobby had seen it. It was a beauty. But why not, with the limitless power of an atomic machine to supply the labor of creating plastic, operate the lifts and perform all the hard manual labor? "You ought to see our garden, though. We've got corn and beans and all sorts of things."

"No kidding?" Junior looked hungry. But he shook his head. "'Synthos suit me *exactly*! I'd rather eat them than any home-grown stuff."

"I bet!" scoffed Bobby. He had finished

dressing. He turned awkwardly. "Well—see you!" he said.

"Tomorrow night," said Junior. And, shucks, that was a date. He couldn't break it, after that, even if he had only been being polite. And it sort of got to be a habit to swim together for a little while every evening. He didn't tell Pop because Pop would be mad. And Junior didn't tell his old man, because he knew he'd get whaled. . . .

And the weeks raced by on eager feet. Until one day, shortly after breakfast, Bobby went out to see how clear the weather was, so he could go fishing; looked heavenward—and came racing back into the house.

"Pop!" he yelled. "Dick! A ship! I think it's the Patrol ship. Coming here!"

They came running. And it was the Patrol ship. It circled high above them like a giant eagle, then, with a flat, flooding thunder of jet-fire, dropped to rest in a field between the properties of the two feuding clans.

## VI

THE COMMANDER of the Patrolship *Sirius* was Lt.-Col. Travers, third ranking officer of the Belt Fleet. He shook Pop's hand heartily.

"Glad to meet you, Dr. Moseley. I've heard so much about you, I feel as if I already know you. My nephew was a student in several of your classes at Midland U. He said you were a very capable instructor . . . and if I may judge from what we noted from above, I might add that you are an extremely capable colonist as well as professor."

Pop wriggled. "Why—why, thank you, Colonel."

"This fine farmland," smiled the space officer, "and that artesian well I see across the river . . . these silos, and your magnificent dwelling. . . ."

Pop hrrumphed, even more embarrassed.

"Colonel," he faltered, "I think I'd better explain immediately that all is not mine. There are two groups of claimants to this planetoid. Ourselves and a family named Wilkes. Martians. Our property is here; theirs is across the river. I—uh—here comes Wilkes now."

Travers' brow furrowed.



"Indeed? Then he was right, after all!"

"He? Who?"

The question was answered by the appearance of a man in drill space-gear who stepped from the *Sirius*. A lean and capable-looking man, hard-bitten of feature, shrewd of eye and tight of lip. Colonel Travers said, "Dr. Moseley, permit me to introduce Mr. Wade, survey scout of the United Ores Corporation."

Wade acknowledged the introduction with a crisp nod. Then, "What's this about there being two claimants to Eros?" He turned to the ship's commander. "This makes a difference, doesn't it, Colonel? My information was correct. Therefore it becomes your duty to make a final, exhaustive study of the settlers' accomplishments right now. And in the event their projects have not been completed in accordance with the provisions of the Squatter's Rights Code, Section 103A, Paragraphs vii to xix, inclusive—"

Eleanor whispered nervously, "What does he mean, Dick? What is he talking about?" and Dick nodded tightly. "I think I know." He stepped forward. "I take it, Mr. Wade, that the U.O.C. has filed a claim on the possession of Eros in the event that our settlement projects should not satisfy the inspector's requirements?"

"Quite right, young man. And I might add—" Wade was openly hostile. "I might add that I have obtained permission to accompany Colonel Travers on his inspection tour. In order to verify his findings. If I am not satisfied—"

"That will do, Mr. Wade!" Colonel Travers was under orders to treat his passenger as a guest; there was no obligation that he like the ore scout. The glint in his eye, the set of his jaw, indicated the direction in which his sympathy lay. "I am quite capable of handling this. Ah—Good day, sir! Mr. Wilkes, I presume?"

"Howdy, Skipper. Yeah, I'm Sam Wilkes." The rival settler glanced around swiftly, sensed the overtones of enmity, glared at Pop suspiciously. "What's wrong here? Has Moseley been squawkin' about—?"

"Dr. Moseley informed us that you and he were both claimants to Eros. Therefore I shall immediately visit your two establish-

ments in order to determine which, if either of you, has the better justified his claim.

"Lieutenant Thrainell, you will serve as my aide."

THUS it began. Pop took the two Patrolmen and the civilian critic to Delta Port, pointed out with pride the many things accomplished within the past months. He met, in Col. Travers, an admiring audience. The commander was outspokenly delighted with what he saw.

"Gad, man! You did all this without power? This is the pioneering feat of the decade! Look, Lieutenant! Running water . . . chinaware . . . that furniture! Marvelous! You deserve a wealth of credit."

"But," pointed out Wade caustically, "you mentioned the biggest fault yourself."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Wade?"

"Without power!" snapped Wade. "Moseley, where are your lights? Where's your power plant? How about heat? And this cooking equipment—it's aboriginal!"

Pop said stiffly, "We have no hypatomic, sir. But you will notice that we have devised satisfactory substitutes for power-driven gear. Hand-pumps draw our water, light is supplied by these oil-float lamps, our house is centrally heated by these open fire-places. We are—" He faltered. "We shall, of course, order a complete hypatomic unit from Earth, install it as soon as possible."

"I'm afraid that's not quick enough," sneered Wade. "Colonel Travers will undoubtedly remember the requirements of the law in that respect. 'Claimant must display, at time of inspection, a power-plant of atomic, motor, or hydraulic drive capable of generating a minimum of 3,000 Legerling units *per diem*, and so arranged as to provide dwellings and other structures with heat, light and power.' You have no such equipment, have you, Dr. Moseley?"

"No, but—"

"You have not, then?"

"No."

"Very well, then." Wade smiled thinly, closed the black book in which he had been jotting notes with a plushy sound of finality. "May I suggest, Colonel, that we see the other claimant's plantation?"

After they had left, Colonel Travers shaking his head regretfully at Pop as if to say



he was sorry but helpless before the arguments of this interloper, Pop sat down and propped his chin on his fists. Yesterday he had looked like a man of thirty; all of a sudden he looked old and weary and discouraged. He said, "Well, there it is, Martha, I've dreamed my dream, and now it's over, and I've failed."

"No you haven't Rob. The Colonel is on our side. He's a good man. He'll—"

"But the law is on Wade's side. If our claim is outlawed, Eros will become a dirty, smoky mining camp. This soft beauty, these green rolling hills, will echo with the clatter of blasters. Unless—"

And suddenly he was again a man of action. He came to his feet suddenly.

"Martha, Eleanor, Dick—everybody! Get those preserves out of the storage closet. Grampaw, get the hauler from the shed. Bobby, you run and tell Sam Wilkes to keep those inspectors out of his house for a half hour or so."

"Why, Pop?" demanded Dick. "What are you going to do?"

"Do? I'm going to see that Sam Wilkes gets this planet, that's what! Oh, I know—there won't be any question of his sharing it with me. He's too hard and stiff-necked a man for that. But he's our kind of man, with all his faults. A pioneer with the daring to come to a new world and try to build it into a home of his own."

"We've known for weeks that all he needed to justify his claim was a food supply. Well, by thunder, we've got a food supply! And we'll give it to him, lock, stock and barrel, to keep Eros out of the Corporation's hands! Now, step, everybody! Moira! Moira—where is that girl?"

"She stayed down by the river, Pop."

"Well, find her. Bobby, go tell Sam Wilkes what I just said!"

Bobby scooted.

HE WAS soaking wet when he got to the Wilkes' house. That was because he took the short-cut, which meant plunging right into the river and swimming across, clothes and all. The inspectors and their snoopy companion would have to take the long route, around the ford.

Mr. Wilkes wasn't in the house when he got there. But Mrs. Wilkes was, and Gin-

ger, and both gasped as they saw him. Mrs. Wilkes bustled forward.

"Sweet stars above, child, what are you doing here? Get those clothes off; you'll catch your death of cold. Ginger—go get one of Junior's suits—"

Bobby said, "There's no time for that, Mrs. Wilkes. Where's Fat Sa—I mean, where's your husband?"

Ginger said, "Don't tell him, Ma. He's just here to crow because he knows we can't pass the inspection requirements—"

"You—you shut up!" bellowed Bobby. "You doggone female! You don't know anything about it. Mrs. Wilkes, get your husband. Mom and Sis and the rest will be here any minute now. They're—"

And he explained. His explanation sent them into a flurry of excitement; there was even deeper excitement when Sam Wilkes, hastily summoned, heard the same story repeated. For once the leathery corners of his mouth relaxed into something like a grin. He swore, and slammed a big hand on his knee.

"Your old man is going to do that for us, sonny? Well, hornswoggle my jets! And to think I—Junior, go find Red. Hop it!"

"Red's not around, Pa. He went toward the river."

"Confound him! Just when we need him most. Well—I'll go meet the confounded rascals, stall them as long as I can. And look here, you—what's your name?"

"Bobby."

"I won't forget this, Bobby! Not by a jugful. If I hadn't been such a stubborn, pigheaded old hound, I'd have dickered with your Pa long afore this. There's plenty of room on Eros for two families. Or two dozen!"

Then followed a half hour of labor so swift that it made all the accomplishments of the past months seem snail-like by comparison. Mom and Eleanor arrived, bearing armloads of canned goods and preserves; Grampaw and Dick brought the hauler across the river on a raft, and piled high on the hauler were fresh vegetables that gorged the never-used Wilkes containers to repletion. It was fast work, but efficient. And when, about three-quarters of an Earth hour later, Wilkes came from the lower acreage accompanied by the two officers and the Cor-



poration investigator, the job was finished, and a tired but glowing two-family group awaited him.

Colonel Travers' inspection of the food-supply was perfunctory. It needed not be otherwise. One glance sufficed to show that there was in the Wilkes household enough food to nourish a dozen families for as many months.

And there was a smile of grim satisfaction on his lips as, turning to his aide, he said, "Very well, Lieutenant. You may make a notation that the Wilkes household has been inspected and found satisfactory in all respects." He looked at Wade purposefully and repeated in a firm tone. "In *all* respects!"

AH, HE WAS no dummy, that Colonel. Bobby had seen the twinkle in his eye as he glanced into the preserve closet. Because, shucks! there wasn't any mistaking Mom's way of doing up preserves. With little red bands around each jar, and her firm, crabbed handwriting telling what was inside.

"In all respects!" he said again. And reached for Sam Wilkes' pudgy paw. "Congratulations, Sir! You've earned possession of the planetoid Eros. Your power-plant is among the finest it has ever been my pleasure to view; you have undeniably cleared and planted the required number of acres, your food supply is well above the minimum requirements—"

"But see here!" Wade's face was an ugly red. "I'm not satisfied, Colonel. There's something fishy about this. The farmlands we inspected were barely out of the seed stage. The corn was only knee high, the vegetables mere sprouts. These people couldn't have raised all this produce—"

Sam Wilkes spluttered helplessly, "Why I—I—"

And Pop came to his rescue. Smoothly. Suavely.

"But he did, Mr. Wade. On the farmlands across the river. Those are the early crops; the ones you've just seen are the late harvest."

"But—but you claimed those were *your* crops!"

"Did I?" Pop stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Well, maybe I was bragging a little.

You see, I've been working for Mr. Wilkes. A sort of share-cropper, you might say."

"Now I get it!" howled the angry scout. "I thought so. It's skullduggery, that's what it is! Don't you see, Colonel? These men are conspiring to defraud us. To cheat the Corporation. Moseley has deliberately given his crops and food-supply to Wilkes—"

There was again a twinkle in the Colonel's eye. He said, soberly, "And suppose you're right, Wade? What then? There's no law against a man giving away his possessions to another man, is there?"

"As an inspector for the Solar Space Patrol, my only interest is in seeing that a settler's domain fulfills the requirements of the Squatter's Rights Code. Mr. Wilkes has fulfilled those requirements. I am not interested in the how or why. Therefore under the power invested in me by the Triune Planetary Government, I hereby decide and award—"

And then a crafty brilliance illumined Wade's eyes.

"Stop!" he cried.

Colonel Travers hesitated. "Pardon, Mr. Wade?"

"Since you are such a stickler for duty, Colonel, I wish to call to your attention a further stipulation of the Squatter's Rights Code. One you have evidently forgotten. The Code says, Section 115B, Paragraph iii, 'Such requirements having been fulfilled, it shall be lawful to award the settled property to any family group comprised of at least six adults who pledge intention to make the property their permanent home—'"

Sam Wilkes said, "Well, what's the matter. Don't we intend to make Eros our permanent home?"

"I have no doubt of it, Mr. Wilkes. But I regret to inform you that you will not be able to do so, since you do not fulfill this last-mentioned paragraph."

"There's six of us!" defended Wilkes stoutly.

"But the law," insisted Wade, "requires six *adults*! May I ask, Mr. Wilkes, how many of your family are more than twenty-one years of age?"

DICK whistled softly. Pop's jaw dropped. Wilkes' face turned crimson. And Bobby computed hastily. This was the final,



devastating blow. The Wilkes household contained only four adults; Old Man Wilkes, Sam and his wife, and Red. Junior and Ginger were just kids.

With sudden regret, Bobby realized that they should have arranged their conspiracy in reverse. There were six adults in the Moseley clan, Moira having just celebrated her twenty-first birthday. But it was too late for that now. As friendly as Colonel Travers was, he could not openly countenance a flagrant, deliberate transference of all property to the Moseleys.

So their last, desperate ruse had failed. And now none of them would win ownership of Eros. All their lovely hopes and dreams had been in vain; their new-found friendship with the Wilkes a dying gesture. . . .

Wade could not restrain himself from elaborating on the situation.

"So, my friends," he chuckled, "your deceit wins its proper reward. Under the circumstances, I shall not do what I had earlier planned on doing. I was going to give each of you, with the Corporation's compliments, a fitting reward for having so diligently opened up this new colony. Now I see no reason for so doing.

"In the future, it might be well to remember the law provides many loopholes to the ingenious man. That is a hard lesson, but a fair one. Were you but six adults—"

And then there was a sudden stir at the doorway. A deep, rumbling, familiar voice. That of Red Wilkes.

"You crow mighty loud for a bantam rooster, Mister!" he said. "But you're crowing at a false dawn. Because it so happens that we are six adults. As a matter of fact, we're more than six adults. There are *ten* of us!"

Wade spun, shocked. The others looked, too, and in all eyes there was surprise. All, that is, but Ginger. She was hugging her knees, rocking back and forth comfortably, looking very much pleased with herself and with the world in general. She said, "I knew it. I knew it all the time."

"Knew what?" said Bobby, but his question was lost in Wade's irate demand.

"Ten of you? What are you talking about? Who is this young whippersnapper?"

"That," said Sam Wilkes conversation-

ally, "is my son. And I'd be careful if I was you, Mister. The last guy who called him names is still pickin' up teeth. Son, I reckon you know what the hell you're talkin' about. But the rest of us don't. So if you'd please explain it would be greatly appreciated all around."

RED WILKES grinned. He said, "Moira, honey." And Moira entered from the porch. There was a smile on her face and somehow there was a smile in her eyes, too, and Bobby got the strange feeling that if you could see inside her, there'd be a smile in her heart. She looked at Mom, and Mom gave a little gasp, like she could tell just by looking at Moira what Moira meant. Red Wilkes continued to grin. He said, "Colonel, commanders of space vessels have the privilege of marrying folks, haven't they?"

"Why—why, yes," said Travers.

"Then," said Red mildly, "how'd you like to get out the little black book and start tying knots? Because, you see, Moira has told me she's willing to take a chance."

Pop said, "Moira, darling, you're not just doing this because . . . because . . ."

"No, Pop. I'm doing it because I want to. Because I love Red and he loves me. It's been that way since the day we met. We—we've been meeting secretly for the past six weeks. We meant to break the news sooner or later. And now seems to be about the best time."

"Particularly," pointed out the groom-to-be, "since our marriage turns two families into *one* family. And I think that will spike your guns, Mr. Wade?"

Wade was no longer crimson. He was purple. "You can't do this, Colonel!" he screamed. "It's illegal. Anyway, they won't be truly related. The two families will just be in-laws—"

But there was an open, admiring grin on the lips of Lieutenant-Colonel Travers, S.S.P. He said, "Maybe I *can't* do it, Mr. Wade—but by the Pleiades, I'm going to! And as for the law—according to all decisions I've ever read, in-laws are valid relatives. You're the one who was yelping about the law providing many loopholes for ingenious men. Well, here's a big, juicy loophole. How do you like it?"



Wade, howled, "I protest! It's unfair! I refuse to allow—"

Red Wilkes looked at his father hopelessly. "Shall I, Pop?" he asked.

And Sam Wilkes shook his head. "No, son. It ain't fittin'. Not on your wedding day."

Which gave Dick an idea. He rose, grimly.

"It's not *my* wedding day!" he said. "Wade—"

But somehow Mr. Wade had vanished. Toward the ship.

AFTERWARD, Colonel Travers lingered to shake hands all around.

"I commend you both," he said, "for the fine spirit you have shown; the fine work you've done in making Eros a member of the Solar family. You prove what I have always claimed—that the pioneer spirit in Man is not dead, nor will it ever die so long as there remain new frontiers to conquer."

"Well, I must go now. But I'll stop back by here on my next swing around the Belt. Perhaps a year from now, perhaps a little less. I'll bring the things you ask for. A new motor, some cloth, silverware—I have your list."

"Don't forget the books," said Pop.

"I won't." The Captain made a note.

"And the seeds." That was Old Man Wilkes.

"No. I'll bring them."

"And bring," said Moira, "a teething ring."

Eleanor said, "Oh, nonsense, Moira! In another year The Pooch will be too old for teething rings."

"Bring," said Moira doggedly, "a teething ring." And blushed.

Bobby blushed, too. It was, he thought, indecent of Moira to be so brazen. And her only married! Golly, did she have to look so far ahead? And, anyway, with Ginger standing right there . . .

He said, "Hey, Stinky, how about a game of quoits?"

"Suits," said Junior.

And Ginger said, "Me, too." She put her hand in Bobby's. She said, with alarming frankness, "I like you! Maybe I'll let you be my beau."

Bobby shook loose. He said, "Aw, you darn girls—"

But she had her way. She played quoits with him and Junior. And she won. Which may have been symbolic, though it didn't occur to Bobby that way. Maybe she would always have her way. And maybe she would always win—whatever she wanted.

Yet for a while there would be peace on Eros . . .

## CHICKEN FARM!

Out in the "perp" belt Harvey aimed  
to raise giant Plymouth Rocks . . .

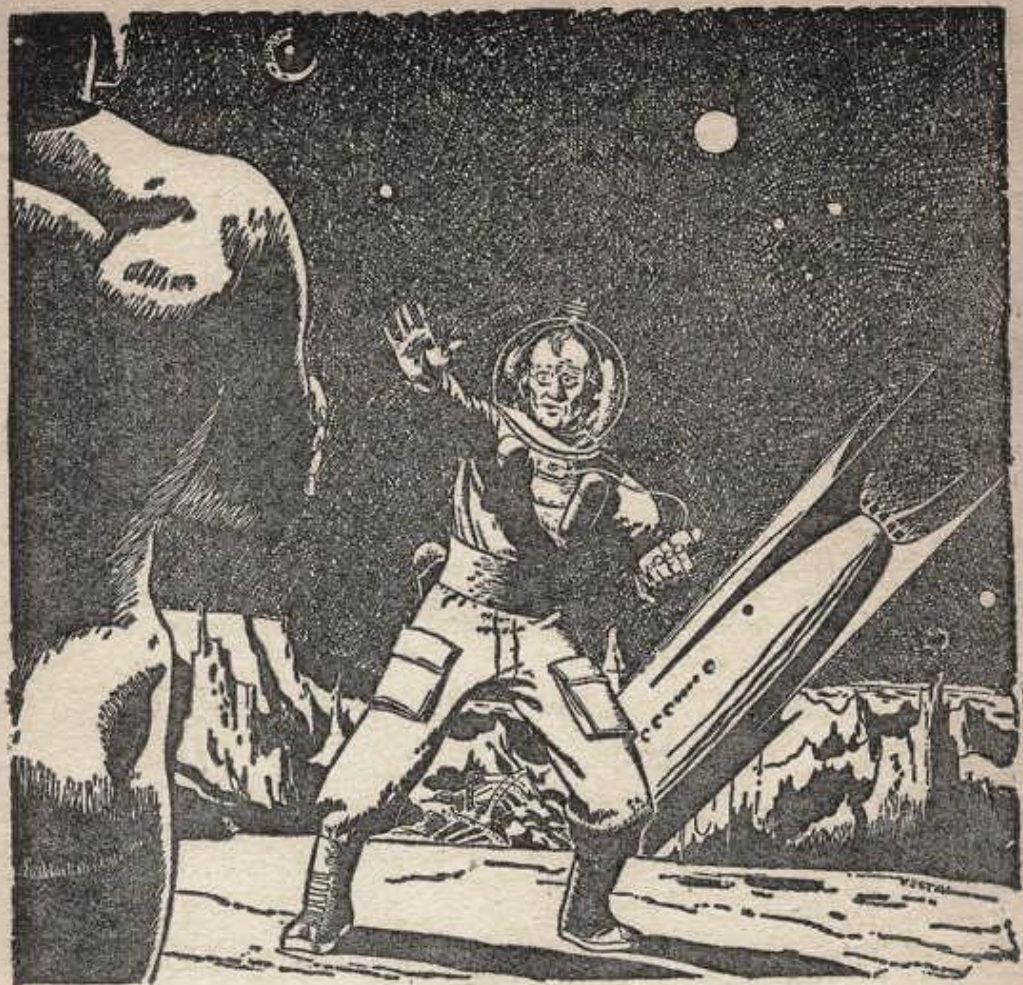
Don't miss this fabulous story by  
ROSS ROCKLYNNE

*in the March issue of*

## PLANET STORIES

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# The First Man on the Moon

By ALFRED COPPEL

John Thurmon swore he'd be the first man on the moon.  
But he wasn't. He was only the first murderer.

THE ship lay at a crazy angle on the stark whiteness of the pumice plain. The rocket nozzles were a fused lump of slag; the fire-darkened hull crumpled and warped by the impact of landing. And there was silence . . . complete and utter

silence. There could be return. Thurmon realized this. At first the thought had brought panic, but, as the scope of his achievement dawned on him, the fear retreated.

Bruised, giddy, half-crazed . . . the

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certainty of death held no terrors. Not yet. And it was worth it! Fame . . . *immortality!*

Across the abyss, the whole world waited for word. The transmitter in the rocket had survived the crash. The word would come, thought Thurmon . . . when he was ready to send it. And sending it, he would place the official seal of immortality on his brow. The book would close. But wonderfully, satisfyingly. There would be no other to steal his rightful glory. Only Wayne could have done that . . . and Wayne was dead. He laughed weirdly within his helmet. So simply done!

With an effort he dragged his eyes from the sky. Slowly, his reason was returning. There was work to do. Wayne must be hidden. The next to come must never know. And it should be done quickly. Time would fly and in the last hours the fear would return. He knew that. Right now his triumph sustained him.

There was the broadcast to look forward to. A billion people waited for his words.

The plan was working . . . almost of its own inertia. He was alone. He was on the Moon, where no man had ever been before him. Not even Wayne. Wayne, who designed the rocket and guided it. Wayne, who had stolen every chance Thurmon had ever had for recognition! Well, Wayne was dead now. He had never put a living foot on the soil of the Moon. Only Thurmon had done that. And it was his passport to eternal glory! No one, *no one* could take that away from him! Weighed in the loaded balance of his mind, it more than compensated for dying alone and on an alien world. In fact, even the dying would add to the legends, and Thurmon would live forever.

He ran his tongue over dry lips and stooped to pick up the thing at his feet. Wayne's corpse was still bloated from internal pressures, and the naked flesh was drying fast to a parchment-like consistency. Moisture was still seeping in awful little globules from the shattered skull where Thurmon's unseen blow had landed.

Thurmon found himself shuddering. The murder had been the hardest part . . . but now it was done . . . and all that remained was to give his dead companion a secret resting-place somewhere in the vast expanse of pumice that lay out there under the

blistering sun.

Thurmon's unsteady mind swerved from high elation to sadness. Poor Wayne! He felt he could afford to be generous now. So many years of work so soon to be forgotten. Just one quick blow, and poor, poor Wayne slipped into the limbo of the Earth's forgotten . . .

Under the light gravity, he carried the naked, grisly bundle easily. And, as he walked out into the Mare Tranquillitatis, his spirits rose again. How wonderful it was to be certain that no one could steal his triumph! Not even Wayne. Particularly not Wayne. He looked down at the thing in his arms and chuckled. The sound was uncanny within the pyrex bubble of his helmet.

After what seemed a long time, Thurmon stopped and set down his burden. With his pack-spade he set to work digging a trench in the pumice. As he dug, he found himself crooning happily to the corpse. His voice was high-pitched and hysterical, but of course he did not notice it.

"There, there . . . Wayne, old friend . . . see? I am making a grave for you. The very first grave, Wayne . . . and you shall have it, old friend! Yours the grave and mine the glory!" He laughed hilariously at the thought. "I'll say you didn't make it alive. You didn't, did you? But I made it, Wayne. *Me!* Alone . . . all alone! With no help from you, do you hear?"

Thurmon chattered on, the sound of his crazed voice dying within the confines of his helmet, while all around him the eternal silence of the Sea of Serenity continued unbroken. The stars shone steadily in the airless sky, and the sun flamed in impotent splendor, furiously silent.

At last the pit was done, and Thurmon lowered the nude corpse into the shadows. "Goodbye, Wayne. You see, you shouldn't have come here with me. You shouldn't have tried to steal my success. That was a wrong thing. But you're sorry now, aren't you, old friend? Don't feel too badly, Wayne, I'll join you soon. Goodbye, Wayne. Goodbye . . ." Laboriously, he shoveled pumice into the pit and tamped it down with his leaded boots. Then he smoothed the surface of the dig until it was as smooth



as the rest of the surrounding plain. Satisfied, he turned his back on the grave and started for the rocket.

He sang on the way back, so happy was he to have done with his ghastly companion. Recklessly prodigal of his oxygen supply, he ran toward the open valve of the ship. Breath coming hard, he stumbled into the rocket and across the buckled deck-plates to the radarphone. The tiny atomic batteries hummed as he removed the cadmium dampers. Power flickered the needles of the main set. Thurmon adjusted the selector to "relay" and tuned in his suit radio. Then he returned to sit in the open valve and call the monitoring station.

He smiled with satisfaction as the response cut through the blanket of hissing solar static.

"Hello! Hello, ES-1! This is White Sands! My Lord, we'd given you up for lost! Where are you?"

Thurmon took a steadier grip on his dancing mind and replied:

"Listen carefully. Carefully, you understand? This is John Thurmon. I am on the westernmost edge of the Sea of Serenity on the Moon. Wayne is dead . . . he didn't make it. Died during acceleration and I had to dispose of his body in space. Did you get that? I am alone here. The ship crashed on landing. I can't get back . . . but it's worth it! I haven't much time left . . . but I want everyone to know that I made it. It will be easier now for others . . . after I've pointed the way. I'm the *first* and it's worth it! Did you get that?"

There was a long silence. Finally, the radarman spoke respectfully. "Yes, Thurmon, we got that. Your transmission is being shunted onto the commercial bands. Can you tell us what you see up there? And . . . and Thurmon, we all want you to know that our prayers are with you." Tears were flowing on Earth now, Thurmon knew. Tears for a martyr to science doomed to death alone on an alien world. He smiled thinly. Even this tiny taste of deference and respect was heady wine to his frustrated psyche.

Thurmon stepped through the valve and lowered himself to the plain. His heart was pounding triumphantly. Carefully,

painstakingly, he began to describe his surroundings, interspersing his words with scientific data. He played the hero well. There was no hysteria recognizable in his voice . . . and, if it trembled slightly, there was reason enough for that.

He rounded the bulge of the rocket's nose and looked for the first time at the western edge of the Mare. In the near distance an irregularly-shaped outcropping of rock caught his eye. Transmitting as he went, he made his way toward it . . . He drew nearer. And as he did, fear began to stir within him. His steps faltered, but some awful power drew him on. His voice became a shrill rasp in his ears, and on Earth a billion people gasped with horror . . .

"Wayne!"

Thurmon shouted the name in fear and threw his arm over his face. But the *thing* remained. It was *real*!

"Wayne . . . no! IT CAN'T BE! NO . . ."

But the figure did not move. The vast colossus loomed stark white and naked in the brilliant sunlight. Legs apart, arms folded on its breast, it stared with brooding eyes at the vast emptiness of the lunar plain.

Thurmon howled with terror and fury.

"Damn you! Damn you! Why don't you answer me? I killed you once . . . I'll kill you again! I'm the first one here! Do you hear me? I'll kill you again!"

He lowered his head and charged. The last thing he remembered was the soundless tinkle of his shattering helmet, and the terrible pain as his skull cracked under the suddenly shifting pressures . . .

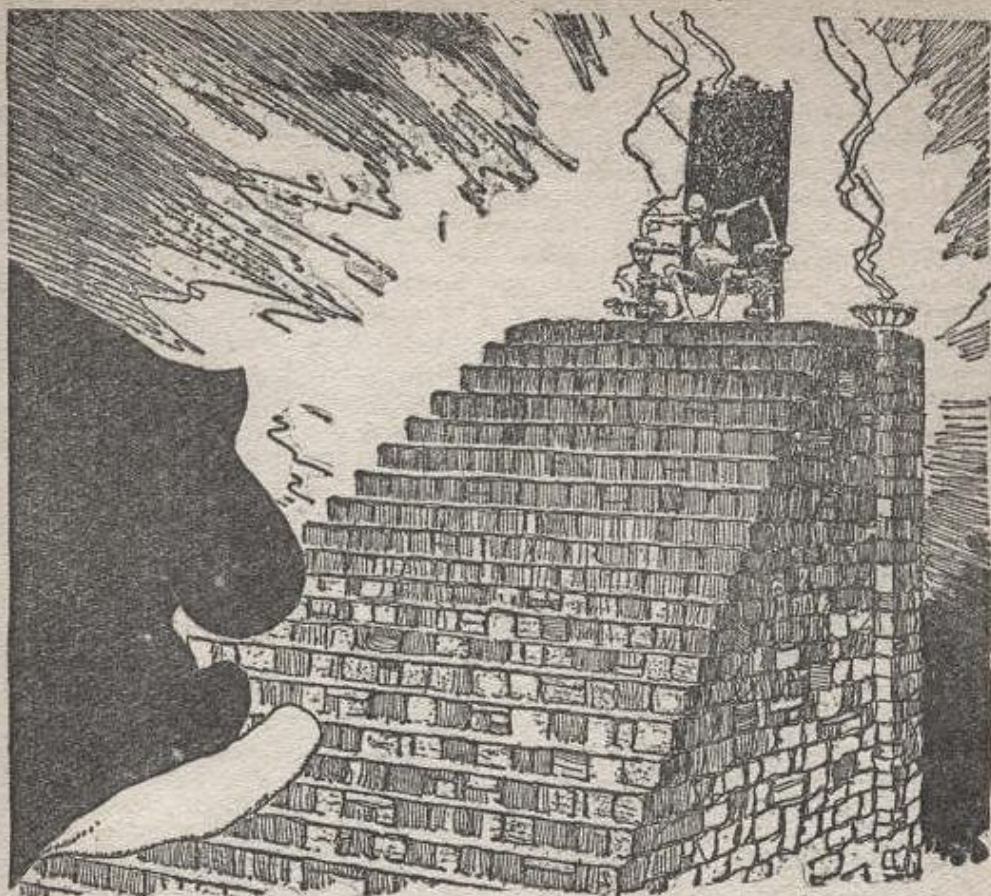
*" . . . And strangely enough, the story of the race's first conquest of space is the story of one man, Sargon, the Lemurian Immortal, who led his people to the Moon in the misty past of Earth's youth. The Lemurians are gone now, but on the westernmost edge of the Sea of Serenity there stands a statue of Sargon. It stands in magnificent isolation, a monument to the first man on the Moon."*

*Essays on Tellurian History,  
Quintus Bland, Geneva Keep  
Press, 12.50 Cr.*









# TASK TO LAHRI

By ROSS ROCKLYNNE

The Lahri were a dying race. Inside their gravityless world, their life-giving sun was waning. And it was the Earthling's grim job to speed their final doom.

THE minute I came into the office, I knew that something was up. My superior, chief of the Tellurian Research Institute, was sitting at his broad desk, staring out the window into the night sky with a sad, faraway look in his eyes. My stomach turned over, and I must have gone a shade pale. Telepathy—clairvoyance—call it what you will, I knew that I was in for an unpleasant job, a job that would

once more carry me across space to a fat planet.

I got a grip on myself, fumbled for my cigarette pack, and cleared my throat.

My superior started. Heavily, he waved me to a seat. I got my cigarette going.

He arose and slowly began to pace up and down behind his desk. Finally, as if by an effort, he raised his fine eyes, and began to talk.



"Sid," he said slowly, "as you know, the human race is spreading over all the System. We're growing. We're proving our greatness, our ultimate destiny. Of all the races in the System, we are the only ones who have ever made an attempt to reclaim and develop the outer planets. That's our heritage, it seems, and we've shed blood and fought, and we'll shed blood and fight again.

"But now our colonization of the outer planets is being threatened!"

I drew smoke into my lungs, bitterly.

As my superior knew, I had before this been in the midst of activities in which the human race had had to show its might in order to win a point.

"Go on," I said, thinly veiling my sarcasm. "There's a planet out there in space. And there's a God-forsaken little race of people who are going to be stepped on, and I'm the stepper-onner."

"On the contrary," he said quietly. "They've been stepping on us, and quite seriously. The Lahri, Sid, who live in the interior of a hollow world, the tenth planet.

"Briefly, Sid, this is the situation. As you know, Vitamin Y is essential to life. Earth peoples have it in plenty, because it comes in the rays of the Sun. But the outer planets must ship from Mercury a plant peculiar to that planet which is composed almost entirely of the vitamin. The outer planets are too far from the Sun to receive it naturally. So our colonization of the outer planets is dependent on Vitamin Y.

"Well, for the past ten years, the Lahri have been engaged in piracy, stealing fully fifty per cent of the vitamin from ships bound out from Mercury. We found it out only in the last year. The Lahri, of whom only a thousand remain, apparently need more of the vitamin than humans. Formerly, they had all they wanted from the rays of their own Sun, which hangs at the center of their hollow planet. But during the last century, their sun has been dying."

"So they had to steal the vitamin from us in order to keep themselves alive," I said slowly. "Which means that the human race is being held back."

"Exactly, Sid. Well, it's up to you and Corey Starr, a research man in the employ

of the Mercurian Garden Corporation, to stop it. Starr will be your superior."

"My superior?" I sat upright and said angrily, "Now look here, chief, if I have to take on a job like this, I'd rather do it without taking orders from somebody else."

He raised a weary hand. "None of that, Sid. I've been given my orders, and have to pass them on to you. I've managed to get your friend, Will Carrist, as pilot for the ship. You three, briefly, will go to the tenth planet, go to the Bureau of Transmitted Egos and get yourselves some Lahri bodies, so that you can stand the difference in atmosphere pressure and temperature. The Lahri won't like it, naturally, but by law they'll be forced to give in."

My superior drew a deep breath. "Then you'll go before the ruling heads and tell them the Council of Ten has an offer to make to them. Briefly, the Lahri will cease this piracy; they will reveal the identity of the person or persons responsible, so that the Interplanetary Police Force can make an arrest; and finally, the Lahri will move to a certain planetoid which moves close to the Sun, where they will receive all they need of Vitamin Y naturally."

"I see," I said grimly. I arose and ground my cigarette under my heel. I felt the sinking sensation of defeat. "Where," I asked, "does Corey Starr fit in?"

"All I know, Sid, is what I've told. Report to Starr at New York field at two o'clock Tri-Planet Time, tonight. The take-off will probably be immediate. Good luck!"

He sounded as if he thought I'd need it. I turned and left the room.

WELL, it was a relief to see Will Carrist again after a year. We pounded each other on the back and discussed old times. Will was not long on brains, but he had an A-1 pilot's license, and he was probably my best and closest friend.

"But Sid," he cried mournfully, "I don't understand what this is all about. Starr wouldn't tell me anything. He sent me over here to the ship and told me to acquaint myself with the controls. As if I don't know the inside of every type ship that was ever made!"

I said bitterly, "He knows something he isn't telling, the hypocritical, lily-faced—"



The door to the control room swung open all the way, and Corey Starr came in, his lips smiling like Mephistopheles above his close-clipped Van Dyke.

He grinned broadly. "Well, well, Hallmeyer! Glad to know your opinion of me. But then, I shouldn't have been eavesdropping, so the fault's as much mine as it is yours, eh?"

He clapped me heartily on the shoulder, and without a glance at Will, urged his compact, handsome body past to the chart table. I turned red in the face.

Starr leaned over the charts, flicking through them with the frequently wetted tip of his thumb, meanwhile muttering abstractedly, "Declination, 80, arc subtended by vectors at two points—aha!" Without lifting his head, he waved an imperative, beckoning hand. "You, pilot—your name's Carrist, I believe? Come here; this is the course we'll use."

Will's eyes smoldered. "I've already got a course picked out!"

"So?" Corey Starr looked up and his blue eyes were soft with merriment. "So? Well, my good man, scrap that course of yours, and remember you're taking orders from me. Come here."

Will went, baffled anger showing in his wide-set eyes, his abnormally broad shoulders set with rebellion. But thirty minutes later, the ship blasted away from New York Field, and we were following Corey Starr's course.

In the long month that followed, as space closed in about us in our roaring flight across the emptiness, Will and I worked up a growing dislike of Corey Starr. He was close-mouthed in an open-mouthed way.

"We're going to be busy the whole of this trip, Hallmeyer," he exclaimed, getting me up the first day out after a mere six hours sleep. "Got a few gadgets we'll have to unpack and put together. Come along."

Frowning, I helped him unpack crates in which delicate little lenses and helices and other machinery were packed. We carried them into the large starboard airlock, arranging them in a certain order. Then, acting entirely in the dark, following his orders, I started helping him. It was a

long, tedious, disagreeable job. He hummed while he worked, and the first week I didn't bother to ask him any questions. Finally, I couldn't hold my curiosity in.

"Ta, ta, ta," he grinned merrily, waggling his finger at me. "This is my business, Hallmeyer. Putting it together is yours. Come along, man; by the time we get to the tenth planet, this has to be done."

"Why?" I charged, angrily throwing down a hair-breath screwdriver. "We're going there for only one reason, aren't we? To talk this situation over with the Lahri; to bring back the persons responsible for the piracy. Why do we need this nasty looking mess?"

He picked up the screwdriver, handing it back butt foremost. Deep in his eyes I saw a trace of anger, but you would never have known it from the way he spoke. He laughed softly. "Talk it over with the Lahri? Naturally, Hallmeyer, naturally. But suppose you let me do the thinking on this trip. This machine—well, I think you'll understand better when we get inside the tenth planet. Let's get to work on this, man. This lens goes into the Type G induction box, and the whole thing gets fitted onto the barrel. A pretty conglomeration, isn't it?" He indicated the scattered parts as I wearily gave up, a proud light in his eyes. "Worked it out by myself, Hallmeyer—me and a dozen other men under me. Took a whole year to do it, and if I do say it myself, it took some straight thinking of a Grade A kind. This'll mean some kind of promotion for me."

"I've heard of that Corporation," I growled, helplessly slipping the casing off the induction box.

He looked at me in a surprised sort of way, then shrugged broad shoulders, grinned affably, and went back to his work as if I were a person to be humored.

I WAS in the control room with Will Carrist, when, ten billions of miles out from the Sun, we picked up the tenth planet. It was a thrill to see that gray dot swimming toward us out of the curtain of light which the stars made on the sky. Neither Carrist nor I had ever been this far from the Sun. There was something indescribably lonely about it. We both felt as



if the Earth and the Sun no longer existed, for both had long since merged into obscurity. Yet, ahead of us was mystery, the mystery of an old race, fighting an old battle, living under the shadow of a dying central sun.

"I'm with the Lahri, myself," Will muttered vengefully. "I haven't heard anything about them except they've been doing a lot of pirating—not only of Vitamin Y plants, but of other foods and clothing ships. Starr's against them, isn't he, Sid? He doesn't give a damn about them. Well, I hate Starr's guts, and for the same reason I'm willing to give the Lahri the benefit of the doubt." He added plaintively, his eyes fixed ahead through the view plate on the growing planet, "What's that machine for, Sid? Why doesn't Starr tell us?"

"I think," I told him somberly, "we'll soon find out."

The planet rushed at us, grew swiftly to a spheroid some four thousand miles in diameter. Using the photo-amplifiers, I made out a rocky, inhospitable terrain whose lowest points were covered with hundreds of feet of air-snow. That planet looked so solid that it was hard to believe it was almost perfectly hollow on the inside.

Corey Starr burst through the door, humming a little to himself while he made marks on a little pocket map. He threw himself down before the control board. Will distastefully edged away. Starr jammed his pencil point down on a spot on the map. "There! Carrist, you'll find a big hole in the crust of the planet. Think you can maneuver her through?"

Will lost his temper. "Say," he cried angrily, "I wouldn't have my master pilot's papers if I couldn't edge this ship or any ship through a hole that gave me only two inches to spare, would I? I'll show you!"

Starr smiled an impudent smile, and bluffly patted Will on the back. "Go ahead, then," he urged. "Why, I never doubted you for a minute!"

Vengefully, Will zipped the ship once around the planet. We swept once past the gaping, dark cavity in the crust, a cavity that was rimmed with volcanic cliffs. But the next time we came around Will turned the tail of the ship straight up into the sky, brought the nose perpendicular to the

planet, roared straight down toward the cavity.

I looked sidewise at Starr, and repressed a smile. He had gone marble-white, his eyes snapping wide. He grabbed onto the console board, staring down unbelievably at the looming hole that rose upward, grew larger as if it were a dark mouth opening to swallow us.

And then, suddenly, the rocket blasts of our ship came roaring back to us as they echoed from the sides of the tunnel. There was a burst of light as Carrist turned on a half dozen search beams. And ahead of us was a solid, basalt wall!

"Carrist!" I suddenly whispered aghast.

But his fingers were playing madly over his console board. The ship swerved—and swerved again. Then, for a racking five minutes, I experienced the most heart-stopping moments I have ever known. The tunnel which led from the outer world to the inner was a twisting, twining, narrow lane, never suited for navigation under such perilous speed. But suddenly it was over, and we burst forth, into the inner world, knowing that only by the suddenly stopping echo of our blasts. Carrist turned off his search beams, grinning happily to himself. He cast a scornful, mocking glance at Starr, whose face was bright with sweat.

But Starr was willing to concede. "You sure do rate your master's license," he breathed. He slowly wiped the sweat off his forehead, then began to rotate the view plates until he picked up the central Sun.

When he finally got it centered, we all looked at it breathlessly. A sense of some unnameable doom, a heartbreak, descended on me along with those weak, futile rays. Our ship was hurtling straight up toward that Sun, the rocket blasts now off. We saw it as a dim, palling disk of gray, hanging suspended in a dead, cloudless sky. Outside we heard the low moan of a cold, mournful wind, a moan that sounded as if it might have been the combined voice of the Lahri themselves. It was somewhat brutal when Starr's voice interrupted.

"Useless hunk of atomic machinery, that Sun," he said tensely. "Only it's not machinery. It's made out of real, atom-exploding Sun-stuff. Made millions of years ago, by the ancestors of the Lahri, before



the human race was ever born. I'd give my right arm to know how they did it. But it's practically dead now—it'll be an easy job, I guess, to put it out the rest of the way."

That sentence exploded like a bomb in my brain. I whirled toward Starr, along with Will Carrist.

"What's that?" I hissed.

STARR leisurely drew his eyes away from the Sun. He faced us. And, a peculiar change seemed to have come over his face. It was cold, angular, cruel. All trace of humor, even of a hypocritical sort, were gone.

He said, transfixing us with merciless eyes, "So now it's come. I knew I'd have to explain. First, I want to caution you against living in a dream world—the world you two apparently like to dally with. You've heard the story of the Lahri, and still you want to dicker with them. Well—"

The whole ghastly thing was coming to me, though it was hard to credit.

"Wait a minute," I snapped. "We came out here to talk with the Lahri. Those are the orders my superior gave me."

"The orders your superior gave you!" He laughed gratingly. He drew out a cigarette, inserted it between sharp white teeth. "Your superior, Hallmeyer, is a dupe who never was given the whole story. I was given orders which countermand his, and I'm your superior."

He got his cigarette going, blew particles of tobacco from between his lips. He jabbed a finger at us. "Look here, you two, wake up! There's no solution to this problem, except one. I have it. What are the Lahri? They are the remnants of an ancient race, a race that has been dying off as their sun cooled.

"They need Vitamin Y in quantities which exceed the supply. They need it so badly they have been pirating food ships for it, and have made it impossible for humanity to settle the outer planets. How, Hallmeyer, will you settle that problem by talking?"

I controlled a growing rage. "By offering them a planet close to the Sun to live on."

He sneered, "And have them become charity patients of the Solar System! Don't be an utter fool. No, there's only one solu-

tion. What do you think that machine we've been putting together is, a toy? Surely, you're enough of a scientist to deduce something of what it's about."

I said through my teeth, "Naturally. It projects a powerful vibration with 'jumps' electrons away from the proton to a higher level."

He exhaled smoke. He said smoothly, "There you have it. And think what will happen to that dying central Sun if that ray is projected on it! Atomic disruptions on the interior of a Sun are caused by pressure. Electrons are crowded so close to protons that radiant heat and light are given off. Suddenly, my ray touches these atoms—the electrons immediately jump away from the protons—the Sun goes out! For good." A proud, satisfied look leaped in his eyes. "It's a clever principle. One which I worked out myself."

"Very clever," I whispered, and he did not see my clenching fists. "What are your orders now?"

"To allow the ship to continue on its course. We'll pass close enough to the Sun to spray it with the ray."

Will looked at me. I looked at him. A soundless signal passed between us. We leaped.

Even with two men grappling with him, Starr put up a fight that filled the little cabin with the sound of blows, the grunts and curses of all three of us. Will went smashing back against the bulkhead, a trickle of blood running down his surprised face. Starr's other fist came toward me, his face behind it alight with furious savagery. I let him have it, swinging up from the hip, putting the whole of my not inconsiderable body into the blow. Corey Starr smashed backward, and even before he tumbled to the floor his face went slack with the slackness of complete and lasting unconsciousness.

Panting, I turned to Will. "All right," I snarled. "We did for him. Turn this ship and put it down outside the city of the Lahri!"

I was fuming, boiling over. I stood there cursing steadily and furiously. Every time I looked at Corey Starr, I felt another burst of the over-powering rage. Deliberately to contemplate murdering a whole race of people;



to be proud of inventing the weapon which would accomplish that wholesale slaughter in one fell blow—it was too much for me. I ran back to the lavatory and I was sick.

I was starting up the companionway again, when I felt the ship come to a rest. I came up behind Will.

"The city's over there," he said, shivering.

I understood a little why he shivered. Looking through the view-plate, at first I could see nothing except a grayness which was all the more gray because of the faint light. Then some of the mist must have cleared away, and I saw those gray edifices rearing somberly upward like tombstones. There were hundreds of them, all massed together, of different shapes and sizes—and what heightened the tombstones effect was the fact that those buildings leaned at all possible angles to the cold, cracked surface. Like wraiths, little clouds of mist curled slowly around and through that city, sometimes slowly approaching arched, open doorways, seeming to hesitate, then darting in for all the world like living creatures.

THE CITY was huge. It must have stretched for an appalling number of miles. But I knew in my heart that most of it was empty, that here and there, in scattered places, the remnants of the people lived. My fascination for the weird, hopeless looking place made me look for unending minutes. I felt the same pall of dread, heard the slow footsteps of death dragging himself along his age-old trail—the same emotion that must have gutted the minds of the Lahri. An ineffable, clinging sadness took hold of me, and finally I turned to Carrist, gesturing toward the lazarette.

Obediently, but curiously, he broke out two space-suits. We got into them; I worked the airlock valves, and leaving Corey Starr where he was, breathing stentoriously in a lifelessness that would last for more than an hour, Carrist and I stepped from the airlock.

Stepped? Hardly! We went straight out from the ship, on a slow line that was parallel to the gouged ground. We floated along for a full minute, stupidly watching that tombstone city coming nearer to us, before Carrist and I woke up to what was happening.

Carrist gave vent to a half-scream. "Sid! We're not falling! We should be down there!" He pointed wildly down to the ground some half-dozen feet below us. His face was contorted with a supernatural fear.

Of course, I knew what it was right away. Carrist, excellent mathematician that he is, is still short on brains and imagination. I explained to him, meanwhile inadvertently moving my arms in such a fashion that I was now floating along head nearest the ground.

There wasn't any gravity! I had known that before we ever came here. There just isn't any gravity in a planet that is hollow, or approximately hollow. All gravity forces cancel out. It was fully possible, if one wished, to jump clear across the interior of this planet, and land with the same speed one took off. I explained that to Carrist.

It did not reassure him. "But how do we get down?" he cried. "How do we move around? Sid, we're going straight toward that tombstone there!"

It was true, and I found myself shivering again. This particular tombstone, really all of a hundred feet high, with numerous arching windows and doors at the levels, leaned at a thirty degree angle with the ground. But it was deserted, as was attested by the scrawny, skeleton-like trees which twined their limbs through the windows and literally around the building—skeletons twining their bony arms around a tombstone. The simile was too apt and I shuddered it away.

Carrist was really frightened at even going near the place. But we couldn't help it. Carrist gave up, and followed my example of grabbing hold of one of the trees and working my way to the ground. Finally, our two feet were on the ground, and we were looking at things in the right perspective again.

Carrist hung miserably to his tree, afraid that the slightest motion would send him up again. He turned to me. He chattered, "But what's the good of this? Why are we leaving the ship? Corey Starr still has the projector. As soon as he wakes up, he'll use it on the Sun, and then we'll die along with the Lahri! Why didn't we destroy the projector?"

"We're already in deep enough water without making things worse," I told him



morosely. "Technically, we mutinied, than which there is no worse offense. If we had destroyed the projector, we might have come up before the Council of Ten themselves!"

Carrist gasped, "You think the Council of Ten is behind this?"

"Who else? They hold all power in the System. Through them all laws and decisions are made. The Mercurian Garden Corporation, of course, were the instigators. They saw their company being ruined. That's all they gave a damn about. They offered to take care of the Lahri for the Council of Ten. The Council knew it was a tough situation, so they just washed their hands of it, and gave the Corporation all the freedom it wanted to work out the solution any way they wanted. So they got Starr busy on that damned projector."

Carrist dragged his eyes away from the dismal city. He said miserably, "But what if Starr uses the projector? We'll freeze, too."

"He won't use it. Simply because," I added grimly, "I doubt if there are more than a dozen pilots in the whole system who could maneuver a space-ship back through that planet-hole without cracking up. Understand? You're the ace in the hole in this game, Carrist, and Starr won't make a move to use the projector until he gets hold of you again. Remember it. So stick close to me, whatever you do!"

Carrist gulped, staring. "I'm the ace in the hole?" he said. He began to shake his head doubtfully, forebodingly, but as I started pulling myself along, deeper into the jungle of crazily leaning edifices, he came hastily after me.

IT WAS singularly easy going, since we could simply scoot along the ground for great distances. Strange how much that city looked as if it were on the floor of the sea—fingers of mist moving about almost purposefully, the twisting vines and erratic trees, the soundlessness, the laxness of the building—all contributed to that effect. A graveyard in the sea, these buildings rising to mark lost hopes and dreams.

Somewhere on the outskirts of the city, we found what we were searching for. The Bureau of Transmitted Egos, erected by

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interplanetary law on all inhabited planets. We pushed ourselves toward the high, domed building, disappointed that so far we had seen no natives. I went ahead, forcing myself by sheer will-power into the ghostly interior. The high dome rose above us finally, like a single deep bass note growing louder and louder. Finally we stood before the long counter, in almost complete darkness. Falling from the ceiling of the dome was a single aged rope.

I looked at Carrist, who looked slightly green. He pulled the rope with a muffled groan. It was like heaven opening wide when the pure, voluminous tolling of that bell sounded through the city. It was a sweet sound—as sweet as Gabriel's horn calling all the dead to appear! Carrist jumped back, his face ghastly. The bell kept on tolling, and we felt like damned sinners who had disturbed the dead too soon.

"Stop that thing!" I said violently, and I brought the rope all the way down, frantic. But the bell merely burst into renewed activity and kept it up until we felt like running away and hiding.

We hardly noticed, then, that we were suddenly bathed in a shaft of mellow light from above. Carrist and I went rigid, and slowly turned. The light was coming from a balcony, from a doorway that had opened soundlessly. And silhouetted in the doorway was a figure clad in hood and flowing black gown. We saw nothing of the face, only a pair of glowing, phosphorescent eyes staring down at us.

Carrist edged closer to me. I could feel his space-suited body trembling.

I opened my lips to speak—once, twice. The third time I whispered, "We are here—"

"Because we're here," Carrist said throatily, half hysterically. Finally he shouted, "We want a couple bodies!" He used the universal tongue.

The witch-figure continued to stare down at us.

Suddenly its head turned, apparently looking at someone in the lighted room behind it. "Below are two members of the robber race."

A sweet, sexless voice answered broodingly. "Robber race, robber race, gobbling



up the worlds apace, see them triumphantly approaching their doom, shoving the others out of their room."

The silhouetted figure burst into a ghoul-ish, high pitched chuckle. Then it said again, "Below are two members of the robber race."

The scream that came was like the maniacal voice of a macaw. It chilled our blood. "Give them their bodies!"

Immediately, the witch closed the door, cutting off the mellow light, and flung herself from the balcony.

She—for we knew it was a woman—floated across the room, and seized the bell-cord. Miraculously, the bell stopped. The witch shinnied down the rope and at last stood behind the counter.

And she was a witch! Long, hooked nose, rotten teeth, eyes that were actually filled with an inner light. I began stupidly to believe in my Mother Goose nursery rhymes.

The wicked eyes leered at us. The thin lips opened and a foul stream of curses flowed out at us. She ended up with a final burst of rage. "May all your children die in their mothers' wombs! *May your Sun go out!*"

I stared at her through popping eyes. With an effort I grabbed hold of myself. "Now, now sister," I said huskily, "that's not a nice thing to say. Suppose we get down to business. We want a couple of nice, sane bodies. Do you have any sane people around here?"

She seemed about to throw herself at me. Instead she flung a pad down in front of us. Hastily, Carrist and I sketched in our names, our occupations, some facts about our ancestry. We checked off our requirements; as much of the mind, conscious, unconscious, as much of the instincts and memories, as we could take without allowing our new bodies to take control of our own minds. In other words, the works.

"And we're in a hurry," I added orally, thinking uneasily of Corey Starr. By this time, he would be waking up. Waking up—to do what? To carry out *his* original plan, while we carried on ours? It was a ghastly thought. I could just imagine this Sun suddenly going out, plunging this world into absolute zero temperature! But Starr couldn't do that without Carrist!

The witch's eyes grew in brilliance. "In a hurry," she hissed. "The robber race is always in a hurry. Some day it will have to hurry to catch up with itself."

With this rather meaningless phrase, she threw herself across the room like a shot. Anxiously, Carrist and I did the same, following her. She sailed through a door maliciously slamming it behind her. Carrist and I came out of it without broken bones, and burst into vicious profanity.

We were sizzling when we finally caught up with her, but the surroundings in which we found ourselves sobered us down. The transmitting machines! They surrounded us in grim array, and Carrist and I felt the sinking sensation always attending a transferral.

The witch beckoned to me with a horny hand. There was only one small light in the room, and I could only see her eyes. Casting Carrist what I felt was a reassuring glance, I went jauntily into the shadows. But it was with quaking heart that I seated myself in a grim looking chair.

She yanked at my arms, binding them to the arms of the chair. A switch threw a generator into high. She unscrewed my helmet, and while my head swam dizzily from the sudden change in air-pressure, she put her ugly, unhealthy face close to mine.

"You will take care not to harm the body," she snarled. "Such is the law! *Aheee!* May your race perish, and may your Sun go out, if there is a single scratch in the body of the child after you have finished with it!"

THE CHILD! I gagged. For, coming floating through a door, their pipe-stem legs dragging after, came two shadowy figures. It was too dark to see their features, but they were children! Children, perhaps no more than ten years old. I started to yell out loud, dimly remember seeing Carrist coming across the room toward me, then a wave of gas hit my nostrils, and my mind was in that half unconscious, yet somehow crystal clear state which would permit my consciousness, instincts, and memories, almost all of them, to go flowing into the brain of the child whom the old witch now strapped into the chair opposite me; to go flowing along a wire, to reassemble themselves into



their original status of giant molecules in the gray matter of mine and the child's brain.

I heard Carrist expostulating frantically with the old witch.

"We want full-grown bodies!" Carrist yelled. "You old witch!"

But she screamed back at him, and I gathered that she was highly amused. And finally Carrist must have realized the hopelessness of the position, for he became quiet, as the transferring machinery sparked and whined.

But he did win his own argument, for, fifteen minutes later, I stood beside him in his new body, and he was an adult, some five feet in height, while I was a boy, a youngster, scarcely three feet tall.

I was completely beside myself. I swore at Carrist. He stood there, his acquired face looking abashed, plainly miserable. And all the while the old witch cackled and chuckled. But finally she tired of that.

"You didn't specify the age you wanted," she cackled. "But why shouldn't you have a child's body. Your race is a child, while ours is old, old—older than the planets themselves, perhaps! Who knows? *Aheee!* You have not given me my money!"

While Carrist rifled my barely conscious body, I stood there shaking with rage. He paid the old witch her two thousand univers, then carried our bodies to separate shelves, carefully adjusting the humidity and air-pressure. I yelled at him, and pushed myself out of the building. Then I let loose my fury on him again.

"A fine help you are," my piping voice yelled. "What good am I in this body? These people have a nasty sense of humor. They'll laugh at me. And I can't let you do the talking!"

Carrist squirmed miserably. "She would not back up. She just kept on going through with it. I couldn't do anything."

I snarled at him, but I realized that he was right. We had been fooled, and fooled royally. Nevertheless, dreading what I might find, I began exploring this body's mind. It was a child's mind, young, inexperienced, unacquainted with the city. I cursed. Yet I did feel something running through this mind. A voiceless, unconscious longing to look at the Sun. I raised my eyes, and let

this mind have full sway. A prayer grew in my mind, a plaintive, wailing cry that carried within it the lost hopes of the damned. At first I thought the prayer, but then I knew I was speaking it aloud: "O, Sun, that was built by the Ancients, wherein the Ancients reside, where is your light, that has fallen upon the Lahri for all the life of the Lahri? We grow cold, and there is an oldness about us that was never ours. The Great Mother She sits upon her throne through the cold hours, and there is no warmth in Her divinity. Sun, shine upon Her, for if Her cries can bring no light and no heat to warm Her, how can our cries bring light to warm us? O, Sun, that was long ago built by the Ancients—"

It was a prayer learned by rote. I was half floating in the air, my arms outstretched, my own mind frozen into the status of a watcher. Ghostly mist fragments washed around my body. My wailing cry went drifting off through the hopeless city. Suddenly, it was too much for me. There was too much horror implicit in the wailing tones. I struggled to reclaim my acquired body, but I am afraid it would have been a hard job without Will Carrist.

"Sid!" His cry blasted in my ear. He grabbed me, and shook me like one demented. "Sid! You're letting it get you. You can't! We have to get this over with. We have to find the rulers. The first thing you know, Corey Starr—"

That name was like a suddenly applied lever which threw my own mind on top. I shuddered, shook my head, and grabbed into a tree limb to steady myself. I turned a white face on Will Carrist—or, rather, the short, squat, shrivel-legged being that held the mind of Will. "That prayer," I whispered. "Did you hear it, Will? It came out of the mind of this child. It came bursting out, and it was genuine, because the child has felt the cold, the lightlessness—"

But Will was only staring at me, and I realized that he didn't know. He couldn't know the terror of a Sun that was going out, of a god that had deserted its people. For he had not yet looked into his acquired mind, and I did not want him to!

I turned and looked over the silent city. "Will," I whispered, "we are going to find the Great Mother She!"



AS WE WORKED along through the city, Will's adult body kept on shooting him along faster and faster, until finally I was panting to keep up with him. When I shouted imprecations at him, he said hopefully, "I could carry you."

I cast him an outraged glance, and went on ahead. But a phrase occurred to me that only made me sorer: "And a little child shall lead. . . ."

I pulled my short, curiously braided coat up around my chin and impelled myself on. The deadly gloom of the city grew as we penetrated deeper into it. The buildings leaned crazily. But it was not until we were entirely lost that we had our first glimpse of the natives.

It came like a shock. A number of figures came bursting like falling leaves from an upper window. They were children. They burst into excited cries when they saw me and came sailing at me. In a second, I was in the midst of a rough-and-tumble squawl such as I have never experienced. Childish, gleeful cries burst against my ear drums. I suddenly squealed with rage, and threw my playful attackers off. They dispersed away from me like a cloud, expertly catching onto trees and tall weeds to keep themselves from "falling" into the sky.

One and all they stared into my eyes with awakening horror. Suddenly, one screamed tinnily: "He is not *be*! He is not *be*!"

The rest got the drift, and commenced to scream, hanging onto their trees like fruit, scared stiff. I was as scared stiff as they, and I felt an inner convulsion of horror for myself. Within me, a tiny mind was protesting vainly. "I *am* her! I *am* the child of the Great Mother She!"

I stilled that cry, and whirled toward Carrist. His peculiarly clammy, acquired skin was green with a tremendous fear.

"Sid," he whispered imploringly, "this is like a nightmare! These people are crazy. You heard that old witch, didn't you? You heard the jingle that other voice dashed off, didn't you? They're insane, down to the last child!"

I didn't listen to him. I was listening to another thought inside me. "Why are the people watching? Why do they stare?" And, suddenly, with my own mind, using these

ears, I heard the faint rustlings, the whisperings that emanated from the buildings around me. I looked up quickly. My phosphorescent eyes saw other phosphorescent eyes motionlessly suspended in dark windows—watching, watching. One by one, as I stared them down, they disappeared.

Will, following my glance, comprehended. "Watching us," he burst out huskily.

I said tonelessly, "Will, take me to the Tower of the Thousand Steps."

He looked at me as if I were mad. He cried frantically, "The Tower of the Thousand Steps? I don't know anything about—"

"Be quiet," I admonished tonelessly. "You know where it is. The mind that lies below yours does. I am a child, with a child's experience. You are an adult. As such, you must lead me to the Tower."

His face was torn with fear and a desire to obey my command. Finally he groaned. "Sid, I can't," he whispered. "I'm afraid to go poking into one of these insane minds."

With a wave of my tiny hand, I cut him off. I started toward a V-shaped aperture made by two thin, tall edifices where they rested against each other crazily. I stopped short. One arm hooked around a small, crooked tree, the other straight at his side, a Lahri with phosphorescent eyes stood, blocking my path. He gave stare for stare. I turned in the opposite direction, with Will helplessly following, muttering pitifully to himself. Another Lahri blocked my path here.

We turned back in the direction we had come.

For minutes we worked our way along, feeling like ghosts in some unreal dream. We passed round solid-looking edifices which were, however, worse than the Tower of Pisa in their leaning proclivities. Even without the aid of my body's mind, I could have told that they were storage bins, loaded to the brim with the Mercurian vitamin plant, with other foodstuffs, with stolen goods of every description.

And in a square at the heart of the city we found a late model space-ship, resting on a long run-way which turned up at the end. Will's breath sucked through his teeth as his eyes encompassed the long powerful



lines of the vehicle.

"The pirate ship!" he whispered.

I nodded woodenly. It was the pirate ship.

We turned to the left here, and were blocked again. I knew what was happening now. The Lahri were guiding us somewhere, forcing us to go there; but where? Dimly, I thought I knew the answer. And so we went on.

And now the music began. It was a mocking, insidious drum beat, interspersed with elfin, piping noises. It penetrated my mind, my whole consciousness until I was in a half hypnotic state. It flowed from everywhere, seemingly, swelling and dying plaintively. I pulled myself along as if I were in a dream. I forgot Carrist. I forgot that—abruptly—he was with me no longer. I vaguely remembered hearing his startled shout, the sound of a scuffle, of furious blows, of a final, dying groan. Then nothing. I forgot him, and I forgot that Starr needed him.

NOR DID I seem to realize or care that a host of Lahri were now moving like wraiths along beside me, moving in from the mists on either side, from gaping doorways. I was half Lahri and half Tellurian, and I was moving toward the Tower of a Thousand Steps, the Praying-Place of the Great Mother She, who was my mother, and in whose blood flowed the blood of the Ancients, and the fire of the sun-god who was withdrawing his radiance.

Now the crazily leaning edifices started falling away, widening out to form a great, hidden square. The music swelled in a great burst that sustained itself. Then I was looking upward, up along the slope of a great pyramid whose top lost itself in creeping, living mist. I felt in my mind the voiceless longing of a child for its mother; a child who is in terror of something it cannot understand.

Around the pyramid, I now saw that a great mass of Lahri were gathered, holding onto each other, the ones in front grasping a railing which ran around the base of the pyramid. Those in the back were suspended in the air, their heads above those in the front. Holding onto each other thus, they were like a great blanket of living beings,

waving in each cold breeze.

A lane was cleared for me. I found myself pulling myself up the pyramid by means of a guide rail. Slowly, slowly, the top of the pyramid unfolded itself to me as I crept upward, now alone. And the higher I went, the colder the air became. Winds began to lash at me, to bite freezingly through the single-braided garment I wore. The sun showed itself as I arose above the damp mists which overlay the city. It stood starkly alone in a dead sky, hardly more alive than its background.

Still came the insidious drum-beat, the hypnotic piping sounds, coming from I never knew where. And a sweet and sad voice spoke down to me from the top of the Tower of a Thousand Steps: "Come, my child, in body defiled, the winds here blow colder, the Great God is older, I pray to the Great God to warm up the cold sod, but come those from the cavity, in awful depravity, what do you do with my child?"

I looked up, and it was as if a shining radiance had burst in my brain. I knew who I was. I was Sidney Hallmeyer. I was half-way in possession of my own thoughts, and deliberately keeping it that way. But I was half-way the child of the Great Mother She who sat on her hammered throne atop the Tower of a Thousand Steps. And she was beautiful, as seen with the eyes of her child and of me.

Beautiful? She was a Lahri, completely without clothing, and her legs were shriveled pipe-stems. She was squat, short, and hairless, and her mouth was abnormally wide. But there were her eyes, and somehow the beauty in them spread out over the rest of her body, and she became a creature of ethereal, divine loveliness. My acquired heart beat painfully, noting the suffering in her face, the blue pallor of cold which the freezing winds induced in her. For it was cold up here, and she sat there naked, completely composed, in her mind her prayer to the Sun god, to warm her, and if it would not warm her, such was the will of her god.

She looked at me with her phosphorescent eyes, and in their pained depths was an understanding that transcended words, an understanding of me, Sidney Hallmeyer.

And sitting at her feet, wrapped in great



swaths of cloth from which only his face protruded was a monstrous little dwarfed man whose phosphorescent eyes were alight with the most vicious, virulent hate I have ever seen! I stared back at him and felt within me the revulsion and fear of the mind of the child whose body my mind occupied. And I felt something else, staring into those eyes. It was uncanny, it was impossible! But the thought grew in my mind, and with the thought the face began to sneer smugly. I shuddered in fascination, and suddenly blurted out:

"Starr!"

I wanted to scream out loud that this couldn't be. That Starr wasn't actually sitting there, at the floor of the Great Mother She's throne. But I suddenly knew it was so. How else and why else should I have been herded here? And Will! For the first time, I fully realized that Will was gone, remembered the sounds of his struggle. Starr had done that! Will was essential to his plan. Without Will, he himself could never leave this hollow planet, he could never maneuver the ship out alone. But if Will had been captured, then why—?

Starr, whose body was that of an old, old man, leered at me twistedly. "Starr it is," his cracked voice whispered, while his eyes glared with a malevolence that seemed entirely uncalled for. "You utter fool, Hallmeyer, for going off and leaving me! Now we're both in a predicament we'll never escape from. Wait and see."

"But—but how—" I gasped, utterly forgetting the Great Mother She.

Starr said bitterly, now speaking English, "I told her what you were up to, Hallmeyer."

"What I was up to?"

"Naturally. I told her you were scouting the lay of the land, that later on members of the 'robber race' were intending to come and empty their food warehouses. That you, personally, were going to take back the Lahri who were responsible for the pirating. Oh, I painted you blackly. And I told her that I would take you two off her hands!"

"Starr—" I began, hardly able to contain myself.

His acquired face twisted in a sneer. "Oh, don't get your dander up, Hallmeyer! I'm in a pickle, too. I should have looked you up

myself instead of going to her and listening to that damned sing-song poetry of hers. She said she would have to judge you on the Tower of a Thousand Steps, and since only royalty was allowed there, I would have to acquire a royal body. This," Starr sneered bitterly, "is it," and he shivered with a convulsion of inner disgust.

I CAST a single glance at the Great Mother She. A great wave of pity enveloped me. Her faith was great in her god, the Sun, but she could not still the little shudders of coldness that ran over her body. She was freezing, and another hour of those blasting, biting winds would turn her into an icicle. I felt a bitter hatred of Starr, who could so complacently remain swathed in his garment.

The Great Mother She did not interrupt our conversation, but her great, beautiful eyes were helplessly staring from one to the other of us, as if trying to determine what we were talking about.

Starr's voice came again above the whine of the cold wind, above the drumbeats and the tiny piping sounds of the invisible musicians. "I," he said, casting a bitter sidewise glance at the Great Mother She, "am *her* husband! Can you feature it? But that's the way it had to be, and the old gander seemed actually pleased when I told him outright that I didn't want to occupy his filthy body. He screamed his amusement at me like a crazy parrot—very funny! I protested to the Great Mother She—whatever *that* means—that all I wanted was Will Carrist, and to hell with you. She said some of her people would capture Carrist and put him in an appropriate place, but still she wanted me as a witness on the Tower of a Thousand Steps. She wanted to hear your side of it."

Involuntarily, Starr tensed, his acquired eyes shooting out phosphorescent sparks. "But if you say a word of it to her," he began passionately.

"Don't think I won't!" I flashed. "You're an old man, Starr, and I'm a child. In a hand-to-hand fight, I think I could do for you." I turned to the Great Mother She and spoke in the language of the Lahri—spoke tenderly to her, as a child would speak to its mother. I told of our discovery that the



Lahri had been pirating the ships of the Earth Federation; told her that we understood the reason for that pirating; told her further that we considered it wrong of the Lahri to take illegally what was not theirs—and she held up a hand, pain in her eyes, and spoke in the ritual of poesy, whose scanning was set to the weird drumbeats that pulsed around us.

"The Sun god dies, the Mother tries to appeal to the wise, and the Council defies! A century flies while the Lahri dies."

She held me with her great, glorious eyes, and I knew what she had been telling me—something I had not been told before. A century ago the Lahri had appealed to the Council of Ten, appealed for relief from the stark, cold existence of a dying central sun. The Council had ignored the appeal. The Lahri had been forced into piracy after a century of misery, of starvation, of death.

My heart actually ached from what was implied in that briefly told tale. I ignored Starr's tense body, the savage look in his rheumy eyes, and stretched forth my arms, hypnotically caught up in the pulse of the music, the crystal quiet of this pyramid whose apex raised above the comparatively warming mists of the city below.

"Great Mother She," I whispered reverently, "the Council of Ten no longer ignores you. It holds salvation open to you. Your sun dies, and will not revive itself. Why not, then, seek another world close to our Sun god, who blazes fiercely and benevolently in the heavens, and will look upon you and your people with the same favor that it looks upon ours? I know of such a world, Great Mother She, which spins swiftly around our Sun, and is yours for the taking!"

I held my breath, praying with every atom of my being that she understood, and that, understanding, she accept. And in the interval Starr's mocking whisper came, in English, "You're a fool, Hallmeyer. I know her answer."

"Shut up!" I said tensely, directing my hate on him. I spoke to the Mother again, in tones of warning, "This the Council offers you, Great Mother; and there sits beside you the representative of him who would direct upon your Sun a weapon which will put his light out at once and forever

if you do not accept."

I was ready for Starr when he came, and he did come. He was on a spot for sure, and he realized it. His plans were not crystal clear in that moment. He was in the grip of rage. That I should actually dare to ruin his original plan, to betray him, was too much for him. The scream of a macaw came from his throat, and he placed one withered leg on the hammered lead throne of the Great Mother She, and pushed himself down at me.

I met him fair and square, one of my child's hands gripping the post of the rail by which I had pulled myself up, the other arm outstretched and ready for him.

He caught onto the arm with hands that were extended like claws. The velocity of his rush tore my grip on the railing loose. And we went floating out into the open air, into a gravity-less atmosphere, where we hung, engaged in the battle of our lives!

We clawed, we struck, and Starr's acquired face was a bestial mask of hate. He screamed while I cursed him in a high, childish treble. And once or twice, in our wild gyrations, I saw the face of the Great Mother She, her face torn with longing and suffering. I was her child, the body of her child, and I was in battle with the aged body of her consort.

We were not evenly matched, as I had erroneously supposed. Starr's body had a wiry venomous strength that could snap my bones if his hands ever got a good hold. I kicked at him frantically, left long welts on his bald head with my nails. But suddenly, I saw my only chance, but if I calculated wrong, it was Starr, and not I, who would benefit.

We were fluttering around without suspension like a pin-wheel gone mad. Off to one side, a few of the cold buildings of the city rose from the creeping mist. To the other side was the pyramid. If I worked it right, I could get rid of Starr, and get back to the pyramid!

If . . .

I waited for the propitious moment, desperately waiting until I was underneath as we turned. I got myself into position, and with one furious effort kicked upward with both my shriveled legs.

The force of that blow was not very



much. But it was enough. It separated Starr from me, and he went floating away, his bestial eyes staring at me in sudden shock. For a moment I was desperately afraid that, inadvertently, it was I who had been on top—but it wasn't. I was floating back through the air at an angle toward the pyramid!

And Starr was floating at an equal and opposite angle in the other direction!

Floating straight up into the sky, with no way in this universe to change his course; floating toward the Central Sun.

I landed, frantically grasped hold of the guide-rail, my tiny chest heaving torturedly with my late exertions. I looked upward toward Starr just in time to see his mouth open wide in a great, agonized scream.

"Hallmeyer! The Sun! I'll fry . . ." And then his voice diminished into a tinny scream, even as his body seemed to become a dot against the pitiless, deadly glowing disk of the central sun. For hours he would float at that speed, and then the small gravity pull of the sun would exert itself and that would be the end of Starr. I turned slowly and started up toward the Mother again.

SHE was staring down at me with a somber fright showing in her eyes. She paid no attention to Starr, who was in the body of her consort. She let him float away. I began to talk to her, still panting. I told her of the plan which Starr had had, a plan outlined to him doubtless by the power of the Mercurian Garden Corporation. I spoke of the weapon, of what it would do to the Sun, and with pointing arm I turned her eyes in the direction of our ship, scarcely a mile distant, near the Bureau of Transmitted Egos.

Then her glance came back to me. Her lips opened, and horror and unbelief trembled in her golden, liquid tones. She whispered, "Let death loom if the god hangs now in his tomb. If he wishes to go, if he wishes to go, the robber race's weapon will not make his blood flow, the robber race's weapon will not make *his* blood flow!"

While I was dizzily trying to translate that, she did an astounding thing. She stood upright, raised her thick, short arms toward the sun and let loose a wordless, wailing cry that shivered my marrow. It was a prayer

and a plea and a resignation. I felt something in my acquired mind pulse to that voiceless chant. And so piercing was that cry, that it must have floated through that tombstone city, striking upon the ears of the Lahri who were gathered at the foot of the pyramid. For there came an answering wail from the assembled throngs. It was too much like the cry of the invisible dead to me, and as appropriate. My teeth chattered.

Once more the Great Mother She, the queen of the Lahri in whose blood flowed the blood of the Ancients, turned her glorious, pained eyes on me. Longing swept her face, a voiceless longing for the body of her child whose mind my mind occupied. Then,

"My child, who is yet not my child," she whispered sadly. "With your reasoning pure, there is no cure, for the bubble world of the Lahri, is unlike the universe starry; there is no heavy trouble in the Lahri's planet bubble!" and she was gone.

Gone? I did not know until half a second later. For, with a motion too swift to follow, she lowered her squat body at an angle, placed her naked, withered legs against the gray, hammered lead throne, and like an arrow shot herself away from the apex of the pyramid on a line parallel with the ground. She diminished as my dumbfounded eyes watched.

Too late, I understood her intentions. The drum beats, the fairy piping sounds, abruptly were no more, and their absence seemed to place on my heart a terrible, foreboding burden, but left me free to think things out clearly. I knew where she was going, and somehow I knew what she was going to do when she got there. And that implied other things. . . .

In another second, summoning what strength I could, I threw myself into the air along the same path she had taken, toward our ship.

It was slow, that fantastic flight above the wreathing mists that enveloped the city of the Lahri. I knew it was too slow. For after ten minutes I was able to look down, to see the outskirts of the city. Our ship was scarcely a hundred feet distant. Frantically, I waited until the angle of my flight allowed me to grasp at the very roof of the tallest building. I hung on for the mer-



est second, gauged my angle and flung myself at the ship with every atom of my strength. I sailed through the air, hands outstretched. The air-lock was open. If I could make that, . . .

I couldn't. I sailed over the ship, grasped at a projecting port with both arms—just as the rocket blasts roared.

It was the most surprising thing that ever happened to me. Suddenly, wind was roaring against my face, and what little of the city of the Lahri I could see out of the corner of my eyes disappeared. The rocket ship was in flight, was boring up through the atmosphere at tremendous, accelerating velocity, and there was a dead emptiness all about me.

I screamed in my childish voice. I hung onto the port, lying on my stomach on the cold surface. The wind pushed at me, literally ripped every shred of clothing from my body and I commenced to freeze solid. My eyes popped, and then the mind of the child in me rose and I had eyes for nothing but the Sun. I prayed. I prayed to the Sun god, for I knew that I was to die. I asked it to warm my people, and to warm my mother, who was the Great Mother She. I asked it to make the lands grow green again, to bring back the white clouds that once made beautiful holes in the blue-black sky, to bring the gentle rains and to make the Lahri great again, so that they could resist the might of the robber race. But I was glad that the creature within my body, my child's body, was also to die with me, for that creature was a member of the robber race.

And a fifty mile wind literally tore me off the back of that speeding rocket ship, my arms and stomach and chest bleeding, and the wounds freezing. The coldness entered my brain, and insidiously began to solidify my thoughts, and that was the last I knew.

**I** LOOKED up into the panic-stricken face of the Lahri who was Will Carrist. And the door beneath me trembled to the roar of rocket blasts!

When my eyes snapped open, he gave a great cry of relief. "I thought you were a goner," he cried piteously. "I came shooting up out of the city with a half dozen

Lahri after me and I was scouting around in this ship looking for some sign of you when I saw our rocket ship go zooming up toward the Sun. And you were hanging onto it. Sid, it's crazy! Why on Earth you ever. . . ."

My child's voice broke in. "You talk too much, Will." Wearily, trying to collect my befuddled thoughts, I staggered to my feet. I looked around. We were in the lounge room of a ship ourselves. I tried to think how that could be, and then remembered the Great Mother She, and the rocket ship she was driving toward the Sun.

Without a word to Will, I ran to the control room, clambered to the control seat. But I was too small. I screamed furiously for Will. Anxious to please, he seated himself at the controls. The ship shook down its length and leaped into speed.

And as the ship roared toward the central sun, I strained my eyes, sweeping the dull sky around the sun with the photo-amplifiers. Suddenly, I picked up our ship, far, far ahead, a tiny dot glowing with the reflection of the sun rays.

"She mustn't," I whispered through my teeth, paying no attention to the smarting wounds on my body. "She mustn't!" Will must have thought I was crazy, but suddenly he must have understood, for his powerful jaw fell slack.

He said slowly, "She did."

Yes, she had. Everything seemed to fall apart inside me. I felt a great weariness flowing through me. It was the sun. It was going out.

That sun couldn't have been very large. Maybe only a half-thousand miles. But for untold millions of years it had blazed brightly and it had been the god of the Lahri. And now that god was dying. True, it had been more than half dead. It was little more than a very hot planet. But it had kept the Lahri going. It was ironical that one of the Lahri, the Great Mother She herself, had killed her own god.

I turned wordlessly away from the photo-amplifiers and sat down quietly. After a while I spoke. "The Great Mother She is dead. Her people soon will be. Carrist, Starr should still be up here, drifting toward the sun. We have to find him."

Carrist did not find him, though he



searched for an hour in the sky under the shadow of the darkening sun.

We finally turned back toward the city of the Lahri and the Bureau of Transmitted Egos, while I sat quietly in a corner, thinking to myself and quelling the voiceless cries of the child of the Great Mother She. Thinking, I realized what must have happened to Carrist, without his telling me. He had broken loose from his captors, and thinking that I had somehow gotten us into a tight spot, had headed straight toward the pirate ship, somehow got inside ahead of a horde of Lahri. After all, he could operate any type ship, no matter how complex the controls. Well, he had come along in time to save me . . . which didn't seem to matter a whole lot to me now.

The ship landed almost in the very doorway of the Bureau of Transmitted Egos. Quietly, we left the ship, and I stood for a minute, accustoming my eyes to the new darkness that was engulfing the tombstone city. What was that I heard? A wail that drifted ghostlike through the mists, the wail of a people bereft? I walked toward the Bureau of Transmitted Egos, fighting down the horror of the child within me. I entered the door and I sought light switches.

I was not even thankful when dim lights did come on. It meant that the Bureau was still supplied with power. But I didn't care.

From the center of the cold floor as we entered, a bedraggled figure raised itself to hands and knees, and started crawling toward us, croaking a strange hybrid of English and the universal tongue.

"Hallmeyer! Help me! I'm dying—I think I'm dead. My body."

I said coldly, "Hello, Starr. What brought you back? I wish you weren't."

HE CLAWED wildly toward us, panting. "It was *she*. She picked me up out in the middle of nowhere. I was her consort's body. She wanted to save it. She put me in the lifeboat, telling me to go back to my people and tell that she—yes, *she*—was the pirate, together with some of her Lahri. And she was, Hallmeyer; the Great Mother She was herself the pirate. No wonder she could drive that ship! Don't you see? And she made me show her how to use the projector!"

He was irrational. I suspected that he was dying, from the cold he had endured and from the blood that was running out of his nose. The lifeboat had crashed, and he could crawl here, dying.

I said, "I suspected she was the pirate."

Then he slumped forward and stiffened. I turned him over and listened to his heart. He was dead.

I turned to Carrist and said dully, "If he really dies there'll be hell to pay."

Carrist understood and went madly to work. He dragged the dead Lahri body to the transmitting chair, in another minute got Starr's real body out. He strapped both in, and frantically went to work. The dimly lighted room jumped with currents driven under high voltage. And Starr's real body stirred, his eyes opening wide. He strained at the straps that bound him, and sweat leaped to his face.

He looked at the dead Lahri body and trembled. He whispered huskily, "My Lord—thanks, Hallmeyer! You brought me straight from hell!"

I loosened him. I said coldly, "And you sent the Lahri to hell with that damned clever weapon of yours."

Starr probably didn't like what he saw in my eyes, but he realized too, that I had a child's body, a body moreover that was covered with dried blood.

He lost his temper. "Well, what the hell do you think you're going to do about it? If there's anything I hate it's a sentimentalist, Hallmeyer, and you're being a sentimentalist from the guts up."

I motioned Will and Will understood, because he felt the same thing I felt. He came up behind Starr and whirled him around and planted a haymaker in Starr's face that sent him clear across the room to smash into a far wall. He bounced back, and hung in the air, his body very relaxed and quiet.

Will got his own body into the transferral chair, and then placed himself in. I got the machinery going, and accomplished the transferral. The Lahri shot out of his seat, cast us one wild glance, and fled from the building. It was the last we saw of him.

"Evidently he didn't enjoy the company of your mind," I told Carrist, mirthlessly.

He cast me a wounded look and went



about the job of strapping me in. And I sat there, thinking some more. I understood much that I hadn't understood before. I remembered the last words to me of the Great Mother She. "There is no heavy trouble in the Lahri's planet bubble!" A cryptic phrase whose meaning came to me now. No heavy trouble—no gravity trouble. Living on the outside of any planet which could hold an atmosphere, the Lahri would have sickened and died, for they were not used to gravity. They *had* to stay in their bubble, where gravity forces canceled out. That was the reason their legs had atrophied. They didn't use them except for pushing. That was the reason the builders of the city had constructed edifices at such crazy angles. Wasn't any gravity to pull them down.

The machinery went into action, and again I went through the strange experience of being in two places at the same time. As our minds went back to their rightful places, I saw the child through my own eyes, the child saw me through its eyes, and vice versa. It was uncanny, particularly when I saw the quiet fear begin to burn in the eyes of the child as it received all of its mind back and got rid of mine.

When it was over, the child, the son of the Great Mother She, sat tense, staring at us. I impelled myself from the chair. Shuddering I took the straps away from the child. It sat there, looking not at me, but thinking, and listening. Coming from the tombstone city was a thin wail. A wail made sadder by the great stillness.

The child pushed itself away from the

chair and went moving ghostlike out the door. It stood there in the door, staring out at blackness. The Sun had entirely gone out. A freezing, windless cold was settling into my very bones. In spite of myself I followed the child into the darkness, and I heard no sound from the city. The only illumination came from the Bureau, and that was thin.

My nails were digging into my palms. The child was standing near a tree, arms outstretched upward toward an invisible sun, and it seemed to me that there was a blue pallor on its naked body.

There was nothing that was worthwhile for me to do. I heard the beginning of the child's prayer to the sun, the prayer it had learned by rote. It was a thin, wailing cry. "Carrist!" I panted. "We're getting out of here."

He nodded and grabbed hold of one of Starr's feet and came out to meet me. He looked for one long moment at the ghostly, crazily leaning buildings that showed now as no more than shadows. There was no vestige of sound coming from the dead city of the Lahri. There was no sign of the child. I knew in my heart that the people of the bubble world were dead, I knew they all thought they were going to live with their forefathers whom they knew as the Ancients. They would all be warm. They would never be cold or hungry again, and they would not have to fear the robber race. That was good. That was very good.

I felt better.

But I was not very glad to be a human being.

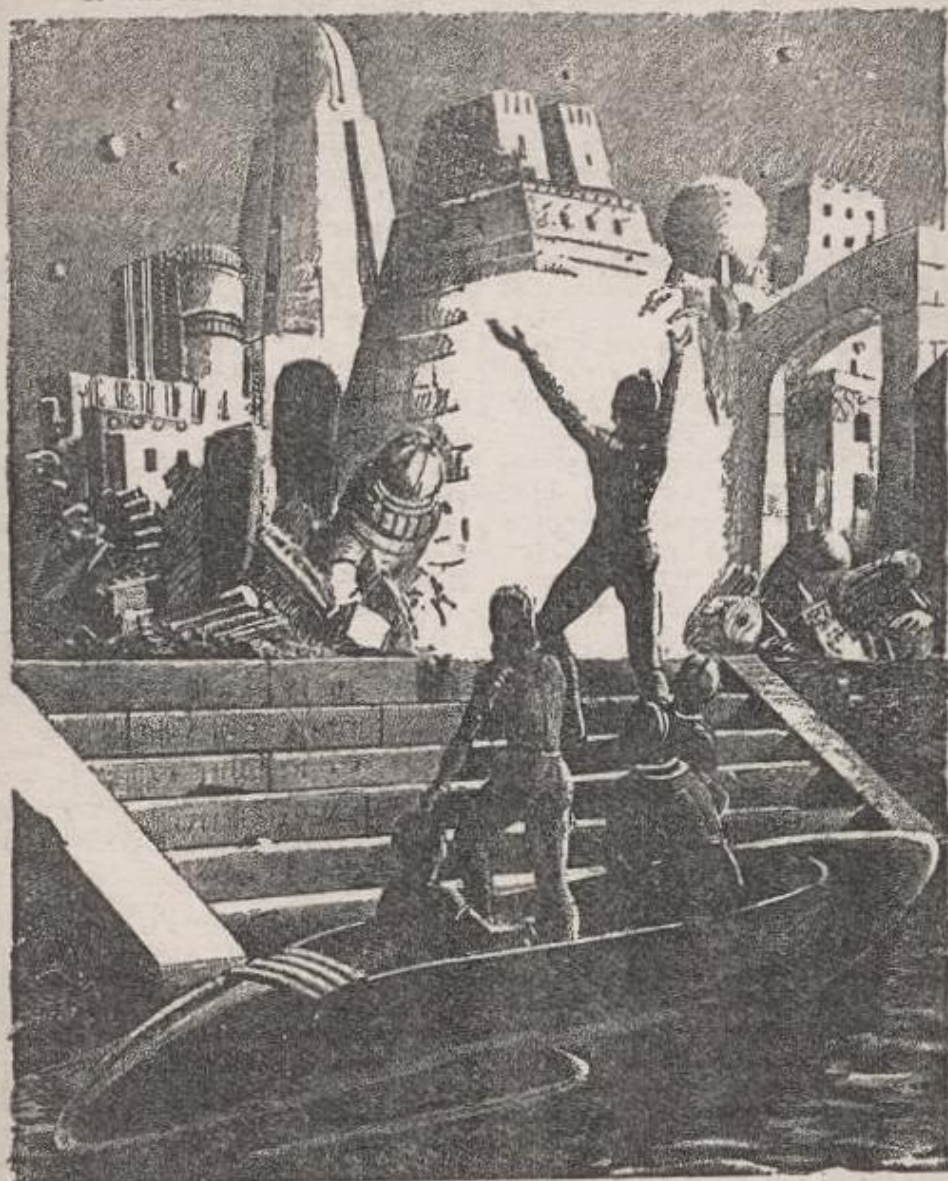
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# The Million Year Picnic

By RAY BRADBURY

It was to be a picnic, fine food and fishing. They would go boating down the silky Martian canals past the dead Martian cities. It was to be a brief holiday—only it would last for an aeon.



SOMEHOW the idea was brought up by Mom that perhaps the whole family would enjoy a fishing trip. But they weren't Mom's words; Timothy

knew that. They were Dad's words, and Mom used them for him, somehow.

Dad shuffled his feet in a clutter of Martian pebbles, and agreed. So immediately

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there was a tumult and a shouting, and quick as jets the camp was tucked into capsules and containers, Mom slipped into traveling jumpers and blouse, Dad stuffed his pipe full with trembling hands, his eyes on the Martian sky, and the three boys piled yelling into the motorboat, none of them really keeping an eye on Mom and Dad, except Timothy.

Dad pushed a stud. The water-boat sent a humming sound up into the sky. The water shook back and the boat nosed ahead, and the family cried, "Hurrah!"

Timothy sat in the back of the boat with Dad, his small fingers on top of Dad's large hairy ones, watching the canal twist, leaving the crumbled place behind where they had landed their small tourist rocket.

Dad had a funny look in his eyes as the boat went up-canal. A look that Timothy couldn't figure. It was made of strong light and maybe a lot of joy. It made the deep wrinkles laugh instead of worry or cry.

So there went the tourist rocket, around a bend, gone.

"How far are we going?" Robert splashed his hand. It looked like a small crab jumping in the violet water.

Dad exhaled, "A million years."

"Gee," said Robert.

"Yeah," said Michael.

"Look, kids," Mother pointed one soft long arm. "There's a dead city."

They looked with fervent anticipation, and the dead city lay dead for them and them alone, drowsing in a hot silence of summer made on Mars by a Martian weatherman.

And Dad looked as if he was pleased that it was dead.

It was a futile spread of pink rocks sleeping on a rise of sand, stretching lazy crumbled arms out three miles, petering finally into a dribble of collapsed pillars, a few tumbled wharves, one lonely shrine with images stolen from it, and then the sweep of sand again. Nothing else for miles. A white desert around the canal, and a blue desert over it, with a sun drifting on the blue one.

Just then, a rocket went up. Like a stone thrown across a blue pond, hitting with a scar of flame, falling deep, deeper, and vanishing.

Dad got a scared look in his eyes when he saw it, and added speed to the boat, gritting his teeth.

That was the last Earth rocket for one hundred days.

Looking up at the sky that was an ocean, you couldn't see a trace of war. Couldn't see men fighting and slaughtering each other like hung pig carcasses, gushing hot, salt blood.

Space dimensions narrowed that all down to one specule of matter, a dot against the cosmos labeled Earth. As removed and far off as two flies battling to the death in the arch of a great high and silent cathedral. And just as senseless.

William Thomas wiped his forehead, and felt the touch of his son's hand on his arm, like a young tarantula, thrilled. He beamed at his son. "How goes it, Timmy?"

"Fine, Dad."

Timothy hadn't quite figured out what was ticking inside the vast adult mechanism beside him. The man with the immense hawk nose, sun-burnt, peeling—and the hot blue eyes like agate marbles you play with after school in summer back on Earth, and the long thick columnar legs in the loose riding breeches.

"What are you looking at so hard, Dad?"

"I was looking for Earthian logic, common sense, good government, peace and responsibility."

"All that up there?"

"No. I didn't find it. It's not there any more. Maybe it'll never be there again. Maybe we fooled ourselves that it was ever there."

"Huh?"

"See the fish," said Dad, pointing.

THERE rose a soprano clamor from all three boys as they rocked the boat in arching their tender necks to see. They oobed and abbed. A silver ring-fish floated by them, undulating, and closing like an iris, instantly, around food particles, to assimilate them.

Dad looked at it. His voice was deep and quiet.

"Just like war. War swims along, sees food, contracts. A moment later—Earth is gone."

"William," said Mother.



"Oh, I'm sorry," said Dad.

Another ring-fish came by, drawing more noise from them, and more pointing. And then they sat still and felt the canal water rush cool under them, swift and glassy. The only sound was the motor-hum, the rush of the water, and the sun heating the air—which wasn't much. Once in a great while a bird would come singing and go singing and drop from hearing and sight.

On both sides of the canal now they saw the great oxygen vines and bushes, planted in irregular diagrams upon sand; plants with deep reaching roots thrusting miles after the wither water-gut of the planet; sowed by far-seeing scientists of Earth fifty years before, and only now profuse enough, active enough to give Mars a thin atmospheric shell.

Dad looked at them and shook his head. He caught himself when he saw Mom staring at him, and this was another symbol that Timothy couldn't fathom.

"When do we see the Martians?" cried Michael, who was ten years old and decorated conspicuously with the medals of Mendelian skin-coloration—freckles. "When do we see the Martians?"

"Quite soon, perhaps," said Father. "Maybe this afternoon. Maybe tonight."

"How do you mean?" asked Mom. "The Martians are a dead race."

"Oh, no, they're not. I'll show you some Martians, all right," William Thomas said, presently.

Timothy scowled at that, but said nothing. There was no questioning the alien thought patterns of grownups. And he had found it far happier circumstance to place his questions only intermittently, and then when he was certain his parents would humor them.

The other boys were already engaged making shelves of their small hands and peering under them toward the seven foot stone banks of the canal, watching for Martians.

"What do they look like?" demanded Michael.

"You'll know them when you see them." Dad sort of laughed, and Timothy saw a pulse beating time in his cheek.

Mother was slender and soft, with a woven plait of spun gold hair over her

head in a tiara, and eyes the color of the deep cool canal water where it ran in shadow, almost purple, with flecks of amber caught in it. You could see her thoughts swimming around in her eyes, like fish—some bright, some dark, some fast, quick, some slow and easy, and sometimes, like when she looked up where Earth was, being nothing but color and nothing else.

She sat in the boat's prow, one hand resting on the side-lip, the other on the lap of her dark blue breeches, and a line of sunburnt soft neck showing where her blouse opened like a white flower.

She kept looking ahead to see what was there, and not being able to see it clearly enough, she looked backward toward her husband, and through his eyes, reflected then, she saw what was ahead; and since he added part of himself to this reflection, a determined firmness, her face relaxed and she accepted it, and she turned back knowing, suddenly, what to look for.

Timothy looked, too. But all he saw was a straight pencil line of canal going violet through a wide shallow valley penned by low, eroded hills, and on until it fell over the sky's edge. And this canal went on and on, through cities that would have rattled like beetles in a dry skull if you shook them. A hundred or two hundred cities dreaming hot summer day dreams and cool summer night dreams . . .

THEY were going far on this outing—to fish. But there was a gun in the boat. This was a vacation. But why all the food, more than enough to last them years and years, left hidden back there near the rocket? Vacation. But just behind the veil of the vacation was not a soft face of laughter, but something hard and bony and perhaps terrifying. Timothy could not lift the veil, and the two other boys were busy being ten years old and eight years old, respectively.

"No Martians yet. Nuts," declared Robert, seriously miffed. He put his v-shaped chin on his hands and glared at the canal.

Dad had brought an atomic-radio along, strapped to his wrist. It functioned on an old-fashioned principle; you held it against the bones near your ear, and it vibrated singing or talking to you. Dad lis-



tened to it now. His face looked like one of those fallen Martian cities, caved in, sucked dry, almost dead.

Then he gave it to Mom to listen. Her lips dropped open.

"What . . . ?" Timothy started to question, but withdrew tactfully, to watch.

Glancing hastily upward, Dad notched the boat speed higher, immediately. The boat leaped and jounced and spanked. This shook Robert out of his funk, and elicited yelps of frightened but ecstatic joy from Michael, who clung to Mom's legs and watched the water pour by his nose in a wet torrent . . .

Dad must have seen something, because he cut speed, swerved the boat, curved and ducked it into a little branch canal and under an ancient crumbling stone wharf dwelling that smelled like crab flesh.

Air-brakes stopped the boat, and Dad twisted to see if the ripples on the canal were enough to map their route into hiding. Water lines went across, lapped the stones, and came back to meet each other, settling to be dappled by the sun. It all went away.

Dad listened. So did everybody.

High in the sky there was a sound like a metal spider spinning a web of noise over and across, down and around, over and across; a swift weaving over the whole land again and again. The spider was a rocket, and the web was flame and noise from its jets.

Dad's breathing echoed like fists beating against the cold wet wharf stones. In the shadow, Mom's cat-eyes just watched Father for some clue to—what next?

The sky spider stopped spinning its web and went away. Father sank back, sighing, and Timothy put out his hand and patted the dark hair on his arm.

A moment later there were two titanic, marrow-jolting explosions that grew upon themselves. Followed by half a dozen others.

"The ship," said Dad. "They found the rocket."

Michael said, "What happened, Dad, what happened?"

"Oh, they just blew up our rocket, that's all," said Timothy, trying to sound matter-of-fact. "I've heard rockets blown up before. Ours just blew. Not only ours, but

four others."

Timothy thought about it and added, "There were only four others on Mars. Down by the Science Colony where those one hundred men lived."

"Why did they do that?" asked Michael. "Huh, Dad?"

Dad still listened, the audio to his ear, blinking wet eyes. After two minutes he dropped his hand like a rag.

"It's all over," he said to Mom. "The radio just went off the atomic beam. Every other world station's gone. The air is completely silent. It'll probably remain silent."

"For how long?" asked Robert.

"Maybe—your great-grandchildren will hear it again," said Dad. He just sat there, and the kids were caught in the center of his awe and defeat and resignation and acceptance.

Finally, he put the boat out into the canal again and they continued in the direction in which they had originally started.

It was beginning to get late. Already the sun was down the sky, and a series of dead cities was ahead of them.

Dad talked very quietly and gently to the kids. Many times in the past he had been brief, distant, removed from them, but now he patted them on the head with just a word and they felt it.

"Mike, pick a city."

"What, Dad?"

"Pick a city, son. Anyone of these cities we pass by."

"All right," said Michael. "How do I pick?"

"Pick the one you like the most. You, too, Robert, and Tim. Pick the city you like the most."

"I want a city with Martians in it," said Michael.

"You'll have that, I promise," said Dad. His lips were for the kids, but his eyes were for Mom.

They passed six cities in twenty minutes. Dad didn't say anything more about the explosions, he seemed much more interested in having fun with the kids, keeping them happy, than anything else.

MICHAEL liked the first city they passed, but this was vetoed because everyone doubted quick, first judgments.



The second city nobody liked. Timothy liked the third because it was fairly large. The fourth and fifth were too small, and the sixth brought acclaim from everyone, including Mother, who joined in the *Gees*, *Gosbes* and *Look-At-Thats*.

There were fifty or sixty huge structures still standing; streets were dusty, but paved, and you could see one or two old centrifugal fountains still pulsing wetly in the plazas. That was the only life—water leaping in the settling sun.

"This is the city," said Timothy.

"Yes, this is it," agreed Dad. "Yes, Alice?"

Mom nodded swiftly, her face an exact replica of Dad's expression.

Steering the boat to a landing flat, Dad jumped out.

"Here we are, kids. This is ours. This is where we live from now on."

"From now on?" Michael was incredulous. He stood up, looking, and then turned to stare back at where the rocket used to be. "What about the rocket, what about New York City?"

"Here," said Dad.

He placed the wrist audio against Michael's blond, pear-shaped skull. "Listen."

Michael listened.

"Nothing," he said.

"That's right. Nothing. Nothing at all any more. No more New York, no more Earth, no more Rocket."

Michael considered the lethal revelation and began to sob little dry sobs, uncoiled as yet by tears.

"Wait a moment," said Dad, the next instant. "I'm giving you a whole lot more in exchange, Mike!"

"What?" Michael held off the tears, curious, but quite ready to continue in case Dad's further revelation was as disconcerting as the original.

"I'm giving you this city, Mike. It's yours."

"M-mine . . ."

"Yes, yes, for you and Robert and Timothy, all three of you, to own for yourselves."

Timothy bounded out of the boat. "Look, guys, all for us; all of *THAT!*" He was playing the game with Dad, playing it good and big, and without a tear. Later, after

it was all over and things had settled, he could go off by himself and cry for ten minutes. But now it was still a game, still a family outing, and the other kids must be kept playing.

Mike jumped out, with Robert. They helped Mom out.

"Be careful of your sister," said Dad, and nobody knew what he meant until later.

They hurried into the great, pink-stoned city, whispering among themselves, because dead cities have a way of making you want to whisper, to watch the sun go down.

"In about five days," Dad said, quietly, "I'll go back down to where our rocket was and collect the food hidden in the ruins there, and bring it up; and I'll hunt for Ralph Edwards and his daughters and his wife there."

"Daughters?" asked Timothy. "How many?"

"Four," said Dad.

"I can see that'll cause trouble later," said Mother, cryptically.

"Girls," Michael made a face like an old Mars stone image. "Girls. *Gabb!*"

"Is this really ours, Dad?"

"The whole planet belongs to us, kids. The whole darn planet."

They stood there, King of the Hill, Top of the Heap, Ruler of All They Surveyed, Unimpeachable Monarchs and Presidents, trying to understand what it meant to own a world, and how big a world really was.

Night came quickly in the thin atmosphere, and Dad left them in the square by the pulsing fountain, went down to the boat, came walking back carrying a pile of papers in his big hands.

He laid the papers in a clutter in the old courtyard and set them afire. To keep warm, they crouched around them and laughed, and Timothy saw the little letters leap like frightened animals when the flames touched and engulfed them. The papers crinkled like an old man's skin and the cremation surrounded words like this:

"Government Bonds, Political Maps, Religious Quarrels, Beliefs, Sciences, Prejudices of the Pan-American Unity, Stock Report for July 23, 2044, THE WAR DIGEST . . ."

Dad had insisted on bringing these pa-



pers, for this purpose.

"I'M BURNING a way of life, just like that way of life is being burned clean of Earth right now. Forgive me if I talk like a politician. I am, after all, a former governor of a state, and I was honest and they hated me for it. Life on earth never oriented itself! It never seemed to have time to settle down or get anywhere good. Science got too far ahead of them too quickly, and the people got lost in a scientific wilderness, like children making over pretty things, gadgets, helicopters and rockets; putting emphasis on wrong things; on machines instead of the thought of how to run the machines. Wars got worse and killed them. That's what the silent radio means. That's what we ran away from.

"Mars is ripe for colonization. Scientists have worked for half a century to prepare it for colonies. But there were too few rockets. I was state-governor. I had pull. I arranged it so your mother and I could bring you kids here as the first colonial family. I knew the war was coming, that the scientists would be called back from Mars to help. We were supposed to go back, too. We didn't. We took a fishing trip. Well, I hoped it wouldn't be this bad. I didn't want to tell you kids unless I had to. But Earth is gone. Interplanetary travel won't be back for another two hundred years, maybe longer, maybe never. But that way of life proved itself wrong, and it strangled itself with its own hands. You're young. I'll tell you this again every day until it sinks in."

Dad paused to feed more papers into the fire.

"Now, we are alone. We and a handful of others who are to meet us in a few days. If they lived. A few of them, I'm sure, will come up the canal. Enough to start over. Enough to begin. Enough to turn their backs on chaos and strike out on a new line . . ."

The fire leaped up to emphasize his talking. He was full of that fire. And then all the papers were gone, except one. That was a symbol, too. All the laws and beliefs of Earth were burnt into small hot ashes

6—Tops in Science Fiction—Spring

which soon would be carried off in a wind.

Timothy looked at the last thing that Dad tossed in the fire. It was a map of the United States, and it wrinkled and distorted itself hotly and went—*slimpy*—and was gone like a warm, black butterfly. Timothy had to turn his head away and swallow, hard.

"Now, I'm going to show you the Martians," said Dad. He got up. "Come along, all of you. Here, Alice." He took her hand.

Michael was crying loudly, and Dad picked him up and carried him, as they walked through the ruins toward the canal.

The canal. Where tomorrow or the next day their future wives would come up in a boat—small laughing girls now, with their father and mother.

The night came down around them, and there were stars. But Timothy couldn't find Earth. It had already set. That was something to think about. *It was already set.*

A cool night wind blew around them, and as they walked, Dad said, "Your mother and I will try to teach you. We both have degrees in psychology. Perhaps we'll fail. I think not. We've had experience. We've seen. We planned this trip years ago, even before you were born. Even if there hadn't been a war, we would have come to Mars to live and form our own standard of living. It would have been another hundred years before Mars would have been even faintly poisoned by Earth civilization. Now, of course—"

They reached the canal. It was long and straight and cool and wet and reflective in the night.

"I've always wanted to see a Martian," said Michael, stiltedly. "Where are they, Dad? You promised."

"There they are, Mike," said Dad, and he shifted Michael on his shoulder and pointed straight down.

The Martians were there, all right. It sent a thrill chasing through Timothy.

The Martians were there—in the canal—reflected in the water. Timothy and Michael and Robert and Mom and Dad.

The Martians stared back up at them for a long, long silent time from the rippling water . . .



ONE OF THE GREATEST SPACE-  
ADVENTURE STORIES EVER TOLD . . .

# THE ROCKETEERS HAVE SHAGGY EARS

A NOVEL By KEITH BENNETT

Some day there will be a legend like this. Some day, from steamy Venus or arid Mars, the shaking, awe-struck words will come whispering back to us, building the picture of a glory so great that our throats will choke with pride—pride in the Men of Terra!

THE COMMANDER'S VOICE went droning on, but Hague's fatigued brain registered it as mere sound with no words or meaning. He'd been dazed since the crash. Like a cracked phonograph, his brain kept playing back the ripping roar of jet chambers blowing out with a sickening lurch that had thrown every man in the control room to the floor. The lights had flickered out, and a sickening elevator glide began as Patrol Rocket One smashed down through the Venusian rainforest roof, and crashed in a clearing blasted by its own hurtling passage.

Hague blinked hard and tried to focus his brain on what hard-faced Commander Devlin was saying, something about the Base and *Odysseus*, the mother ship.

"We've five hundred miles before we'll be in their vicinity, and every yard of it we walk. Hunting parties will shoot food animals. All water is to be boiled and treated with ultra-violet by my section. The photographers will march with the science section, which will continue classifying and writing reports. No actual specimens will be taken. We can't afford the weight."

To Hague, the other five men seated around the little charting table appeared cool, confidently ready to march through

five hundred, or a thousand miles of dark, unexplored, steaming Hell that is Venusian rainforest. Their faces tightset, icily calm, they nodded in turn as the Commander looked at each one of them; but Hague wondered if his own face wasn't betraying the fear lurking within him. Suddenly Commander Devlin grinned, and pulled a brandy bottle from his pocket, uncorking it as he spoke: "Well, Rocketeers, a short life and a merry one. I never did give a damn for riding in these tin cans." The tension broke, they were all smiling, and saying they'd walk into the base camp with some kind of a Venusian female under each arm for the edification of Officers' Mess.

Lead-en doubt of his own untried abilities and nerve lay icy in Hague's innards, and he left after one drink. The others streamed from the brightly lighted hatch a moment later. The Commander made a short speech to the entire party. Then Navigator Clark, a smiling, wiry little man, marched out of the clearing with his advance guard. Their voices muffled suddenly as they vanished down a forest corridor that lay gloomy between giant tree boles.

Commander Devlin slapped Hague cheerfully on the shoulder as he moved past; and the second section, spruce and trim in blue-

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black uniforms, with silver piping, followed him. Crewmen Didrickson and Davis followed with rifles and sagging bandoliers of explosive bullets crossing their chests; and then Arndt, the lean craggy geologist, his arm in a sling, and marching beside him was rotund, begoggled Gault, the botanist. The little whippet tank clattered by next with Technician Whittaker grinning down at Hague from the turret.

"It pains me somethin' awful to see you walkin' when I'm ridin'," Whittaker piped over the whippet's clanking growl.

Hague grinned back, then pinched his nose between two fingers in the ageless dumb show of disgust, pointed at the tank, and shook his head sadly. The two carts the whippet towed swayed by, and the rest of the column followed; Bachmann, the doctor and Sewell, his beefy crotchety assistant. The two photographers staggered past under high-piled equipment packs, and

Hague wondered how long they would keep all of it. Lenkranz, Johnston, Harker, Szachek, Hirooka, Ellis—each carried a pack full of equipment. The rest filed by until finally Swenson, the big Swede technician, passed and the clearing was empty.

Hague turned to look over his own party. In his mind's eye bobbed the neatly typed "Equipment, march order, light field artillery" lists he'd memorized along with what seemed a thousand other neatly typed lists at Gunnery School.

The list faded, and Hague watched his five-man gun-section lounge against their rifles, leaning slightly forward to ease the heavy webbing that supported their marching packs and the sectioned pneumatic gun.

"All right," Hague said brusquely. He dredged his brain desperately then for an encouraging speech, something that would show the crew he liked them, something the Commander might say, but he couldn't



think of anything that sounded witty or rang with stirring words. He finally muttered a disgusted curse at his own blankheadedness, and said harshly, "All right, let's go."

The six men filed silently out of the clearing battered in the forest by Patrol Rocket One, and into damp gloom between gargantuan trunks that rose smoothly out of sight into darkness. Behind them a little rat-like animal scurried into the deserted lot of blasted trees, its beady black eyes studying curiously the silver ship that lay smashed and half-buried in the forest floor.

**BASE COMMANDER CHAPMAN** shuffled hopelessly through the thick sheaf of onion-skin papers, and sank back sighing. Ammunition reports, supply reports, medical reports, strength reports, reconnaissance reports, radio logs, radar logs, sonar logs, bulging dossiers of reports, files full of them, were there; and elsewhere in the ship efficient clerks were rapping out fresh, crisp battalions of new reports, neatly typed in triplicate on onion-skin paper.

He stared across his crowded desk at the quiet executive officer.

"Yes, Blake, it's a good picture of local conditions, but it isn't exploration. Until the Patrol Rocket gets in, we can send only this local stuff, and it just isn't enough."

Blake shrugged.

"It's all we've got. We can send parties out on foot from the base here, even if we do lose men, but the dope they'd get would still be on a localized area."

The Commander left his desk, and stared through a viewport at the plateau, and beyond that at the jungled belt fringing an endless expanse of rainforest lying sullenly quiet under the roof of racing grey clouds.

"The point is we've got to have more extensive material than this when we fire our robot-courier back to earth. This wonderful mountain of papers—what do they do, what do they tell? They describe beautifully the physical condition of this Base and its complement. They describe very well a ten mile area around the Base—but beyond that area they tell nothing. It's wonderful as far as it goes, but it only goes ten miles, and that isn't enough."

Blake eyed the snowy pile of papers abstractedly. Then he jumped up nervously

as another bundle shot into a receiving tray from the pneumatic message tube. He began pacing the floor.

"Well, what can we do? Suppose we send the stuff we have here, get it microfilmed and get it off—what then?"

The Commander swore bitterly, and turned to face his executive.

"What then?" he demanded savagely. "Are we going into that again? Why, the minute every other branch of the services realize that we haven't got any kind of thorough preliminary report on this section of Venus, they'll start pounding the war drums. The battleship admirals and the bayonet generals will get to work and stir up enough public opinion to have the United States Rocket Service absorbed by other branches—the old, old game of military politics."

Blake nodded jerkily. "Yes, I know. We'd get the leftovers after the battleships had been built, or new infantry regiments activated, or something else. Anyway we wouldn't get enough money to carry on rocket research for space explorations."

"Exactly," the Commander cut in harshly. "These rockets would be grounded on earth. The generals or admirals would swear that the international situation demanded that they be kept there as weapons of defense; and that would be the end of our work."

"We've got to send back a good, thorough report, something to prove that the Rocket Service can do the job, and that it is worth the doing. And, until the patrol rocket gets back, we can't do it."

"Okay, Commander," Blake called as he went through the steel passage opening onto the mother ship's upper corridor, "I'll be holding the Courier Rocket until we get word."

**SEVEN** hours later it lightened a little, and day had come. Hague and the Sergeant had pulled the early morning guard shift, and began rolling the other four from their tiny individual tents.

Bormann staggered erect, yawned lustily, and swore that this was worse than spring maneuvers in Carolina.

"Shake it," Brian snarled savagely. "That whistle will blow in a minute."

When it did sound, they buckled each



other into pack harness and swung off smartly, but groaning and muttering as the mud dragged at their heavy boots.

At midday, four hours later, there was no halt, and they marched steadily forward through steaming veils of oppressive heat, eating compressed ration as they walked. They splashed through a tiny creek that was solidly slimed, and hurried ahead when crawling things wriggled in the green mass. Perspiration ran in streams from each face filing past on the trail, soaked through pack harness and packs; and wiry Hurd began to complain that his pack straps had cut through his shoulders as far as his navel. They stopped for a five minute break at 1400, when Hurd stopped fussing with his back straps and signalled for silence, though the other five had been too wrapped in their own discomfort to be talking.

"Listen! Do you hear it, Lieutenant? Like a horn?" Hurd's wizened rat face knotted in concentration. "Way off, like. I can just barely get it."

Hague listened blankly a moment, attempted an expression he fondly hoped was at once intelligent and reassuring, then said, "I don't hear anything. You may have taken too much fever dope, and it's causing a ringing in your ears."

"Naw," with heavy disgust. "Listen! There it goes again!"

"I heard it." That was Sergeant Brian's voice, hard and incisive, and Hague wished he sounded like that, or that he would have heard the sound before his second in command. All of the six were hunched forward, listening raptly, when the Lieutenant stood up.

"Yes, Hurd. Now I hear it."

The whistle blew then, and they moved forward. Hague noticed the Sergeant had taken a post at the rear of the little file, and watched their back trail warily as they marched.

"What do you think it was, sir?" Bucci inquired in the piping voice that sounded strange coming from his deep chest.

"The Lord knows," Hague answered, and wondered how many times he'd be using that phrase in the days to come. "Might have been some animal. They hadn't found any traces of intelligent life when we left the Base Camp."

BUT in the days that followed there was a new air of expectancy in the marchers, as if their suspicions had solidified into a waiting for attack. They'd been moving forward for several days.

Hague saw the pack before any of his men did, and thanked his guiding star that for once he had been a little more alert than his gun-section members.

The canvas carrier had been set neatly against one of the buttressing roots of a giant tree bole and, from the collecting bottles strapped in efficient rows outside, Hague deduced that it belonged to Bernstein, the entomologist. The gunnery officer halted and peered back into the gloom off the trail, called Bernstein's name; and when there was no reply moved cautiously into the hushed shadows with his carbine ready. He sensed that Sergeant Brian was catfooting behind him.

Then he saw the ghostly white bundle suspended six feet above the forest floor, and moved closer, calling Bernstein's name softly. The dim bundle vibrated gently, and Hague saw that it hung from a giant white lattice radiating wheel-like from the green gloom above. He raised his hand to touch the cocoon thing, noted it was shaped like a man well-wrapped in some woolly material; and on a sudden hunch pulled his belt knife and cut the fibers from what would be the head.

It was Bernstein suspended there, his snug, silken shroud bobbing gently in the dimness. His dark face was pallid in the gloom, sunken and flaccid of feature, as though the juices had been sucked from his corpse, leaving it a limp mummy.

The lattice's slick white strands vibrated—something moved across it overhead, and Hague flashed his lightpak up into the darkness. Crouched twenty feet above him, two giant legs delicately testing the strands of its lattice-like web, Hague saw the spider, its bulbous furred body fully four feet across, the monster's myriad eyes glittering fire-like in the glow of Hague's lightpak, as it gathered the great legs slightly in the manner of a tarantula ready to leap.

Brian's sharp yell broke Hague from his frozen trance. He threw himself down as Brian's rifle crashed, and the giant arachnid was bathed in a blue-white flash of ex-



plosive light, its body tumbling down across the web onto Hague where he lay in the mud. The officer's hoarse yells rang insanely while he pulled himself clear of the dead spider-beast, but he forced himself to quiet at the sound of the Sergeant's cool voice.

"All clear, Lieutenant. It's dead."

"Okay, Brian. I'll be all right now." Hague's voice shook, and he cursed the weakness of his fear, forcing himself to walk calmly without a glance over his shoulder until they were back on the trail. He led the other four gunners back to the spider and Bernstein's body, as a grim object lesson, warned them to leave the trail only in pairs. They returned their weary footslogging pace down the muddy creek marked by Clark's crew. When miles had sweated by at the same steady pace, Hague could still feel in the men's stiff silence their horror of the thing Brian had killed.

HOURS, and then days, rolled past, drudging nightmares through which they plowed in mud and steamy heat, with punctually once every sixteen hours a breathtaking, pounding torrent of rain. Giant drops turned the air into an aqueous mixture that was almost unbreathable, and smashed against their faces until the skin was numb. When the rain stopped abruptly the heat came back and water vapor rose steaming from the mud they walked through; but always they walked, shoving one aching foot ahead of the other through sucking black glue. Sometimes Bormann's harmonica would wheedle reedy airs, and they would sing and talk for a time, but mostly they swung forward in silence, faces drawn with fatigue and pale in the forest half light. Hague looked down at his hands, swollen, bloody with insect bites, and painfully stiff; and wondered if he'd be able to bend them round his ration pan at the evening halt.

Hague was somnambulating at the rear of his little column, listening to an ardent account from Bormann of what his girl might expect when he saw her again. Bucci, slowing occasionally to ease the pneumatic gun's barrel assembly across his shoulder, chimed in with an ecstatic description of his little Wilma. The two had been married just before the Expedition blasted Venusward out of an Arizona desert. Crosse was at the

front end, and his voice came back nasally. "Hey, Lieutenant, there's somebody sitting beside the trail."

"Okay. Halt." The Lieutenant swore tiredly and trotted up to Crosse's side. "Where?"

"There. Against the big root."

Hague moved forward, carbine at ready, and knew without looking that Sergeant Brian was at his shoulder, cool and self-sufficient as always.

"Who's there?" the officer croaked.

"It's me, Bachmann."

Hague motioned his party forward, and they gathered in a small circle about the Doctor, seated calmly beside the trail, with his back against a root flange.

"What's the matter, Doc? Did you want to see us?"

"No. Sewell seems to think you're all healthy. Too bad the main party isn't as well off. Quite a bit of trouble with fever. And, Bernstein gone of course."

Hague nodded, and remembered he'd reported Bernstein's death to the Commander three nights before.

"How's the Commander?" he inquired.

The Doctor's cherubic face darkened. "Not good. He's not a young man, and this heat and walking are wrecking his heart. And he won't ride the tank."

"Well, let's go, Doc." It was Brian's voice, cutting like a knife into Hague's consciousness. The Doctor looked tired, and drawn.

"Go ahead, lads, I'm just going to sit here for a while." He looked up and smiled weakly at the astonished faces, but his eyes were bleakly determined.

"This is as far as I go. Snake bite. We've no anti-venom that seems to work. All they can do is to amputate, and we can't afford another sick man." He pulled a nylon wrapper from one leg that sprawled at an awkward angle beneath him. The bared flesh was black, swollen, and had a gangrenous smell. Young Crosse turned away, and Hague heard his retching.

"What did the Commander say?"

"He agreed this was best. I am going to die anyway."

"Will—will you be all right here? Don't you want us to wait with you?"

The Doctor's smile was weaker, and he



mopped at the rivulets of perspiration streaking his mud-spattered face.

"No. I have an X-lethal dosage and a hypodermic. I'll be fine here. Sewell knows what to do." His round face contorted, "Now, for God's sake, get on, and let me take that tablet. The pain is driving me crazy."

Hague gave a curt order, and they got under way. A little further on the trail, he turned to wave at Doctor Bachmann, but the little man was already invisible in forest shadows.

THE tenth day after the crash of Patrol Rocket One, unofficially known as the Ration Can, glimpses of skylight opened over the trail Clark's crew were marking; and Hague and his men found themselves suddenly in an opening where low, thick vines, and luxuriant, thick-leaved shrubs struggled viciously for life. Balistierri, the zoologist, slight wisp of a dark man always and almost a shadow now, stood wearily beside the trail waiting as they drew up. Their shade-blinded eyes picked out details in the open ground dimly. Hague groaned inwardly when he saw that this was a mere slit in the forest, and the great trees loomed again a hundred yards ahead. Balistierri seized Hague by the shoulder and pointed into the thick mat of green, smiling.

"Watch, all of you."

He blew a shrill blast on his whistle and waited, while Hague's gunners wondered and watched. There was a wild, silvery call, a threshing of wings, and two huge birds rose into the gold tinted air. They flapped up, locked their wings, and glided, soared, and wheeled over the earth-stained knot of men—two great white birds, with crests of fire-gold, plumage snowy save where it was dusted with rosy overtones. Their call was bell-like as they floated across the clearing in a golden haze of sunlight filtered through clouds.

"They're—they're like angels." It was Bormann, the tough young sentimentalist.

"You've named them, soldier," Balistierri grinned. "I've been trying for a name; and that's the best I've heard. Bormann's angels they'll be. In Latin, of course."

Unfolding vistas of eternal zoological glory left Bormann speechless and red-

faced. Sergeant Brian broke in.

"I guess they would have made those horn sounds. Right, Lieutenant?" His voice, dry and a little patronizing, suggested that this was a poor waste of valuable marching time.

"I wouldn't know, Sergeant," Hague answered, trying to keep dislike out of his voice, but the momentary thrill was broken and, with Balistierri beside him, Gunnery Officer Hague struck out on the trail that had been blasted and hacked through the clearing's wanton extravagance of greedy plant life.

As they crossed the clearing, Bucci tripped and sprawled full length in the mud. When he tried to get up, the vine over which he'd stumbled clutched with a woody tendril that wound snakelike tightly about his ankle; and, white faced, the rest of the men chopped him free of the serpentine thing with belt knives, bandaged the thorn wounds in his leg, and went on.

The clearing had one more secret to divulge, however. A movement in the forest edge caught Brian's eye and he motioned to Hague, who followed him questioningly as the Sergeant led him off trail. Brian pointed silently and Hague saw Didrickson, Sergeant in charge of Supplies, seated in the lemon-colored sunlight at the forest edge, an open food pack between his knees, from which he snatched things and swallowed them voraciously, feeding like a wild dog.

"Didrickson! Sergeant Didrickson!" the Lieutenant yelled. "What are you doing?"

The supply man stared back, and Hague knew from the man's face what had happened. He crouched warily, eyes wild with panic and jaw hanging foolishly slack. This was Didrickson, the steady, efficient man who'd sat at the chart table the night they began this march. He had been the only man Devlin thought competent and nerveless enough to handle the food. This was the same Didrickson, and madder now than a March hare, Hague concluded grimly. The enlisted man snatched up the food pack, staring at them in wild fear, and began to run back down the trail, back the way they'd come.

"Come back, Didrickson. We've got to have that food, you fool!"

The madman laughed crazily at the sound



of the officer's voice, glanced back for a moment, then spun and ran.

Sergeant Brian, as always, was ready. His rifle cracked, and the explosive missile blew the running man nearly in half. Sergeant Brian silently retrieved the food pack and brought it back to Hague.

"Do you want it here, Lieutenant, or shall I take it up to the main party?"

"We'll keep it here, Sergeant. Sewell can take it back tonight after our medical check." Hague's voice shook, and he wished savagely that he could have had the nerve to pass that swift death sentence. Didrickson's crime was dangerous to every member of the party, and the Sergeant had been right to shoot. But when the time came—when perhaps the Sergeant wasn't with him—would he, Hague, react swiftly and coolly as an officer should, he wondered despairingly?

"All right, lads, let's pull," he said, and the tight lipped gun crew filed again into the hushed, somber forest corridors.

## II

### COMMUNICATIONS TECHNICIAN

HARKER took a deep pull at his mug of steaming coffee, blinked his eyes hard at the swimming dials before him, and lit a cigarette. Odysseus warning center was never quiet, even now in the graveyard watch when all other lights were turned low through the great ship's hull. Here in the neat grey room, murmuring, softly-clicking signal equipment was banked against every wall in a gleaming array of dials and meters, heavy power leads, black panels, and intricate sheafs of colored wire. The sonar kept up a sleepy drone, and radar scopes glowed fitfully with interference patterns, and the warning buzzer beeped softly as the radar echoed back to its receivers the rumor of strange planetary forces that radar hadn't been built to filter through. What made the interference, base technicians couldn't tell, but it practically paralyzed radio communication on all bands, and blanketed out even radar warnings.

The cigarette burned his finger tips, and Harker jerked awake and tried to concentrate on the letter he was writing home. It would be microfilmed, and go on the next

courier rocket. A movement at the Warnings Room door, brought Harker's head up, and he saw Commander Chapman, lean and grey, standing there.

"Good evening, sir. Come on in. I've got coffee on." The Communications Technician took a pot from the glow heater at his elbow, and set out another cup.

The Commander smiled tiredly, pulled out a stubby metal stool, and sat across the low table from Harker, sipping the scalding coffee cautiously. He looked up after a moment.

"What's the good word, Harker? Picked up anything?"

Harker ran his fingers through his mop of black hair, and grimaced.

"Not a squeak, sir. No radio, no radar. Of course, the interference may be blanketing those. Creates a lot of false signals, too, on the radar screens. But we can't even pick 'em up with long-range sonar. That should get through. We're pretty sure they crashed, all right."

"How about our signals, Harker? Do you think we're getting through to them?"

Harker leaned back expansively, happy to expound his specialty.

"Well, we've been sending radio signals every hour on the hour, and radio voice messages every hour on the half hour. We're sending a continuous sonar beam for their direction-finder. That's about all we can do. As for their picking it up, assuming the rocket has crashed and been totally knocked out, they still have a radio in the whippet tank. It's a transceiver. And they have a portable sonar set, one of those little twenty-pound armored detection units. They'll use it as a direction finder."

Chapman swirled the coffee around in the bottom of his cup and stared thoughtfully into it.

"If they can get sonar, why can't we send them messages down the sonar beam? You know, flick it on and off in Morse code?"

"It won't work with a small detector like they have, sir. With our big set here, we could send them a message, but that outfit they have might burn out. It has a limited sealed motor supply that must break down an initial current resistance on the grids before the rectifiers can convert it to audible



sound. With the set operating continuously, power drainage is small, but begin changing your signal beam and the power has to break down the grid resistance several hundred times for every short signal sent. It would burn out their set in a matter of hours.

"It works like a slide trombone, sort of. Run your slide way out, and you get a slowly vibrating column of air, and that is heard as a low note, only on sonar it would be a short note. Run your slide way up, and the vibrations are progressively faster and higher in pitch. The sonar set, at peak, is vibrating so rapidly that it's almost static, and the power flow is actually continuous. But, starting and stopping the set continuously; the vibrators never have a chance to reach a normal peak, and the power flow is broken at each vibration in the receiver—and a few hours later your sonar receptor is a hunk of junk."

"All right, Harker. Your discussion is vague, but I get the general idea that my suggestion wasn't too hot. Well, have whoever is on duty call me if any signals come through." The Commander set down his cup, said good night, and moved off down the hushed corridor. Harker returned to his letter and a chewed stub of pencil, while he scowled in a fevered agony of composition. It was a letter to his girl, and it had to be good.

NIGHT had begun to fall over the forest roof, and stole thickening down the muddy cathedral aisles of great trees, and Hague listened hopefully for the halt signal from the whippet tank, which should come soon. He was worried about Bucci who was laughing and talking volubly, and the officer decided he must have a touch of fever. The dark, muscular gunner kept talking about his young wife in what was almost a babble. Once he staggered and nearly fell, until Hurd took the pneumatic gun barrel assembly and carried it on his own shoulders. They were all listening expectantly for the tank's klaxon, when a brassy scream ripped the evening to echoing shreds and a flurry of shots broke out ahead.

The scream came again, metallic and shrill as a locomotive gone amok; yells, explosive-bullet reports, and the sound of

hammering blows drifted back.

"Take over, Brian," Hague snapped. "Crosse, Hurd—let's go!"

The three men ran at a stagger through the dragging mud around a turn in the trail, and dropped the pneumatic gun swiftly into place, Hurd at firing position, Crosse on the charger, and Hague prone in the slime snapping an ammunition belt into the loader.

Two emergency flares some one had thrown lit the trail ahead in a garish photographic fantasy of bright, white light and ink-black shadow, a scene out of *Inferno*. A cart lay on its side, men were running clear, the whippet tank lay squirming on its side, and above it towered the screaming thing. A lizard, or dinosaur, rearing up thirty feet, scaly grey, a man clutched in its two hand-like claws, while its armored tail smashed and smashed at the tank with pile-driver blows. Explosive bullets cracked around the thing's chest in blue white flares of light, but it continued to rip at the man twisting pygmy-like in its claws—white teeth glinting like sabers as its blindly malevolent screams went on.

"On target," Hurd's voice came strained and low.

"Charge on," from Crosse.

"Let her go!" Hague yelled, and fed APX cartridges as the gun coughed a burst of armor-piercing, explosive shells into the rearing beast. Hague saw the tank turret swing up as Whittaker tried to get his gun in action, but a slashing slap of the monster's tail spun it back brokenly. The cluster of pneumatic shells hit then and burst within that body, and the great grey-skinned trunk was hurled off the trail, the head slapping against a tree trunk on the other side as the reptile was halved.

"Good shooting, Crosse," Hague grunted. "Get back with Brian. Keep the gun ready. That thing might have a mate." He ran toward the main party, and into the glare of the two flares.

"Where's Devlin?"

Clark, the navigation officer, was standing with a small huddle of men near the smashed supply cart.

"Here, Hague," he called. His eyes were sunken, his face older in the days since Hague had last seen him. "Devlin's dead,



smashed between the cart and a tree trunk. We've lost two men, Commander Devlin and Ellis, the soils man. He's the one it was eating." He grimaced.

"That leaves twenty-three of us?" Hague inquired, and tried to sound casual.

"That's right. You'll continue to cover the rear. Those horn sounds you reported had Devlin worried about an attack from your direction. I'll be with the tank."

Sergeant Brian was stoically heating ration stew over the cook unit when Hague returned, while the crew sat in a close circle, alternately eyeing nervously the forest at their backs, and the savory steam that rose from Brian's mixture. There wasn't much for each of them, but it was hot and highly nutritious, and after a cigarette and coffee they would feel comfort for a while.

Crosse, seated on the grey metal charger tube he'd carried all day, fingered the helmet in his lap, and looked inquiringly at the Lieutenant.

"Well, sir, anybody hurt? Was the tank smashed?"

Hague squatted in the circle, sniffed the stew with loud enthusiasm, and looked about the circle.

"Commander Devlin's dead, and Ellis. One supply cart smashed, but the tank'll be all right. The lizard charged the tank. Balistierri thinks it was the lizard's mating season, and he figured the tank was another male and he tried to fight it. Then he stayed --to--lunch and we got him. Lieutenant Clark is in command now."

The orange glow of Brian's cook unit painted queer shadows on the strained faces around him, and Hague tried to brighten them up.

"Will you favor us with one of your inimitable harmonica arrangements, Maestro Bormann?"

"I can't right now. I'm bandaging Helen's wing." He held out something in the palm of his hand, and the heater's glow glittered on liquid black eyes. "She's like a little bird, but without her feathers. See?" He placed the warm lump in Hague's hand. "For wings, she's just got skin, like a bat, except she's built like a bird."

"You ought to show this to Balistierri, and maybe he'll name this for you too."

Bormann's homely face creased into a

grin. "I did, sir. At the noon halt when I found it. It's named after my girl, 'Bormann's Helen', only in Latin. Helen's got a broken wing."

AS THEY ATE, they heard the horn note again. Bucci's black eyes were feverishly bright, his skin hot and dry, and the vine scratches on his leg badly inflamed; and when the rest began to sing he was quiet. The reedy song of Bormann's harmonica piped down the quiet forest passages, and echoed back from the great trees; and somewhere, as Hague dozed off in his little tent, he heard the horn note again, sandwiched into mouth organ melody.

Two days of slogging through the slimy green mud, and at a noon halt Sewell brought back word to be careful, that a man had failed to report at roll call that morning. The gun crew divided Bucci's equipment between them, and he limped in the middle of the file on crutches fashioned from ration cart wreckage. Crosse, who'd been glancing off continually, like a wizened, curious rat, flung up his arm in a silent signal to halt, and Hague moved in to investigate, the ever present Brian moving carefully and with jungle beast's silent poise just behind him. Crumpled like a sack of damp laundry, in the murk of two root buttresses, lay Romano, one of the two photographers. His Hasselblatt camera lay beneath his body crushing a small plant he must have been photographing.

From the back of Romano's neck protruded a gleaming nine-inch arrow shaft, a lovely thing of gleaming bronze-like metal, delicately thin of shaft and with fragile hammered bronze vanes. Brian moved up behind Hague, bent over the body and cut the arrow free.

They examined the thing, and when Brian spoke Hague was surprised that this time even the rock-steady Sergeant spoke in a hushed voice, the kind boys use when they walk by a graveyard at night and don't wish to attract unwelcome attention.

"Looks like it came from a blowgun, Lieutenant. See the plug at the back. It must be poisoned; it's not big enough to kill him otherwise."

Hague grunted assent, and the two moved back trailward.



"Brian, take over. Crosse, come on. We'll report this to Clark. Remember, from now on wear your body armor and go in pairs when you leave the trail. Get Bucci's plates on to him."

Bormann and Hurd set down their loads, and were buckling the weakly protesting Bucci into his chest and back plates, as Hague left them.

COMMANDER CHAPMAN stared at the circle of faces. His section commanders lounged about his tiny square office. "Well, then, what are their chances?"

Bjornson, executive for the technical section, stared at Chapman levelly.

"I can vouch for Devlin. He's not precisely a rule-book officer, but that's why I recommended him for this expedition. He's at his best in an unusual situation, one where he has to depend on his own wits. He'll bring them through."

Artilleryman Branch spoke in turn. "I don't know about Hague. He's young, untried. Seemed a little unsure. He might grow panicky and be useless. I sent him because there was no one else, unless I went myself."

The Commander cleared his throat brusquely. "I know you wanted to go, Branch, but we can't send out our executive officers. Not yet, anyway. What about Clark? Could he take over Devlin's job?"

"Clark can handle it," Captain Rindell of the Science Section, was saying. "He likes to follow the rule book, but he's sturdy stuff. He'll bring them through if something happens to Devlin."

"Hmmm—that leaves Hague as the one questionable link in their chain of command, Young man, untried. Of course, he's only the junior officer. There's no use stewing over this; but I'll tell you frankly, that if those men can't get their records through to us before we send the next courier rocket to earth, I think the U.S. Rocket Service is finished. This attempt will be chalked up as a failure. The project will be abandoned entirely, and we'll be ordered back to earth to serve as a fighter arm there."

Bjornson peered from the space-port window and looked out over the cinder-packed parade a hundred feet below. "What makes

you so sure the Rocket Service is in immediate danger of being scrapped?"

"The last courier rocket contained a confidential memo from Secretary Dougherty. There is considerable war talk, and the other Service Arms are plunging for larger armaments. They want their appropriations of money and stock pile materials expanded at our expense. We've got to show that we are doing a good job, show the Government a concrete return in the form of adequate reports on the surface of Venus, and its soils and raw materials."

"What about the 'copters?" Rindell inquired. "They brought in some good stuff for the reports."

"Yes, but with a crew of only four men, they can't do enough."

Branch cut in dryly. "About all I can see is to look hopeful. The Rocket would have exhausted its fuel long ago. It's been over ten weeks since they left Base."

"Assuming they're marching overland, God forbid, they'll have only sonar and radio, right?" Bjornson was saying. "Why not keep our klaxon going? It's a pretty faint hope, but we'll have to try everything. My section is keeping the listeners manned continually, we've got a sonar beam out, radio messages every thirty minutes, and with the klaxon we're doing all we can. I doubt if anything living could approach within a twenty-five mile range without hearing that klaxon, or without us hearing them with the listeners."

"All right." Commander Chapman stared hopelessly at a fresh batch of reports burdening his desk. "Send out ground parties within the ten mile limit, but remember we can't afford to lose men. When the 'copters are back in, send them both West." West meant merely in a direction west from Meridian 0, as the mother rocket's landing place had been designated. "They can't do much searching over that rainforest, but it's a try. They might pick up a radio message."

Chapman returned grumpily to his reports, and the others filed out.

### III

AT NIGHT, on guard, Hague saw a thousand horrors peopling the Stygian forest murk; but when he flashed his lightpak



into darkness there was nothing. He wondered how long he could stand the waiting, when he would crack as Supply Sergeant Didrickson had, and his comrades would blast him down with explosive bullets. He should be like Brian, hard and sure, and always doing the right thing, he decided. He'd come out of OCS Gunnery School, trained briefly in the newly-formed U.S. Rocket Service. Then the expedition to Venus—it was it was a fifty-fifty chance they said, and out of all the volunteers he'd been picked. And when the first expedition was ready to blast off from the Base Camp on Venus, he'd been picked again. Why, he cursed despairingly? Sure, he wanted to come, but how could his commanders have had faith in him, when he didn't know himself if he could continue to hold out.

Sounds on the trail sent his carbine automatically to ready, and he called a strained, "Halt."

"Okay, Hague. It's Clark and Arndt."

The wiry little navigation officer, and lean, scraggy Geologist Arndt, the latter's arm still in a sling, came into the glow of Hague's lightpak.

"Any more horns or arrows?" Clark's voice sounded tight, and repressed; Hague reflected that perhaps the strain was getting him too.

"No, but Bucci is getting worse. Can't you carry him on the cart?"

"Hague, I've told you twenty times. That cart is full and breaking down now. Get it through your head that it's no longer individual men we can think of now, but the entire party. If they can't march, they must be left, or all of us may die!" His voice was savage, and when he tried to light a cigarette his hand shook. "All right. It's murder, and I don't like it any better than you do."

"How are we doing? What's the over-all picture?" Both of the officers tried to smile a little at the memory of that pompous little phrase, favorite of a windbag they'd served under.

"Not good. Twenty-two of us now."

"Hirooka thinks we may be within radio range of Base soon," he continued more hopefully. "With this interference, we can't tell, though."

They talked a little longer, Arndt gave

the gunnery officer a food-and-medical supply packet, and Hague's visitors became two bobbing glows of light that vanished down the trail.

A soul crushing weight of days passed while they strained forward through mud and green gloom, like men walking on a forest sea bottom. Then it was a cool dawn, and a tugging at his boot awoke the Lieutenant. Hurd, his face a strained mask, was peering into the officer's small shelter tent and jerking at his leg.

"Get awake, Lieutenant. I think they're here."

Hague struggled hard to blink off the exhausted sleep he'd been in.

"Listen, Lieutenant, one of them horns has been blowing. It's right here. Between us and the main party."

"Okay." Hague rolled swiftly from the tent as Hurd awoke the men. Hague moved swiftly to each.

"Brian, you handle the gun. Bucci, loader. Crosse, charger. Bormann, cover our right; Hurd the left. I'll watch the trail ahead."

Brian and Crosse worked swiftly and quietly with the lethal efficiency that had made them crack gunners at Fort Fisher, North Carolina. Bucci lay motionless at the ammunition box, but his eyes were bright, and he didn't seem to mind his feverish, swollen leg. The Sergeant and Crosse slewed the pneumatic gun to cover their back trail, and fell into position beside the gleaming grey tube. Hague, Bormann and Hurd moved quickly at striking tents and rolling packs, their rifles ready at hand.

Hague had forgotten his fears and the self-doubt, the feeling that he had no business ordering men like Sergeant Brian, and Hurd and Bormann. They were swallowed in intense expectancy as he lay watching the dawn fog that obscured like thick smoke the trail that led to Clark's party and the whippet tank.

He peered back over his shoulder for a moment. Brian, Bucci, and Crosse, mud-stained backs toward him, were checking the gun and murmuring soft comments. Bormann looked at the officer, grinned tightly, and pointed at Helen perched on his shoulder. His lips carefully framed the words, "Be a pushover, Helen brings luck."

The little bird peered up into Bormann's



old-young face, and Hague, trying to grin back, hoped he looked confident. Hurd lay on the other side of the trail, his back to Bormann, peering over his rifle barrel, bearded jaws rhythmically working a cud of tobacco he'd salvaged somewhere, and Hague suddenly thought he must have been saving it for the finish.

Hague looked back into the green light beginning to penetrate the trail fog, changing it into a glowing mass—then thought he saw a movement. Up the trail, the whip-pet tank's motor caught with a roar, and he heard Whittaker traversing the battered tank's turret. The turret gun boomed flatly, and a shell burst somewhere in the forest darkness to Hague's right.

Then there was a gobbling yell and gray man-like figures poured out onto the trail. Hague set his sights on them, the black sight-blade silhouetting sharply in the glowing fog. He set them on a running figure, and squeezed his trigger, then again, and again, as new targets came. Sharp reports ran crackling among the great trees. Sharp screams came, and a whistling sound overhead that he knew were blowgun arrows. The pneumatic gun sputtered behind him, and Bormann's and Hurd's rifles thudded in the growing roar.

Blue flashes and explosive bullets made fantastic flares back in the forest shadows; and suddenly a knot of man-shapes were running toward him through the fog. Hague picked out one in the glowing mist, fired, another, fired. Gobbling yells were around him, and he shot toward them through the fog, at point-blank range. A thing rose up beside him, and Hague yelled with murderous fury, and drove his belt-knife up into gray leather skin. Something burned his shoulder as he rolled aside and fired at the dark form standing over him with a poised, barbed spear. The blue-white flash was blinding, and he cursed and leaped up.

There was nothing more. Scattered shots, and the forest lay quiet again. After that shot at point-blank range, Hague's vision had blacked out.

"Any one else need first aid?" he called, and tried to keep his voice firm. When there was silence, he said, "Hurd, lead me to the tank."

He heard the rat-faced man choke, "My

God, he's blind."

"Just flash blindness, Hurd. Only temporary," Hague kept his face stiff, and hoped frantically that he was right, that it was just temporary blindness, temporary optic shock.

Sergeant Brian's icy voice cut in. "Gun's all right, Lieutenant. Nobody hurt. We fired twenty-eight rounds of H.E. No A.P.X. Get going with him, Hurd."

He felt Hurd's tug at his elbow, and they made their way up the trail.

"What do they look like, Hurd?"

"These men-things? They're gray, about my size, skin looks like leather, and their heads are flattish. Eyes on the side of their heads, like a lizard. Not a stitch of clothes. Just a belt with a knife and arrow holder. And they got webbed claws for feet. They're ugly-looking things, sir. Here's the tank."

Clark's voice came, hard and clear. "That you, Hague?" Silence for a moment. "What's wrong? You're not blinded?"

Sewell had dropped his irascibility, and his voice was steady and kindly.

"Just flash blindness, isn't it, sir? This salve will fix you up. You've got a cut on your shoulder. I'll take care of that too."

"How are your men, Hague?" Clark sounded as though he were standing beside Hague.

"Not a scratch. We're ready to march."

"Five hurt here, three with the advance party, and two at the tank. We got 'em good, though. They hit the trail between our units and got fire from both sides. Must be twenty of them dead."

Hague grimaced at the sting of something Sewell had squeezed into his eyes.

"Who was hurt?"

"Arndt, the geologist; his buddy, Galut, the botanist; lab technician Harker, Crewman Dowsen, and Szachek, the meteorologist man. How's your pneumatic ammunition?"

"We fired twenty-eight rounds of H.E."

Cartographer Hirooka's voice burst in excitedly.

"That gun crew of yours! Your gun crew got twenty-one of these—these lizard men. A bunch came up our back trail, and the pneumatic cut them to pieces."

"Good going, Hague. We'll leave you extended back there. I'm pulling in the advance party, and there'll be just two groups.



We'll be at point, and you continue at afterguard." Clark was silent for a moment, then his voice came bitterly, "We're down to seventeen men, you know."

He cursed, and Hague heard the wiry little navigator slosh away through the mud and begin shouting orders. He and Hurd started back with Whittaker and Sergeant Sample yelling wild instructions from the tank as to what the rear guard might do with the next batch of lizard-men who came sneaking up.

Hague's vision was clearing, and he saw Balistierri and the photographer Whitcomb through a milky haze, measuring, photographing, and even dissecting several of the lizard-men. The back trail, swept by pneumatic gunfire was a wreck of wood splinters and smashed trees, smashed bodies, and cratered earth.

They broke down the gun, harnessed the equipment, and swung off at the sound of Clark's whistle. Bucci had to be supported between two of the others, and they took turnabout at the job, sloshing through the water and mud, with Bucci's one swollen leg dragging uselessly between them. It was punishing work as the heat veils shimmered and thickened, but no one seemed to consider leaving him behind, Hague noticed; and he determined to say nothing about Clark's orders that the sick must be abandoned.

Days and nights flashed by in a dreary monotony of mud, heat, insects and thinning rations. Then one morning the giant trees began to thin, and they passed from rainforest into jungle.

The change was too late for Bucci. They carved a neat marker beside the trail, and set the dead youth's helmet atop it. Lieutenant Hague carried ahead a smudged letter in his shirt, with instructions to forward it to Wilma, the gunner's young wife.

Hague and his four gunners followed the rattling whippet tank's trail higher, the jungle fell behind, and their protesting legs carried them over the rim of a high, cloud-swept plateau, that swept on to the limit of vision on both sides and ahead.

**T**HE city's black walls squatted secretively; foursquare, black, glassy walls with a blocky tower set sturdily at each of the

four corners, enclosing what appeared to be a square mile of low buildings. Gray fog whipped coldly across the flat bleakness and rustled through dark grass.

Balistierri, plodding beside Hague at the rear, stared at it warily, muttering, "And Childe Roland to the dark tower came."

Sampler's tank ground along the base of the twelve-foot wall, turned at a sharp right angle, and the party filed through a square cut opening that once had been a gate. The black city looked tenantless. There was dark-hued grass growing in the misted streets and squares, and across the lintels of cube-shaped, neatly aligned dwellings, fashioned of thick, black blocks. Hague could hear nothing but whipping wind, the tank's clatter, and the quiet clink of equipment as men shuffled ahead through the knee-high grass, peering watchfully into dark doorways.

Clark's whistle shrilled, the tank motor died, and they waited.

"Hague, come ahead."

The gunnery officer nodded at Sergeant Brian, and walked swiftly to Clark, who was leaning against the tank's mudcaked side.

"Sampler says we've got to make repairs on the tank. We'll shelter here. Set your gun on a roof top commanding the street—or, better yet, set it on the wall. I'll want two of your gunners to go hunting food animals."

"What do you think this place is, Bob?"

"Beats me," and the navigator's wind-burned face twisted in a perplexed expression. "Lenkranz knows more about metals, but he thinks this stone is volcanic, like obsidian. Those lizard-men couldn't have built it."

"We passed some kind of bas-relief or murals inside the gate."

"Whitcomb is going to photograph them. Blake, Lenkranz, Johnston, and Hirooka are going to explore the place. Your two gunners, and Crewman Swenson and Balistierri will form the two hunting parties."

For five days, Hague and Crosse walked over the sullen plateau beneath scudding, leaden clouds, hunting little lizards that resembled dinosaurs and ran in coveys like gray chickens. The meat was good, and



Sewell dropped his role of medical technician to achieve glowing accolades as an expert cook. Balistierri was in a zoologist's paradise, and he hunted over the windy plain with Swenson, the big white-haired Swede, for ten and twelve hours at a stretch. Balistierri would sit in the cook's unit glow at night, his thin face ecstatic as he described the weird life forms he and Swenson had tracked down during the day; or alternately he'd bemoan the necessity of eating what were to him priceless zoological specimens.

Whittaker and Sampler hammered in the recalcitrant tank's bowels and shouted ribald remarks to anyone nearby, until they emerged the third day, grease-stained and perspiring, to announce that "She's ready to roll her g— d— cleats off."

Whittaker had been nursing the tank's radio transceiver beside the forward hatch this gray afternoon, when his wild yell brought Hague erect. The officer carefully handed Bormann's skin bird back to the gunner, swung down from the city wall's edge, and ran to Whittaker's side. Clark was already there when Hague reached the tank.

"Listen! I've got 'em!" Whittaker yelled and extended the crackling earphones to Clark.

A tinny voice penetrated the interference.

"Base . . . Peter One . . . Do you hear . . . to George Easy Peter One . . . hear me . . . out."

Whittaker snapped on his throat microphone.

"George Easy Peter One To Base. George Easy Peter One To Base. We hear you. We hear you. Rocket crashed. Rocket crashed. Returning overland. Returning overland. Present strength sixteen men. Can you drop us supplies? Can you drop us supplies?"

The earphones sputtered, but no more voices came through. Clark's excited face fell into tired lines.

"We've lost them. Keep trying, Whittaker. Hague, we'll march-order tomorrow at dawn. You'll take the rear again."

GRAY, windy dawnlight brought them out to the sound of Clark's call. Strapping on equipment and plates, they assem-

bled around the tank. They were tested, and full fed.

"Walk, you poor devils," Whittaker was yelling from his tank turret. "And, if you get tired, run awhile," he snorted, grinning heartlessly, as he leaned back in pretended luxury against the gunner's seat, a thinly padded metal strip.

Balistierri and the blond Swenson shouldered their rifles and shuffled out. They would move well in advance as scouts.

"I wouldn't ride in that armored alarm-clock if it had a built-in harem," Hurd was screaming at Whittaker, and hurled a well-placed mudball at the tankman's head as the tank motor caught, and the metal vehicle lumbered ahead toward the gate, with Whittaker sneering, but with most of his head safely below the turret rim. Beside it marched Clark, his ragged uniform carefully scraped clean of mud, and with him Lenkranz, the metals man. Both carried rifles and wore half empty bandoliers of blast cartridges.

The supply cart jerked behind the tank, and behind it filed Whitcomb with his cameras; Sewell, the big, laconic medical technician; Johnston; cartographer Hirooka perusing absordedly the clip board that held his strip map; Blake, the lean and spectacled bacteriologist, brought up the rear. Hague waited until they had disappeared through the gate cut sharply in the city's black wall, then he turned to his gun crew.

Sergeant Brian, saturnine as always, swung past carrying the pneumatic barrel assembly, Crosse with the charger a pace behind. Next, Bormann, whispering to Helen who rode his shoulder piping throaty calls. Last came Hurd, swaggering past with jaws grinding steadily at that mysterious cud. Hague cast a glance over his shoulder at the deserted street of black cubes, wondered at the dank loneliness of the place, and followed Hurd.

The hours wore on as they swung across dark grass, through damp tendrils of cloud, and faced into whipping, cold wind, eyes narrowed against its sting. Helen, squawking unhappily, crawled inside Bormann's shirt and rode with just her brown bird-head protruding.

"Look at the big hole, Lieutenant," Hurd called above the wind.



Hurd had dropped behind, and Hague called a halt to investigate Hurd's find, but as he hiked rapidly back, the wiry little man yelled and pitched out of sight. Brian came running, and he and Hague peered over the edge of a funnel shaped pit, from which Hurd was trying to crawl. Each time he'd get a third of the way up the eighteen-foot slope, gravelly soil would slide and he'd again be carried to the bottom.

"Throw me a line."

Brian pulled a hank of nylon line from his belt, shook out the snarls, and tossed an end into Hurd's clawing hands. Hague and the Sergeant anchored themselves to the upper end and were preparing to haul, when Hague saw something move in the gravel beneath Hurd's feet, at the funnel bottom, and saw a giant pincers emerging from loose, black gravel.

"Hurd, look out!" he screamed.

The little man, white-faced, threw himself aside as a giant beetle head erupted through the funnel bottom. The great pincers jaws fastened around Hurd's waist as he struggled frantically up the pit's side. He began screaming when the beetle monster dragged him relentlessly down, his distorted face flung up at them appealingly. Hague snatched at his rifle and brought it up. When the gun cracked, the pincers tightened on Hurd's middle, and the little man was snipped in half. The blue-white flash and report of the explosive bullet blended with Hurd's choked yells, the beetle rolled over on its back and the two bodies lay entangled at the pit bottom. Brian and Hague looked at each other in silent, blanched horror, then turned from the pit's edge and loped back to the others.

Bormann and Crosse peered fearfully across the windwhipped grass, and inquired in shouts what Hurd was doing.

"He's dead, gone," Hague yelled savagely over the wind's whine. "Keep moving. We can't do anything. Keep going."

#### IV

AT 1630 HOURS Commander Technician Harker slipped on the carset, threw over a transmitting switch, and monotoned the routine verbal message.

"Base to George Easy Peter One . . .

Base to George Easy Peter One . . . Do you hear me, George Easy Peter One . . . Do you hear me George Easy Peter One . . . reply please . . . reply please." Nothing came from his earphones, but bursts of crackling interference, until he tried the copters next, and "George Easy Peter Two" and "George Easy Peter Three" reported in. They were operating near the base.

He tried "One" again, just in case.

"Base to George Easy Peter One . . . Base to George Easy Peter One . . . Do you hear me . . . Do you hear me . . . out."

A scratching whisper resolved over the interference. Harker's face wore a stunned look, but he quickly flung over a second switch and the scratching voice blared over the mother ship's entire address system. Men dropped their work throughout the great hull, and clustered around the speakers.

"George One . . . Base . . . hear you . . . rocket crashed . . . overland . . . present strength . . . supplies . . . drop supplies."

Interference surged back and drowned the whispering voice, while through Odysseus' hull a ragged cheer grew and gathered volume. Harker shut off the address system and strained over his crackling earphones, but nothing more came in response to his radio calls.

He glanced up and found the Warning Room jammed with technicians, science section members, officers, men in laboratory smocks, or greasy overalls, or spotless Rocket Service uniforms, watching intently his own strained face as he tried to get through. Commander Chapman looked haggard, and Harker remembered that someone had once said that Chapman's young sister was the wife of the medical technician who'd gone out with Patrol Rocket One.

Harker finally pulled off the earphones reluctantly and set them on the table before him. "That's all. You heard everything they said over the P.A. system. Nothing more is coming through."

Night came, another day, night again, and they came finally to the plateau's end and stood staring from a windy escarpment across an endless roof of rainforest far below, gray green under the continuous roof of lead-colored clouds. Hague, stand-



ing back a little, watched them. A thin line of ragged men along the rim peering mournfully out across that endless expanse for a gleam that might be the distant hull of *Odysseus*, the mother ship. A damp wind fluttered their rags and plastered them against gaunt bodies.

Clark and Sampler were conferring in shouts.

"Will the tank make it down this grade?" Clark wanted to know.

For once, Sergeant Sampler's mobile, merry face was grim.

"I don't know, but we'll sure try. Be ready to cut that cart loose if the tank starts to slip."

Drag ropes were fastened to the cart, a man stationed at the tank hitch, and Sampler sent his tank lurching forward over the edge, and it slanted down at a sharp angle. Hague, holding a drag rope, set his heels and allowed the tank's weight to pull him forward over the rim; and the tank, cart, and muddy figures hanging to drag ropes began descending the steep gradient. Bormann, just ahead of the Lieutenant, strained back at the rope and turned a tight face over his shoulder.

"She's slipping faster!"

The tank was picking up speed, and Hague heard the clash of gears as Sampler tried to fight the downward pull of gravity. Gears ground, and Sampler forced the whippet straight again, but the downward slide was increasing. Hague was flattened under Bormann, heels digging, and behind him he could hear Sergeant Brian cursing, struggling to keep flat against the downward pull.

The tank careened sideways again, slipped, and Whittaker's white face popped from her turret.

"She's going," he screamed.

A drag rope parted. Clark sprang like a madman between tank and cart, and cut the hitch. The tank, with no longer sufficient restraining weight, tipped with slow majesty outward, then rolled out and down, bouncing, smashing as if in a slow motion film, shedding parts at each crushing contact. It looked like a toy below them, still rolling and gathering speed, when Hague saw Whittaker's body fly free, a tiny rag-

doll at that distance, and the tank was lost to view when it bounced off a ledge and went floating down through space.

Clark signalled them forward, and they inched the supply cart downward on the drag ropes, legs trembling with strain, and their nerves twitching at the memory of Whittaker's chalky face peering from the falling turret. It was eight hours before they reached the bottom, reeling with exhaustion, set a guard, and tumbled into their shelter tents. Outside, Hague could hear Clark pacing restlessly, trying to assure himself that he'd been right to cut the tank free, that there'd been no chance to save Whittaker and Sampler when the tank began to slide.

Hague lay in his little tent listening to the footsteps splash past in muddy Venusian soil, and was thankful that he hadn't had to make the decision. He'd been saving three cigarettes in an oilskin packet, and he drew one carefully from the wrapping now, lit it, and inhaled deeply. Could he have done what Clark did—break that hitch? He still didn't know when he took a last lung-filling pull at the tiny stub of cigarette and crushed it out carefully.

As dawn filtered through the cloud layer, they were rolling shelter tents and buckling on equipment. Clark's face was a worn mask when he talked with Hague, and his fingers shook over his pack buckles.

"There are thirteen of us. Six men will pull the supply cart, and six guard, in four hour shifts. You and I will alternate command at guard."

He was silent for a moment, then watched Hague's face intently as he spoke again.

"It'll be a first grade miracle if any of us get through. Hague, you—you know I had to cut that tank free." His voice rose nervously. "You know that! You're an officer."

"Yeah, I guess you did." Hague couldn't say it any better, and he turned away and fussed busily with the bars holding the portable Sonar detection unit to the supply cart.

They moved off with Hague leaning into harness pulling the supply cart bumpily ahead. Clark stumbled jerkily at the head, with Blake, a lean, silent ghost beside



him, rifle in hand. The cart came next with Hague, Bormann, Sergeant Brian, Crosse, Lenkranz and Sewell leaning in single file against its weight. At the rear marched photographer Whitcomb, Hirooka with his maps, and Balistierri, each carrying a rifle. The big Swede Swenson was last in line, peering warily back into the rainforest shadows. The thirteen men wound Indian file from sight of the flatheaded reptilian thing, clutching a sheaf of bronze arrows, that watched them.

HAGUE had lost count of days again when he looked up into the shadowy forest roof, his feet finding their way unconsciously through the thin mud, his ears registering automatically the murmurs of talk behind him, the supply cart's tortured creaking, and the continuous Sonar drone. The air felt different, warmer than its usual steam bath heat, close and charged with expectancy, and the forest seemed to crouch in waiting with the repressed silence of a hunting cat.

Crosse yelled thinly from the rear of the file, and they all halted to listen, the hauling crew dropping their harness thankfully. Hague turned back and saw Crosse's thin arm waving a rifle overhead, then pointing down the trail. The Lieutenant listened carefully until he caught the sound, a thin call, the sound of a horn mellowed by distance.

The men unthinkingly moved in close and threw wary looks into the forest ways around them.

"Move further ahead, Hague. Must be more lizard men." Clark swore, with tired despair. "All right, let's get moving and make it fast."

The cart creaked ahead again, moving faster this time, and the snicking of rifle bolts came to Hague. He moved swiftly ahead on the trail and glanced up again, saw breaks in the forest roof, and realized that the huge trees were pitching wildly far above.

"Look up," he yelled, "wind coming!"

The wind came suddenly, striking with stone wall solidity. Hague sprinted to the cart, and the struggling body of men worked it off the trail, and into a buttress angle of two great tree roots, lashing it

there with nylon ropes. The wind velocity increased, smashing torn branches overhead, and ripping at the men who lay with their heads well down in the mud. Tiny animals were blown hurtling past, and once a great spider came flailing in cartwheel fashion, then smashed brokenly against a tree.

The wind drone rose in volume, the air darkened, and Hague lost sight of the other men from behind his huddled shelter against a wall-like root. The great trees twisted with groaning protest, and thunderous crashes came downward through the forest, with sometimes the faint squeak of a dying or frightened animal. The wind halted for a breathless, hushed moment of utter stillness, broken only by the dropping of limbs and the scurry of small life forms—then came the screaming fury from the opposite direction.

For a moment, the gunnery officer thought he'd be torn from the root to which his clawing fingers clung. Its brutal force smashed breath from Hague's lungs and held him pinned in his corner until he struggled choking for air as a drowning man does. It seemed that he couldn't draw breath, that the air was a solid mass from which he could no longer get life. Then the wind stopped as suddenly as it had come, leaving dazed quiet. As he stumbled back to the cart, Hague saw crushed beneath a thigh-sized limb a feebly moving reptilian head; and the dying eyes of the lizard-man were still able to stare at him in cold malevolence.

The supply cart was still intact, roped between buttressing roots to belt knives driven into the tough wood. Hague and Clark freed it, called a hasty roll, and the march was resumed at a fast pace through cooled, cleaner air. They could no longer hear horn sounds; but the grim knowledge that lizard-men were near them lent strength, and Hague led as rapidly as he dared, listening carefully to the Sonar's drone behind him, altering his course when the sound faded, and straightening out when it grew in volume.

A day slipped by and another, and the cart rolled ahead through thin greasy mud on the forest floor, with the Sonar's drone mingled with murmuring men's voices talk-



ing of food. It was the universal topic, and they carefully worked out prolonged menus each would engorge when they reached home. They forgot heat, insect bites, the sapping humidity, and talked of food—steaming roasts, flanked by crystal goblets of iced wine, oily roasted nuts, and lush, crisp green salads.

## V

HAGUE, again marching ahead with Balistierri, broke into the comparatively bright clearing, and was blinded for a moment by the sudden, cloud-strained light after days of forest darkness. As their eyes accommodated to the lemon-colored glare, he and Balistierri sighted the animals squatting beneath low bushes that grew thickly in the clearing. They were monkey-like primates with golden tawny coats, a cockatoo crest of white flaring above dog faces. The monkeys stared a moment, the great white crests rising doubtfully, ivory canine teeth fully three inches long bared.

They'd been feeding on fruit that dotted the shrub-filled clearing; but now one screamed a warning, and they sprang into vines that made a matted wall on every side. The two rifles cracked together again, and three fantastically colored bodies lay quiet, while the rest of the troop fled screaming into tree tops and disappeared. At the blast of sound, a fluttering kaleidoscope of color swept up about the startled rocketeers, and they stood blinded, while mad whorls of color whirled around them in a miniature storm.

"Giant butterflies," Balistierri was screaming in ecstasy. "Look at them! Big as a dove!"

Hague watched the bright insects coalesce into one agitated mass of vermillion, azure, metallic green, and sulphur yellow twenty feet overhead. The pulsating mass of hues resolved itself into single insects, with wings large as dinnerplates, and they streamed out of sight over the forest roof.

"What were they?" he grinned at Balistierri. "Going to name them after Bormann?"

The slight zoologist still watched the spot where they'd vanished.

"Does it matter much what I call them?

Do you really believe anyone will ever be able to read this logbook I'm making?" He eyed the gunnery officer bleakly, then, "Well, come on. We'd better skin these monks. They're food anyway."

Hague followed Balistierri, and they stood looking down at the golden furred primates. The zoologist knelt, fingered a bedraggled white crest, and remarked, "These blast cartridges don't leave much meat, do they? Hardly enough for the whole party." He pulled a tiny metal block, with a hook and dial, from his pocket, loped the hook through a tendon in the monkey's leg and lifted the dead animal.

"Hmmm. Forty-seven pounds. Not bad." He weighed each in turn, made measurements, and entered these in his pocket notebook.

The circle around Sewell, who presided over the cook unit, was merry that night. The men's eyes were bright in the heater glow as they stuffed their shrunken stomachs with monkey meat and the fruits the monkeys had been eating when Hague and Balistierri surprised them. Swenson and Crosse and Whitcomb, the photographer, overate and were violently sick; but the others sat picking their teeth contentedly in a close circle. Bormann pulled his harmonica from his shirt pocket, and the hard, silvery torrent of music set them to singing softly. Hague and Blake, the bacteriologist, stood guard among the trees.

At dawn, they were marching again, stepping more briskly over tiny creeks, through green-tinted mud, and the wet heat. At noon, they heard the horn again, and Clark ordered silence and a faster pace. They swung swiftly, eating iron rations as they marched. Hague leaned into his cart harness and watched perspiration staining through Bormann's shirted back just ahead of him. Behind, Sergeant Brian tugged manfully, and growled under his breath at buzzing insects, slapping occasionally with a low howl of muted anguish. Helen, the skin bird, rode on Bormann's shoulder, staring back into Hague's face with questioning chirps; and Hague was whistling softly between his teeth at her, when Bormann stopped suddenly and Hague slammed into him. Helen took flight with a startled squawk, and Clark came loping



back to demand quiet. Bormann stared at the two officers, his young-old face blank with surprise.

"I'm, I'm shot," he stuttered, and stared wonderingly at the thing thrusting from the side opening in his chest armor. It was one of the fragile bronze arrows, gleaming metalically in the forest gloom.

Hague cursed, and jerked free of the cart harness.

"Here, I'll get it free." He tugged at the shaft, and Bormann's face twisted. Hague stepped back. "Where's Sewell? This thing must be barbed."

"Back off the trail! Form a wide circle around the cart, but stay under cover! Fight 'em on their own ground!" Clark was yelling, and the men clustered about the cart faded into forest corridors.

Hague and Sewell, left alone, dragged Bormann's limp length beneath the metal cart. Hague leaped erect again, man-handled the pneumatic gun off the cart and onto the trail, spun the charger crank, and lay down in firing position. Behind him, Sewell grunted, "He's gone. Arrow poison must have paralyzed his diaphragm and chest muscles."

"Okay. Get up here and handle the ammunition." Hague's face was savage as the medical technician crawled into position beside him and opened an ammunition carrier.

"Watch the trail behind me," Hague continued, slamming up the top cover plate and jerking a belt through the pneumatic breech. "When I yell charge, spin the charger crank; and when I yell off a number, set the meter arrow at that number." He snapped the cover plate shut and locked it.

"The other way! They're coming the other way!" Sewell lumbered to his knees, and the two heaved the gun around. A blowgun arrow rattled off the cart body above them, and gobbling yells filtered among the trees with an answering crack of explosive cartridges. A screaming knot of gray figures came sprinting down on the cart. Hague squeezed the pneumatic's trigger, the gun coughed, and blue-fire-limned lizard men crumpled in the trail mud.

"Okay, give 'em a few the other way."

The two men horsed the gun around and sent a buzzing flock of explosive loads down the forest corridor opening ahead of the cart. They began firing carefully down other corridors opening off the trail, aiming delicately lest their missiles explode too close and the concussion kill their own men; but they worked a blasting circle of destruction that smashed the great trees back in the forest and made openings in the forest roof. Blue fire flashed in the shadows and froze weird tableaux of screaming lizard-men and hurtling mud, branches, and great splinters of wood.

An exulting yell burst behind them. Hague saw Sewell stare over his shoulder, face contorted, then the big medical technician sprang to his feet. Hague rolled hard, pulling his belt knife, and saw Sewell and a gray man-shape locked in combat above him, saw leathery gray claws drive a bronze knife into the medic's unarmored throat; and then the gunnery officer was on his feet, knife slashing, and the lizard-man fell across the prone Sewell. An almost audible silence fell over the forest, and Hague saw Rocketeers filtering back onto the cart trail, rifles cautiously extended at ready.

"Where's Clark?" he asked Lenkranz. The gray-haired metals man gazed back dully.

"I haven't seen him since we left the trail. I was with Swenson."

The others moved in, and Hague listed the casualties. Sewell, Bormann, and Lieutenant Clark. Gunnery Officer Clarence Hague was now in command. That the Junior Lieutenant now commanded Ground Expeditionary Patrol Number One trickled into his still numb brain; and he wondered for a moment what the Base Commander would think of their chances if he knew. Then he took stock of his little command.

There was young Crosse, his face twitching nervously. There was Blake, the tall, quiet bacteriologist; Lenkranz, the metals man; Hirooka, the Nisei; Balistierri; Whitcomb, the photographer, with a battered Hasselblad still dangling by its neck cord against his armored chest. Swenson was still there, the big Swede crewman; and imperturbable Sergeant Brian, who was now



calmly cleaning the pneumatic gun's loading mechanism. And, Helen, Bormann's skin bird, fluttering over the ration cart, beneath which Bormann and Sewell lay in the mud.

"Crosse, Lenkranz, burial detail. Get going." It was Hague's first order as Commander. He thought the two looked most woebegone of the party, and figured digging might loosen their nerves.

Crosse stared at him, and then sat suddenly against a tree bole.

"I'm not going to dig. I'm not going to march. This is crazy. We're going to get killed. I'll wait for it right here. Why do we keep walking and walking when we're going to die anyway?" His rising voice cracked, and he burst into hysterical laughter. Sergeant Brian rose quietly from his gun cleaning, jerked Crosse to his feet, and slapped him into quiet. Then he turned to Hague.

"Shall I take charge of the burial detail, sir?"

Hague nodded; and suddenly his long dislike of the iron-hard Sergeant melted into warm liking and admiration. Brian was the man who'd get them all through.

The Sergeant knotted his dark brows truculently at Hague. "And I don't believe Crosse meant what he said. He's a very brave man. We all get a little jumpy. But he's a good man, a good Rocketeer."

THREE markers beside the trail, and a pile of dumped equipment marked the battle ground when the cart swung forward again. Hague had dropped all the recording instruments, saving only Whitcomb's exposed films, the rations, rifle ammunition, and logbooks that had been kept by different members of the science section. At his command, Sergeant Brian reluctantly smashed the pneumatic gun's firing mechanism, and left the gun squatting on its tripod beside charger and shell-belts. With the lightened load, Hague figured three men could handle the cart, and he took his place with Brian and Crosse in the harness. The others no longer walked in the trail, but filtered between great root-flanges and tree boles on either side, guiding themselves by the Sonar's hum.

They left no more trail markers, and

Hague cautioned them against making any unnecessary noise.

"No trail markers behind us. This mud is watery enough to hide footprints in a few minutes. We're making no noise, and we'll drop no more refuse. All they can hear will be the Sonar, and that won't carry far."

On the seventy-first day of the march, Hague squatted, fell almost to the ground, and grunted, "Take ten."

He stared at the stained, ragged scarecrows hunkered about him in forest mud.

"Why do we do it?" he asked no one in particular. "Why do we keep going, and going, and going? Why don't we just lie down and die? That would be the easiest thing I could think of right now." He knew that Rocket Service officers didn't talk that way, but he didn't feel like an officer, just a tired, feverish, bone-weary man.

"Have we got a great glowing tradition to inspire us?" he snarled. "No, we're just the lousy rocketeers that every other service arm plans to absorb. We haven't a Grant or a John Paul Jones to provide an example in a tough spot. The U. S. Rocket Service has nothing but the memory of some ships that went out and never came back; and you can't make a legend out of men who just plain vanish."

There was silence, and it looked as if the muddy figures were too exhausted to reply. Then Sergeant Brian spoke.

"The Rocketeers have a legend, sir."

"What legend, Brian?" Hague snorted.

"Here is the legend, sir. 'George Easy Peter One.'"

Hague laughed hollowly, but the Sergeant continued as if he hadn't heard.

"Ground Expeditionary Patrol One—the outfit a planet couldn't lick. Venus threw her grab bag at us, animals, swamps, poison plants, starvation, fever, and we kept right on coming. She just made us smarter, and tougher, and harder to beat. And we'll blast through these lizard-men and the jungle, and march into Base like the whole U. S. Armed Forces on review."

"Let's go," Hague called, and they staggered up again, nine gaunt bundles of sodden, muddy rags, capped in trim black steel helmets with cheek guards down. The others slipped off the trail, and Hague,



Brian, and Crosse pulled on the cart harness and lurched forward. The cart wheel hub jammed against a tree bole, and as they strained blindly ahead to free it, a horn note drifted from afar.

"Here they come again," Crosse groaned.

"They—won't be—up—with us—for days," Hague grunted, while he threw his weight in jerks against the tow line. The cart lurched free with a lunge, and all three shot forward and sprawled raging in the muddy trail.

They sat wiping mud from their faces, when Brian stopped suddenly, ripped off his helmet and threw it aside, then sat tensely forward in an attitude of strained listening. Hague had time to wonder dully if the man's brain had snapped, before he crawled to his feet.

"Shut up, and listen," Brian was snarling. "Hear it! Hear it! It's a klaxon! Way off, about every two seconds!"

Hague tugged off his heavy helmet, and strained every nerve to listen. Over the forest silence it came with pulse-like regularity, a tiny whisper of sound.

He and Brian stared bright-eyed at each other, not quite daring to say what they were thinking. Crosse got up and leaned like an empty sack against the cartwheel with an inane questioning look.

"What is it?" When they stared at him without speaking, still listening intently, "It's the Base. That's it, it's the Base!"

Something choked Hague's throat, then he was yelling and firing his rifle. The rest came scuttling out of the forest shadow, faces breaking into wild grins, and they joined Hague, the forest rocking with gunfire. They moved forward, and Hirooka took up a thin chant:

"Ooooooh, the Rocketeers  
have shaggy ears.  
They're dirty—"

The rest of their lyrics wouldn't look well in print; but where the Rocketeers have gone, on every frontier of space, the ribald song is sung. The little file moved down the trail toward the klaxon sound. Behind them, something moved in the gloom, resolved itself into a reptile-headed, man-like thing, that reared a small wooden

trumpet to fit its mouth, a soft horn note floated clear; and other shapes became visible, sprinting forward, flitting through the gloom . . .

WHEN a red light flashed over Chapman's desk, he flung down a sheaf of papers and hurried down steel-walled corridors to the number one shaft. A tiny elevator swept him to Odysseus' upper side, where a shallow pit had been set in the ship's scarred skin, and a pneumatic gun installed. Chapman hurried past the gun and crew to stand beside a listening device. The four huge cones loomed dark against the clouds, the operator in their center was a blob of shadow in the dawnlight, where he huddled listening to a chanting murmur that came from his headset. Blake came running onto the gundeck; Bjornson, and the staff officers were all there.

"Cut it into the Address system," Chapman told the Listener operator excitedly; and the faint sounds were amplified through the whole ship. From humming Address amplifiers, the ribald words broke in a hoarse melody.

"The rocketeers have shaggy ears,  
They're dirty—"

The rest described in vivid detail the prowess of rocketeers in general.

"How far are they?" Chapman demanded.

The operator pointed at a dial, fingered a knob that altered his receiving cones split-seconds of angle. "They're about twenty-five miles, sir."

Chapman turned to the officers gathered in an exultant circle behind him.

"Branch, here's your chance for action. Take thirty men, our whippet tank, and go out to them. Bjornson, get the 'copters aloft for air cover."

Twenty minutes later, Chapman watched a column assemble beneath the Odysseus' gleaming side, and march into the jungle, with the 'copters buzzing west a moment later, like vindictive dragon flies.

Breakfast was brought to the men clustered at Warnings equipment, and to Chapman at his post on the gundeck. The day ticked away, the parade ground vanished



in thickening clots of night; and a second dawn found the watchers still at their posts, listening to queer sounds that trickled from the speakers. The singing had stopped; but once they heard a note that a horn might make, and several times gobbling yells that didn't sound human. George One was fighting, they knew now. The listeners picked up crackling of rifle fire, and when that died there was silence.

The watchers heard a short cheer that died suddenly, as the relief column and George One met; and they waited and watched. Branch, who headed the relief column communicated with the mother ship by the simple expedient of yelling, the sound being picked up by the listeners.

"They're coming in, Chapman. I'm coming behind to guard their rear. They've been attacked by some kind of lizard-men. I'm not saying a thing—see for yourself when they arrive."

Hours rolled past, while they speculated in low tones, the hush that held the ship growing taut and strained.

"Surely Branch would have told us if anything was wrong, or if the records were lost," Chapman barked angrily. "Why did he have to be so damned melodramatic?"

"Look, there—through the trees. A helmet glinted!" The laconic Bjornson had thrown dignity to the winds, and capered like a drunken goat, as Rindell described it later.

Chapman stared down at the jungle edging the parade ground and caught a movement.

A man with a rifle came through the

fringe and stood eyeing the ship in silence, and then came walking forward across the long, cindered expanse. From this height, he looked to Chapman like a child's lead soldier, a ragged, muddy, midget scarecrow. Another stir in the trees, and one more man, skulking like an infantry flanker with rifle at ready. He, too, straightened and came walking quietly forward. A file of three men came next, leaning into the harness of a little metal cart that bumped drunkenly as they dragged it forward. An instant of waiting, and two more men stole from the jungle, more like attacking infantry than returning heroes. Chapman waited, and no more came. This was all.

"My God, no wonder Branch wouldn't tell us. There were thirty-two of them." Rindell's voice was choked.

"Yes, only seven." Chapman remembered his field glasses and focused them on the seven approaching men. "Lieutenant Hague is the only officer. And they're handing us the future of the U. S. Rocket Service on that little metal cart."

The quiet shattered and a yelling horde of men poured from Odysseus' hull and engulfed the tattered seven, sweeping around them, yelling, cheering, and carrying them toward the mother ship.

Chapman looked a little awed as he turned to the officers behind him. "Well they did it. We forward these records, and we've proven that we can do the job." He broke into a grin. "What am I talking about? Of course we did the job. We'll always do the job. We're the Rocketeers, aren't we?"



# BLACK FRIAR OF THE FLAME

By ISAAC ASIMOV

On Earth alone burned the final flame of free Mankind.  
Once its proud glow was quenched, the last of the  
human planets would fall to the cruel Lhasinuic  
tyrants from beyond the stars.

RUSSELL TYMBALL'S eyes were filled with gloomy satisfaction as they gazed at the blackened ruins of what had been a cruiser of the Lhasinuic Fleet a few hours before. The twisted girders, scattered in all directions, were ample witness of the terrific force of the crash.

The pudgy Earthman re-entered his own sleek Strato-rocket and waited. Fingers twisted a long cigar aimlessly for minutes before lighting it. Through the up-drifting smoke, his eyes narrowed and he remained lost in thought.

He came to his feet at the sound of a cautious hail. Two men darted in with one last fugitive glance behind them. The door closed softly and one stepped immediately to the controls. The desolate desert landscape was far beneath them almost at once, and the silver prow of the Strato-rocket pointed for the ancient metropolis of New York.

Minutes passed before Tymball spoke, "All clear?"

The man at the controls nodded. "Not a tyrant ship about. It's evident the 'Grahul' had not been able to radio for help."

"You have the dispatch?" the other asked eagerly.

"We found it easily enough. It is unharmed."

"We also found," said the second man bitterly, "one other thing—the last report of Sidi Peller."

For a moment, Tymball's round face softened and something almost like pain entered his expression. And then it hardened

again, "He died! But it was for Earth, and so it was not death. It was martyrdom!"

Silence and then sadly, "Let me see the report, Petri."

He took the single, folded sheet handed him and held it before him. Slowly, he read aloud.

"On September 4, made successful entry into 'Grahul' cruiser of the tyrant fleet. Maintained self in hiding during passage from Pluto to Earth. On September 5, located dispatch in question and assumed possession. Have just shortened rocket jets. Am sealing this report in with dispatch. Long live Earth!"

Tymball's voice was strangely moved as he read the last word. "The Lhasinuic tyrants have never martyred a greater man than Sidi Peller. But we'll be repaid, and with interest. The Human Race is not quite decadent yet."

Petri stared out the window. "How did Peller do it all? One man—to stow away successfully on a cruiser of the fleet and in the face of the entire crew to steal the dispatch and wreck the fleet. How was it done? And we'll never know; except for the bare facts in his report."

"He had his orders," said Willums, as he locked controls and turned about. "I carried them to him on Pluto myself. Get the dispatch! Wreck the 'Grahul' in the Gobil! He did it! That's all!" He shrugged his shoulders wearily.

The atmosphere of depression deepened until Tymball himself broke it with a growl. "Forget it. Did you take care of everything







at the wreck?"

The other two nodded in unison. Petri's voice was businesslike, "All traces of Peller were removed and de-atomized. They will never detect the presence of a Human among the wreckage. The document itself was replaced by the prepared copy, and carefully burnt beyond recognition. It was even impregnated with silver salts to the exact amount contained in the official seal of the Tyrant Emperor. I'll stake my head that no Lhasinu shall suspect that the crash was no accident or that the dispatch was not destroyed by it."

"Good! They won't locate the wreck for twenty-four hours at least. It's an airtight job. Let me have the dispatch now."

He fondled the metalloid container almost with reverence. It was blackened and twisted, still faintly warm. And then with a savage twist of the wrist, he tore off the lid.

The document that he lifted out unrolled with a rustling sound. At the lower left-hand corner was a huge silver seal of the Lhasinuic Emperor himself—the tyrant, who from Vega, ruled one-third of the Galaxy. It was addressed to the Viceroy of Sol.

The three Earthmen regarded the fine print solemnly. The harshly angular Lhasinuic script glinted redly in the rays of the setting sun.

"Was I right?" whispered Tymball.

"As always," assented Petri.

NIGHT did not really fall. The sky's black-purple deepened ever so slightly and the stars brightened imperceptibly, but aside from that the stratosphere did not differentiate between the absence and the presence of the sun.

"Have you decided upon the next step?" asked Willums, hesitantly.

"Yes—long ago. I'm going to visit Paul Kane tomorrow, with this," and he indicated the dispatch.

"Laura Paul Kane!" cried Petri.

"That—that *Loarist*!" came simultaneously from Willums.

"The Loarist," agreed Tymball. "He is our man!"

"Say rather that he is the lackey of the Lhasinu," ground out Willums. "Kane—the head of Loarism—consequently the

head of the traitor Humans who preach submission to the Lhasinu."

"That's right," Petri was pale but more calm. "The Lhasinu are our known enemies and are to be met in fair fight—but the Loarists are vermin. Great Space! I would rather throw myself on the mercy of the tyrant Viceroy himself than have anything to do with those snuffling students of ancient history, who praise the ancient glory of Earth and encompass its present degradation."

"You judge too harshly." There was the trace of a smile about Tymball's lips. "I have had dealings with this leader of Loarism before. Oh—" He checked the cries of startled dismay that rose, "I was quite discreet about it. Even you two didn't know, and, as you see, Kane has not yet betrayed me. I failed in those dealings but I learned a little bit. Listen to me!"

Petri and Willums edged nearer, and Tymball continued in crisp, matter-of-fact tones, "The first Galactic Drive of the Lhasinu ended two thousand years ago just after the capture of Earth. Since then, the aggression has not been resumed, and the independent Human Planets of the Galaxy are quite satisfied at the maintenance of the status quo. They are too divided among themselves to welcome a return of the struggle. Loarism itself is only interested in its own survival against the encroachments of newer ways of thought, and it is no great moment to them whether Lhasinu or Human rules Earth as long as Loarism itself prospers. As a matter of fact, we—the Nationalists—are perhaps a greater danger to them in that respect than the Lhasinu."

Willums smiled grimly, "I'll say we are."

"Then, granting that, it is natural that Loarism assume the role of appeasement. Yet, if it were to their interests, they would join us at a second's notice. And this," he slapped the document before him, "is what will convince them where their interests lie."

The other two were silent.

Tymball continued, "Our time is short. Not more than three years, perhaps not more than two. And yet you know what the chances of success for a rebellion today are."

"We'd do it," snarled Petri, and then in a muffled tone, "if the only Lhasinu we had to deal with were those of Earth."



"Exactly. But they can call upon Vega for help, and we can call upon no one. No one of the Human Planets would stir in our defense, any more than they did five hundred years ago. And that's why we must have Loarism on our side."

"And what did Loarism do five hundred years ago during the Bloody Rebellion?" asked Willums, bitter hatred in his voice. "They abandoned us to save their own precious hides."

"We are in no position to remember that," said Tymball. "We will have their help now—and then, when all is over, our reckoning with them—"

Willums returned to the controls, "New York in fifteen minutes!" And then, "But I still don't like it. What can those filthy Loarists do? Dried out husks fit for nothing but treason and platitudes!"

"They are the last unifying force of Humanity," answered Tymball. "Weak enough now and helpless enough, but Earth's only chance."

They were slanting downwards now into the thicker, lower atmosphere, and the whistling of the air as it streamed past them became shriller in pitch. Willums fired the braking rockets as they pierced a gray layer of clouds. There upon the horizon was the great diffuse glow of New York City.

"See that our passes are in perfect order for the Lhasinuic inspection and hide the document. They won't search us, anyway."

**L**OARA PAUL KANE leaned back in his ornate chair. The slender fingers of one hand played with the ivory paperweight upon his desk. His eyes avoided those of the smaller, rounder man before him, and his voice, as he spoke, took on solemn inflections.

"I cannot risk shielding you longer, Tymball. I have done so until now because of the bond of common Humanity between us, but—" his voice trailed away.

"But?" prompted Tymball.

Kane's fingers turned his paperweight over and over. "The Lhasinu are growing harsher this past year. They are almost arrogant." He looked up suddenly. "I am not quite a free agent, you know, and haven't the influence and power you seem to think I have."

His eyes dropped again, and a troubled note entered his voice, "The Lhasinu suspect. They are beginning to detect the workings of a tightly knit conspiracy underground, and we cannot afford to become entangled in it."

"I know. If necessary, you are quite willing to sacrifice us as your predecessor sacrificed the patriots five centuries ago. Once again, Loarism shall play its noble part."

"What good are your rebellions?" came the weary reply. "Are the Lhasinu so much more terrible than the oligarchy of Humans that rules Santanni or the dictator that rules Tranter? If the Lhasinu are not Human, they are at least intelligent. Loarism must live at peace with the rulers."

And now Tymball smiled. There was no humor in it—rather mocking irony, and from his sleeve, he drew forth a small card.

"You think so, do you? Here, read this. It is a reduced photostat of—no, don't touch it—read it as I hold it, and—"

His further remarks were drowned in the sudden hoarse cry from the other. Kane's face twisted alarmingly into a mask of horror, as he snatched desperately at the reproduction held out to him.

"Where did you get this?" He scarcely recognized his own voice.

"What odds? I have it, haven't I? And yet it cost the life of a brave man, and a ship of his Reptilian Eminence's navy. I believe you can see that there is no doubt as to the genuineness of this."

"No—no!" Kane put a shaking hand to his forehead. "That is the Emperor's signature and seal. It is impossible to forge them."

"You see, Excellency," there was sarcasm in the title, "the renewal of the Galactic Drive is a matter of two years—or three—in the future. The first step in the drive comes within the year—and it is concerning that first step," his voice took on a poisonous sweetness, "that this order has been issued to the Viceroy."

"Let me think a second. Let me think." Kane dropped into his chair.

"Is there the necessity?" cried Tymball, remorselessly. "This is nothing but the fulfillment of my prediction of six months ago, to which you would not listen. Earth, as a Human world, is to be destroyed; its



population scattered in groups throughout the Lhasinuic portions of the Galaxy; every trace of Human occupancy destroyed."

"But Earth! Earth, the home of the Human Race; the beginning of our civilization."

"Exactly! Loarism is dying and the destruction of Earth will kill it. And with Loarism gone, the last unifying force is destroyed, and the human planets, invincible when united, shall be wiped out, one by one, in the Second Galactic Drive. Unless—"

The other's voice was toneless.

"I know what you're going to say."

"No more than I said before. Humanity must unite, and can do so only about Loarism. It must have a Cause for which to fight, and that Cause must be the liberation of Earth. I shall fire the spark here on Earth and you must convert the Human portion of the Galaxy into a powder-keg."

"You wish a Total War—a Galactic Crusade." Kane spoke in a whisper, "yet who should know better than I that a Total War has been impossible for these thousand years." He laughed suddenly, harshly, "Do you know how weak Loarism is today?"

"Nothing is so weak that it cannot be strengthened. Although Loarism has weakened since its great days during the First Galactic Drive, you still have your organization and your discipline; the best in the Galaxy. And your leaders are, as a whole, capable men, I must say that for you. A thoroughly centralized group of capable men, working desperately, can do much. It must do much, for it has no choice."

"Leave me," said Kane, brokenly, "I can do no more now. I must think." His voice trailed away, but one finger pointed toward the door.

"What good are thoughts?" cried Tymball, irritably. "We need deeds!" And with that, he left.

THE night had been a horrible one for Kane. His face was pale and drawn; his eyes hollow and feverishly brilliant. Yet he spoke loudly and firmly.

"We are allies, Tymball."

Tymball smiled bleakly, took Kane's outstretched hand for a moment, and dropped it, "By necessity, Excellency, only. I am not your friend."

"Nor I yours. Yet we may work together. My initial orders have gone out and the Central Council will ratify them. In that direction, at least, I anticipate no trouble."

"How quickly may I expect results?"

"Who knows? Loarism still has its facilities for propaganda. There are still those who will listen from respect and others from fear, and still others from the mere force of the propaganda itself. But who can say? Humanity has slept, and Loarism as well. There is little anti-Lhasinuic feeling, and it will be hard to drum it up out of nothing."

"Hate is never hard to drum up," and Tymball's moon-face seemed oddly harsh. "Emotionalism! Propaganda! Frank and unscrupulous opportunism! And even in its weakened state, Loarism is rich. The masses may be corrupted by words, but those in high places, the important ones, will require a bit of yellow metal."

Kane waved a weary hand, "You preach nothing new. That line of dishonor was Human policy far back in the misty dawn of history when only this poor Earth was Human and even it split into warring segments." Then, bitterly, "To think that we must return to the tactics of that barbarous age."

The conspirator shrugged his shoulders cynically, "Do you know any better?"

"And even so, with all that foulness, we may yet fail."

"Not if our plans are well-laid."

Loara Paul Kane rose to his feet and his hands clenched before him, "Fool! You and your plans! Your subtle, secret, snaky, torturous plans! Do you think that conspiracy is rebellion, or rebellion, victory? What can you do? You can ferret out information and dig quietly at the roots, but you can't lead a rebellion. I can organize and prepare, but I can't lead a rebellion."

Tymball winced, "Preparation—perfect preparation—"

"Is nothing, I tell you. You can have every chemical ingredient necessary, and all the proper conditions, and yet there may be no reaction. In psychology—particularly mob psychology—as in chemistry, one must have a catalyst."

"What in Space do you mean?"

"Can you lead a rebellion?" cried Kane.



"A crusade is a war of emotion. Can you control the emotions? Why, you conspirator, you could not stand the light of open warfare an instant. Can I lead the rebellion? I, old and a man of peace? Then who is to be the leader, the psychological catalyst, that can take the dull worthless clay of your precious 'preparation' and breathe life into it."

Russell Tymball's jaw muscles quivered, "Defeatism! So soon?"

The answer was harsh, "No! Realism!"

There was angry silence and Tymball turned on his heels and left.

IT WAS midnight, ship time, and the evening's festivities were reaching their high point. The grand salon of the super-liner *Flaming Nova* was filled with whirling, laughing, glittering figures, growing more convivial as the night wore on.

"This reminds me of the triply-damned affairs my wife makes me attend back on Lacto," muttered Sammel Maronni to his companion. "I thought I'd be getting away from some of it, at least out here in hyperspace, but evidently I didn't." He groaned softly and gazed at the assemblage with a faintly disapproving stare.

Maronni was dressed in the peak of fashion, from purple head-sash to sky-blue sandals, and looked exceedingly uncomfortable. His portly figure was crammed into a brilliantly red and terribly tight tunic and the occasional jerks at his wide belt showed that he was only too conscious of its ill fit.

His companion, taller and slimmer, bore his spotless white uniform with an ease born of long experience and his imposing figure contrasted strongly with the slightly ridiculous appearance of Sammel Maronni.

The Lactonian exporter was conscious of this fact. "Blast it, Drake, you've got one fine job here. You dress like a nob and do nothing but look pleasant and answer salutes. How much do you get paid, anyway?"

"Not enough." Captain Drake lifted one gray eyebrow and stared quizzically at the Lactonian. "I wish you had my job for a week or so. You'd sing mighty small after that. If you think taking care of fat dowager damsels and curly-headed society snobs is a bed of roses, you're welcome to it." He muttered viciously to himself for a moment and

then bowed politely to a bejeweled harridan who simpered past. "It's what's grayed my hair and furrowed my brow, by Rigel."

Maronni drew a long *Karen* smoke out of his waist-pouch and lit up luxuriously. He blew a cloud of apple-green smoke into the Captain's face and smiled impishly.

"I've never heard the man yet who didn't knock his own job, even when it was the pushover yours is, you hoary old fraud. Ah, if I'm not mistaken, the gorgeous Ylen Surat is bearing down upon us."

"Oh, pink devils of Sirius! I'm afraid to look. Is that old hag actually moving in our direction?"

"She certainly is—and aren't you the lucky one. She's one of the richest women on Santanni and a widow, too. The uniform gets them, I suppose. What a pity I'm married."

Captain Drake twisted his face into a most frightful grimace, "I hope a chandelier falls on her."

And with that he turned, his expression metamorphosed into one of bland delight in an instant. "Why, Madam Surat, I thought I'd never get the chance to see you tonight."

Ylen Surat, for whom the age of sixty was past experience, giggled girlishly, "Be still, you old flirt, or you'll make me forget that I've come here to scold you."

"Nothing is wrong, I hope?" Drake felt a sinking of the heart. He had had previous experience with Madam Surat's complaints. Things usually were wrong.

"A great deal is wrong. I've just been told that in fifty hours, we shall land on Earth—if that's the way you pronounce the word."

"Perfectly correct," answered Captain Drake, a bit more at ease.

"But it wasn't listed as a stop when we boarded."

"No, it wasn't. But then, you see, it's quite a routine affair. We leave ten hours after landing."

"But this is insupportable. It will delay me an entire day. It is necessary for me to reach Santanni within the week and days are precious. Now I've never heard of Earth. My guide book," she extracted a leather-covered volume from her reticule and flipped its pages angrily, "doesn't even mention the place. No one, I feel sure, has



any interest in a halt there. If you persist in wasting the passengers' time in a perfectly useless stop, I shall take it up with the president of the line. I'll remind you that I have some little influence back home."

Captain Drake sighed inaudibly. It had not been the first time he had been reminded of Ylen Surat's "little influence." "My dear madam, you are right, entirely right, perfectly right—but I can do nothing. All ships on the Sirius, Alpha Centauri, and 61 Cygni lines must stop at Earth. It is by interstellar agreement and even the president of the line, no matter how stimulated he may be by your argument, could do nothing."

"Besides," interrupted Maronni, who thought it time to come to the aid of the beleaguered captain, "I believe that we have two passengers who are actually headed for Earth."

"That's right. I had forgotten." Captain Drake's face brightened a bit. "There! We have concrete reason for the stop as well."

"Two passengers out of over fifteen hundred! Reason, indeed!"

"You are unfair," said Maronni, lightly. "After all, it was on Earth that the Human race originated. You know that, I suppose?"

Ylen Surat lifted patently false eyebrows. "Did we?"

The blank look on her face twisted to one of disdain. "Oh, well, that was all thousands and thousands of years ago. It doesn't matter anymore."

"It does to the Loarists and the two who wish to land are Loarists."

"Do you mean to say," sneered the widow, "that there are still people in this enlightened age who go about studying 'our ancient culture'? Isn't that what they're always talking about?"

"That's what Filip Sanat is always talking about," laughed Maronni. "He gave me a long sermon only a few days ago on that very subject. And it was interesting, too. There was a lot to what he said."

He nodded lightly and continued, "He's got a good head on him, that Filip Sanat. He might have made a good scientist or businessman."

"Speak of meteors and hear them whizz," said the captain, suddenly, and nodded his head to the right.

"Well!" gasped Maronni. "There he is. But—but what in space is he doing *here*?"

Filip Sanat *did* make a rather incongruous picture as he stood framed in the far doorway. His long, dark purple tunic—mark of the Loarist—was a sombre splotch upon an otherwise gay scene. His grave eyes turned toward Maronni and he lifted his hand in immediate recognition.

Astonished dancers made way automatically as he passed, staring at him long and curiously afterwards. One could hear the wake of whispering that he left in his path. Filip Sanat, however, took no notice of this. Eyes fixed stonily ahead of him and expression stolidly immobile, he reached Captain Drake, Sammel Maronni, and Ylen Surat.

FILIP SANAT greeted the two men warmly and then, in response to an introduction, bowed gravely to the widow, who regarded him with surprise and open disdain.

"Pardon me for disturbing you, Captain Drake," said the young man, in a low tone. "I only want to know at what time we are leaving hyper-space."

The captain yanked out a corpulent pocket-chromo. "An hour from now. Not more."

"And we shall then be—?"

"Just outside the orbit of Planet IX."

"That would be Pluto. Sol will then be in sight as we enter normal space?"

"If you're looking in the right direction, it will be—toward the prow of the ship."

"Thank you," Filip Sanat made as if to depart, but Maronni detained him.

"Hold on there, Filip, you're not going to leave us, are you? I'm sure Madam Surat here is fairly dying to ask you several questions. She has displayed great interest in Loarism." There was more than the suspicion of a twinkle in the Lactonian's eye.

Filip Sanat turned politely to the widow, who, taken aback for the moment, remained speechless, and then recovered.

"Tell me, young man," she burst forth, "are there really still people like you left?—Loarists, I mean."

Filip Sanat started and stared quite rudely at his questioner, but did not lose his tongue. With calm distinctness, he said, "There are



still people left who try to maintain the culture and way of life of ancient Earth."

Captain Drake could not forbear a tiny bit of irony, "Even down to the culture of the Lhasinuic masters?"

Ylen Surat uttered a stifled scream, "Do you mean to say Earth is a Lhasinuic world? Is it? Is it?" Her voice rose to a frightened squeak.

"Why, certainly," answered the puzzled captain, sorry that he had spoken. "Didn't you know?"

"Captain," there was hysteria in the woman's voice. "You *must* not land. If you do, I shall make trouble—plenty of trouble. I will *not* be exposed to hordes of those terrible Lhasinu—those awful reptiles from Vega."

"You need not fear, Madam Surat," observed Filip Sanat, coldly. "The vast majority of Earth's population is very much human. It is only the one percent that rules that is Lhasinuic."

"Oh—" A pause, and then, in a wounded manner, "Well, I don't think Earth can be so important, if it is not even ruled by Humans. Loarism indeed! Silly waste of time, I call it!"

Sanat's face flushed suddenly, and for a moment he seemed to struggle vainly for speech. When he did speak, it was in an agitated tone, "You have a very superficial view. The fact that the Lhasinu control Earth has nothing to do with the fundamental problem of Loarism which—"

He turned on his heel and left.

Sammel Maronni drew a long breath as he watched the retreating figure. "You hit him in a sore spot, Madam Surat, I never saw him squirm away from an argument or an attempt at an explanation in that way before."

"He's not a bad-looking chap," said Captain Drake.

Maronni chuckled, "Not by a long shot. We're from the same planet, that young fellow and I. He's a typical Lactonian, like me."

The widow cleared her throat grumpily, "Oh, let us change the subject by all means. That person seems to have cast a shadow over the entire room. Why do they wear those awful purple robes? So unstylish! Really there should be a law about it."

LOARA BROOS PORIN glanced up as his young acolyte entered.

"Well?"

"In less than forty-five minutes, Loara Broos."

And throwing himself into a chair, Sanat leaned a flushed and frowning face upon one balled fist.

Porin regarded the other with an affectionate smile, "Have you been arguing with Sammel Maronni again, Filip?"

"No, not exactly." He jerked himself upright. "But what's the use, Loara Broos? There, on the upper level, are hundreds of Humans, thoughtless, gaily dressed, laughing, frolicking; and there outside is Earth, disregarded. Only we two of the entire ship's company are stopping there to view the world of our ancient days."

His eyes avoided that of the older man and his voice took on a bitter tinge, "And once thousands of Humans from every corner of the Galaxy landed on Earth every day. The great days of Loarism are over."

Loara Broos laughed. One would not have thought such a hearty laugh to be in his spindly figure. "That is at least the hundredth time I have heard that said by you. Foolish! The day will come when Earth will once more be remembered. People will yet again flock. By the thousands and millions they'll come."

"No! It is over!"

"Bah! The croaking prophets of doom have said that over and over again through history. They have yet to prove themselves right."

"This time they will." Sanat's eyes blazed suddenly, "Do you know why? It is because Earth is profaned by the reptile conquerors. A woman has just said to me—a vain, stupid, shallow woman—that 'I don't think Earth can be so important if it is not even ruled by Humans.' She said what billions must say unconsciously, and I hadn't the words to refute her. It was one argument I couldn't answer."

"And what would your solution be, Filip? Come, have you thought it out?"

"Drive them from Earth! Make it a Human planet once more! We fought them once during the First Galactic Drive two thousand years ago, and stopped them when it seemed as if they might absorb the Galaxy."



Let us make a Second Drive of our own and hurl them back to Vega."

Porin sighed and shook his head, "You young hothead! There never was a young Loarist who didn't eat fire on the subject. You'll outgrow it. You'll outgrow it."

"Look, my son!" Loara Broos arose and grasped the other by the shoulders, "Man and Lhasinu have intelligence, and are the *only* two intelligent races of the Galaxy. They are brothers in mind and spirit. Be at peace with them. Don't hate; it is the most unreasoning emotion. Instead, strive to understand."

Filip Sanat stared stonily at the ground and made no indication that he heard. His mentor clicked his tongue in gentle rebuke.

"Well, when you are older, you will understand. Now, forget all this, Filip. Remember that the ambition of every real Loarist is about to be fulfilled for you. In two days, we shall reach Earth and its soil shall be under your feet. Isn't that enough to make you happy? Just think! When you return, you shall be awarded the title 'Loara.' You shall be one who has visited Earth. The golden sun will be pinned to your shoulder."

Porin's hand crept to the staring yellow orb upon his own tunic, mute witness of his three previous visits to Earth.

"Loara Filip Sanat," said Sanat slowly, eyes glistening. "Loara Filip Sanat. It has a wonderful sound, hasn't it? And only a little ways off."

"Now then, you feel better. But come, in a few moments we shall leave hyper-space and we will see Sol."

Already, even as he spoke, the thick, choking cloak of hyper-stuff that clung so closely to the sides of the *Flaming Nova* was going through those curious changes that marked the beginning of the shift to normal space. The blackness lightened a bit and concentric rings of various shades of gray chased each other across the portview with gradually hastening speed. It was a weird and beautiful optical illusion that science has never succeeded in explaining.

Porin clicked off the light in the room, and the two sat quietly in the dark, watching the feeble phosphorescence of the racing ripples as they sped into a blur. Then, with a terrifying silent suddenness, the whole

structure of hyper-stuff seemed to burst apart in a whirling madhouse of brilliant color. And then all was peaceful again. The stars sparkled quietly, against the curved backdrop of normal space.

And up in the corner of the port blazed the brightest spark of the sky with a luminous yellow flame that lit up the faces of the two men into pale, waxen masks. It was Sol!

The birth-star of Man was so distant that it lacked a perceptible disc, yet it was incomparably the brightest object to be seen. In its feeble yellow light, the two remained in quiet thought, and Filip Sanat grew calmer.

In two days, the *Flaming Nova* landed on Earth.

FILIP SANAT forgot the delicious thrill that seized him at the moment when his sandals first came into contact with the firm green sod of Earth, when he caught his first glimpse of a Lhasinuic official.

They seemed actually *human*—or humanoid, at least.

At first glance, the predominantly Man-like characteristics drowned out all else. The body plan differed in no essential from Man's. The four-limbed, bipedal body; the middling-well-proportioned arms and legs; the well-defined neck, were all astonishingly in evidence. It was only after a few minutes that the smaller details marking the difference between the two races were noticed at all.

Chief of these were the scales covering the head and a thick line down the backbone, halfway to the hips. The face itself, with its flat, broad, thinly scaled nose and lidless eyes was rather repulsive, but in no way bestial. Their clothes were few and simple, and their speech quite pleasant to the ear. And, what was most important, there was no masking the intelligence that showed forth in their dark, luminous eyes.

Porin noted Sanat's surprise at this first glimpse of the Vegan reptiles with every sign of satisfaction.

"You see," he remarked, "their appearance is not at all monstrous. Why should hate exist between Human and Lhasinu then?"

Sanat didn't answer. Of course, his old



friend was right. The word "Lhasinu" had so long been coupled with the words "alien" and "monster" in his mind, that against all knowledge and reason, he had subconsciously expected to see some weird life-form.

Yet overlying the foolish feeling this realization induced, was the same haunting hate that clung closely to him, growing to fury as they passed inspection by an overbearing English-speaking Lhasinu.

The next morning, the two left for New York, the largest city of the planet. In the historic lore of the unbelievably ancient metropolis, Sanat forgot for a day the troubles of the Galaxy outside. It was a great moment for him when he finally stood before a towering structure and said to himself, "This is the Memorial."

The Memorial was Earth's greatest monument, dedicated to the birthplace of the Human race, and this was Wednesday, the day of the week when two men "guarded the Flame." Two men, alone in the Memorial, watched over the flickering yellow fire that symbolized Human courage and Human initiative—and Porin had already arranged that the choice should fall that day upon himself and Sanat, as being two newly arrived Loarists.

And so, in the fading twilight, the two sat alone in the spacious Flame Room of the Memorial. In the murky, semi-darkness, lit only by the fitful glare of a dancing yellow flame, a quiet peace descended upon them.

There was something about the brooding aura of the place that wiped all mental disturbance clean away. There was something about the wavering shadows as they weaved through the pillars of the long colonnade on either side, that cast a hypnotic spell.

Gradually, he fell into a half doze, and out of sleepy eyes regarded the Flame intently, until it became a living being of light, weaving a dim, silent figure beside him.

But tiny sounds are sufficient to disturb a reverie, especially when contrasted with a hitherto deep silence. Sanat stiffened suddenly, and grasped Porin's elbow in a fierce grip.

"Listen," he hissed the warning quietly.

Porin started violently out of a peaceful day-dream, regarded his young companion

with uneasy intentness, then, without a word, trumpeted one ear. The silence was thicker than ever—also a tangible cloak. Then the faintest possible scraping of feet upon marble, far off. A low whisper, down at the limits of audibility, and then silence again.

"What is it?" he asked bewilderedly of Sanat, who had already risen to his feet.

"Lhasinu!" ground out Sanat; face a mask of hate-filled indignation.

"Impossible!" Porin strove to keep his voice coldly steady, but it trembled in spite of itself. "It would be an unheard-of event. We are just imagining things now. Our nerves are rubbed raw by this silence, that is all. Perhaps it is some official of the Memorial."

"After sunset, on Wednesday?" came Sanat's strident voice. "That is as illegal as the entrance of Lhasinuic lizards, and far more unlikely. It is my duty as a Guardian of the Flame to investigate this."

He made as if to walk toward the shadowed door and Porin caught his wrist fearfully, "Don't, Filip. Let us forget this until sunrise. One can never tell what will happen. What can you do, even supposing that Lhasinu have entered the Memorial? If you—"

But Sanat was no longer listening. Roughly, he shook off the other's desperate grasp, "Stay here! The Flame must be guarded. I shall be back soon."

He was already halfway across the wide marble-floored hall. Cautiously, he approached the glass-paned door to the dark, twisting staircase that circled its way upwards through the twilit gloom into the desert recesses of the tower.

Slipping off his sandals, he crept up the stairs, casting one last look back toward the softly luminous Flame, and toward the nervous, frightened figure standing beside it.

THE two Lhasinu stared about them in the pearly light of the Atomo lamp.

"Dreary old place," said Threg Ban Sola. His wrist camera clicked three times. "Take down a few of those books on the walls. They'll serve as additional proof."

"Do you think we ought to?" asked Cor Wen Hasta. "These Human apes may miss them."



"Let them!" came the cool response. "What can they do? Here, sit down!" He flicked a hasty glance upon his chronometer. "We'll get fifty credits for every minute we stay, so we might as well pile up enough to last us for a while."

"Pirat For is a fool. What made him think we wouldn't take the bet?"

"I think," said Ban Sola, "he's heard about the soldier torn to pieces last year for looting a European museum. The Humans didn't like it, though Loarism is filthy rich, Vega knows. The Humans were disciplined, of course, but the soldier was dead. Anyway, what Pirat For doesn't know is that the Memorial is deserted Wednesdays. This is going to cost him money."

"Fifty credits a minute. And it's been seven minutes now."

"Three hundred and fifty credits. Sit down. We'll play a game of cards and watch our money mount."

Threg Ban Sola drew forth a worn pack of cards from his pouch which, though they were typically and essentially Lhasinuic, bore unmistakable traces of their Human derivation.

"Put the Atomo-light on the table and I'll sit between it and the window," he continued peremptorily, shuffling the cards as he spoke. "Hah! I'll warrant no Lhasinu ever gamed in such an atmosphere. Why, it will triple the zest of the play."

Cor Wen Hasta seated himself, and then rose again, "Did you hear anything?" He stared into the shadows beyond the half-open door.

"No," Ban Sola frowned and continued shuffling. "You're not getting nervous, are you?"

"Of course not. Still, if they *were* to catch us here in this blasted tower, it might not be pleasant."

"Not a chance. The shadows are making you jumpy." He dealt the hands.

"Do you know," said Wen Hasta, studying his cards carefully, "it wouldn't be so nice if the Viceroy were to get wind of this, either. I imagine he wouldn't deal lightly with offenders of the Loarists as a matter of policy. Back on Sirius, where I served before I was shifted, the scum—"

"Scum, all right," grunted Ban Sola. "They breed like flies and fight each other

like mad bulls. Look at the creatures!"

He turned his cards downward and grew argumentative. "I mean, look at them scientifically and impartially. What are they? Only mammals! Mammals that can think, in a way; but mammals just the same. That's all."

"I know. Did you ever visit one of the Human worlds?"

Ban Sola smiled, "I may, pretty soon."

"Furlough?" Wen Hasta registered polite astonishment.

"Furlough, my scales. With my ship! And with guns shooting!"

"What do you mean?" There was a sudden glint in Wen Hasta's eyes.

Ban Sola's grin grew mysterious. This isn't supposed to be known, even among us officers, but you know how things leak out."

Wen Hasta nodded, "I know." Both had lowered their voices instinctively as they leaned closer.

"Well. The Second Drive will be on now any time."

"No! Fact! And we're starting right here. By Vega, the Viceregal Palace is buzzing with nothing else. Some of the officers have even started a lottery on the exact date of the first move. I've got a hundred credits at twenty to one myself. But then, I drew only to the nearest week. You can get a hundred and fifty to one, if you're nervy enough to pick a particular day."

"But why here on this Galaxy-forsaken planet?"

"Strategy on the part of the Home Office." Ban Sola leaned forward. "The position we're in now has us facing a numerically superior enemy hopelessly divided amongst itself. If we can keep them so, we can take them over one by one. The Human Worlds would just naturally rather cut their own throats than cooperate with each other."

Wen Hasta grinned agreement, "That's typical mammalian behavior for you. Evolution must have laughed when she gave a brain to an ape."

"But Earth has particular significance. It's the center of Loarism, because the Humans originated here. It corresponds to our own Vegan system."

"Do you mean that? But you couldn't! This little two-by-four fly-speck?"



"That's what they say. I wasn't here at the time, so I wouldn't know. But anyway, if we can destroy Earth, we can destroy Loarism which is centered here. It was Loarism, the historians say, that united the Worlds against us at the end of the First Drive. No Loarism; the last fear of enemy unification is gone; and victory is easy."

"Damned clever! How are we going to go about it?"

"Well, the word is that they're going to pack up every last Human on Earth and scatter them through the subject worlds. Then we can remove everything else on Earth that smells of the Mammals and make it an entirely Lhasinuic world. We should have done it long ago, I say."

"But when?"

"We don't know; hence the lottery. But no one has placed his bet at a period more than two years in the future."

"Hurrah for Vega! I'll give you two to one I riddle a Human cruiser before you do, when the time comes."

"Done," cried Ban Sola. "I'll put up fifty credits."

They rose to touch fists in token and Wen Hasta grinned at his chronometer, "Another minute and we'll have an even thousand credits coming to us. Poor Pirat For. He'll groan. Let's go now; more would be extortionate."

There was low laughter as the two Lhasinu left, long cloaks swishing softly behind them. They did not notice the slightly darker shadow hugging the wall at the head of the stairs, though they almost brushed it as they passed. Nor did they sense the burning eyes focused upon them as they descended noiselessly.

LOARA BROOS PORIN jerked to his feet with a sob of relief as he saw the figure of Filip Sanat stumble across the hall toward him. He ran to him eagerly, grasping both hands tightly.

"What kept you, Filip? You don't know what wild thoughts have passed through my head this past hour. If you had been gone another five minutes, I would have gone mad for sheer suspense and uncertainty. But what's wrong?"

It took several moments for Loara Broos' wild relief to subside sufficiently to note the

other's trembling hands, his disheveled hair, his feverishly glinting eyes; but when it did, all his fears returned.

He watched Sanat in dismay, scarcely daring to press his question for fear of the answer. But Sanat needed no urging. In short, jerky sentences he related the conversation he had overheard and his last words trailed into a despairing silence.

Loara Broos' pallor was almost frightening, and twice he tried to talk with no success other than a few hoarse gasps. Then, finally, "But it is the death of Loarism! What is to be done?"

Filip Sanat laughed, as men laugh when they are at last convinced that nothing remains to laugh at. "What *can* be done? Can we inform the Central Council? You know only too well how helpless they are. The various Human governments? You can imagine how effective *those* divided fools would be."

"But it can't be true! It simply can't be!"

Sanat remained silent for seconds, and then his face twisted agonizedly and in a voice thick with passion, he shouted, "I won't have it! Do you hear? It shan't be! I'll stop it!"

It was easy to see that he had lost control of himself; that wild emotion was driving him. Porin, large drops of perspiration on his brow, grasped him about the waist, "Sit down, Filip, sit down! Are you going crazy?"

"No!" With a sudden push, he sent Porin stumbling backwards into a sitting position, while the Flame wavered and flickered madly in the rush of air, "I'm going sane. The time for idealism and compromise and subservience is gone! The time for force has come! We will fight and, by Space, we will win!"

He was leaving the room at a dead run.

Porin limped after, "Filip! Filip!" He stopped at the doorway in frightened despair. He could go no further. Though the Heavens fell, someone must guard the Flame.

But—but what was Filip Sanat going to do? And through Porin's tortured mind flickered visions of a certain night, five hundred years before, when a careless word, a blow, a shot, had lit a fire over Earth that was finally drowned in Human blood.



LOARA PAUL KANE was alone that night. The inner office was empty; the dim, blue light upon the severely simple desk the only illumination in the room. His thin face was bathed in the ghastly light, and his chin buried musingly between his hands.

And then there was a crashing interruption as the door was flung open and a disheveled Russell Tymball knocked off the restraining hands of half a dozen men and catapulted in. Kane whirled in dismay at the intrusion and one hand flew up to his throat as his eyes widened in apprehension. His face was one startled question.

Tymball waved his arm in a quieting gesture. "It's all right. Just let me catch my breath." He wheezed a bit, and seated himself gently before continuing. "Your catalyst has turned up, Loara Paul—and guess where? Here on Earth! Here in New York! Not half a mile from where we're sitting now!"

Loara Paul Kane eyed Tymball narrowly. "Are you mad?"

"Not so you can notice it. I'll tell you about it, if you don't mind turning on a light or two. You look like a ghost in the blue." The room whitened under the glare of Atomos and Tymball continued, "Ferni and I were returning from the meeting. We were passing the Memorial when it happened, and you can thank Fate for the lucky coincidence that led us to the right spot at the right moment.

"As we passed, a figure shot out the side entrance, jumped on the marble steps in front, and shouted, 'Men of Earth!' Everyone turned to look—you know how filled Memorial Sector is at eleven—and inside of two seconds, he had a crowd."

"Who was the speaker, and what was he doing inside the Memorial? This is Wednesday night, you know."

"Why," Tymball paused to consider, "now that you mention it, he must have been one of the two Guardians. He was a Loarist—you couldn't mistake the tunic. He wasn't Terrestrial, either!"

"Did he wear the yellow orb?"

"No."

"Then I know who he was. He's Porin's young friend. Go ahead."

"There he stood!" Tymball was warming

to his task. "He was some twenty feet above street level. You have no idea what an impressive figure he made with the glare of the Luxites lighting his face. He was handsome, but not in an athletic, brawny way. He was the aesthetic type, if you know what I mean. Pale, thin face, burning eyes, long, brown hair.

"And when he spoke! It's no use describing it; in order to appreciate it really, you would have to hear him. He began telling the crowd of the Lhasinuic designs; shouting what I had been whispering. Evidently, he had gotten them from a good source, for he went into details—and how he put them! He made them sound real and frightening. He frightened *me* with them; had me standing there scared blue at what he was saying; and as for the crowd, after the second sentence, they were hypnotized. Everyone of them had had 'Lhasinuic Menace' drilled into them over and over again, but this was the first time they listened—actually *listened*.

"Then, he began damning the Lhasinu. He rang the changes on their bestiality, their perfidy, their criminality—only he had a vocabulary that raked them into the lowest mud of a Venusian ocean. And every time he let loose with an epithet, the crowd stood upon its hind legs and let out a roar. It began to sound like a catechism. 'Shall we allow this to go on?' cried he. 'Never!' yelled the crowd. 'Must we yield?' 'Never!' 'Shall we resist?' 'To the end!' 'Down with the Lhasinu!' he shouted. 'Kill them!' they howled.

"I howled as loud as any of them—forgot myself entirely.

"I don't know how long it lasted before Lhasinuic guards began closing in. The crowd turned on them, with the Loarist urging them on. Did you ever hear a mob yell for blood? No? It's the most awful sound you can imagine. The guards thought so, too, for one look at what was before them made them turn and run for their lives, in spite of the fact that they were armed. The mob had grown into a matter of thousands and thousands by then. It swamped the place.

"But in two minutes, the alarm siren sounded—for the first time in a hundred years. I came to my senses at last, and made



for the Loarist, who had not stopped his tirade a moment. It was plain that we couldn't let him fall into the hands of the Lhasinu.

"The rest is pretty much of a mixup. Squadrons of motorized police were charging down on us, but somehow, Ferni and I managed between the two of us to grab the Loarist, slip out, and bring him here. I have him in the outer room, gagged and tied, to keep him quiet."

During all the last half of the narrative, Kane had paced the floor nervously, pausing every once in a while in deep consideration. Little flecks of blood appeared on his lower lip.

"You don't think," he asked, "that the riot will get out of hand? A premature explosion—"

Tymball shook his head vigorously, "They're mopping up already. Once the young fellow disappeared, the crowd lost its spirit, anyway."

"There will be many killed or hurt, but—Well, bring in the young firebrand," Kane seated himself behind his desk and composed his face into a semblance of tranquillity.

Filip Sanat was in sad shape as he kneeled before his superior. His tunic was in tatters, and his face scratched and bloody, but the fire of determination shone as brilliantly as ever in his fierce eyes. Russell Tymball regarded him breathlessly as though the previous hour's magic still lingered.

Kane extended his arm gently, "I have heard of your wild escapade, my boy. What was it that impelled you to do so foolish an act? It might very well have cost you your life, to say nothing of the lives of thousands of others."

For the second time that night, Sanat repeated the conversation he had overheard—dramatically and in the minutest detail. It was a startling story.

"Just so, just so," said Kane, with a grim smile, upon the conclusion of the tale, "and did you think we knew nothing of this? For a long time we have been preparing against this danger, and you have come near to upsetting all our carefully laid plans. By your premature appeal, you might have worked irreparable harm to our cause."

Filip Sanat reddened, "Pardon my inexperienced enthusiasm—"

"Exactly," exclaimed Kane. "Yet, properly directed, you might be of great aid to us. Your oratory and youthful fire might work wonders if well managed. Would you be willing to dedicate yourself to the task?"

Sanat's eyes flashed, "Need you ask?"

Loara Paul Kane laughed and cast a jubilant side-glance at Russell Tymball, "You'll do. In two days, you shall leave for the outer stars. With you, will go several of my own men. And now, you are tired. You will be taken to where you may wash and treat your cuts. Then you had better sleep, for you shall need your strength in the days to come."

"But—but Loara Broos Porin—my companion at the Flame?"

"I shall send a messenger to the Memorial immediately. He will tell Loara Broos of your safety and serve as the second Guardian for the remainder of the night. Go now!"

But even as Sanat, relieved and deliriously happy, rose to go, Russell Tymball leaped from his chair and grasped the older Loarist's wrist in a convulsive grip.

"Great Space! Listen!"

The shrill, keening whine that pierced to the inner sanctum of Kane's offices told its own story. Kane's face turned haggard.

"It's martial law!"

Tymball's very lips had turned bloodless, "We lost out after all. They're using to-night's disturbance to strike the first blow. They're after Sanat, and they'll have him. A mouse couldn't get through the cordon they're going to throw about the city now."

"But they musn't have him," Kane's eyes glittered. "We'll take him to the Memorial by the Passageway. They won't dare violate the Memorial."

"They have done it once already," came Sanat's impassioned cry. "I won't hide from the lizards. Let us fight."

"Quiet," said Kane, "and follow silently."

A panel in the wall had slid aside and toward it Kane motioned.

And as the panel closed noiselessly behind them, leaving them in the cold glow of a pocket Atomo lamp, Tymball muttered softly, "If they are ready, even the Memorial will yield no protection."



NEW YORK was in ferment. The Lhasinuic garrison had mustered its full strength and placed it in a state of siege. No one might enter. No one might leave. Through the key avenues, rolled the ground cars of the army, while overhead poised the Strato-cars that guarded the airways.

The Human population stirred restlessly. They percolated through the streets, gathering in little knots that broke up at the approach of the Lhasinu. The spell of Sanat lingered, and here and there frowning men exchanged angry whispers.

The atmosphere crackled with tension.

The Viceroy of New York realized that as he sat behind his desk in the Palace, which raised its spires upon Washington Heights. He stared out the window at the Hudson River, flowing darkly beneath and addressed the uniformed Lhasinu before him.

"There must be positive action, Captain. You are right in that. And yet, if possible, an outright break must be avoided. We are woefully undermanned and we haven't more than five third-rate war-vessels on the entire planet."

"It is not our strength but their own fear that keeps them helpless, Excellency. Their spirit has been thoroughly broken in these last centuries. The rabble would break before a single unit of Guardsmen. That is precisely the reason why we must strike hard now. The population has reared and they must feel the whip immediately. The Second Drive may as well begin tonight."

"Yes," the Viceroy grimaced wryly. "We are caught off-stride, but the—er—rabble-rouser must be made an example of. You have him, of course."

The captain smiled grimly. "No. The Human dog had powerful friends. He is a Loarist, you know. Kane—"

"Is Kane standing against us?" Two red spots burnt over the Viceroy's eyes. "The fool presumes! The troops are to arrest the rebel in spite of him—and him, too, if he objects."

"Excellency!" the captain's voice rang metalically. "We have reason to believe the rebel may be skulking in the Memorial."

The Viceroy half-rose to his feet. He scowled in indecision and seated himself

once more, "The Memorial! That presents difficulties!"

"Not necessarily!"

"There are some things those Humans won't stand." His voice trailed off uncertainly.

The captain spoke decisively, "The nettle seized firmly does not sting. Quickly done—a criminal could be dragged from the Hall of the Flame itself—and we kill Loarism at a stroke. There could be no struggle after that supreme defiance."

"By Vega! Blast me, if you're not right. Good! Storm the Memorial!"

The captain bowed stiffly, turned on his heel, and left the Palace.

FILIP SANAT re-entered the Hall of Flame, thin face set angrily, "The entire Sector is patrolled by the lizards. All avenues of approach to the Memorial have been shut off."

Russell Tymball rubbed his jaw, "Oh, they're not fools. They've treed us and the Memorial won't stop them. As a matter of fact, they may have decided to make this The Day."

Filip frowned and his voice was thickly furious, "And we're to wait here, are we? Better to die fighting, than to die hiding."

"Better not to die at all, Filip," responded Tymball quietly.

There was a moment of silence. Loara Paul Kane sat staring at his fingers.

Finally, he said, "If you were to give the signal to strike now, Tymball, how long could you hold out?"

"Until Lhasinuic reinforcements could arrive in sufficient numbers to crush us. The Terrestrial garrison, including the entire Solar Patrol, is not enough to stop us. Without outside help, we can fight effectively for six months at the very least. Unfortunately it's out of the question." His composure was unruffled.

"Why is it out of the question?"

And his face reddened suddenly, as he sprang angrily to his feet, "Because you can't just push buttons. The Lhasinu are weak. My men know that, but Earth doesn't. The lizards have one weapon, fear! We can't defeat them, unless the populace is with us, at least passively." His mouth twisted, "You don't know the practical diffi-



culties involved. Ten years now I've been planning, working, trying. I have an army; and a respectable fleet in the Appalachians. I could set the wheels in motion in all five continents simultaneously. But what good would it do? It would be useless. If I had New York now—if I were able to prove to the rest of Earth that the Lhasinu were not invincible."

"If I could banish fear from the hearts of Humans?" said Kane softly.

"I would have New York by dawn. But it would take a miracle."

"Perhaps! Do you think you can get through the cordon and reach your men?"

"I could if I had to. What are you going to do?"

"You will know when it happens." Kane was smiling fiercely. "And when it does happen, strike!"

There was a Tonite gun in Tymball's hand suddenly, as he backed away. His plump face was not at all gentle, "I'll take a chance, Kane. Good-bye!"

**T**HE CAPTAIN strode up the deserted marble steps of the Memorial arrogantly. He was flanked on each side by an armed adjutant.

He paused an instant before the huge double-door that loomed up before him and stared at the slender pillars that soared gracefully upwards at its sides.

There was faint sarcasm in his smile, "Impressive, all this, isn't it?"

"Yes, Captain!" was the double reply.

"And mysteriously dark, too, except for the dim yellow of their Flame. You see its light?" He pointed toward the stained glass of the bottom windows which glinted flickeringly.

"Yes, Captain!"

"It's dark, and mysterious, and impressive—and it is about to fall in ruins." He laughed, and suddenly brought the butt end of his saber down upon the metal carvings on the door in a clanging salvo.

It echoed through the emptiness within and sounded hollowly in the night, but there was no answer.

The adjutant at his left raised his televisor to his ear, and caught the faint words issuing therefrom. He saluted, "Captain, the Humans are crowding into the sector."

The captain sneered, "Let them! Order the guns placed in readiness and aimed along the avenues. Any Human attempting to pass the cordon is to be rayed mercilessly."

His barked command was murmured into the televisor and a hundred yards beyond. Lhasinuic Guardsmen put guns in order and aimed them carefully. A low, inchoate murmur went up—a murmur of fear. Men pressed back.

"If the door does not open," said the captain, grimly, "it is to be broken down." He raised his saber again, and again there was the thunder of metal on metal.

Slowly, noiselessly, the door yawned wide, and the captain recognized the stern, purple-clad figure that stood before him.

"Who disturbs the Memorial on the night of the Guarding of the Flame?" demanded Loara Paul Kane solemnly.

"Very dramatic, Kane. Stand aside!"

"Back!" The words rang out loudly and clearly. "The Memorial may not be approached by the Lhasinu."

"Yield us our prisoner, and we leave. Refuse, and we will take him by force."

"The Memorial yields no prisoner. It is inviolate. You may not enter."

"Make way!"

"Stand back!"

The Lhasinu growled throatily and became aware of a dim roaring. The streets about him were empty, but a block away in every direction was the thin line of Lhasinuic troops, stationed at their guns, and beyond were the Humans. They were massed in noisy thickness and the whites of their faces shone palely in the Chromolights.

"What," gritted the captain to himself, "do the scum yet snarl?" His tough skin ridged at the jaws and the scales upon his head uptilted sharply. He turned to the adjutant with the televisor. "Order a round over their heads."

The night was split in two by the purple blasts of energy and the Lhasinu laughed aloud at the silence that followed.

He turned to Kane, who remained standing upon the threshold. "So you see that if you expect help from your people, you will be disappointed. The next round will be aimed at head level. If you think that



bluff, try me!"

Teeth clicked together sharply, "Make way!" A Tonite was leveled in his hand, and thumb was firm upon the trigger.

Loara Paul Kane retreated slowly, eyes upon the gun. The captain followed. And as he did so, the inner door of the anteroom swung open and the Hall of the Flame stood revealed. In the sudden draft, the Flame staggered, and at the sight of it, there came a huge shout from the distant spectators.

Kane turned toward it, face raised upwards. The motion of one of his hands was all but imperceptible.

And the Flame suddenly changed. It steadied and roared up to the vaulted ceiling, a blazing shaft fifty feet high. Loara Paul Kane's hand moved again, and as it did so, the Flame turned carmine. The color deepened and the crimson light of that flaming pillar streamed out into the city and turned the Memorial's windows into staring, bloody eyes.

Long seconds passed, while the captain froze in bewilderment; while the distant mass of Humanity fell into awed silence.

And, then, there was a confused murmur, which strengthened and grew and split itself into one vast shout.

*"Down with the Lhasinu!"*

There was the purple flash of a Tonite from somewhere high above, and the captain came to life an instant too late. Caught squarely he bent slowly to his death; cold, reptilian face a mask of contempt to the last.

RUSSELL TYMBALL brought down his gun and smiled sardonically, "A perfect target against the Flame. Good for Kane! The changing of the Flame was just the emotion-stirring thing we needed. Let's go!"

From the roof of Kane's dwelling he aimed down upon the Lhasinu below. And as he did, all Hell erupted. Men mushroomed from the very ground, it seemed, weapons in hand. Tonites blazed from every side, before the startled Lhasinu could spring to their triggers.

And when they did so, it was too late, for the mob, white-hot with flaring rage, broke its bounds. Someone shrieked, "Kill the lizards!" and the cry was taken up in

one roaring ululation that swelled to the sky.

Like a many-headed monster, the stream of Humanity surged forward, weaponless. Hundreds withered under the belated fury of the defending guns and tens of thousands scrambled over the corpses, charging to the very muzzles.

The Lhasinu never wavered. Their ranks thinned steadily under the deadly sharp-shooting of the Tymbalists, and those that remained were caught by the Human flood that surged over them and tore them to horrible death.

The Memorial sector gleamed in the crimson of the bloody Flame and echoed to the agony of the dying, and the shrieking fury of the triumphant.

It was the first battle of the Great Rebellion, but it was not really a battle, or even madness. It was concentrated anarchy.

Throughout the city, from the tip of Long Island to the mid-Jersey flatlands, rebels sprang from nowhere and Lhasinu went to their death. And as quickly as Tymball's orders spread to raise the snipers, so did the news of the changing of the Flame speed from mouth to mouth and grow in the telling. All New York heaved, and poured its separate lives into the single giant crucible of the "mob."

It was uncontrollable, unanswerable, irresistible. The Tymballists followed helplessly where it led, all efforts at direction hopeless from the start.

Like a mighty river, it lashed its way through the metropolis, and where it passed no living Lhasinu remained.

The sun of that fateful morning arose to find the masters of Earth occupying a shrinking circle in upper Manhattan. With the cool courage of born soldiers, they linked arms and withstood the charging, shrieking millions. Slowly, they backed away; each building a skirmish; each block a desperate battle. They split into isolated groups; defending first a building, and then its upper stories, and finally its roof.

With the noonday sun boiling down, only the Palace itself remained. Its last desperate stand held the Humans at bay. The withering circle of fire about it paved the grounds with blackened bodies. The Viceroy himself from his throne room directed the de-



fense; his own hand upon the butt of a semi-portable.

And then, when the mob had finally come to a pause, Tymball seized his opportunity and took the lead. Heavy guns clanked to the front. Atomos and delta-rays, from the rebel stock and from the stores captured the previous night, pointed their death-laden muzzles at the Palace.

Gun answered gun, and the first organized battle of machines flared into desperate fury. Tymball was an omnipresent figure, shouting, directing, leaping from gun-emplacment, to gun-emplacment, firing his own hand Tonite defiantly at the Palace.

Under a barrage of the heaviest fire, the Humans charged once more and pierced to the walls as the defenders fell back. An Atomos projectile smashed its way into the central tower and there was a sudden inferno of fire.

That blaze was the funeral pyre of the last of the Lhasinu in New York. The blackening walls of the palace crumbled in, in one vast crash; but to the very last, room blazing about him, face horribly cut, the Viceroy stood his ground, aiming into the thick of the besieging force. And when his semi-portable expended the last dregs of its power and expired, he heaved it out the window in a last futile gesture of defiance, and plunged into the burning Hell at his back.

Above the Palace grounds at sunset, with a yet-roaring furnace as the background, there floated the green flag of independent Earth.

New York was once more Human.

RUSSELL TYMBALL was a sorry figure when he entered the Memorial once more that night. Clothes in tatters, and bloody from head to foot from the undressed cut on his cheek, he surveyed the carnage about him with sated eyes.

Volunteer squads, occupied in removing the dead and tending to the wounded had not yet succeeded in making more than a dent in the deadly work of the rebellion.

The Memorial was an improvised hospital. There were few wounded, for energy weapons deal death; and of these few almost none slightly. It was a scene of indescribable confusion and the moans of the

hurt and dying mingled horribly with the distant yells of celebrating war-drunk survivors.

Loara Paul Kane pushed through the crowding attendants to Tymball.

"Tell me; is it over?" His face was haggard.

"The beginning is. The Terrestrial Flag flies over the ruins of the Palace."

"It was horrible! The day has—has—" He shuddered and closed his eyes, "If I had known in advance, I would rather have seen Earth dehumanized and Loarism destroyed."

"Yes, it was bad. But the results might have been much more dearly bought, and yet have remained cheap at the price. Where's Sanat?"

"In the courtyard—helping with the wounded. We all are. It—it—" Again his voice failed him.

There was impatience in Tymball's eyes, and he shrugged weary shoulders, "I'm not a callous monster, but it had to be done, and as yet it is only the beginning. Today's events mean little. The uprising has taken place over most of Earth, but without the fanatic enthusiasm of the rebellion in New York. The Lhasinu aren't defeated, or anywhere near defeated; make no mistake about that. Even now the Solar Guard is flashing to Earth and the forces on the outer planets are being called back. In no time at all, the entire Lhasinuic Empire will converge upon Earth and the reckoning will be a terrible and bloody one. We must have help!"

He grasped Kane by the shoulders, and shook him roughly. "Do you understand? We must have help! Even here in New York the first flush of victory will fade by tomorrow. *We must have help!*"

"I know," said Kane tonelessly. "I'll get Sanat and he can leave today." He sighed, "If today's action was any criterion of his power as a catalyst, we may expect great events."

SANAT climbed into the little two-man cruiser half an hour later and took his seat beside Petri at the controls.

He extended his hand to Kane a last time, "When I come back it will be with a navy behind me."

Kane grasped the young man's hand



tightly, "We depend upon you, Filip." He paused and said slowly, "Good luck, Loara Filip Sanat!"

Sanat flushed with pleasure at the title as he resumed his seat once more. Petri waved and Tymball called out, "Watch out for the Solar Guard!"

The airlock clanged shut, and then, with a coughing roar, the pygmy cruiser was off into the heavens.

Tymball followed it to where it dwindled into a speck and less and then turned to Kane, "All is now in the hands of Fate. And Kane, just how was that Changing of the Flame worked? Don't tell me the Flame turned red of itself!"

Kane shook his head slowly, "No! That carmine blaze was the result of opening a hidden pocket of strontium salts, originally placed there to impress the Lhasinu in case of need. The rest was chemistry."

Tymball laughed grimly, "You mean the rest was mob psychology! And the Lhasinu, I think, were impressed—and *bow!*"

SPACE itself gave no warning, but the mass-detector buzzed. It buzzed peremptorily and insistently. Petri stiffened in his seat and said, "We're in none of the meteor zones."

Filip Sanat held his breath as the other turned the knob that rotated the periscope. The star-field in the visor shifted with slow dignity, and then they saw it.

It glinted in the sun like half a tiny, orange football, and Petri growled, "If they've spotted us, we're sunk."

"Lhasinuic ship?"

"Ship? That's no ship! That's a fifty-thousand ton battle cruiser! What in the Galaxy it's doing here, I don't know. Tymball said the Patrol had made for Earth."

Sanat's voice was calm. "That one hasn't. Can we outrace it?"

"Fat chance!" Petri's fist clenched white on the G-stick. "They're coming closer."

The words might have been a signal. The audiometer jiggled and the harsh Lhasinuic voice started from a whisper and rose to stridence as the radio beam sharpened. "Fire reverse motors and prepare for boarding!"

Petri released the controls and shot a look at Sanat, "I'm only the chauffeur.

What do you want to do? We haven't the chance of a meteor against the sun—but if you like the gamble—"

"Well," said Sanat, simply, "we're not going to surrender, are we?"

The other grinned, as the decelerating rockets blasted, "Not bad for a Loarist! Can you shoot a mounted Tonite?"

"I've never tried!"

"Well, then learn how. Grab that little wheel over there and keep your eye on the small visor above. See anything?" Speed was steadily dropping and the enemy ship was approaching.

"Just stars!"

"All right, rotate the wheel—go ahead, further. Try the other direction. Do you see the ship now?"

"Yes! There it is."

"Good! Now center it. Get it where the hairlines cross, and for the sake of Sol, keep it there. Now I'm going to turn toward the lizard scum," side-rockets blasted as he spoke, "and you keep it centered."

The Lhasinuic ship was bloating steadily, and Petri's voice descended to a tense whisper, "I'm dropping our screen and lunging directly at her. It's a gamble. If they're sufficiently startled, they may drop their screen and shoot; and if they shoot in a hurry, they may miss."

Sanat nodded silently.

"Now the second you see the purple flash of the Tonite, pull back on the wheel. Pull back *hard*; and pull back *fast*. If you're the tiniest trifle late, we're through." He shrugged, "It's a gamble!"

With that, he slammed the G-stick forward hard and shouted, "Keep it centered!"

Acceleration pushed Sanat back gaspingly, and the wheel in his sweating hands responded reluctantly to pressure. The orange football wobbled at the center of the visor. He could feel his hands trembling, and that didn't help any. Eyes winced with tension.

The Lhasinuic ship was swelling terribly now, and then, from its prow, a purple sword leaped toward them. Sanat closed his eyes and jerked backwards.

He kept his eyes closed and waited. There was no sound.

He opened them and started to his feet; for Petri, arms akimbo, was laughing down



upon him.

"A beginner's own luck," he laughed. "Never held a gun before in his life and knocks out a heavy cruiser in as pretty a pink as I ever saw."

"I hit it?" gasped Sanat.

"Not on the button, but you did disable it. That's good enough. And now, just as soon as we get far enough away from the sun, we're going into hyper-space."

**T**HE TALL purple-clad figure standing by the central portview gazed longingly at the silent globe without. It was Earth, huge, gibbous, glorious.

Perhaps his thoughts were just a trifle bitter as he considered the six-month period that had just passed. It had begun with a nova-blaze. Enthusiasm kindled to white heat and spread, leaping the stellar gulfs from planet to planet as fast as the hyper-atomic beam. Squabbling governments, sudden putty before the outraged clamoring of their peoples, outfitted fleets. Enemies of centuries made sudden peace and flew under the same green flag of Earth.

Perhaps it would have been too much to expect this love-feast to continue. While it did, the Humans were irresistible. One fleet was not two parsecs from Vega itself; another had captured Luna and hovered one light-second above the Earth where Tymball's ragged revolutionaries still held on doggedly.

Filip Sanat sighed and turned at the sound of a step. White-haired Ion Smitt of the Lactonian contingent entered.

"Your face tells the story," said Sanat.

Smitt shook his head, "It seems hopeless."

Sanat turned away again, "Did you know that we've gotten word from Tymball today? They're fighting on what they can filch from the Lhasinu. The lizards have captured Buenos Aires and all South America seems likely to go under their heel. They're disheartened—the Tymballists—and disgusted, and I am, too." He whirled suddenly, "You say that our new needle-ships insure victory. Then why don't we attack?"

"Well, for one thing," the grizzled soldier planted one booted leg on the chair next to him, "the reinforcements from Santanni are not coming."

Sanat started, "I thought they were on their way. What happened?"

"The Santannian government has decided its fleet is required for home defense." A wry smile accompanied his words.

"What home defense? Why, the Lhasinu are five hundred parsecs away from them."

Smitt shrugged, "An excuse is an excuse and need not make sense. I didn't say that was the real reason."

Sanat brushed his hair back and his fingers strayed to the yellow sun upon his shoulder, "Even so! We could still fight with over a hundred ships. The enemy outnumbered us two to one but with the needle ships and with Lunar Base at our backs and the rebels harassing them in the rear—" He fell into a brooding reverie.

"You won't get them to fight, Filip. The Trantorion squadron favors retreat." His voice was suddenly savage, "Of the entire fleet, I can trust only the twenty ships of my own squadron—the Lactonian. Oh, Filip, you don't know the dirt of it—you never have known. You've won the people to the Cause, but you've never won the governments. Popular opinion forced them in, but now that they are in, they're in only for what they can get."

"I can't believe that, Smitt. With victory in their grasp—"

"Victory? Victory for whom? It is exactly over that bone that the planets are squabbling. At a secret convention of the nations, Santanni demanded control of all the Lhasinuic worlds of the Sirius sector—none of which have been reconquered as yet—and was refused. Ah, you didn't know that. Consequently, she decides that she must take care of her home defense, and withdraws her various squadrons."

Filip Sanat turned away in pain, and Ion Smitt's voice hammered on, hard, unmerciful.

"And then Trantor realizes that she hates and fears Santanni more than ever she did the Lhasinu and any day now she will withdraw *her* fleet to refrain from crippling them while her enemy's ships remain quietly and safely in port. The Human nations are falling apart," the soldier's fist came down upon the table, "like rotten cloth. It was a fool's dream to think that the selfish idiots could ever unite for any worthy pur-



pose long."

Sanat's eyes were sudden calculating slits. "Wait a while! Things will yet work out all right, if we can only manage to seize control of Earth. Earth is the key to the whole situation." His fingers drummed up on the table edge. "Its capture would provide the vital spark. It would drum up Human enthusiasm, now lagging, to the boiling point, and the Governments—well, they would either have to ride the wave, or be dashed to pieces."

"I know that. If we fought today, you have a soldier's word we'd be on Earth tomorrow. They realize it, too, but they won't fight."

"Then—then they must be *made* to fight. The only way they can be made to fight is to leave no alternative. They won't fight now, because they can retreat whenever they wish, but if—"

He suddenly looked up, face aglow, "You know. I haven't been out of the Loarist tunic in years. Do you suppose your clothes will fit me?"

Ion Smitt looked down upon his ample girth and grinned, "Well, they might not fit you, but they'll cover you all right. What are you thinking of doing?"

"I'll tell you. It's a terrible chance, but—Relay the following orders immediately to the Lunar Base garrison—"

**THE ADMIRAL** of the Lhasinuic Solar squadron was a war-scarred veteran who hated two things above all else: Humans and civilians. The combination, in the person of the tall, slender Human in ill-fitted clothing, put a scowl of dislike upon his face.

Sanat wriggled in the grasp of the two Lhasinuic soldiers. "Tell them to let go," he cried in the Vegan tongue. "I am unarmed."

"Speak," ordered the admiral in English. "They do not understand your language." Then, in Lhasinuic to the soldiers, "Shoot when I give the word."

Sanat subsided, "I came to discuss terms." "I judged as much when you hoisted the white flag. Yet you come in a one-man cruiser from the night side of your own fleet, like a fugitive. Surely, you cannot speak for your fleet."

"I speak for myself."

"Then I give you one minute. If I am not interested by the end of that time, you will be shot." His expression was stony.

Sanat tried once more to free himself, with little success. His captors tightened their grips.

"Your situation," said the Earthman, "is this. You can't attack the Human squadron as long as they control Lunar Base without serious damage to your own fleet, and you can't risk that with a hostile Earth behind you. At the same time, I happen to know that the order from Vega is to drive the Humans from the Solar System at all costs, and that the Emperor dislikes failures."

"You have ten seconds left," said the admiral, but tell-tale red spots appeared above his eyes.

"All right, then," came the hurried response, "how's this? What if I offer you the entire Human Fleet caught in a trap?"

There was silence. Tymball went on, "What if I show you how you can take over Lunar Base, and surround the Humans?"

"Go on!" It was the first sign of interest the admiral had permitted himself.

"I am in command of one of the squadrons and I have certain powers. If you'll agree to our terms, we can have the Base deserted within twelve hours. Two ships," the Human raised two fingers impressively, "will take it."

"Interesting," said the Lhasinu, slowly, "but your motive? What is your reason for doing this?"

Sanat thrust out a surly under-lip, "That would not interest you. I have been ill-treated and deprived of my rights. Besides," his eyes glittered, "Humanity's is a lost cause, anyway. For this I shall expect payment—ample payment. Shake to that, and the fleet is yours."

The admiral glared his contempt. "There is a Lhasinuic proverb: The Human is steadfast in nothing but his treachery. Arrange your treason, and I shall repay. I swear by the word of a Lhasinuic soldier. You may return to your ships."

With a motion, he dismissed the soldiers and then stopped them at the doorway, "But remember, I risk two ships. They mean little as far as my fleet's strength is concerned, but, nevertheless, if harm comes to



a Lhasinuic head through Human treachery—"The scales on his head were stiffly erect and Sanat's eyes dropped beneath the other's cold stare.

For a long while, the admiral sat alone and motionless. Then he spat. "This Human filth! It is a disgrace even to fight them!"

THE Flagship of the Human fleet lazed one hundred miles above Luna and within it the captains of the Squadrons sat about the table and listened to Ion Smitt's shouted indictment.

"—I tell you your actions amount to treason. The battle off Vega is progressing and if the Lhasinu win, their Solar squadron will be strengthened to the point where we must retreat. And if the Humans win, our treachery here exposes their flank and renders the victory worthless. We can win, I tell you. With these new needle-ships—"

The sleepy-eyed Trantor leader spoke up. "The needle-ships have never been tried before. We cannot risk a major battle on an experiment, when the odds are against us."

"That wasn't your original view, Porcut. You—yes, and the rest of you as well—are a cowardly traitor. Cowards! Cravens!"

A chair crashed backwards as one arose in anger and others followed. Loara Filip Sanat, from his vantage-point at the central port, from where he watched the bleak landscape of Luna below with devouring concentration, turned in alarm. But Jem Porcut raised a garbled hand for order.

"Let's stop fencing," he said. "I represent Trantor, and I take orders only from her. We have eleven ships here, and Space knows how many at Vega. How many has Santanni got? None! Why is she keeping them at home? Perhaps to take advantage of Trantor's preoccupation. Is there anyone who hasn't heard of her designs against us? We're not going to destroy our ships here for her benefit. Trantor will not fight! My division leaves tomorrow! Under the circumstances, the Lhasinu will be glad to let us go in peace."

Another spoke up, "And Poritta, too. The treaty of Draconis has hung like neutronium around our neck these twenty years. The imperialist planets refuse revision, and

we will not fight a war which is to their interests only."

One after another, surly exclamations dinned the perpetual refrain, "Our interests are against it! We will not fight!"

And suddenly, Loara Filip Sanat smiled. He had turned away from Luna and laughed at the snarling arguers.

"Sirs," he said, "no one is leaving."

Ion Smitt sighed with relief and sank back in his chair.

"Who will stop us?" asked Porcut with disdain.

"The Lhasinu! They have just taken Lunar Base and we are surrounded."

The room was a babble of dismay. Shouting confusion held sway and then one roared above the rest, "What of the garrison?"

"The garrison had destroyed the fortifications and evacuated hours before the Lhasinu took over. The enemy met with no resistance."

The silence that followed was much more terrifying than the cries that had preceded. "Treason," whispered someone.

"Who is at the bottom of this?" One by one they approached Sanat. Fists clenched. Faces flushed. "Who did this?"

"I did," said Sanat, calmly.

A moment of stunned disbelief. "Dog!" "Pig of a Loarist!" "Tear his guts out!"

And then they shrank back at the pair of Tonite guns that appeared in Ion Smitt's fists. The burly Lactonian stepped before the younger man.

"I was in on this, too," he snarled. "You'll have to fight now. It is necessary to fight fire with fire sometimes and Sanat fought treason with treason."

Jem Porcut regarded his knuckles carefully and suddenly chuckled, "Well, we can't wriggle out now, so we might as well fight. Except for orders, I wouldn't mind taking a crack at the damn lizards."

The reluctant pause was followed by shamefaced shouts—proof-positive of the willingness of the rest.

In two hours, the Lhasinuic demand for surrender had been scornfully rejected and the hundred ships of the Human squadron spread outwards on the expanding surface of an imaginary sphere—the standard defense formation of a surrounded fleet—and the Battle for Earth was on.



A SPACE-BATTLE between approximately equal forces resembles in almost every detail a gigantic fencing match in which controlled shafts of deadly radiation are the rapiers and impermeable walls of etheric inertia are the shields.

The two forces advance to battle and maneuver for position. Then the pale purple of a Tonite beam lashes out in a blaze of fury against the screen of an enemy ship, and in so doing, its own screen is forced to blink out. For that one instant it is vulnerable and is a perfect target for an enemy ray, which, when loosed, renders *its* ship open to attack for the moment. In widening circles, it spreads. Each unit of the fleet, combining speed of mechanism with speed of human reaction, attempts to slip through at the crucial moment and yet maintain its own safety.

Loara Filip Sanat knew all this and more. Since his encounter with the battle cruiser on the way out from Earth, he had studied space war, and now as the battle fleets fell into line, he felt his very fingers twitch for action.

He turned and said to Smitt, "I'm going down to the big guns."

Smitt's eye was on the grand 'visor, his hand on the etherwave sender, "Go ahead, if you wish, but don't get in the way."

Sanat smiled. The captain's private elevator carried him to the gun levels, and from there it was five hundred feet through an orderly mob of gunners and engineers to Tonite One. Space is at a premium in a battleship. Sanat could feel the crampedness of the room in which individual Humans dove-tailed their work smoothly to crate the gigantic machine that was a giant dreadnaught.

He mounted the six steep steps to Tonite One and motioned the gunner away. The gunner hesitated; his eye fell upon the purple tunic, and then he saluted and backed reluctantly down the steps.

Sanat turned to the co-ordinator at gun's visiplat, "Do you mind working with me? My speed of reaction has been tested and grouped 1-A. I have my rating card, if you'd care to see it."

The co-ordinator flushed and stammered, "No, *sir*! It's an honor to work with you, *sir*."

The amplifying system thundered, "To your stations!" and a deep silence fell in which the cold purr of machinery sounded its ominous note.

Sanat spoke to the co-ordinator in a whisper, "This gun covers a full quadrant of space, doesn't it?"

"Yes, *sir*."

"Good, see if you can locate a dreadnaught with the sign of a double sun in partial eclipse."

There was a long silence. The co-ordinator's sensitive hands were on the Wheel, delicate pressure turning it this way and that, so that the field in view on the visiplat shifted. Keen eyes scanned the ordered array of enemy ships.

"There it is," he said. "Why, it's the flagship."

"Exactly! Center that ship!"

As the Wheel turned, the space-field reeled, and the enemy flagship wobbled toward the point where the hair lines crossed. The pressure of the co-ordinator's fingers became lighter and more expert.

"Centered!" he said. Where the hairlines crossed, the tiny oval globe remained impaled.

"Keep it that way!" ordered Sanat, grimly. "Don't lose it for a second as long as it stays in our quadrant. The enemy admiral is on that ship and we're going to get him, you and I."

The ships were getting within range of each other and Sanat felt tense. He knew it was going to be close—very close. The Humans had the edge in speed, but the Lhasinu were two to one in numbers.

A flickering beam shot out, another ten more.

There was a sudden blinding flash of purple intensity!

"First hit," breathed Sanat. He relaxed. One of the enemy ships drifted off helplessly, its stern a mass of fused and glowing metal.

The opposing ships were not at close grips. Shots were being exchanged at blinding speed. Twice, a purple beam showed at the extreme limits of the visiplat and Sanat realized with a queer sort of shiver down his spine that it was one of the adjacent Tonites of their own ship that was firing.



The fencing match was approaching a climax. Two flashes blazed into being, almost simultaneously, and Sanat groaned. One of the two had been a Human ship. And three times there came that disquieting hum as Atomo-engines in the lower level shot into high gear—and that meant that an enemy beam directed at their own ship had been stopped by the screen.

And always, the co-ordinator kept the enemy flagship centered. An hour passed; an hour in which six Lhasinu and four Human ships had been whiffed to destruction; an hour in which the Wheel turned fractions of a degree this way, that way; in which it swivelled on its universal socket mere hair-lines in half a dozen directions.

Sweat matted the co-ordinator's hair and got into his eyes; his fingers half-lost all sensation, but that flagship never left the ominous spot where the hair-lines crossed.

And Sanat watched; finger on trigger—watched—and waited.

Twice the flagship had glowed into purple luminosity, its guns blazing and its defensive screen down; and twice Sanat's finger had quivered on the trigger and refrained. He hadn't been quick enough.

And then Sanat rammed it home and rose to his feet tensely. The co-ordinator yelled and dropped the Wheel.

In a gigantic funeral pyre of purple-hued energy, the flagship with the Lhasinuic Admiral inside had ceased to exist.

Sanat laughed. His hand went out, and the co-ordinator's came to meet it in a firm grasp of triumph.

But the triumph did not last long enough for the co-ordinator to speak the first jubilant words that were welling up in his throat, for the visiplat burst up into a purple bombshell as five Human ships detonated simultaneously at the touch of deadly energy shafts.

The amplifiers thundered, "Up screens! Cease firing! Ease into Needle formation!"

Sanat felt the deadly pall of uncertainty squeeze his throat. He knew what had happened. The Lhasinu had finally managed to set up their big guns on Lunar Base; big guns with three times the range of even the largest ship guns—big guns that could pick off Human ships with no fear of reprisal.

And so the fencing match was over, and the real battle was to start. But it was to be a real battle of a type never before fought, and Sanat knew that that was the thought in every man's mind. He could see it in their grim expressions and feel it in their silence.

It might work! And it might not!

THE Earth squadron had resumed its spherical formation and drifted slowly outwards, its offensive batteries silent. The Lhasinu swept in for the kill. Cut off from power supply as the Earthmen were, and unable to retaliate with the gigantic guns of the Lunar batteries commanding near-by space, it seemed only a matter of time before either surrender or annihilation.

The enemy Tonite beams lashed out in continuous blasts of energy and tortured screens on Human ships sparked and fluoresced under the harsh whips of radiation.

Sanat could hear the buzz of the Atomo-engines rise to a protesting squeal. Against his will, his eye flicked to the energy gauge, and the quivering needle sank as he watched, moving down the dial at perceptible speed.

The co-ordinator licked dry lips, "Do you think we'll make it, sir?"

"Certainly!" Sanat was far from feeling his expressed confidence. "We need hold out for an hour—provided they don't fall back."

And the Lhasinu weren't. To have fallen back would have meant a thinning of the lines with a possible break-through and escape on the part of the Humans.

The Human ships were down to crawling speed—scarcely above a hundred miles an hour. Idling along, they crept up the purple beams of energy; the imaginary sphere increasing in size; the distance between the opposing forces ever narrowing.

But inside the ship, the gauge-needle was dropping rapidly, and Sanat's heart dropped with it. He crossed the gunlevel to where hard-bitten soldiers waited at a gigantic and gleaming lever, in anticipation of an order that had to come soon—or never.

The distance between opponents was now only a matter of one or two miles—almost contact from the viewpoint of space war-



fare—and then that order shot over the shielded etheric beams from ship to ship.

It reverberated through the gun level: "Out needles!"

A score of hands reached for the lever, Sanat's among them, and jerked downwards. Majestically, the lever bent in a curving arc to the floor and as it did so, there was a vast scraping noise and a sharp thud that shook the ship.

The dreadnaught had become a "needle ship"!

At the prow, a section of armor plate had slid aside and a glittering shaft of metal had lunged outward viciously. One hundred feet long, it narrowed gracefully from a base ten feet in diameter to a needle-sharp diamond point. In the sunlight, the chrome-steel of the shaft gleamed in flaming splendor.

And every other ship of the Human squadron was likewise equipped. Each had become ten, fifteen, twenty, fifty thousand tons of driving rapier.

Swordfish of space!

Somewhere in the Lhasinuic fleet, frantic orders must have been issued. Against this oldest of all naval tactics—old even in the dim dawn of history when rival triremes had maneuvered and rammed each other to destruction with pointed prows—the super-modern equipment of a space-fleet has no defense.

Sanat forced his way to the visiplat and strapped himself into an anti-acceleration seat, and he felt the springs absorb the backward jerk as the ship sprang into sudden acceleration.

He didn't bother with that, though. He wanted to watch the battle! There wasn't one here, nor anywhere in the Galaxy, that risked what he did. They risked only their lives; and he risked a dream that he had, almost single-handed, created out of nothing.

He had taken an apathetic Galaxy and driven it into revolt against the reptile. He had taken an Earth on the point of destruction and dragged it from the brink almost unaided. A Human victory would be a victory for Loara Filip Sanat and no one else.

He, and Earth, and the Galaxy were

now lumped into one and thrown into the scale. And against it was weighed the outcome of this last battle, a battle hopelessly lost by his own purposeful treachery, unless the needles won.

And if they lost, the gigantic defeat—the ruin of Humanity—was also his.

The Lhasinuic ships were jumping aside but not fast enough. While they were slowly gathering momentum and drifting away, the Human ships had cut the distance by three-quarters. On the screen, a Lhasinuic ship had grown to colossal proportions. Its purple whip of energy had gone out as every ounce of power had gone into a man-killing attempt at rapid acceleration.

And nevertheless its image grew and the shining point that could be seen at the lower end of the screen aimed like a glittering javelin at its heart.

Sanat felt he could not bear the tension. Five minutes and he would take his place as the Galaxy's greatest hero—or its greatest traitor! There was a horrible, unbearable pounding of blood in his temples.

Contact!!

The screen went wild in a chaotic fury of twisted metal. The anti-acceleration seats shrieked as springs absorbed the shock. Things cleared slowly. The screen-view veered wildly as the ship slowly steadied. The ship's needle had broken, the jagged stump twisted awry, but the enemy vessel it had pierced was a gutted wreck.

Sanat held his breath as he scanned space. It was a vast sea of wrecked ships, and on the outskirts tattered remnants of the enemy were in flight, with Human ships in pursuit.

There was the sound of colossal cheering behind him and a pair of strong hands on his shoulders.

He turned. It was Smitt—Smitt, the veteran of five wars, with tears in his eyes.

"Filip," he said, "we've won. We've just received word from Vega. The Lhasinuic Home Fleet has been smashed—and also with the needles. The war is over, and we've won. You've won, Filip! You!"

His grip was painful, but Loara Filip Sanat did not mind that. For a single, ecstatic moment, he stood motionless, face transfigured.

Earth was free! Humanity was saved!