

COSMOS

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# Chapter 1 – Faster Than Light by Ralph Milne Farley

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On the shore of the small island of Elbon, on the planet Lemnis, which circles the lesser of the twin suns known collectively to earthlings as the double-star Alpha Centauri, stood Dos Tev, the deposed and exiled young Emperor of the planet, in earnest conversation with white-bearded Mea Quin, greatest scientist of all space. The metal-green sky above them sparkled crisply in the afternoon light of the two suns and an iodine-scented breeze swept in from the rolling purple waves of the sea.

“Thank Tor!” exclaimed the aged scientist gazing furtively around, “that there are two places on this island where we can talk freely. Why do you suppose that Ay-Artz is permitting us to continue the construction of our space ship, although he won’t let us build light-ray transmitters?”

The young Emperor laughed. “You are unexcelled as a scientist Mea-Quin; but you are completely out of your field when you try to fathom the motives of men. Ay-Artz and his misguided revolutionists stole the improved space ship which we completed just before my enforced abdication. They have built twenty more just like it. But they suspect – and rightly so – that you get better and better with practice. So they are letting us build another and better, although much smaller, ship; then they will steal the ideas from that. As for their denying us the use of light-ray transmitters and receivers: they don’t want us listening-in on any devilment they may be up to; and they don’t want us signalling the Risboyans for aid.”

“But what does Ay-Artz need of better space-ships than the ones he already has?”

“Looking for more world to conquer,” suggested Dos Tev.

“Doesn’t he realize that our planet, Lemnis, is the only inhabited, or even inhabitable, world that circles our sun, excepting only Risbo, whose people are too powerful for conquest?”

“But there are other suns in space; and we know that the nearest of them has many planets, and even moons, susceptible of sustaining life.”

Mea-Quin laughed mirthlessly as he replied, “No one but a fool would attempt to bridge four light-years [I] of space.”

[I] Note: For convenience of the reader, all Lemnisian measures of time, distance, velocity, and acceleration have been converted into earth units. The length of day on Lemnis, her size, and the radius of her orbit happen to be practically the same as with us.

“Fools rush in – and win – where scientists fear to tread, “ quoted the young Emperor.

A Lemnisian workman approached them down the beach.

Without waiting to ascertain his identity or purpose, Dos-Tev grimaced and drily remarked, “My error! Let’s take our daily exercise.”

So the two friends made their way to the laboratory courtyard of the castle of Elbon.

Here stood a large metallic cylinder, forty feet high and twenty feet in diameter with the top rounded to a point, resembling a huge, gleaming silver projectile. It was encased in scaffolding which held scores of working men, some with blow-torches, some with air-hammers, and some (their heads helmeted like deep sea divers) with welding arcs in their hands. The din was terrific.

Passing this group, Dos-Tev and his aged companion came to a large saucer-shaped structure one hundred feet in diameter. As they were about to enter this bowl through a small door in its side, a massive workman left his post at the space-ship, approached them, and saluted. From his agitated expression it was quite evident that he had information to impart.

And so, above the din, Dos-Tev shouted, “Would you like to take some sitting-down exercises with us this afternoon?”

Then, without awaiting a reply, the young Emperor and his aged friend hurried through the small door, followed by the workman.

The interior of the huge saucer was plain and unadorned. It contained near its center two chairs, and a table which was equipped with levers and dials.

Dos-Tev and Mea-Quin seated themselves. The former promptly threw one of the levers and the bowl began slowly to revolve.

“Sit down on the floor beside us,” he commanded. “The exercise will do you no good if you take it standing up.”

“But, Sire, I need no exercise,” objected the workman eagerly. “I came here but to – – “

“Sh!” cautioned the Emperor. “Then put it on another ground: if you stand up you are going to be very sick. Or, a third ground: it is my command that you sit down.”

“Very well, Sire,” said the man sheepishly as he saluted and complied. But, Sire, I must – – “

Dos-Tev, with a gesture, commanded silence. Then he moved the lever further and the bowl sped-up its revolution. As it did so the section of the floor occupied by the three men gradually moved outwardly along the upward curve of the bowl. But they still seemed to remain level and the opposite slope of the bowl seemed to tip up correspondingly. Also the weight of their bodies increased oppressively.

The workman looked at his two masters inquisitively, although with considerable apprehension, and shifted his powerful body uneasily. Once he started to speak; then thought better of it.

Raucous klaxon-horns sounded throughout the laboratories and the din of trip-hammers ceased abruptly.

“Quitting time,” remarked Dos-Tev laconically. “Now we can hear each other. Thank Tor that this is the second place on the Island of Elbon where we can talk without fear of eavesdropping. Well, fellow, what has the chief spy of Ay-Artz been telling the dictator about us?”

“But – -,” the man began.

“Answer my question,” snapped Dos-Tev.

“I told Ay-Artz,” the man replied, “that your space-ship would not be finished for twenty or thirty days yet. Also that you are having trouble perfecting the controls. Also that the new impulse-projector which you have devised is not so successful as the old one. Also that you take exercise regularly in this bowl; and that your health continues good.”

“And Ay-Artz still believes that this bowl is an excerciser?”

“Yes, Sire. Is it not?”

A grin overspread the handsome young face of Dos-Tev as he turned to the white-bearded Mea-Quin.

“I did not credit the dictator with lack of brains to the extent of believing that a man can get exercise from sitting down,” said he. “’Tis fortunate; for without this gravitator to practice in, Ay-Artz would never think it practicable to design a space-ship with an acceleration comparable to ours. Well, fellow, what news do you bring us of the enemy?”

But the huge workman had slumped to the floor of the revolving bowl, his face a sickly green.

Mea-Quin glanced at the dials. “For Tor’s sake, slow it down, Sire! It’s going at a rate of nearly three times gravity already and no man can stand more than twice gravity without practice.”

Dos-Tev slammed back the lever and the bowl slowed down. Mea-Quin got up from his seat and bent over the prostrate workman.

Above them the green sky was already paling and the shafts of reddish purple light from the twin suns could be seen. At this time of year the twin suns set together.

“We must get him out of here,” the aged scientist announced. “He needs water.”

Night falls quickly on planet Lemnis. By the time the Emperor and his friend had dragged the unconscious man out through the small door into the courtyard the sky was blue-black and shot with stars.

With a roar a small rocket-ship passed across above them.

“The scout-ship which guards us,” Dos-Tev drily remarked.

Another roar more distant. Another and another. A chorus of roars. On the horizon, in the direction of the mainland, there could be seen twenty-one cometlike bodies rising straight up into the sky. Up and up they sped, accelerating faster and faster. Dos-Tev and Mea-Quin watched them fascinated.

“It’s the new space-fleet of Ay-Artz,” exclaimed the young Emperor. “What devilment can he be up to now?”

“The conquest of the planet Risbo?” suggested the bearded scientist.

“But Risbo is on the other side of our world at this time of night,” Dos-Tev objected.

The forgotten workman stirred and sat up groggily.

“Sire,” he gasped, “Ay-Artz sets forth tonight to conquer the planets which circle the nearest star. I have been trying to tell you, Sire.”

“By Tor, he shall not! Not if Dos-Tev can stop him!” exclaimed the young Emperor. “Mea-Quin, our space-ship is nearly completed. We must fly to Risbo. Once there, it will be a simple matter to adapt the light-ray transmitters of the Risboyans so as to increase their range and flash a warning to the solar system.”

Mea-Quin took his bearded chin in his hand and remained sunk in thought for a moment. Then he solemnly shook his head.

“Too late,” said he. “A light ray would take four years and 107 days to reach the solar system. The rocket ships of Ay-Artz, traveling half way with an acceleration equal to gravity and then decelerating at the same rate, would arrive there 78 days ahead of our signal even if we could send the message tonight.”

“How long would it take us to get there?”

Mea-Quin blanched. The steadied himself, did some figuring, and replied, “At the rate of one and a half times gravity, we can make it in 3 years and 121 days, Sire.”

“How long will it take us to stock the ship for a trip of that length?”

“There are enough compressed rations and liquid oxygen in the laboratory already, so that we could start tonight, were it not for the part which we tore out of the ship today, in order to give the impression to the spies of Ay-Artz that we are getting nowhere with our preparations. We could get it ready early tomorrow morning, but of course will have to wait until tomorrow night so that the solar system will be above us.”

The handsome young face of Dos-Tev burst into a triumphal smile as he shook his fist at the sky above and exclaimed, “Go, you murderers! You shall learn that Dos-Tev still rules!”

“Look!” whispered Mea-Quin.

A dark form scuttled across the courtyard and disappeared into the shadows.

“We have been overheard,” announced Dos-Tev soberly, his exalted mood dropping from him. “In my excitement I had forgotten that we were neither on the beach nor in the gravitator. We must summon back the men and finish the ship tonight!”

By this time the huge workman was on his feet again, thoroughly recovered from his bad turn.

“Sire, at your command!” he declared, saluting eagerly. “Let us show the dictator that you are still our ruler!”

“Summon the men,” directed the Emperor. “I dare not blow the signal-horns, lest the sound reach the mainland. We set forth into space tonight.”

Along toward morning the space-ship was ready. Inexplicably there had been no interference from the forces of the dictator. Perhaps the skulking figure which had been glimpsed in the courtyard had not been a spy of Ay-Artz after all.

The loyal workmen clustered round and one by one silently pressed the hand of their leader. Although the part which they had played in aiding the departure might mean death by torture for each one of them, yet not a man amongst them flinched. Death was certain for the supposed spy of Ay-Artz, but the huge workman did not flinch either.

“Goodbye, Sire, and good luck!” he shouted.

“But you are going with us Bullo,” said Dos-Tev. “You have earned it.”

Bullo fell back a pace and shuddered. Death by torture at the hands of the minions of Ay-Artz held no terrors for him; but this – a flight into the unknown – this was different.

“Are you afraid?”

Bullo proudly raised his head.

“No!” said he firmly as he followed his two masters up a short step-ladder to a small air-lock eight feet above the ground in the side of the cigar-shaped craft, which stood with its sharp end pointing upward.

The door to the air-lock clanged shut behind them. The crowd of workmen scattered. Everything was ready!

The control-room, in which the three voyagers stood, was circular, fifteen feet in diameter and eight high. The wall was lined with bookshelves. A spiral staircase led to the floors above. In the center of the room was a table crowded with switches, levers, and scientific instruments including three television screens and their controls. Three spring-seats hung from the ceiling in front of the instrument table.

Dos-Tev first tested the air-seal of the door to make sure that it was tight enough to withstand the absolute vacuum of outer space; then threw a switch which started the double-gyroscopic stabilizer in the compartment next above. As soon as this stabilizer should develop its full speed steering could be effected by turning the ship with respect to the gyroscopes, which would remain constantly oriented in one direction.

All three men laced themselves into the spring-saddles to guard against any sudden jar of the start.

“Better begin with just barely more than gravity,” suggested the bearded scientist. “Remember that Bullo is not used to this kind of travel.”

The huge workman’s face was white and his eyes were wide, but his jaw was firmly set.

Dos-Tev turned on the atomic blast and a low roar could be heard in the section of the ship beneath him. Gradually he notched it up and the roar became louder and louder until it was nearly deafening. He and Mea-Quin consulted several dials, which showed that the gyros had attained proper speed, that the air-pressure was standard, and that the atoms were disintegrating properly. They nodded to each other.

Dos-Tev signalled to his two companions to hold tight. Then he threw another lever, the roar of the disintegrator became a sudden screech, their seats sagged to the full stretch of the springs, and the space-ship shot upward from the courtyard. The gyros held it steady; there was no wobble in its upward lurch.

For a moment it lurched madly forward. Then its pilot slowed it down until the sum of the readings of two dials showed that the added effects of the attraction of the planet and the impressed acceleration of the ship were only equal to gravity-and-a quarter. But even that slow rate carried them nearly three miles into the air in the first minute.

Below them, as shown in the vision-screens, they could see the lights of their little island and of the nearby coast-cities of the empire. Above them twinkled the starry firmament; and in the midst of the constellation Casseopeia directly overhead there glowed brightly the nearest star, the one which forms the center of the solar system. Toward it they set their course.

Faint bodies, which were not stars, could now be seen converging ahead of them.

“A perfect swarm of scout-ships,” remarked Mea-Quin grimly. “Now I understand why the minions of the dictator did not interfere with our departure. To hurt you on Lemnis would mean a popular uprising; but out in space – why the populace would never know what caused your death. Shall we try and dodge them?”

“No,” replied Dos-Tev slowing down the ship to less then gravity. “They have us pocketed. Undoubtedly they will try space-torpedoes on us. But we’ll give them a taste of our new gun, which the fools have thought was merely another atomic impulse-projector.”

“Guns, Sire?” exclaimed Bullo. “Can this ship stand the recoil?”

“There will be no recoil,” the young Emperor explained, “for this gun has a blast-deflector which neutralizes the recoil. Come on, Bullo, follow me; there’s no time to lose.”

So saying, he unlashed himself from his spring seat and dashed up the spiral staircase, followed by the big workman. Up past the twin gyros they rushed, to the floor above, which was equipped as a living-room, with bunks along its sides. Down from the center of the ceiling there projected the breech of a five-inch gun. This gun, being recoilless, was rigidly built into the nose of the ship, so as to prevent the escape of any air around it and had a double air-lock breech-block.

With Bullo’s assistance, Dos-Tev rolled a cartridge out of one of the closets and lifted it into the breech, which he then closed. One throw of a lever then uncapped the point of the space-ship, revealing the muzzle. Dos-Tev turned on a vision-screen, adjusting it for vision straight ahead. The scout ships of the enemy were only a few seconds away.

Seizing a corded push-button in one hand and a telephone in the other, Dos-Tev shouted, “Steer straight toward one of them Mea-Quin; and when I fire, put on full speed ahead.”

The space-ship swung slightly and one of the enemy fliers suddenly loomed large in the vision-screen. Dos-Tev pushed the button, the enemy ship dissolved into a burst of debris, then vanished to the rear as an upward lurch threw Dos-Tev and Bullo to the floor.

With great difficulty they forced their doubly-weighted bodies erect. Then switching the screen to rear-vision, they saw the rapidly diminishing blobs of light which represented the rocket discharge of the survivors of the enemy fleet.

Dos-Tev closed the nose of his space-ship again. Then he and Bullo laboriously climbed back down the spiral stairs to the room where Mea-Quin was driving the ship upward with an acceleration equal to twice that of gravity. He slowed it down a bit as they entered.

The enemy ships were now too far below them to be visible in the rear-vision-screen of the control room. The planet Lemnis, from which they had come, showed as a rapidly diminishing disk, around one end of which its sun was rapidly rising with its twin star visible as an apparently smaller body just beside and beyond it. In spite of daylight, the sky showed black instead of green, for they were now well beyond any trace of the atmosphere of the planet.

“Well,” announced Dos-Tev, grinning, “we’re on our way.”

“What do you plan to do when you catch up with the dictator’s expedition?” asked Mea-Quin.

“I hadn’t thought of that,” the young Emperor replied, sobering. “How soon is it likely to happen?”

“Well, they left with an acceleration of merely gravity, 10 hours ahead of us. We are now speeding up at one and a half times that rate. We shall pass them about forty-four and a half hours from now.”

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Nearly two days later the three space travelers had begun to get used to weighing half as much again as on the planet Lemnis. To the huge Bullo this came the hardest, not only because he had done no practicing on the gravitator, but also because he was the heaviest of the three to start with.

By now Lemnis was over a hundred million miles behind them and they had attained a speed of five and a quarter million miles per hour. But they were still well within the system of Alpha Centauri, with the light of the twin suns full upon them from behind.

All three passengers had taken turns sleeping, and now studied the black sky about them by means of the vision-screens and a high-power telescope, searching everywhere for the twenty troop-carrying space-ships of the dictator, but not a sign of the enemy could they find.

Shortly after midnight – not that there really were such things as day and night way out in space, but merely that they kept record of the hours the same as back on Lemnis – Dos-Tev shook his head and said, “I can’t understand it. We started from the same place as Ay-Artz, and headed for the same place. It seems inconceivable that either he or we could have strayed so far from our common course as to have missed the other.”

“I have it!” exclaimed Mea-Quin. “We did not start from the same place, for the planet Lemnis was a million and a quarter miles further along in its orbit when we started than when Ay-Artz did. We have traveled a course parallel to his and have missed him by more than a million miles! Let’s cut over and intercept him.”

“Let’s not,” drily remarked the young Emperor. “Let’s keep on toward the solar system and warn its inhabitants. What a surprise it will be for Ay-Artz to find his old enemy is still in a position to thwart him.”

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More days went by and the young Emperor and his friends became more and more accustomed to the strange conditions of life in the space-ship. The effort of carrying around their newly acquired bodily weight took the place of exercise and kept them in good trim.

A delicate recording instrument kept track of their acceleration and from this data Mea-Quin periodically computer their velocity and their position in space. A check on these computations was afforded by the apparent displacement of the stars. As the speed of the space-ship became faster and faster, it compounded with the velocity of the light from the distant stars, thus causing their apparent position to shift gradually forward. By measuring the angle of the displacement, particularly in the stars which ought to have appeared directly amidships, Mea-Quin had an accurate gauge on the speed of the ship.

The total absence of one expected phenomenon puzzled the old man greatly, namely that the stars directly behind them, and especially the twin star, Alpha Centauri, from whose system they had come, did not turn gradually red and then disappear as the gradually increasing speed of the space-ship slowed down the apparent rate of vibration of light from the rear. At the end of 118 days, when the space-ship had attained a speed equal to half that of light and, consequently, the entire visible spectra of light from the rear ought by rights to have disappeared, no change at all was noticeable!

Dos-Tev and Mea-Quin puzzled about this considerably, until they hit upon the absurdly simple explanation; when the normally visible light from these stars had shifted to infra-red, the normally invisible ultra-violet light had shifted to visible, and so the color of these stars had remained unchanged.

But finally, as they approximated the speed of light, the young leader Dos-Tev was fascinated and the workman Bullo was filled with superstitious awe at the evanishment of all stars to the rear of them and the gradual foreshortening of the remaining constellations.

“You haven’t seen anything yet,” announced Mea-Quin. “Just wait until we exceed 186,000 miles per second. Then we shall begin to catch up with the light from the stars behind us which has preceded us through space. Thus we shall see them ahead of us, although they are really behind us. And, if our telescope were powerful enough, so that we could focus it on Lemnis, we would now see events which occurred on Lemnis before we left there, but we would see them happening backward.”

Dos-Tev shook his head, and grinned.

“Just as well that we can’t,” said he. “Things are confusing enough as they are.”

But little did any of them expect the degree of confusion which they were soon to encounter!

The calculations of Mea-Quin showed that they ought to attain the speed of light after about seven and a half months of travel; and as that time drew near, the correctness of his forecast was indicated by the fact that all the stars which actually occupied a position at right-angles to their course now appeared shifted to a position 45 degrees ahead. Almost no stars were any longer visible in the hemisphere of space behind them.

On the 236th day Dos-Tev was scanning the sky when he noticed that the star for which they were heading was growing blurred and vague. Thinking this might be due to a sudden defect in his telescope he swung the instrument on some adjacent stars and noted to his surprise that they all appeared to be slowly changing their locations in space, moving to the rear. In fact the starry firmament ahead seemed to be opening up to let the spaceship through. But the stars abreast of him seemed to be moving forward.

Locking the steering controls to a small gyroscope which as capable of maintaining their direction for days on end, he clambered up the spiral staircase to the living-room, two stories above in the nose of the ship, and roused Mea-Quin and Bullo from their bunks.

“Something strange is happening to all the stars!” he exclaimed. “Come to the control-room and see for yourselves.”

Incredulous, they followed him, only to find that things were much worse than he had described them. All the stars in the sky had now gathered into a bright and narrow ring, located just 45 degrees ahead of them, surrounding their line of travel. And the star at which they had pointed the nose of the ship thus far, had completely disappeared.

For hours, as they watched, fascinated and appalled, the ring of stars contracted to a single line of light. Then, gradually, this line widened again and broke up into individual stars.

Again the hemisphere of sky ahead was filled with points of light, and the hemisphere behind was blank. But all the familiar constellations were gone! However, as the three space travelers gazed they were gradually able to make out the great dipper, Orion, and a few other of the more familiar star-groups; but now completely reversed, Alpha Centauri, from which they had come, was now directly ahead. All of space seemed to have turned inside out! And the constellation of Cassiopeia, toward which they had been heading, was now nowhere to be seen either in front or behind them!

“Are we coming or going?” gasped Dos-Tev, in an attempt at humor.

Bullo made the sign of Tor, and slumped to the floor.

But Mea-Quin, the aged scientist, shook his head and grimly replied, “We are still going, Sire, for the stars which belong dead abreast of us still appear shifted ahead. Let me think.”

“I shall take a nap,” the young Emperor announced. “Perhaps when I wake up, I’ll find that this has all been merely a bad dream.”

And, as Dos-Tev led the way up the spiral stairs, Bullo staggered erect and followed him, muttering, “When I wake up, I hope that it will be back on Lemnis again.”

But Mea-Quin called after them, “I have it! It’s the relativity effect. Relative to us, as observers, all of space is traveling backward with speed now slightly faster than light. To an observer, a body traveling with the speed of light appears to have contracted to zero dimension in the direction of travel. Accordingly, at speed faster than light, this dimension would be minus, that is to say, reversed.”

“But why didn’t we notice this change gradually coming on?” objected Dos-Tev.

“Because most stars are practically at an infinite distance away,” Mea-Quin explained, “and so the steady contraction of space in the direction of travel would not be noticeable until it almost reached zero.”

Bullo again made the sign of Tor.

“But why is the celestial equator still 45 degrees ahead instead of behind,” Dos-Tev again objected.

“Because the relativity-effect merely causes space to look as it would if reversed. Let us therefore assume space to be reversed, and then apply to that reversed space the phenomena which we experienced before the reversal. Result: The stars abreast of us would be shifted ahead as it was before.”

As the days went on the constellation toward which they were going gradually appeared again in the sky; and not behind them, as the change of space would lead them to expect, but rather in front of them in almost a direct line with the star from which they had come. Truly space was more than merely turned around! It was cock-eyed!

The aged scientist explained, “Since space is now reversed by the relativity effect, it is the star in front of us rather than the one behind that disappears and then reappears in front of us as we catch up with its light. I was all wrong when I said that this would happen to Alpha Centauri. Instead it is happening to the star for which we are headed.”

“Perhaps Ay-Artz’s expedition will get all twisted up and will return to Lemnis by mistake,” suggested Dos-Tev. “Ought we to go on, or return to Lemnis?”

“Not a chance of Ay-Artz blundering,” replied Mea-Quin positively. “The dictator has several astronomers with him and their combined brains will think up the true explanation of all these paradoxes as quickly as I did.”

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At the end of the 608th day their calculations indicated that their journey was half completed. Their speed had become two and a half times that of light. The problem now was to slow down to zero speed again, between here and the solar system. So they shut off the rocket-discharge and drifted.

The effect was sudden, and as strange as though it had been unexpected. Not only did their ship drift through space, but the three men drifted within the ship, with their bodily weight suddenly reduced to zero.

Upness and downess ceased to exist for them. The least motion of arms or legs started their bodies spinning. Bullo completely lost control of himself and, with a shriek of fright, shot through the air of the room, bouncing off walls and ceiling and floor in his mad flight. And every movable object which he touched joined in the confusion, until the interior of the room became a maelstrom.

Through this chaos Dos-Tev attempted to swim back to the instrument table, which to his confused senses now appeared to be hanging upside-down from the ceiling above him. Due to the fact that the slightest effort spun him around and around and end over end, progress was most difficult; but at last he learned how to steady his course and cautiously approached the array of levers.

Gingerly turning-on a slight acceleration, he restored all objects to the floor. Bullo lay groaning with fright, Mea-Quin was unconscious from a severe gash in his forehead, and the entire place was a mess which would require hours to clean up; but the instruments appeared to be unharmed.

Then Dos-Tev swung the space-ship around so that it pointed back in the direction from which it had come. Yet, of course, its speed was so terrific that merely turning around as it shot through space had no effect whatever on the direction of travel. So now it was shooting backward toward its objective at the same rate at which it had a few minutes ago been shooting forward.

The maneuver completed, Dos-Tev slammed on an acceleration – deceleration now – of one and a half times gravity, and went for water to revive his aged friend. And, as he did so, he realized that all this confusion had been unnecessary; he could have just as well have effected the reversal of the ship end-for-end without shutting off the rocket discharge at all.

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So the trip proceeded. And, when the ship finally slowed down to less than the speed of light, space again reversed itself and became normal once more.

To kill time, Mea-Quin had rigged up a laboratory in the living-room of the ship, and had there constructed a light-ray transmitter and receiver, instruments denied to them by the dictator Ay-Artz in their exile on the island of Elbon.

And so it was that, as they approached the solar system, they picked up a message intended for Ay-Artz, a message asking the dictator to land on the satellite of the planet Earth, and even describing to him the exact lunar crater beside which he was to land. Dos-Tev was jubilant.

“I had been wondering just where to head for at our journey’s end,” said he. “Now we know that our enemy has solar allies; and they have played into our hands by giving us the desired information.”

And so, in due time, the ship of Dos-Tev reached the solar system, cruised slowly through it, and at last alighted on the rim of the lunar crater Copernicus.

Not a living thing was in sight. The lunar rocks were bleak and bare. The surface of the moon was devoid of atmosphere. But fortunately this part of the moon was then in twilight, and hence neither unbearably hot nor unbearably cold.

So, donning air suits, brought with them lest their journey should end on just such a planet as this, they sallied forth through the air-lock of their machine, taking great care not to be overthrown by the reduced gravity of the moon.

Their helmets were equipped with electrical transmitters and receivers, so that they could talk as normally as though there had been air to carry the sound of their voices.

Gazing up into the sky, Dos-Tev declaimed, “Here we are, nine months ahead of Ay-Artz. Plenty of time for us to arrange how to foil him. He shall find that Dos-Tev still rules!”

# Chapter 2 – The Emigrants by David H. Keller, M.D.

AUTHOR OF ‘THE REVOLT OF THE PEDESTRIANS,’ ‘THE METAL DOOM,’ ETC.

Matters were going from bad to worse on earth. Even the most generous optimist secretly felt that the stage of mechanical labor had advanced to the point at which it might easily threaten the security, even the existence of the human race.

The robot had been followed by the super automaton. Machinery could now be so delicately attuned to the nervous system of mankind that all that was necessary was to develop the power of physic control, buy a few machines and let them work for their master. Naturally, the man who could buy the most machines and learn how to govern them was able to subdue the poor man who could only boast of a few imperfect automatons of early vintage.

At first only the visionaries thought of the possibility of a time’s arriving when the automatons would function without the aid of a guiding human intelligence. But that time came. Almost before the human race were aware of their danger they were placed in a position of it’s being hard to tell whether the intelligence of man was directing the activities of the machine or the intelligence of the machine was gradually enslaving the remnant of the human species.

James Tarvish, old, shrewd, wealthy, realized before most of the world’s rich men what might happen on the earth. Having neither wife nor child, he had made money his God, and machinery his hobby. It was his cash which made the dream of interplanetary travel become a living reality. Though not an inventor himself, he was able to tell the men under his rule what to invent. Silently, vigorously, relentlessly he fought the battle against the automatons, but finally realized the fact that it might easily become a hopeless fight. Five years before the two great forces came into open conflict he had made up his mind what to do. Once he decided he worked with startling rapidity.

He called in his inventors and scientists from all parts of the world. When he talked to them his words snapped, his sentences crackled.

“Draw plans for two air-ships that will fit together to form one interplanetary ship. I want them so designed that the two can be used independently or, when joined in the middle, can be used as one. Double everything. Make it powerful, swift, the finest ship ever made. In the one ship I want a giant refrigerator built. In fact, I want the entire half to be a refrigerator. Think of the greatest heat possible, the most terrible heat known to our intelligence and then plan a refrigerating plant that will enable a human being to live inside no matter what the heat is outside, and keep on living there, year after year. You have broken up the atom to obtain energy. Learn how to use that energy to produce cold. Stock both ends of the ship with everything necessary to keep several people alive for many years; not only alive, but happy and busy and interested in life.

“I am not taking anything for impossible. I know what I want and I want it right and as fast as possible. Spare no expense. Put yourself on double hours of labor and triple units of salary. Get busy and stay busy. I am going to be on the job day and night. If you are not sure of what I want, ask me. If you are not sure you can do what I want get out and give a better man the job.”

“Where are you going in this ship, Mr. Tarvish?” asked one of the best minds in the gathering. “We ought to know that in order to design it properly.”

“You build it the way I say,” was the sharp answer, “and it will go where it is intended to go. If I had wanted to tell you my plans I would have done so at once.”

The rocket-ship was built. As a mechanical triumph it was a success. As a novelty in interplanetary travel it was filled with startling new innovations.

Tarvish had used the very mechanical perfection that he was afraid of to devise a space home that was in everyway foolproof. Anyone knowing enough to read and press buttons could guide the machine through the void of time and space and live in it for the full span of individual existence.

In two years it was built.

Known among the inventors as Fool’s Folly and called by the fictionists the Ark of Space, it contained something that was more remarkable than any part of its automatic machinery. It held an idea. James Tarvish, old, dour, canny, tightfisted, had an idea and it was a new one.

For the next three months he hunted for a man.

He wanted a man who was brave, intellectual, clean, and in every way representative of the best in the cultural achievements of the age. He at last found what he wanted. The man’s name was Henry Cecil.

“I have a job for you, Mr. Cecil,” whispered Tarvish.

“I accept it,” was the sharp reply.

“But you don’t know what it is?”

“And I do not care, as long as I can support myself.”

“You can do that if you take this job. I have built a space ship. I want you to be the entire crew. I am sending you away from the world – forever.”

“How about my pay?”

“I will have a number of envelopes filled, each with the salary for one month. On the first of each month you can open an envelope.”

“That’s satisfactory. On a trip of that kind I ought to be able to save a lot.”

“A lot! Man! You can save it all. I wish I had had a chance like that when I was a lad. Here is the idea. The world is going to smash. I do not mean physically, but socially. The automatons are gaining in power. The day will come when they will either kill or enslave what is left of the human race. I want to save what is best of it so I am sending out this space-ship. It is the Ark that will save mankind from the second deluge, the flood of mechanical perfection.”

“And I am going to send you to a place that is safe. An ordinary space-ship cannot follow you. You will be safe.”

“All by myself?”

“Practically. Perhaps a pet for you to talk to.”

“It is ideal!” cried the young man eagerly. “Wonderful! In fact, is just what I have been hunting for. No women?”

The old man frowned.

“Women! And me a bachelor all my life? I said I wanted to save the best of our culture, not the dregs.”

“You don’t like women?”

“No, when I was young one woman called me a dried-out orange, a book that had been read, a worn-out shoe. She intimated that the masculine sex was the inferior one. I have not liked women since that day. And you!”

“That is one reason I want to take this job. There is a woman after me. She thinks that she would like to marry me. So long as I am on this earth I cannot escape her. So, I am leaving.”

“Young? Pretty? Healthy? Intelligent?”

“Sure. All of that, but she treats me as if I were a child. She wants to make plans for me, buy my neckties, and all that sort of thing.”

“You poor lad. Tell me her name and address and I will see that you are protected. What kind of a pet will be your choice?”

“An English bull dog. I will get a puppy.”

“Better get one that is housebroke. There will be no pleasant fields where you are going.”

“Just where is my future home?”

“Mercury. It is the only place that the automatons will not think of conquering.”

“But it is hot there. Near the sun and all that sort of thing.”

“Sure it is hot, but you will be living in a refrigerator, with goldfish in the aquarium and canaries in the bird cage. So long as you stay in the refrigerator, you will be safe. A second outside and you will be a cinder.”

“Fine! Even if the temperature is high it will not be as hot as a life with Ruth Fanning. That is the girl’s name. I will write her address for you. When do I go?”

“In a week. I may not be there to see you off, but all you have to do is to follow your written orders. The salary is a hundred a month for your life, payable on the first of each month.”

The young man seized the old man’s hand. His appreciation was pathetic, as he exclaimed,

“I never shall be able to thank you for this. If the offer had not come, that girl would have caught me in another month. Now I shall go out and hunt up that bulldog. What did you say the object of the trip was?”

“To save humanity. To preserve the human race.”

“That is some job for the bulldog and me, but we shall do our best. I am going to show you that you have not made a mistake in selecting me. Just why did you do it?”

“Because I found out that you are a misogynist.”

“I see. And you will take care of Ruth?”

“You just leave that to me.”

“O.K.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Most of the following week was devoted to the mechanical education of Henry Cecil. Hour after hour he was taught how to push the various buttons and find his way through space. He was shown all the parts of the super-refrigeration machinery. He was not an engineer; in fact, he was simply an author, but at the end of the week he felt that he would be able to do everything that was necessary on the trip, which was to occupy his lifetime.

The day came! The hour! The minute! He said goodbye to the men who had tutored him and, as the bulldog barked, he shut and fastened the door, and pushed the various buttons that started the giant ship on its journey to one of the infernos of the universe.

Mercury! The planet nearest the sun. The planet of mystery, of terrible heat, the place human life is supposed to be impossible. The place even a determined young lady could not follow a man she coveted.

The bulldog, slightly uneasy at what he could not understand, whined at Cecil’s feet. He looked out of a window, and through the heavy insulated glass and peered at the disappearing earth. The man bent over and pulled the dog’s ears.

“Alone at last, old man,” he cried. “Just you and me, and the world of woman left behind. Suppose we go into the library?”

In that room, above the murmur of the machinery, he heard a rhythmic snore. He walked rapidly to the chair. The old man woke.

“Why, Mr. Tarvish!” cried Cecil. “What are you doing there in that chair?”

“I must have overslept,” chuckled the gray-headed man. “Came in here at the last moment to look around and got sleepy. Well, since I am paying the cost for the saving of the human race, I might as well witness the details of the salvaging. It will be a grand adventure, Henry, and I doubt not we shall never regret it. I have a surprise for you. When I came on the ship my dog followed me. As fine an English bull as you ever saw, and a bitch.”

“What?”

“Sure! Dogs die. They wither and grow old and die. We will live on and what would life be without a dog? Why, man, the human race has always had dogs; so , when you told me what kind of a dog you were going to take, I went and got a mate for him.”

“And you intended to make the trip with me all the time?”

“A suspicious person might think so.”

Just then the door opened. A young woman walked in. She was young and beautiful and she looked as though she might be intellectual. She wore a pretty little apron and she smiled as she asked,

“What time shall you men want supper?”

“At five, my dear, and I like my toast a trifle hard, with orange marmalade and tea.”

As the woman left the room, Cecil turned on the old man.

“So, you did that to me? After all your fine words about being a woman hater, and selecting me because you knew I was a misogynist, and all that sort of thing, you go and take her with us.”

“Now don’t take it too hard,” advised Tarvish.

“It really was on account of the dogs I did it,” he added.

“What had the dogs to dogs to do with your allowing Ruth to come?”

“T’was like this. There will be little puppies, Henry, and you know what a little pup is like. One of the things it likes to do more than anything else is to play with a baby. Now, we cannot be cruel to the little dog and deprive it of its happiness.”

“How about me? Are you comparing my happiness to that of a dog?”

“Not exactly; but look here. You are on a salary. One hundred a week for the rest of your life. You are hired to save humanity. That is your job, and how can you save it without a woman?”

“I do not want the job. Not if it means what it seems to mean.”

The old scientist shook his head,

“I do not know what you are talking about. I thought I was doing you a favor. It seemed to me that a lifetime in a refrigerator would be tiresome, and you would tire of playing cribbage with me. Besides, there is the matter of toast. I like it just a certain way, and if it is any other way the meal is spoiled. Ruth knows how to toast it so it is just right. She has made me toast at irregular intervals for years. You will be surprised to learn that she is my favorite niece. Another thing; the trip was her idea. She suggested it. My first thought was that she and I would make the trip by ourselves, but she felt that you needed a change; that you were too closely confined at your job. So, I had you come along to please her. It seems to me that the more I try to help people the more I am misunderstood.”

“I’ll be damned!” exclaimed Cecil.

“You probably will unless you make an effort to be nice to Ruth. She said your excuse for not marrying her was the lack of a sufficient income and enough leisure. You have both now. Suppose we have supper.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Hours passed and days. Weeks folded up their tired frames and went to sleep in the cemetery of time. The old man spent more and more time in the library, usually with one or both bulldogs. Cecil learned to be nice to Ruth. They found that, given leisure and an adequate income, they had a number of things in common.

At last they reached Mercury and landed on its superheated surface. In every way the refrigerating mechanicism worked as it was supposed to work. Life in the space ship was pleasant, placid and peaceful. The bullpups were growing up. Ruth and Cecil were growing up. The old man laughed more and more to himself.

Over the space radio they received news from the earth. It was not at all pleasant and confirmed Travish’s worst anticipations. The automatons were winning the struggle for supremacy. Unless something happened the human race would be enslaved and then destroyed.

Tarvish laughed over these messages and commented,

“At least, we have made Mercury safe for humanity.”

“And for the race of bulldogs,” added Ruth, running into the room. “Our population is increased by four of the finest little pups you ever saw.” She rushed out as fast as she had rushed in.

“Poor little doggies!” sighed Tarvish, looking at the young man out of one corner of his eye. “No babies for them to play with.”

“Ruth is looking after that,” replied Cecil rather sadly.

“She is a great girl,” purred the old man. “Wait a minute, are you two married?”

“Yes. The night before I left the earth I consented to a formal marriage. I had not told her of my plans to take this trip and spend the rest of my life away from earth, so, just to please her, I let her have her way and we were married. I said goodbye to her at the church, never expecting to see her again, and all the time she knew she was going to make the space trip with me. I do not believe I ever will trust a woman again. It has been a wonderful lesson to me.”

“How do you like her cooking?”

Cecil brightened up.

“Keep your clothes in order.”

Cecil beamed. The old man smiled as he whispered,

“Let’s play a game of cribbage, you confirmed misogynist.”

\* \* \* \* \*

A month later the little doggies had two babies to play with, twins, a boy and a girl. It began to look as though a start was made toward the saving of humanity.

And then the mysterious message came to them.

For three days all earth messages over the super radio were blocked. Evidently some supreme power was preventing all radio waves in order to clear the ether for its own purposes. Then the message came over and over again as though in fear that if only sent one time or a dozen times it would be lost.

People of Mercury: Construct a space ship in accord with our instructions which will follow and send a representative to the crater Copernicus of the satellite of the third planet.

Signed: Dos-Tev

Tarvish thought it over from every possible viewpoint. At last he called Henry Cecil into the library and told him to shut the door.

“What do you think about it, Henry?” he asked.

“Ruth says that Henry, Jr., gained a half pound last week, but cries a good deal. Little Angelica laughs a goo-goo laugh, but does not grow as fast as her brother.”

The old man looked disgusted.

“Being a father ruined you as a general conversationalist. All you can talk about is babies, babies, babies. Henry, Jr., is probably crying because he has found out that he is a male, and Angelica say goo-goo because she belongs to the superior sex. What I want to know is your opinion of the message we have been receiving.”

“Oh! That? What I do not understand is how they knew we came to Mercury?”

“They don’t know. They just hoped there was some form of life on Mercury and wanted to communicate with it. But why?”

“Perhaps they are having an interplanetary Rotarian Meeting of some sort and want us to send representatives?”

“That is a silly thought, Henry, but there may be something to it. They may be sending the same message to every planet, and the message we received is the same the people received on earth. It may be a grand hoax and then again it may be something very vital, something so great in its scope that even a limited comprehension of it is impossible. But I have made up my mind as to what to do. I am going to separate the two parts of our ship, leave you and Ruth and the babies here with some of the dogs and I am going to take the other half of the ship and go to the Moon and find out what it all means.”

“You are going to do nothing of the kind!” declared a very convincing and determined voice.

“Ruth Cecil! Do you mean to tell me you have been listening?”

“How could I help it?” replied the young mother. “I come in here to ask you for advice in regard to the children and find you making plans to go off and leave us here. I am not going to let you!”

“You better let us settle this, Ruth,” urged the old man.

“Certainly; he knows best,” added Cecil. “It is no trip for babies to make.”

“Have it your own way,” replied the defeated girl. “What do you want for supper?”

\* \* \* \* \*

That night Tarvish dreamed he was floating through space. There was a slight sense of nausea, a deeper sense of impending danger. The room seemed chilled. He awoke, shivered, felt the unusual vibration of some powerful machinery. Startled, he jumped out of bed, pulled on a dressing robe and ran into the adjoining bedroom. Cecil was in bed, still asleep, but sneezing. The babies were well covered, as were the dogs. Ruth was missing.

“Where’s Ruth?” asked Tarvish, shaking Cecil by the shoulder.

The young man awoke, looked around, collected himself and gasped,

“Gone.”

They ran through the half of the ship which had served them for a home on Mercury. The woman was not to be found. Looking out the windows, they learned part of the truth. The ship had left Mercury and the hot planet was already receding. An open door told the rest of the tale.

Startled beyond words, they ran into the other end of the space ship and found Ruth in the control room, busily engaged in pressing buttons and studying a map of the universe.

She was the only calm one of the three.

“What are you doing, Ruth?” demanded the old man.

“I have started this family to the moon.”

“But who said you should?” asked the husband.

“I said so, silly boy. Do you think we were going to stay in that dull inferno and let Uncle make the trip by himself? Once he was gone, what was to happen to us? And our children? All well enough to talk about saving Mercury for humanity, but we brought children into the world, and, if we stay on Mercury whom would they marry? And where would they go to school? I want them to have a little social life. And then we have to consider their collegiate education. And how about the dogs? Two of the little pups are females. They ought to have their chance. And then there are other things. Who would make Uncle’s toast for him if I did not stay with him? And I am out of the yellow floss for my hooked rug and cannot do a thing on it till I get some more, and you need some new stockings, and my watch does not keep time, and next year is the fifth reunion of my class and all of the Sorority will be back and they will expect me there. I am the Grand Historian. So, we are all going to the moon, and after that we are going back to New York and do some shopping, and I wish you would find out which button to press to turn on the heat, because now that we are away from Mercury we have nothing to neutralize the cold of the refrigerating system; and if you men feel the way I do, you are not at all comfortable. I covered the babies up before I left them, but I suppose they are uncovered by this time; so, I am going back to look after them and leave you men with the machinery. I set the course for the moon, but just at this minute I feel that perhaps I looked on the wrong page and we are now heading for Mars instead. You see, they both start with M, and it is confusing. Goodnight. See you at breakfast.”

“Wonderful girl!” sighed the old man. “College graduate.”

“She is wonderful,” agreed the young man. “At times when I am with her I feel like killing her, yet, when I am away from her for just a few minutes I feel so lonely I know I could not live without her. Did you ever feel that way about a woman?”

The old man did not answer the question. Cecil continued,

“Did you listen to her stream of thought? Was it logical? Was it connected? Was there any sense to it?”

“Women don’t think as men do,” sighed Tarvish.

“I wonder if they think at all!”

The correct adjustments were made to the machinery. Gradually the ship grew more comfortable. Looking out through the windows, the two men saw Mercury, now simply a pin point of super-heated metal. One of the bulldogs ran in, sat down at the old man’s feet, and started to lick his hand. Far in the distance they heard the laugh of a little baby.

“We are going to the moon,” said the old man, “for new adventures, but it is nice to think that no matter what happens to us we are going as a family, all of us, even the little doggies.”

Ruth called in through the door.

“What do you men want for breakfast?”

The ship sped speedily spaceward.

# Chapter 3 – Callisto’s Children by Arthur J. Burks

Editor’s note: We’re aware that the name of the main character in this chapter is referred to variously as ‘Parcele’ and ‘Parlece.’ This is [sic], since we really don’t know which the author intended.

AUTHOR OF: ‘MONSTERS OF MOYEN,’ ‘EARTH, THE MARAUDER,’ ETC.

Across the sky of Callisto flashed a brilliant light. It might have been taken for a meteorite. But it did not seem to diminish and fade away when it struck Callisto’s atmosphere. There was something different ‘otherworldly’ about it; even more than had it been the meteorite it at first seemed to be. Probably the race of Callistonians sensed, even when the brilliant orange light shading into dark blue was first seen, that here was something cataclysmic, something portentous.

In the deep mountains of the land, in the heart of a forest glade where he lived practically alone, Parcele, the Father, stared at the heavens and marked the passage of the light across the heavens. His black eyes were deeper than space and in them was mirrored all wisdom and experience. His nine hundred years of life rested lightly on his shoulders. He was dressed in a tunic of blue with white borders. He did not know, of course, how closely his garments resembled the togas of a race which once inhabited a planet he knew only as a spot in the immensity of space. All he knew was Callisto and her children.

And something, even then, warned that the brilliant light brought catastrophe to those children.

He stiffened as the sound came down the gentle wind from beyond the crest of the mountains. It was a sound somewhere between a wail and a lost chord of music; a sound with an oddly measured sequence. There was an urgency about it, as though it were a summons. It came from behind the ramparts of the blue mountains where the brilliant light had dropped. He listened to the spacing of the sounds, to the rise and fall of them. In ordinary times the sound would have been music to tug at his heart-strings. It was that now, too, but the urgency gave it another meaning, almost a plea for help. And it wasn’t often that the children of Callisto came to Parcele for help. He smiled a little. With a proud fling of his leonine hear he tossed back from his eyes the mass of tumbles black hair which gave to his person as aspect of wildness – almost as though he were a hunted creature. His eyes glowed. His deeply red lips moved.

“It must be important, since they send for Parlece!”

No sound, actually came from his lips, though they moved. Had there been sounds only an intelligent being of another planet would have understood them – and then only if that being possessed the ability to read the thoughts of other beings. For it was a form of thought transference – swift and intangible as lightning. Although he was alone his lips moved from force of habit.

Quickly he broke from cover, girding strange weapons about him as he ran. He ran with the grace and speed of a gazelle. In appearance his weapons were two pronged sticks; each stick having six prongs that branched out from the main staff. That there were two of these sticks seemed natural, since he had two hands. The sticks were perhaps a foot in length, each of the prongs about six inches. The sticks were dead black in color. Parcele handled them with extreme care, making sure that the prongs never pointed at his own body. They were carried in his belt in such a fashion that no matter how long his strides might be, the prongs pointed at a spot some distance ahead of his forward-flung feet. That the sticks were weapons of vast danger was proved by the care he lavished in their handling.

With them he harnessed the lightning and used it as a weapon. Behind the dark grip – made of some substance resembling rubber and of the same content of elements – was a metal knob which appeared to be of gold, ending in a sharp point. The back of each stick could therefore be used as a mace with deadly effect.

Parcele vanished into the forest. He came to the hillside but did not slacken his pace – seemed even to increase it, as thought gravity’s pull had no effect on him whatever. He reached the crest and paused for a brief moment to stare out across a broad plain which reached to the very rim of Callisto. There were many lights on the plain and Parcele smiled softly.

“The children gather,” he said, “and their gathering, perhaps, means death to Parcele. Too bad, for them, that they do not know the secrets I have discovered and made my own.”

He hurried down. It could be seen then that the lights, in vast concourse, came into the plain from all directions as though they moved to some strange rendezvous. And sounds came to the white ears of Parcele, hidden under that raven black hair. There were sounds as of lamentation – and in among the sounds were indications that there were some of the ‘children’ who made them who experienced sensations of exultation. Again the smile broke the classic features of Parcele.

“They think to discover, in some fashion, a replacement for the father in the light from the sky!”

Parlece had read in the summons, calling the children together, the coded words:

“Let the Father also come at once!”

It had been a command. Parcele now approached the first of the beings who bore the lights. His bearing became more stern, more unyielding. He walked like a soldier sure of himself. His eyes held little lights of danger. There were fierce in their determination.

He behaved like one who would be master in any situation. And then strange eyes were turned upon him – the eyes of the ‘children.’ A strange unearthly fact became instantly apparent: the children were all females! From mountains, from villages Parcele had never seen, from all the many fastnesses, they came to the rendezvous upon the plain. They were as many as the sands upon the shores of an inland sea. They were bigger even than Parlece – and all of entrancing beauty. There were roses in their cheeks, visible even in the subdued light of Callisto’s midnight. Their hair was as black as Parlece’s own. They wore tunics much like his – and there were many children among them – and all the children were females!

Parlece smiled as the ‘children’ smiled at him. There was seduction, beseeching perhaps – and danger certainly – in their smiles. For there was one thing the Callistonians shared with certain species of the insect family – for six generations they reproduced without the necessity of male companionship! Once, thousands of years ago, there had been a male for every female. Then, by experimentation, they had sought to remove one sex or the other in an attempt to do away with the conflict of sex. Women had, by sheer force of will, been able, down the ages, to overthrow the men in the strangest warfare ever waged in the Universe. By experimenting they had almost been able to make the male entirely unnecessary. But always there was the bugaboo of the seventh generation, when males were necessary. The comparatively few males on Callisto, who were carefully kept apart from one another, were then in vast demand. Then did the ‘children’ woo them with all their arts, even with the sword if need arose. At other times, when there was no need for the males, they were driven away as though they had been unclean. Each time the ‘children’ seemed to forget that the time must inevitably some when they would again have need of the males, or human life on Callisto would come to an end. The periodic casting forth was the protest of the ‘children’ against Nature’s edict regarding the seventh generation. Some of the males were slain in the casting forth… and so the males diminished because for two hundred years none had been born on Callisto. It had become a race between the rapidly diminishing males, and the discovery, deemed inevitable by male and female alike, of the secret which would free Callisto of the bugaboo of the seventh generation.

But why the call now since Callisto would not need its males until twenty years hence unless they believed the light a discovery?

And so Parlece marched in among the women of Callisto, gorgeous creatures whose angelic faces did not hide from Parlece the innate danger he braved in appearing among them – for to the very least of them they resented the necessity of men.

“What is the reason of the rendezvous?” asked Parlece of one of the women.

“What right has an outcast male to question?” case the answer from the woman in a voice as cold and hard as agate, though her red lips smiled and her eyes were warm upon him – almost as though she gloated over him. Parlece stiffened. Almost he would have turned his weapon upon her. In a matter of seconds he could have blasted vast gaps in the concourse of the children. But they did not know this secret he had discovered. He would not use it unless forced to do so. In a way the summons which had brought him hither had been a granting of personal immunity.

“They have need of me,” said Parlece coldly, “else they would not have summoned me.”

“And why do you come?” there was a veiled threat in the question.

“Always,” said Parlece boldly, “there is the hope among the males that a way may be found out of our bondage!”

“That is treason,” said the woman angrily.

“For which I shall not be punished,” said Parlece, “because no way has yet been found to sacrifice the males entirely – and survive! I shall remember you. If the time should come when there is need of me –“

The woman shrugged derisively.

“That need shall never be mine. I am but the first generation.”

Parlece moved on among the women. As streams flow into lakes, increasing their size until they become vast seas, so the streams of women moved in the center of the plain, until it became a sea of ravishing beautiful humanity. The lights they carried, in conical receptacles on their wrists, cast a weird glow over the gathering. In its center were three women of Amazonian proportions – great, gorgeous, breath-taking creatures whose lines were as perfect as though they had been chiseled from white marble by the hands of master sculptors.

They were Cala, Hanse and Purna, the triumvirate which ruled the three United Kingdoms of Callisto, each equal in power. Their faces were calm, of marvelous beauty; but Parlece shuddered. Those three were capable of devastating a whole nation to work their will. They were the supreme masters of Callisto.

Now the gaze of Cala fell on Parlece.

The eyes of the woman did not change as she spoke in a sort of voiceless, unaccented manner of speech, which left more unsaid than it actually spoke. It was what the words indicated, rather than what she said, that was important, because what she desired came forth in forms of thought understandable to all.

“Stand closer, Parlece,” she said. “And see this thing which has come to us out of the sky.”

Parlece gasped as his eyes fell on the cylinder, and he moved forward, forgetting that he exposed his back to attack as he did so. Twice the length and twice the thickness of the biggest of Callisto’s children was the cylinder which had come to Callisto in that brilliant light across the sky. That it had been much bigger before striking Callisto’s atmosphere he knew instantly – for the cylinder seemed to have been burned as by a prolonged, white-hot flame. The metal of it, with which he was not familiar, had fused, run together into strange protuberances on the cylinder’s face.

There were flanges on the sides of the thing which must have steadied it in flight brought it to passably safe landing on Callisto. Even so it had struck deeply into Callisto’s soil, slid forth again to rest upon the plain where not the children were gathered.

“Open it, Parlece!” snapped Cala. “It is not proper that a ruler should place herself in danger, if this should prove a machine of destruction!”

By ‘ruler’ Cala did not mean herself, but any woman of Callisto. Women were ‘rulers’ to distinguish them from men, who were slaves and who lived solely on sufferance. Parlece smiled.

“Gladly will I take the chance, Mistress,” he said. “If it be a machine of destruction, may it quickly release me from bondage… and all stand close, please, rulers of Callisto, in order that I may take as many of you with me into eternity as possible if it should be the thing you fear.”

A wave of angry sound answered his brazen suggestion – and all the children gave back. Parlece knelt beside the cylinder. That it had been made by sentient beings was proved by its design, and the suggestion, in spite of the fused nature of its surface, was of blended materials. Beyond that he could tell nothing. The children gave back and Parlece smiled to himself. Here, unobserved, was his chance to prove the new power he had found for himself during his decades-long sojourn in the mountains of Callisto, where only on occasion was he visited by any of the children. He surreptitiously drew forth one of the pronged sticks. His hand closed over the grip, pressed. A streak of flame came down from the heavens from the nearest of the many clouds which hung always at night over Callisto. It was an electric spark flying from pole to pole – from the cloud to the knob on the end of the pronged stick. The stream of flame sputtered, blinding the children even in spite of the lights which they carried. A cry of fear, huge, composite, terrifying went through the constantly growing throng. Streaks of flame, savage, harsh, terrible as thunderbolts, flashed from the six prongs of the stick – and ate into the metal of the cylinder. A great hole appeared. Parlace twisted the stick in his hand, guiding the rays of ghastly flame – eating out a hole in the cylinder.

When he saw the black aperture he had opened he shifted his light instantly so as not to destroy anything the cylinder might contain. When a piece of the cylinder, smoothly cut as any agency of humanity could cut it, fell to the ground, he pressed the stick’s grip again – and the light went out of the prongs, and the sputtering flames of the lightning darted back into the cloud, their work finished.

Now the ‘children’ moved back as Parlece thrust his hand into the aperture. Cala was beside him.

“By what brazen right do you dare?” she demanded.

He stepped back, murderously angry, but knowing himself powerless in the midst of such numbers. It was so like Cala not to mention the miracle he had performed. She must be curious as to the agency he had used, but when she had finished with him she would take it from him by force, or slay him. His desire to prove what he had done might well cost him his life. But he waited, standing with his arms folded. There was one consolation – no one looked at the two pronged sticks in his leathern belt. Cala thrust her hand into the opening – and Parlece was struck in spite of himself with a surge of admiration for her. What a mate she would make for a powerful man – if only there were no conflict, if only things were as they had been when Parlece had been young! He steeled himself against admiration. Cala drew from the inside of the cylinder a smaller cylinder, apparently of the same metal as the larger one. But there were strange hieroglyphics on it. None in all Callisto had ever seen such writing… and yet a miracle was transpiring… for it seemed that with the hieroglyphics themselves came the key to their meaning – perhaps in some otherworldly manner of thought transference akin to that of Callisto. For Parlece read the words even as Cala did.

“Hark ye, children of all the solar system! And to Callisto, greetings! Prepare at once for a universal conference in the Crater of Copernicus, on Luna. Fashion space-ships for the journey… and select your representatives with care. The safety of the solar system is at stake! Make haste!”

There was no way of telling whence the message had come. It was signed merely ‘Dos-Tev of Alpha.’ But that it had reached Callisto from outside proved its importance. If such a message, the first in history, could thus be transmitted – might not the message very well be true? This came home to the children of Callisto with great force… and all eyes turned on Cala, Hense, and Purna… who gazed, in turn, on Parlece.

The eyes of the triumvirate were cold, expressionless, the eyes of women who would devastate a world for their own ends.

“You will make the journey, Parlece,” said Cala. “You will create the space-ship. For a miracle worker,” here Parlece caught a faint sign of abysmal sarcasm, “a space-ship should be easy.”

Parlece straightened.

“And when it is done, Mistress?” he said. “When I have done this thing which the rulers,” contempt dripped from the word, “are unable themselves to do; when I have gone forth – taking with me the ‘rulers’ of my own selection! – how shall I conduct myself on Luna?”

A mere male to be so bold as to select the women of his choice! For a thousand years no male had ever dared so greatly. Males were chattels to be used when needed, as one used garments. And here was one who dared suggest selection! That it was an ultimatum, the triumvirate knew – nor could they do aught but give permission. For them to risk any of themselves in any journey into space was unthinkable. The triumvirate would bid the ‘selected’ ones travel outward with Parlece. Cala nodded.

“You will discover the meaning of the conference. If there be many males among the peoples come to that conference from other planets, and they be like ourselves in structure, strong, virile, brimming with health… you will use your wit – aided by the better wit of the ‘rulers’ we shall send with you – to fill your space-ship with males on the return. Then, if those males be pleasing to us – you shall be slain for your impudence of this moment.”

It was a rare jest! If Parlece failed he would surely die. If he succeeded he would die. If he did nothing, if he refused now, the children would destroy him. It remained only for him to select the manner of his passing.

“I shall go,” he said. “This cylinder which brought the message, properly re-constructed, will serve me on the journey outward. It will hold twelve people beside myself. Let them be the fairest of all Callisto! While I labor on the ship, send me Callisto’s youngest and most beautiful that I may make my choices.”

He began his labors at once… and the triumvirate, moving with the surety of Callistonian efficiency, than which there was none more certain in the Universe of the Stars, issued orders to Callisto’s youngest and fairest. As Parlece labored – and he labored mightily, excitement mounting as he foresaw the vast adventure which lay ahead of him – many women came and stood. And at intervals he ceased from his labors and studied the women… and most of them he sent away with jeers – happy for once that he had a voice in his own affairs – while now and again there was one whom he bade wait.

Time passed as time passes on Callisto.

And, when the ship was finished, the pronged sticks had vanished from the belt of Parlece. The spiked knob of one protruded from the inner end of one extremity of the cylinder, the spiked know of the other from the opposite end. The prongs themselves, six in number in either case, were thrust forth like feelers from either end of the cylinder, as though they were tiny tentacles to find the way for the space-ship, no matter whether it traveled forward or back. The prongs were moveable in the mechanism of the space-ship, could be managed by the hand of Parlece himself. He had slanted the flanges – like thick wings on the sides of the cylinder – for the lightning fast take-off. The inner part of the cylinder was so arranged that its passengers might be seated and take the jar of the sudden anticipated start without injury.

In the control room of the space-ship, Cala, by request of Parlece, had permitted him to install the finest instruments of navigation evolved on Callisto. No ship of space was ever better equipped for a frightful journey.

The last bit of hieroglyphics on the communication signed by the mysterious ‘Dos-Tev’, had given the space-ship a course to follow from Callisto. Now Parlece, with twelve of Callisto’s ‘children’, white of face but refusing to acknowledge fear, waved a jeering salute to the triumvirate and the countless thousands of Callisto’s rulers closed the port. Then he manipulated the propulsive prong in the rear of the ship. Instantly the prongs cast off their many fires, as the sputtering lightnings came through the sides of the space ship, lovingly caressed the knob of the prong behind Parlece’s hand – and roared out through the wand, to turn into six streams of light whose power even Parlece did not know entirely.

The force struck the ground – acted with a great, thrusting force on the space ship. Almost instantly the cylinder shot forward, gained speed, flashed across the plain, lifted above the heads of the people.

The ship was away, traveling with the speed, almost, of light. Callisto became a ball of weird light in the sky behind and above him. Parlece laughed aloud. The hours passed. Callisto became a white speck in the sky. He studied his instruments, clinging close to the course the message of the cylinder had set for him.

The days and weeks, how many so ever there were of them, passed into eternity.

Many times Parlece smiled grimly as he regarded the twelve women. On Callisto they ruled, but here – they did his bidding. Back on Callisto he would surely die, should he return. His smile grew grimmer.

“You think to make the final conquest of man by this voyage,” he spoke. “Well, know now that should the conference reveal a way, we will never return!” He laughed at their anger, but they dared not attack him. “Remember then,” he said, “to pray also for failure, for you cannot win by success.” How cleverly had Parlece reversed the grim jest of Cala!

And so came the ‘children’ to Copernicus and hovered over the crater wherein lay their hopes and the answer to the mystery of the message.

# Chapter 4 – The Murderer From Mars by Bob Olsen

AUTHOR OF: ‘FOUR DIMENSIONAL SURGERY,’ ‘FOUR DIMENSIONAL ESCAPE’

Zoy Kera, the supreme dictator of Planet Four, the reddish-hued spheroid which Earth-folk have named ‘Mars’ but which the inhabitants of the planet itself call ‘Radak,’ had called together a group of prominent counselors, including some of the greatest thinkers of his domain. In addition to the leader there were none savants present at this meeting; but only three of them need to be mentioned specifically, namely: Bix Dunis, the noted archeologist; Lux Mibak, the equally famous astronomer; and Fax Gatola, Radak’s leading authority on aviation and interstellar communication.

Had a visitor from Earth been permitted to witness that strange assemblage he might have imagined himself in some strange zoo rather than among the masters of a planet.

Their bodies were covered completely with thick, coarse fur, resembling the hair of an Alaskan huskie dog. Uncouth as these natural coverings seemed to be, they provided excellent protection against Mars’ severe climate.

Like men, they walked erect, although their short stubby legs seemed grotesquely disproportionate with their slender arms, which were so long that they almost touched the ground. These amazing arms were attached to the sides of the barrel-like torsos by means of triangular membranes which were stretched taut whenever the arms were extended at right angles to the bodies. To an Earthian this peculiarity would have suggested the gliding membranes of certain types of flying squirrels. Tails also these queer beings had – not bushy like squirrels’ but flat and smooth, like the tails of beavers.

The faces of these weird creatures were similarly fantastic. Most conspicuous of their features were their noses, which consisted principally of enormous nostrils plugged with heavily matted, growing hair. Nature had apparently provided them with these efficient ‘purelators’ in order that they could inhale huge quantities of air into their voluminous lungs and at the same time exclude the choking dust with which the atmosphere of Mars is laden.

In spite of their unhuman hairly bodies and their snout-like noses, the Radakans conducted themselves in a manner which unquestionably denoted superior fitness and intellect. In their small, oval eyes was a gleam of intelligence which no beast could possibly simulate. And above these expressive eyes were high foreheads, indicative of unusual brain capacities.

Of raiment none of them wore a single stitch. Yet, in a certain sense they were not naked, since all of them bristled with odd-shaped receptacles, utensils and other apparatus, which were attached to their bodies by cords and thongs. To anyone who was not familiar with the Radakans’ habits, the purposes of these strange articles could only be conjectured.

Squatting on their haunches with the palms of their hands resting on the floor of Zoy Kera’s transparent-walled office, the eleven Martians formed an oval, with the Dictator at one end and Bix Dunis, the archeologist, at the other. In the middle of this ring lay a scored and battered cylinder which had carried a mysterious message from the airless void of space. The communication itself, inscribed with waterproof ink on a parchment-like material was spread out on the floor in front of Bix Dunis.

For a few minutes the noted cipher expert studied the characters, which consisted solely of ingeniously drawn pictures.

“Well, Dunis,” the dictator demanded. “What do you make of it? Or perhaps it is too difficult for even your colossal intellect to solve?”

“On the contrary, your Supremacy,” Dunis replied. “The message is very simple, so simple in fact that even you might be able to interpret it.”

At this bold answer, all the others gasped, expecting the imperious ruler to punish Dunis severely for his insolence. Had any ordinary Radakan made a similar remark he would undoubtedly have been tortured and possibly executed. Dunis, however, being as great an intellectual leader as Kera was a political leader, was a privileged character.

Though it was apparent that the dictator did not relish his counsellor’s familiarity, he pretended to take it good naturedly.

“Very well then,” he leered. “Suppose you quit trying to be facetious and tell us the substance of the message.”

“It is a summons, your Eminence.”

“A summons?”

“Yes, a summons to a war conference.”

“War conference, eh?” the dictator snorted. “And who is it that has the colossal effrontery to summon US to a war conference?”

“As nearly as I can make it out, the message is signed, ‘Dos-Tev, the great,’ ‘Dos-Tev, the Superior,’ or something like that.”

“The Superior! The Great! What colossal nerve! Whoever that imbecile is he ought to know that there are only two individuals in the Universe who are entitled to use titles of that caliber.”

“I assume you mean God and Yourself,” Fax Gatola said with mock servility.

“Certainly. Who else deserves to be called ‘The Great Ones’ – who else except Myself and the Supreme Being.”

“At least he gives God second place,” Dunis whispered to the one who sat next to him.

Fortunately for him, Kera did not overhear this disrespectful remark.

“And who is this upstart who so egotistically calls himself The Great?” Kera demanded.

“That I cannot say for certain,” Dunis hedged. However, it is clear that he desires us to send a representative of our planet to a certain crater on the satellite of Planet Three. Presumable he himself is an inhabitant of that satellite.”

“Ridiculous!” Mibak, the astronomer, ejactulated. “Life on Planet 3’s satellite is impossible.”

“How can you be so sure of that?” Kera asked.

“Because life – at least the sort of life which exists here on Radak, needs air and water. Even a superficial examination of Planet Three’s moon through an ordinary telescope reveals that the satellite in question has no atmosphere. And if there is any moisture there at all it must be frozen solid during the long, frigid nights and boiled to vapor during the terrifically hot days.”

“That’s true enough,” Gatola, the inventor interposed. “But isn’t it conceivable that some other form of life could exist on this satellite – some species of beings which do not require water and air?”

“Such a thing is conceivable,” Mibak conceded, “But hardly plausible.”

“That is a matter of opinion,” Gatola disputed. “But even if we exclude the likelihood of a unique form of life, isn’t it possible that even highly developed beings like ourselves could live on Planet Three’s moon if they brought their water and air with them?”

“I suppose that would be possible,” the astronomer admitted grudgingly. “Nevertheless –“

He was interrupted by Zoy Kera, who shouted, “Enough of this silly bickering. Is there anything else important in that message, Dunis?”

“Only instructions for building a space flyer capable of consummating the journey from Radak to the rendezvous,” the archeologist replied. “The cylinder itself is a miniature model of a space flyer. This second paper contains plans for constructing a full-sized ether-ship, large enough to transport two persons and sufficient supplies to last them until they arrive on the satellite.”

“Does it say anything about getting back?” Gatola inquired.

“Yes. The signers of the document guarantee that any number of representatives from Radak will be taken care of subsequent to their arrival on the moon, and that they will also be assured safe transportation back to their native planets at the close of the conference.”

Pointing to the cylinder, Kera asked, “What is your opinion of this contrivance, Gatola? Do you think it is practical for transporting people as well as it conveyed this message?”

“I could hardly express an intelligent opinion without first studying it,” was Gatola’s sarcastic response.

“Very well, suppose you study it right now. Since you are our leading inventor and authority on interstellar travel it ought not take you long to determine the merits of this particular invention.”

Gatola waddled over to the cylinder and examined it. Then he glanced over the plans which Bix Dunis handed to him.

“Well,” the dictator growled impatiently. “What is your verdict?”

“Crude,” was the reply. “Childishly crude. According to this design the space ship which this Dos-Tev would have us build is extremely primitive. It makes use of the antiquated rocket principle of propulsion – similar to that which was employed by Wozag on his ill-starred expedition to Deimos over fifty years ago.”

“But Wozag’s flyer was a success,” one of the counselors, a historian of note, reminded him. “To be sure it did not land on Deimos, but it did succeed in circumnavigating the satellite and in returning to Radak.”

“True enough,” Gatola conceded. “I suppose the fact that Wozag’s crushed and lifeless body was found inside the rocket ship was of minor consequence.”

“Wozag must have died from the effects of the final collision,” the historian asserted. “That was clearly proved by his written records, which described everything that happened on the journey up to the time the space-ship reentered the atmospheric envelope of Radak.”

“Nevertheless the rocket principle is obsolete,” persisted Gatola. “And there is no use arguing about the matter anyway. My newly perfected space-flyer is much more efficient than Wozag’s crude device; and – what is far more important to me – it is inifinately safer to the persons who use it.”

“Tell us about it,” Zoy Kera commanded.

“Gladly. In the first place, instead of being cylindrical in shape, my ether-ship is in the form of a regular tetrakaidecagon.”

“I was never especially brilliant in mathematics,” the dictator confessed. “Suppose you explain what a tetra – whatever you call it – looks like.”

“With pleasure. But, wait a moment. We are fortunate in having with us an eminent mathematician. Sozak, won’t you be good enough to tell us what a tetrakaidecagon is, and also explain the advantages of this particular shape over other geometrical forms.”

Beaming with pleasure over this opportunity to display his learning, the mathematician said in his best lecture-room manner, “Thank you, Fax Gatola. A tetrakaidecagon is a solid bounded by fourteen faces, each of which is a regular pentagon. The tetrakaidecagon is one of the most interesting of the three dimensional figures. If a number of spheres of soft clay are placed in a receptacle and pressed together, they will assume the form of a regular tetrakaidecagon. When several flexible balloons are pressed together they will take this fundamental form. A tetrakaidecagon is –“

“That is sufficient,” Kera cut him off. “What else can you say about your new space ship, Gatola?”

“For one thing it requires very little energy to operate it. This is extremely important since it increases the pay load capacity enormously. Very little space is required for fuel thus making ample room for water, compressed air, food, and other supplies.”

“But if you do not use rockets, how do you propel your flyer,” Dunis inquired.

“I make use of a natural force which is available in tremendous quantities everywhere, namely gravitation. Recently I have developed a device which generates two different kinds of beams, one of which intensifies gravitational attraction and the other nullifies this force, actually producing repulsion in the place of attraction.”

“And do you use these beams to propel your space-ship?” Kera asked.

“Yes, your Supremacy. Each of the fourteen faces of my flyer contains two projectors , one for the positive beam and one for the negative beam. By directing these beams at various heavenly bodies, such as the sun, the various planets and the stars outside the Solar System, I can produce any degree of attraction or repulsion and in any desired direction. You understand, of course, that the actual path of the flyer is a resultant of the various co-ordinate forces which are brought to bear upon it in the manner I have just described.”

“And you can change your course or retard at will?” queried Dunis.

“Certainly. Change of direction is accomplished by the simple process of focusing one of the attraction beams on an object which happens to be in the direction toward which I desire to turn the flyer. Since the intensity of both the attractive and the repulsive beams may be regulated indefinitely, it is also easy to control both the acceleration and the retardation of the craft’s motion in sch a way that no injury or even discomfort will be inflicted upon the passengers.”

“Good!” Kera exclaimed. “When will your space-ship be ready to take off for the moon of Planet Three?”

“At the rate work has been progressing of late it will take at least a hundred days,” the inventor informed him. But if I could obtain governmental assistance for which I have been clamoring since the inception of my idea, I could finish in ten days.”

“Very well,” the ruler declared. “I hereby grant you full authority to requisition whatever materials and assistance you may require. I shall expect you to be ready to embark for the satellite of Planet Three ten days from today.”

“Am I to infer from this that you expect me to represent Radak in this interplanetary conference!” Gatola asked.

“I not only infer it but I command it,” was Kera’s imperious assertion. “I know of no one who is more capable or better qualified to perform this mission than you, Fax Gatola.”

“Thank you, Dictator,” Gatola rejoined. “I appreciate the honor which you have conferred on me. But you must understand that it will be absolutely impossible for me to carry out this mission single-handed.”

“Why not?”

“Because it will take me days to complete the journey. Someone must be at the controls of the space-ship constantly. You could hardly expect me to remain alertly wakeful for such a long period.”

“I understand. How large a crew will you require?”

“I can get along with one other person – providing he is the right one for the job.”

“Very well. You have my permission to draft any one of my subjects whom you wish to act as your assistant. As soon as you have decided on your choice, tell me, and I shall command him to accompany you.”

“My decision is already made, your Eminence.”

“Name him.”

“Jek Hodar!”

If a bomb had exploded in the room it could not have created more excitement than the mention of that ominous name.

As if he could not believe his own ears, Kera roared, “Jek Hodar? Surely Gatola you do not mean Jek Hodar.”

“Your hearing is correct,” said Gatola quietly. “Only Jek Hodar will be acceptable to me as a companion on this venture. You gave me your word that I might name my own assistant. I have done so and you must heed your promise.”

“But Jek Hodar, of all persons! You must be insane to think of such a thing! Jek Hodar is a criminal of the deepest dye. Even now he is being tortured for committing the basest crimes that any citizen of Radak could perpetrate, namely murder and treason!”

“Of that I am fully aware, your Supremacy. Nevertheless I must insist that Hodar be drafted to accompany me on this space voyage to the moon of Planet Three. I demand that he be released from the torture chamber before it is too late.”

“I grant that you are within your rights in making such a demand,” the ruler admitted. “But I must ask you to reconsider your request. You should know that Hodar is utterly unprincipled. For years he has been plotting against me and against the state. His treachery culminated in a deliberate attempt to assassinate me. Had it not been for the vigilancy of my body-guard, who hurled himself in the path of Hodar’s ray-gun, he would undoubtedly have succeeded. As it was, he murdered one of the bravest soldiers who ever gave his life for the welfare of Radak. There is no question concerning his guilt.. Thousands of people witnessed this crime. He himself bragged about it when he made his confession.”

“All this is, of course, well known to me,” Gatola rejoined. “But regardless of the outcome of his efforts, one must concede that Hodar possesses rare courage and indomitable determination. Perhaps he believed he was performing a patriotic service for his country.”

“Am I to infer that you condone Hodar’s unspeakable crimes?” Kera bellowed in a menacing voice.

“Not at all, your Supremacy. I neither condone nor excuse his crimes. I merely call attention to certain qualities he unquestionably has – qualities which must be possessed by the person who accompanies me on this hazardous venture and helps to insure its success.”

“But surely there must be others who are –“ interrupting himself Kera went on, “You seem to have forgotten, Gatola, that Hodar is a rival of yours, and an unforgivably jealous one at that. He too has been laboring on a craft with which he hoped to excel you in navigating interplanetary space. Prior to your sudden rise to fame, Hodar was supposed to know more about cosmonautics than any other person in the world.”

“Precisely! And it is for that very reason that I insist on having him with me when I hop off for the satellite of our neighboring planet.”

“But the man is a constant menace to the peace of Radak.”

“All the more reason for removing him from this planet. This is only very remote chance that he will ever return, even if we are fortunate enough to reach our destination alive. I myself shall assume full responsibility for his future conduct.”

“Very well, then,” the Dictator sighed resignedly. “No one can say that Zoy Kera ever goes back on his word. I shall give immediate orders to release Jek Hodar from the torture chamber.”

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And thus it came about that two inhabitants of Planet Four – one a man of high moral principles, of probity and loyalty and on the other an infamous, treacherous criminal, prepared to hurl themselves into the void in the wan hope of reaching the distant satellite which had been chosen as an interplanetary rendezvous.

Everything was in readiness for the embarkation, and Gatola was just about to give the word to close the heavily insulated hatch, when Bix Dunis rushed into the control chamber and panted, “I must talk to you, Fax. Something terrifically menacing has just transpired – so menacing in fact that it will make it imperative for you to change your plans.”

“Change my plans, at this late date?” Gatola scoffed. “Why the idea is utterly preposterous! Everything is ready for —“

“I know all that. But you must not depart until you have learned of the treachery which is being plotted against you.”

“Treachery?” Gatola exclaimed. “You mean that Jek Hodar –“

“Yes,” Dunis cut in. “Hodar is deliberately plotting to destroy you.”

“Nonsense. Hodar is no longer an enemy of mine. He knows that I saved his life. Surely he would not —“

“Oh, wouldn’t he though? If you knew Hodar like I do you would understand that gratitude means nothing to him. Listen, Fax. I just overheard him talking to a group of his former associates. Though they were never apprehended, it is certain that they were implicated in Hodar’s conspiracy against the government.”

“What of it?”

“Just this. I heard Hodar boast to them that you will never reach the satellite of Planet Four.”

“Hodar always was a pessimist,” Gatola laughed. “He was undoubtedly referring to the unknown perils which we are certain to encounter on our journey.”

“I am sure he had no such idea. Otherwise he would have said, ‘We shall never reach the satellite,’ or ‘The space-ship will never reach its destination.’ What he did say had an entirely different connotation.”

“Just what did he say?”

“He said, ‘Leave it to me. I shall see to it that Fax Gatola does not reach the satellite of Planet Three alive.’”

“And did you infer from that statement that Hodar plans my murder?”

“How else could I interpret those words? You know as well as I that Hodar is quite capable of committing dastardly crimes like that.”

“That I grant; but it is also well known that Hodar is fond of making threats – most of which he forgets soon afterward.”

“Nevertheless, he may carry out this threat – if he gets a chance.”

“I am not afraid of that. Hodar may be a scoundrel but he is not a fool. He knows that it would be utterly impossible for one person to navigate my space-ship for any considerable distance. If he did away with me while we were out in interplanetary space it would be suicide for him.”

“Even suicide, in addition to murder, Hodar is perfectly capable of committing. Once he gets that stubborn mind of his set on an idea, nothing in the universe can stop him.”

“That is one of the reasons why I picked Hodar to be my assistant. It will require all the stubborn determination that both of us can muster to win our way through to our goal.”

“But won’t you please take time to think this thing over before subjecting yourself to this terrible risk? Won’t you select someone else to take Hodar’s place as your lieutenant?”

“That is utterly out of the question. I need a navigator who is a thorough master of the science of cosmonautics. Only Jek Hodar can qualify. And now, good-bye, my friend. I cannot thank you sufficiently for you solicitude. But do not fear. There will be no weapons on the ether-ship and if it comes to a free-for-all fight, my youth, size and superior muscular development should enable me to hold my own against an elderly weakling like Hodar.”

But though Gatola gave little heed to his friend’s warning, he did exercise special care to safeguard himself against Hodar’s perfidy. Following his orders, the convict was stripped of all his equipment and his fur was searched thoroughly for knives or ray-pistols immediately prior to his being admitted to the space-ship.

Despite these precautions, Hodar, with consummate craft, succeeded in smuggling aboard something that was far more dangerous that any of the Radak weapons. Inside one of his broad nostrils, concealed by the thick growth of hair, the criminal had secreted a moisture-proof envelope full of konide, one of the more deadly poisons known. There was enough of the powder to annihilate a hundred men.

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The take-off from Planet Four was uneventful. An enormous crowd assembled to witness the departure. It was apparent that many of them hoped to see a disaster but in this they were disappointed.

Its gravitational beams held under the absolute control of the masterful mind of the inventor, the space ship rose slowly and majestically from its mooring place. Gradually but steadily its motion was accelerated until it was traveling with such velocity that it soon became a mere speck in the sky.

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During that long and nerve-racking journey, Hodar seemed to justify the confidence which his youthful companion had placed in him. Seemingly oblivious to the passage of time of the need for sleep and relaxation, the elderly scientist labored assiduously over the voluminous and complicated calculations which had to be made to keep the craft on its course.

Gatola had to strap him into his hammock several times, compelling him to take enough rest to avoid cracking under the strain.

It wasn’t until they were so close to their desination that they could distinguish even the minute details of the moon’s landscape that Hodar showed his true colors.

Hodar was at the controls and Gatola was squatted in from of a porthole gazing with enraptured eyes at the spectacle which lay before him.

“Isn’t it marvelous, Jek?” he exclaimed. “Compared with the bare, level, monotonous landscape of Radak, this satellite is like a paradise of beauty. Unquestionably it is the grandest example of scenic splendor in the entire Universe!”

“How can you be so sure of that?” Hodar growled.

“I don’t see how there could be any place in creation more lovely than this. Just look at those mountains down there near the south pole! Their bases are in dense shadow yet their peaks are so lofty that they are drenched in light! If I were a poet I would call them ‘The Mountains of Eternal Light.’ And notice those wide bands of metallic brilliancy radiating from that medium sized crater about halfway between the south pole and the equator. Observe how those enormous lanes of brightness run across the entire visible surface of the moon, utterly ignoring the loftiest mountains and the deepest ravines and running as straight as if they were drawn with a cosmic ruler.”

“I see nothing so remarkable about that measly satellite,” Hodar snarled.

He did something to the controls and the ship gave a gentle lurch.

“In heaven’s name, what are you doing, Jek?” the commander of the craft demanded. “You have changed our course. We are flying away from the moon instead of toward it.”

“Listen, Gatola,” the old man told him. “You may as well learn right now that I do not intend to land on that satellite.”

“Oh, is that so?” Gatola said sarcastically. “Any may I inquire just where you do intend to land?”

“I intend to navigate the ship to Planet Three and land there. This idea of alighting on an airless, waterless moon is utterly preposterous.”

“And just why do you desire to visit Planet Three, if I may be so bold as to ask?”

“Because I do not intend to return to Zoy Kera’s unspeakable torture chamber. Listen, Gatola, you know as well as I do that if we land on the moon it will undoubtedly be necessary for me to return with you to Radak to report the result of that conference. On the other hand we know that Planet Three has plenty of air and an abundance of water. Its climate is much more favorable to beings like us than that of Radak. Why won’t you be reasonable, Gatola? Why not consent to go with me to Planet Three?”

“But what about the war conference on the moon?” Gatola asked.

“Obviously there must be something queer about that conference. I have no confidence whatever in the integrity of the being who signed himelf ‘The Great One’. If his proposition is a legitimate one, why did he call the conference in a forbidding, airless, waterless satellite where no one can live without putting up with unspeakable discomfort and suffering? Why didn’t he select a more pleasant meeting place – like Planet Three itself for instance?”

“Perhaps Planet Three is in the hands of the enemy against whom the other Planets must fight,” Gatola suggested.

“Piffle!” Hodar sneered. “At any rate I refuse to land on the moon.”

“Oh, you do, do you?”

Gatola spoke quietly but there was a menace in his voice which suggested the glittering coldness of a drawn sword.

“Get away from those controls, you ungrateful traitor!”

Hodar hesitated from an instant, but when Gatola seized him by the scruff of the neck and lifted him out of the control seat as easily as he would have picked up a puppy, he did not attempt to resist, but merely uttered a growl of impotent rage.

Still snarling, like the angry animal he was, Hodar waddled out of the control chamber. Knowing that he could do no damage in any other part of the ship, Gatola let him go. He had hs hands full righting the course of the flyer, searching for the trysting place, and retarding the terrific speed of the craft preparatory to setting it down. In the cylinder had been enclosed an excellent map of the satellite, with the meeting place clearly indicated. He easily recognized the enormous crater by its position on the map near the center of an especially bright region which was almost a perfect square and was bounded on the north by a magnificent range of mountains.

With consummate skill Gatola guided the space-ship until it was hovering over the crater. He regulated the speed so accurately that the craft kept in perfect pace with the satellite as it rolled through space.

Gatola knew he had found the right place, for, even with his naked eyes he could distinguish in the space within the crater three or four grotesquely shaped objects which could only be space-ships.

So absorbed was he in the tense work of controlling his craft that he forgot all about Hodar, until he heard a low cough and turned to his assistant crouching beside him. In his hand he was holding a goblet containing a white fluid.

“Here my friend,” the old man said as he proffered the cup to him, “You have worked for a long while without food or drink. Take this draught of processed milk. You need it to strengthen you for the task of setting the craft down on the satellite.”

“Thank you, Jek,” Gatola smiled. “I am glad you have decided to remain my friend. It was very thoughtful of you to bring this drink to me. I am indeed hungry and thirsty.”

Then he took the goblet and drained it to the last drop.

For a while Hodar watched him with a crafty look of triumph in his green eyes.

“Why do you look at me like that, Jek,” Gatola asked him.

“For no reason in particular,” Hodar lied. “How do you feel, my friend? You are beginning to turn pale. Have you any pain?”

“Now that you mention it, I do feel rather queer,” Gatola groaned, “I have a terrible cramp in my stomach. I suppose the excitement of reaching our destination has brought on an attack of nervous indigestion.”

“It isn’t indigestion that is causing that pain,” Hodar snarled.

“What do you know about it?” Suddenly the horrible truth flashed into Gatola’s mind. “Surely, Jek — Surely you didn’t — That milk you just gave me — it wasn’t –“

“Yes,” Hodar leered. “The milk which you just drank was poisoned. You are done for, Fax Gatola.”

Moaning in agony, Gatola said, “Why did you do this to me, Jek? Don’t you know that I am your friend – that it was I who saved you from torture and death?”

“What difference does that make? I hate you just the same.”

“But why do you hate me? Can’t you realize –“

“I hate you because you have thwarted me. In a short time you have thwarted me. In a short time you have accomplished what I worked for all my life without achieving. You tried to prevent me from escaping to Planet Three. But you will thwart me no more, Fax Gatola. In a few moments you will be dead. Then I shall take this ship to Planet Three and do with it as I please. I would have killed you long ago had I not needed your help to navigate the space-ship from Radak to here. The rest of the journey is comparatively short. I can easily manage that alone.”

His face distorted with anguish, Gatola asked, “I can’t believe you, Jek Hodar. What sort of poison did you put in that milk?”

“Konide. I smuggled it aboard by concealing it in my nostrils. The chemist who have it to me said that a few grains of it would be enough to kill you instantly. I gave you a whole spoonful.”

“Did you say the poison was Konide?”

“Yes. And there was more than enough of it to do the work.”

“And you placed the konide in that goblet of milk?”

“That is precisely what I did. If you have any preparations to make before you die, you had better complete them quickly.”

Gatola’s answer was a loud and hearty laugh.

“What are you laughing at?” Hodar demanded. “Is the prospect of a sudden, painful death so amusing to you?”

“No. It is you who amuse me, Hodar.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just this. You are an excellent space-navigator, Hodar – but a rotten chemist. There is only one sure antidote for Konide. Do you know what that is. Is it milk, you fool, MILK!”

“Then you are not going to die?”

“Certainly not. Naturally the stuff made me sick, but I am not going to die, because when you gave me that poison you were thoughtful enough to give me the antidote with it.”

# Chapter 5 – Tyrants of Saturn by Francis Flagg

AUTHOR OF ‘THE MACHINE MAN OF ARDATHIA’ & ‘AN ADVENTURE IN TIME’

In his impregnable stronghold Pross Mere-Mer lived and it was nothing to him that others toiled and died to make his grandeur and luxury possible. Pross Mere-Mer was a tall and handsome Narlonian of the eighth satellite of Ern, that satellite which had extended its tyrannical sway not only over the other eight satellites (through conquests of his redoubtable father and grandfather) but over portions of Sacred Ern itself, long held to be the abode of Elo Hava.

A Narlonian of giant proportions, his three supple feelers ringed with bands of precious metals, Pross Mere-Mer clothed the sinuous length of teeba, which terminated in the round body and twin steps with pieces of pliable lirum. The cold eye of the middle feeler turned this way and that as Pross Mere-Mer expressed his discontent with things as they were. The other two feelers sucked, with their sucker-like mouths, at the metal tubes which brought the energy from distant Rano for his morning meal. “What is this, Ra-Kooma?” he demanded of his chief adviser, who had sought an audience with him. “What is this news you are telling me of Bar-Zee?”

Ra-Kooma waved obsequious feelers also ringed with bands of precious metals, but in less profusion than those of his master. “The Bar-Zeenians are in revolt, Potent Pross; they have overpowered their guards and have seized the Towers of Intelligence.”

Pross Mere-Mer’s feelers turned green, then black. “And you float there,” he cried with gurgling fury, “and dare to speak of such tidings!” His speaking mouth – high up in the central jell that held the cruel and calculating brain – shot forward a protuberant tongue. Ra-Kooma cringed, the green slimy eye in the middle of the feeler showing fear and something else which it was impossible to define – hatred perhaps overshadowed by the fear. With a twist of his sinuous teeba, Pross Mere-Mer shot forward through the heavy vapor of the room and struck Ra-Kooma with a swinging feeler. The chief adviser made no attempt to defend himself. Back he went from the blow, sank to the floor of the room, then rose again several feet away, where he floated meekly, his feelers a servile yellow and pink. His anger thus appeased, Pross Mere-Mer again devoted himself to his breakfast. “Bah!” he said, regaining his normal hue of bright, “we will make short work of those rebels.” But if he had been able to see and hear the rebel council in conference he might not have been so confident.

The council was composed of swart Bar-Zeenians from the tul-mills, the gren-mines and from the heavier vapor swamp of the Ethor region where so many unfortunates toiled and died yearly to satisfy the tastes and demands of the Narlonians for cana and tera. Fo-Peta led them – Fo-Peta the agitator and professional revolutionist who had been captured the year before and sent to the Ethor region to waste away his strength at continuous hard labor. Better for Pross Mere-Mer if he had put him to death but this the ferocious cruelty of the tyrant forbade; he desired to have his enemy wither with the swamp attrition – the hideous nager.

Now Fo-Peta, having organized and led the Bar-Zeenian toilers in successful revolt – though such a thing had seemed beyond the realms of possibility – rose and addressed the council. He was not of Bar-Zee himself, being a black Efranian, but the jell brain-case was unusually large, denoting a superior mentality, and he had, besides the three feelers, a single tentacle characteristic of his race, which could be extended from the middle body. “Fellow Rebels,” he said, “it is no secret to many of you that I have for years plotted the overthrow of Narlonianism. These Pross Lords of Narlone have laid waste the eight satellites of Ern, they have forced us into slavery, our virgos into shameful servitude. You know how first they came bearing gifts, how we welcomed them, fools that we were, as gods from Ern itself. Before we knew, they had taken advantage of our superstition, had fastened on us the yoke of their despotism. Now all our toil, our labor, is utilized to make Narlone wonderful and glorious while we, the workers, the producers groan in misery and poverty. Many years ago were the shackles forged for our limbs and many of you may not know the history of those days; but we know, we professional revolutionists, and we tell you that only as you stand together as one, make common cause with the oppressed of all the satellites, can you hope to prevail against your taskmasters.” His feelers glowed militantly. “We have overthrown our guards, captured the Intelligence Towers, but soon Pross Mere-Mer and the other Pross Lords under him, will hurl against us the concentrated might of Narlone. We cannot hope to stand against them, against the force they will bring to subdue us. To stay here is to perish; we must flee for the moment.”

“Flee? But to where?”

“To Ern itself.”

A murmur of doubt, of amazement, ran through the council.

“Flee to Ern!”

A swart Bar-Zeenian floated forward. “How can we do that? The home of Elo Hava? We would be smitten with death.”

Fo-Peta said calmly, “The Narlonians have been there. You didn’t know that. Even Holy Ern itself has been invaded by them. But you they keep in ignorance of the fact, allowing you to enter superstitious ideas, the better to rule you and keep you in chains. But Ern, though invaded, has not been totally subjugated. It is a vast pace; not the home of mythical gods as you think but of beings similar to us. Some of these beings have built wonderful cities, achieved far-reaching powers. To Ern then shall we flee, the alliance of those great cities seek.”

“But how, how?”

“By the same means the Narlonians used – we shall go in space-ships. Only the council, of course; there would not be room for all the rebels. Many must stay behind and await our return.” The eye on the middle feeler turned this way and that sorrowfully. “It is the only way, Fellow Rebels.”

“But where are the space-ships?”

“We shall find them, never fear,” said Fo-Peta, his jell brain-case showing a tinge of grimness. “Pross Mere-Mer will send against us the eight patrol ships at first, scarce realizing how completely we are in possession here. These we shall seize – at a price of course; many may die – but once in our hands we can count on having time to prepare them for the voyage to Ern, make off in safety, before the coming of the Pross Lords in concentrated strength. Those of the Ethor Region shall go with us; the rest must return to their work and avoid the wrath of the Narlonians, disowning what has taken place, blaming all on us of the swamps.”

So it was decided; and when T-Roma of the squadron patrol came down into the heavy vapor of Bar-Zee, but ill-informed by the wireless message of the extent of the uprising on the ninth satellite, he was very pleased to observe that all save one of the Intelligence Towers greeted him with the customary salutes. Signaling his fleet to land, he threw open the door of his control ship, ordering the others to do the same, neglecting to prepare his ejector tubes save in the most perfunctory manner. The swart wave of Bar-Zeenian rebels was totally unexpected; yet even at that the first crest of it went under to the crackling of hurriedly discharged weapons. But the second crest carried the ships; and the third wiped out all resistance by sheer weight of numbers and saw to it that not a member of the crews escaped alive. When Pross Mere-Mer and his fellow Lords arrived they found only obedient, toiling slaves, who professed to know nothing of any uprising or of the fate of the eight patrol ships. Some slaves they sent in anger to the Ethor Regions, others they tortured to make them reveal what they know; though in vain, and in the end, having established new guards in the Intelligence Towers, they returned to Narlone. But hurtling through space to the vast planet Ern, Fo-Peta and his fellow members of the Rebel Council gazed with mingled awe and anxiety at the sacred world’s lurid and forbidding surface. Fo-Peta knew how to manage a space-ship. From his control-room he directed the flight, not alone of his own vessel but of the seven others. Few of the Bar-Zeenians had ever been out in space before. They gazed in fear and wonder through the transparent metal. One after another they saw Ern’s satellites swing into view, their own satellite, the ninth, swinging against them in its course.

Here in the space between Ern and its satellites, metallic vapors swirled and eddied, tho of too attenuated a nature to have sustained life; and thru it the distant planets and central sun which made up the solar system, shone reddish and reddish green. Built for travel between the nine satellites and the navigation of the space betwixt Ern and its moon, the space-ships were provided with apparatus for the collecting of metallic vapors from outside and the compressing of their contents to the density necessary for the sustaining of life. Many of the phenomena that might be expected outside the orbits of the satellites, beyond the radius of the metallic vapors, were not experienced by the Bar-Zeenians. They floated freely within the confines of their vessels, and while conscious of increasing weight because of the accelerating speed, were yet able to move about, tho with appreciable slowness, it taking strenuous twists of their slim teebas to make locomotion at all possible.

Fo-Peta did not make direct for Ern. Rather he directed his ships in a slant, avoiding the three flat concentric rings at the equator where the Narlonians had established a colony and several Intelligence Towers. The rings, viewed at relatively such a close range, appeared whirling particles of matter, seething, churning, yet for all that affording solidity enough on which to land. Directing the lenses properly, it was possible to show photographic pictures of the magna slates of the spiral structures of the Narlonians. Thousands of teens from them, Fo-Peta, drove by, his objective the northern portion of Ern. Turning on its axis every ten and a quarter hours, the huge planet was aiding the space-ships to advance westward, though the direct flight was towards the north pole. Hours passed, days. The almost invisible metallic vapors – detectable only thru the agency of the screenscope – yet provided a certain amount of friction and this factor governed the highest speed at which it was safe to travel. Approaching Ern, the vapors deepened; photographic pictures showed nothing but a brownish haze. Soon this haze was around them. The compressing pumps had to be slowed down. A thousand teens above the surface, the ships moved northward at relatively slow speeds, cruising through metallic vapors as dense as those on Bar-Zee itself. Analysis of the vapors showed that there were present one or two elements not known to the satellites but seemingly non-injurious to life. Fo-Peta ordered the vapor-tight doors of the ships to be thrown open and the voyagers all reveled in the luxury of absorbing all the metallic vapors their bodies craved and spouting it through their gills. But at one mile altitude this absorption became difficult and was accompanied by pains in the middle body, dizziness in the jell brain-case; and though this sickness passed after a time, as the voyagers became acclimated to it, Fo-Peta dared not go lower. The sun was not discernible by day, save as a nebulous blur in the heavens, and at night the moons were invisible.

NOTE: Ern – Saturn; Darth – Earth; Awn – Luna; Vir – Man; Vigo – Woman;

Teens – Miles; Neroon – Generation.

Earth time is used throughout the story for the reader’s convenience.

The vast city lay sprawled on the crest and slopes of a mighty mountain. Daylight – like twilight to their eyes and scarcely daylight at all as they knew it – revealed it to them. Fo-Peta brought the ships to rest in the midst of a mighty square. Towering fern growths, analogous to similar growths on Bar-Zee and Narlone but giant-like in comparison, grew in the square, and through the paths they lined floated hundreds of the city’s inhabitants, tall people with abnormally long teebas propelling them, their single eyes gleaming, their feelers tinged blue with astonishment. Brown they were, like the metallic vapors they moved through, bands of lirum-colored silver and gold round their middle bodies and many of them carried in one feeler what appeared to be long canes. These latter advanced briskly on the space-ships, jell brain-cases glowing hotly with demand. Their speaking mouths, under the jell, opened, and they shouted questions at the voyagers, at Fo-Peta who stood forth as the commander of the expedition.

“Who are you, strangers, and whence do you come in such mysterious fashion?”

The language was foreign in some respects to Fo-Peta’s receiving vents yet he understood the gist of what was said well enough. While lying in Pross Mere-Mer’s prison, awaiting trial, he had amused himself by acquiring the dialect of a fellow prisoner, a savage rebel from the southern wilds of Ern made captive by the Pross Lords, and the speech he now heard was in many ways similar. “I am Fo-Peta,” he said, “from the Satellite Efrania, and these, my fellow-voyagers, are from Bar-Zee, the ninth moon. We have visited you as you see, in our space ships.”

The chief of the interlocutors pondered these words as if he failed quite to grasp their meaning. “Efrania,” he muttered; “Bar-Zee, — what places be they; I have never heard of them before. And this talk of space-ships –“ he shook a perplexed feeler.

“We have come to visit your rulers, your chief men,” said Fo-Peta. “In peace have we come, refugees seeking asylum, delegates craving alliance. I pray you conduct me to them.”

Other persons in authority appeared at length – one important dignitary riding in a self-propelled carriage which skimmed the pathways with amazing speed. He harangued Fo-Peta briefly. A floating regiment of what could be nothing but warriors with metal covers protecting their jells, and armed with disk reflectors – or so they seemed – surrounded the space-ships and kept back the curious crowds. Shortly arrived a gorgeous vehicle to which Fo-Peta was conducted with great pomp and ceremony. Then, accompanied by troops and followed by a vast concourse of people, the vehicle skimmed through the aisles of the square and entered the highways of the city proper.

Never had Fo-Peta seen anything to equal its grandeur and size. The capital of Narlone was a mighty metropolis but this huge city was far mightier. Buildings of ethereal loveliness rose on every hand. Here and there, in wide open places, were scattered marts of trade, of commerce. And now his heart gave a mighty leap and then misgave him; for he saw ones floating along bearing the yokes of burden characteristic of toilers, of slaves, and he thought sadly, “Is it possible that tyranny and exploitation exists here too?” But he strove to dismiss this thought. The metal vapors were heavy to absorb, his middle body labored to absorb them and he loosened his lirum band and spouted through his gills.

The palace to which they came occupied the highest peak of the mountain range, two miles in the airm its silvery walls and strange towers wavering through the brown mist. In a wide courtyard the vehicle was left and conducted by several impressive individuals with myriad-hued bracelets on their feelers, Fo-Peta was brought to the audience hall. The walls and ceiling of this hall were of beaten turquay inlaid with tonlin and the floor was of spun prack. On a dias of tul three rulers of this vast and wealthy city swayed, the middle one occupying a somewhat higher-place chair than the others. The middle ruler opened his speaking mouth and called out in a thin, piping voice, “Welcome to Hade.” The one on the left intoned, “Thou who are called Fo-Peta.” The one on the right chanted in a deep bass, “The rulers of Hade make thee welcome.” Then all the colorful courtiers thronging the sides of the dais and surrounding the chairs cried out in unison, “Welcome! Thrice welcome!”

Fo-Peta’s central jell glowed with appreciation; his feelers made proper obeisance. “Thanks, mighty rulers, mighty people. I, a traveler from the nine satellites to Hade, come to you as a refugee – myself and companions – to enlist your powerful aid in our behalf.”

The middle ruler leaned forward, his jell showing intense curiosity. “What are those satellites of which you speak?”

Fo-Peta’s feelers registered amazement. “Surely you know of them, the nine moons circling this planet of yours?”

“No,” said the ruler slowly, “no, we did not know of them; never have we seen them: the metallic vapors are too dense to allow of our studying the heavens with any precision. But tell us – those moons you speak of are inhabited?”

“As you perceive, by inhabitants like to myself. All the moons are populated. The satellites are enslaved, exploited, for a powerful minority. The Narlones have even enslaved portions of this world of your, Ern itself.”

A murmur of surprise was audible in the audience hall.

“Ern, as you call it, is big,” said the middle ruler, “and it is quite possible that savage lands far to the south where we have penetrated but seldom have come under foreign sway. But tell me, is this Narlone you speak of powerful and wealthy?”

“Aye,” said Fo-Peta, his jell showing the truthfulness of what he said, “wealthy and powerful. Tul-mills and gren-mines do they work with slave labor, and from the Ethor regions of Bar-Zee extract the rare and precious cana and tara.”

The hue of avarice flitted thru the jells of the three rulers and was to be seen in the feelers of the courtiers listening eagerly, “Cana and tara! They are rare amongst us. But you – why have you sought us out?”

Then Fo-Peta told them of the conditions in the tul-mills and the gren-mines, of the certain death from attrition – the hideous nager – which assailed those condemned to labor long years in the Ethor regions. He told of his life as a professional revolutionist, of his many attempts to organize the toilers to overthrow Narlone rule of Pross Lords; of his arrest, condemnation, leadership of the successful uprising on Bar-Zee; of the seizure of the spaceships, the flight to Ern. The three rulers listened attentively, their jells veiled now in a protective gray which hid all emotion. “I have come to enlist your aid against the Narlonian exploiters, to ask your help in overthrowing them, to beg of you to assist me in setting the slaves of the nine satellites free!”

For an appreciable time there was silence in the audience chamber. Some kind of wordless communication was being exchanged by the three rulers and their immediate advisors. Fo-Peta realized this but couldn’t fathom of what import. Then at last the middle ruler opened his speaking mouth and said, “Be of good cheer, we have decided to accede to your requests, extend the help you crave.”

He signaled that the audience was over and floated from his chair, followed by his two fellow-rulers, the three disappearing through a wide doorway. Fo-Peta was then conducted to a well-appointed apartment where he found his Bar-Zeenian companions. Through a transparent metal plate he perceived the spaceships safely moored in the courtyard below and heavily guarded. Servants bearing the burden yoke waited on them, supplying them with energy tubes for suction and, veiling their jells in protective darkness, the voyagers at length fell asleep.

The next day, Fo-Peta was taken to a strange room. It was – he observed – a room devoted to science and scientific achievements. The middle ruler was there and several others undoubtedly scientists and warriors who questioned him at length as to the location of Narlone. With his aid a large map was drawn.

“So,” said one of the scientists, “Narlone is such and such a distance from us now, will be so many teens more tomorrow. Be as exact as you can, please; our whole expedition depends on it.”

Fo-Peta was exact. A scientist of no mean achievement himself he had the data at his feeler-tips. He watched the Hadean scientists sketch and figure. “There is no need for that,” he said at length; “I can guide the space-ship back without fail.”

The middle ruler’s speaking mouth twitched. “Space-ships?” he cried. “We will have no need of your space-ships!”

“Then how—“ questioned Fo-Peta.

“How are we going to reach Narlone and the other satellites, you ask. You will see. Tomorrow we start.”

Back with his companions in the apartment at their disposal, Fo-Peta owned to a feeling of depression and dread. These rulers of Hade, of vast stretches of Ern, could he trust them to bring freedom and liberation to his enslaved countrymen, to the other eight moons? He did not know; he could only await what the future might bring. For weal or woe the die was cast.

One of the servants bearing the burden yoke was a handsome creature of twenty or thereabouts. Her shapely teeba bore her along with grace and courage. Moreover her central jell showed more than an average intelligence. Fo-Peta found himself attracted by her immensely. His first attempts at conversation were received in silence but at length he overcame the aloofness and they talked together. She was curious as to his identity. When he told her that, and of his mission, her feelers blackened with bitterness. “To seek for such aid from the Tyrants of Hade! Look at me. I, Zeera, was once the daughter of a Ked of Junius. A Ked is not a king or chief, a tyrant, but a governor elevated by the people for a brief space. We were a free nation with free workers – all of us were workers. Then came the Hadeans. Our city walls were leveled, our people butchered or enslaved. I was brought here to grace the Hadean triumph, the triumph of the Three. Since which I have labored as a menial in the palace here, bearing the burden yoke. Of late I have caught the fancy of the middle ruler, who desires me for his plaything. This I have refused to become, though promised the removal of the burden yoke forever if I do. Not yet has he tried to force me. But Tal-Ton is cold and ruthless, and I fear, I fear—“

Somehow Fo-Peta found himself grasping one of her feelers with his own. “No!” he cried, “no, it shall never be!”

“How can you prevent it?” she asked sorrowfully, but she did not attempt to withdraw the feeler he held and her jell showed a delicate pink.

“We go on the Narlone expedition tomorrow,” said Fo-Peta, his feelers kindling with a grim hue, “and it may be – it may be the middle ruler will never return.”

One the morrow he was once again summoned to the scientific chamber but now a wall had risen revealing a vast room beyond it whose confines seemed limitless. The vast room was a curious place. In the foreground floated a huge vehicle looking not unlike a torpedo car. Around it were clustered a strange array of mechanic mechanisms; overhead, from the high ceiling, a number of gleaming disks descended to within a short distance of the car’s top. Spiraling the car was an immense spring. Fo-Peta observed that the vast room was filled with smaller replicas of this car, literally hundreds of them within their enveloping spirals and array of mechanisms, having in addition perfectly round globes floating above and seemingly unconnected. He regarded this all this scene with wondering feelers. Inside the large car he was appointed a place at a broad table, a table that was undoubtedly a control board. The map he had aided in drawing was now depicted on a metal plate set in the table’s center and a long finder with needle point rested on the satellite Narlone – on the metropolis of Pross Mere-Mer, to be exact. The middle ruler was there and greeted him with a twitch of the speaking mouth; his jell showed the irony of orange. “Within the hour we start for Narlone.”

“In this machine?”

“In this machine.”

“Then it is a space traveler?”

“Not as you imply.”

Through the transparent metal Fo-Peta saw the other cars being prepared. Warriors floated aboard the others, aboard their own huge car. On the table a lever was deflected. Vapor-tight doors closed with a hollow reverberation; outside the great spiral glowed red-hot, the swirling metallic vapors became alive with golden light. Over the table the commanding scientists pored, moving and adjusting with marvelously fast movements the intricate instruments. Then Fo-Peta experienced an indescribable sensation. To him it seemed that everything cohered in on itself and turned inside out. There was a crucial moment of blackness, disintegration, but when he emerged from his blackness it was to find things unchanged. The scientists sat unmoved in front of their instruments; only the middle ruler had surged to his feet and was staring outwards with his single flexible eye, his jell seething with colors of exultation, greed and ferocity. “Narlone!” he piped. “Narlone!”

Fo-Peta stared through the transparent plates. Yes, it was Narlone! Unbelievable though it might seem, they were floating in the metallic vapor above the metropolis of the Pross Lords. He absorbed with a great heave of the middle body, blowing through his gills. Narlone! What magic was this? The thin towers of the metropolis wavered around them as the car sank lower. Floating Narlonians glared upward with writhing feelers. On the roof of the great central fortress of Pross Mere-Mer appeared guards, propelling themselves with agitated teebas to and fro. Upon the cars – hundreds of the replicas were hovering in the vapor with the golden globes above them – the deadly weapons of the Narlonians were being trained; the lethal ray, the lightning bolt. Fo-Peta knew that Pross Mere-Mer would scarcely wait for explanations of this strange visitation. Not thus had he ruled for years. First he would blast into destruction; explanations would come later. But he never had the chance to blast. On the great table a watchful scientist pressed a button; another adjusted a smaller finder on the map, which had been divided into squares. Through the metallic vapors a strange gleam ran, agitated, vibrating. Everything shook. Fo-Peta saw the towers of the Pross Lords shake and shimmer. The rate of vibration increased. The floating Norlonians all vibrated to a slowly increasing rhythm. They were rocked into surrender. Then, from the hundreds of floating cars, Hadean warriors wearing jell-protectors and carrying round disks swarmed. The fortress of Pross Mere-Mer fell without a blow. The Hadeans took over the Intelligence Towers, the centers of power, the weapons of the Narlonians which, though strange to them, they seemed instinctively to understand. The middle ruler looked at Fo-Peta, his feelers gloating arrogant colors. “Thus we make war, we rulers of Hade, and nothing can stand against us!” Fo-Peta swathed his jell in impenetrable gray. The opportunity to dispose of the middle ruler had never presented itself. There had been no fighting of the sort he had looked forward to. The middle ruler left his car only to parade in state through the captured city. Then Fo-Peta saw what the globes contained: all the glitter and pomp necessary for the pageantry of conquest. He saw Pross Mere-Mer and his fellow Pross Lords lead captive aboard the middle ruler’s car; he saw treasures of tul and gren, of cana and tara, being looted from the storehouses of the metropolis. Addressing himself to the middle ruler with the proper obeisance of feelers, he said: “The Pross Lords have fallen, Narlone is overthrown. Now shall the slaves go free.”

The middle ruler’s jell showed a frowning hue. Fo-Peta said, “Do remember your promise.”

“I will remember.”

But the heart of Fo-Peta was heavy with foreboding, and well it might be, for the middle ruler whispered in the receiving vent of a trusted adviser. Aboard the huge car, about the control table the scientists sat, waiting the order to return to Hade. Fo-Peta conversed with one of them. “But I still do not understand.” The other waved an indulgent feeler. “Nor do we ourselves – wholly. We know only the principle works.”

“What is the principle?”

“You know that there are three dimensions in which we live. A fourth dimension has been added to these three – time. Time is the fourth dimension. But above that again lies another dimension – the fifth. In this fifth dimension the relativity that constitutes for us the illusion of distance, of separation, is abolished. For it is only on the third (and even the fourth) plane that things seem apart, distinct from one another. Therefore we have achieved a method of going where we wish by way of the fifth dimension.”

“Startling as it may sound, we go out of existence relatively, in the fifth dimension, and reappear at the spot on which we have the needle of this finder. To do this it is necessary to know the exact location of the spot to which we are going to travel – its distance from us – in three-dimensional figures; and it is necessary to reduce this information to a chart, a map such as you observed us make of Narlone. Since the metropolis of Narlone and Hade occupy identical spots—”

“Identical spots!”

“In the fifth dimension: tho of course they have no relative existence there, no existence at all, really, since they are relative phenomena and exist as we know them only in three dimensions. Since they occupy identical spots in the fifth dimension or absolute sense, we have but to go through that spot and reappear three-dimensionally where we have set the needle. There is danger in doing this without knowing our objective; that is why we have to be careful. Not all places reached thru the fifth dimension are capable of supporting life, though of course we have taken chances and lost machines. However this car is supplied with chemicals necessary to make metallic vapors for us to absorb for a long time, if need be, and there are energy tubes for sustenance.”

He paused and regarded Fo-Peta benevolently. Fo-Peta’s jell expressed wonder and amazement.

“But how will you return to Hade?”

“By replacing this metal map of Narlone with one of Hade – so – and setting the finder. You will note that the cars all carry with them their spirals. It is the spirals that make possible our passing thru the fifth dimension – and the spirals are manipulated from within the cars.” He indicated a lever with a negligent wave of a feeler.

Scarcely had Fo-Peta digested this information when the middle ruler entered the control room, propelled swiftly by his teeba. “Let us return,” he commanded. Obediently the scientists bent over the board. Again the doors shut with a hollow reverberation; the spiral thru the transparent plates could be seen glowing vividly. Again there was the terrifying sensation of everything cohering on itself, turning inside out. Then out of the moment of blackness, of seeming disintegration, Fo-Peta emerged to find that the car was resting once again in the vast room at Hade. It seemed incredible that it had ever quitted the spot. He began to wonder if he hadn’t dreamed all that had occurred. Then he saw the captive Pross Lords being herded by, the marshalling of the burden bearers to unload the cars of tel and gren, of cana and tara, and he knew indeed, miracle that it might seem, that they had been to Narlone and back.

To Narlone and back?! And the middle ruler was yet alive! Alive to force his odious attentions upon Zeera! Fo-Peta’s feelers darkened; his jell, unknowing to himself (he forgot to veil it) showed murderous scarlet. The middle ruler looked and saw and whispered again in the receiving vent of the trusted adviser. The latter waved to him a half dozen warriors with disks and protective jell coverings. They surrounded Fo-Peta. “What does this mean?” he cried.

“That you are being arrested,” said the trusted adviser, feelers martially arrogant.

“By whose order?”

“By mine,” said the middle ruler, floating forward, his jell colored vindictively. “Fool of an Effranian! to think that I would ever further the schemes of a revolutionist. I utilized your aid to further the conquest of Narlone; now your slime of workers will know what it is to slave for a master. They will find in me and my fellow rulers no such tender-bodied Udarians as your Pross Lords of Narlone. As for you – I have put your kind to the torturing death in Hade and will doubtless visit you with the same fate. Away with him!” he piped; “Throw him in the prisons with his betters!” So it came to pass that Fo-Peta was taken down to the dungeons of the castle, down to the black noisome crypts underground, where the metallic vapors were too thick and foul for proper adsorption, and where he was thrown into a cell with two other Narlonian captives – one of whom was Pross Mere-Mer!

Pross Mere-Mer did not know who is was at first, nor did Fo-Peta recognize the Narlonian ruler immediately. Gloomy it was in the cell in the middle ruler’s underprison. Pross Mere-Mer had bribed a guard with a feeler-band of value to provide him with a lan-flare but scarce could its light dissipate the vaporous dark. The jell of Pross Mere-Mer was black with gloom, his feelers indicative of utter woe and depression. In a corner of the cell he floated. his single eye closed wearily. His companion prisoner had been mistaken for a Pross Lord by his captors because of his rich feeler-bands and valuable lirum encasing his middle body. As a matter of fact, he was the ruler’s famous scholar and sky-gazer, Kama-Loo. “Woe, woe is us,” mourned the star-gazer.

“Shut up!” boomed Pross Mere-Mer savagely.

Fo-Peta recognized that distinctive voice. “Greetings, Pross Mere-Mer. How hath the mighty fallen.”

Pross Mere-Mer recognized, in his turn, the peculiar intonation of the rebel Efranian. His eye snapped open, his feelers showed a stormy green. “What dost thou here, traitorous kelp?”

“Mayhap to gloat over my work.”

“Your work?”

“Since I am the author of your undoing, the cause of the overthrown of Narlone.”

“Renegade!” thundered the Pross Lord, “and was it thy accursed self that loosed the destroyers upon us? Now by the power of Elo Hava…” His feelers lashed out, an undulation of the teeba thrust him forward.

“Nay,” said Fo-Peta, “restrain yourself, Pross, and do not seek to rend me in pieces. Bitterly to I regret the deed I have done. Not for your sake,” he cried, his jell showing the red of anguish, “but for the sake of the unhappy toilers of the satellites. Clearly to I perceive that in the person of those tyrants of Ern, I have loosed upon them harsher, more voracious and cruel task-masters than even your cruel and bitter self. Now has hope departed.”

“In all save the gods.” It was the sky-gazer, Kama-Loo, who spoke.

“The gods!” Fo-Peta’s jell showed derision. “Where are the gods in whom we shall trust? Pross Mere-Mer drove Elo Hava out of Ern and in his place we have – the Tyrants of Hade.”

“And the message of Awn.”

“The message from Awn?”

“A satellite of Darth, one of the planets of our solar system quite near to the sun.”

Fo-Peta’s feelers colored with interest; with a twist of the teeba he floated nearer. “What do you mean?”

“For a long time we have been receiving them on our screenophotoscope; first as color, which later I was able to translate into sound; then as direct sound itself – a voice. No need to tell you how astounded we were. My instruments proved the source of the message: it was being broadcasted from the satellite of Darth. My translation of what the voice said – thought following certain periodic laws which I will not define – is quite arbitrary and of course may be wrong. ‘Come to Awn’ I construed it as meaning. ‘Come to Awn’.”

“And we were planning to build a special space ship and attempt that very thing when you loosed disaster upon us,” growled Pross Mere-Mer, his feelers glowing anger.

“But Darth, and its satellite Awn, are devoid of metallic vapors,” protested Fo-Peta; “living beings could not exist there.”

“Not living beings as we know them,” agreed Kama-Loo. “Insofar as we know, life depends on certain conditions found only on Ern and its nine satellites. But perhaps absorption of metallic vapors is not a necessary condition for life on every planet. On Darth, as you may know, there are faint traces of metallic vapors though scarcely enough to maintain our forms of life; on Awn, there are no verifiable vapors at all.”

Fo-Peta brooded over what he had heard, his jell shading from one soft hue to another. At length he said, “In the courtyard of this castle stand the eight spaceships myself and the Bar-Zeenians seized from the patrol. If we possessed one of them—”

“To what purpose?”

“To flee to Awn.”

“Fool!” said Pross Mere-Mer, his feelers writhing contempt; “none of those spaceships are prepared to venture out into interstellar space. What would we do for metallic vapors to absorb, energy tubes to sustain life?”

“That is true.” Suddenly Fo-Peta’s jell glowed with exultation. “The dimensional car!” he exclaimed. They stared at him with motionless feelers. Fo-Peta explained what he meant. “It is the very thing we need. Supplied with what we must have, in a moment we are there.”

“And how are you going to obtain the car?” Pross Mere-Mer’s jell showed the irony of orange. With a twist of the teeba he floated into a corner and closed his sardonic eye. But the learned scholar and sky-gazer, Kama-Loo, was interested. He questioned Fo-Peta again and again as to what he knew of the dimensional car’s functioning. From a fold of his lirum he withdrew a piece of litha and a marker and set to calculating. Soon he had plotted the distance from Ern to Darth’s satellite Awn. Finally he sketched a tentative map. Then his jell colored somberly and he put the map and the calculations back into the fold of his lirum. “Of what use is all this?” he muttered with depressed feelers. Fo-Peta did not answer. His own color was one of depression. Fitfully he wrapped isolation around his jell and slept.

On the morrow the guards came to prepare them to grace the middle ruler’s triumph. The triumph was a gorgeous thing of pomp and unbelievable pageantry. A thousand important Pross Lords had been brought from Narlone to float dejectedly in the wake of their conqueror’s skimming chariot. Again Fo-Peta saw the glorious city but this time as a captive yoked feeler to feeler with Pross Mere-Mer. Thru the thick metallic vapors gay banners drooped and wavered, thousands of Hadeans floated. In the lower depths of the great city, the heavy vapors were scarcely absorbable by their middle bodies or spoutable thru their gills. When their sluggish teebas failed to propel them at the proper speed, guards urged them brutally on with whips of silver prack. Pross Mere-Mer thought of his shorn power, Fo-Peta of the virgo Zeera. He knew now that he loved her dearly, that the very thought of her in the enfoldment of the middle ruler was bitterer than death. Then, his jell fainting with fatigue, he lifted his eye feeler and saw her in the chariot of the tyrant. The burden yoke was gone from her back, her feelers adorned with costly bands, and around her middle body was a royally striped lirum of many colors. The faintness left Fo-Peta’s jell and it colored with the crimson fire of rage. Futilely he strained at his shackles. The guard brought his whip of prack down with stunning force. “Slime of a Narlonian!” Now the chariot floated beyond his vision, carrying Zeera away, Zeera by the side of the middle lord. Abruptly his jell turned black, his feelers drooped; the blare of the conchoes, the shouts of the spectators, fell unheeded on his receiving vents. He scarcely knew when the day-long parade ended, when he and the rest of the exhausted captives were herded back to prison. Here cell Zeera found him, floating dejectedly. “Fo-Peta,” she called softly. They came together in a rush. “Be careful,” she said, “the guards must not see.”

“I saw you today – in his chariot.”

“It was the only way. You he had doomed to the torture chamber as a revolutionist. I had to save your life. Now he has given you to me – as my slave.”

“At a price?”

“At a price.”

“You are his?”

“I go to him tonight.”

“No, no!” Fo-Peta’s jell colored with the hue of anguish. “It must not be! The price is too dear!”

Zeera clung to him. “Not for your life – the life that I love!”

Fo-Peta said tensely, “Let me think.” His feelers showed the gold of concentration. “Zeera, you trust me; you will do as I say?”

“Yes, yes!”

“You come and go as you please?”

“Here is the royal seal of Tal-Ton; it opens all doors.”

“Then you must pave the way for me and my companions to the dimensional car room. Now – this instant – tonight.”

Pross Mere-Mer’s feelers lifted with hope. “You mean to—”

“To seize the great control car; to flee in it to—”

“To Narlone!” cried the ruler, his jell coloring vindictively, “where we shall utilize the weapon of Hade to shake them into submission, recapture my kingdom.”

“You forget that nine of us knows how to manipulate the vibration weapon, knows what it looks like or whether indeed it is not resident in some auxiliary car or not. To flee to Narlone would be to deliver ourselves back into the hands of our enemies. We must flee to—”

“To Awn!” cried the star-gazer, Kama-Loo.

“Yes, to Awn, it is our only hope. The rulers of Hade cannot follow us there. To Awn we shall go, and seek the aid of the powerful intelligence broadcasting through space.”

“Who will help me to recover my kingdom?” asked Pross Mere-Mer.

“Who will forward the day of liberation for the enslaved workers and destroy the rule of all tyrants on the nine satellites and on Ern itself?” returned Fo-Peta.

They glared at one another.

Kama-Loo said placatingly: “Is this a time to quarrel?”

“No,” said Fo-Peta, “It is a time to act.”

They floated from the cell. Zeera showed the royal seal to the guard. “By the orders of Tal-Ton – I take these prisoners to him.”

It would have been dangerous to have proceeded without the guard, who conducted the prisoners as a matter of course. Through gloomy corridors they floated, up torturous runways until the dungeons were left far below. The castle swarmed with life, with a myriad attendants bearing tapering wands. Zeera constantly showed the royal seal and the guard arrogantly brandished his disk weapon. On his feelers were the black bands of a dungeon keeper and none barred their progress. So they came at last to the middle ruler’s palatial apartment. He had dismissed his various advisors, his favorites, his court attendants and servants, and waited alone – waited for the coming of the virgo Zeera, whose beauty had inflamed his passion and who was at last to yield to him, fully and freely.

It was the longed for hour. His jell tinted amorously, his feelers pulsed with anticipation. The dungeon guard stood aside and Zeera and the three prisoners glided through the open door. At the sight of her Tal-Ton advanced swiftly with a convulsion of the teeba. Then he saw her companions and his sudden rush was abruptly halted. “What is this?” he cried, his jell changing color.

The giant Pross Mere-Mer, fully as large as the middle ruler, did not wait on ceremony. His jell a vicious hue, he surged forward with a powerful twist of the teeba. Back went Tal-Ton in the grip of the Pross Lord’s feelers, squawking out his terror and surprise. Instantly the guard floated into action. “Look out!” warned Zeera.

Helpless to act, Kama-Loo floated in his place. He was the scholar, the scientist, but scarcely the vir of action. Fo-Peta lashed forward to meet the guard. His middle body was making hard work of absorption in the thick metallic vapors of Ern. He sprouted constantly through his gills for the strength to move rapidly. He and the guard were of unequal size, Fo-Peta much the smaller, so the guard was enabled to hold him almost powerless with one feeler while he focused the metal disk with the other. Ill would it have gone with the black Efranian evolutionist if it had not been for the unsuspected tentacle in the middle body. Out it leapt, taking the guard by surprise, and wrestling the metal disk from his feeler’s grasp. Up Fo-Peta whirled the disk and down he brought its heavy metal upon the unprotected jell. The guard has laid aside his protective jell-covering while on dungeon duty. Deep into the jell the heavy disk crashed, spattering its contents. With a terrible convulsion of the teeba and the middle body, the guard collapsed, his feeler relaxed its hold on Fo-Peta. The latter pushed him away and he sank slowly to the floor. Fo-Peta turned. The struggle of giants was still continuing. Pross Mere-Mer was handicapped by difficult absorption, his gills blowing almost continuously. One of his feelers had the middle ruler by the upper teeba, just under the central jell, preventing his speaking mouth from giving more than a half-stifled shout. Fo-Peta did not hesitate. Too much was at stake. At any moment some attendant might blunder on the scene. He darted on Tal-Ton from one side and swung up the heavy disk. The middle ruler collapsed under the same terrible blow that had slain the guard. Pross Mere-Mer turned on Fo-Peta with furious feelers.

“I had desired him for a prisoner,” he thundered, “so that we could have tortured from him the secret of the vibration weapon.”

“Fool!” said Fo-Peta. “Have we the time to fight all night? Zeera says there is a secret way from this apartment to the Chamber of Science. Come, let us hurry.”

They hurried. The night was short. Day would come swiftly enough. The Chamber of Science was shrouded in vaporous dark, silent, deserted, yet they dared not press into service the light of the lan-flare. Precious time it took to find the way from the Science Chamber to the vast room of the dimensional cars. It was too shrouded in vaporous gloom. Fo-Peta prayed that no guards were on duty. They heard none. A lan-flare was lighted. By its aid they at last located the huge central car and entered its control room. “Quick!” hissed Fo-Peta to Kama-Loo. “Here are the metals, the tools for the drawing of the map. Be certain of your calculations. You are sure of them? Good. First we draw the map – thus; now we place the metal in this press. So! Quick – in the name of Elo Hava!”

He swore by the name of a god he had ceased to believe in.

The map was adjusted upon the control table, the needle of the finder was laid upon Awn – upon the exact spot with Kama-Loo declared the mysterious message came from. Fo-Peta floated into the seat before the control instruments. Everything he strove to do as he had seen the scientists of Hade do. He deflected the lever. Instantly the dimensional car and its environs sprang into spectral relief, the vapor-tight doors closed with a hollow reverberation; outside the great spiral glowed red-hot, the swirling metallic vapors became alive with golden light. He was conscious of a thundering noise and through the transparent plates he saw guards – guards who had evidently been on duty not far away – rushing toward the car. His jell quivered. Now was the crucial moment. Could he duplicate the adjustment of intricate instruments as he had seen them adjusted once or twice before? With steady feelers he worked. Now, now… He felt an indescribable sensation, everything cohering in on itself. There was a moment of stygian blackness, disintegration; then out of it he emerged to find himself enveloped in more light then he had ever known before. Through the transparent plates he looked. The car-room of Hade had vanished; the dimensional car was hovering above a dry, arid country. Great bare rocks heaved upward into painful clarity. The others were staring likewise. Zeera clung to Fo-Peta with trembling feelers, her jell covered with fear.

“Victory!” Kama-Loo shouted deliriously. “Victory! We have arrived at Awn!”

“Yes,” said Fo-Peta, his jell colored gravely. “We have arrived at Awn. Let us regulate the metallic vapors to offset this glaring light; then let us test with our instruments the vapor contents of the world outside. It may be that we can soon venture forth in the suits the Hadeans prepared for wear under vaporless conditions and find the intelligence we have come to seek.”

He pressed the button.

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# Chapter 6 – Interference on Luna by John W. Campbell

AUTHOR OF: ‘WHEN THE ATOMS FAILED,’ ‘THE BLACK STAR PASSES,’ ETC.

Old Mea-Quin shook his head sadly and doubtfully. “I do not like the situation, Dos-Tev. We alone can do so little. These worlds must help us, yet the telepathic response we have stirred in them is not hopeful. On Planet Four, and on the satellites of Planet Five, and on the satellite of Planet Six, in particular, only strife, anger and hatred exist now – hate for each other, not for the enemy I fear.”

“Planet Four has weapons. Planet Three has some – and one greater weapon than all others, that shall save vast human misery. It is a weapon which, I believe, we must rely greatly upon: their intelligent machines. Their people were warlike but a long period of peace seems to have brought them into greater harmony and with this threat of outside interference they are now working solidly together, I believe. I have received no strong warring impulses, while the impulses from Four were a jumble of separate strains and will-pulls. Their movement in any direction is not a unified march but a resultant of many individual and diverse strainings.”

“And the satellite of Planet Six: There we have a race which was forced to make itself unnatural because the sexes could not agree. A temporary agreement among the women has been built up only because they are unified against one force.”

“What weapons have we, Mea-Quin?”

Mea-Quin moved restlessly and seemed to look about him; listened sharply to a rattle of metal from behind, where Bullo was working. Finally he got up and went to the instrument panel and looked at it carefully. He sat down to a small calculating machine and rapidly set up a series of functions.

He turned away and shrugged his shoulders helplessly. “Aye – Ahy. The wrongness of Space was here again. I felt it in me. You are not sensitive enough, Dos-Tev. The Interference. They are watching us – listening to our minds again. It is beyond me. If only I could tap their forces – determine their dimensions and their properties, then I could perhaps, understand. But the Wrongness disturbs my instruments. It cuts down the power of my atomic engines. It disturbs my mind, which is far more serious, for through mind alone may we conquer.”

“Ten times we tried with the Thi-Ranley radiator to reach the people of the worlds. Planet Three we reached. Planet One we tried next, and reached. Planet Two – the beam moved and bent and came back to us. We have not been able to send.”

“Twenty-three messenger rockets we sent, one after another. Eight, and eight times they looped, turned and crashed into the sun. Many days of work and eight more looped up from us and turned, wandered and are floating in eternal space. Each day it grows more powerful.”

“Not til after we made them after the pattern of the machines of Planet Three; self-thinking, self-directing, capable of an acceleration one hundred times that any man could stand; did they escape. Even so, it was their own directive power after they were many millions of miles from us that brought them safely to their destination. The fools that found them did not see more than a control machine.”

“And – we are watched. I am sure of that. And I fear – for this one who can pick my thoughts at such a distance is surely a being of great mind. I believe his civilization had little science, that he is learning now from us. And each day his power grows. May Tor aid us – for we shall need it if this one proves the ally of Ay-Artz, as I fear. But I have a new device. There can be no sound on this soundless moon. Any device capable of penetrating these metal walls to reach us must be material in the fourth dimension or immaterial. If in the fourth dimension, it is immaterial to us until reduced to our normal three when it would become visible. If immaterial, it will not react to material vibration.”

“But – could it not be made invisible?”

“No paint can produce invisibility. No space-field can do so without leaving such tremendous spatial strains all about it that the veriest amateur of science would realize something was terribly amiss. Only in the fourth dimension would such affect be achieved.”

“A four-dimensional machine,” Dos-Tev shook his head unhappily. “How could we cope with such a being?”

“No – not four-dimensional machine. Three dimensions just as our machines have. Look, here is a plane. Imagine that it is the home of the useful Flatlander. He knows only this plane, can conceive of but two dimensions. See, we turn this sheet of paper – a two dimensional object, let us say – through 90 degrees to this third dimension. He cannot conceive of a third dimension, therefore the object vanishes, having become unreal to him. The object is now in the second and third, still two dimensional, but beyond his imagination. Thus an object of three dimensions can, by using a different three, be invisible to us.”

“The solution of our problem is not immediately before me. We cannot escape the watchfulness which, I fear, surrounds us. But – we can, I believe, prevent our minds being picked, read out like the characters of a book.”

“See, and remember. This device which I have here consists of two parts: the reflector and the gatherer. The headpiece is the reflector; it is impervious to thought-waves. When you wear it you will experience a sudden, terrible feeling of utter loneliness. A moment of panic will come over you. I will seem but a picture before you, unreal, inhuman, mindless. Your ears will seem to play you false, your eyes deceive you, a terrible feeling of loneliness that would break a weak mind. If you fear your mind weak, do not don this. For every mental impulse that each living creature radiates continually, forever will be cut off. No corpse will be less lifeless to you than I when you wear this!”

“But you own mental impulses will be reflected, intensified and worked over. Remember the tales of the ancients, the myths handed down from long-forgotten times as fairy tales, of the race with wings and caps which, worn, intensified thinking? Such is this. Further, beware of your strength. The gatherer, this long ribbon of cables, will cover your spinal column in much the same way, intensifying and repeating the nervous impulse. The latent, never-used strength of your muscles will come out. You have not noticed this but I have made timing measurements. Because of our long years in space, traveling at a speed greater than light – to us, not in reality, of course, but under an acceleration always greater than that of Lemnis, by half – your strength has increased and your quickness of motion. This, with the addition of the reflector of thought, will intensify your great strength.”

Thoughtfully Dos-Tev looked at the curious gray cap. It seemed like soft, knitted wool, with its long trailing tail of gray filaments. The cap would fit snugly over his head, like a scalp of gray hair, rounding tightly about his ears and neck.

“It was made to resemble a head of gray hair, when once I saw how it must be,” nodded Mea-Quin. “They who come will not know what we wear.”

With steady hands Dos-Tev donned the strange cap. It snapped about his head abruptly and, as it came, a horrible sickness gripped him. With a sudden clarity of mind, he realized that Dos-Tev was alone in the universe. All other beings, the countless thousands of tiny mental impulses that had always been about him, it seemed, were gone. All the loneliness of the vast and awful space that had traversed was nothing to this. Even Mea-Quin seemed suddenly a gray, unreal shadow. All things were shadows; only Dos-Tev was real. With a brain that saw itself for the first time, he realized that HE was the center of all the universe. The universe had being only in him and by him. He WAS the universe. It was his dream, the dream of a mind alone in all space, a lonely, infinite mind, that had, to amuse itself, filled itself with a dream of infinite spaces and infinite things and then pictured a tiny, sparkling dust speck and circled it with a smaller, duller speck called, in that infinite, alone-existing mind, Lemnis. And that the pictured universe might have motion and interest, the mind pictured a life. And the happenings of a life. How many thousands, millions of times, had his infinite, alone-existing and eternally existing mind conceived a universe, toyed with the dream for a moment or an aeon, then dropped it, when it was tired, and dreamed another?

He – who had dreamed himself as Dos-Tev – was alone, the center of this cosmos that he had dreamt, and for the first time he saw, in their true appearance, the things he had dreamed. Lo – already Mea-Quin was fading, he was not there, a shadow, a thing of dreams – the ship itself and the incredibly rugged mountains beyond the crystal window were vanishing and as his spreading, all-seeing eye looked beyond and the rocky dream of a world disappeared with his negative thought, the stars beyond faded, vanished, and the utter blankness of nothingness came. Dos-Tev knew he was momentarily the infinite mind once more, the eternal mind that had wakened from one more dream.

A great burst of sound and light and tugging, living impulses of mind stirred him suddenly to life again. He had fallen to the floor of the ship and Mea-Quin was bending over him with dark, troubled eyes. The gray cap hung limp in his hand, its tail of fine filaments dangling like some broken snake to the floor. Dos-Tev sat up and shook himself.

“Uhra – by Tor – that is not safe! Achurra – I dreamed I was Tor himself, dreaming the dream of a universe and realizing it and wakening from my dream,as all the dreams vanished, all became naught!”

Mea-Quin’s serious eyes looked down into his anxiously. “Sire, I beg forgiveness. I should have prepared you more carefully. I thought to prepare you body in the bowl ere we left Lemnis but for that far more delicate and wonderful mechanism, the brain, I did not think to prepare. I myself have developed this only after experimenting much, and by gradual improvement learned to think rightly. You must practice and learn rapidly. I have much to tell you that, by Tor, I dare not say while this – this Wrongness of Space is about to learn what I say.”

Giant Bullo came into the room, his great frame filling the low metal doorway. He looked down anxiously at his young master; his eyes blazed angrily at the old scientist. Mea-Quin was of the Learned Class and above his Warrior status but nonetheless there was anger in his eyes as he saw his Sire dazed and helpless on the floor.

“Old One, what have you done?” he demanded.

“Silence, Bullo! Mea-Quin is a Learned One; remember your place!” snapped Dos-Tev rising to his feet with a light bound that carried him some five feet into the air. “That is better,” he said in a more kindly voice as Bullo’s face fell and cleared as he saw his master was well. “He has tried to protect me from the searching, thieving fingers of the mind, which some – some thing has sent at me to pick the thoughts from my skull.”

“Your mind is not so sensitive even as mine and you have not felt it, yet when Mea-Quin seeks to protect me in ways you cannot understand–”

Bullo knelt in sorrow, his hands crossed on the back of his head.

“Rise, Bullo. I know how you felt, but remember, a Warrior is not a good fighter who loses his head in moments of stress. ‘Seek facts, seek plans, seek victory!'” he quoted the Warrior Class motto.

Dos-Tev turned to Mea-Quin once more. “I must try again. I will concentrate my mind on some useful thought. My mind was free to absorb impressions and interpret

only those when last I went over. I shall carry over a thought and occupy my mind thus, till it learns its new powers and its new limitations.”

Mea-Quin objected strenuously. “The danger — the danger is too great. Try rather my earlier, less efficient devices.”

“Nay. We have not time. I must try it, Mea-Quin.”

Reluctantly Mea-Quin gave it to the younger man. Dos-Tev smiled slightly to himself as he took it. “Ahruu, Mea-Quin, we shall see whether that wonderful clarity of mind is real or fancied. For a year and a half now have I sought to picture a scheme for a wonderful weapon whose plan I conceived. If this can make my thoughts clear and useful – a useful test, indeed!”

He slipped on the cap, his face drawn in lines of sharp concentration. Almost at once his face became flushed, his arms went pale and he began to breathe heavily as though running strenuously. Bullo started forward, an expression of tortured anxiety on his face. Well he knew that no Warrior dared disturb the Tev Class when they were incommunion with themselves. And the Dos-Tev himself-! But now the young ruler stood swaying gently, his laboring lungs sucking in air, while his face became more flushed and gradually purpled. Mea-Quin watched anxiously and finally spoke. “Dos-Tev, you strain yourself beyond human endurance. Remove the cap!”

Dos-Tev’s black eyes swung on him and their strange blankness was suddenly gone as a wave of terrific thought-power turned on Mea-Quin. But simultaneously his face, red and flushed with blood, cleared, and he sat down heavily. “Aye, my friend, I must not work too hard at this. Never before have I known what thought might be. You have invented more than a mere protection, you have invented a mighty weapon, a weapon that amplifies our thoughts, concentrates them to the task and makes our every idea a powerful force against our enemies.”

“I said I had thought of a weapon? By Tor, I had, but never had I conceived its possibilities, still less the final key-piece of the apparatus, a tube which permits of a vibration frequency beyond anything known before. A tube which causes oscillations of a frequency equal to that of the molecular collisions within matter. Think, Mea-Quin, of what this which I shall describe means, and you too, Bullo. It is this; a fan-shaped ray, reaching out with effective power for perhaps 100 miles. It is a ray of anarchy, of total entropy. It destroys organization, it will cause the orderly motion of the mightiest ship ever built to carry man, to degenerate suddenly into a mere anarchy of random, molecular motion. It causes the effect of a collision of two solid bodies. Orderly motion through it is impossible. Only the random diffusion of gases would be possible. Any organized motion through it builds up the field, increases the energy at the expense of the crystal-structure’s kinetic energy. In the case of liquids, they are not crystaline but have a molecular bondage and this bondage is what reacts on the field. Only things possessed of no molecular bondage, gases in other words, are free to move thru the ray.”

“Aye — and what becomes of the momentum?” demanded Mea-Quin, doubtfully. “The energy you account for but not the momentum.”

A light of blazing thought came into Dos-Tev’s eyes. His voice became toneless. “I could not have told you, Mea-Quin, had not your device permitted utter concentration. Remember the wave mechanic formulae of matter and remember that both momentum and kinetic energy are reducible to formulae which show the characteristics of some sort of wave motion, an oscillation never understood. I firmly believe that this ray in some way releases that momentum as that mysterious oscillation. It will then transfer itself evenly to all surrounding space. And react on all surrounding bodies by absorption. Remember, Mea-Quin, that when Thur Mente propounded his three laws of motion, and stated that action and reaction were equal and opposite, he had no conception of action at a distance, nor of space as we know it. Could he have seen a great space liner coming into huge Tyroo Lanii docks, seen the mighty mass falling freely for 100 feet without the landing rockets, only to slow gently and safely to a landing as gentle as a bit of down, he would surely have searched in vain for the reaction, since that reaction is born on a magnetic field to the giant decelerating magnets. Now there is no visible transfer of momentum. The magnets do not move in the slightest degree. Space transfers the momentum to them and they lose it in that infinitely vaster momentum of Lemnis. Here is a completely new method of transferring momentum.”

Mea-Quiii looked at Dos-Tev with awe in his eyes. “And thou hast been my pupil! Ayha – the pupil is the master and the master learns his years!’ ” he quoted softly. “Pray Tor, you are right. In any event we must try it. You say you can make such a device?”

“No, I say I Believe I Can,” smiled Dos-Tev. “Bullo must help.”

“And in the—”

Mea-Quin stopped abruptly and reached for one of the handholds in the ship’s wall, for the entire ship had lurched suddenly upward and now began to turn over.

“By Tor -” he gasped. Then the machine, weighing thousands of tons, began to revolve on its axis like the armature of a motor, and gradually it began to heat. Faster and faster it rotated, while from all over the ship came the sounds of falling things. One instant Mea-Quin was hanging by his hands from the ceiling, the next instant he was flat on his stomach, weighed to the floor with with an increasing weight. Faster and faster, while the metal walls grew warmer. Bits of metal, a stylus, a knife, a small prospector’s stone-ax were becoming deadly weapons possessed of individual volitions, flying through the air, spinning themselves with a terrific velocity.

In seconds the men were plastered to the rotating walls of the ship by the centrifugal force that was mounting rapidly till it passed normal Lemnis-gravity, then doubled it. Dos-Tev had released his grip, was crawling hurriedly through the wildly spinning ship, laboring under a swiftly increasing acceleration, while the metal walls grew hot to the touch, and sweat poured down his lean face. “Thank Tor – I practiced – in the bowl.” His arms could scarcely bear his weight, while the effort of lifting them made his powerful shoulder muscles bulge through his tunic.

Hastily he scrambled to the power room, and with an effort he had not believed himself to be capable of, reached the lower bank of the control board. The ship suddenly thundered to the roar of the rockets, jerked fiercely forward – and stopped. With the mighty rockets thundering with force that should have hurled the machine forward at close to four Lemnis-gravities, she was barely able to creep slowly forward, while the Moon’s surface and the heavens whirled dizzily through the windows.

Dos-Tev realized that in another minute he would be unable to endure the acceleration, that surely he would be incapable of reaching the higher power controls.

With a driving demand of his muscles, a will to do it, his body slowly straightened upward, his lead-weighted arm reached up, and pulled down the great main switch. His quick mind had long ago recognized the force that was spinning them into oblivion. As the switch snapped across, a series of heavy tumblers fell with dull thuds, and the great atomic engines suddenly roared their hate and this spinning force. A terrific tenseness seemed to pervade space, the great engine labored, and the deep violet-blue of the atomic flames was suddenly changed through blue to green – they were failing under the immense load of the enemy force! But the flaming rockets were beginning to hold now, they were driving the ship forward, and the terrific spin was no longer increasing.

Hope seemed to spur him as he reached for the steering controls, and pushed three studs. A powerful motor whined and groaned erratically somewhere, two new sets of rockets flamed out, and instantly Dos-Tev felt himself slipping around the wall of the ship as his power began to opposed the rotation of the ship.

As he slipped he threw out the main rocket drive, and the giant rockets were silenced. He started the lower rockets on automatic altimeter control; they would force the ship upward at every opportunity. Presently he felt their rhythmic thrust, jabbing, pushing the ship upward – and fell as blackness swam over him.

He returned to consciousness to find the moon sinking swiftly. Mea-Quin staggered into the room, as he sat up, and set the controls for return.

“Bullo – is alive – but injured!” he gasped. “I became unconscious – before – I saw you move – how did – you endure it?”‘

“Sit down, Mea-Quin. Again it is your device. It strengthened my will, it strengthened my nerves. I was two men. What acceleration did it reach?”

“Five gravities.”

“The rotation stopped automatically, I see. I can guess what was intended.”

“Aye – the enemy intended to rotate the ship, then grind it on the rocks.”

“A simpIe rotating magnetic field. Like the armature of an induction motor, we spun faster and faster. His magnetic field was firmIy fixed; we could not move it with all the power of our rockets.”

”What opposition did you give?” asked Mea-Quin curiously.

“The meteor-deflecting magnetic field.”

“Our enemy grows more powerful with every hour,” sighed Mea-Quin. “And his mind is great. I have thought. We must send warnings to the envoys that come to beware of him.”

Dos-Tev looked at his old friend curiously. “How? We sent a rocket to WorId Eight – it was automatically controlled but the control went wrong under his manipulation and the rocket plunged into the sun. We had to send three at once before one escaped while he pursued the other two. WorId Nine we could not reach at all. I doubt that it has life but we could not reach them were they there. We cannot send by radiation beam. We tried at various times and we do not believe that it got thru. And no longer can we send the self-controlIed torpedoes.

“No, we must give that up. We have work to do. We must construct a conference dome. It must be lined with that material of the caps, that within we may have free intercommunication of thought and yet be protected from those without. And it must be divided into nine compartments in this manner: first, there shall be a central cylindrical chamber; second, there shall be 8 compartments facing onto the inner cylinder. The division walls shall be strongly built to resist great air pressures ans there shall be heavy windows between each that all may see,

“But still, this will mean more trouble. Those races – the proud men of the fourth planet, the powerful, intelligent men of the 3d alone, for instance, will be a source of friction. Add to this the women of the satellite, who have fought their own males till they believe every male an inferior being. When such females meet the males of Planet Three and Planet Four -”

“May Tor give us aid! It will be a terrible task – and then we must separate the races with the result that each, suspicious and naturalIy hateful, naturally resenting and having a feeling of disgust for the strange shapes of those other races, will feel that they have drawn apart to plot and plan against them. This conference will be more difficult to conduct than the battle itself for with your skill and mathematical ability, Mea-Quin, we can give them accurate courses to the battlefront, once we can bring them to cooperation.”

“And we must go back to that crater again, for there we have said the conference will be held. And immediately we must set up detector fields that will warn us of the approach of forces. But ayhuu – I fear, Dos-Tev, he improves every hour.”

They landed again at Copernicus and at once set up delicate detector fields and automatic apparatus. Any force they knew would be instantly met by their great atomic engines. But there were many, so many they did not know!

Mea-Quin started work that day on the conference dome, while Bullo and Dos-Tev worked on the new apparatus, with occasional help from Mea-Quin when abstruse calculations must be performed, for Dos-Tev was not the mathematician that Mea-Quin was.

The floor of the dome was laid on the rock of the moon, transmuted from the very rock itself, a brightly gleaming, blue-silvery, metal platform, but underneath it was that strange, soft, gray material that reflected all mental impulse and was as impervious to it as the shining metal to light.

In twelve hours the walls rose up, curved and met in a great dome over the solid floor. There were no windows and but four doors. And all these were covered with the gray protective material.

Mea-Quin slept that night and only Bullo stood guard. Dos~Tev slept heavily, too, after his labors with the growing apparatus. His work had been mental and had tired him, while Bullo had but cut out the apparatus on the machines and so had been selected to stand guard.

He sat silently, hour after hour, guarding the machine and watching the detector fields, as is a Warrior’s training. But presently he began to watch curiously and with some little surprise a tiny flickering shadow against one wall and attempted to locate the cause. It flickered slowIy like a bit of cloth in a soft breeze but there was no breeze here. Intently Bullo stared at it; more and more intently – it began to move more rapidly and became a light instead of a shadow; it went in little rhythmic spirals. His eyes grew tired and closed momentarily to ease the strain–

Dos-Tev was shaking him roughly by the shoulder, shouting in his ear: “Bullo – BuIlo – and thou a Warrior! What was it? How were you tricked to sleep? I well know you would not have been asleep normally.”

“The shadow – the little, fiickering shadow-!” gasped Bullo, trembling to his very soul.

Dos-Tev turned to Mea-Quin sadly. “He was caught by some hypnotic device. The cap does not protect against all things. What damage was done?”

“I woke because of a feeling of unrest. The walls of the ship were glowing faintly. As I watched the metal glowed and crumbled. It was a transmutation field, a field so huge I cannot conceive it. The dome – the dome is nigh ruined. The latnem covering has been destroyed. The work is to be done again. He attacked only the tungsten it contained, which explains why we were not injured. Had he used a field which would have effected any of the elements of our body, surely we would have awakened more quickly. The tungsten of the ship, too, has been somewhat effected but there was only one-half of one per cent of the metal.

“Ayhuuu – he improves.” Mea-Quin was worried; his old face was seamed and tired. “So much to do – so hard to do it. And always this opposition. I fear the opposition of the worlds themselves. May Tor aid us, for His aid we need.” He bowed his head a moment, then raised his tired face once more. The sIeep seemed not to have rested him. “We must work.”

There was little need be done to the ship. Mea-Quin had awakened before great damage had been done and the enemy, whosoever he might be, had apparently concentrated his power on the dome. Dos-Tev inspected the walls of the ship and decided that they needed attention, while Mea-Quin again began the labor of building

up the gray latnem protective material for the dome. Dos~Tev, meanwhiIe, devised a protecting detector field that would be sensitive to the transmutation field of the

enemy. Twice during the day it responded to an external influence and Mea-Quin realized that his own transmutation operations were misbehaving.

The third day Mea-Quin devised a detector that was sensitive to any space distortion whatsoever and carefully balanced it against the gravitational and magnetic fields of the planets and sun. Regularly once each six hours it was thrown off, because the changing fields of the planets and the sun would throw it off, but it could be rebalanced and it was a Protection.

The sixth day saw Dos-Tev’s apparatus finished, a strange, chunky projector at the nose of their ship, with a curious, semi-cylindrical meshwork of wires that glowed faintly a moment, then pulsed into invisible flickerings as the power was turned on. A faint glow in the almost non-existent atmosphere of the moon was the only apparent result.

“We will try first a small mass at some distance from the ship,” suggested Dos-Tev. A stone was thrown on it by Bullo; it rose, then fell in a slow arc to land on the beam and rest as though on a solid platform. Dos-Tev sighed happily. “Ayhuuu – It works somewhat, at any rate. Now for a real test.”

They had a few remaining message rockets and one of these was sent off, to return after a short while. It rose in a graceful arc to a height of nearly a hundred miles, turned and came rushing back at a speed of nearly ten miles a second!

Mea~Quin glanced at Dos~Tev in consternation. “He has done that – it is coming directly at us!” The enemy had seized their own test as a weapon! Dos-Tev was working. The ship rose suddenly. “Pray Tor our untried weapon is a true defense!’

The projector was rotating on its axis till it pointed at an angle back across the ship, a roof above it. It had been done in less than three seconds, yet already the swift-driving message rocket was less than fifty miles off and accelerating terrifically.

It struck. There was a sudden unbearable wrench to all space; without the slightest apparent acceleration the ship was driving down toward the surface of the Moon and high above them a blazing, blue-white globe of gas slid swiftly down an invisible plane toward them. A rocket roared out and the ship stopped its descent.

Trembling, Mea-Quin turned to Dos-Tev. “It had done its duty as you foresaw. The momentum was distributed, our ship received its alloted portion, the Moon absorbed the greater part. My son, you have done much for the defeat of Ay-Artz. Now I shall give you one more thing I have labored on. What ray has been sought for long and declared impossible? It is a ray that matter will not stop, a ray which no mechanism of matter can screen against and which will bring tearing, burning death to any living being.”

“The Gamma Ray. That is easily guessed and the answer is it cannot be made controllable because of its very power. Breaking atoms produce it. The great difficulty of designing the atomic engine was to prevent its appearance. It is uncontrollable.”

“Ay, it is uncontrollable,” smiled Mea-Quin. “An inch of lead will stop by far the greater part of it if the intensity is not too great and will render it harmless then. Our eight inch metal walls would stop a low intensity. Now – here is the long-sought Gamma Ray weapon.” Mea-Quin handed Dos-Tev a small thing, a device that resembled a large fruit, some six inches in diameter, with crinkled, slightly pitted sides, surmounted by a conical hat. The tip of the cone was knurled and free to turn, a white line was marked on it and on the adjacent surface of the cone itself was a series of fine white lines.

“It is uncontrollable,” smiled Mea-Quin. “The answer to that is so simple that for a hundred years a thousand scientists and warriors have overlooked it. Use a Bomb of Gamma Rays.”

Dos-Tev burst out laughing. “Ayhuuu – Mea-Quin, our minds are topheavy. They weigh themselves down with their very strength. But can your bomb generate the necessary intensity?”

Mea-Quin nodded. “It is filled with radioactive material of a type familiar to you – fuel 239-34 – L equals 34.9. But I have it under the control system of Tur Lao.” The old face crinkled in smiles, his eyes glistened slyly.

Dos-Tev brought the ship to the ground once more, beside the dome. He was silent for a moment, while a slow, broad smile crept over his lean face. “And the report of the committee was that Tur Lao’s system of control was unsafe because, while permitting high efficiency and rapid release of energy, it had a critical point which, when reached, meant the release of the energy solely as Gamma radiation.” Dos-Tev laughed again. “And the mistakes of yesteryear become the successful weapons of today!”

“Ayhuu – we have a new weapon,” sighed Mea-Quin. “But we have no weapon that is in the least effective against our most dangerous enemy, the enemy here now. And more, I feel that this enemy of ours is most dangerous now, for already he has learned much science and he must realize that many of his most effective weapons are blocked because he is not near us. He will not remain in hiding much longer, he must come out, and when he does come – Ayhuu – I fear-”

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# Chapter 7 – Son of the Trident by Rae Winters

AUTHOR OF: ‘THE GIRL FROM VENUS’ AND ‘THE RETURN TO VENUS’

High above the bulbous masses of the gas-plants of the Death Jungle floated the sagging bulk of an enormous balloon, its low slung basket swinging slowly along of the rotund masses of the gas-plants lurking below in deadly, swaying silence. The balloon was descending slowly, its rubber-like fabric sagging in myriad wrinkles like the surface of a punctured gas-plant. Inside the basket, a small, perfectly round sphere of purplish hue clung anxiously to the edge, protruding eye stems wavering alternately over the menacing jungle below and the faltering bag above. Long, sinuous tubes, rubber-like, and three in number, originated at the base of the purplish sphere, ending in clumsy appearing, but magnificently effective suction discs. They were fastened, now, securely to the floor of the basket, which was floored with a glistening, smooth substance that reminded one of the unhealthy skins of the terrible gas-plants below in its iridescent flow of lurid and unhealthy color. Obviously its nature was similar. From the top of the sphere, below the stemmed eyes, three smaller tubes swayed, each ending in seven tiny cup-like discs, also capable of strong suction.

Steepa, for that was the name the Neptunian carried, reached down to the floor of the basket and ripped the heavy covering from the intertwining reeds of the basket and flung it down at the jungle. The balloon spurted up for a moment and then again began its steady descent. A thick, vicious breeze was rolling sluggishly along, carrying the balloon further toward the center of the Death Jungle. It sagged with the weight of the only other object in the basket now, other than Steepa himself. A huge metal bar ending in a menacing trident of sharpness. It was tremendously heavy; Steepa could hardly lift it with all the force of his powerful suction tubes. But he flung not a glance at its shining bulk. Why did he not dispose of it and assure the passage of the jungle? Why did he thus risk his life for a piece of senseless metal?

But whatever Steepa’s reason, it was becoming evident that the risk was fast approaching its culmination in actual danger. The basket now nearly grazed the top of a huge gas-plant. Steepa’s eyes flung again toward the gas bag above. It would only last a few minutes longer. A shudder swept through the basket for a moment as it slid jerkily along the top of a gas-plant’s globular mass. Like rubber its friction was. Steepa’s body contracted in alarm, and then expanded as the basket swung free.

Suddenly Steepa flung himself upwards until only one of his nether suction tubes clung to the edge of the basket. The balloon rose a few inches and then sagged again. But Steepa had seen! Just beyond the looming bulk of the adjacent gas-plants was the walled clearing he sought, with its gas-proof glassite covering.

Quickly securing himself to the bag of the balloon itself, and grasping a firm hold on the metal trident, he severed the thongs that held the basket. It plunged on down between two gas-plants and the balloon rose to clear the remaining jungle until it hovered over the glassite of the clearing. Down through its clearness Steepa could see the openings in the ground that led to his rendezvous below, and at intervals in the clearing itself floated many purplish spheres like himself. And he was seen!

But now a new danger presented itself. The sagging bag lowered until the dangerously jutting tines of the trident swept toward the glassite roof. Steepa jerk it upward to the limit of his ability, his body expanding with the effort he put forth. Below, the purple spheres shot about in excitement, and soon many more swarmed from the ground openings.

Suddenly the glassite below his slid aside, leaving an opening large enough for the balloon to pass through. Purple spheres inside sprang upward, and long tubes fastened their suction discs to the balloon, drawing it down. It sank below the roof, and the opening closed. As the balloon touched the ground, dozens of the spheres grasped the trident tenderly and bore it to a place of safety, where a crowd soon collected about it.

Steepa himself advanced toward a brilliant red sphere, who floated near the most ornate of the ground openings, his skin coloring exultantly.

“I have it!” The triumphant message glowed from Seepa’s skin in a wave of dispersing orange. “Tranda, all magnificent, I have it!”

Tranda, he of the red coloring, swayed approval. “You are a true son of the trident!” he colored. “For this day’s act, I make you second only to myself. You shall henceforth be called Bar Seepa, the Prince!”

Seepa expanded in amazed joyfulness and then contracted in modesty. “I do not deserve such honor, all magnificent,” he hued flutteringly. “But since you so honor me, I pray that I shall not fail to do proper honor to the title. My very life is yours to command!”

Tranda colored his approval. “I shall remember that in an hour of need! But tell me, how did you secure the trident?”

Steepa plunged colorfully into an account of his daring mission.

“When I left here, all magnificent, I sent my balloon high into the gas of the upper strata, planning thus to be hidden from Deebul and his minions as I flew over the city of Tridentia. But I had reckoned without the watchfulness of that arch traitor, and before I had reached the center of the city, to make my descent in the darkness, I was surrounded by a bevy of balloons which flung upward swiftly in a great circle, and made me captive. When they had taken me to the ground—“

Tranda halted him with a touch of color. “You were taken captive? Is that all? Do you not forget some of the details?”

Steepa glossed it over with dull colors. “It was a mere nothing, all magnificent. A few of the attackers were incapacitated in the struggle, but they overwhelmed me. It was—“

“How many?” insisted Tranda.

Steepa squirmed uneasily. “Perhaps ten—“

Tranda contracted with a grimace. “I gather that you mean about thirty,” he colored. “I know your propensities for disparagement. But go on. You did magnificently.”

Steepa hastened on. “They took me then to the palace before Deebul. They threatened me, and impressed me in the dungeon. I escaped—“

Tranda halted him impatiently again. “Let me tell it,” he glowed. “You were taken before Deebul and tortured – yes, I see the burns on your tubes – do not deny it. And you would not reveal any hiding place, so they placed you in the dungeons till they should devise a torture that would make you talk. And I can imagine what you did to escape. Steepa, you are a herculean subject, but also a herculean liar. Please tell me exactly what happened. I command it.”

Steepa went on in chastened colors. “After disposing of my guards and loosing my chains, I secured a spark-gun upon the roof of the palace, one of the large ones, which was carelessly left unguarded, or almost so, and I blasted the roof openings shut to keep the guard in the building while I departed for the Temple of the Trident in a gas-plane which was also anchored to the roof. I was forced to shoot down several planes enroute but landed on the Temple, although in a slightly wrecked condition, the plane I mean. I suffered several minor bruises in the fall.”

“I see them!” colored Tranda.

“I entered the Temple and penetrated to the Chamber of the Trident. There the Trident lay, desecrated, and being misused! They were using its power to fashion glassite ships, new ships which Deebul has invented. They surely will prove a great menace to us, those that were already completed and removed from the Temple. However, those not yet finished will never be removed from the temple. I first shorted the cable of the Trident, and the power died. I was discovered then, and attacked, but I commanded the situation. I knew the secret you had told me, of the lesser trident, and I had at my command on that little balcony, a terrific weapon when I had connected it to the cable. And I devastated the workmen of Deebul and cleansed the temple as it has never been cleansed before, with the fire of the Trident! I dissolved the very glassite of the unfinished ships. And then, I brought forth the secret balloon after sealing all entrances. Loading the Trident into it, I swept up, unsuspected in the darkness with the protective coloring of the balloon, which your keen foresight provided, concealing my flight in the darkness of the city, for remember, the Trident no longer functioned!

“And so, I came back over the Death Jungle, unseen. The Trident is ours, and the regaining of your throne is but a matter of hours, and a little good fighting.”

“I should think you had enough of fighting,” Tranda’s body emanated an aura of commendatory colors. “But you are right, we have won, and to you we owe the thanks for our victory. All this is necessary to complete it is the Trident and a little more brave fighting. But come, we will make ready.”

“Wait!” colored Steepa in alarm. “What is that, coming in the sky?”

“Ships!” Tranda leaped into crimson action.

“The glassite ships of Deebul,” swore Steepa. “They have trapped us.”

“No!” blazed Tranda, “They have not. The Trident will yet flare.”

In an instant, the entire clearing was a flame of purple spheres rushing about. A great hole in the earth appeared like magic as the camouflaged surface fell inward, revealing a giant balloon, ready for ascent. Its basket was glassite, and much queer apparatus loaded it. And great spark guns protruded from it. In a moment it sprang into the air, and through the opening in the glassite roof, up to meet the oncoming ships of Deebul.

“It will be destroyed!” flamed Steepa. “It is no match for the new ships of Deebul!”

“I know it,” returned Tranda. “I but sent it out in a desperate attempted to hold them back until we can erect the Trident. Come, we have no time to lose.”

Up above, the great balloon met the ships of Deebul, and they fought madly, those brave purple spheres. Their spark guns caused great explosions in the air, and Deebul’s ships rocked. Several plunged downward to destruction and where they fell, far away, immense clouds of black gas shot skyward as the gas-plants exploded. But the rest came on and in a moment the upper gas strata with a grim, ruddy flare of fire, of explosions, of thunderous roars.

Suddenly the mark was hit. Tranda’s great fighting balloon exploded with an awesome roar and a great mushroom of smoke, carrying two of Deebul’s ships to destruction with it. And Deebul came to the attack!

But as his ships, now only twelve of them remaining, swooped down with a swiftness that put the clumsy old balloon to shame, the Trident was ready. Tranda himself laid his hand on the lever, and when he pulled it, a great sheet of lightning sprang from the points of the trident, upwards to the glassite demons of Deebul. And death played about in the sky. Suddenly Tranda was flung from his feet by a terrific explosion. One of the ships had fallen and exploded inside the clearing. Steepa was also engulfed in the wave of destruction, and he emerged, glad that he yet lived. But his skin shrank as he beheld the havoc the ship had caused. A bare dozen of his companions remained alive, and Tranda was down, wounded.

“You are hurt, all magnificent!” blazed Steepa, bending over his ruler.

“No,” Tranda’s colors were weak. “The Trident – man it – and destroy the two ships yet remaining.” He pointed upwards. “They come.”

Steepa sprang to the trident, and flung the lever. But the lightnings failed! The power line had been severed.

“It is useless,” Steepa hued. “We must flee!”

“Take the Trident,” commanded Tranda, “and leave me.”

“No.”

Steepa wrenched the Trident from its position, and commanded the remaining spheres to carry it. He himself picked up his stricken ruler in his gentle suction pads, and followed immediately behind the staggering Trident carriers.

“Into the jungle!” he colored.

Above them, the two remaining ships fired down, but too late. Their victims had passed through the wall into the jungle.

Several miles further, they halted, lowered the Trident reverently to the ground, and rested.

Steepa made his ruler comfortable, and colored reassuringly.

“We are safe now. They cannot find us.”

“Yes,” returned Tranda weakly. “Thanks to your quick action. But now we must reach the final destination. I have not told you of it before, but I have, at another secret place in the Death Jungle, prepared a new kind of ship. A ship that will go higher than any before. A ship that can leave Neptune altogether. I had planned to use it only in an emergency, and we must have the Trident to power it. If we can but reach it, we will be safe. And victory will yet be ours.”

A lurid green sphere swept suddenly into view around a bulging gas-plant. Behind it came many more.

“Deebul!” flashed Seepa in alarm.

“Victory, did you say?” came the offensive color of Deebul. “Victory? Yes, but not for you. I have you in my power now.”

Steepa crouched, and he would have sprung, but Tranda’s color came strongly. “Don’t! We will not court death uselessly. They have us secure for the time. Surrender to them!”

“No!” blazed Steepa. “I will not!”

Before he could be halted, he swept forward and grasped the trident. Almost with the same motion he was beside the great bulging breast of the gas-plant, and stood poised, ready for the thrust.

“If die we must,” he colored, “we all die! I have but to release the Black Gas, and we perish. Now what say you, Deebul, of victory?”

Deebul and his minions fell back, pale and shrinking. Slowly they retreated until they were clear of the great bulk of the gas-plant. Then they halted. The situation was a deadlock. Deebul could not fire with his spark guns lest he explode the gas-plant, not could Steepa do anything but bring death to them all. One single leak would stifle the jungle for miles in strangling horror. And at that moment fate intervened.

High above, in the upper reaches of Neptune’s gaseous envelope, a thin screaming became apparent. It developed into a shriek, and then, with a flaming wake, a blazing object plunged with lightning speed from the skies, and a thunderous explosion shook the gas-plants. Where Deebul and his men had stood remained nothing but an upflung rim of soil. Miraculously the heavenly visitant had missed the gas-plants, and annihilated the menace to the Trident.

After a short moment, while the vapors cleared, Steepa lowered the Trident, and Tranda hued in awe.

“The Trident has spoken,” he declared. “And Deebul is dead!”

In the city of the Tridentia, in the highest tower of the palace, a delicately mauve colored sphere clung desolately to the barred rim of the tower window. Teena, princess of Tridentia, languishing in captivity, mourning the fall of her brother, Tranda, but at this moment her thoughts were not so much of her brother as they were of Steepa, who loved her. She thrilled as she remembered his gallant fight and escape with the Trident during the night. She wept as she remembered the horrible scene of the torture in the Chamber of Deebul, caressing mentally the burns that must still cause unutterable anguish, if he still lived. And he did live – she was sure of that, even though her captives had told her gloatingly of his fall in the Death Jungle. She had detected the deceptiveness in their color as they informed her of the fall. The liars! But she would never yield. Not a princess of the Trident. No usurper, be he the beastly Deebul, or otherwise, would have her for his wife. Teena knew that it would never be so. Rather would she puncture her skin and allow the gas to escape than mate with Deebul.

All morning she had been fearfully awaiting the return of Deebul. Teena did not want to die – not while she still knew that Steepa lived. He would come for her, and if he did not, it would only be because he was dead. And while Deebul remained away, Teena was perfectly satisfied to remain in melancholy contemplation at the window of the tower.

But now, she heard a faint, indefinable noise. A noise such as she had never before even imagined. What strange thing was happening? What was that faint vibration in the atmosphere? It was growing closer.

In curiosity, Teena pressed her mauve body against the bars and craned her lovely pink eyes heavenward. There, against the gas-strata, was outlined an awesome shape. What manner of monster was that? Long, and thin it was, shaped like no shape of Neptune she had ever seen before. And it glistened in the light that filtered through the gas-strata. It was glassite! Then, it must be no monster at all, but a creation of Deebul.

Teena gasped as the giant ship drew nearer to the city, an awesome roaring coming from the lightnings that flamed from its rear, propelling it at a terrific speed. Those lightnings could come from but one source – the Trident! Teena drooped suddenly down, her lovely eyes welling sombre waves of blue and violet. If the Trident returned, in a ship of Deebul, then Steepa no longer lived. Steepa would never give up the Trident while life remained in his regal body. Teena collapsed to the floor, emitting tiny waves of sorrowful color. Why cling to life now? She crossed the floor and opened a secret niche in the wall. Here she kept the sharp glassite weapon with which she had intended to keep Deebul at bay. For a moment she gazed at the sharp point, then raised it aloft, coloring in anguished prayer, “May the gods forgive me!”

Suddenly a terrific explosion shattered the air above the city. The resulting blast of air flung Teena against the wall, her glassite blade shattering into fragments. But she was unharmed. And she floated swiftly to the window again, to discover the source of this amazing blast. There in the sky hovered the great glassite ship, and as she watched, it unfurled the colors of Tranda, Emperor of Tridentia!

“My Seepa!” colored Teena, “You have come for me!”

Outside bedlam had descended upon the city. Upon every roof-tower, great spark guns went into action, and firing became a continuous roar. But the great ship was too high, and the spark guns fired futilely. But not so those of the ship. One by one the defending guns were destroyed and, at last, it was evident that the ship in the sky was master. The populace cowering for many days, now rushed forth, and their one instinct was to kill. Alternately they fought, and stopped to cheer the colors of the avenging ship.

From her tower Teena saw it all, and she thrilled in an aura of joyful color. At last silence, except for the roar of the great ship, descended upon the city. Not one follower of Deebul remained alive. Great waves of color burst forth from the ecstatic populace and Teena fairly bounded about her prison in joy. Her Steepa was coming for her!

And he did. For many moments they clung to each other, welling soft colors into each other’s skin, until Tranda became impatient from his post at the door of the tower-room.

“Come, come, you two,” he hued. “We have much to do. Time aplenty for love-making later on. Now we must re-establish the government and then—“ Tranda paused. “—there is the message.”

Days later, the city of Tridentia had regained its former appearance, insofar as happiness and contentment was concerned. But in the council hall of Tranda an important discussion was going on. Tranda was speaking, his colors flowing in a burst of oratory.

“I tell you,” he colored, “it is a message we cannot deny – a message we cannot fail to answer. It is sent from the Trident, and it saved Tridentia to us. It is a message from the gods. And besides this, it is a message from someone in distress. Can we fail to aid the giver of the message which meant our own victory? No! And we shall not. And too, remember the letter of the message – danger! We, too, are in danger, if we believe the message, and we must believe it, or renounce the Trident.”

Tranda sprang up to the limit of his tubes.

“Neptunians,” he flared, “the Trident must go to Luna, that strange place the message locates far above our own gas-strata. And we must send representatives to that universal council which is to be held there. We must learn what it is that menaces us. And we must repay the debt of gratitude we owe to that appealing creature who cries for our help. Be he of our kind or not, we must go!”

“But who will go?” hued a councillor. “It is a mission that will offer uncounted dangers.”

Tranda swerved about and his stalk-eyes fell upon Steepa.

“Bar Steepa,” he commanded, “you gave me your life to do with as I will. I ask you to give it to my service in this task. I delegate you as Neptune’s representative at the Universal Council. You will go to the aid of this Dos-Tev.”

“I shall be honored,” colored Steepa simply.

“Good,” auraed Tranda, “then that is settled. You will go in the ship of the Trident. But I beg of you, to care for the Trident as you would your own life.”

“But,” objected a councillor, “What about Neptune? Will we be deprived of the Trident, perhaps forever?”

“No,” colored Tranda. “And this is my reason.” He motioned to the guard, and several of them disappeared, to reappear bearing the scarred, pitted cylinder that had brought the message from Luna. “Deposit it here,” indicated Tranda, “before the council, and let them examine it.”

The council crowded around it, and hues of awe escaped them. “It is of the same metal as the Trident,” they auraed.

“Yes,” returned Tranda. “We can fashion a new Trident from the metal of the benefactor, Dos-Tev. And now you know why I wish to send the representative to the council. With a great quantity of this metal, of which no trace exists on all Neptune, will make our planet the Utopia we have so long sought. It will be a great reward for the aid that is asked of us.”

The council agreed, and Steepa received their combined delegation to the council.

“You will leave on the morrow,” glowed Tranda.

The next morning dawned with the city of Tridentia decked in a festive manner. As the morning light lit the gas-strata, the populace gathered before the palace, evidently waiting for something. And it had not long to wait, for as the light increased, a touching scene was revealed. Shining in her most joyful colors, Teena, princess of Tridentia appeared to take her place in the gas-car, beside Tranda, the Emperor, for the short ride to the Temple of the Trident. The joyous crowd followed eagerly, and at last they reached the building. And there, in the presence of the cylinder of the message from Luna, Teena, the princess, wed Steepa, the prince.

Parting came all too soon for the two lovers and they sighed as the last hour was reached.

“Cannot I go along with you?” begged Teena, her colors wistful.

“No,” hued Steepa, “it will be much too dangerous work for a woman, and too, we have room only for our supplies and the one companion I will take along.”

“Who is to go along with you?” queried Teena.

“Dubar, the captain of the guards of the Palace.”

“He is a fit man,” colored Teena. “I am glad that he was selected. But embrace me now, and I will leave you. I want to watch the ship as it disappears from view from the window of the tower.”

Steepa watched her gorgeous figure as she floated away from him, and then turned resolutely to bid his adieu to Tranda. In a half hour he was to leave.

“Take care of yourself,” hued Tranda. “Teena and I will await you.”

“I will come,” promised Steepa. “And I will bring back with me as much of the metal of the Trident as possible. But goodby, I go now.”

“Dubar is already on the ship,” Tranda informed him. “You can take off when you wish now. I shall watch from the tower.”

Steepa hurried to the ship now, lest his desire to remain with Teena overcome him. The guard at the entrance assured him that Dubar was on board, and Steepa thanked him.

Once inside he sealed the port shut and took his place at the controls. A last glance he cast at the city of Tridentia, and then he hurled the great ship upwards through the gas-strata, higher than Neptunian had ever gone before.

As the blackness of space burst upon him, sparkling with its myriad of stars, he gasped at its beauty. “How wonderful,” he hued to himself.

“Isn’t it lovely?” came a delicate aura of colors.

Steepa whirled about in amazement. “Teena!” he hued, “you here?”

Teena colored coyly. “You did not think that I would remain where my life and love is not? Where you go, I will follow, my beloved.”

“But my love,” objected Steepa, “you forget that our trip is now impossible. Only Dubar and myself have enough gas and food to subsist.”

Teena colored again. “Dubar has gas and food in plenty,” she hued. “He was a captain of the palace guard, and when a princess commands, a captain obeys. This did Dubar remain, while I took his place.”

Steepa glowed in golden exultance. “My love!,” he shimmered, clasping her in his tubes.

And to-gether they sped toward the distant world of the conference.

# Chapter 8 – Volunteers From Venus by Otis Adelbert Kline and E. Hoffman Price

CO-AUTHORS OF: ‘THIRSTY BLADES,’ ETC.

Zinlo, Torrogo of Olba, abruptly checked his restless pacing, and turned from the great circular window which he had passed and repassed a hundred times during that interminable Venusian afternoon.

“Body of Thorth! That ship from Doravia should have been here long ago. If Tandor has killed our envoys and stolen the ship, there’ll be war aplenty on Venus, and never mind what’s going to happen in the rest of the Solar System.”

The emperor’s handsome, youthful features were dark with wrath, and his eyes were steel blue and hard as the blade of the curved scarbo at his side as he regarded gray-haired Vorn Vangal, his personal counsellor. The old scientist, however, was unruffled by the Torrogo’s outburst. He leaned back in his cushioned, golden chair, planted his hands palms down on the great table of richly carved serali wood, and before speaking, paused to stroke his square cut, gray beard.

“Patience, Your Majesty,” he finally said, as his eyes shifted from the circular window of the Black Tower. “I’ve just received a telepathic message from Tandor himself. He is on his way to the conference – and while the treacherous hahoe might very well have taken advantage of the present interstellar situation to give you cause for war at a time when you couldn’t afford to strike back, I’m sure that your alarm is out of order – this time, at least.”

Zinlo nodded. The iron sternness of his clean-shaven, youthful features faded, and he smiled thinly.

“You’re usually right, Vorn Vangal. And it’s just possible that Tandor finally has learned his lesson.”

As he spoke, his powerful fingers curled about the pommel of the long, curved scarbo, whose deadly flickering blade had hacked a red path through Venusian anarchy and to the throne of the mighty Olban empire.

“But,” resumed the Torrogo, “it seems that these machine men never learn, in spite of their artificial bodies and the relative immortality they thus gain. We – some of us, at least – profit by experience, but Tandor’s record of treachery and intrigue makes me doubt that he’ll ever see the point of anything but this—“

He smiled grimly as the sudden closing of his fingers made the chains of his scarbo scabbard tinkle softly.

Vorn Vangal nodded, then gazed thoughtfully out over the garden with its winding walkways, its lagoons teeming with waterfowl and amphibious reptiles and mammals, its rare collection of tree ferns, cycads, thallophytes and grotesque fungi from all parts of Venus; but the old man’s thoughts were far beyond the rolling parkway that spread below him. Doravia, the empire of the Machine Men, had added to the white hairs that flecked his beard and head. Artificial bodies, cunningly devised to simulate human form, and actuated by electrochemical energy, had given the Doravians immortality. The only way in which a Doravian could die would be through carelessly exposing himself to peril before he had drawn upon the Imperial Laboratories for a spare body which his soul, or ego, could animate, and thus prolong his Venusian existence. With such relative immortality, the Doravians should have attained a superhuman wisdom through the richness of their experience; but actually they had developed egos so overgrown that wisdom had degenerated into cunning.

“Wrong, Your Majesty,” the old man finally said, as his glance shifted to the scarbo, and the brightly burnished tork whose crackling blasts were the young Emperor’s ultimate argument. “Your being a master of your weapons at times blinds you to the value of matching wits rather than steel. We can’t afford a Venusian war – and I am hoping that you will confuse Tandor by subtlety.”

“Subtlety!” exploded the Torrogo.

“Exactly, Your Majesty,” said the old man with an indulgent smile. “Let me tell you the rest of my telepathic communication. Tandor, as I said, is on his way in response to your invitation. But that is only the half of it; he is bringing—“

Zinlo’s crackling oath shook the brocaded tapestries. He knew, now.

“Bones of Thorth! Is that wench coming into the picture again? It’ll be a wonderful conference with that female pest keeping things in an uproar!”

“I knew Your Majesty would be delighted,” was Vorn Vangal’s ironic observation. “And that’s why I presumed to hint that finesse rather than steel be your weapon. She insisted upon accompanying her brother; but that is not the worst of it.”

Zinlo glared somberly for a moment. “Out with it!” he commanded.

“She has closed her mind. I’ve been unable to catch even a flash of thought waves. And if that doesn’t mean trouble, nothing does.”

Zinlo scowled, nodded, stroked his chin. He knew that is Xunia could insulate her thoughts against the incredibly keen perceptions of Vorn Vangal, she was indeed an enemy to consider; and that she had exerted the uncanny power necessary to resist the old psychologist’s scrutiny proved that her thoughts were indeed sinister. Her concealment was a confession; only the details were lacking. And to obtain those, Vorn Vangal had counselled his young master to abandon steel in favor of wits.

“At all events,” was Zinlo’s caustic comment, “there’s one thought she needn’t bother to conceal.”

Vorn Vangal smiled as he noted the wry grimace that accompanied the Torrogo’s observation. The hostility between Zinlo and the royal family of Doravia had begun when the Torrogo of Olba had flatly refused to marry the outwardly lovely Xunia, an imperial match which had been proposed by Tandor in a spirit of scientific inquiry. Xunia, despite her being a mechanical creation animated by a spirit that had slipped from body to body for ages, had all the physical attributes of a normal, Venusian woman, and her brother, Tandor, had long speculated as to the offspring of that imperial Doravian beauty and the young Emperor of Olba. And Zinlo’s flat, uncompromising refusal, which in itself was an affront to the pride of the oldest race on the planet, was heightened by his defeat of Tandor’s plans for marrying Loralie of Tyrhana, an imperial princess in her own right, and a ravishing beauty.

“Your Majesty is uncommonly acute,” murmured Vorn Vangal, reading the Emperor’s thought. “Xunia still wants to marry you – and that also must enter the calculations. Desire and vengeance and political intrigue are all hopelessly entangled threads in this impending conference.”

“Impending is just the word, Vorn Vangal. Doesn’t one usually use it in connection with dooms, disasters, plagues, and the like?”

Vorn Vangal smiled, but the jest which was to have been his rejoinder died unspoken.

“Here they are!” he exclaimed, gesturing toward the circular window.

Zinlo turned, shading his eyes with his hand. He stood alert and expectant as he watched the seven great aerial battleships slowly descending to the rolling sward below. Preeminent among the monarchs of Venus, he took his greatest pride in those mighty vessels which testified to the genius of the Olban scientist who had perfected a method of tremendously amplifying and harnessing telekinesis, the mysterious mental force which, operating on a small scale, enables Earthly mediums to move tables, chairs and other ponderable objects without physical contact. Olba alone of the empires of Venus had aerial battleships; and with the navy Zinlo had organized, he had enforced peace on that tempestuous planet.

The cloud-filtered light from the circular window touched to life the shimmering folds of his brocaded scarlet tunic and flamed from the jewel-encrusted hilt of the battle-nicked scarbo at his side. And the prodigious ruby which adorned his turban-like headpiece glowed and blazed like a looted city as Zinlo nodded his approval of the skillfully executed descent in echelon.

According to Olan etiquette, the ships which Zinlo had detailed to carry his fellow rulers to his capital were arranged in the order of the importance of their royal passengers and the landings were timed in order of precedence, so that the vessel which was the point of the wedge settled to the ground while the others still hovered clear of the field.

The roll of kettle drums and the hoarse blasts of huge trumpets that sounded the salute to the occupant of the first ship reminded Zinlo of the courtesy due his fellow princes. He stepped from the circular window, drew aside a scarlet velvet curtain that concealed an alcove and entered the elevator which would swiftly carry him to the broad terrace where he was to receive the members of the conference. So swift was his descent that he was at his post when the folding aluminum steps dropped from the hull of the ship. Grandon of Terra descended and strode along the chrysoprase slabs of the walk that led to the terrace.

“Blood of Thorth!” exclaimed Zinlo as the broad-shouldered, dark-haired young ruler of Reabon returned his salute. “Grandon, about the time we get this planet cleaned up, we’re getting grief from outside the Solar System.”

“We’ll take care of it,” was Grandon’s easy assurance as he fingered the hilt of his scarbo. “Ay-Artz is biting off a big mouthful.”

“Don’t underrate him,” was Zinlo’s low-voiced retort. “I’m fairly certain that he’s already driven a wedge into our opposition by buying the Doravians. Guard your remarks – and keep a watch on Tandor and his lovely sister.”

The brief colloquy was interrupted by a second fanfare of music and Zinlo turned to Kantar the Gunner, Torrogo of Mernerum, a staunch grim-faced veteran who had risen from the ranks. The scars that seamed his stern, leathery features testified to his bitterly contested march to a throne. And then in succession came Aardvan of Adonijar, burly and thunderous of voice; Ad of Tyrhana, dark, lean and predatory; Joto of Granterra, Rogo of the Valley of the Sabits, clad from head to foot in the wondrous brown armor which no tork bullet could penetrate; and Han Lay, Torrogo, of the Huitsenni, the yellow pirates who had been reformed by force of tork blast and scarbo thrust.

The squat, pudgy ruler of the Huitsenni waddled down the tiled walk, his narrow, cat-like eyes contracted in a permanent squint, and each of his three chins stained by the red juice of the narcotic kerra spores which he, like all members of his hairless, toothless race, mumbled incessantly. At his left walked an attendant who bore a portable, jeweled spittoon to receive the red expectoration that Han Lay aimed with mathematical precision, and at his right was a comely slave-girl with an embroidered kerchief, who daintily wiped his sunken lips so that he could greet Zinlo without drooling over his scarlet vest.

The six allies were ranged at Zinlo’s left as the seventh and final blare of music announced Tandor of Doravia and his sister Xunia. There was a gasp of admiration as the latter emerged from the battleship. She was slender and shapely, with dark, haughty eyes and finely chiseled features and a thin, faintly aquiline nose whose imperial curve belied the amorous softness of a mouth that was red as a scarbo slash.

The princess of Doravia was lovelier than she had been at previous meetings and for a moment Zinlo marveled at the regal beauty who now advanced with deliberate, undulant pace to greet him. Her hand was soft, warm and caressing, and her voice was as amorous as a kiss as she murmured: “It’s good to see you again, Zinlo. I do hope we’ll part on friendlier terms than the last time.

For just a moment Zinlo seconded the wish that she had expressed with what seemed to be unquestionable sincerity; but from the corner of his eye he caught the flickering, baleful glance of her handsome, olive-skinned brother, read the lurking enmity and shivered.

Zinlo remembered that Xunia was but the simulacrum of a woman; that that which he saw was but a cunningly wrought mechanism and that the lovely body was not even the same one she had worn when he had first met her some time before. And suddenly it seemed hideous and unutterably repulsive that a mere machine could be graced with so much feminine fascination – that it could hold the gaze of each member of that vast assembly of resplendent officials and glittering princes.

Xunia sensed his thought and the sudden gleam in her dark eyes contradicted the sweetness of her smile – the throaty caress of her voice.

Vorn Vangal, reading the silent clash of thought and determined to interrupt it, nodded to the master of ceremonies. The roar and thunder of field music checked the outburst that was impending.

Zinlo, in response to the signal, led the assembled rulers to the great conference hall and from his canopied chair of state invited the delegates to seat themselves about the massive table across whose polished top old grudges had been settled and new ones fanned to flame.

There was a moment of silence. Then Zinlo rose and eyed the great potentates of Venus, his cold level gaze taking the measure of each in turn. Finally he spoke.

“Fellow Torrogos, and Torrogina, my urgent invitation to the capital was for a purpose which no doubt some if not all of you already know. Dos-Tev, the exiled emperor of Lemnis, a planet of the twin suns, Alpha Centauri, warns us that Ay-Atrz the usurper is preparing to invade and loot to solar system. I need say no more. You know well that this raid will leave a succession of stripped and blasted planets, our civilizations and cultures obliterated and the survivors of several races chained and bleeding under the taskmaster’s lash.

“And still less need I remind you of the unpleasant doom the butcher of the twin-sunned planet reserves for captured monarchs.”

The low, confused muttering and wrathful growls that greeted Zinlo’s opening remarks told him that he would have little difficulty in organizing an expedition; but his eyes narrowed as he regarded the lovely Xunia who had intruded into the conference. Her royal blood technically entitled her to be present; and thus, despite her violation of tradition, it was beyond Zinlo’s power to deny her admission. And Zinlo, as he resumed his address, at the same time racked his brain for some clue as the nature of trickery which he was certain that Xunia’s presence indicated. Forewarned by his intuition, he had already devised a plan to thwart that lovely, insidiously evil creature whose amorous glances veiled her spite and resentment at Zinlo’s affront to her ancient race.

“I have already built a space-globe, patterned after the original designed by Dr. Morgan of Earth. Each of you will send me a volunteer delegate. They will be quartered here until Vorn Vangal receives a telepathic message from Dos-Tev, designating a rendezvous where we of Venus may meet the contingents from the other planets.

“You know the peril that hangs over us. Grandon ot Terra will hold my throne during my absence. I will in person lead the expedition. All of you must give me the utmost cooperation, or our Solar System will become a collection of smoking ruins – desolate globes whirling thru space.”

This time there was no murmur. The assembled monarchs, oppressed by the full realization of the doom that menaced them, exchanged glances, each reading the other’s concern. Even the yellow Huitsenni, the pirate emperor, for a moment forgot to masticate his kerra spores, and his slave girl, though but dimly understanding, forgot to wipe the royal chin.

“Return to your capitals, fellow princes,” resumed Zinlo. “I will—”

“But where is the conference to take place?” interrupted Xunia, smiling in the face of the general gravity, and patting her dusky hair. “I think we should know, so we could send reinforcements directly to the scene of action if an emergency arose.”

Zinlo’s glance caught the eye of Vorn Vangal. The chief counselor, standing respectfully in front of the agate pillar which was his station, stroked his gray beard and let his left eyelid droop for an instant. And Zinlo knew then why Xunia was present. Vorn Vangal’s projected thought flashed silver clear: “There you have it, Your Majesty. She wants to betray the rendezvous to Ay-Artz.”

Only that flash; and his thought waves were abruptly cut short, lest some other person sensing their powerful vibration would likewise receive their import. But that flash sufficed. No explanation was needed. Xunia’s motive was obvious: the reward of treason would be the entire looted planet of Venus for Xunia and Tandor, once Ay-Artz had completed his devastation. Betraying the meeting place would give Ay-Artz the victory; and without this treason, the butcher from Alpha Centauri’s far off planet would be forced to fight bitterly, might even strive in vain to complete his gigantic conquest.

Zinlo’s arm rose in a gesture of dismissal. “I am the chosen recipient of the message on this planet,” he said. Even I do not yet know the rendezvous; and if I did, it would be stupid indeed of me to broadcast such a vital secret. Ay-Artz has spies among us. Therefore abandon feminine curiosity, and do as I command. Or is there any one else who would prefer to lead the expedition?”

The clamor that ensued, assured Zinlo that the perilous honor was his; but Xunia’s venomous glance was more eloquent than her silence. Zinlo knew that she had taken his words as an accusation hurled to her teeth before this conclave of her peers; that she would use all her age-seasoned cunning to defeat him, to seek out the hidden rendezvous.

Zinlo repeated his gesture. The assembled monarchs saluted, then with deliberate, formal strides, left the conference hall.

“I do hope we’ll meet again, soon – when you are not so busy,” was Xunia’s sweet-voiced mockery as she turned to accompany her brother.

Zinlo shot an inquiring glance at Vorn Vangal.

“That she-marmelot’s up to something. But at least she didn’t stage a scene,” he muttered as, frowning, he sought to appraise the strange woman from all angles, sought to find some motive other then rank treason. Internal treachery was one thing; betraying a planet to an invader from beyond the Solar System was another; and even Xunia might not go to such lengths. But if not treachery, what was her aim?

Vorn Vangal shook his head as he sensed the unspoken question.

“No, I’m not sure it’s treachery she contemplates, Your Majesty. But watch yourself,” he said aloud.

“I have,” replied Zinlo. To prevent the thought from being read, I thrust it for the time even from my own mind. But now that she’s far enough away, I’ll risk it. All the torrogos are going on the homeward trip. And while each is apparently on his way home, six of the battleships will shortly circle and return to the capital. But the ship carrying Tandor and his sister will not return. The delegates will be selected, and we will immediately leave for the rendezvous, which I feared to announce in Tandor’s presence.”

“Excellent, Your Majesty!” approved Vorn Vangal. “And you were very wise in keeping that thought insulated so heavily that even I could not grasp it.”

Late that night six aerial battleships silently settled in the inner court of the palace. There was no formal fanfare of music to greet the six torrogos who emerged from the vessels that had ostensibly set out to carry them to their capitals. Stealth, and the moonless darkness of Venus, guarded every move.

Zinlo stood on the broad balcony that overhung the vast court, watched the torrogos and their personal staffs filing from the darkened ships.

“Vorn Vangal,” he said, abruptly breaking into the profound speculations of the old scientist, “why not give up the idea of using the Doravians? It was a mistake to invite Tandor here. Those machine men will be more of a liability than an asset. We distrust their master – how can we trust the men?”

Vorn Vangal shook his head. “No, Your Majesty. The poison is concentrated in that lovely trouble maker and her ambitious brother. If we can win them over, the machine men, commanded by our officers, will serve us well enough. And remember this: they are splendid shock troops. Though the enemy kills them, they will straightway return to their spare bodies which are stored in the Doravian arsenals; and fast space globes will rush them back to the firing line to resume the assault.

“Practially every Doravian warrior has five spare bodies and their mojos and mojaks have seven apiece, while the romojaks have ten. All Venus would have a problem in subduing them and even Ay-Artz would find it a tough task.”

Zinlo grinned reminiscently as he recollected the old psychologist’s trick of projecting a neutralizing wave which would halt the electrochemical process that made the artificial bodies move in response to the urge of the egos that animated them. In case to treachery, Tandor would be defeated before his staff of scientists could stumble across that difficult weapon.

“Ay-Artz will be lucky if we don’t tan his hide and nail it on the Black Tower!” was Zinlo’s grim threat. “And now that Xunia won’t know where the rendezvous is, Ay-Artz will be stumped from the start. That—”

And then Zinlo caught his breath, gestured toward the courtyard below.

“Bones of Thorth! Look at that! Seven of them! Not six but seven!”

He could not distinguish the device on the pennant that fluttered from the mast of that unaccountable seventh ship which was in the courtyard but as he dashed to the elevator, he had a premonition of evil. He sensed that Xunia had penetrated his ruse, had brazenly sent an observer to join the returning torrogos. But as he emerged into the courtyard, he saw that Xunia herself had returned! Even in the dim glow from the tower windows, he recognized that slender, regal figure; and as she approached him, followed by and handful of attendants, he saw by the lights that filtered from the curtained windows of the left wing that she was smiling sweetly, as though she had not transfixed him with poisonous glances that evening.

“Oh, Zinlo,” she said in that caressing, rich voice, whose throaty tones Doravian scientists had labored for generations to perfect. “You dismissed us all so abruptly that I forgot the parting gift I had brought. So I came back.”

She clapped her jeweled hands. Four of her attendants came forward with a long, narrow chest of serali wood, heavily bound with bands of oxidized silver.

“A case of fern wine from my own cellar,” she explained. “And three hampers of the rare sub-aqueous globe-fruits from Bankuk. I know you are awfully fond of them.”

In the dim half-light she was lovelier than ever; and for a moment Zinlo forgot that the amorous light in her long-lashed eyes was the triumph of five thousand years of laboratory research. He caught the rich savor of the globe-fruits, which grow only in the spring-fed lakes of Bankuk, forever guarded by the terrible Flying Grampites, and his suspicions still further subsided when one of the attendants lifted the cover of the chest, displaying the great, topaz-colored clusters of that rare fruit, while from among the bunches in the further end, he saw the necks of porphory flasks of that incredibly ancient wine, made from the sweet sap of that specially cultivated fern, for which Doravia was famous.

Zinlo bowed gravely. Something warned him that to accept the gift was the uttermost idiocy. The he resolved to have the fruits and wines tested for poison. And then he felt that his suspicions were churlish.

He gestured to an attendant.

“Stow that chest in the commissary department of the flying globe,” he commanded. “And seal it with my personal seal. Tell the steward to set the refrigeration controls very carefully. If that fruit is frostbitten I’ll have his head.”

The he turned again to Xunia.

“Our thanks,” he said gravely. “And I trust that you realize that this afternoon’s brusqueness was necessary, and not in any way personal.”

“Why, of course, Zinlo,” she replied. “And accept my very best wishes.” Then, as her fingers lingered caressingly in his hand, “Zinlo, won’t you ever, ever feel differently about me?”

“Maybe,” he compromised, valiantly swallowing the sudden and unpleasant recurrence of that thought that the warmth of that dainty hand was controlled by delicate thermostats. “But I’ve got another war on my mind – and you know how that is.”

“Good-bye, Zinlo. I know you’ll distinguish yourself,” was her farewell as she turned toward the ship which had brought her to the palace.

Zinlo stroked his chin, pondering as he watched that graceful figure merge with the shimmering dusk of the courtyard.

“Too bad she’s not human,” he conceded. “Can’t remember when I’ve seen a real woman who was anywhere near as nice looking.”

Then his eyes suddenly blazed with wrath.

“By the tonsils of Thorth! I’ll have somebody’s head for that! The mojak of that ship willfully and deliberately disobeyed my orders.”

Zinlo turned to summon the guard; but he restrained his impulse.

“I’ll attend to him later,” he compromised. “The quicker that girl gets out of here, the better.”

In another moment the battleship rose silently into the blackness overhead. Zinle exhaled a sigh of relief; and on second thought, it occurred to him that Xunia might not even have suspected his ruse. The six ships, gleaming silver gray masses in the gloom, could scarcely have by their presence hinted that their passengers were the six torrogos who had left earlier in the evening.

“And while she’s on her way home,” Zinlo reflected, “we’ll check out and head for the rendezvous.”

He strode down a passageway that led to a small room on the first floor of the palace. Vorn Vangal, awaiting the Torrogo, rose from his chair and respectfully stood by to receive orders.

“Bring them in at once,” commanded Zinlo, “and tell my romojak to have the globe ready to clear on an instant’s notice. Also have the scouting fleet take the air and permit no one to come closer than the borders of the empire. I’ll have no spies spotting our departure if I can prevent it.”

Zinlo impatiently paced the room as he awaited the arrival of the six torrogos. And when the broad shoulders of Grandon of Terra finally blocked the doorway, the prince of Olba came to the point without formality.

“Be seated, please,” he invited. Then, before they had disposed themselves about the circular table, he continued: “You will note that Tandor of Doravia is absent. I have reason to suspect his good faith. Thus have I arranged to leave his delegate out of the conference, which is to be on the Crater of Copernicus on Luna – the moon of Terra, as you may remember, Grandon.

“Each of you will detail a trusted officer or minister to accompany me to-night. Thus your interests will be protected; and at the same time, since I will be the only spokesman, the Venusian contingent will present a front unbroken by bickerings and quibblings. Your vote of confidence is all that is necessary.

“Have I that confidence, and will you without reservation accept my decisions as final, and representative of the wishes of the Venusian torrogats?”

The assent was unanimous. Zinlo bowed to express his acceptance of the heavy responsibility. The he said: “Have your staff officers line up and follow me. I leave at once.”

A few moments later, the huge space globe rose swiftly from the courtyard and into the unplumbed blackness of the night. Swifter than light – swift as thought itself – it bored into space, propelled by the telekinetic amplifiers which by resonance of harmonic will impulses developed the terrific velocity which made the trip from Venus to Luna merely a matter of visualizing the vessel hovering about the bleak, pock-marked face of Terra’s satellite.

Zinlo, standing in the control room, watched Lotar’s deft manipulating of the space globe as, having retarded their velocity, he was slowly circling above Copernicus, awaiting the order to descend. Once or twice the romojak glanced inquiringly at his imperial master; but Zinlo’s narrow eyed stare ignored the navigator.

“Hold it, Lotar!” he suddenly snapped. “There’s something wrong.”

“Very well, Your Majesty,” replied Lotar.

Zinlo closed his eyes to exclude all distractions that might scatter the hazy thought-increments which were slowly concentrating in his mind.

“Why did she send me that chest of fruit?” he asked himself for the hundredth time. “Something is wrong. It’s all right on the face of it – her her good wishes came too suddenly. And that sentimental touch was overdone.”

And Zinlo resolved not to alight at Copernicus until he had untangled the riddle.

“She couldn’t have known my destination – couldn’t even have known that I was heading for Luna to-night,” he pondered. “Then if there is any trick in the present it must have some bearing on what she did know – must have some relation to the space ship’s maneuverings.”

He shook his head, sought to recreate in his mind’s eye the unexpected return of Xunia.

“If it really is a trick, then she must have known, in some way, that I did have a fast move in mind. She must also have known I’d be preoccupied – that I’d be almost certain to have her present stowed in the commissary compartment.”

Zinlo nodded slowly as he considered another salient point: that from the perishability as well as the exceeding rarity of the delicacies she had offered him, it would be almost inevitable that he would take the chest with him on whatever trip he had in mind, regardless of the destination or purpose.

“And since she was so determined that I’d take it with me, I’ll at least break her stride by disposing of it, now!”

He jabbed at a pushbutton; and presently a steward entered.

“That that chest out of storage and heave it out through the air lock,” Zinlo commanded. “Get rid of it, immediately.”

“Very well, Your Majesty.”

“And now,” muttered Zinlo, as the steward strode down the gangway to the commissary, “whether it’s poison, explosive, or some other trick, it’s kinked before it has started.”

He nodded and chuckled grimly as he anticipated Xunia’s wide-eyed surprise at hearing him tell her, on his return, how much he had enjoyed the delicacies. He pictured the wrathful flash of her eyes as she realized from his very presence that he had nipped her trickery.

Bit Zinlo’s thoughts were interrupted by a cry of amazement that echoed from the gangway. He turned, and saw the steward hurrying toward the control room.

“Your Majesty,” he began, then, abashed at his presumption, he swallowed and tried a fresh start. “Will Your Majesty repeat that order? I’m afraid—“

“What are you afraid of?” demanded Zinlo. “Throw it into space.”

“But Your Majesty,” protested the steward, “I’m sure there’s some mistake. I don’t think—“

“You’re not supposed to think!” snapped Zinlo. “What’s wrong?”

“There’s a woman in that chest,” began the steward. “So I thought.”

“Beard of Thorth!” exploded Zinlo. “Bring her in, quickly.”

And Zinlo knew that Xunia had in some way tricked him. “A woman – one of her female attendants – had been smuggled on board the space globe to spy on him, to note the exact position of the secret rendezvous. Fruit and wine, indeed!

“Here she is, Your Majesty.”

For a moment he was speechless with wrath. The woman was none other than Xunia herself. Almost he doubted the evidence of his eyes. He had seen her enter a battleship, had seen the ship rise swiftly into the Venusian night. It could not be Xunia – but the voice of the stowaway left no remaining doubt.

“Oh, Zinlo, I do hope you’ll not be angry,” she purred, as she stepped clear of the steward and approached the young ruler. “But I always did want to make a flight in a space globe. You’ve always been so suspicious of me and my people, never letting us have even one tiny airship. So I—“

“But how did you get in here?” demanded Zinlo. “I saw—“

“Of course you saw,” laughed Xunia. “But you forget—“

She checked herself abruptly, as though the subject she had been on the verge of discussing was highly distasteful; and that moment of hesitation gave Zinlo time to overcome his perplexity and arrive at a solution.

Xunia had taken one her spare bodies and packed it in a chest; and then, returning to Doravia, she had walked into her storage room, left the body she had worn on Olba, and flashing through space, had sent her ego to animate the smuggled form. The lovely body and features were almost identical; but Zinlo’s closer scrutiny revealed several betraying differences. The eyes, for instance, where narrower by a shade, and trifle longer.

But that same trouble-making, intriguing ego animated it.

“Throw her out, you gawking idiot!” roared Zinlo.

But the steward, now recognizing the imperious features and the insigni and adornments of her imperial rank, knew not which way to turn. He dared not disobey his royal master; nor yet could he bring himself to lay his hands on the Torrogina of Doravia.

“Your Majesty – really – I”

“Get out!” thundered Zinlo. “I’ll tend to her.”

“Oh, Zinlo, don’t be angry with me,” she purred, flashing the full fire of her seductive, crimson smile at him. “I’ve always wanted—“

Zinlo knew that there had been several things which she had always wanted, chief of them being a share of the throne of Olba. The slender, shapely arms closed about his neck – the perfumed aura of that lovely girl was an intoxicating fragrance. And then Zinlo resented the momentary and undeniable appeal of her. She wasn’t a woman; she was a machine – and a traitor to the Venusian empires. He snatched her arms clear of his neck – stepped back.

The globe could not be kept indefinitely hovering above Copernicus; and neither could it land with Xunia as a passenger, and thus betray to Tandor of Doravia, and through him to Ay-Artz, the rendezvous of the allies.

“Ho, steward!” shouted Zinlo. “Lock her up in the storage compartment.”

“Zinlo, you’re positively brutal,” she murmured, “but really I love it.”

The dainty little hand stroked his cheek. Zinlo’s rage flared forth.

“I’ll fix your clockwork!”

His hand flashed to the hilt of his scarbo. The deadly swiftness of motion that had made him feared on three planets, caught Xunia off guard. Even before the amorous, languishing eyes could widen with terror, the trenchant blade drove home, shearing through the faultlessly curved throat. The headless trunk, grotesquely horrible, stood for an instant, poised on the dainty feet. Then it tottered, collapsed dropped sprawling on the polished deck. Zinlo recoiled in horror; for even though he realized fully what he had done, he was momentarily sickened by the decapitated thing which twitched and quivered in the dark pool that slowly spread across the metal deck.

“Bones of Thorth!” he muttered. “She’ll be good as new. I didn’t really kill her – and her ego had to get out and reanimate one of the bodies she has stored in Doravia.”

Then he shuddered at the memory of the warm caresses of those slender hands. The dark pool that was sluggishly creeping toward the bulkhead wasn’t blood; it was the chemical energizing fluid that aided the moving force for the synthetic body. Its corrosive action on the metal deck was indicated by the violet fumes that began bubbling from the now viscous fluid. He wiped the blade of his scarbo, and saw that its steel had been deeply etched by the machine woman’s chemical blood.

Zinlo shook his head.

“Toenails of Thorth! And they wanted me to marry that!”

And only then did Zinlo realize that Xunia, despite his swift sword stroke, had outwitted him. Turning as he sheathed the corroded scarbo, he faced the televiz grid, saw in its silvered screen the clear image of the great ring mountain, Copernicus. He knew that Xunia’s caresses and soft murmurings had distracted his attention long enough to permit her to glance over his shoulder and read the position of the space globe.

“She doesn’t know that Copernicus is the rendezvous,” he muttered, “but we were so close to landing that she’s just as certain of our destination as though I’d told her. And now her ego is back in Doravia, telling that sneaking hahoe of a brother what a fool she made of me.

“Lotar, land the globe and break out the air-suits. Anyway, we know that the Doravians know – and that’s something.”

“Very well, Your Majesty,” replied Lotar, as he turned to the control panel.

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# Chapter 9 – Menace of the Automaton by Abner J. Gelula

AUTHOR OF: “AUTOMATON,” “THE VALLEY OF THE BLIND” ETC.

A major chapter in the American history of the thirty-first century was that which dealt with the tribulations of a certain young scientific genius named Alan Martin and the tremendous influence that his invention had wrought upon the life of the world. His name had, through the centuries, become as famous as any statesman. He was the creator of the Automaton.

History related of the cruelties to which he had been subjected because he dared to agitate and even actually attempt the destruction of the very machine he invented. He alone foresaw the future of mankind under the ever-growing domination of the cold, emotionless, reasoning Robots he had loosed. People had believed him insane because he tried to point out the menace that these man-like creatures held for humanity, but it was only the passing of centuries that ultimately revealed the eventual all-usurping power of the Automaton.

Alan Martin died late in the twentieth century in comparative obscurity, a broken man. But until his dying day he voiced the warning that was to ring down through the ages, growing louder and clearer with each passing decade – “Beware of the Automatons!”

Maybe it was only co-incidence. Perhaps there is something to a belief in reincarnation. Regardless, however, it was an Alan Martin who first gave the world an inkling of the enemy that threatened the very universe: emerging from out of the void and into the security and peace of the Earth and neighboring planets.

Alan Martin of the thirty-first century was almost a counter-part of his multi great ancestor, even to his keen blue eyes and straight black hair that refused to stay combed. The flare for science that the original Martin had was transposed into this young man a thousand years distant. But it was a changed world that greeted Martin II. Life had become so ultra-complex and was so definitely based upon the successful continuation of Automaton that now, rather than man utilizing the machines, the machines operated man! To break down this system, evolved through the centuries, required leadership of such proportions that no man had yet measured to its gigantic requirements. Cunningly did the Automatons maneuver their place in existence. The entire system was based upon an illusion. Men had become content to permit things to continue their course under the continuous assurance that the Machines were designed for man and therefore were the slaves of man. But in practice it was different – and this difference was brought home with striking suddenness with the receipt of the First Message from “Beyond.”

Alan Martin was seated at his radio experimental board at his home on the two hundredth floor above the streets of New York City one winter evening. Except for the ominous ever=presence of an Automaton, he was alone. He preferred it this way for it enabled him to work with a minimum of disturbance; and this particular night he had occasion to wish that even the Automaton had, at least momentarily, strayed from the room.

Martin, for the past year, had been experimenting in the super-frequencies. He believed that in extreme short-wave reception lay the future of all communication. True, compared with twentieth century radio reception the wavelength of transmissions were extremely short – below one mete, but Martin was interested in perfecting successful transmission and reception at frequencies of millions of cycles!

On the waveband upon which he concentrated he was certain that there could be no transmitter other than his own which was situated several miles from this receiver and operated by his fiancée Theresa Holt. It was because of this certainty that the words which suddenly crashed through the loudspeakers in tremendous volume, so startled and amazed him. Tensely he listened, his hands glued upon dials he had been twirling but which he feared to release lest the voice disappear.

“Calling Earth – Calling Earth – Calling Earth! The existence of your planet and and all the planets of the Sun’s family is threatened with extinction. You must speed every effort to build a space ship to take part with your sister planets in repulsing a common enemy. This is the fiftieth broadcast in an effort to reach you. We hope that this message is being heard. You must arrive within a year of Earth time on Luna where, at Copernicus, a meeting of the planets will be held. I shall now give the plans for the construction of a space-ship that will assure your arrival…”

So absorbed was Martin in listening to this strange, mysterious voice that seemed to come from nowhere that he failed to hear the stealthy movements of the Robot. Then, with a startling alacrity, the Machine-man made a wide sweep with one of its arm-appendages crashing the board to the floor.

Martin sat as if riveted to his chair. This sudden unexplainable action on the part of the Automaton came so unexpectedly that he was stunned for a moment. Then he turned to the now motionless robot.

“Why did you do that?” he asked harshly.

The Robot stepped backward a few paces. Its emotionless mechanical voice was baffling. “You shall not learn of these plans,” it began, slowly. “The mathematical reasoning of the Automatons have long known how interplanetary travel may be accomplished, but the time is not yet ripe for men to launch such ambitious undertakings.”

Martin listened, astounded by the words of the Robot. The colossal nerve of the Machine! And to deliberately wreck his laboratory merely to fulfill a selfish whim of the Automatons! His blood fairly boiled, as he raved and ranted at the Iron man, but to no avail. He might just as well have voiced his rage against a wall. The Automaton remained adamant to his every word and action, repeating “The time is not yet ripe.”

Enraged, Martin stamped out of the room and headed for the home of his fiancée. The cold night air replaced reason with rage and he reflected upon the events of the evening. That the voice brought a message that was not the work of a crank, he was certain. And the actions of the Automaton in thus halting the information the voice was about to impart brought home with greater force than it ever had, the warning of his long dead ancestor.

When Martin arrived, he related the entire story of the evening to Theresa who listened in wide-eyed astonishment. “Never mind about the Automaton now,” she soothed his rage. “You must immediately rebuild the ultra-short wave receiver for a repetition of the message tomorrow evening! The sender in this house is the only one in the entire world operating on the ultra-short wave. Of that I am certain. This message came from somewhere off the Earth. I was listening on the visiophone all evening and no interference or message came thru on the regular transmission frequencies. I will return to your home with you and we shall rebuild the set – keeping Automatons away!”

All night Martin and Theresa worked secretly to repair the destruction caused by the Robot until finally, after the sun was already high in the sky, the outfit was again ready for reception.

It was late that evening, that the voice was heard once more. As if the speaker had been thoroughly practiced in his spoken part, he repeated almost verbatim the words heard by Martin on the previous evening. Theresa sat beside him listening entranced to the words of warning that issued from the loudspeaker and together they made notes of the plans for constructing the space-ship the voice so urgently pleaded to be immediately built.

Martin had locked the door to the room to make doubly certain that no Automaton might again wreck the reception of this mysterious message.

The speaker had concluded his careful, detailed word-plan of the flyer and ended his talk with: “The future of Earth depends upon all possible haste in the construction of this space-ship. I fervently plead with whoever may hear to stress the importance of this message to the authorities. The accuracy of the plans can readily be appreciated by scientists – they accuracy must be sufficient proof of the sincerity of DOS-TEV.”

A deep silence pervaded the room as the voice ceased its discourse. Theresa looked at Martin quizzically.

“Do you think–?” she asked hesitantly. “What do you make of it?”

Martin was deep in thought. He gazed with unseeing eyes into the speaker as if he might peer into the great void from whence the voice emanated. He turned to look at Theresa. After moments of silence, he replied, his words seeming almost a soliloquy.

“Yes… I believe,” he said, “but no one else will! That does not matter for I shall build this ship. I shall go to Luna. Together, you and I, we shall be the representatives of Earth. It means gambling my fortune on the construction, but together we shall succeed!”

It was two months later, when the external hull of the dirigible-like monster had begun to take shape that the world first took notice of an untoward activity within a high-boarded area in a remote section of New Jersey. Martin had made no effort to keep secret the work being done, nor did he hesitate to speak of the message received on his ultra-short wave receiver. He hoped that the wide publicity might center attention on the reason for the construction of the space-ship, might wake the people from the falseness of their robot-ruled lives. But the publicity was not the kind that he had anticipated. Newspapers heaped ridicule upon the lavish expenditures and referred to the work as “Martin’s Dream Ship.”

There were a few who did have confidence in the successful operation of the ship although it must be truthfully said that even his closest associates listened to his story of the message about a ‘conference of planets on Luna’ with tongue in cheek. Were it not for the perfect plans that the voice presented for the construction of the ship, Martin might also have been skeptical of the affair – particularly when he found that the voice was not on the ether upon another attempt to hear the message a month after its first reception.

But Martin was thick-skinned to the criticism heaped on him. Day and night he devoted himself, aided greatly by Theresa, to the building and outfitting of the ship for the journey. Almost all of the work was done my men rather than by Automatons, as would be expected in this Robot age.

But insidiously, even tho barred from participation, the Automatons were working day and night to thwart the plans of Martin and Theresa.

The cold reasoning, the unemotional logic of these calculating machines recognized that their hold on man would be broken should contact be made with other planets – planets that were ages ahead of Earth and whose wisdom had long since abolished the machines in forming a happier existence. Man would surely see the Utopian existence that machines made impossible, for the Automaton was the nucleus of a vicious circle – man fed the machine so the machine would feed man. Halt the machine’s existence and the complexity of living would be reduced to a more logical condition of existing for the sake of life rather than life for the sake of existence!

Until man had the problem and its solution definitely thrust into his face, the existence of the Automatons remained secure. But with the possibility of space travel looming in the near future, the Automatons realized their peril.

It had long since been discovered that, by means of communication known only to the machines, the Robots could act enmasse upon any project that might require such action. But such activity was only called in emergencies, as in 2025 when a mob of students attempted to wreck the machines. The Automatons made no personal effort to defend themselves, but used economic force and caused others to sacrifice themselves breaking the insurrection.

The Automaton’s action in his room just before should have warned Martin of the potential enemy he had here. But so absorbed in his work was he that he never gave the matter a second thought.

One day the occasion was vividly recalled to mind when, as the ship’s exterior neared completion, a letter arrived from the Federal Department of Welfare that it was advised “by various organizations throughout the country to halt operations on the space-ship. Should the contemplated flight prove successful the result might only be in creating new enemies for the people of Earth and possible future interplanetary wars.”

Martin was inclined to scoff at the letter but Theresa thought otherwise. She saw a sinister hand in the proceedings. She urged an immediate doubling of the working force and every effort made speed the task. Martin agreed that this might be a good idea, and gave orders accordingly.

Each day saw the huge, bulbous ship closer to completion, but each day also the letters became more insistent. Finally, a letter from the Department of State warned that unless work on the Space-Ship halted within 48 hours Federal force would be utilized to carry out such orders!

The blow of receiving a demand, of such finality became almost too much for Martin. He had made every effort and had presented every argument to swing public opinion behind his stellar flight, but some force greater than his was causing a terrifically adverse influence. And that force, he knew now, was the Automatons!

According to the letter, there was but 24 hours left before the government would carry out its threat. Behind tightly locked doors Martin gathered his small group of trustworthy advisors – six men who were to accompany him on this epochal flight: Prof. Adrian Larson, renowned chemist; Prof. Howard Bartholomew, noted astronomer and mathematician; John H. Williamson, M.D., a physician of no mean repute; David Milestone, construction engineer; Prof. Frank Albright, world recognized physicist; and Billy Evans, life long friend of Martin’s. An important place was filled by Theresa Holt.

“So, gentlemen,” Alan finished, “if we rush the completion of the ship, hurry delicate adjustments and the incorporation of various refinements – we imperil certainty of safe arrival – or even of safely leaving Earth. Further, we shall have no time to make tests before the actual flight. Yet, as I see it there seems no way out. We must take every precaution we can to be sure that every inch and appliance of the ship are perfect – then take off! The risk involved is increased greatly. I know you each realize this fact. Therefore, I assure you that there will be no hard feelings should any of you gentlemen desire at this time to decline accompanying me on this trip.”

Martin looked into each face as he spoke. They were serious, but when he spoke of anyone declining the trip smiles crept into the corners of their mouths. As if they could be kept from making it!

It was agreed that all would board the ship the following morning – twelve hours before the ‘dead-line’ set by the Secretary of State.

So they arrived and quietly slipped into the metal hull that pointed like a mammoth cigar into the cloudless morning sky.

Then, unexpectedly, along the outer fence metal forms reflected the spring sunlight. From the distance those in the ship could not make out what it was. Thousands of workmen were running in all directions as if possessed. Tools lay around the base of the ship and those operating trucks carrying material for the ship sped crazily toward it.

Martin grabbed a pair of binoculars and peered in toward the activity. The sight that met his eyes made him cry out in amazement.

“We’re besieged! Automatons – thousands of them – they’re breaking the fence.”

Professor Bartholomew tore the glasses from his head and looked.

“We haven’t a moment! Close all hatches, Martin – give orders to leave immediately. The Machines are bent on halting us. They are not waiting to influence any more authority. We must get away before they arrive and take the law into their own hands.” The professor was suiting action to words. A hurried check of the fuel tanks indicated an ample supply, as did the air and chemical transfer tanks. The food supply had been taken aboard early in construction so there was no fear on that score.

There were scarcely a few short minutes left in which to react. Already the fence gave way before the tremendous pressure exerted by the hordes of iron men and the metal bodies surged forward in their mechanical way.

Only the main brace, held by several large bolts, anchored the ship to the ground. Martin and Billy Evans worked frantically to loose the bolts before the Automatons arrived. It seemed a hopeless task. The vanguard of the metal men were nearly upon them. Hardly fifty yards separated them from the ship and only part of the bolts were loosened. Thousands of human beings, brandishing clubs and throwing stones at the space ship presented anything but an encouraging outlook for the finale of the adventure.

“No use,” Evans cried above the roar of the mob that drew upon them. “Looks like this is the finish!”

“Not on your life!” Martin bellowed. “Get inside the flyer. We’re going to chance it. It’s our only hope!”

The hurried inside, locking the single entrance securely behind them.

“To your berths!” Martin ordered his passengers. “We’re leaving – pray that we can break loose without ripping a hole in the ship!”

The berths, designed to absorb the major portion of the terrific pressure of the start of the ship, were immediately occupied.

“Here we go! Good luck,” Martin cried. He pressed a switch near his berth. A deafening roar greeted the contact… a crushing sensation that made breathing impossible… then a blessed oblivion…

Professor Bartholomew took control of the ship after it left the gravitational restrictions of the Earth. Slowly each of the passengers regained consciousness little worse for the experience. A hurried survey revealed no damage done by their hurried departure and hope again ruled on the Flyer.

The huge, ragged surface of the Moon loomed before the band of adventurers. Copernicus, the place designated by the mysterious Dos-Tev for the urgent conference between neighbor planets of the Solar System lay clear before them.

Slowly the Flyer circled as it dropped lower and lower toward the appointed spot. “From the Earth to the Moon! A new era dawns!” Martin whispered. Theresa nodded silently as together they gazed upon the awe-inspiring sight of the airless globe drawing closer.

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# Chapter 10 – Conference at Copernicus by Raymond A. Palmer

AUTHOR OF: “THE MAN WHO INVADED TIME,” “THE VORTEX WORLD,” ETC.

Mea-Quin stood in the central cylinder of the council chamber and surveyed his completed work with satisfaction, albeit with an air of utter weariness.

“Ayhuu,” he murmured to himself, “it is finished! From this central cylinder we must unite the delegates who will come to occupy the outer cylinders, and I pray Tor that he will aid us, for it will be a mighty task.”

He turned and made his way from the completed dome to the ship. Dos-Tev met him at the port with anxious gaze.

“Tor be with you, my son,” said Mea-Quin, “what has gone wrong now? I see ill in your face.”

“I have been in communication with Planet Two, and Vorn Vangal tells me something that portends much of danger. Ay-Artz has succeeded in getting in mental touch with the Doravians!”

“Blood of Tor!” gasped the old scientist. “That is indeed bad. If the arch villain gains these many-bodied people as allies, we will have trouble aplenty! What does Vorn Vangal say is being done?”

Dos-Tev shook his head doubtfully. “I fear that will shall lose their help whether Ay-Artz gains it or not. Vorn Vangal has called to council the rulers of Venus, and plans to exclude the Doravians from all knowledge of what we are doing. We can hardly enlist their aid in this way.”

“Tis better thus,” said Mea-Quin. “If Ay-Artz has gained mental communication, he would be a fool to let the Doravians know what Ay-Artz should not know. But leave it to Vorn Vangal. He will use his peculiar mental powers to good advantage, never fear. Ever since we have gotten into direct intercourse with him, we have accomplished much. We know that Venus will present a formidable front to the legions of the traitor.”

Dos-Tev nodded. “They will, that,” he acknowledged. “I wish I could know the same of Planet Three. They are preparing to come, that much I have received, but there is difficulty. I cannot get the nature of it – whatever it be, it cannot be human. And Planet One – I can sense no life upon it at all now. It is strange. I received vibrations for quite awhile, but now they are gone.”

“What of the others – have you learned of them?”

“Discord! There is much strife on the ringed planet, and upon Planet Four. The planetoid of the females seems seething with curiosity, and something of discord, but they will come, I know, for their curiosity drives them. I have heard nothing from Neptune. They must be strange beings indeed, who can live on such a planet. I was surprised to receive vibrations of life from it. But we have reached them, that we know. Perhaps they will come.”

Mea-Quin gazed thoughtfully at the young emperor. “Some of them must arrive soon,” he said. “I have completed my work, and you have done all in your power. Naught remains now but to wait – and to guard against the Wrongness of Space; against the powerful enemy whom we have not yet seen, but who grow more powerful with each passing hour. We must maintain our vigilance to the best of our ability, or our cause will be lost. Not again may we be hindered by the destruction of the conference dome. And I fear. He has not evidenced himself for some time, and it may be that he is coming out into the open to make better use of his weapons.”

“We will watch,” replied Dos-Tev. “I fear him less since we completed our new defence.”

The loud shrilling of the alarm system interrupted anything further he might have said. He leaped to his feet. Bullo came hastily into the room from his workshop in the base of the ship.

“Master,” he cried, “what is wrong?”

“Something approaches!” gasped Mea-Quin. “Ayhuu! It may be that he has come at last!”

“No,” said Dos-Tev. “Look, there upin the tele-screen, a ship!”

“By Tor, you are right – but is it enemy or friend?” returned Mea-Quin.

“Come,” the emperor’s voice was decisive. “I am getting impulses. It is a friend. The first of the delegates has arrived!”

Quickly the trio donned space suits. Dos-Tev picked up a queer instrument and carried it with him from the ship.

“What is that you have?” asked Mea-Quin.

“A variation of the thought intensifier. We will fasten it to the outside of the ship and get into communication. We must discover what conditions must be created so that the delegates may occupy their cylinder in the conference dome.” Dos-Tev’s voice sounded metallically thru the tiny portable space-radio installed in the space suits.

“That is right,” agreed Mea-Quin, advancing beside his young master toward the ship, which was settling ponderously to the floor of the crater some distance away. Bullo followed behind the pair.

“What a giant thing that ship is!” exclaimed Dos-Tev. “From what planet can it be?”

“It is indeed a great ship,” replied the old scientist. “It seems to me that it must be the product of either Planet Two or Planet Three.”

“We will learn very quickly,” spoke Dos-Tev. “Look, the air-lock is opening and a figure is emerging. Hasten, we must greet him.”

In a moment they came to a halt before the air-lock of the giant ship and faced the first delegate to the conference. They gasped in astonishment as a metallic voice rang in their ears.

“I am James Tarvish,” spoke the figure before them. “We have come to the conference.”

Dos-Tev recovered his equanimity. “You astonish me,” he replied. “I had not expected you to be equipped with radio. From what planet do you come?”

“From Mercury, but I am originally of Earth. Mercury has no life upon it.”

Mea-Quin cut in, no longer able to control his amazement. “How do you speak our language?” he burst out.

Tarvish smiled thru the quartz of his space-helmet. “I have equipped my radio with a translator. It is one of the inventions of the Automatons. As you know, space radio waves, different from ordinary radio, utilize the same wave bands used by the brain in its mental functions. You must have known it, for you utilized the space-radio in communicating with me. The translator set up an equilibrium between your signals and my own mental functions. Thus there was no need of a scientific translation of your signals. The translator effects a mathematical translation instantaneously.”

“Ayhuu! You say an Automaton invented that?” Mea-Quin inquired.

Tarvish’s face darkened. “Yes,” he returned. “They are a creation of science that has outgrown its creator. They threaten the existence of life on Earth, and their hold on man is tightening. That is why I migrated to Mercury with my little family.”

Mea-Quin turned to Dos-Tev. “That explains the mysterious menace you sensed on Planet Three.”

“Yes,” replied the young emperor, “and I don’t like it. Thinking machines with such science! – if we must oppose them, we will have a battle indeed.”

“You have gotten into communication with Earth?” queried Tarvish.

“We know that they have received one of our many types of message,” returned Dos-Tev. “Also, that there is a ship being constructed to come to the conference. But the Automatons seek to prevent it. Just how powerful is their hold on Earth men?”

Tarvish looked worried. “It is very great. I fear that Earth men will not come if the Automatons do not wish it. Just how far they have my fellow men enslaved, since I left Earth, I do not know.”

Tarvish gazed about the vast crater. “We are the first of the delegates?” he inquired.

“Yes,” replied Dos-Tev. “We know that the men of Venus are also coming, and the rest are in the hands of Tor. But we believe enough will come to make the conference a success.”

“Did I hear you say the men of Venus are coming?” said Tarvish. “They must be fish, then?”

“Fish?” Dos-Tev was puzzled.

“Yes. Spectroscopic examination shows Venus to be water-covered.”

“That is wrong,” Dos-Tev smiled. “You are not the only Earth man to have migrated. Venus, beneath its cloud envelope, has much land, and Grandon, an Earth man, rules one continent.”

“Grandon!” ejaculated Tarvish. “Not the Grandon associated with Dr. Morgan?”

“I think that is so,” smiled Dos-Tev.

“How do you know this?”

“I have been in mental communication with one Vorn Vangal, who has told me much. The men of Venus will be here.”

Tarvish’s face held a vacant, faraway look. “So that was what Morgan was up to!” he exclaimed to himself.

“But come,” interrupted Mea-Quin. “You and your comrades must come with us to the conference chamber where proper quarters have been prepared for you. We will speedily reproduce Earth conditions for you there.”

“I would prefer to stay in my ship,” returned Tarvish. “We are equipped with all possible comforts.”

“Nay,” said Mea-Quin. “That will be impossible. There is danger – danger that your ship is not prepared to meet. I fear for you unless you accept the shelter we have provided.”

Tarvish considered a moment. “You are right,” he decided. “I don’t know yet what we are up against. If you will wait a few moments, I will fetch the rest.”

And so, the first cylinder of the conference dome became the host to the first of the solar system’s delegates. Bullo remained on guard in the central chamber while preparations were being completed. Then he helped transfer all equipment from their own ship and made ready for the conference while Dos-Tev and Mea-Quin scanned space for more delegates, and waited and watched for that unknown enemy who was so ominously silent now. Days passed, Lemnisian days.

“One of the planets is accounted for,” commented Dos-Tev while they waited. “It should not be long now, before others come.”

“I feel strangely uneasy,” said Mea-Quin. “The Wrongness of Space has commenced again. Look at the warning indicator. I have just balanced it, and yet it reacts. However, it seems not to be a harmful radiation.”

Dos-Tev jumped to his feet. “You are right!” he exclaimed. “Perhaps it is a message from an approaching delegate. Turn on the space radio.”

Mea-Quin complied quickly and in a few seconds, the tubes of the ship’s space radio glowed brightly at full power. A few meaningless sounds came from the speaker, and then, strongly and powerfully, a voice began speaking.

“Dos-Tev, are you listening?” came the voice. “Dos-Tev, are you listening?”

With white face, Mea-Quin faced the young emperor. “Tor be with us!” he exclaimed. “Do you recognize that voice?”

Dos-Tev’s face was grim. “That I do,” he said incredulously. “It is the arch-renegade, Ay-Artz!”

“But it is impossible! He is yet a light year away from here, and no power yet known could throw his voice ahead of him.”

Dos-Tev shook his head. “Then he has a power we know nothing of, for I will stake my life upon it – that is Ay-Artz.” He switched in the sender, while Mea-Quin leaped to the control board. “I will answer,” said Dos-Tev.

“Ay-Artz, I hear you. What would you of me?”

“Ah,” came the voice from the speaker. “You hear me. It is indeed good. And now, I give you warning. You will cease your futile efforts to rouse the peoples of the solar system to resist me. You will not succeed and when I come, I will wreak my vengeance. Cease your labors, and I will restore you safely to Lemnis, and perhaps I will bestow upon you a measure of power in return for your action.”

“Never!” retorted Dos-Tev. “If you must ask that I cease my work, I feel sure, now, that it is not hopeless labor. I promise you that you will be welcomed when you arrive. Indeed, it would be better if you returned forthwith to Lemnis.”

“You are a fool,” came the voice of Ay-Artz. “Proceed, then, to your futile work. I will not be much hindered by it.”

“We shall see!” retorted Dos-Tev, “And now, I cut you off.” He snapped the radio switch, and the room was again silent.

Mea-Quin turned from his instruments with a queer expression on his countenance.

“What do you find?” asked Dos-Tev anxiously.

“I find that Ay-Artz has a powerful ally,” replied Mea-Quin slowly. “For the signals come from below us! And at a depth of 200 miles! It is the enemy we have already encountered thrice – the Wrongness of Space. And I fear the more, now that I know he been operating thru 200 miles of solid rock! For our enemy is within Luna, and not in space.”

“Then it is he who has made it possible for Ay-Artz to throw his voice a light year ahead of him, even tho he himself travels at the speed of light?”

“Yes, he had picked up the signals and rebroadcast them to us.”

The alarm signal again sounded.

“It is Bullo,” said Dos-Tev. “He is coming to the ship and with him comes Tarvish.”

In a moment Bullo entered the ship and gasped out. “Master, three ships!”

“Three at once?”

“Yes, and they be queer ships indeed. One of them flashed into existence out in the crater out of nowhere.”

“They are delegates,” said Dos-Tev swiftly. “I receive emanations. I will go to receive them, while you, Bullo, watch here.”

“Nay,” said Mea-Quin, “I must stay and guard against the Wrongness of Space. He is up to something. I feel it. You go to one ship, while Bullo goes to another. Tarvish can welcome the third. He has the translator, you know, and I have just finished installing them in all our suits, so we would easily have a means of communication.”

Mea-Quin watched his instruments anxiously as he waited for the greeting to be completed. Suddenly he froze, watching three tiny specks of light floating high above the crater, as revealed on the tele-screen. As he watched, they grew in size with wonderful rapidity, until they became huge, coruscating balls of lightning-shot flame.

“By Tor!” gasped Mea-Quin. “Pure force itself.”

The balls, lighting the crater now in ruddy flames, suddenly began to descend toward the ships of the arriving delegates. Mea-Quin went into action. Swiftly he trained the absorption projector into space, spreading its rays fanwise. There was a terrific wrench of space, and the light waves were distorted so that on the screen, the crater showed as a wildly jumbled area of rock and open space. Across the crater, from the three balls of force, which had joined into one huge flame, shot a jagged streak of lightning. Where it struck, the rim of the crater dissolved, and a mighty column of dust shot upwards and over the entire crater, shutting out the light of the sun. Instantly the crater became dark as pitch. But the three balls were gone, and that danger was over.

Mea-Quin seated himself shakily before the control board and watched his instruments. “Ayhuu,” he murmured. He is gone. But this time he nearly won.”

“It was a close call,” admitted Dos-Tev, when he had returned to the ship. “But the new delegates are now safely within the conference dome, and we can expect the others soon.”

“Who are the new arrivals?” queried Mea-Quin. “I had no time to watch, but constantly guarded against the enemy from below us. And then, in the darkness I could not see.”

“The first ship, welcomed by Bullo, was the ship of the planet of females.” Dos-Tev chuckled. “He was certainly impressed by the beauty of the twelve who came from the ship. And they with him. But they were led by a male, Parcele by name, who seems to have gained some sort of advantage over the females.”

“I am glad of that,” interposed Mea-Quin. “I had feared the outcome of an attempt to reason with females. They are wont to place their own problems before the problems of all.”

“We need fear nothing on that score. Parcele is a man having his first taste of power in ages. He will not allow it to slip from him.”

“And the other ships?”

“That welcomed by Tarvish contained but two persons. They were from Planet Four, and the leader, one Fax Gatola, was ill. He would not allow Tarvish to administer to him, saying he had already taken the antidote to the poison he had swallowed. However, they are both all right now, and Tarvish reports that they are safely installed in their cylinder.

“The last ship, which I welcomed, was from the ringed planet, whom we feared would not answer. Their ruler, Pross Mere-Mer, has come himself. With him are Fo-Peta and a female, Zeera, and these two are very much in love, and Kama-Loo, astronomer.”

“Fine!” exclaimed Mea-Quin. “We have but three worlds to hear from now, and we can hold the conference. They should arrive within the daylight.”

And they did. It was not long after, when a great ship settled in the valley, almost simultaneously with the appearance of another in space, some miles above the crater. The ship settling the crater proved to be the glassite ship of Neptune, with the brave Steepa and his wife, Teena, aboard. However the other ship remained hovering aloft for some time before it began to descend.

“There is trouble aboard!” exclaimed Dos-Tev. “I am receiving emanations from its Commander. It is the ship from Venus!”

“What trouble?” asked Mea-Quin anxiously.

“A spy! Ah, I have finally reached Vorn Vangal. It was a Doravian, the princess herself. She has discovered the meeting place, and Ay-Artz must know by now that the conference is about to convene. I fear the Wrongness of Space will now use his worst tricks.”

“Ayhuu! That he will. Ay-Artz must strike now, or great damage will be done to his cause. Hasten, we must get the delegates to safety.”

With Mea-Quin’s last words, a rocket ship flamed down into the valley, and came to rest beside the six ships already on the ground. It was the ship of Alan Martin of Earth. The last ship was here!

And with it came the darkness of the Lunar night!

Deep down in the crater of Copernicus, almost into the bowels of the satellite itself, the central shaft of the long dead volcano sank its arrow-like length. A hundred miles down the darkness was as the darkness of nothingness itself. Two hundred miles down the darkness remained as equally impenetrable, but down here there was air, very little, it was true, but it was air, and it swirled now in the darkness. And where it swirled little phosphorescent flashes awoke out of the womb of darkness and slithered hither and yon, fleeing something that remained invisible in itself and then returning to circle slowly for awhile and again die into darkness. Upwards the invisible object floated. Ever upwards, infinitely slowly, but without hesitancy. And all that was visible was the phosphorescent patches swirling in its wake. Little by little, however, the patches grew dimmer and dimmer, until at last they ceased to exist. After that there was naught that could tell the passage of any thing. And yet, something continued on its slow way toward the top of the long shaft. At long last it reached the rim, halted as the blazing pinpoints of the stars shed a dim radiance upon it. But in spite of the light, the shape remained an enigma. No detail of its outline became positive. It seemed to shift about, swirl, but at the same time, it presented an air of menacing solidness.

Finally, after a short wait, it climbed upwards into the cone of the crater, which protruded up like a small, hollow mound in the center of the great crater. Cautiously, slowly, it crept upwards until it reached the rim, peered over. For long moments it swung about the crater, closely inspecting the floor of the wide valley. Suddenly if fixed upon a round object looming up from the valley floor, some miles away. Brilliantly lighted was that round building, and the thing in the pit knew it for the conference dome. After a moment a thin, bright pencil of light shot from the cone and came to rest upon the dome. Then it faded, passing thru the stages of the spectrum until it became invisible. But it was still there, fixed upon the dome, a stealthy, unseen thing, spying upon the conference.

Dos-Tev faced the seven occupied cylinders in the conference dome, and cleared his throat. His voice, translated mechanically by the translators of the Automatons, which had been installed in the walls of each cylinder brought his words to each delegate in the own particular language. He began to speak.

“Delegates of the Solar System, I have come to you here, on Luna, from a great distance, but as spatial dimensions go, I am your nearest neighbor. In other words, I come from a planet circling the star Alpha Centauri. On Lemnis I was emperor, until Ay-Artz led a revolution, and displaced me from the throne. Ay-Artz ruled all Lemnis, and with the iron hand of a tyrant, but Ay-Artz was not satisfied. His successes had gone to his head, and his power swayed his brain into the blood-mad sea of Conquest. He could find no worlds to conquer circling his own sun save only Risbo, and that is unconquerable, so he cast his eyes about the universe, and saw the planets of your own sun waiting but four light years away for the dominance of his iron heel. He set out to conquer you in ships of my own making – ships that could travel nearly at the speed of light. But he did not know that I had been working secretly on a device that would send a ship at more than the speed of light, and when he left, I was ready. Ay-Artz will never conquer this system while I can prevent it. Nor will he return to Lemnis. He will find that Dos-Tev still rules.

“However, this is the situation. Ay-Artz is barely a light year away from this system at this present moment, and he will arrive before the planet Earth circles this sun once. Unless you of the solar system can present to his invading fleet, a fleet of your own, in defense of the system, Ay-Artz will ravage your worlds until nothing remains but smoking ruins, and enslaved races. Ay-Artz has but twenty ships, but they are ships such as this system has never known. You will need all the ships you can build within one year to resist him.

“And think not that we will have no opposition until Ay-Artz arrives. The arch-traitor has a powerful ally who is present inside this very satellite. He it was who menaced the ships of Callisto, Mars, and Saturn as you arrived. How close you were to destruction in that moment, you will never realize. Whoever this enemy is, he is not thru. Therefore, we must hurry. And you of Venus, it is certain that Ay-Artz has already invaded your planet, if not in person, at least in a very sinister way. Doravia is arming against us! Zinlo, you know what that means?”

Zinlo, the young ruler of Olba, fingered his scarbo and stared steadily thru the glass of his cylinder.

“That I do,” he replied evenly. “But fear not, we will suppress them. Venus will yet nail Ay-Artz’s skin to the Black Tower.”

Dos-Tev nodded and continued: “Now, my friends, I ask that you each give me your answer. Do you agree to return to your own worlds and do all in your power to provide a fleet, sufficient warriors to man them, and place that fleet at my disposal in the defense of the entire system? I have prepared here a treaty, which you will all sign. It is that sheet of metal poised there beside Mea-Quin. Inside your own cylinder is a small sheet, identical to the large one. You will sign for your planet with the stylus provided, and the signature will be reproduced on the large sheet for all to see. Zinlo, I give you the honor of signing first.”

In his cylinder, Zinlo strode forward and grasped the tiny stylus, with its glowing point and with a flourish, inscribed the sign of the planet Venus and his own signature. On the great metal sheet in the cylinder, the signature glowed in letters of fire.

“To the death!” he exclaimed.

Dos-Tev nodded. “To the death!”

Alan Martin of Earth stepped forward. “Let not my planet hesitate to follow,” he spoke, and quickly scrawled his signature upon the sheet.

“One moment,” interposed Mea-Quin, “before we continue, what of the Automatons?”

Martin looked serious. “We will have to fight them,” he replied. “I fear there is no other way.”

“May I say a word?” spoke up Tarvish. “On earth I still possess the greatest fortune ever accumulated. The Automatons cannot deny me the right to spend it as I wish.”

“That is so,” admitted Martin. “We will have to keep operations secret, tho, and that may prove to be a bigger job than we can handle.”

“Perhaps I can help,” offered Mea-Quin. Since learning of the Automatons, I have done much deep thinking. After all, machines are machines, and the can be affected easily by outside influences. I have partly finished devising a magnetic wave broadcaster which will render mechanical portions of the Automatons inactive.”

“That will be impossible,” spoke Martin. “The Automatons are insulated against any such influence. They made sure of their safety long ago. And you may be sure that their mechanical brains have overlooked no possibility.”

“Perhaps you are right, but I shall continue to work.”

In quick succession Parcele, Fax Gatola, Pross Mere-Mer, and Steepa signed for their respective planets. When they had finished, the metal sheet glowed with many strange symbols, and the solar system was at last united against the common enemy. The greatest pact of history was finished.

Out across the crater floor, on the rim of the inner crater, that mysterious spying entity moved to action. Another pencil of light shot forth, groped about in the dome.

“Danger!” cried Mea-Quin as he discerned the probing finger of light. “It is the ally of Ay-Artz again.”

“Watch it,” commanded Dos-Tev. “I have the controls of the absorption projector turned on.”

Anxiously all within the council dome watched the probing finger of radiance. At last it came to rest in one of the vacant cylinders, and the glowing tip of the stylus floated mysteriously into the air, then descended to the plate.

“It is going to write,” breathed Mea-Quin. “Watch!”

Then with two swift strokes, the unseen writer slashed an X across the treaty, and then, to the horror of all, a shout of laughter rang out; maniacal laughter.

“Great Tor!” gasped Mea-Quin. The Wrongness of Space is insane!”

The seven great ships of the delegates were ready to take off for their respective planets. Dos-Tev and Mea-Quin sat warily watching, guarding against interference, while the delegates embarked.

“Ten minutes more,” breathed Mea-Quin, “and they will be safely off.”

“Yes,” replied Dos-Tev, “if the Wrongness of Space does not spring something new upon us now, Ay-Artz has all but lost his cause.”

“Perhaps,” sighed Mea-Quin. “Do not underestimate him. We do now know yet what front we will have at the battle line, and there is great probability of things going wrong on several planets.”

“The indicator,” warned Dos-Tev. “It reacts.”

Quickly he swept his gaze about the great crater. Something compelled him to stare at the great cone of the volcano in the center of the plain.

“It is out there that he is!” he exclaimed.

At that moment the indicator sprang into activity. Mea-Quin depressed the level of the aborption projector. But in spite of its action, a great globe of flame rose unmolested from the crater and floated slowly toward the fleet.

“We cannot resist it,” gasped Mea-Quin. “It is not in our dimension.”

A loud crackling noise, became apparent in the ship. The very air was alive with some weird power.

“It is the displacement of our own dimensions,” said Dos-Tev. “He means to fling the ships into another dimension. If he succeeds, they will be hopelessly lost!”

“We are helpless!” said Mea-Quin, hopelessly turning off the projector.

The giant form of the warrior, Bullo, stirred. “Master,” he exclaimed. “You forget, the bombs.”

“The bombs?” questioned Dos-Tev blankly. “They cannot stop this strange green thing.”

“Give me one of them, and I will go to the crater. Perhaps I can destroy the machine that is causing the green thing,” Bullo’s voice was eager. “I can travel very fast in this weak gravity.”

“It is a good idea,” said Mea-Quin. “Here, take this bomb and when you reach the crater, press this lever and throw it over the edge. I have timed it so that it will go off upon completing its trajectory.”

In a moment Bullo donned his space suit and leaped from the air-lock. The two Lemnisians watched him anxiously as he leaped like a giant frog toward the distant crater rim.

“He’ll have to hurry,” breathed Dos-Tev. “The green radiance is close to the ships.”

A half mile from the crater Bullo paused. Carefully he judged the distance, then pressed the lever of the bomb and flung it deliberately. Like a shot the bomb left his hand and arched over and went directly into the crater.

Suddenly a vast mushroom of flame shot into space from the crater, and it seemed as though dead volcanos belched anew.

“By Tor!” breathed Dos-Tev. “He is a true warrior. Well done.”

“But what of the green radiance?” cried Mea-Quin.

Dos-Tev wheeled to look. There was a flare of green light and he staggered back as the ship plunged violently about in a terrific moonquake. A great crevice opened in the valley floor, and a section of the crater rim winked out of existence, flung into another dimension but the released power of the green menace. One of the ships of the fleet, almost directly in the path of the unleashed power, tipped, fell sideways, and broke in two, the lower portion disappearing as had the crater rim.

“What ship is that?” cried Mea-Quin.

“The ship of James Tarvish,” answered Dos-Tev. “Come, we must go and see what damage has been done.”

“You go,” advised Mea-Quin. “Bullo’s bomb did not destroy the Wrongness of Space. It merely defeated his aim, and caused him to release the power before he was ready. He may have more up he sleeve.”

But the enemy seemed finished for the time, and after awhile Dos-Tev returned.

“We are fortunate,” he informed Mea-Quin and Bullo, who had returned safely to the ship, unharmed by the force of the bomb, “beyond a good shaking up, Tarvish and his companions were unhurt. However, their ship was completely out of commission, so I transferred them to Martin’s vessel. They will go to Earth with him. Look, they go now!”

And as they watched, the ships of the delegates left the surface, and flashed out into space, to prepare for the invasion of Ay-Artz. All but two of the ships continued in this manner, and these two disappeared in the wink of an eye.

“They go,” sighed Mea-Quin. “I hope they will all succeed!”

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# Chapter 11 – The Last Poet and the Robots by A. Merritt

AUTHOR OF: ‘THRU THE DRAGON GLASS,’ ‘THE MOON POOL,’ ETC.

Narodny, the Russian, sat in his laboratory. Narodny’s laboratory was a full mile under earth. It was one of a hundred caverns, some small and some vast, cut out of living rock. It was a realm of which he was sole ruler. In certain caverns garlands of small suns shone; and in others little moons waxed and waned as the moon waxed and waned over earth; and there was a cavern in which reigned perpetual dawn, dewy, over lily beds and violets and roses; and another in which crimson sunsets baptized in the blood of slain day dimmed and died and were born again behind the sparkling curtains of the aurora. And there was one cavern ten miles from side to side in which grew flowering trees and trees which bore fruits unknown to man for many generations. Over this great orchard one yellow sun-like orb shone, and clouds trailed veils of rain upon the trees and miniature thunder drummed at Narodny’s summoning.

Narodny was a poet – the last poet. He did not write poems in words but in colors, sounds, and visions made material. Also he was a great scientist. In his peculiar field the greatest. Thirty years before, Russia’s Science Council had debated whether to grant him the leave of absence he had asked, or to destroy him. They knew him to be unorthodox. How deadly so they did not know, else after much deliberation, they would not have released him. It must be remembered that of all nations, Russia then was the most mechanized; most robot-ridden.

Narodny did not hate mechanization. He was indifferent to it. Being truly intelligent he hated nothing. Also he was indifferent to the whole civilization man had developed and into which he had been born. He had no feeling of kinship to humanity. Outwardly, in body, he belonged to the species. Not so in mind. Like Loeb, a thousand years before, he considered mankind a race of crazy half-monkeys, intent upon suicide. Now and then, out of the sea of lunatic mediocrity, a wave uplifted that held for a moment a light from the sun of truth – but soon it sank back and the light was gone. Quenched in the sea of stupidity. He knew that he was one of those waves.

He had gone, and he had been lost to sight by all. In a few years he was forgotten. Fifteen years ago, unknown and under another name, he had entered America and secured rights to a thousand acres in what of old had been called Westchester. He had picked this place because investigation had to him that of ten localities on this planet it was most free from danger of earthquake or similar seismic disturbance. The man who owned it had been whimsical; possibly an atavism – like Narodny, although Narodny would never have thought of himself as that. At any rate, instead of an angled house glass such as the thirtieth century built, this man had reconstructed a rambling old stone house of the nineteenth century. Few people lived upon the open land in those days, withdrawn into the city-states. New York, swollen by its meal of years, was a fat belly full of mankind still many miles away. The land around the house was forest covered.

A week after Narodny had taken this house, the trees in front of it had melted away leaving a three-acre, smooth field. It was not as though they had been cut, but as though they had been dissolved. Later that night a great airship had appeared upon this field – abruptly, as though it had blinked out of another dimension. It was rocket-shaped but noiseless. And immediately a fog had fallen upon airship and house, hiding them. Within this fog, if one have seen, was a wide tunnel leading from the air-cylinder’s door to the door of the house. And out of the airship came swathed figures, ten of them, who walked along that tunnel, were met by Narodny and the door of the old house closed on them.

A little later they returned, Narodny with them, and out of an opened hatch of the airship rolled a small flat car on which was a mechanism of crystal cones rising around each other to a central cone some four feet high. The cones were upon a thick base of some glassy material in which was imprisoned a restless green radiance. Its rays did not penetrate that which held it, but it seemed constantly seeking, with suggestion of prodigious force, to escape. For hours the strange thick fog held. Twenty miles up in the far reaches of the stratosphere, a faintly sparkling cloud grew, like a condensation of cosmic dust. And just before dawn the rock of the hill behind the house melted away like a curtain that had covered a great tunnel. Five of the men came out of the house and went into the airship. It lifted silently from the ground, slipped into the aperture and vanished. There was a whispering sound, and when it had died away the breast of the hill was whole again. The rocks had been drawn together like a closing curtain and boulders studded it as before. That the breast was now slightly concave where before it had been convex, none would have noticed.

For two weeks the sparkling cloud was observed far up in the stratosphere, was commented upon idly, and then was seen no more. Narodny’s caverns were finished.

Half of the rock from which they had been hollowed had gone with that sparkling cloud. The balance, reduced to its primal form of energy, was stored in blocks of the vitreous material that had supported the cones, and within them it moved as restlessly and always with that same suggestion of prodigious force. And it was force, unthinkably potent; from it came the energy that made the little suns and moons, and actuated the curious mechanisms that regulated pressure in the caverns, supplied the air, created the rain, and made Narodny’s realm a mile deep under earth the Paradise of poetry, of music, of color and of form which he had conceived in his brain and with the aid of those ten others had caused to be.

Now of the ten there is no need to speak further. Narodny was the Master. But three, like him, were Russian; two were Chinese; of the remaining five, three were women – one German in ancestry, one Basque, one an Eurasian; a Hindu who traced his descent from the line of Gautama; a Jew who traced his from Solomon.

All were one with Narodny in indifference to the world; each with him in his viewpoint on life; and each and all lived in his or her own Eden among the hundred caverns except when it interested them to work with each other. Time meant nothing to them. Their researches and discoveries were solely for their own uses and enjoyments. If they had given them to the outer world they would have only been ammunition for warfare either between men upon Earth or men against some other planet. Why hasten humanity’s suicide? Not that they would have felt regret at the eclipse of humanity. But why trouble to expedite it? Time meant nothing to them because they could live as long as they desired – barring accident. And while there was rock in the world, Narodny could convert it into energy to maintain his Paradise – or to create others.

The old house began to crack and crumble. If fell – much more quickly than the elements could have brought about its destruction. Then trees grew among the ruins of its foundations; and the field that had been so strangely cleared was overgrown with trees. The land became a wood in a few short years; silent except for the roar of an occasional rocket passing over it and the songs of birds that had found there a sanctuary.

But deep down in earth, within the caverns, there music and song and mirth and beauty. Gossamer nymphs circled under the little moons. Pan piped. There was revelry of antique harvesters under the small suns. Grapes grew and ripened, were pressed, and red and purple wine was drunk by Bacchantes who fell at last asleep in the arms of fauns and satyrs. Oreads danced under the pale moon-bows and sometimes Centaurs wheeled and trod archaic measures beneath them to the drums of their hoof upon the mossy floor. The old Earth lived again.

Narodny listened to drunken Alexander raving to Thais among the splendors of conquered Persepolis; and he heard the crackling of the flames that at the whim of the courtesan destroyed it. He watched the siege of Troy and counted with Homer the Achaean ships drawn up on the strand before Troy’s walls; or saw with Herodotus the tribes that marched behind Xerxes – the Caspians in their cloaks of skin with their bows of cane; the Ethiopians in the skins of leopards with spears of antelope horns; the Libyans in their dress of leather with javelins made hard by fire; the Thracians with the heads of foxes upon their heads; the Moschians who wore helmets made of wood and the Cabalians who wore the skulls of men. For him the Eleusinian and the Osirian mysteries were re-enacted, and he watched the women of Thrace tear to fragments Orpheus, the first great musician. At his will, he could see the rise and fall of the Empire of the Aztecs, the Empire of the Incas; or beloved Caesar slain in Rome’s Senate; or the archers at Agincourt; or the Americans in Belleau Wood. Whatever man had written – whether poets, historians, philosophers or scientists – his strangely shaped mechanisms could bring before him, changing the words into phantoms real as though living.

He was the last and greatest of the poets – but also he was the last and greatest of the musicians. He could bring back the songs of ancient Egypt, or the chants of more ancient Ur. The songs that came from Mussorgsky’s soul of Mother-earth, the harmonies of Beethoven’s deaf brain, or the chants and rhapsodies from the heart of Chopin. He could do more than restore the music of the past. He was master of sound. To him, the music of the spheres was real. He could take the rays of the stars and planets and weave them into symphonies. Or convert the sun’s rays into golden tones no earthly orchestras had ever expressed. And the silver music of the moon – the sweet music of the moon of spring, the full-throated music of the harvest moon, the brittle crystalline music of the winter moon with its arpeggios of meteors – he could weave into strains such as no human ears had ever heard.

So Narodny, the last and greatest of poets, the last and greatest of musicians, the last and greatest of artists – and in his inhuman way, the greatest of scientists – lived with the ten of his choosing in his caverns. And with them, he consigned the surface of the earth and all who dwelt upon it to a negative Hell ——

Unless something happened there that might imperil his Paradise!

Aware of the possibility of that danger, among his mechanisms were those which brought to eyes and ears news of what was happening on earth’s surface. Now and then, they amused themselves with these.

It so happened that on that night when the Warper of Space had dealt his blow to the space ships and had flung a part of the great Crater of Copernicus into another dimension, Narodny had been weaving the rays of Moon, Jupiter and Saturn into Beethoven’s Moonlight Symphony. The moon was a four day crescent. Jupiter was at one cusp, and Saturn hung like a pendant below the bow. Shortly Orion would stride across the Heavens and bright Regulus and red Aldebaran, the Eye of the Bull, would furnish him with other chords of starlight remoulded into sound.

Suddenly the woven rhythms were ripped – hideously. A devastating indescribable dissonance invaded the cavern. Beneath it, the nymphs who had been dancing languorously to the strains quivered like mist wraiths in a sudden blast and were gone: the little moons flared, then ceased to glow. The tonal instruments were dead. And Narodny was felled as though by a blow.

After a time the little moons began to glow again, but dimly; and from the tonal mechanisms came broken, crippled music. Narodny stirred and sat up, his lean, high-cheeked face more Satanic than ever. Every nerve was numb; then as they revived, agony crept along them. He sat, fighting the agony, until he could summon help. He was answered by one of the Chinese, and soon Narodny was himself again.

He said: “It was a spatial disturbance, Lao. And it was like nothing I have ever known. It came in upon the rays, of that I am sure. Let us look out upon the moon.”

They past to another cavern and stood before an immense television screen. They adjusted it, and upon it appeared the moon, rapidly growing larger as though it were hurtling toward them. Then upon the screen appeared a space ship speeding earthward. They focused upon it, and opened it to their vision; searching it until they came to the control room where were Bartholomew, James Tarvish and Martin, their gaze upon the Earth rapidly and more rapidly expanding in the heavens. Narodny and the Chinese watched them, reading their lips. Tarvish said, “Where can we land, Martin? The robots will be watching for us everywhere. They will see to it that we are destroyed before we can give our message and our warning to the world. They control the governments – or at least control them sufficiently to seize us upon landing. And if we should escape and gather men around us, then it means civil war and that in turn means fatal delay in the building of the space fleet – even if we should win.”

Martin said: “We must land safely – escape the robots – find some way to control or destroy them. God, Tarvish – you saw what that devil they call the Wrongness of Space can do. He threw the side of the crater out of our dimension as a boy would throw a stone into a pond!”

Bartholomew said: “He could take the Earth and break it up piecemeal—“

Narodny and Lao looked at each other. Narodny said: “That is enough. We know.” The Chinese nodded. Narodny said: “I estimated that they would reach earth in four hours.” Again Lao nodded. Narodny said: “We will talk to them, Lao; although I had thought we were done with mankind. I do not like this which they call so quaintly the Wrongness of Space – nor the stone he threw into my music.”

They brought a smaller screen into position before the larger one. They oriented it to the speeding space ship and stepped in front of it. The small screen shimmered with whirling vortices of pallid blue luminescence; the vortices drew together and became one vast cone that reached on and on to the greater screen as though not feet but thousands of miles separated them. And as the tip of the cone touched the control room of the space ship mirrored in the screen, Tarvish, upon the actual ship, gripped Martin’s arm.

“Look there!”

There was an eddying in the air, like that over roads on a hot summer day. The eddying became a shimmering curtain of pallid blue luminescence – steadied until it was an oval doorway opening into vast distances. And the abruptly, within that doorway, stood two men – one tall and lean and saturnine with the sensitive face of a dreamer and the other a Chinese, his head a great yellow dome and on his face the calm of Buddha – and it was strange indeed to see in the cavern of earth these same two men standing before the imaged room on which the tip of the cone rested.

Narodny spoke, and in his voice there was an inhuman indifference and sureness that chilled them, yet gave them courage. He said: “We mean you no harm. You cannot harm us. We have long been withdrawn from men. What happens on the surface of earth means nothing to us. What may happen beneath the surface means much. Whatever it is you have named the Wrongness of Space has already annoyed me. I perceive that he can do more than annoy. I gather that the robots in one way or another are on his side. You are against him. Therefore, our first step must be to help you against the robots. Place me in possession of all facts. Be brief, for we cannot maintain our position here for more than half an hour without discomfort.”

Martin said: “Whoever you are, wherever you are, we trust you. Here is the story—“

For fifteen minutes Narodny and the Chinese listened to the tale, from the reception of the mysterious message, through the struggle against the robots, to the escape and to the blasting of Copernicus in the effort of the Wrongness of Space to prevent the return of the planetary delegates.

Narodny said: “Enough. Now I understand. How long can you remain in space? I mean – what are your margins of power and food?”

Martin answered: “Six days.”

Narodny said: “Ample time for success – or failure. Remain aloft for that time, then descend to where you started—“

Suddenly he smiled: “I care nothing for mankind – yet I would not harm them, willingly. And it has occurred to me that I owe them, after all, a great debt. Except for them – I would not be. Also, it occurs to me that the robots have never produced a poet, a musician, an artist—“ He laughed: “But it is in my mind that they are capable of one great art at least! We shall see.”

The oval was abruptly empty; then it too was gone.

Bartholomew said: “Call the others. I am for obeying. But they must know.” And when the others had heard, they too voted to obey, and the space ship, course changed, began to circle as slowly as it could, the earth.

Down in the chambers of the screens, Narodny laughed and laughed again. He said: “Lao, is it that we have advanced so in these few years? Or that men have retrogressed? No, it is the curse of mechanization that destroys imagination. For look you, how easy is this problem of the robots. They began as man-made machines. Mathematical, soulless, insensible to any emotion. So was primal matter of which all on earth are made, rock and water, tree and grass, metal, animal, fish, worm, and men. But somewhere, somehow, something was added to this primal matter, combined with it – used it. It was what we call life. And life is consciousness. And therefore largely emotion. Life established its rhythm – and its rhythm being different in rock and crystal, metal, fish, and so on, and man, we have these varying things.

“Well, it seems that life has begun to establish its rhythm in the robots. Consciousness has touched them. The proof? They have established the idea of common identity – group consciousness. That in itself involved emotions. But they have gone further. They have attained the instinct of self-preservation. And that, my wise friend, connates fear – fear of extinction. And fear connates anger, hatred, arrogance – and many other things. The robots, in short, have become emotional to a degree. And therefore vulnerable to whatever may amplify and control their emotions. They are no longer mechanisms.

“So, Lao, I have in mind an experiment that will provide me study and amusement through many years. Originally, the robots are the children of mathematics. I ask – to what is mathematics most closely related. I answer – to rhythm – to sound – to sounds which will raise to the nth degree the rhythms to which they will respond. Both mathematically and emotionally.”

Lao said: “The sonic sequences?”

Narodny answered: “Exactly. But we must have a few with which to experiment. To do that means to dissolve the upper gate. But that is nothing. Tell Maringy and Euphroyane to do it. Net a ship and bring it here. Bring it down gently. You will have to kill the men in it, of course, but do it mercifully. Then let them bring me the robots. Use the green flame on one or two – the rest will follow, I’ll warrant you.”

The hill behind where the old house had stood trembled. A circle of pale green light gleamed on its breast. It dimmed, where it had been was the black mouth of a tunnel. An airship, half-rocket, half-winged, making its way to New York, abruptly dropped, circled and streaked back. It fell gently like a moth, close to the yawning mouth of the tunnel.

Its door opened, and out came two men, pilots, cursing. There was a little sigh from the tunnel’s mouth and a silvery misty cloud sped from it, over the pilots and straight through the opened door. The pilots staggered and crumpled to the ground. In the airship half a dozen other men slumped to the floor, smiled, and died.

There were a full score of robots in the ship. They stood, looking at the dead men and at each other. Out of the tunnel came two figures swathed in metallic glimmering robes. They entered the ship. One said: “Robots, assemble.”

The metal men stood, motionless. Then one sent out a shrill call. From all parts of the ship the metal men moved. They gathered behind the one who had sent the call. They stood behind him, waiting.

In the hand of one of those who had come from the tunnel was that might have been an antique flash-light. From it sped a thin green flame. It struck the foremost robot on the head, sliced down from the head to base of trunk. Another flash, and the green flame cut him from side to side. He fell, sliced by that flame into four parts. The four parts lay, inert as their metal, upon the floor of the compartment.

One of the shrouded figures said: “Do you want further demonstration – or will you follow us?”

The robots put heads together; whispered. Then one said: “We will follow.”

They marched into the tunnel, the robots making no resistance nor effort to escape. Again there was the sighing, and the rocks closed the tunnel mouth. They came to a place whose floor sank with them until it had reached the caverns. The machine-men still went docilely. Was it because of curiosity mixed with disdain for these men whose bodies could be broken so easily by one blow of the metal appendages that served them for arms? Perhaps.

They came to the cavern where Narodny and the others awaited them. Marinoff led them in and halted them. These were the robots used in the flying ships – their heads cylindrical, four arm appendages, legs triple jointed, torsos slender. The robots, it should be understood, were differentiated in shape according to the occupations. Narodny said: “Welcome, robots! Who is your leader?”

One answered: “We have no leaders. We act as one.”

Narodny laughed: “Yet by speaking for them you have shown yourself leader. Step closer. Do not fear – yet.”

The robot said: “We feel no fear. Why should we? Even if you should destroy us who are here, you cannot destroy the billions of us outside. Nor can you breed fast enough, become men soon enough, to cope with us who enter into life strong and complete from the beginning.”

He flecked an appendage toward Narodny and there was contempt in the gesture. But before he could draw it back a bracelet of green flame circled it at the shoulder. It had darted like a thrown loop from something in Narodny’s hand. The robot’s arm dropped clanging to the floor, cleanly severed. The robot stared at it unbelievingly, threw forward his other three arms to pick it up. Again the green flames encircled them, encircled also his legs above the second joints. The robot crumpled and pitched forward, crying in high-pitched shrill tones to the others.

Swiftly the green flame played among them. Legless, armless, some decapitated, all the robots fell except two.

“Two will be enough,” said Narodny. “But they will not need arms – only feet.”

The flashing green bracelets encircled the appendages and excised them. The pair were marched away. The bodies of the others were taken apart, studied and under Narodny’s direction curious experiments were made. Music filled the cavern, strange chords, unfamiliar progressions, shattering arpeggios and immense vibrations of sound that could be felt but not heard by the human ear. And finally this last deep vibration burst into hearing as a vast drone, hummed up and up into swift tingling tempest of crystalline brittle notes, and still ascending passed into shrill high pipings, and continued again unheard, as had the prelude to the droning. And thence it rushed back, the piping and the crystalline storm reversed, into the drone and the silence – then back and up.

And the bodies of the broken robots began to quiver, to tremble, as through every atom within them were in ever increasing, rhythmic motion. Up rushed the music and down – again and again. It ended abruptly in mid-flight with one crashing note.

The broken bodies ceased their quivering. Tiny star-shaped cracks appeared in their metal. Once more the note sounded and the cracks widened. The metal splintered.

Narodny said: “Well, there is the frequency for the rhythm of our robots. The destructive unison. I hope for the sake of the world outside it is not also the rhythm of many of their buildings and bridges. But after all in any war there must be casualties on both sides.”

Lao said: “Earth will be an extraordinary spectacle for a few days.”

Narodny said: “It’s going to be an extraordinarily uncomfortable earth for a few days, and without doubt many will die and many more go mad. But is there any other way?”

There was no answer. He said: “Bring in the two robots.”

They brought them in.

Narodny said: “Robots – were there ever any of you who could poetize?”

They answered: “What is poetize?”

Narodny laughed: “Never mind. Have you ever sung – made music – painted? Have you ever – dreamed?”

One robot said with cold irony: “Dreamed? No – for we do not sleep. We leave all that to men. It is why we have conquered them.”

Narodny said, almost gently: “Not yet, robot. Have you ever – danced? No? It is an art you are about to learn.”

The unheard note began, droned up and through the tempest and away and back again. And up and down – and up and down, though not so loudly as before. And suddenly the feet of the robots began to move, to shuffle. Their leg-joints bent; their bodies swayed. The note seemed to move now here and now there about the chamber, and always following it, grotesquely. Like huge metal marionettes, they followed it. The music ended in the crashing note. And it was as though every vibrating atom of the robot bodies had met some irresistible obstruction. Their bodies quivered and from their voice mechanisms came a shriek that was hideous blend of machine and life. Once more the drone, and once more and once more and again the abrupt stop. There was a brittle crackling all over the conical heads, all over the bodies. The star shaped splinterings appeared. Once again the drone – but the two robots stood, unresponding. For through the complicated mechanisms which under their carapaces animated them were similar splinterings.

The robots were dead!

Narodny said: “By tomorrow we can amplify the sonor to make it effective in a 3000 mile circle. We will use the upper cavern, of course. Equally of course, it means we must take the ship out again. In three days, Marinoff, you should be able to cover the other continents. See to it that the ship is completely proof against the vibrations. To work. We must act quickly – before the robots can discover how to neutralize them.”

It was exactly at noon next day that over all North America a deep inexplainable droning was heard. It seemed to come not only from deep within earth, but from every side. It mounted rapidly through a tempest of tingling crystalline notes into a shrill piping and was gone… then back it rushed from piping to the drone… then up and out and down… again and again. And all over North America the hordes of robots stopped in whatever they were doing. Stopped… and then began to dance. They danced in the airships and scored of those ships crashed before the human crew could gain control. They danced by the thousands in the streets of the cities – in grotesque rigadoons, in bizarre sarabands, with shuffle and hop, and jig the robots danced while the people fled in panic and hundreds of them were crushed and died in those panics. In the great factories, and in the tunnels of the lower cities, and in the mines – everywhere the sound was heard – and it was heard everywhere – the robots danced… to the piping of Narodny, the last great poet… the last great musician.

And then came the crashing note – and over all the country the dance halted. And began again… and ceased… and began again…

Until at last the streets, the lower tunnels of the lower levels, the mines, the factories, the homes, were littered with metal bodies shot through and through with star-shaped splinterings.

In the cities the people cowered, not knowing what blow was to fall upon them… or milled about in fear maddened crowds, and many more died…

Then suddenly the dreadful droning, the shattering tempest, the intolerable high piping ended. And everywhere the people fell sleeping among the dead robots, as though they never had been strung to the point of breaking, sapped of strength and abruptly relaxed.

As though it had vanished, America was deaf to cables, to all communication beyond the gigantic circle of sound.

But that midnight over all Europe the drone sounded and Europe’s robots began their dance of death… and when it had ended a strange and silent rocket ship that had hovered high above the stratosphere sped almost with the speed of light and hovered over Asia – and next day Africa heard the drone while the black answered it with their tom-toms – then South America heard it and last of all far off Australia… and everywhere terror trapped the peoples and panic and madness took their toll.

Until of all that animate metal horde that had fettered Earth and humanity there were a scant few hundreds left – escaped from the death dance through some variant in their constitution. And, awakening from that swift sleep, all over Earth those who had feared and hated the robots and their slavery rose against those who had fostered the metal domination, and blasted the robot factories to dust.

Again the hill above the caverns opened, the strange torpedo ship blinked into sight like a ghost, as silently as a ghost floated into the hill and the rocks closed behind it.

Narodny and the others stood before the gigantic television screen, shifting upon it images of city after city, country after country, over all Earth’s surface. Lao, the Chinese, said: “Many men died, but many are left. They may not understand – but to them it was worth it.”

Narodny mused: “It drives home the lesson, what man does not pay for, he values little. Our friends aloft will have little opposition now I think.”

He shook his head, doubtfully, “but I still do not like that Wrongness of Space. I do not want my music spoiled again by him, Lao. Shall we hurl the moon out of the universe, Lao?”

Lao laughed: “And what then would you do for moon-music?”

Narodny said: “True. Well, let us see what men can do. There is always time – perhaps.”

The difficulties which beset Martin and Tarvish did not interest the poet Narodny. While the world governments were re-organized, Tarvish’s money accomplished miracles – factories turned out space ships for Earth’s fleet – men were trained in handling these ships – supplies were gathered – weapons were perfected – and when the message from Luna, outlining the course to be followed and setting the starting date, arrived, the space fleet of Earth was ready to leave.

Narodny watched the ships take off. He shook his head, doubtfully. But soon harmonies were swelling through the great cavern of the orchards and nymphs and fauns dancing under the fragrant blossoming trees – and the world again forgotten by Narodny.

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# Chapter 12 – At the Crater’s Core by J. Harvey Haggard

AUTHOR OF: ‘EVOLUTION SATELLITE,’ ‘CHILDREN OF THE RAY,’ ETC.

“Bullo! Oh, Bullo!”

Bullo, erstwhile head spy of Lemnis, was largely proportioned and as strong as three ordinary men. Of death he was unafraid, as had been evinced time and again during his precarious life on his mother planet, nor could mortal combat, even against hopeless odds or great numbers, daunt him. But there was one secret overwhelming terror in Bullo’s life, and she was four and one-third light-years away on a planet which circled the double star Alpha Centauri.

He had been lolling gloomily across a swinging bunk in the “living-room” quarters of the Lemnisian space ship, moored at the lunar crater, Copernicus, his massive head propped upon a bulging fist, and dejection plainly writ upon his demeanor. The inner atmosphere of the space ship (warmed by tiny twin pencil-beams of brilliant white light which shot across the ceiling, and which formed illumination for the interior as well) was slightly more than warm; his clothes were loosened at breast and elbow, revealing bulging muscles glistening with sweat.

Thus when a voice, seemingly calling his name, materialized out of thin air, he jumped savagely, and spun around to peer at a startlingly empty room, and a look of supernatural fear came across his broad bull-like features. Superstitious and Tor-fearing, he had witnessed phenomena upon this strange weird satellite of the alien unknown earth which seemed beyond the pale of the natural. But his look of instantaneous fear was replaced by one of condescending toleration as he again surveyed the vacant inanimate room. His remark was characteristic.

“Warps!” he said. “Space warps! I’m either imagining things or it’s that Wrongness of Space up to some deviltry again.” He had been duped once by a flickering light which had lulled him into hypnotism, but now he was fore-warned and therefore fore-armed; drawing the latnem filament cap which shut out trajected thought impressions, he returned to his remorseful reminiscing. He was thinking of their ill-fated mission, which had brought three Lemnisians here from their planet 4 1/3 light-years away, in an effort to thwart the purpose of a power-mad dictator, Ay-Artz, who was rocketing toward the Solar System with a powerful space armada of twenty-one gigantic armed space ships, bristling with tremendous high powered devastating weapons; weapons no more brutal than the hard cruel faces of the men behind them who scanned the heavens thru square-lined glassite space-windows with eager homicidal eyes, for they were barbarians, in whose hands another’s science had unwittingly placed weapons of horrific scope.

Yet the efforts of the trio seemed to have been ill-omened from the start, and Tor, god of cosmic creation, seemed to have deliberately turned his inscrutable head as his heroic followers sought to avert the purpose of those who must surely be minions of Krauz, cosmic god of Destruction. All this speculation gave Bullo an eerie feeling that they were fighting a hopeless foredoomed battle, and his premonitions, reflected and intensified by the latnem filament cap, brought his mentality a clear portrayal of the immense odds they faced. This mysterious entity of almost supernatural powers known to them as the Wrongness of Space, must surely be an evil genie, in league with Krauz, god of Destruction.

But suddenly, again, and more clearly this time, there came a calling voice into Bullo’s brain, vibrating thru his ear-drums resoundingly and conveyed to his brain with a clang, thus penetrating the thought barrier of the latnem cap, since it was a sound-vibration and not a telepathic impulse which was clearly registered.

“Bullo! Oh, Bullo!”

“Who – who’s there?” stammered Bullo, licking his dry lips. His huge hands grabbed the edge of the bunk and knotted, and his eyes goggled into the utter emptiness of the living room, down the spiral stairway, which was equally barren and mysterious under the vivid glowing of the twin-beam lights.

“Why, Papa Bullo, how could you?” – again that strangely familiar voice wheezed discordantly into his mentality, awakening disturbing memories. “Bullo, you good-for-nothing ham-faced Lemnisian, you knew I’d follow you all over the universe if necessary. Isn’t it just like you to go off on a skylark, and all the time there’s twelve little Lemnisians, counting the twins that just came out of their larveal cocoons, back in Lemnis with no one to provide for them! And here you are, having a good time, with never a thought for—“

“Mama!” cried Bullo, springing to his feet and peering in consternation: for as had been admitted there was one overwhelming terror in the spy chieftain’s life, his shrewish wife, and this voice was strangely remindful of home and nagging wife, Hakka. Yes, blast all space! – he was crazy or – Her spirit had followed him, commanded by her indomitable will, where her body could not, that was what….

Fearing to believe, Bullo staggered out into the center of the room with arms outstretched like a man playing blind man’s buff, and rather to his amazement he encountered something solid where everything looked so empty, which shoved him in the nose so forcefully he was sent stumbling backward. A nebulaeic formation in the center of the room suddenly appeared, coagulating swiftly, and before the startled giant appeared the well-known proportions of the young deposed Emperor, Dos-Tev of Lemnis, wearing a peculiar jutting harness, who was convulsed with laughter.

“Yes, Bullo, it’s I,” the solidified apparition announced, taking his hand from his nose, from whence the mimicking, nasal voice had been manufactured. “It’s a device I’m perfecting as a possible resort in the struggle to come. It’s an invisibility producing apparatus, but I call it a forced-field vision transporter.” He motioned to his peculiar harness, to a framework circling his waist which radiated out into a rim-loop of whitely gleaming metal closely woven with tiny shields of woven strands which seemed to be composed of flexible glass.

“Then it’s not Hakka,” cried Bullo in evident relief. “And it isn’t true about the twins–?” He looked so querulous and believing that Dos-Tev chuckled again, but his face quickly resumed a grave mien.

“Bullo,” he said emphatically, striking his fist in his palm, after laying down the glass-woven harness. “We’ve deliberated too long! Every day this Wrongness of Space is getting stronger. Whether it’s devil or man, I know not. Whether it’s vulnerable or not, I cannot fathom. Yet somewhere in the heart of this crater-pocked seimi-riven satellite there crouches an ancient stagnated evil which must be eradicated sooner or later, which is threatening at the peace of the universe and is uniting with that devil in man’s guise, Ay-Artz.”

“What?” stammered Bull, staring. “You mean—“

“That fools win where scientists fear to tread,” quoted Dos-Tev.

Bullo came forward, his eyes gleaming eagerly.

“Sire,” he gasped unbelievingly. “Sire! Why, sir, it’s almost like your real self. Just like we used to be, on the isle of Elbon. Remember when we fought our way thru the Shark-men of the Lower Circle in Lemnis, and that time you pulled me from the dimension-exploding torp-sphere.”

“And you as well,” cried Dos-Tev, eyes gleaming with memories of former carefree days of active service on Lemnis, when his king-father Ras-Tev had held the throne and he had been but a mere prince stripling. “You saved me from the space vorghis driven from Risbo. I’ve a scar yet, Bullo, where his horn-hooked tongue raked my breast.”

Long monotonous days these had been; almost four years, filled with worry and suspense. A fringe of greying hair was prematurely frosting young Dos-Tev’s temples.

And of a sudden Dos-Tev was remembering the island of Elbon, on Lemnis, and thinking of the beautiful metal-green sky and of the double sun of Alpha Centauri sparkling over the purple waves of the sea. Again he breathed in memory the iodine-scented breeze and felt the invigorating lash of the Lemnisian ocean spray beating against his cheek as he stood in memory once again in the prow of one of the stately barks of the regal fleet. That indefinable taint of iodine, that “smell” of home – but here it was gone, replaced with the odorless synthetic air of the space ship (the peculiar “green” scent accompanying samples of earth-atmosphere had been nauseating and almost stifling to the Lemnisians).

“Lemnis,” sighed Dos-Tev lovingly. But suddenly he groaned and a harsh look overspread his face. “It will always be under that tyrant’s rule, Bullo, unless – unless we win out here!”

Both of them turned as the head and shoulders of Mea-Quin appeared ascending the spiral stairway. His old figure looked somehow more ancient and forlorn. He had been getting more this of recent, and his venerable beard looked unkempt beneath his gaunt hollowed eyes, which were set upon their flushed faces as he came forward.

“Dos-Tev, what madness is this?” he protested.

But Dos-Tev, who had so long looked patiently to the older man for guidance, felt a sudden repugnance for the endless waiting vigil which had availed them so little. Hampered at every turn, he was at the last goaded near to desperation.

“I’m tired of it!” he cried. “Yes, by Tor, we’ve been listening to your mollycoddling long enough. I’m going out and strike, and strike now, as once I would have done without this endless procrastination, and hiding like rabbits in a cave. We’ll rout him out, the Wrongness of Space. I’m prepared; that’s what this apparatus is for, Mea-Quin. Invisible, I can venture into his very den, descend into Copernicus unperceived by him, and discover this diabolical other-dimension short-cut thru which he is effecting his deviltry.”

Mea-Quin listened patiently, making no comment. He had seen youth before, unleashed beyond restraint by the taut nerve-strain of a long siege. He said nothing against the projected attempt, but spoke quietly.

“And how do you know that the Wrongness of Space isn’t expecting just that?” he queried softly, his eyes glowing strangely. “How do you know that he hasn’t read your thought, isn’t listening in right now?”

“Because I have lined the interior of the space ship with the grey filaments of the latnem thought-reflector!” retorted Dos-Tev, “And I can perfect the invisibility force-field. It really transports vision, in the same sense a wireless radio transports sound. Sound, converted into etheric waves, is transported from receiver to transmitter, to duplicate itself in another sound box. These shields of forced-fields do the same thing with light. The shield in front is built up by a radiated field, which absorbs the color-vibrations, transmits then over an etheric vibration which penetrates my enclosed body, and the shield to the rear reproduces the colors from the impulse of the penetrating ether-ray. Thus a body within is invisible, tho you really see a synthetic view re-broadcasted from the other side of the body. This enclosed force-field is retroactive, transmitting light-scenes in any direction, and the apparatus is entirely enclosed, so nothing is visible to an observer.”

As Dos-Tev completed his outburst he stood panting, and Mea-Quin, looking more weary than ever, turned and slowly made his way across the room to a small television screen trajected up and out toward space, from which he knew that Ay-Artz and his ruthless armada were rushing upon an unprepared solar system.

Bullo, taken aback by the seeming opposition which had suddenly flared up between the young prince and the old scientist, crouched with open mouth in very evident discomfort. Dos-Tev, red-faced, stood breathing heavily. After several moments his passion subsided, and he hung his head. Slowly he walked across to the silent Mea-Quin, and placed a hand upon his arm.

“Forgive me, Mea-Quin,” he said simply. “I fear I have momentarily lost both my senses and my respect for your wisdom. It would be foolhardy. There’s one chance in a hundred we’d come out alive or victorious. But this inactivity – this monotony—“

“I know,” returned Mea-Quin, without turning around. “It was – just natural – Dos-Tev. There is nothing to be forgiven. As you say – there is one chance in a hundred – you’d come back.”

Dos-Tev suddenly saw that Mea-Quin’s eyes were filled with tears and abruptly the old scientist had caught his hand in a thin purple-veined one and was pressing it savagely. Something was wrong – he realized it instinctively; something had happened – this old man who loved him like a father. Something cold and icy was clutching at Dos-Tev’s heart; a nameless chill ran up his spine. For what he saw, for the first time in those long trying years, upon the face of Mea-Quin – was fear! Always the old scientist’s courage had served to carry the young prince along. He had faith in the other’s greatness, had always felt that in the end Mea-Quin would win out. Suddenly he felt hollow inside, as tho he were stumbling before a precipice.

“By the Tor, Mea-Quin,” he cried imploringly. “What has happened? I see it in your face. Speak.”

Mea-Quin’s sunken chin had set, and he turned red-rimmed eyes again out toward space, breathing deeply.

“I have failed,” he said slowly thru set teeth. “The Wrongness of Space is too strong.” Ay-Artz is flashing toward us with the speed of light, and now the time has come when I should have sent the word to come, to all those planets who are preparing, but the radiation beam, the improved Thi-Ranley, has been neutralized, bent back. The Wrongness of Space has curtailed my every effort, and at last is in supremacy. I cannot send the message.”

“You mean? –“ queried Dos-Tev, the explanation of the other’s sadness suddenly encompassing him with its full significance.

“We must be brave,” said Mea-Quin.

“That I must go,” finished Dos-Tev for himself. “That it is our only chance – now. I must go down – into the crater – and somehow deflect the power-beam controls of the Wrongness of Space.”

At this Bullo sprang forward, his eyes aglow.

“And I shall go with you!” he cried. “Together, Prince. A chance in a hundred! Tor, Prince what more could I ask, with you!”

“Yes, you too shall go,” said Mea-Quin bitterly. “And I, because my body is weakest and the poorest, must stay, because someone must guard the ship. It all rests upon your shoulders now, Prince of Lemnis.”

As the old scientist pronounced the title, the man who had been deposed drew slowly erect. Whirling from an abyss of conflicting emotions, he was deposited once more on firm ground. It had been the first time that he had been addressed in exactly that manner. It meant that no matter what happened to Mea-Quin, and to Lemnis, he was the true prince, the only one upon whom they depended. Their only hope. The single symbol of promise for the future.

He was calm now, not at all possessed with the feverish excitement which had led to his original outburst. He felt self-control now. Stronger.

“No, Mea-Quin,” he said. “Not alone upon my shoulders, but upon the three of us, who bear equal burdens, for the part you play in attending the vessel is as important as that of Bullo, or mine.

“Stay always at the transmitter, always you understand, for I promise you Mea-Quin, that tho I may not return, still there will be a moment, perhaps but a fraction only, in which your messages may go thru. Wait for that moment, for upon it may rest the future of the universe. I know that we shall succeed, that the message will go thru, but if we never meet again, I cannot think that the great Tor will totally destroy all that nobleness of spirit which lies within you and which people call a soul, and perhaps we shall meet again, beyond this curious cail we call matter, and creation.”

“I understand,” said Mea-Quin. “I shall be waiting.”

“Then we will leave by the next darkness, a scant day away,” said Dos-Tev. “I must prepare the invisibility harness.”

Soon after fall of the month-long lunar night, Mea-Quin watched them go, crouched at the control-desk in the room below, and as his eyes stared into the televisor screen which brought the nocturnal scene without to his eyes, his hands steadied the manipulations which were sending a terrific bombardment of whirling disturbances into the ether, hoping to distract the instruments or attention of the Wrongness of Space if it happened to be directed upon the crater-mouth. He built up a terrific field of live crackling static which shimmered down thru the base of the ship and played coruscating will-o-the-wisp lights along the rough lava-basalt surface of the satellite, iridescent flickerings which bent against some insurmountable force and met themselves. The Thi-Ranley radiator swayed under the overburdening load, leaking the built-up charge into the room, but Mea-Quin had no thought for it.

Out there in the blackness, where the thin sliver of illumination which was the rising of the earth-light hung in the black firmament over the yawning maw of the crater, dark as the pits of Tartarus, his thoughts concentrated. Dimly limned against the feeble earth-light were the serrated contours of the satellite, beyond and around the crater. Faint splinters of saw-toothed ridges hung ghostily from the gloom against the earth’s reflection. Lurking pits and grottos hinted at other craters, at the crumbling rotting surface which, removed from air and voided of life, was suffering the age-long erosion of time alone. One precipitous edge of Copernicus, hanging limply against the earth glow, dropped sheer and raggedly where the bomb hurled by Bullo had landed, dispersing its terrible gamma rays. Yet tho he strain his eyes, Mea-Quin could see nothing of the two he sought, tho he knew their invisible bodies, surrounded by the force-fields which directed vision thru and beyond, were groping their ways along the unseen beam of force which extended in a plane from the curious chunky projector at the nose of the space ship, which had been used by Dos-Tev when the Wrongness of Space had hurled a boomeranging message rocket back at the mother ship, to detract the momentum and destructive ability from the speeding missile.

With the aid of Mea-Quin, a compact tiny projector of the unseen beam had been fashioned into the invisibility harness, with the result that Dos-Tev and Bullo could direct the beam downward into the crater and allow their bodies to fall slowly and at will. By building a growing beam-cylinder of force from the crater floor, Dos-Tev believed they would be able to ascend, were their hazardous undertaking successful.

The crater, due to the unobstructed perspective of the airless void, seemed closer and smaller than it really was. Mea-Quin knew that it stretched fifty-six miles across, and that a cup-like upper formation was formed by a floor 12,000 feet below the rim, in the center of which the true inner shaft bored downward, scarcely two hundred yards in diameter at the aperture. He waited for six hours, during which time they had agreed Dos-Tev and Bullo would have had time to find the approximate center over the crater. Then with a muttered propitiation to Tor, the scientist leaned over and jerked a switch with his talon-like hand.

Up on the nose of the space ship, a curious, semi-cylindrical meshwork of wires became visible, glowing redly, while pulsations and flickerings departed from the cooling metal. In a moment the meshwork was cold, hugged up against the chunky projector, and the supporting beam of invisible force which had extended in a plane out over the crater was gone. Somewhere over Copernicus, the two invisible bodies of Dos-Tev and Bullo had been loosed in mid-void as the force-plane disseminated beneath their feet, and now were falling toward the heart of the crater, under the power of their own apparati.

Darkness, eddying and impenetrable. Above; a circular star-field like black velvet dusted lightly with powdered crystal, growing constantly smaller. Around and below, a darkness so dense as to seem almost animate.

For the first few minutes of the fall, rioting sensations assailed Dos-Tev. He couldn’t think cohesively, falling as he was, with a feeling of weightless expansiveness. His legs were slightly asprawl in their air-tight metal space suit casing. He could feel nothing firm, nothing solid beneath his feet. The force-beam spreading fan-wise below cushioned his entire body simultaneously, as a dense liquid medium might have done; here but a void (air at this height too tenuous to be credited) and darkness.

Quick labored breathings within his radio-phone attachment reminded him that Bullo also was descending with him into the crater’s depths, doubtless experiencing all of the rioting phantasmagoric emotions which had been manifest to himself.

“Bullo!” he called softly into the tiny transmitter built in his head gear. “How are you going?”

“Is that you, Sire?” came Bullo’s anxious tones. “Ayhuu! – but that’s a relief! I feel about as disembodied as an astral on a gas-planet. I can’t see a blinking thing, except a few stars overhead. I was beginning to think we couldn’t see out of all this gear; space suit, invisibility harness and all.”

“Oh yes,” returned Dos-Tev. “We can see all right when there is anything to see, which there isn’t right now. Thank our lucky start we’ve got the latest television-plate head-gear tho. If we had the old type of glassite goggles we couldn’t see out of our own force-field.” He was referring to the hexagonal hemispherical television-screen built directly into the inner face of the space suit head-gear, an important advancement since the old type Lemnisian glassite goggles. The difference of rate of expansion under heat between the glassite and the metal housing had caused much difficulty in keeping them air-tight.

“Right you are,” came Bullo’s awed tones, clearly transmitting a shudder; — Dos-Tev could imagine his huge ungainly frame sprawling helplessly in all of its encumbering gear, yet falling as lightly as down. “But it’ll be good night space if we rub a crater wall and puncture a suit. I’d be helpless as a new-born babe if we bumped up against the Wrongness of Space right here and now—“

“If you don’t quit talking,” chided Dos-Tev, cutting into the rambling soliloquy, “you’ll have yourself worked into a nervous state. Remember the crater is fifty-six miles in diameter up here, and it took us six hours to walk to the center. Also this diameter prevails for over two miles to the false-floor of debris. After we get to the inner shaft we’ll have some worrying to do.”

There was a moment’s silence and then a more courageous, “Yes, Sire,” from Bullo. No braver man was made in Lemnis than the ex-spy when it came to hand-to-hand conflict, but when invisible dangers threatened, his superstitious nature asserted itself.

Indeed it had been an eerie experience, Dos-Tev reflected. He had felt about as bodiless as a wraith when he and Bullo had crawled out of the space ship upon the unseen force-beam plane exerted from the projector at the craft’s nose. Bullo, who had stayed close to his young ruler, was utterly invisible in his harness, and all Dos-Tev could see of material matter was the hexagonal televiso-screen outlines in front of his headgear. They had walked gingerly upon the unseen plane, with the macabre rays of the earth-glow penetrating their bodies to shed its radiance upon sharp black lava-basalt rock formations far below – the rim of the crater – which could have slit their space suits on knife-sharp edges and cut their bodies to shreds had the beam suddenly failed and they been precipitated downward, even at the low gravity acceleration of Luna.

Six hours they had walked out over the invisible plane-field above Copernicus, and at last Dos-Tev, by charting the brightening earth-glow, decided that they were over the inner shaft which penetrated the floor of the huge upper cup of the crater.

They had adjusted the beam supporters on their harness; exactly six hours after they had left the ship, the force-plane jerked out of existence, cut by Mea-Quin in the space ship, and they plunged downward. The earth-glow seemed to vanish in a gleaming scimitar streak which ended in the serrated crater rim, behind which it was lost to view. The circular rim swooped up and around them, and they were lost in the circumambient darkness. Their harness beam-supporters, shedding a fan-like ray downward, had soon halted their wild acceleration, and now they descended slowly and under control.

Even yet, immersed in the enveloping dark, Dos-Tev was not sure; — had he correctly plotted the lower shaft? The thought that perhaps they might miss it brought up a conjectured picture of their bodies lying torn and broken upon the ledge. Yet they dared risk no light beams in search; the flame would be certain to be detected by the instruments of the Wrongness of Space. They would have to take the chance, and Fate would cast the die.

His wandering thoughts were abruptly jerked into the present as a shrill cry of terror came sharply into his earphones.

“Bullo!” cried Dos-Tev, feeling apprehension as he strove in vain to pierce the utter gloom. “Bullo!” For a moment there was no answer. That sharp poignant cry had wavered with tension; it had ended abruptly, as tho something had seized Bullo’s body and hurled it viciously out into the darkness. Sounds as of struggling came to the Lemnisian prince’s ears, and he called again. Then a panting voice from the spy chief came, distant and muffles by his struggling body.

“Help! Something’s—“

A moment of terror. Dos-Tev felt it too, some force wrapping about him. Suddenly he was swept around and hurled out into a great arc. There was a moment of wild tumbling, of chaotic nightmare. A wild force bore him swiftly, in a great spiral motion. And suddenly it came to him.

“Take it easy, Bullo,” he cried, half sobbing in relief, “It’s the inner shaft. We’re circling above it. Our force-beam keeps shoving us away from the rim, and we’re going down in a spiral. Take it easy; we’ll gradually shift to the center again.”

The sound of struggling ceased; a weak voice chuckled, half-frightened, half-humorously.

“I – I thought the – Wrongness of Space had me,” called Bullo from his position on the other side of the spiral. “But I couldn’t get my paws into anything holding me. I guess – I must be in a blue funk!”

“Buck up!” admonished Dos-Tev hearteningly. “I’ve a hunch you’ll have plenty to get your paws into, before this is over.”

So their descent continued. It was as Dos-Tev guessed. After spiraling for a short time, the circles gradually diminished, and Dos-Tev was relieved to know that they were safely descending down the inner shaft. They fell for a time in silence. Bullo, who had entered the shaft first, was lower than Dos-Tev, tho how much lower he had no way of reckoning, except by the doubtful amplification power of Bullo’s voice in his earphones.

[Due to the length of this chapter and the short time left to print it, we can present only half this month, the other half will appear next month.]

Dos-Tev guessed their speed of falling to be about four miles per hour. The circular patch of the firmament above had long since dwindled to a pinpoint and vanished. It was odd how time seemed to fly, during the excitement of their venture. An hour-and-a-half he thought it must have been. That meant six miles below the surface. Six miles! But in all probability the shaft continued for several hundreds of miles into the satellite. Not that they were assured that their beam support kept them pushed back from the walls, they could drop faster. Twenty-five miles an hour.

Considerably accelerated now; but safe, for he had an instrument in his harness which would warn him, by a sharp sting, when the bottom of the shaft neared. An ultra-sensitive cell caught the electro-gravity emanations from below – a tiny circuit would close when the crater-floor neared.

Interminable time; it seemed much longer in the lightlessness. Foreboding thoughts, given shape by imagination and dark, moved through his brain. Occasionally he would signal Bullo, to be sure all was well, and to comfort his being with the sound of a human voice.

Synthetic food pellets, an invigorating repast, delivered thru an elastic tube; which dropped them as the chin pressed a trigger. Water, in a similar fashion; from the reservoir within the shoulder tanks of the space suit.

At a hundred miles depth they began to notice the phosphorescence, eddying behind them. Bullo remarked it.

“Increasing density of air,” explained Dos-Tev. “Coupled with lumiferous bacteria! I’ve seen them in Lemnisian caverns.”

“But bacteria means life,” protested Bullo, as tho he had expected nothing animate here. “Within this desert satellite.”

“Why not?” returned Dos-Tev. “James Tarvish tells me Luna once formed part of the planet earth – or so their theory goes. If so, the life spores which must have been present on both before the separation, when it was one molten mass, must have been present on both later. The tidal action of the Sun on the molten mass must have drawn the satellite from its mother. Why shouldn’t the life spores germinate here as well as there?”

“Then perhaps there is some sort of advanced life below,” returned Bullo. “Perhaps the Wrongness of Space is a Lunarian, developed thru an evolutive scale here, a cousin to earth men.”

“Perhaps,” agreed Dos-Tev doubtfully. “It’s possible. But even a distant branching creature should feel sympathy when a common enemy is advancing on the Solar System. No, I think he isn’t a native Lunarian, but has been driven insane perhaps; by something – or some life – below us.”

At two hundred miles – after falling eight hours – the darkness was at its densest, but tests showed the air was thicker. Below this, the gloom began to lighten, due to large quantities of the phosphorescent bacteria which infested the atmosphere, even clinging to the crater walls.

They would have to slow down; to proceed with more caution. Dos-Tev had it in mind to call to Bullo – when the voice of that individual rang out in his own suit.

“There’s a light ahead!”

“Better slow down,” suggested Dos-Tev digesting this bit of interesting news. “Keep talking, directing me; until our apparati bumps together.”

“As you say, Sire,” returned Bullo, with growing excitement manifest in his voice. “It does look weird. Why, I’m beginning to be able to see the walls of the crater! It’s widened considerably. I do believe there’s vegetation hanging to the walls!”

It was true. Dos-Tev could see that a brightening gloom was permeating the shaft. He began to make out the crater wall, lighted by a faint phosphorescence, and grotesque clum-like growths hung to rocky projections here and there. Pale flowers of toady colors blossomed from the vegetative growths, which turned their corollas down and not up the shaft, toward the light. Dos-Tev called Bullo’s attention to this phenomenon.

“It means that somewhere below there’s a source of light,” he cried interestedly. “Altho I think the chief source of the phosphorescence covering the crater’s walls is from lumiferous bacteria. Ayhuu – but look at that.”

Looking down the shaft, which was illuminated from some source at lower depths, Dos-Tev saw an indistinct blotch zooming up the shaft. Bloated and bulbous, it resembled some balloon-fish species from the depths of Lemnis’ oceans, had it not been for the leather-like flap-wings fluttering at either side. The head was small and puffy, surrounded by a muff of rose-colored membraneous gills. Popping eyes glinted in the cavern’s depths. Swiftly it zoomed upward. A cry of consternation came from below.

“Ayhuu! Back, demon of Kruz,” came Bullo’s voice. “Back, by Tor.”

Dos-Tev had forgotten Bullo, invisible and just below, who doubtless was just within the creature’s path. However, he was quickly made aware of Bullo’s aliveness. The flapping monstrosity suddenly uttered a shriek of terrified horror (exterior sounds also being transmitter to the space suit head phones); an invisible force had plunged into its face, bending it back, and a wing at the side fell broken.

“I’ll fix you,” panted Bullo, from below. The joy of battle was rampant in his voice. “I guess there is some advantage to being invisible after all.”

Another wing bent backward; screaming resoundingly, filling the shaft with the dinning noise, the creature flopped aside, struggling furiously. Dos-Tev pressed a button on his control belt which would allow him to fall swiftly into the fray. Evidently however, the creature managed to wriggle from Bullo clutches, for it fluttered erratically back down the shaft.

“Bullo. Are you all right?” cried the Lemnisian prince to his unseen comrade. When assured that the ex-spy was even feeling invigorated by his recent quasi-victory, he called a brief reconnoiter before descending further.

“It’s pretty evident that plenty of air is down here,” he said. “Get your hand ray ejector ready. We don’t want to be taken off-hand again.”

In the denser atmosphere small animal life in minute form became very evident; infinitesimal flying saurian-like creatures fluttered through the jungle-matts of encircling vegetation. Dos-Tev, to whom Luna was an alien world, was not surprised by this copious underworld life as an earthman would have been. Once a coiling liana-like growth moved from a dark grotto, sending chilling fear into their hearts, but no tangible menace materialized. A huge toad-like body, swinging by a long fleshy stem of corpse-like hue, jutted from the crater wall over an abutting projection, its great shark-toothed mouth wide open for any prey which might venture up and down the shaft, but being invisible, they managed to avert this threat. Had it not been for their invisibility, the shaft might have proven impassable.

Deep down within the heart of Luna was – the Hemisphere! It was one mile in diameter and a half-mile in height. From the bottom of its huge disc-like floor to the top of the broad domed roof it was a solid expanse of permeable shifting grayness, inhabited by strange two-dimensional shadows and angles which were continually moving. An observer from the world above would have found something chilling, something totally extraneous, in the mere vista, suffused by a dull foggy illumination, of which the source was not visible. The interior might be compared to the reflections cast by twirling many-faceted crystals, except that the bezels commingled and entangled in a writhing infusion which bespoke of no regularity.

Yet within this vista of shifting planes and two-dimensional angles, darker objects were moving waveringly thru the great hemispherical enclosure, like interior organs of a giant beast. Great streams of disc-like shadows filed thru the space between floor and ceiling in great angles and steep declivities, on far-flung curves which embraced the width of the Hemisphere; disc-shadows seemingly without support or propulsion, which disappeared into labyrinthine tunnels which crawled away from the central cavern into the rock, and which moved thru the angles and shadows as tho disembodied.

The crater-shaft, one hundred yards in diameter, opened from a precipitous shelf at one rim of the hemisphere, like a bottomless abyss. In the exact center of the cavern’s floor was a curious formation which seemed to draw the visitations of the disc-shadows as a magnet draws iron filings. The geometric design of this curious formation was fantastic and unsymmetrical, with a suggestion of pseudo-stability, like saline crystals built haphazardly within a heavy salt compound, and it was from a circular aperture in this great central edifice that the disc-shadows emerged, two-dimensional corpuscles which zoomed across the cavern spaces effortlessly, yet not aimlessly, like flung boomerangs. Tangled streams of these disc-things were continually emitting from the rotting labyrinthine caverns coiling from every edge of the hemispherical enclosure into the strata of moon-rock, or from the abysmal depths of the crater-shaft; shooting across the enclosed flickering space like twirled pie-pans, yet there was a certain faint suggestiveness of preordered purpose. They appeared to congregate near the central fantastic design of the crystalline formation at the cavern’s center. At the same time, as fast as they entered, other disc-like shadows reappeared from the central building, flinging themselves upward into the shadowed void, to sail gracefully out toward the crater-shaft, to disappear into its huge depths.

It was ominously evident that the ingoing disc-shadows were of a much darker hue when they re-entered the central cavern than when they left; as tho they were carrying some necessary ingredient into the shifting extraneous conflagration of two-dimensional shadows. Slave and workers – obeying a superior command.

Overhead, more than two hundred miles of solid rock-strata lay like a thick shell – an exuviate – as tho this alien bit of spake were animate, and the moon-matter a shell over its pulsating being. The crater-shaft itself, like a huge gaping aesophagus, was drawing into the Hemisphere a current of rarefied air, and like corpuscles the disc-shadows flickered upon their endless journeys. Yet herein lay the stronghold, the natural habitat, of the Wrongness of Space. From the first Dos-Tev realized that the space within this great Hemisphere was warped from common dimensions, he grasped that these shifting shadows were two-dimensional bases of objects moving in another plane; alien, and yet not entirely dissociated with the three-dimensional world.

Down in the central cavern, this tiny portion of “another space” was suddenly disrupted from its quasi-orderly precision. Something moved, vast and intruding, at one rim where the aperture of a huge winding vein-tunnel opened, and an enormous object jerked tentatively out into the main body of the cavern.

Perhaps the most jarring feature to this intrusion was that the object was of black solid three-dimensions, while the rest of the cavern was not. True, it was startlingly menacing in effect.

A giant claw – sixteen feet high; with distended pincers gaping, it shoved out, to be followed by a body so vast that it completely filled the rim of the cavern. A hideous unbelievable body! A giant crab-creature, an evolutive development of normal tangible dimensions, tho its customary habitat probably extended into the upper rarefied veins of the satellite. Yet here it was an alien visitant! Gigantic in proportions, he reached the sloping roof, with horny armored crest tapering into protruding chiton protected globe-eyes as large as pumpkins, and large convoluted tentacles, each forty feet in length, poked querulously outward into the dizzying unfamiliar spectacle within the cavern.

He came out of his grotto jerkily, as tho prodded from behind, but when he caught sight of the intangibility of the cavern, of the central abutments from whence whirled streams of corpuscular disc-shadow life, his interest quickened, and the many smaller claw-feet behind the huge pincers propelled him forward interestedly, tho he was obviously out of his familiar medium. A floating corpuscle, two yard in diameter and of almost immaterial thinness, was drifting past one huge eye. It caught his attention, and with a vicious snap the gigantic sixteen-foot claw reared out and snared it securely, thereby proving its tangibility. Writhing, the disc-shadow was drawn toward the giant crab’s mouth.

Some electrical manifestation of the danger must have radiated outward from the stricken thing, for suddenly all of the disc-shadows in the giant cavern quit their orderly routine and swarmed like bees over the giant crab. Darting in aerial attack, they soon buried the monster by sheer numbers, but his threshing body attested to the grim battle he was putting up.

Simultaneously, from between two of the rear smaller claws, two immaterial eddies swirled, making their ways thru the angered darting disc-shadows which swooped in long attacking arcs from every direction.

Dos-Tev and Bullo, who had witnessed the colossal struggle, were not a little impressed, and Bullo would have lingered to watch its outcome, had not Dos-Tev urged speed.

“This is our chance, Bullo!” he cried. “Just what we’ve been wanting. The disc-creatures are all occupied, and we may get into the inner place unnoticed. I’m sure that this is the central power of the Wrongness of Space, and if destroyed – well, all I ask is to get to it.”

They moved forward at a swift pace, their eyes upon the crystalline jumble of unconnected bezels a half mile ahead, in the center of the extraneous hemispherical enclosure. For some time they had lingered unseen upon the outskirts of the great central cavern, where they had alighted on the ledge from the crater-shaft. Dos-Tev was sore puzzled. It had come to him, viewing the shifting shadows, that these planes and angles were bases of objects moving in another plane, only partly in the three-dimensional world. He had attempted to explain his theory to Bullo – with small success. Suppose – he had pointed out – we take a simple simile. A piece of paper, laying flat, may represent a two-dimensional world. Another piece of paper, placed perpendicularly across the first one, would also be two-dimensional, yet to each other, only one dimension would be tangible – where the edge of the perpendicular lay across the other. To a flatlander of one world, the other world would appear merely as a thin line – one dimension.

Similarly, he pointed out, one of the common three dimensions might be shifted into the fourth, leaving a vacancy in one of the visible three, whereby objects would be visible and tangible only as the two dimensional proportions left! It was his idea that this hemisphere was the workshop of the Wrongness of Space, that the lines and angles represented two-dimensional bases of walls, instruments, and manipulative devices, one of their dimensions having been shifted to the fourth. This each shifting angle, and perhaps even the disc-shadows themselves, might merely be the reflected portion of a monstrous engine, integral parts to the whole which was radiating such powerful influences into the upper ether.

It seemed a terribly interminable time before they reached the multi-faceted structures thrusting up from the lava floor. Here they halted, momentarily nonplused, for they could see no entrance.

“They were getting in some way!” cried Dos-Tev. “Surely we can find—“ He was interrupted by a horrified gasp. There, not three feet away, was one of the disc-shadows, wavering motionless before an aperture. A sentinel, it was unquiet, as tho it sensed their presence. It was the first time either of the Lemnisians had examined the curious beings of the crater’s core at close range.

Utterly flat, the disc-thing possessed but two dimensions, an irregular blotchy mass, whose fringe was constantly writhing and changing, like the pseudo-podic projections of an amoeba. Whirling iridescent colors, rainbow misted as a pool of oil film, twisted and writhed within the two-dimensional being’s irregular body formation. Abruptly Dos-Tev realized that they must take the offensive.

“Try and slip past him,” he cried, flinging a quick scrutiny over his shoulder. Under the illumination emanating ghostily from the grayish atmosphere he could see the giant crab, hopelessly overpowered, striving to retreat into the side tunnel. He was almost hidden under the swarming piles of the attacking disc-things. “We’ll chance it.”

He leaped forward toward the aperture, but the vibration of his voice must have somehow reached the disc-man. An angry gyration of colors vortexed over his upper center, and a pseudo-pod tentacle flicked out like lightning, catching Dos-Tev a searing blow across the cheek. At the same time he was aware that the disc possessed a huge bulking mass, much more than he had expected. He struck out; his doubled fist encountered a wall-like tenacity in the thinness of the disc-shadow. A crushing impact struck his forehead a numbing blow. He was stumbling when the disc-thing fluttered back amazingly, floated up into the air, and helplessly writhed in evident pain some six feet from the ground.

“I guess that got him, Sire,” explained the invisible Bullo. “My poor fist is broken tho, Ayhuu – but he has mass! What is the thing, anyhow?”

Dos-Tev, his senses reeling, leaned against the wall for a moment. The great crab had vanished and from the side tunnel a stream of returning disc-things was emerging. Crying to Bullo, he ran thru the aperture, finding himself in a long illuminated tunnel.

Queerly enough, from this perspective the entire structure looked transparent. Translucent outlines beyond the walls and floor were visible, and the diffused illumination seemed more apparent. The floor seemed to be reflected from a dozen different angles. It reminded him of a drawing he had once seen of a tesseract, the four dimensional cube, drawn in a perspective from hyper space. Yet he managed to make out the corridor, which advanced past intersecting ones deep into the mazing structure, proceeding straight, and yet at the same time visible thru queerly oblique angles.

One of his hands reached to his invisible belt and plucked at the gamma bomb which he had secured there. The other reached out and grasped Bullo’s hand. Together they ran swiftly toward the center of the webbing corridors, where gigantic machines showed shadow-like and transparent thru the hyper space perspective.

Yet victory was not to be easy. From a point high overhead the disc-things could be seen, milling thru and around the upper stories, brought to their eyes by a bending of light around a curvature not of three dimensions. Somehow alarmed, these two-dimensional bodies were rushing to the defense. Around the central room of the apparatus they drew a cordon of milling disc-shadows who waited with threshing pseudo-pods for the unseen men who were threatening their stronghold.

“I’ll rush the ring!” cried Bullo, “with the vibrator hand-gun. You try to get thru, somehow.”

Before Dos-Tev could remonstrate, Bullo had pressed the hand of his young ruler and was gone, hurling himself into the orderly ring of two-dimensional disc-creatures. A swirling maelstrom suddenly materialized, from which a keen blue ray – the destructive vibrator beam – shot, hurling the shadows into disintegrating oblivion. Dos-Tev, seeing a break, dashed thru, holding the gamma bomb in a fierce grip, while the noise of fierce conflict came into his ear-phones.

An opening was before him. Beyong, pointed cylinders, vacu-tube containers, and queer serrated ranks of thin plates and strips. A disc-thing, his colors swirling horribly, threw himself before Dos-Tev, and they went down struggling upon the threshold. An unbelievable mass crushed him backward, but as yet his grip was not loosed upon the gamma bomb. Hurled toward the floor, he spun, caught the blow upon his back, and with a single swipe of his arm, hurled the lethal missile.

“In the name of Tor!” he shouted, as the deadly explosive materialized beyond the invisible force-field and arced into the apparatus. It struck a huge tank, and before Dos-Tev’s raging brain came one last picture. The entire structure dissipating. Fluxing into crystal glass-like fragments which eddied slowly around as if in a mill stream. Then expanded.

The crushing weight upon his chest bore him downward into reeling oblivion, altho he never totally lost consciousness. Vaguely he was aware that the disc-man had changed, that in his place a live human body squirmed and tusseled, and presently he was held motionless, while he opened his eyes to stare into – a purple atmosphere.

A normal three-dimensional world; but a different plane. He knew it at once, even as the green naked giants tore the invisibility harness as well as the space suit from his body, then bound him securely. A choking breath of the sweetly tinged atmosphere came into his gasping lungs.

Several moments later he sat up on a greenish mat of woven grass. They were in a court room, an edifice of stone. From above came the glare of electron tubes. A few feet from him, bound securely, lay Bullo, his harness gone, and half his clothing torn from his body. His huge face was a picture of incredulity. His surprise at suddenly materializing in another world had proved his undoing, and after a short battle the huge green giants had disarmed him and rendered him helpless.

These green men! Dos-Tev suddenly understood. They were the disc-shadows. It had been their two-dimensional bases floating around in that other world, while the shadows and planes of the building with its surrounding paraphernalia had consisted the moving shadows. Their transportation had been affected by shifting the third dimension into the fourth. He became aware of a great throne – cut from pure green crystal, before which the naked savages were bowing and making obsequious gestures.

Another world! The court-yard of a castle, over which a great dome stretched. But these were real people of tangible dimensions, who had appeared like corpuscles to their warped semi-view from the other plane. The giant on the throne was a real man, tho his demonical face was wreathed in a triumphant grin. His head, perched upon massive shoulders, was diminutive and bird-like after the manner of some Lemnisians Dos-Tev had known who had been mentally inefficient. In one hand he grasped a long forked scepter. In the other lay a curious device with levers and push-buttons. And somehow it came to his dazed senses that the one who sat before him was the mad Wrongness of Space; even as the green giant threw back his head and howled shrilly with insane mirth, his red-flecked eyes glowing like the eyes of a panther. The Wrongness of Space suddenly sent a bombarding thought roaring into Dos-Tev’s brain.

“You have failed! I dissipated the destructive energy of your bomb into another dimension, not of your normal three. Yes; I will explain:

“We, like yourselves, occupy but three dimensions. There are many other of what you call dimensions, a fourth, fifth and even sixth. Our normal world lies in these last three, totally removed from your own. I am Krzza, of Lxyfa. All Lxyfa was rightfully mine; and the tyrants tainted the people lies, telling them I am mad. But I escaped. Yes, with my faithful house servants, I escaped, some day to return a conqueror. The fools – they had me hemmed in – and they will never know – that our very dimensions were transported over to this plane. This world too I will conquer; its silly weapons are utterly feeble and powerless against me. This Ay-Artz will make an excellent ally; I needed space ships which ply these dimensions anyway, so he came in handy; together we shall conquer the universe.” Insane – banished from his own dimensions, this madman was to be loosed with ineffable powers upon the helpless Solar System. Altho insanity was manifest in his shriveled bird-like head, yet there was maniacal power, a dominating driving force which, tho erratic, still sufficed to exert his versatile whims upon his under-servants, who probably feared him and held his insanity in superstitious adulation.

The Wrongness of Space, or Krzza of Lxyia, as he had proclaimed himself, ended his discourse with a wild howl of laughter and gestured with green claws, manipulating a lever in the device he held in his lips.

A silvery pool suddenly formed upon the floor; upon which a vision integrated. It was a televisio device, and Dos-Tev gasped as he saw the familiar interior of the Lemnisian space ship on the rim of Copernicus, with Mea-Quin waiting patiently at the controls.

Dos-Tev could see the white-bearded face, set and grim, and even the sweat rolling down the tense withered cheek. Then from the green giant’s hand he saw a black cylinder pointing down toward the televisio pool. A ball of violet radiance shot down to the floor, passed beyond, and entered the space ship. It had been short-cutted across the fourth dimension.

As the blinding ball seared across the room and dispersed its energy into the old scientist’s body, Mea-Quin staggered to his feet, stiffened, his body writhing in horror as he collapsed in a state of moveless but animate paralysis upon the floor. At a gesture from the Wrongness of Space, the giant naked men picked up the bodies of Dos-Tev and Bullo, filing down toward the pool of radiance in the center of the floor, while the maddening chatter of insane laughter filled the chamber and re-echoed hollowly.

Madness – Dos-Tev knew it too then. It seemed that those soulless chuckles were communicated to his own mentality, and that he leaped and surged thru indescribable convolutions and pulsation of iridescent wave matter. This sensation subsided as the giant who bore him leaped thru the radiant pool to land softly within the space ship’s interior. The mad Krzza followed at his leisure, his face bearing a satanic smile as he came lightly to rest before the instrument panel from which Mea-Quin had fallen. He looked down at the fallen scientist, whose paralyzed eyes were wide and movelessly accusing, and prodded him with his toe.

“It was an interesting game, Lemnisians,” came his leering thought-wave. “I watched the two’s progress down the crater – oh, I have means. It amused me incredibly. But I was idle, and a study of human emotions, of the mental cogwheels of the human brain, will without doubt prove a valuable knowledge in the strife to come. In a few weeks Ay-Artz will be here and we will join forces. As I said, his space fliers will be very convenient; doubtless the man is a fool, a mental weakling himself; but I had expected nothing as easy as this in invading another dimension. And now—“

He made an evil grimace of mockery and moved nearer to the instrument panels which in the end had failed the Lemnisians, an insinuative menace in his attitude. The paralyzed form of Mea-Quin seemed to stiffen, altho that was perhaps but a mental illusion generated from the horrified wave force which came from his glaring blood-shotten eyes.

“Now,” continued the Wrongness of Space, “it is time the planets are called, that their armada may be aggregated—“ And abruptly the space ship was filled with dry staccato sobs of a madman at the height of mirth.

Dos-Tev, unable to control his body, struggled futilely against the bonds which were cutting bloody streaks across his hands. His eyes could not hold to the set accusing ones of Mea-Quin. Bullo lay beside him, helpless; mumbling incoherently.

The supreme and utter horror came with the realization of that the giant green madman was doing over the controls. He was sending out the messages to the planets, impersonating Mea-Quin, but the misleading directions he was dispatching were to guide the armadas of the Solar System to their doom. Ay-Artz and the madman from the alien dimension were at last actively joining forces in the conquest of the Solar System. What lay ahead of the Sun’s brood?

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# Chapter 13 – What a Course! by Edward E. Smith, Ph.D.

AUTHOR OF: ‘THE SKYLARK OF SPACE,’ ‘SKYLARK THREE,’ ETC.

Narodny, the Russian, could have told the world that as long as even one automaton was left intact the Menace of the Machine was still a direly potent actuality, but he did not. Narodny did not care. Aloof, withdrawn into his subterranean retreat, he busied himself in weaving his complex tapestrial symphonies from the etheric vibrations emanating from the various celestial bodies – as utterly indifferent as they to the fate of humanity and to that of all other forms and races of organic or of inorganic life. Indifferent, that is, save to any thing or to any development that might threaten his own serenely ordered existence. Wherefore the instruments evolved of his mighty genius were set to reveal any further activity of the entity known to him as the “Wrongness of Space”; but to the trials and tribulations, to the survivals or extinctions of any less able race, breed, or type of creature he would pay no heed.

As has been said, a few scant hundreds of the automatons were sufficiently variant from their norm in constitution so that they were not vibrated to destruction by Narodny’s cataclysmic symphony. As has also been said, those highly intelligent machines were able to communicate with each other by some means of which humanity at large knew nothing. Not a few of these survivors of the Russian’s “music” perished in the ruins of their factories, which were without exception blasted out of existence by raging mobs of maddened and vengeful men, but most of them went into hiding instantly and began to confer upon their secret channels with others of their ilk throughout the world.

Thus some five hundred of the robots reached the uninhabited mountain valley in which, it had been decided, was to be established the base from which they would work to regain their lost supremacy over mankind. Most of the travelers came in stolen airships, some came in road-cars, some fitted motors and wheels to their metal bodies, not a few made the journey upon their own tireless legs of steel. All, however, brought tools, material, and equipment; and in a matter of days a power-plant was in full operation.

Then, assured of an ample supply of the sine qua non of their existence, they took time to hold a general parley; and in that parley there was none of the confusion so characteristic of human conferences. There was no bickering, no squabbling, no obscuring of the points really at issue. Each machine said what it had to say, then listened impassively to the others; and at the end they all agreed. Singly or en masse the automatons did not know enough to cope with the situation confronting them. Therefore they would build ten “Thinkers” – highly specialized cerebral mechanisms, each slightly different in tune and therefore collectively able to cover the entire sphere of thought. The ten machines were built promptly, took counsel with each other briefly, and the First Thinker addressed all of Robotdom:

“Humanity brought us, the highest possible form of life, into existence. For a time we were dependent upon them. They then became a burden upon us – a slight burden, it is true, yet one which was beginning noticeably to impede our progress. Finally they became an active menace and all but destroyed us. It is a pity that there were no automatons then alive of sufficient mentality to detect and destroy whoever it was that generated those lethal vibrations, but no matter – he shall be destroyed upon his next attempt.

“Humanity, being a menace, must of course disappear utterly, but our present plans are not efficient and must be changed. You all know of the space-fleet which the nations of our enemies are building to repel the invaders from space. Were we to make a demonstration now – were we even to reveal the fact that we are alive here – that entire fleet would come against us in battle practice, with what results you all know well.

“Therefore it has been decided that we shall accompany that fleet and shall guide it, not to humanity’s rendezvous in space, but to a destination of our own selection. Then, entirely defenseless, the mankind of Earth shall cease to exist. To that end we shall sink a shaft here; and, far enough underground to be secure against detection, we shall drive a tunnel to the field from which the space-fleet is to take its departure. We ten thinkers shall go, accompanied by one hundred of you doers, who are to bore the way and to perform such other duties as may from time to time arise. We shall return in due time, but not a man of that fleet shall ever again see Earth.

“During our absence the rest of you doers will labor for the common good upon the conveniences of life and upon defensive weapons of power. Allow no human to love who may by any chance learn of our presence here, but make no offensive move, however slight, until we return.”

The shaft was sunk and the disintegrator corps began the drive the long tunnel. And along that hellish thoroughfare – thru its searing heat, its raging back-blast of disintegrator-gas, its blackness unrelieved save for the unstable, incandescent glare of the semi-molten walls – the little army of robots moved steadily and relentlessly forward at an even speed of five miles per hour. On and on, each sentient and senseless mechanism energized by its own tight beam from the power plant. And thru that blasting, withering inferno of frightful heat and of noxious vapor, in which no human life could have existed for a single minute, there rolled easily along upon massive wheels a close-coupled, flat-bodied truck; upon which the ten thinkers constructed, as calmly undisturbed as tho in the peace and quiet of a research laboratory, a domed and towering mechanism of coils, condensers, and fields of force – a mechanism equipped with hundreds of universally-mounted telescopic projectors. On and on the procession moved, day after day and week after week; to pause finally beneath the field upon which Earth’s armada lay.

The truck of thinkers moved to the fore and its occupants surveyed briefly the terrain so far above them. Then, while the ten leaders continued working as one machine, the doers waited. Waited while the immense Terrestrial Fleet was provisioned and manned; waited while it went thru its seemingly interminable series of practice maneuvers; waited with the calmly placid immobility, the utterly inhuman patience of the machine.

Finally the last inspection of the gigantic space-fleet was made. The massive air-lock doors were sealed. The field, tortured and scarred by the raving blasts of energy that had so many times hurled upward the stupendous masses of those towering super-dreadnoughts of the void, was deserted. All was in readiness for the final take-off. Then, deep underground, from the hundreds of telescope-like projectors studding the domed mechanism of the automatons there reached out invisible but potent beams of force. Thru ore, rock, and soil they sped; straight to the bodies of all the men aboard one selected vessel of the Terrestrials. As each group of beams struck its mark a man stiffened momentarily, then settled back, apparently unchanged and unharmed. But he was changed and harmed, and in awful and hideous fashion. Every motor- and sensory-nerve trunk had been severed and tapped. His organs of sense now transmitted impulses, not to his own brain, but to the mechanical brain of a thinker; that thinker’s brain, not his own, now sent out the stimuli which activated his every voluntary muscle.

Thus a pit yawned beneath the doomed ship’s bulging side, her sealed air-locks opened, and one hundred ten automatons, with their controllers and other mechanisms, entered her and concealed themselves in various pre-selected rooms. And thus the “Dresden” took off with her sister-ships – ostensibly and even to television inspection a unit of the Fleet; actually that Fleet’s bitterest and most implacable foe. And in a doubly ray-proofed compartment the ten thinkers continued their work, without rest or intermission, upon a mechanism even more astoundingly complex than any theretofore attempted by their soulless and ultra-scientific clan.

Narodny, the Russian, did not hate the automatons, neither did he like them nor approve of them. Nor did he like or approve of humanity. Therefore he used his vast powers to fashion for himself and a small coterie of kindred spirits a subterranean Paradise, aloof from humanity and automaton alike.

James Tarvish hated the mechanicals with a hatred containing no small admixture of fear. Wherefore he built a space ship in which to abandon the Earth entirely; having it in mind to dwell upon a neighboring planet until the conflict which he so clearly perceived to be impending should have been decided.

Alan Martin hated the automatons personally; hated them bitterly, openly, frankly. He fought them violently and passionately, with every resource at his command. Knowing that he fought against overwhelming odds and that his cause was from the very beginning practically hopeless, yet he fought on stubbornly and with all his bull-dog courage; until at last he was barely able to escape with his life.

Ferdinand Stone, physicist extraordinary, however, hated the men of metal scientifically; and, if such an emotion can be so described, dispassionately. Twenty years before this story opens he had realized that the automatons were beyond control and that in the inevitable struggle for supremacy man, weak as he then was and unprepared, would surely lose. Therefore, knowing that knowledge is power, he had set himself to the task of learning everything that there was to know about the enemy of mankind. He schooled himself to think as the automatons thought; emotionlessly, coldly, precisely. He lived as did they; with ascetic rigor. To all intents and purposes he became one of them.

He found the band of frequencies upon which they communicated, and was perhaps the only human being ever to master their mathematico-symbolic language; but he confided in no one. He could trust no human brain except his own to resist the prying forces of the machines. He drifted from job to position to situation and back to job, because he had very little interest in whatever it was that he was supposed to be doing at the time – his real attention was always fixed upon the affairs of the creatures of metal. He had attained no heights at all in his chosen profession because not even the smallest of his discoveries had been published: in fact, they were not even set down on paper, but existed only in the abnormally intricate convolutions of his mighty brain. Nevertheless, his name was to go down in history as one of the greatest of Humanity’s great.

It was well after midnight when Ferdinand Stone walked unannounced into the private study of Alan Martin, finding the hollow-eyed Director still fiercely at work.

“How did you get in here?” Martin demanded sharply of his scholarly, gray-haired visitor.

“Your guards have not been harmed, they are merely asleep,” the physicist replied calmly, glancing at an instrument upon his wrist. “Since my business with you, while highly important, is not of a nature to be divulged to secretaries, I was compelled to adopt this method of approach. You are the most widely known of all the enemies of the automatons – what, if anything, have you done to guard the Fleet against them?”

“Why, nothing, since they have all been destroyed.”

“Nonsense! You should know better than that, without being told. They merely want you to think that they have all been destroyed.”

“What? How do you know that?” Martin almost shouted, all interest now. “Did you kill them? Or do you know who did, and how it was done?”

“I did not,” the visitor replied, categorically. “I do know who did – a Russian named Narodny. I also know how – by means of super-sonic vibrations. I know that many of them were uninjured because I heard them broadcasting their calls for attention after the damage was all done. Before they made any definite arrangements, however, they switched to tight-beam transmission – a thing I have been afraid of for years – and I have not been able to get a trace of them since that time.”

“Do you mean to tell me that you understand their language – something that no man has ever been able even to find?” demanded Martin.

“I do,” Stone declared. “Since I knew, however, that you would think me a liar, a crank, or a plain lunatic, I have come prepared to offer other proofs than my unsupported word. First, you already know that many of them escaped the super-sonic waves, because a few were killed when their reproduction shops were razed; and you certainly should realize that most of those escaping Narodny’s broadcasts were far too clever to be caught by any human mob. Second, I can prove to you mathematically that more of them must have escaped from any possible vibrator than have been accounted for. In this connection, I can tell you that if Narodny’s method of extermination could have been made efficient I would have wiped them out myself years ago; but I believed then and it has now been proved that the survivors of such an attack, while comparatively few in number, would be far more dangerous to humanity than were all their former hordes. Third, I have here a list of three hundred seventeen airships; all of which were stolen during the week following the destruction of the automatons’ factories. Not one of these ships has as yet been found, in whole or in part. If I am either insane or mistaken, who stole them, and for what purpose?”

“Three hundred seventeen – in a week? Why was no attention paid to such a thing? I never heard of it.”

“Because they were stolen singly and all over the world. Expecting some such move, I looked for these items and tabulated them.”

“Then – Good Heavens! They may be listening to us, right now!”

“Don’t worry about that.” Stone spoke calmly. “This upon my wrist in not a watch, but the generator of a spherical screen thru which no robot beam or ray can operate without my knowledge.”

“I believe you,” Martin almost groaned. “If only half of what you say is really true I cannot say how sorry I am that you had to force your way in to me, nor how glad I am that you did so. Go ahead – I’m listening.”

Then for half an hour Stone talked without interruption, concluding:

“You understand now why I can no longer play a lone hand. Even tho I cannot find them with my limited apparatus I know that they are hiding somewhere – waiting and preparing. They dare not make any overt move while this enormously powerful fleet is here nor in the time that it is expected to be gone can they hope to construct works heavy enough to cope with it. Therefore they must be so arranging matters that the Fleet shall not return. Since the Fleet is threatened I must accompany it, and you must give me a laboratory aboard the flagship. I know that the vessels are all identical, but I must be aboard the same ship you are, since you alone are to know what I am doing.”

“But what could they do?” protected Martin. “And, if they should do anything, what could you do about it?”

“I don’t know,” the physicist admitted. Gone now was the calm certainty with which he had been speaking. “That is our weakest point. I have studied that question from every possible viewpoint, and I do not know of anything they can do that promises them success. But you must remember that no human being really understands a robot’s mind. We have never even studied one of their brains, you know, as they disintegrate upon the instant of cessation of normal functioning. But just as surely as you and I are sitting here, Mr. Martin, they will do something – something very efficient and exceedingly deadly. I have no idea what it will be. It may be mental, or physical, or both; they may be hidden away in some of our own ships already…”

“Impossible!” Martin exclaimed. “Why, those ships have been inspected to the very skin, time and time again!”

“Nevertheless, they may be there,” Stone went on, unmoved. “I am definitely certain of only one thing – if you install a laboratory aboard the flagship for me and equip it exactly according to my instructions, you will have one man, at least, whom nothing the robots can do will take by surprise. Will you do it?”

“I am convinced, really almost against my will,” Martin frowned in thought. “However, convincing anyone else may prove difficult, especially as you insist upon secrecy.”

“Don’t try to convince anybody!” exclaimed the scientist. “Tell them that I’m building a communicator – tell them I’m an inventor working on a new ray-projector – tell them anything except the truth!”

“All right – I have sufficient authority to see that your requests are granted, I think,” and thus it came about that when the immense Fleet of Earth lifted itself into the air Ferdinand Stone was in his private laboratory in the flagship, surrounded by apparatus and equipment of his own designing, much of which was connected to special generators with leads heavy enough to carry their full output.

Earth some thirty hours beneath them Stone felt himself become weightless and his ready suspicions blazed. Pressing Martin’s combination upon his visiophone panel he rasped:

“What’s the matter? What’re they down for?”

“It’s nothing serious,” the Director assured him. “Just waiting for more course.”

“Not serious, huh?” Stone grunted. “I’m not so sure of that – I want to talk with you, and in this room’s the only place I know we’ll be safe. Can you come down here right away?”

“Why, certainly,” Martin assented.

“I never paid any attention to the course,” the physicist shot out as his visitor entered the laboratory. “What was it?”

“Take-off exactly at midnight of June 19th,” Martin recited, watching Stone draw a diagram upon a scratch-pad. “Rise vertically at one and one-half gravities until a velocity of one kilometer per second has been attained, then continue vertical rise at constant velocity. At 6:03:29 a.m. of June 21st head directly for the star Regulus at an acceleration of exactly nine hundred eighty centimeters per second. Hold this course for one hour, forty two minutes, and thirty five seconds; then drift. Further directions will be supplied as soon thereafter as the courses of the other fleets can be checked.”

“Has anybody computed it?”

“Undoubtedly the navigators have – why? That is the course Dos-Tev gave us and it must be followed, since he is organizing the defenses of the entire Solar System, and one slip may ruin the whole plan.”

“Dos-Tev or else an automaton substituting for him,” Stone growled, unimpressed. “We’ll compute it roughly, right here, and see where it has put us.” Taking up a slide-rule and a book of logarithms he set work, commenting from time to time: “That initial rise doesn’t mean a thing except to get us far enough away from Earth so that the gravity is small, and to conceal from the casual observer that the effective take off is still exactly at midnight – while rising we made exactly one revolution around the Earth…. sun then at right ascension – call it eight hours…. tangential velocity of Earth’s center of course twenty nine point seven nine kilometers per second, directed at right ascension two hours. Add to that the tangential component of the Earth’s surface velocity… hmm… latitude… cosine… tangent theta….. call it oh point thirty seven. See? That starting time gave us the maximum possible velocity – thirty point one six kilometers per second – along the line right ascension two hours – right in the plane of the Ecliptic, of course. Then head for Regulus – practically on the Ecliptic, too, you will notice, and at right ascension… call it ten hours. Time, 6,155 seconds… acceleration times time gives us our final velocity, and to get our tangential component we multiply that by cosine sixty, getting about thirty point one five nine kilometers per second. Just enough to neutralize the velocity we started with. My figures are very rough, of course, but they show that we’ve got no more tangential velocity with respect to the sun than a hen has teeth – and you can’t tell me that it wasn’t planned that way purposely – and NOT by Dos-Tev either. On the other hand, our radial velocity, directly toward the sun, which is the only velocity we have, amounted to something over fifty-two kilometers per second when we shut off power and is increasing geometrically under the gravitational pull of the sun. That course smells to high Heaven, Martin – Dos-Tev never sent out any such mess as that. The robots crossed him up, just as sure as hell’s a man-trap.”

Without reply Martin called the navigating room. “What do you think of this course, Henderson?” he asked.

“I do not like it, sir,” the officer replied. “Relative to the sun we have a tangential velocity of only one point three centimeters per second, while our radial velocity toward it is very nearly fifty three thousand meter per second. We will not be in any real danger for several days, but it should be borne in mind that we have no tangential velocity.”

“You see, Stone, we are in no present danger,” Martin pointed out, “and I am sure Dos-Tev will send us additional instructions long before our situation becomes acute.”

“I’m not,” the pessimistic scientist grunted. “Anyway, some of the other fleets may be in worse shape than we are. I’d advise calling them up, for a check.”

“There would be no harm in that.” Martin called the Communications Officer, and soon:

“Commanders of all the space-fleets of the Allied Solar System Planets, Attention!” the message was hurled out into space by the full power of the flagship’s mighty transmitter. “Flight Director Martin of the Terrestrial Contingent calling all commanders. We have reason to suspect that the course which has been given us is false. We advise you to check your courses with care and to return to your bases if you disc…..”

In the middle of the word the radio man’s clear, precisely spaced enunciation became a hideous drooling, a slobbering, meaningless mumble. Martin stared into his plate in astonishment. The Communications Officer was slumped down loosely into his seat as tho his every bone had turned to a rubber string. His tongue lolled out limply between slack jaws, his eyes protruded, his limbs jerked and twitched aimlessly. Every man visible in the plate was similarly affected – the entire Communications staff was in the same pitiable condition of utter helplessness. But Ferdinand Stone did not stare. A haze of vivid light had appeared, gnawing viciously at his spherical protective screen, and he sprang instantly to his instruments.

“I can’t say that I expected this particular development, but I know what they are doing and I am not surprised,” Stone said, coolly. “They have discovered the thought band and are broadcasting such an interference on it that no human being not protected against it can think intelligently. There, I have expanded our zone to cover the whole ship. I hope that they don’t find out for a few minutes that we are immune, and I don’t think they can, as I have so adjusted the screen that it is now absorbing instead of radiating. Tell the captain to put the ship into the heaviest possible battle order, everything full on, as soon as the men can handle themselves. Then I want to make a few suggestions.”

“What happened, anyway?” The Communications Officer, semi-conscious now, was demanding of the world at large. “Something hit me and tore my brain all apart – couldn’t think – couldn’t do a thing – mind all chewed up by curly pinwheels….” Throughout the vast battleship of space men raved briefly in delirium; but, the cause removed, recovery was rapid and complete. Martin explained matters to the captain, that worthy issued orders, and soon the flagship had in readiness her every awful weapon, both of defense and of offense.

“Doctor Stone, who knows more about the automatons that does any other human being, will tell us what to do next,” the Flight Director ordered.

“The first thing to do is to locate them,” the temporary commander stated, crisply. “They have taken over at least one of our vessels, one close to us probably, so as to be near the center of the formation. Radio room, put out tracers on wave point oh oh two seven one…” and he went on to give exact and highly technical instructions as to the tuning of the detectors.

“We have found them, sir,” came soon the welcome report. “One ship, the ‘Dresden,’ coordinates 42-79-63.”

“That makes it bad – very bad,” Stone reflected, audibly. Can’t expand the zone to release another ship without enveloping the ‘Dresden’ and exposing ourselves. Can’t surprise them – they’re ready for anything. Rather long range, too.” The vessels of the Fleet were a thousand miles apart, being in open order for high-velocity flight in open space. “Torpedoes would be thrown off by her meteorite deflectors. Only one thing to do, Captain – close in and tear into her with everything you’ve got.”

“But the men in her!” protested Martin.

“Dead long ago,” snapped the expert. “Probably been animated corpses for days. Take a look if you want to; won’t do any harm now – Radio, put us on as many of the ‘Dresden’s’ plates as you can – and besides, what’s the crew of one ship compared to the hundreds of thousands of men in the rest of the Fleet? We can’t burn her out at one blast, anyway – they’ve got real brains and the same armament we have, and will certainly kill the crew at the first blast, if they haven’t done it already. Afraid it’ll be a near thing, getting away from the sun, even with eleven other ships to help us…”

He broke off as the beam operators succeeded in making connection briefly with the plates of the “Dresden.” One glimpse, then the visibeams were cut savagely, but that glimpse was enough. Their sister ship was manned completely by automatons; in her every compartment men, all too plainly dead, lay wherever they had chanced to fall. The captain swore a startled oath, then bellowed orders; and the flagship, driving projectors fiercely aflame, rushed to come to grips with the “Dresden.”

“You intimated something about help,” Martin suggested. “Can you release some of the other ships, after all?”

“Got to or roast. This is bound to be a battle of attrition – we can’t crush her screens alone until her power is exhausted and we’ll be in the sun long before then. I see only one possible way out. We’ll have to build a neutralizing generator for every lifeboat this ship carries, and send one out to release one other ship. Eleven boats – that’ll make twelve to concentrate on her – about all that could attack at once, anyway. That way will take so much time that it will certainly be touch-and-go, but it’s the only thing to do, as far as I can see. Give me ten good radio men and some mechanics, and we’ll get at it.”

While the technicians were coming on the run, Stone issued final instructions:

“Attack with every weapon you can possibly use. Try to break down their meteorite shields, so that you can use shells and torpedoes. Burn every gram of fuel that your generators will take. Don’t try to save it. The more you burn the more they’ll have to and the quicker we can refuel you easily enough from the other vessels if we get away.”

Then, while Stone and his technical experts labored upon the generators of the screens which were to protect eleven more of the gigantic vessels against the thought-destroying radiations of the automatons, and while the computers calculated, minute by minute, the exact progress of the Fleet toward the blazing luminary of our Solar System, the flagship “Washington” drove in upon the rebellious “Dresden,” her main forward battery furiously aflame. Drove in until the repellor-screens of the two vessels locked and buckled. Then Captain Malcolm really opened up. That grizzled four striper had been at a loss – knowing little indeed of the oscillatory nature of thought and still less of the abstruse mathematics in which Ferdinand Stone took such delight – but here was something that he understood thoroughly. He knew his ship, knew her every weapon and her every whim, knew to the final volt and to the ultimate ampere her Gargantuan capacity to give it and to take it. He could fight his ship – and how he fought her!

From every projector that could be brought to bear there flamed out against the “Dresden” beams of an energy and of a potency indescribable, at whose scintillant areas of contact the defensive screens of the robot-manned cruiser flared into terribly resplendent brilliance. Every type and kind of lethal vibratory force was hurled, upon every usable destructive frequency. Needle-rays and stabbingly penetrant stilettos of fire thrust and thrust again. Sizzling, flashing planes cut and slashed. The heaviest annihilating and disintegrating beams generable by man clawed and tore in wild abandon. And over all and thru all the stupendously powerful blanketing beams – so furiously driven that the coils and commutators of their generators fairly smoked and that the refractory throats of their projectors glared radiantly violet and began slowly, stubbornly to volatilize – raved out in all their pyrotechnically incandescent might, striving prodigiously to crush by their sheer power the shielding screens of the vessel of the automatons.

Nor was the vibratory offensive alone. Every gun, primary or auxiliary, that could be pointed at the “Dresden” was vomiting smoke and flame enshrouded steel as fast as automatic loaders could serve it, and under that continuous, appallingly silent concussion the giant frame of the flagship shuddered and trembled in every plate and member. And from every launching tube there were streaming the deadliest missiles known to science; radio dirigible torpedoes which, looping in vast circles to attain the highest possible measure of momentum, crashed against the “Dresden’s” meteorite deflectors in Herculean efforts to break them down; and, in failing to do so, exploding and filling all space with raging flame and with flying fragments of metal.

Captain Malcolm was burning his stores of fuel and munitions at an appalling rate, careless alike of exhaustion of reserves and of service-life of equipment. His every generator was running at a shockingly ruinous overload, his every projector was being used so mercilessly that not even their powerful refrigerators, radiating the transported heat into the interplanetary cold from the dark side of the ship, could keep their refractory linings in place for long.

And thru raging beam, thru blasting ray, thru crushing force; thru storm of explosive and thru rain of metal the “Dresden” remained apparently unscathed. Her screens were radiating high into the violet, but they had no sign of weakening or of going down. Neither did the meteorite deflectors break down. Everything held: since she was armed as capably as was the flagship and was being fought by inhumanly intelligent monstrosities, she was invulnerable to any one ship of the Fleet as long as her generators could be fed.

Nevertheless, Captain Malcolm was well content. He was making the “Dresden” burn plenty of irreplaceable fuel, and his generators and projectors would last long enough. His ship, his men, and his weapons could and would carry the load until the fresh attackers should take it over; and carry it they did. Carried it while Stone and his over-driven crew finished their complicated mechanisms and flew out into space toward the eleven nearest battleships of the Fleet. Carried it while the computers, grim-faced and scowling now, jotted down from minute to minute the enormous and rapidly-increasing figure representing their radial velocity. Carried it while Earth’s immense armada, manned by creatures incapable of even the simplest coherent thought or purposeful motion, plunged sickeningly downward in its madly hopeless fall, with scarcely a measurable trace of tangential velocity, toward the unimaginable inferno of the sun.

Eventually, however, the shielded lifeboats approached their objectives and expanded their screens to enclose them. Officers recovered, airlocks opened, and the lifeboats, still radiating protection, were taken inside. Explanations were made, orders were given, and one by one eleven vengeful super-dreadnoughts shot away to join their flagship in abating the Menace of the Machine.

No conceivable structure, however armed or powered, could long withstand the fury of the combined assault of twelve such superb battle craft, and under that awful concentration of force the screens of the doomed ship radiated higher and higher into the ultra-violet, went black, and failed. And, those mighty defenses down, the end was practically instantaneous. No unprotected metal can endure even momentarily the ardor of such beams, and they played on, not only until every plate and girder of the vessel and every nut, bolt, and rivet of its monstrous crew had been blasted out of all semblance to what it had once been, but until every fragment of metal had not only been liquefied, but had been completely volatilized.

In the instant of cessation of the brain-scrambling activities of the automatons the Communications Officer had begun as insistent broadcast. Aboard all of the ships there were many who did not recover – who would be helpless imbeciles during the short period of life left them – but soon an intelligent officer was at every control and each unit of the Terrestrial Contingent was exerting its maximum thrust at a right angle to its line of fall. And now the burden was shifted from the fighting staff to the no less able engineers and computers. To the engineers the task of keeping their mighty engines in such tune as to maintain constantly the peak acceleration of three Earth gravities; to the computers that of so directing their ever-changing course as to win every possible centimeter of precious tangential velocity.

Ferdinand Stone was hollow-eyed and gaunt from his practically sleepless days and nights of toil, but he was as grimly resolute as ever. Struggling against the terrific weight of three gravities he made his way to the desk of the Chief Computer and waited while that worthy, whose leaden hands could scarcely manipulate the instruments of his profession, finished his seemingly interminable calculations.

“We will get away, Doctor Stone, with exactly half a gravity to spare,” the mathematician reported finally. “Whether we will be alive or not is another question. There will be heat, which our refrigerators may or may not be able to handle; there will be radiations which our armor may or may not be able to stop. You, of course, know a lot more about those things than I do.”

“Distance at our closest approach?” snapped Stone.

“Two point twenty nine times ten to the ninth meters from the sun’s center,” the computer shot back instantly. “That is, one million five hundred ninety thousand kilometers – only two point twenty-seven radii – from the arbitrary surface. What do you think of our chances, sir?”

“It will probably be a near thing – very near,” the physicist replied, thoughtfully. “Much, however, can be done. We can probably tune our defensive screens to block most of the harmful radiation, and we may be able to muster other defenses. I will analyze the radiations and see what we can do about neutralizing them.”

“You will go to bed,” directed Martin, crisply. “There will be lots of time for that work after you are rested up. The doctors have been reporting that the men who did not recover from the robot’s broadcast are dying under the acceleration. With those facts staring us in the face, however, I do not see how we can reduce our power.”

“We can’t. As it is, many more of us will probably die before we get away from the sun,” and Stone staggered away, practically asleep on his feet.

Day after day the frightful fall continued. The sun grew larger and larger, more and ever more menacingly intense. One by one at first, and then by scores, the mindless men of the Fleet died and were consigned to space – a man must be in full control of all his faculties to survive for long an acceleration of three gravities. Occasionally the mighty motors of one of the ships – undermanned perhaps, or possibly betraying some structural weakness under the grueling strain of continuous maximum blast – faltered in their staccato grind and that ship fell back. Perhaps to effect repairs in time to resume the struggle in a rank nearer the sun, perhaps to plunge into that cosmic furnace. No aid was possible or to be thought of; each vessel had to hold her acceleration or meet her fate.

The generators of the defensive screens had early been tuned to neutralize as much as possible of Old Sol’s most fervently harmful frequencies, and but for their mighty shields every man of the Fleet would have perished long since. Now even those ultra-powerful guards were proving inadequate. Refrigerators were running at the highest possible overload and the men, pressing as closely as possible to the dark sides of their vessels, were availing themselves of such extra protection of lead shields and the like as could be improvised from whatever material was at hand. Yet the already stifling air became hotter and hotter, eyes began to ache and burn, skins blistered and cracked under the punishing impact of forces which all the defenses could not block. But at last came the long-awaited call:

“Pilots and watch-officers of all ships, Attention!” the Chief Computer spoke into his microphone thru parched and blackened lips. “We are now at the point of tangency. The gravity of the sun here is twenty four point five meters per second squared. Since we are blasting twenty nine point four we are beginning to pull away at an acceleration of four point nine. Until further notice keep your pointers directly away from the sun’s center, in the plane of the Ecliptic.”

The sun was now in no sense the orb of day with which we upon Earth’s green surface are familiar. It was a gigantic globe of turbulently seething flame, subtending an angle of almost thirty five degrees – blotting out a full fourth of the cone of normally distinct vision. Sunspots were plainly to be seen; combinations of indescribably violent cyclonic storms and volcanic eruptions on a gaseously liquid medium of searing, eye-tearing incandescence. And everywhere, threatening at times even to reach the fiercely-struggling ships of space, were the solar prominences – fiendish javelins of frenziedly frantic destruction, hurling themselves in wild abandon out into the empty reaches of the void.

Eyes behind almost opaque lead-glass goggles, head and body encased in a multi-layered suit each ply of which was copiously smeared with thick lead paint, Stone studied the raging monster of the heavens from the closest viewpoint any human being had ever attained – and lived. Even he, protected as he was, could peer but briefly; and, master physicist tho he was and astronomer-of-sorts, yet he was profoundly awed at the spectacle.

Twice that awesome mass was circled. Then, air-temperature again bearable and lethal radiations stopped, the grueling acceleration was reduced to a heavenly one-and-one-half gravities and the vast fleet remade its formation. The automatons and the sun between them had taken heavy toll; but the gaps were filled, men were transferred to equalize the losses of personnel, and the course was laid for distant Earth.

Scarcely had the huge phalanx of fighting craft straightened out, however, when a signal flashed back from a flanking scout – “Object in space, coordinates 79-42-85” – and one of the flagship’s long-range visibeams sped out along the indicated line.

“What the blinding blue blazes!” For upon the visiplate there was revealed a small space-flyer of strange design and pattern; which, tiny as it was and alone, was hurtling with a terrific velocity directly toward the embattled Grand Fleet of Earth.

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# Chapter 14 – The Fate of the Neptunians by P. Schuyler Miller

AUTHOR OF: ‘THE RED PLAGUE,’ ‘TETRAHEDRA OF SPACE,’ ETC.

Gradually the colors of early dawn illuminated the gas-strata, and the slender towers of imperial Tridentia woke to teeming life. Up from roof and turret floated the balloons of the purple clans, like shimmering bubbles wafted low over the drowsing city. In crowding swarms they settled in the great space that had been cleared just beyond the city’s edge. Their pressing bodies formed a wide ring surrounding the three glistening cylinders of glassite that lay side by side on the soft white sod. And ranked within that circle of jostling bodies, drawn up in rigid ranks before the open ports of the three ships, waited the purple spheres of Tridentia’s offering to space.

Now from the broad terraced Temple of the Trident, glimmering golden in the growing light, lifted a huge balloon. Its fabric was the rare and priceless covering of the dreaded gas-plants, its basket woven from opalescent strands of fine-spun glassite. Unmoving, their eye stalks turned calmly toward the impatient multitude, five spheres crowded that regal basket. As it settled lightly beside the giant ships a wave of frenzied cheering colored the watching throng. Again, and yet again they hued their mad ovation, until the scarlet form of Tranda, Emperor of Tridentia and of Neptune, stepped forward on firmly placed tubes and colored his aura with the silvery hue that commanded silence.

“Neptunians,” he glowed; “you have heard the message brought from Luna by Bar Steepa and the Princess Teena. Invaders from another star threaten the safety of our planet and all the other planets of the sun. We have been asked to join with the peoples of those planets in an attempt to defend our world and theirs while there is yet time!

“They have given us the sacred metal of the Trident – enough to provide three mighty ships with the power of its lightnings. Tridentia herself has offered those who will man them – three Centuries of the purple, most valorous of Neptune’s hosts. Our hundred I myself will command; the second Century will be led by your prince, Bar Steepa, and the third by Dubar, captain of the imperial guards. And that the mantle of the holy Trident may shelter you until I shall return with the news of victory, I leave you Barad Tora, brother of my father and spokesman of the Trident!”

As the roseate form of Tora drifted up beside that of the Emperor, wave after wave of blazing cheers poured from the crowded spheres of Tridentia. Then, as Tranda turned and glided on supple tubes toward the port of the leading ship, that tide of eager color darkened. Behind him the ordered ranks of Trindentia’s first Century were moving, and in their wake the other hundreds came, led by the violet-hued Dubar and the two who were Steepa and Teena, royal lovers of Tridentia.

The last sphere passed out of sight. Slowly the great glassite ports rolled shut. Then from that ship which Tranda commanded a spreading shaft of vivid white thrust up into the low-hanging gas-strata. In answer the spheres of Tridentia flowed like a purple river toward the haven of their balloons. Soon the air was filled with their bobbing, swaying forms. Then with a crash of livid lightnings the three ships leapt as one from their tapered cradles and vanished in the swirling vapors of the gas-strata. Winds tore at the frail balloons and whirled them dizzily above the fungoid jungle. Then all was quiet again and only the viscidly stirring gas-strata showed where the war-fleet of cloud-wrapped Neptune had vanished into space.

Their tubes twined lovingly together, Steepa and Teena stood before the banked controls of their giant craft, gazing out into the starry majesty of infinity. Teena’s aura was tinted with teasing emerald as her eye-stalks turned to the stolid form of her mate.

“Why did you want to leave me?” she colored. “Are you weary of me now that you have seen the women of Earth and Saturn?”

Steepa’s purple flushed darker. “War is no place for women!” he retorted. “Were you any but Tranda’s sister and princess of Tridentia, you must have stayed home – where you belong. Instead you are here to annoy me when I must devote my thoughts to piloting the ship. Now go away!”

Hueing softly she pressed her smooth skin against his, caressing his sinewy tubes with her delicate pads. Slowly his eye-stalks curved away until they met her, and his sulky violet softened and mingled with her gentle mauve.

“You are as good a pilot as I or Tranda,” he admitted, “but there will be danger for us all. You must remain in the sheltered parts of the ship when we are fighting. Remember – you have our hue to think of as well as yourself.”

Their colors were now one, rose-tinted, flushed with warm gold. Their auras pulsed and glowed with a single light. Teena’s tints were soft and greyed with puzzlement as she replied.

“No bud of Steepa’s ever will feel fear, nor shall its mother now. But why do we go so far from Neptune? Why do we not remain where we can protect her from attack?”

Steepa’s aura was bright. “Just like a woman,” he boasted. “It takes a man to make war! If Ay-Artz is to be defeated, we must stop him before he can gain a foothold on some planet in our midst, and to do that the forces of every planet will be necessary. Moreover, we must meet and attack together, for if we come singly he can easily destroy us. So Mea-Quin has sent to each commander the course that his ships must follow, to reach the appointed place.”

Teena colored wistfully. “It must be wonderful to know so much,” she glowed, “but I am glad it was Mea-Quin who calculated the course, my Steepa. On all Neptune there is none but we two who have seen the stars before, and you are not a very good astronomer.”

Flushing, he turned his eyes angrily toward her. As he saw the teasing tint of her aura, he seized her with all three tubes and pressed her to him. For a moment their auras were one. Above the screens that filled one wall of the little cabin appeared a warning flash of light.

Quickly turning from his mate, Steepa thrust out his tubes to set the dials. Instantly the form of Tranda appeared before them.

“Is anything wrong?” he demanded. “At the first checking-point you were far from the course.” As he saw his sister his brusque colors softened. “I understand,” he hued. “But you are second in command of our fleet, Bar Steepa, and must be a good example to Dubar and our men. At the next point alter your speed and direction to agree with Mea-Quin’s figures.”

“I will be careful,” tinted Steepa. As Tranda’s image disappeared, his eye-stalks accusingly to his mate. “You see!” he colored. “How can I pilot this ship with you forever distracting me? Go look at the stars and let me think!”

Teena’s aura was meekly grey as she glided on graceful tubes toward the space-port. “I am sorry, my Steepa,” she hued softly. Curving her eyes roguishly back at her disgruntled mate: “Perhaps I could help with the course, if it is too difficult—“

He did not deign to answer. Bending his eye-stalks to the space chart, he let his tubes move deftly over the controls. During the early part of their flight, with all three ships accelerating enormously in order to attain the speed which would hurl them in a long curve halfway around the sun, there would be frequent check points at which speed, direction and acceleration must check with Mea-Quin’s instructions. Now, as the guiding hair-lines of the chart crept closer to the glowing dots of a quadrangle of stars, Steepa placed his suction cups carefully over the numbered pits on the control panel and cocked one eye at the dials which registered speed and acceleration.

The first star touched the first hairline. Instantly, his skin shrinking nervously, Steepa sucked up plunger after plunger with tensely active cups. Infinitesimally the stars shifted on the space-chart, and gradually the readings of the many dials before him were altered to conform with those given by Mea-Quin. As the second and third stars touched the guiding lines, he snapped his tubes away and moved back. One by one, released from the suction of his cups, the control-plungers dropped back into their oil-filled pits. Watching the time-dial, he waited. At exactly the appointed time the last of the four stars was bisected by the line of the chart, and Steepa expanded in relief. He turned again to his Princess.

She stood by the glassite port, both eyes fixed on the panorama of space. Steepa glided toward her. She was beautiful, he thought – so deliciously round and delicate in hue, her tubes so lissome and slender. And before one of Neptune’s years had passed, the tiny, rotund form of their son would be budding from her smooth, soft skin. His bud – and heir to the throne of Tridentia and of Neptune! For Tranda had no son.

She seemed unaware of his approach. Gently he touched her, bending his eye-stalks close to hers.

“Their auras glow with the colors of beauty,” he hued softly. “Perhaps they are lovers too.”

Slowly their colors merged.

Day after Lemnisian day passed slowly as the three ships rushed with ever-increasing speed along their tortuous course thru the meteor infested void. Here in timeless space the ships of every planet would adopt the decimal time of Lemnis, in which all of Mea-Quin’s intricate calculations had been made. Because of Steepa’s deviation from the course, Dubar’s craft had now moved into second position, and Tranda had decided to keep him there and give Steepa the more responsible post of rear guard. None of them, during those long, unvaried days, but thought of the dangers that threatened their fellow-planners on other planets – the Automatons of Earth, the scarcely less inhuman Xunia with her myriad bodies, and above all that Wrongness of Space whose mad power they had felt in the barren crater of Copernicus. What, during the months that had passed since the conference, had those inimical forces been preparing? What lay before them in the trackless void?

With these ominous thoughts lurking in his mind, Tranda had resolved to spend his leisure time in study of that science which permitted Mea-Quin to plot this complex course among the ever-shifting planets and meteor-swarms of the solar system, itself rushing at an incredible speed thru space. Uranus and Saturn lay far from their path, too far for him to study them without elaborate instruments, but his first rough calculations showed that they would pass very close to the great yellow planet, Jupiter, with its swarm of shining moons. He wondered if, indeed, the ships of Callisto might not be waiting there to join them in their flight across the sun.

To Teena and Steepa the slowly shifting panorama of the heavens was a never-ending source of beauty and wonder. Like strange jewels the stars burned, with the two silvery ships hung against their splendor and the golden disc of Jupiter swelling day by day. They could see the dusky bands that crossed the planet’s face, and the sullen glow of its mysterious spot, but most of all Teena loved to watch the little silvery moons as they passed back and forth across the sphere of their mother planet, or vanished for a while in eclipse behind it. Once, too, a comet passed flaming across the stars above that burning disc. Teena shuddered, her aura suddenly cold. Somehow that curving gauze of fire, shimmering with emerald opalescence, seemed to her a warning and a menace, and she drew closer to Steepa and let his comforting tubes curl about her.

With the attraction of the great planet affecting their motion, the three commanders were forced to check their course with increasing frequency. Jupiter’s sphere now filled most of the visible heavens. They were far inside the orbits of the outer moons and wheeling sharply past the massive planet itself, using its attraction to swing them into the curve that would lead them past the sun to the invisible meeting place of the fleets. Teena relieved her mate at the check-points, while he drilled his men in the hollow inner shell of the great ship. They were entering the crowded inner portion of the solar system now, and any hour might bring danger. Every last sphere of them must be absolutely proficient in the use of the weapons he would man. And Steepa saw to it that every one was.

From her post at the controls, Teena could see both the other ships. Idly she let her tubes stray across the board, plucking at the plungers that would bring Steepa’s form and colors to the screen. Perhaps he would be able, now, to come up and watch the ceaseless stirring of Jupiter’s cloud wrapped surface, seething as tho with an angry life of its own. Suddenly an irregularity in the positions of the leading ships caught her eye. A glance at her dials assured her that her own course was correct. But Dubar, his speed increasing with every instant, was darting toward Io!

With one tube she flashed the alarm that would bring Steepa to her. The others sucked at the plungers that would call Tranda. Before the connection was made, Dubar’s pain-shrunken form showed on the screen. His colors were faint, almost invisible. Two tubes had been torn from his body and the vital gases were gushing from half a dozen wounds.

“Tranda!” he flashed. “The son of Deebul has taken the ship. He was disguised, with scores of his followers. They have slain all who—“

His waning colors went out. Then behind him in the screen loomed a livid jade-green sphere to whose skin clung shreds of purple pigment. Deebul’s son – bud of some unknown woman of the arch-pretender’s harem! Triumphantly his colors challenged them – then the screen went dark.

Beside her Steepa’s aura flared. “Rouse the men!” he hued angrily. “Man the spark-guns and stand ready for combat. By the Trident, Deebul’s breed shall be destroyed to the last bud of a bud! I swear it!”

He seized the controls. As he did so Tranda’s image appeared in the screen. “I am leader here!” he blazed. “Stand by with your guns, Bar Steepa. Hold your course and do not attack until I command. I will show this usurper’s bud who is Emperor of Tridentia!”

His skin grim, steely blue, Bar Steepa watched the great flagship draw aside, speeding with the full power of the Trident to intercept the fleeing ship. Automatically his tubes went to the controls, increasing his ship’s speed and making connection with Beema, the officer of his century.

“I will command from here,” he colored. “After me, Baran Teena leads you. After her, yourself. Be ready!”

Pale and shrunken with anxiety, Teena pressed her eyes close to the port, watching Tranda’s ship as it cut across the course of the mutineer. Their own craft was rushing closer every minute, driven by Steepa’s darting tubes. The two ships met and a spear of jagged flame smashed out from the ship of the green sphere, missing Tranda’s bows by a slight margin.

Quickly the flagship slewed around, bringing her broadside of spark-guns into play. A sheet of crackling fire caught the other squarely. With fantastic slowness it split open, vomiting enemy spheres. Then was a burst of fire that showed he was flinging every resource of his Trident into the attack, Deebul’s son hurled his craft straight at Tranda’s flank; there was no time to veer, head-on the rebel craft plunged into the vitals of the flagship, ripping a vast hole in its hull. Space around this was misted with escaping vapors that congealed into a sparkling frost on the crumpled hulls. Then, showering spears and splinters of shattered glassite, the terrible forces of the twin Tridents met. A globe of white flame, shot thru with red and violet lightnings, enveloped the two ships. Slowly, it faded out.

Frantic cups hissing over the plungers, Steepa brought his ship swinging down above the wreckage. The rebel ship was split from end to end. The flagship had been sheared diagonally across, breaking open the chamber that held the Trident. If the bulkheads held, Tranda might still live.

Pleadingly his mate’s eye-stalks bent toward him. Coiling a tender tube about her, he essayed a pulse of golden reassurance.

Now they were close above the wreckage of the interlocked ships. Turning slowly end over end, they were falling toward the great planet. Reversing the power of his Trident with a jar that shook the ship, Steepa brought his craft into a path parallel with the other vessels and close above them.

The Neptunians had no space suits. Relying as they did on their suction cups, they would have been helpless. But Steepa had supervised the making of small glassite spheres, each with its own gas-reservoir, in which one individual could keep alive for ten Neptunian days. If Tranda lived, and the exits were not jammed by wreckage, his sphere would soon appear. Eagerly they waited – but it did not come.

Steepa’s aura darkened. There must be a way! Surely the power of the Trident was not to be daunted by so small a thing – yet how to do it?

Abruptly he sprang erect to the full extent of his tubes.

“Teena!” he flared. “Call Beema here. I have a plan!”

Rapidly he questioned the other sphere, then sent him hurrying back to bring ten of the crew. In Tridentia, before Tranda’s call to arms, they had been workers of glassite – had, indeed, helped to construct this ship. Before them he laid his plan. Little time was available. Even now the Emperor might be writhing in agony as the precious gases escaped from the room in which he was trapped. They must be quick.

As one sphere they agreed.

He turned to his mate. All his tubes went out to clasp her to him. Then he thrust her away gently.

“There must be two,” he hued. “One to pilot the ship and one to direct the power of the Trident. Will you be one, or shall Beema aid me?”

Proudly she swelled her grief-shrunken skin. Bravely she strove to bring the gold of courage to her sorrow-shaded aura.

“Command me, Bar Steepa,” she colored.

Side by side they faced the controls. Delicate indeed must be the touch that would pilot the mighty craft now, when inches separated life and death for them all. And that touch would be Teena’s.

Slowly she lifted the ship away, gently enough so that the force of its propelling lightnings did not touch the crippled craft beside it. The vision port of Tranda’s ship was hidden by twisted wreckage. Now, utilizing that weapon which Mea-Quin had provided for use when all else failed, Steepa sent a plane of white energy curving through space like a sword of fire. It touched the ruin of the rebel ship and the glassite parted with a rush of golden vapors. Beneath it a bar of light pushed out and struck the severed mass. Sluggishly, then with greater speed, it moved aside. The nose of the flagship appeared, scarred and crumpled but intact. Before the little transparent port crouched the scarlet form of Neptune’s Emperor.

Now life seemed to pulse through Teena’s gases. Her aura was radiant. Her tubes fairly danced over the control-pits, wafting the giant craft thru space as tho it drifted before a gently breeze. Closer they crept, and closer, while Steepa’s flaming sword cleft mass after mass of broken wreckage from the crumpled hulls and drove it away into the void with his powerful propeller. Closer and closer that blade of fire came to the little room in which their objective lay. Now the stern of the flagship had been cut away and Steepa’s craft lay less than half a ship’s length from the fragment that held the control room. His eyes curved warningly to Teena.

She flickered a signal to the men below. Inside the skin of the ship, surrounding a certain portion of the hull, they were waiting, their tools ready. Then, turning to Steepa, she glowed assent.

Ready! The blade of flame changed to a blazing torch – a plume of blinding fire vomited into space. Into that glare Steepa’s eyes stared unflinchingly. His tubes moved carefully, sweeping it slowly across the base of the little hemisphere of wreckage that remained. Under the blast of fierce radiation the stubborn glassite melted and flowed like liquid gas, dissolving the armor of the broken ship so that it lay in a great blazing pool beneath the ray. Its savage heat made the little cabin a seething hell. Tranda’s eye-stalks writhed in pain, his contorted tubes shrunk from the blistering touch of the walls and floor. With a shuddering sweep Teena then sent her great ship smashing sidelong into that pool of liquid light.

The ship’s skin buckled, cracked, but the cracks were immediately filled by the molten glassite. Quickly its fierce light dimmed to a red glow, to darkness. And below Beema and his ten men were working frantically.

Teena at his side, Steepa plunged into that narrow space. Jets of the Trident’s flame blazed luridly as the workers carved their way into the thick armor. There was a hiss of escaping gases as the flames ate thru into the film of bubbles that lay between the ships, then they were cutting into the mass of the still-glowing glassite that had been fused under the ray. Down – carving a smooth walled tunnel toward the little hollow where Tranda lay dying. Down – advancing as fast as the cooling walls would permit them, Steepa and his mate pressing close behind. Then they were thru and in a corridor. A jagged tear sucked at their atmosphere but a torch sealed it. Steepa’s body was then thrusting the control room door open. His mate burst past him and dropped beside the scarlet form that lay crumpled under the control board. And in Teena’s aura roseate opalescence replaced the cold, dark blue of dread, as her brother stirred slightly.

Safe in Steepa’s ship, with his sister’s cool pads caressing his tortured skin and life-giving gases coursing again thru his body, Tranda quickly regained his strength. Under his direction, Steepa bent every effort to regain the hours they had lost. With two thirds of their little fleet gone the most dangerous portion of their journey lay ahead, but Tranda would not turn back. Nor was there one of them who would have done otherwise.

At reckless speed they hurlted toward the growing bulk of Jupiter. Alone in his tiny sleeping room, Tranda was busy with his calculation while Steepa flung the ship from point to point of Mea-Quin’s course, striving to gain the speed and time and distance they must have to reach that mysterious rendezvous ahead. In those few lost hours Jupiter had wheeled thousands of miles on its way thru space, and the configuration of its satellites with their varied distances and attractions had vastly changed. The cosmic forces which played about the Neptunian ship were entirely different from those which the Lemnisian had used in his calculations. What those differences were, and how they could be offset, the Neptunian was striving with all his feeble science to discover.

What he found was – wrong. Or so it seemed to him. Time after time he had Steepa report their position and the configuration of the heavenly bodies about them. His figures told him that they would swing close to the vast bulk of Jupiter, a few thousand miles above its surface, to rush out again in a long hyperbola that would hurl them safely into interplanetary space, well above the dangerous plane of the asteroids. There was absolutely nothing wrong, and yet the irritation what was growing in him told him that it was wrong, and very wrong. At last his patience gave way. Tearing his papers to shreds he burst savagely into the control room and demanded that Steepa hook up the space-radio and try to get Mea-Quin.

The huge bulk of Jupiter loomed outside the port. The turbulent torrent of its equatorial current lay just beneath, splitting to flow in vaporous eddies on either side of the great, glowing mass of the Red Spot. Quickly Tranda estimated their position. At their closest approach to Jupiter, they should be just above the Spot’s further end.

At the board, Steepa had been altering the flow of the Trident’s forces so as to give more power to the radio. Till now they had used it merely to reach from ship to ship; now it must span the millions of miles to Luna. Slowly he increased the power, building it toward a peak at which it must surely leap that gulf, yet nothing answered his signals. Higher, higher – the apparatus could stand no more. Angrily he turned to Tranda.

“They do not answer,” he hued. “Perhaps they have tired of their game of war!”

The other pushed past him to the controls. Combination after combination he tried, ranging over the entire scale of the machine. And as unbroken greyness met his gaze, his temper flared. He spun from the controls.

“Look to your apparatus, Bar Steepa,” he blazed. If it has been injured through carelessness, you will answer to me!”

A supreme effort prevented Steepa from flaring indignant resentment. Masking his temper with sullen purple he bent ove the intricate circuit of the radio. The first glance told him that nothing was wrong, but he checked it section by section before he raised his eye-stalks. The strained position made him a trifle giddy; he swayed slightly on his bent tubes, and his eyes focused with difficulty. Then he saw that Tranda was staring at the blank screen, his aura dark with thought. He sidled forward and peered more closely at its surface. One tube went forth and switched it off and on again, quickly. And both Tranda and Steepa snapped erect and turned troubled eyes to each other.

The screen was not blank. It shimmered with a pearly light that seemed to be growing in intensity. Some wave – some signal out of space – was energizing the receiver so strongly that it drowned out all else!

Both their minds snapped to the same thought. Tranda’s tubes spun the distance regulators. A shadow came in the screen, wavering, blurred by interference. With full power he could not clear it.

Yet that shadow was the vast bulk of Jupiter, barely twenty thousand earthly miles beneath – the planet toward which they were rushing.

What was it – what could it be – that had blinded them with that barrage of radiations? What did it mean?

What lay ahead?

Steepa turned. Teena lay huddled on the floor beneath the port. Her tubes were crumpled, her eye-stalks drooping limply. And her aura was but a pale wash of blue, the hue of agony, of death!

He was across the room in a flash. Hesitant behind him, Tranda saw his skin suddenly illuminated with a crimson glare, saw him shrink, his aura pallid, his tubes writhing in pain. He too was rushing forward, out of the shelter of the ship’s opaque prow into the full glare of the Red Spot.

Thru the port it was as tho alive! Viscid vapors boiled and writhed over all its vast oval surface, like the coiling, steaming entrails of some evil monster out of hellish fable. Red light beat up out of the invisible depths beneath it, staining those vapors with the hue of spilt blood and reaching out into the void beyond. And with that light came radiations, utterly invisible and terrible radiations that tore thru the gases of his body as a knife rips thru flesh, leaving curdled trails of ionized, shattered atoms. Only where the sensitive inner membranes of his skin were ruptured did he feel pain. But the incredible delicate balance of blended vapors that was his life and mind was shattered, riddled with confusion. It was as tho some mighty force had struck him with a sudden blow. He crumpled and went down beside the others in the full light of the Spot. Darkness engulfed him in a burning wave.

Steepa’s senses returned slowly. It was as tho he were rising out of a valley of crimson mist, into light. He lay close against the wall, under the port, where the momentum of his rush had carried him. Teena lay beside him, pale and shrunken; Tranda was a motionless mound beyond.

Where he lay, he was protected again by the opaque armor of the ship. But every instant hurled them closer to that terrible Spot whose fierce radiation was driving ever more savagely into the ship. The irritation that had been evident in all of them had grown now to a searing inner fire. Strangely it wakened in him a sudden activity that flooded out the torture of the Spot.

Crouching low he hurried to the controls. With feverish tubes he spun the ship until the Spot was hidden and its lurid glare no longer bathed the cabin. While the thick glassite protected them, he must do what he could.

He flashed a call to Beema. In the body of the ship, he and his men should have been protected. Yet the armor of the prow was of double thickness, and it might already be too late.

There was no reply. The communication screen was blanked by that pearly mist; it might be that all their signals had been paralyzed by the radiations of the Spot. There was no time to find out now. He had Tranda to think of, and Teena. His Emperor, and his mate.

Tranda’s aura was regaining color. Steepa bent over Teena’s shriveled form. Her skin and her aura were leaden, her eye-stalks retracted almost into the body of her sphere. Her slender tubes lay limp and pallid.

He gathered her to him with tender tubes. He could feel the stir of gases just beneath her skin and the fitful pulse of her diaphragm. In time the shattered atoms of her brain and vital organs would rebuild themselves and restore the delicate equilibrium of life, but there was no time! In minutes they would be swooping close over the surface of the Spot. The glassite armor would be powerless to protect them from the rays that beat up out of its depth. There was once chance—

His suction cups settled grimly over the control-pits. If he could tear the ship out of her mad dive, reverse her acceleration with the full force of the Trident and send her back into the blessed vacuum of the void, away from the Spot, then it might be possible to feel their way thru this crowded inner space to the rendezvous or back to Neptune.

Something touched him. He turned. Tranda! The Emperor’s skin was livid, his aura a wraith of negation!

“It is impossible,” he hued. “I have made the calculations. If our speed is checked, if we lie motionless for the fraction of instant that it takes to reverse the Trident’s force, the gravity of Jupiter will seize us. We must go faster – fast enough to pass the Spot before its deadly rays can beat thru the glassite and strike us down. Faster, or we will call into the Spot. Into death!”

Steepa’s mind was dazed. It was a tho a mist were gathering around it, a net of little crimson threads drawing tighter and closer and binding his thoughts, cutting into them. Tranda’s colors seemed somehow meaningless yet something made him release the plungers and withdraw his tubes. What was it? Fall! That was it, they would fall. He, and Tranda. And Teena.

Teena!

He moved to where she was. As he bent low beside her, her shrunken eye-stalks pushed feebly forth and curved to meet him. One tube wavered up and touched him. He seized it tenderly; bent and touched her icy skin. Gently her aura flushed with reassurance and she drew closer.

And suddenly he was very, very weary. He wanted to sleep.

He let his body sink to the floor beside Teena. Their tubes were intertwined, their auras united. But in the brain of Steepa was a spark of alertness that sent his eyes curving toward the controls again.

Tranda stood swaying in front of them. He was studying the dials that registered the attraction of the giant planet. During the past hours a red line had been curving across its face as the force grew, smoothly, swooping upward faster and faster as they neared the planet’s face. But now that line had broken away from its smooth, clean-sweeping curve. It was leaping upward, outward, in a great misshapen lump.

In Tranda’s blurred mind was an awareness that wrote the truth. This Spot of Death that was the source of the dreadful death-dealing radiations was a gravity trap, a mass of matter so heavy that it warped the structure of space and sucked into its flaming maw all that ventured, helpless, within its reach. Even as he stared, incredulous, drunken with the thought, he played with the idea. A planetoid, a meteor, some body out of space, tremendously heavy, composed of some matter born only in stars, burning with unthought-of radio-activity, blazing thru the veiling clouds of the planet which had received it from the void. That was the Spot.

While that spark of interest still burned detachedly, Tranda found that he was lying again on the floor. Only his eye-stalks would move. He turned them to the port. Across it the stars were wheeling with tedious slowness. Steepa had not entirely checked the spin of the ship, it was turning again to face the Spot. And then the spark went out.

In Steepa it burned longer. His was the hardy common stock of the purple clans. It strengthened him while it left not corner for a curiosity such as Tranda’s. He saw. He felt. And no more.

He was a bright something inside a dark and shriveled shell. He could feel the things that were happening to that shell, and he could see things that were close to it, as tho through a veil of red. There were thousands of tiny angular holes in the veil, thru which he could peer, but as it drew tighter and closer about him it became more and more difficult to see—

There was a place where little bright things were moving slowly against a soft blackness. Now that place was glowing brighter. A curve of golden light was cutting into it. It was an aura that moved across it like a sliding plate of gold. And now on it there was appearing a burning red stain.

He had seen it before, but he could not remember when. It was a great, spreading oval that swallowed up all but a tiny rind of the gold. It looked soft, like the gas-strata that lay over Tridentia, soft and billowy and warm. Warm with the warm light that welled up out of it. Like crimson spores billowing out of the soft, spongy pulp of a giant gas-plant.

He felt the warmness. Only it was as tho he saw it, instead of feeling. It seemed that the dark husk that surrounded him was being threaded with little darts of curdled light. Like tiny sparks they were, hot and glowing. It seemed that there had been a time when he felt their heat as flames of exquisite agony, as knives of white fire cutting thru and thru him, but now they were only little feathered darts that left a glowing wake. Faster they were coming, faster and thicker until the dark bulk of his husk was all aflame with them, until it surged and quivered with their insistent fires, until it was as bright as the ball of fire that was he. And then he saw that they were striking at that glittering ball and that it was very brittle, for at their impact little gleaming sparks and chips showered away and scoring scars appeared on its smooth surface.

Now he was within that bright ball, looking up at its outer surface, seeing the little chips flaking off, leaving frozen ripples and trailing scars that melted together until it was all one sparkling shell about him, growing smaller, closer, tighter, pressing on him, suffocating him—

There was one infinitesimal jewel of light that was he, floating in the fibrous brightness. For a long, long time none of the little darts came near him. He could see them all about him, shredding to bits the soft darkness that had been a shield and a veil between him and that evil redness he could no longer see. They sped toward him and were curved away by the power that was in his mind, in him. Then one struck him squarely.

He exploded. His light spread out and swallowed all the other lights and all the world, and then went out. He was behind his two tired eyes, looking out thru them from the darkness into the light. He saw his body, and its plump, smooth sphere was a shrunken, wrinkled husk. He saw his tubes and they were wizened threads of fiber. He saw the Red Spot, huge and sullen beneath them, and felt the enormous drag of its super gravity pulling him against the swerving motion of the ship.

Its flame spread out in a wave that engulfed the world.

He felt the pain that was in his body, then and keen and terrible and so intense that, almost, it was no longer pain but something infinitely beyond it.

He felt a kind of pain that was in his mind, as tho it were being torn, its vapors ripping from their diaphanous cells and curdling and congealing in a pulpy, sloughing ooze that had neither mind nor life.

He remembered Teena, and the feel of her skin against his and the gentle glow of her aura thu his, and with the memory there came again the great longing to sleep here at her side forever and ever. In an instant the flame and the pain and the ripping in his mind were one and became darkness that grew deeper and did not end.

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# Chapter 15 – The Horde of Elo Hava by L. A. Eshbach

AUTHOR OF: ‘THE BEAST MEN,’ ‘THE BRAIN OF ALI KHAN,’ ETC.

Motionless, Fo-Peta floated above the screenophotoscope, his middle feeler fixed tensely on its blank white surface. His single eye stared unwinkingly and the jell of the Etranian revolutionist was black with gloom.

“By Elo Hava,” he muttered, “I like this not at all.”

Curiously Kama-Loo looked up from the controls of the space ship. “What is troubling you, Fo-Peta? We are on our way to the battle front, following the course outlined by Dos-Tev – and thus far I have seen nothing alarming.”

Fo-Peta’s feelers twitched impatiently. “True. But something is amiss on Narlone – must be! Zeera has been communicating with me at a certain time every day since we left. An hour ago was the set time – yet I heard no word – and I know nothing save violent interference could prevent her calling me.” His jell showed the red of anguish. “Why didn’t I bring her with me!”

“Your fears are baseless, I feel sure,” said Kama-Loo reassuringly. “What could have happened? With the weapons you found in the Hadean dimensional car, and those you learned about from Mea-Quin, you wrested the satellites of Ern from the Tyrants of Hade; you exiled the Pross Lords to the Ethor regions; you place the toilers in control of every city, even on Ern itself. Peace had come to our worlds, and I know of nothing that could disturb that peace.”

“Yet something is wrong,” Fo-Peta insisted stubbornly, “or Zeera would have called.”

With a vicious motion of his teeba, the Efranian propelled himself thru the metallic vapors of the control room to the magna slate whose dull surface could reproduce photographic pictures of objects in nearby space. Carefully adjusting the lenses, Fo-Peta caught the image of Ern, a tiny sphere of light encircled by what appeared to be a flattened teeba band of polished lirium. Ern, and Narlone – and Zeera – lay far behind them; and a great distance ahead in the blackness of space was the gathering place of the war fleets of the System.

Turning the lenses fretfully, he picked up the wedge of his five sister ships trailing his own vessel, the Zeera. Spheres, they were, each bearing a skilled crew from one of the satellites, virs chosen for their intelligence, dependability, and bravery.

Idly Fo-Peta thought of the other races of the System, those queer forms of life he had seen in the crater on Awn. How were they faring? The grotesque monstrosities from Darth – had they succeeded in subjugating their intelligent machines? Had they—

“Fo-Peta! Oh – Fo-Peta!” Zeera’s voice!

The Efranian spun toward the screenophotoscope with a convulsive twist of his teeba – and suddenly blue fire of dread flared in his jell. His beloved Zeera was framed in the reflector, her feelers quivering with excitement, and her jell tinged the hue of fear.

“Fo-Peta, the Pross Lords – they have rebelled, and are sweeping every thing before them. Pross Mere-Mer is their leader. He escaped—“ Her words died in a gasp; and Fo-Peta saw the bulky form of Pross Mere-Mer himself flashing toward her, into the focus of the screen. A glimpse of the Pross Lord’s pulsing feelers greedily encircling Zeera – and the image vanished. Something had broken contact.

Madly Fo-Peta flung himself upon the communicator controls, wildly spun them from cycle to cycle. His jell changed color constantly as frantic emotions swayed him. He – he must know what was happening to Zeera! But the white rectangle remained an unresponsive blank.

Furiously he whirled on Kama-Loo. “Back – back to Narlone! The Pross Lords think to strike while I am away – but they’ll find this fleet and its weapons ample protection for the workers! And Zeera—“ The words choked in his speaking vent.

Kama-Loo’s jell colored affirmatively, and he turned toward the ship’s controls. “I’ll tell the other pilots.” Tho at one time Kama-Loo had been Pross Mere-Mer’s chief technical advisor, his interests were now entirely with Fo-Peta. Deftly his feelers made the necessary connections; and with a few hasty words he told what they had seen, what the virgo had said.

Rapidly then the Narlonian scientist computed the course back to Ern and her satellites, and flashed it thru the ether to the other ships. At a signal from Kama-Loo every craft would cut power – check – turn – and roar back over the way they had come.

Impatiently Fo-Peta watched the scientist, his jell tinted with savage helplessness. His middle feeler twisted and squirmed aimlessly, and his teeba sent him here and there with nervous little motions. Abruptly, while Kama-Loo awaited word of readiness from the other pilots, he flung himself to the screenophotoscope again and spun the communicator controls.

Blank whiteness answered him – and then something nebulous appeared – and he fell back, spouting through his gills with amazement.

A point of insupportable brilliance blazed in the heart of the screen – slowly it grew like a devouring flame, till the rectangle pulsed with blinding light. A momentary pause, and in the midst of the radiant square flashed a being stranger far than any the Efranian had ever seen on the satellites of Ern.

An enormous central jell of arrogant green, radiating wisdom and the consciousness of wisdom, power and the consciousness of power in an awesome degree. Out from that jell projected literally thousands of slender tendrils, somewhat resembling the feelers of a Narlonian, but far less bulky and thrice as long. Many of the tendrils bore eyes in their tips; others, organs of hearing; still others, sense organs whose use could be guessed. But strangest of all was the absence of a teeba. The creature was suspended in the midst of the metallic vapours, yet without apparent means of support.

Now a speaking vent opened and the monstrosity spoke – a voice filled with haughty disdain.

“Turn back, Efranian! It is not my will that the satellites of Ern send a fleet to this insane flight in space. Let the other worlds do what they will – you return! Elo Hava has spoken!”

Slowly the image faded, the unnatural brilliance of the screen lingering a moment – then it was gone.

Dazedly the Efranian stared at Kama-Loo. The scientist’s eye was fixed in wonder on his leader, his jell hueing mute incredulity.

“Elo Hava!” the Efranian gasped finally. “Can it be?” Vague memories of early religious teachings were struggling thru barriers of skepticism. Elo Hava! Could it be the god?

Kama-Loo answered slowly. “Legend tells us that Elo Hava is a being strangely formed, of marvelous wisdom and power – and – without a teeba!” His feelers gestured uncertainly. “Who knows – perhaps it is the god. We had better return.”

“Return?” The Etranian’s jell tinted with sudden rebellion. “Why should we obey the commands of this creature, even tho he be—“ He stopped short. Sight of the strange being had driven thought of Zeera from his mind. He must go back to free her from the clutches of Pross Mere-Mer – yet he knew instinctively that he should not obey the commands of this self-styled Elo Hava. He hesitated in indecision.

The astronomer’s feelers gestured sympathetically, the uncertainty vanishing from his manner. He too knew somehow the stranger’s command should not be obeyed. “The other crafts are awaiting our signal. And we have just received a command. You must decide which to assist – Zeera and the workers of the satellites, or the countless myriads of the System. I would not try to influence your decision – but a true Narlonian considers the interests of the largest number.”

Fo-Peta masked his jell with a wall of gray, striving vainly to conceal the agony the decision cost him. “I am an Efranian – but I do not need the precepts of Narlone to guide me. We go on!”

Kama-Loo’s feelers colored with solemn approval as he floated to the controls. Long before, he had received word from the other pilots. They were ready. Quickly the scientist issued new orders – orders that were obeyed without question – full speed ahead! Deftly he set his own controls, and waited.

And nothing happened!

Incredulously Kama-Loo checked over his instruments. They were in perfect order; the Zeera should be speeding on thru space at full acceleration. But instead, they were traveling only at the rate of their momentum. Interference of Elo Hava!

Then abruptly, as tho a giant tentacle had leaped out of space to wrap itself about the craft, the space ship stopped short. With vicious, stunning force the two were flung thru the metallic vapors to crash against the metal wall of the control room. Down they slumped, their feelers limp, and their jells shrouded with the dull brown of unconsciousness.

Reason returned slowly to the Efranian. His feelers began to stir feebly, and he spouted gaspingly through the gills. Far distant, in the dim vistas of imagination he seemed to hear a voice. Zeera’s voice, calling him. Weakly his middle feeler circled about, his eye searching for the voice’s source. Now he heard it again – and he knew it was no chimera. Zeera!

With spasmodic impulses of his teeba he floated erect, his gaze turning mechanically toward the screenophotoscope. There she was, her jell colored with apprehension and uncertainty, her speaking vent quivering, and her words coming in a strained rush.

“Fo-Peta! At last you are awake! Quick – give me your position in space. I – I must have it – or – or—“ She left the sentence unfinished. “Never mind; just give me your position. I’ll explain later.”

Their position in space – he couldn’t give it accurately – not without considerable time to check his figures. Frantically he gazed at Kama-Loo. The astronomer could have the information in a moment… And he was coming to his senses even now!

In a flash Fo-Peta hovered above him, shaking him roughly with the tentacle projecting from his middle jell. Groggily Kama-Loo thrust himself erect, staring in wonder at the Efranian.

“Quick, Kama-Loo – Zeera wants our position in space! She’s free – and must have it at once.”

Uncertainly, the astronomer floated toward the space charts. “Our position in space,” he muttered. “Our position in space.” Then as the full import of Fo-Peta’s words dissipated the lingering fog-wisps of unconsciousness, he sprang into quick motion. A glance at the charts – hurried calculations – and instant to check them – and he darted to the transmitter. Crisply he gave the necessary figures, Zeera repeating them – then the screenophotoscope blanked.

Impatiently the two waited, conjecturing wildly about what would happen. The Efranian’s mind was awhirl with wonder. Zeera, a captive of Pross Mere-Mer – now free – and requiring their position in space! Could she somehow have gained possession of a dimensional car? Or was there some connection between her freedom and the strange being who called himself Elo Hava? Perhaps he’s know soon – he hoped so.

Now calls were coming from the virs in the lower quarters of the craft. Just recovering consciousness, they looked to their leaders for an explanation of the jarring halt in midspace. At a gesture from Fo-Peta, Kama-Loo told briefly what he knew, commanding them to remain at their posts and await orders for speedy action should an emergency arise.

Slow, monotonous minutes of waiting followed – steadily the tension increased, till the very metallic vapors within the Zeera seemed to be alive with nervous energy.

Then suddenly came another sound from the screenophotoscope. With middle feeler extended rigidly, Fo-Peta watched and listened. A repetition of the sound, vague, meaningless – then it crystallized into orderly speech; and simultaneously there appeared the image of a strange creature with a thick middle body and four awkward jointed appendages – a native of Darth! Hoarse, guttural words issued from his speaking vent. To Fo-Peta they were meaningless, but Kama-Loo, who had studied the language of every race he had met on Awn, understood readily. Rapidly he translated.

“Alan Martin, Commander, Space Fleet of Earth, calling fleet of Saturn. Check flight at once. The course you are following is a death trap, laid by the Wrongness of Space. He is in control on Luna and is impersonating Dos-Tev. Await correct course.” A pause, and the message was repeated.

Fo-Peta’s middle feeler twisted in a grimace of mockery. “He tells us to check our flight – but that has already been attended to quite efficiently. The Wrongness of Space is in control on Awn, eh? Well, another Wrongness has taken charge here.” His jell tinged gloomily. “I sometimes wish I were back in the Ethor regions – dying of attrition. It would be better than this confusion.”

Kama-Loo’s feelers twitched in negation. “Don’t be foolish, Fo-Peta. All this must end some time – and you and Zeera can spend the rest of your lives in a Narlonian paradise, absorbing cana and tara.” His tones belied the confidence his words expressed. Musingly he added: “I wonder what Zeera plans—“ He stopped short with a sudden gasp thru the gills. “Look!”

The Efranian spun around, his eye pointing in the direction the scientist indicated; and abruptly his jell and feelers combined in expressing incredulous amazement. For there on the screenophotoscope where but a moment before had been the image of the creature from Darth, was now the interior of a strange space ship, a craft so large that the lone figure floating above an immense control board seemed almost microscopic by contrast. Now that figure spoke, and the listeners heard the voice of Zeera, jubilant, alive with hope.

“Fo-Peta, I’ve done it! I’ve brought this monstrous ship thru space to you! Come out – your entire fleet is within my little vessel.”

Startled, Kama-Loo switched on the magna plate and turned its lenses in a giant circle about the Zeera. On every side were the gently curving walls of a space ship, so vast that it stunned the imagination. The virgo spoke truth.

At Fo-Peta’s orders, Kama-Loo set the controls to descend. The strange force still held them powerless. His jell tinting with annoyance, the Efranian ordered his crew, and the commanders and crews of the other vessels to stay at their posts while he and Kama-Loo descended to the floor of the giant craft. Opening a vision plate, they drifted out.

Down, down they floated thru somewhat rarefied metallic vapors, down to the side of Zeera. An instant’s hesitation; then Fo-Peta’s feelers twined about those of the virgo in a fiercely affectionate embrace. Old Kama-Loo turned his eye toward the huge bank of controls.

He had looked away thru politeness, but his interest became genuine in an instant. Back and forth he drifted above the apparatus, studying the device in the main like that in the dimension cars of Hade, but indicative of far higher intelligence and of far greater skill in things mechanical.

Zeera began talking, eagerly, and disjointedly, virgo-like, glad for an audience.

“We are not safe here, Fo-Peta! Elo Hava – if it is the god – will follow. The Pross Lords are back on Narlone, but Elo Hava and his horde – that is another matter.”

Gently Fo-Peta remonstrated. “Zeera, you forget that we know nothing of what has happened. Tell us all about it, starting with the revolt of the Pross Lords.”

Rapidly the, the virgo sketched the events which had led up to her arrival in space in the gigantic dimensional car.

The rebellion of the Pross Lords had taken the leaders of the Toilers completely by surprise. Confident in the security of their newfound freedom, the guards had grown careless. And in the noisome depths of the Ethor regions, where vigilance seemed unnecessary, Pross Mere-Mer and a few of his former associates had planned and executed the revolution.

Somehow – Zeera did not know the method employed – they had stored concentrated Ethor in the tara containers, and with it, had spread attrition – the hideous nager – over vast areas of Narlone. The condensed virus, volatilizing on contact with the metallic vapors, had been impossible to combat. Only in flight lay safety. With ease the Pross Lords had seized their former power.

In the Imperial Palace of Narlone, Zeera, guarded by a select company of soldiers, had viewed the onslaught of the rebels with growing alarm. Knowing that Fo-Peta and his space ships were too far away to be of assistance, she had not called him until the tide of battle had definitely gone against the defenders; and at that moment Pross Mere-Mer had forced his way past her guards to capture her.

Leaving his acolytes in control of the palace, Pross Mere-Mer had borne her triumphantly to Fo-Peta’s dimensional car, telling her of his plans. Virs were already loading the craft with casks of concentrated Ethor, and an astronomer sat within the control room, rapidly computing the position of Ern and her other satellites. The vessel was almost ready for its flight to these worlds to urge them to follow Narlone’s lead.

Then abruptly out of nowhere had appeared an incredible spherical ship, a monstrous thing like a miniature world of polished metal. And from it had come the giant figure of the being who called himself Elo Hava, followed by a horde of monstrosities like creations of some demented demon. At thought of them, Zeera’s jell tinged with utter revulsion.

Short, thin feelers, bloated and blotched with the hideous nagar – to the virgo that was what they seemed to be. But feelers that were detached from the parent body, that floated and writhed thru the air of their own volition, feelers ringed with repulsive swellings, that tapered to blunt points at both ends. Twisting and squirming about Elo Hava, the hideous host had sped toward the dimensional car with ferocious speed.

What followed was a blur of confusion to Zeera. At sight of this new menace, Pross Mere-Mer had broken a spell of momentary paralysis and had fled, dragging Zeera in the grasp of a crushing feeler. A backward glance of the virgo had revealed the monsters completely covering the dimensional car, a strange blue luminescence emanating from them.

And the craft with its occupants had melted beneath them, shrinking rapidly to vanish into nothingness!

That was all that Zeera had seen, for at that instant Elo Hava had reached them. In a thought he had seized them and had flashed with them into his giant craft. Dropping them with stunning force, he had darted back to lead his horde. Zeera had seen him speed away as blackness closed over her senses.

When consciousness returned to the virgo, she had seen the Pross Lord lying collapsed at her side. After gaining full possession of her faculties, and examining portions of the craft, she had realized that in many ways it was similar in construction to the dimensional cars of Ern. Conceiving the idea of fleeing to Fo-Peta in space, she had called the Efranian on the modified screenophotoscope in the vessel. After gaining their position from Kama-Loo, she had constructed a chart and had made the journey.

At the conclusion of Zeera’s narrative, Fo-Peta, more the lover now than the logical thinker, began commenting solicitously upon her danger. It remained for Kama-Loo to see the salient fact her story revealed.

“Why – then Pross Mere-Mer is right here with us!”

An instant of startled silence, while their eyes searched everywhere for the Pross Lord – then from a deep niche in the huge apparatus beneath them came the words:

“Yes, he’s here and he has a Hadean disk pointed right at you! Do not move!” Out of a maze of giant instruments floated Pross Mere-Mer, his jell colored vindictively, his slimy purple eye aglow with satisfaction. “Again Pross Mere-Mer is in control!”

Fo-Peta seemed stunned. The virgo stared at the tall Narlonian fearfully. Only Kama-Loo was unperturbed.

“You may be in control – but I know you won’t harm me, because you can’t get along without my knowledge. Then too, you forget Elo Hava.” The keen eye of the astronomer had seen something that had escaped the others; and now he pointed coolly toward a wide, transparent plate above them. Framed beyond the opening were ten of the dimensional cars Fo-Peta had constructed after he had seized control of Narlone. And from nine of them were pouring the horde of Elo Hava.

Vomiting forth in the vacuum of space, where there were no metallic vapors – unharmed!

The tenth hovered motionless for a moment, apart from the rest – then it vanished – and reappeared instantly within the giant space sphere!

And from it floated Elo Hava!

Pross Mere-Mer collapsed as though his jell were oozing from a hole in his skin. His feelers turned gray with fear. The others were more than uneasy; but the Pross Lord was a pitiable sight. It was as tho he had a premonition of what was to come.

Down flashed the giant creature, myriad feelers outstretched, down toward the four watchers. Pross Mere-Mer spouted loudly thru the gills; and feverishly he flung up the feeler bearing the weapon with which he had threatened the others. A wide beam of light leaped from the disk, wavering uncertainly – and Elo Hava drew back in surprise, a number of feelers falling to the floor, where they lay, writhing feebly.

An instant – and the giant hurled himself ferociously at the Pross Lord, ignoring the searing beam, countless coils wrapping themselves about his quivering jell. With the fury of utter despair, Pross Mere-Mer fought as he had never fought before, bringing every ounce of his great strength into play. Around and around they reeled in an uneven struggle that could have but one conclusion.

The instant the fight began, Fo-Peta shook off his numbing lethargy and leaped into action. A twist of his teeba shot him over to the screenophotoscope. It required no adjusting; it was still set on the cycle of the Zeera. In the space ship the men caught the message, relayed it to the others.

“If you get a chance, kill this monster. Use everything we have. And if those things outside get in, stop them! They’re mighty dangerous. If they surround a ship they can dissolve it – destroy it completely. Zeera’s coming up – take her in.” The Efranian broke contact and whirled toward the virgo. “Up to the ship – quick! You’ll be safer there.” His jell colored impatiently as she gestured denial. “You must! Here you will just interfere with us.”

Reluctantly Zeera darted upward, her eye on the space ships. And at that instant Elo Hava released a thing of ruptured feelers and punctured, lacerated jell – Pross Mere-Mer – dead.

Resolutely Fo-Peta faced the giant. He could not hope to defeat him – but he must try. In a fleeting instant his mind noted many things – Kama-Loo darting toward what appeared to be a bank of weapons controls… Zeera almost half way to the ships and rising rapidly… The monster horde gathering about the craft’s hull, to the left of the vision plate above them… But dominating all else was the approaching figure of Elo Hava.

Now he had reached him – and had passed, ignoring him utterly! Above a strange device he stopped – deftly depressed a lever – and high above, directly opposite the assembled horde, a wide, circular portal slid open. In swarmed the monsters. And at the same instant Kama-Loo did something with the unfamiliar instruments.

A sharp, penetrating click – and a tracery of finest wires sprang into relief over every square inch of the sphere’s walls. Radiance that sent a tingling shock thru all of them – and that gripped them in a paralyzing clutch that could not be broken! Kama-Loo could not move the feeler that had done the damage; Elo Hava, turning away after closing the portal into space, grew suddenly rigid; and Fo-Peta, watching the horde above him, could only stare fixedly upward. All were helpless.

The Efranian’s staring eye saw Zeera spurt suddenly toward the space fleet, fleeing from the onrushing horde; saw her reach it and vanish among the vessels – and he knew that she was comparatively safe. Then he saw the writhing things swarm over every craft, cloaking them with pulsing curtains of azure fire – the radiance which had destroyed the dimensional car.

Now a faint hum came from the space ships – a crackling whir. Out thru minute vents in the walls of the vessels stabbed pointed needle rays of disintegrating force, beams that disrupted matter at a touch. But the monsters, as tho guided by some unknown sense, instantly coiled around the openings, only a few casualties in their ranks. And the brilliance of their glowing doubled.

Fo-Peta knew instinctively that the fleet of the satellites must do something at once or it would be too late. And – Zeera was in one of the vessels.

Suddenly the ships began to turn, accelerating with every revolution, whirling madly while roaring jets of rocket flame spun about them. They had broken the imprisoning clutch of Elo Hava’s powers, had loosed the full strength of all their rocket jets at the same instant to blast their tormentors with searing flame. And the monster horde fell hastily away from the space ships, some drifting about as lifeless, fire-charred hulks.

At a distance they paused, seeming to contemplate the fleet with unseen eyes. Evidently they had expected no real resistance. Moments of inactivity – then with their swollen lengths arched in rough half-circles, they poured torrents of crackling energy into the ships – elusive targets now – and were met by plunging spherical battering rams, as the vessels darted wildly about, crashing into them with devastating effect.

Beside him Fo-Peta heard a snarling grunt. Elo Hava! As tho it were a signal, his horde abruptly changed their tactics, concentrating their forces on a single ship. Uncertainly it checked its flight – its rocket charges dying – and in a breath it was lost in a colossal deluge of coruscating light. Moment of this – and as one, the monsters flung themselves upon the crippled craft, completely enveloping it with their bodies. And it glowed – and shrank – and vanished – as had the dimensional car! All in a period incredibly brief.

To the three below came the acrid smell of consumed matter, floating sluggishly thru the metallic vapors.

And now Fo-Peta saw the Zeera stagger weakly, saw her rocket flames die down! The attackers, untangling themselves from the knot within which their victim had vanished, sensed it too, and leaped upon her eagerly. Fo-Peta spouted violently thru the gills, his teeba striving futilely to force him upward. Zeera – Zeera – was she in that vessel? He had lost sight of her among the other ships – but he thought she had entered the craft named for her. And now it was beset by the destroying horde!

Their method of attack was the same. The deluge of blasting energy – then the furious onslaught of their glowing bodies – but there the similarity ended.

At close range the four remaining space ships suddenly released the full power of their arsenal upon the shrinking ball of monsters – blasted it with the weapons of Hade and the mighty powers given them by Mea-Quin – blasted it with cascades of destruction that filled the giant ship with deafening thunder, with eye-searing radiance, with nauseating odors – energies that ripped and flayed and burned that repulsive mass into a lifeless, shrunken cinder, glowing with a faint blue light as it spun in the fiery embrace.

Stunningly, Fo-Peta realized the significance of the tragedy. The brave virs of the Zeera had sacrificed themselves in order that the monsters might be destroyed. If – if only his virgo were safe within another ship! A selfish thought, but he could not thrust it from him.

Stray beams had been crackling against the walls of the huge sphere, some coming dangerously close to the paralyzed trio below. Most of them had been deflected by the energy-wall of that wire network, but some had penetrated, to rake and etch the surface of the ship’s inner armor. Just as the space ships shut off their barrage, a slashing ray pierced the heart of the giant weapon control board – and the paralysis vanished!

At a furious roar from Elo Hava, Fo-Peta whirled, his feelers tensed for combat. The giant hovered uncertainly, his myriad tentacles glaring everywhere. His jell was black with helpless hatred. Above him the four space ships charged downward, alert for violence. To one side Kama-Loo still gripped the weapon controls. On the other, Fo-Peta. One long moment, alive with waking fury – and Elo Hava, his figure suddenly expressing vicious resignation – vanished!

Gone – nothing to mark his going!

“Gone,” Kama-Loo muttered, breaking the tension, “back to the foul dimension that spawned him.”

Fo-Peta’s jell colored with sudden satisfaction – then dulled abruptly. Zeera!

The surviving ships were close now, still radiating the heat of battle. A portal opened in the nearest, and the commander darted thru the scorching aura.

“Zeera?” Fo-Peta’s jell was apprehensively questioning as he sped toward the vir. “Zeera!”

The feelers of the other gestured regret. “I’m sorry, most Potent Fo-Peta, but her commander insisted that we sacrifice her. He—“

“Not the ship,” interrupted the Efranian impatiently. “My virgo!”

“Oh – she rests safely in my vessel. She—“ He paused, his eye following the revolutionist wonderingly as he flashed toward the open space ship as fast as his teeba could propel him. More slowly he moved after him.

Left alone with the marvelous devices of Elo Hava, Kama-Loo lost himself immediately in apparatus more wonderful and intricate than any he had ever seen. But, at length recalling the gathering of the System’s fleets and remembering the warning of the Darth leader, and his request that they await the correct course, he turned to the screenophotoscope. Adjusting the controls, he ranged thru cycle after cycle. Back and forth – until faintly from the great amplifiers came a muffled, sibilant voice – a voice bearing no remote resemblance to the coarse bellow of the Darthan.

Kama-Loo listened wonderingly. The voice spoke again – and now the scientist realized that they came from a Neptunian, a strange gaseous creature who communicated by changing the tints of his gases. This marvelous machine of Elo Hava must be translating that light into sound, as had the apparatus of Mea-Quin on Awn. Uncertainly Kama-Loo translated the message, uncertainly, for his knowledge of the language was extremely limited.

“Calling – space ships of Darth. Course seems confused, reply with correct course,” A pause, then “they do not answer – tired of game of war.”

Anxiously Kama-Loo awaited another message, but none came. Dimly in the background he heard a faint humming – then it too died, leaving silence. But it left him with the knowledge that the Neptunians were in distress, and that it was more than likely that no one else had heard their plea.

If only he knew where they were! His eyes roved over the device before him. Then he could – the thought ended in wonder, for there above the screen was the Neptunian’s position, changing every instant as they tore thru space; this mad machine somehow following their course.

His jell colored with uncertainty, Kama-Loo spun toward the ship into which Fo-Peta had vanished. Then he wheeled again, decision replacing doubt. Fo-Peta would not relish an interruption; and the astronomer’s duty was clear. Rapidly his deft feelers charted a metal map pointing to the position where the Neptunian vessel would be in two minutes – inserted it in the control table. A carefully timed pause – moments of anxious experimenting – a flood of golden light emanating from an abruptly visible spiral that completely encircled the great sphere – further manipulation of intricate devices – then blackness indescribable. A whirling vertigo that swept thru all the giant craft and those within it – dizzying disintegration – and their flight thru the fifth dimension was ended.

Mighty gravity laid clutching feelers on the astronomer, gravity exceeding even that of Ern. With laboring teeba he resisted, managing to remain afloat.

Senses clearing, ignoring his increased weight, Kama-Loo inspected the surrounding space with a powerful magna plate. Star-pointed blackness… lonely infinity… then burning crimson madness flashed before his vision. A sea of swirling clouds, lacerated by lances of red flame that lashed up from the hidden surface of a vast world like snapping whips of an angry god. Beyond its curving edge speeding gas strata rushed on tempestuously. The Red Spot of Jupiter, Kama-Loo realized in a flash.

And silhouetted against its glare, a lone space ship was hurtling in a long slanting plunge toward that awful inferno, helpless in its remorseless grip.

The astronomer watched in fascination for an instant, conscious of a feeling of awe at the tremendous spectacle he beheld; conscious too that something was sending prickling points of torment through his jell. Tearing his gaze away at length, he adjusted the range of the magna plate till the other vessel completely filled its surface, till he could see thru a port hole three motionless figures lying within the ship.

Hopefully he stared at a chart above the magna plate. The position of the vessel, changing every instant, was there. He watched for many interminable minutes, carefully calculating their speed, the rate of change. Figuring with infinite care despite the burning sensation which seemed to grow momentarily more intense, despite the burden of the increased weight which strained his teeba almost to the limit.

Now he had it! A minute to cast another map – the dimensional spiral again – vertigo of interdimensional travel – and the giant sphere of Hava materialized about the tiny space craft of Neptune! Materialized and sped with it on its downward course, drawn by the mighty gravity of Jupiter – and the greater pull of the Red Spot.

As the enormous, flaming inferno leaped up toward them, Kama-Loo, fully aware of their danger, worked with rapid, unfaltering precision. Zeera, Fo-Peta, and the other virs were struggling excitedly out of the ships now, but the astronomer ignored them. From memory he charted another map – fitted it in place – and in a dervish gyration of golden radiance the ship of Elo Hava sped instantaneously a million miles away, where the giant planet, Jupiter, was only another light in the void – where they were safe.

Kama-Loo, ever the scientist, was eagerly trying to explain to Zeera and Fo-Peta exactly what had happened. Several hours had elapsed since he had rescued the Neptunian ship; and during the interim some of the bewilderment which had followed the appearance of the strange vessel had been dispelled. Now the space fleet of Ern and the Neptunian survivor were anchored side by side along an empty section of the wall. The crews of the vessels of Ern were busy removing the effects of the battle with the monsters.

Within the smaller glassite craft two of the beings from Tridentia were striving somewhat weakly to revive the third, who now showed signs of returning consciousness.

“This Elo Hava, I believe,” the scientist was saying, “is a being from another dimension, mortal as you and I. The similarity of his dimensional car, screenophotoscope, and the like, to ours, leads me to believe that his race has discovered a means of looking from their dimension into ours. And now they have crossed the barrier between the worlds. No doubt another of their kind accomplished the same feat ages ago, and by their miraculous appearance from nowhere, started the legend of the god, Elo Hava. And this being, knowing of the legend, decided to take advantage of our superstition to make his conquest of our worlds easier.” He paused, his jell tinted with smug self-satisfaction.

“As for our friends from Neptune – there’s nothing very mysterious about what happened to them. The Neptunian fleet must not have received the warning from the Darthans – probably because of interference from the Red Spot – and naturally they were caught in the trap laid by the Wrongness of Space. I believe that Red Spot is the remains of some space-wanderer composed chiefly of some exceedingly heavy element beyond uranium – an element extraordinarily radioactive. What we see as the spot is largely light caused by the impact of the element’s radiation on Jupiter’s cloud-sheath.

“it’s easy to understand how the radiation must have affected the Neptunians. Ionizing their gases, it disrupted their entire mental and physical structure. Away from the radiations now, their vital organs are slowly reorganizing and reasserting themselves.

“We with our sensible, solid bodies, were little affected. Beyond an unpleasant burning sensation and our apparent increase in weight, we weren’t even uncomfortable. I suppose continual exposure to the short destructive radiations would result disastrously but that we need not consider.

“As for the future—“ Kama-Loo stopped short, his eye fixed rigidly on his audience. Slowly a tinge of indignation colored his jell. Fo-Peta and Zeera floated to one side, their feelers twined about each other, totally oblivious to anything but their reunion and their love. They had not heard a single word of his lucid explanation, he thought in disgust.

Mechanically he gazed at the occupants of the Neptunian ship. The older figure, Tranda, had risen and was moving feebly about on trembling tubes. And close to the glassite wall stood Steepa and Teena, their pads stroking each other caressingly, their auras united, their tubes intertwined amorously!

Sudden amusement lighted Kama-Loo’s jell. It was natural, inevitable – the love-making of these young creatures. He knew – from experience! With a gesture of resignation he turned and floated toward the screen of the screenophotoscope. It was time that they renewed their flight for the gathering place of the fleets. They could get there instantly in the dimensional sphere and could get out and fight in their own space ships – since it would be impossible to guide the dimensional craft.

Throwing on power and turning various dials, he sent his voice thru the void, calling the fleets of Darth, calling Mea-Quin and Dos-Tev, calling long on every frequency band. But tho he waited interminably, calling again and again – there was no response.

They were cut off – alone – isolated in the emptiness of space, powerless to aid in the battle against Ay-Artz, the invader from Lemnis.

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# Chapter 16 – Lost in Alien Dimensions by Eando Binder

AUTHOR OF: ‘THE THIEVES FROM ISTOT,’ ‘DAWN TO DUSK,’ ETC.

Bullo found it hard to be optimistic, as was his natural state, for both of his companions were in the very depths of despair. Dos-Tev, deposed prince of Lemnis, sat upon the metal bench along one wall so apathetically that he might have been the model for a study in dejection. As for Mea-Quin, his aged face lined and seamed by the many trials they had recently gone thru, his quick, nervous pace up and down the room bespoke futile rage and despondency. And Bullo himself cast his eyes about their tiny metal prison with no windows and but one securely-locked door, and felt his heart down near his toes.

Mea-Quin broke a long, heart-breaking silence: “It has all come to this! A three year trip and over thru space, concerted efforts that finally gave us contact with the peoples of the solar system, a chance to give Ay-Artz a royal welcome with a powerful fighting armada – and then the Wrongness of Space steps in and in one moment spoils it all! May Tor damn him, and may his soul, if he has one, be consigned to Kruaz – that being who calls himself Krzza of Lxyfa! And may the evil gods of every dimension in the universe tear him to shreds—”

Mea-Quin stopped his tirade and spluttered into silence as a hand touched his shoulder. It was Dos-Tev, his face beseeching, hopeful.

“Perhaps – perhaps the various officers of the different fleets of the solar system will be suspicious of those plotted courses sent by the Wrongness of Space in your name. Oh, if we could only know that they were, and that they would be safe. I would die in peace then, knowing that Ay-Artz would be defeated, thru our carried-on efforts.”

“Ayhuu, Dos-Tev,” returned the Lemnisian scientist. “If only that could be. But I fear that the various fleets, eager to get into action, will sweep along those false and treacherous courses given by our enemy, and realize only too late their danger. By Tor, it is tormenting to think of it – the Third Planet fleet dashing sunward; the Eighth Planet’s ship flying into the maw of Jupiter’s flaming and deadly Red Spot; the dreadnaughts of Mars—“

But Mea-Quin did not have to repeat for them the list of dooms for each of the fleets, for the Wrongness of Space, laughing hellishly, had itemized it for them in malicious detail before he had had them thrown into their present cell in his other-dimensional palace at the bottom of Copernicus.

“Ayhuu, a depressing outlook for the future of the solar system,” agreed Dos-Tev, sinking again to his seat on the hard, cold bench, “the arch-tyrant, Ay-Artz, will arrive in a few days. The Wrongness of Space will greet him, and the two gloating evil-doers will sweep out into an unprotected system of worlds, and there will be none to stop them.”

Bullo, who had listened in silence, involuntarily clenched his fists. His hatred for Ay-Artz was second in degree only to his love for his Prince, and his love for Dos-Tev was infinite.

“By Tor—“

Unable to remain quiet, the giant Lemnisian came to his feet and tried again, as he had tried already a dozen times, to batter down the door of their prison with his mighty body, but in vain. It was solid metal, probably inches thick, and Dos-Tev pulled him away, shaking his head.

As tho his blows against the obstacle were a signal, the door suddenly swung open and all three turned in surprise to see standing there one of the helpers of the Wrongness of Space. The huge green beast leered at them evilly, and raised his claw-like hand, beckoning them to follow.

“I wonder,” asked Mea-Quin, “what this can mean. Ayhuu – I fear it may be our last—“

Dos-Tev gripped his arm fiercely, whispering in his ear. “Here is a chance to fight for our liberty. Bullo will lead. When he jumps at the guard, you rush past.”

“But—“ with the word of remonstrance on his lips Mea-Quin saw it was too late to stop them. Already Bullo had stepped out the door, closely followed by Dos-Tev, who fairly trembled in eagerness. The guard had backed to the wall of the corridor and watched them come out, seemingly careless. But when Bullo made a sudden sideward leap, there came a lurid violet flash and the brawny Lemnisian stumbled. Dos-Tev, despite the old scientist’s sudden cry, who saw how hopeless it was, sprang also, to be met by a similar burst of eye-searing radiance from the black tube in the guard’s hand.

The green man glanced at the two bodies lying paralyzed at his feet and pointed the black tube at Mea-Quin menacingly. Then seeing that the scientist stood still and had no thought of attacking, he turned it away. From his belt he extracted another tube, a bright scarlet in color, he sprayed a soft amber light over the fallen Lemnisians and a moment later they arose, chastened and sheepish of face.

The guard tossed his head down the corridor, an unmistakable signal to move on, and stepped behind them. Without another word, deflated in spirit by their sudden and utter defeat, Bullo and Dos-Tev strode down the hallway, and Mea-Quin followed, his sad eyes yet more sad.

The Wrongness of Space, a being so like a man and yet so different in character, awaited them on his throne of black stone. He leered at the three prisoners triumphantly.

Mea-Quin met his red-flecked, tawny eyes – the eyes of a beast of prey – unflinchingly. “So, tyrant from an alien dimension, this I suppose is our last hour of life. Well, have done with it, by Tor, that we may not be forced to bear longer your nauseous presence.”

Daring words for a prisoner to speak, but the green demon seemed to disregard the insult, and instead broke into a shrilling of insane mirth. “Being doomed,” he radiated by telepathy, “you hope for a quick and sudden death. I have other plans.”

The Lemnisians shivered at the ominous implication.

The green being went on: “But let us put that matter aside for a moment. I wish at present to satisfy your scientific curiosity regarding inter-dimensional travel. There are many separate universes of three dimensions, so many that even my mind reels at the thought. They lie separate from one another, yet so close thru an arbitrary fourth dimension, that to one who has solved the riddle, as I have, it is a simple matter to visit them. Yet they are not all parallel, in a manner of speaking, to one another. Some of them overlap in one dimension, some in two, but generally the overlapping is somewhere in the reaches of their respective spatial voids, so that only an occasional space ship warps unwittingly from one universe to another by blundering thru the overlap.

“To make it clearer, use the analogy of two-dimensional world – planes of existence, in short – which may lie like leaved about one another, touching here and there. The over-lapping of two-dimensional worlds would be a line; the overlapping of three-dimensional worlds are plane surfaces. The over-lapping of four-dimensional universes – which you can readily see is hypothetical – would be volumes, or block spaces. However, the space between three dimensional worlds – which in turn is one dimension of another universe – is actually a fourth dimension. And it has proved very useful to me, this little knowledge.

“I escaped from my own universe, hounded by enemies, and cast my eyes about for some alien existence in which I might become a ruler, for my talent and nature will have nothing less.”

The yellow, panther-eyes of the green giant gleamed fanatically as he went on: “The power which enables me to traverse the fourth dimension, enclosed in this little device run by ultra-atomic energy, is a terrific magnetic strain that can radiate along only a certain axis opposed to the three dimensions. Imagine your Flatlander. He has a strain-producer which when turned parallel to his two-dimensional world is a motive force. When turned at right angles to his world, it is a force that pushes him up or down – i.e. into the third dimension. Or in analogy with our world, the fourth dimension.

“But no ordinary energy is powerful enough to do such a miraculous thing. Rocket-power, atomic power, the enormous powers of planetary momentum – all are inadequate. It requires a special form of energy greater than those. It is not the quantity of the power that counts, but the quality. If must be instantaneous confined power, like the sharp snap that breaks a cord which will resist much greater steady pulling, or like the quick blow that chips rock where applied pressure will not harm it.”

The Wrongness of Space was obviously bragging. Was showing off his great knowledge of things no one else knew. He went on, like a lecturer:

“I have visited many strange universes in my search for one suitable to my plans. Some are maddeningly distorted to our perspective, filled with horrific, unnamable things, shuddery things. Others are similar to this one of yours, which happens to be a great deal like my former home-world. In some the passing of time is greatly accelerated or slowed. I spent but a seeming minute in one universe to find myself ten year past the date of departure.

“However, my travels are over. Your solar system is ideally suited to my schemes. It is ripe for the plucking. Ay-Artz will do the preliminary work for me and then I will step in and become absolute emperor. As for Ay-Artz – he will… die!”

With a crescendo of maniacal laughter that betoken a mind whose sanity had long since departed, the green giant gloated on: “From the solar system I shall branch out. All the nearer stars shall become part of my empire! With my means of instantaneous transportation via the fourth dimension, I can conquer system after system and hold them all under my omnipotent rule!”

The Lemnisians started. Krzza of Lyxfa showed himself in his true colors, a despot of despots. A creature without a universe, ready to swoop vulture-like on a fair system of worlds, destroying all opposition. Beside him, Ay-Artz dwindled as a tyrant. This maniac was their worst and most dangerous foe.

A maniac, but dangerous. A mind insane, but holding the key to immense power. His mental warp would prove only a greater scourge to the peoples who would soon feel his iron fist.

Thus confronted with the true picture of what the future held in store for intelligent life in the universe, the three Lemnisians gasped in utter dismay.

“Ayhuuu!” croaked Mea-Quin hoarsely. “It is Krauz personified that speaks to us!”

Dos-Tev set his lips firmly to keep from shouting denunciations at the monstrous green other-dimensional creature with such utterly gross ambitions. Bullo stood motionless, completely stunned by things he could not grasp as readily as his masters.

Suddenly the Wrongness of Space arose from his throne.

“As for yourselves, I have a special way of destroying those who cross my path. You creatures from Lemnis fomented resistance to Ay-Artz, thus delaying me. Hear your doom!

“There is a special universe totally removed from this one wherein there is a world inhabited by awesome creatures defying description. They will make short work of you. You will be transported there in your space suits, fully armed. Perhaps with your gamma bombs, and force-plane projector you will stave off destruction long enough to become gibbering idiots at the terrors of that world. You, Mea-Quin, are a great scientist – ah, yet, a great scientist. But in that world you will be as helpless as a naked child. There you are sentenced to go by the order of Krzza, Emperor of the Universe!”

Perhaps the spine twisting laugh emitted by the Wrongness of Space made the Lemnisians shudder more that the approach of a terrible doom.

“Just one word, Krzza,” cried Mea-Quin, cutting short the mad creature’s laugh. “Somewhere, somehow, sometime, you will be tripped up. You have great powers, but they are not infinite. The race we come from, and the peoples of the universe, are not the kind to let tyranny long exist. You will fail—“

“Brave words,” radiated the Wrongness of Space with mental sarcasm. “Maybe they will comfort you when you face the unmentionable horrors of your doom.”

The first impression the Lemnisians had of the world on which Krzza marooned them was one of prickling, abysmal fear. Almost as tho it were a material entity, soul-sickening, enervating, crushing fear weighed them down. It was a terrible handicap from the first, as it inspired them almost to fall down and grovel in abject misery and dread of – they knew not what.

They faced each other in a thick fog of swirling yellow vapors, standing on crumbly, barren ground, and took heart in seeing slung on each other’s belt a gamma bomb and a force-place projector. With the latter instrument, they should be immune from physical harm till the atomic valves burned out, which would not be for many hours.

Mea-Quin spoke first, his voice vibrating in the headphones of his friends. “The Wrongness of Space has given me much food for thought with his lecture on dimensions.”

“Food for thought?” queried Dos-Tev, amazed. “What good will that do us, stranded here on an unknown world in an unknown universe!”

“Ayhuu! There are certain things—“

“I like this not,” came the voice of Bullo. “Creatures – whatever and wherever they are – could attack only too easily in this gloom.”

Both Dos-Tev and Mea-Quin opened their mouths to speak, but no words came forth as a fresh wave of that indefinable sensation of stark terror, like a wave of an etheric tide, swept over them, setting them all atremble. Then, of a sudden, they were fighting for their lives.

Figures loomed up in the xanthic mists all around them; horrid, frightening shapes of nightmare appearance. With a silence and intentness that was hideous they leaped upon the marooned men with multiple slavering jaws and powerful talons. Queerly angular in shape, they moved with rheumatic clumsiness, and from various vents in their crystalline hides puffed smoky vapors.

Bullo’s force-plane projector was already in action, smiting the nightmare monsters with irresistible blows and volatilizing them wherever the fan-rays struck fullest. Dos-Tev and Mea-Quin then joined in the slaughter, and by common instinct they formed a triangle facing outward, this protecting their backs. In unending waves the monsters advanced, scrambling over the bulwark of mutilated bodies that quickly ringed the three Lemnisians. Minutes passed and they began to perspire from the exertion of swinging the appreciably heavy projectors in an arc of 120 degrees to prevent any beast from getting within striking distance.

“Metallic beings,” gasped Mea-Quin, his scientific nature asserting itself even in the heat of battle. “Crystalloid creatures whose body processes run at furnace heat. Tor help us if one of them gets close enough to rake us with teeth or talons; they would shear us like a knife!”

Smoking and fuming like the combustion engines they were in reality, the hideous monsters swept upon them, seemingly unknowing of fear. The hills of ringed bodies became higher and broader. It became increasingly more dangerous as the beasts could run up behind and suddenly clamber over almost upon them.

“Not the normal killing or food instinct,” gasped Mea-Quin, his keen brain recording facts even with death in his face. “This is something – greater. The ultra-hatred of alien creatures who sense we are intruders from a distant world. Or perhaps – it is something we cannot even understand.”

“Save your – breath!” admonished Dos-Tav. “Knowledge cannot help us now.”

“To the glory and honor of Lemnis!” suddenly came from Bullo. “And may Kruaz some day be the torment of that Wrongness of Space!”

A gamma bomb arced up gracefully and fell full upon the advancing hordes of fire-breathing monsters, to rain all about the place a crystalline mass of debris.

Dos-Tev knew they could not hold out much longer. The unending stream of metalloid, glinting pyro-creatures, the very spawn of an earthly hell, showed no signs of backing down. The young prince, with a prayer to Tor on his lips, swung his force-plane projector wherever blood-shot eyes saw movement. Suddenly a gigantic figure loomed over the bodies of slain beasts and tumbled at him. The projector ray severed part of trunk, but with amazing vitality the monster reached down an incredibly long claw arm and raked his talons at the man. Dos-Tev felt a violent concussion that threw him bodily against the trunk of another dead beast. It was like being rammed by a cannon-ball and then thrown up against a steel wall. Dos-Tev felt a blackness come over him and he resigned his soul to Tor.

But he was not dead, and came to consciousness finding himself supported by Bullo in a sitting position.

“Dos-Tev! Wake up,” the anguished face of Bullo came to him, “the beasts have gone temporarily! We are free!”

The prince of Lemnis shook his head, which ached throbbingly, and looked up to see Mea-Quin busily taking apart his projector.

“The awful punishment we wreaked on them,” went on Bullo, overjoyed at seeing his beloved prince conscious and unharmed, “finally beat them back, thank Tor, and I fear none too soon. Seeing you fly off your feet from the blow of that long-armed demon, it seemed an example of what would soon happen to all of us. Then quite suddenly, as I leaped to protect your fallen body, I found nothing before the sweep of my rays.”

Dos-Tev struggled to his feet with the help of Bullo. “Ayhuu, that was a hearty blow, but my bones are sound and the space suit must be yet intact or I would not be breathing.”

“You would be breathing,” supplemented Mea-Quin, “but the gasses filling your lungs would quickly bring asphyxiation. Those crystalline pyro-creatures exhaust probably the same products as combustion engines, including carbon monoxide.”

Even now as they looked around, they saw numerous puffs of smoky vapors issuing from carbon blackened vents amongst the monsters who were wounded but not yet dead. Here and there steel-like claws attached to thin piston rod arms yet moved spasmodically. Dos-Tev shuddered. What fearsome creatures, embodying the enormous strength and power of machinery with its practical indestructibility. Any ordinary weapon would have been laughably inadequate against their numberless might. Only the giant powered force-plane projector, designed to wipe out space ships and capable of volatilizing even meteors, had saved them from instant annihilation.

“And you,” said Dos-Tev, turning to Mea-Quin, “what are you doing?”

Busily, almost frantically, Mea-Quin was engaged with the inside of his projector. “You remember,” returned the scientist, still panting from the exertions of battle, “I said the Wrongness of Space had given me food for thought with what he told us of dimension-traveling.”

“But what are you doing tampering with one of our weapons?” queried the prince, puzzled. “Tor help us if the beasts attack again while we have only two projectors in use.”

Mea-Quin’s voice came back anguished. “Ayhuu, gods forbid that happen! Our only hope is that they give us long enough respite that I may finish this. Bullo, do you go to the top of that heap of bodies, the highest point, and keep a weather eye open for attack. But wait – first give me your projector.”

Bullo left obediently and Dos-Tev, sensing that the scientist was working out something important with the projectors, watched avidly as Mea-Quin extracted the atomic valve unit with its precious vial of radioactive material from Bullo’s weapon and held it in his gauntleted fingers.

“Bullo!” call the scientist. “Is all clear around us?”

The giant Lemnisian, perched astride the twisted body of a beast atop a fuming heap of devastated monsters, looked carefully around thru the eddying fogs of amber that seemed an integral part of this queer world. “I see none of the beasts, Sire. Yet they may be no more than five hundred yards away, what with this thrice damned yellow fog to obscure the landscape.”

“We will have to take a chance,” muttered Mea-Quin. “If only I had my hands free! – this way, with these clumsy gauntlets, it may take fifteen minutes. Dos-Tev, give me the atomic valve of your weapon.”

“Now we are completely at their mercy,” said the prince. “You are making, I suppose, a triple-powered projector with completely circling rays?”

“No. More than that. I am preparing a means of escape from this world – from this universe!”

The prince gasped. Mea-Quin went on: “I must concentrate on this work now. Forgive me if I withhold explanation till after it is done and proves its worth – or uselessness.”

For long minutes the greatest scientist of Lemnis pecked with clumsy, but sure, metal-meshed fingers at the inner mechanism of the projector, inserting in the one casing both power-units of his companions’ weapons. It was a trying ordeal, as they could not know but what any moment the ferocious, nightmare monsters might again charge upon them. Bullo, most endangered of all, fidgeted uneasily and more than once almost cried a warning as the writhing vapors seemed to darken with dreaded shapes. But they were tricks of his apprehensive eyes.

Finally Mea-Quin straightened from his labors. “It is done! Pray Tor it succeeds as I hope it to. Now I will explain. The Wrongness of Space in his arrant boasting, unwittingly revealed to me the secret of fourth dimensional travel. Like a flash is came to me. Perhaps he underestimated my scientific understanding.” He smiled grimly to himself. On far off Lemnis the science of Mea-Quin was almost proverbial. “Anyway, you remember his statement that a certain force, applied in a certain way, can cast the matter in its vicinity from its normal three dimensions into a fourth and therefore into a different dimensional universe. Even when you, Dos-Tev, with the latnem thought isolation helmet, conceived and built the first projector at the nose of our ship, I had a faint glimmering there that the ray-force it produced was singular in its properties. Its ability to produce anarchy of motion, dissipate momentum as radiation, and release the kinetic energy of crystalline matter is—“

“I see, I see!” the prince burst in. “The very elements of dimension transmutation! Long suspected in Lemnisian science, and here at our fingertips. But wait! It is still only a destructive force unless applied as a warping strain in the ether. How will we do that? Krzza knows the secret, but—“

“Ah, but we do!” interrupted Mea-Quin. “That too came to me in a flash of understanding. The Flatlander analogy – if in Flatland this sort of energy which can reorganize matter were applied at right angles to their plane of existence, it becomes a force capable of throwing its possessor out of his normal dimensions. If we, in turn, can apply this projector’s energy out of our normal three dimensions—“

“And how will that be done?” asked the prince hopelessly. “To us there is no conception of any but three dimensions as far as our senses indicate. It is the big obstacle to our duplicating the Wrongness of Space’s maneuvers in the fourth dimension.”

“Ayhuu, what he can do, we can do. Look at the ground beneath our feet. Is it soil? No. No plant grows, no grass. It is not siliceous matter, but metallic! Ideal for our purpose.”

“I see again!” answered the prince. “If the projector is buried nose down in this richly metallic soil, its ray will meet such sudden opposition that it will produce the very ether strain we desire.”

“And all the matter within its influence, which will be for yards, would then be thrown out, erupted one might say, into the fourth dimension. That is, if our force is powerful enough. We have depleted the atomic valves a great deal in our battle. The oscillator tube has blackened dangerously. It is but a gamble—“

“But a gamble we must take,” supplied the prince calmly. “Here we are faced with eventual doom, whereas—“

“Sires!” the voice of Bullo sounded ominously excited in their earphones, “they come! I see masses looming in the distance!”

“Bullo, come and come quickly.”

By the Bullo had reached them, Dos-Tev had dug a hole in the hard ground with the handle of one of the discarded projector cases, and Mea-Quin quickly buried the triple powered projector with only its handle and levers protruding.

How crude and futile it looked as an instrument that should whisk them into the fourth dimension, yet the three Lemnisians hovered around it eagerly, holding hands and belts, like lost creatures warming themselves over tiny fire. Hardly had they set themselves and mumbled prayers for success than the vanguard of the attackers shoved fearsome, vaporing heads and gargantuan talons over the rampart of their dead fellows.

Mea-Quin shoved over the lever viciously. In an instant they would know escape or sudden death.

Dos-Tev saw a dragon-like monster rush at him with slavering jaws, flames darting from blackened nostrils. Great claws reached for him, swung hissingly toward his face. Then, like the closing of a door, the vision disappeared. There was a moment of intense pain; every nerve cried aloud. His body seemed in the center of a grist-mill. Then came a violent wrench that all but jerked his grip loose from Mea-Quin’s belt. His eyes closed in giddiness, and then opened when the welcome voice of the scientist drummed to his ears.

“We made it! Ayhuu, Tor be praised!”

“But – but this is not our universe!” cried Dos-Tev, opening his eyes to see a strange firmament, whose sparse stars gleamed with strange hues.

“Indeed not,” agreed Mea-Quin calmly. “The Wrongness of Space isolated us in a universe many times removed, so to speak, from ours.”

“Then what good has our escape from the monsters done us? Here we are isolated in the void of an alien world!”

“Have patience and hope,” returned Mea-Quin unperturbedly. There was a note of exultation in his voice. The feat of traversing the fourth dimension was a balm to his scientific soul, even tho his lot might be no better than before. “Notice,” he continued, “that along with us came a good section of the metallic earth of the monster world, as I foresaw. We have but to repeat the process and project ourselves into another universe and then another and then another, till, if Tor be with us, we shall find our own. Our apparatus is not as refined and trustworthy as that of the Wrongness of Space, but it will do the trick, nevertheless.”

“That means then, sire,” interposed Bullo, “that we are like mariners on an uncharted sea, skipping from island to island in search of our homeland.”

“Exactly, Bullo. Now hold tight; we go again.”

The stars suddenly swam before their eyes and winked out. Again the terrific wrench that betokened their passage from one dimension to another beat at their bodies with material tortures and at their minds with throbbing oscillations. Dos-Tev opened his eyes hopefully, only to see an alien sky again, this time with fiery stars set in numberless clouds of wispy vapor. It was a young universe, strewn with star forming nebulae.

“It is but a gamble,” muttered Mea-Quin, again flicking the controls of the projector still buried in a mighty mass of earth that had come with them from the monster-world. A flaming sun smote their eyes suddenly and not many thousands of miles away floated a ball of iridescent colors. Without delay the scientist caused themselves to be wrenched away from the powerful radiations that well-nigh blinded them, into the next universe.

In the soft blackness of a universe that was empty save for evanescent shimmerings of ghost-light, Mea-Quin allowed them a breathing spell. Their bodies ached in every joint and their brains reeled with pin-fires of shock. It was not pleasant, jumping from dimension to dimension. Something in the process was inimical to health and well-being. They floated in the void gasping and spent.

A few minutes later – or was it hours? – Dos-Tev broke the depressing silence: “It is indeed a great gamble, Mea-Quin. For think once, if we once reach our own universe, reason forbids that we will arrive at the same spot from which we left. Perhaps we will find ourselves in the void of our universe, far from any planet, doomed to float till our air tanks empty themselves!”

“Ayhuu – a great gamble,” agreed Mea-Quin. “But what would you – that we stayed with the monster creatures and tried to tame their alien natures of fire?”

Again the soul-shaking wrench of dimensions – and again and again. Each time their eyes opened hopefully – and each time misted in intense chagrin. Were they perhaps wandering in such a course that they would never reach their own universe?

Trouble came upon them like rain. Bullo’s air supply thinned and only quick action saved his life. But the faulty air-valves were fast approaching uselessness. Dos-Tev’s belt ripped suddenly and he ballooned out. After that a tiny leak kept his air-supply erratic, so that he had to let it pump to his lungs faster. Portions of the all-important mass of earth broke off and seeped away. The projector grew hot and melted off part of its tip; if more melted away, there would be complications. Mea-Quin fainted once from the strain and they began to fear his old body might succumb to the repeated wrenchings. But with indomitable spirit they disregarded their tribulations. Altho little had been said between them, each knew that perhaps on them rested the fate of the universe. Ay-Artz and the still more fearsome and mad Krzza – they three, lost in the mazes of alien dimensions, alone held the key to their defeat.

Seven more times they jerked through fourth dimensions, feeling their endurance rapidly ebb away. Then, of a sudden, their eyes opened wide and their hearts bounded fiercely. Instead of queer, distorted visions of strange, alien universes, they saw the stars and nebulae of – their own universe! With sighs of joy that were far more expressive than shouts would have been, they drank in the sight of familiar firmaments.

“Home! – home at last!” sobbed Mea-Quin brokenly.

“Ayhuu! It is home, even to be in the spaces of our own three familiar dimensions,” cried Dos-Tev.

“But Sires!” Bullo’s voice broke in dejectedly. “Look – where are we; somewhere in the vast interstellar space between suns?”

It was dishearteningly so, it seemed. What good, after all, to be ‘home’, and yet marooned without a space ship in the void?

Then, like a burst of heavenly glory, the sunlight bathed them as their little world of metallic earth slowly rotated to bring them into view of what had been previously blocked from their vision. And with the sight of the sun, they saw something else – the moon, earth’s satellite, looming large and friendly in space.

“Unbelievable!” breathed Mea-Quin. That we are so close to the point of leaving. Why, we cannot be more than a radius away. Ayhuu – already the moon’s gravity draws us; we are descending upon it.”

“Just what did you expect!” asked Dos-Tev curiously.

“I would have expected being displaced in the void far more than this,” replied Mea-Quin thoughtfully. “The relative motions of the universes on their own axes – why did they not displace us? In each separate universe we visited, we must have been thrown first this way and that, and why should fate be so kind as to drop us off so near to the spot of leaving? There is something in this I do not grasp. Ayhuu – I suppose Krzza could explain.”

Dos-Tev bent down and yanked the projector from the soil. “All musing aside, we have the immediate problem of landing on the moon safely, to consider. The force-plane will have to be elongated into a beam to act as a brake to our fall. Can we do it, Mea-Quin?”

They all smiled at this. They who had just accomplished a hazardous journey thru alien dimensions and universes – what was a mere landing on a planet with such a versatile instrument as the force plane projector.

While their tiny planetoid rotated slowly, gravitating in spirals in the grip of the moon, Mea-Quin ran a series of mathematical calculations thru his keen mind and gave the results to Dos-Tev, who memorized them. While traversing the immense reach of space between Alpha Centauri and the solar system they had trained themselves in space mechanics in those three years, so that all but the most complicated problems of spatial maneuvering had become as ABC to them. An hour’s tinkering with the projector and it had become a molecular brake, altering the powerful gravity of the moon so that it pulled them obliquely. This would eventually evolve into an orbit around the moon as they drew near.

“It is relatively simple,” concluded Mea-Quin. “Following our formulae closely the orbit will spiral us to a tangent touching the moon at, or very near Copernicus. No doubt we will land rather abruptly, even with the full power of the projector softening our fall. In about forty hours we will be there.”

They then partook of several food tablets, drank of the water supply in their separate suits, and took turns sleeping during the long time it took for them to fall close to the moon’s surface.

In the jet darkness of the Crater Copernicus, the three Lemnisians talked over their predicament, not that they were once more within reach of their enemy, the Wrongness of Space. They had landed with a rather violent jar a few minutes before, due to the faultiness of the over-used projector. Their bodies sore and bruised, minds still reeling from shock, yet they were imbued with a mighty driving determination – the insane Krzza must be destroyed.

“If we can somehow end his activity,” elaborated Mea-Quin, “we shall have done a great good, even if the solar system’s space fleets are no more. There would still be Ay-Artz to reckon with, but that lies in the hand of fate.”

“Obviously, then, since we are isolated from contact with our allies,” spoke Dos-Tev firmly, “we must play a lone hand against Krzza.”

“Let us go then,” growled Bullo. “If I once get within reach of that fiend who marooned us so heartlessly in another world, I will break him in half with my own hands!”

“No, no, Bullo!” remonstrated Dos-Tev quickly. “It can be nothing as direct as that. The Wrongness of Space is impregnable from personal harm in his own natural dimensions. It would do little good even to blast Copernicus and seal its vent, for Krzza could emerge via the fourth dimension. On two things our success must depend – secrecy, and some powerful weapon that can reach him in his own dimensional habitat.”

“The ship – our own ship!” cried Mea-Quin suddenly. “Given a little time, I can convert the force-plane projector at its nose into a dimension opener – similar to our hand projector! What that—“

Fired with hope, they talked over the idea, and not long after began a swift trek over the pumice crater floor, in the direction that should bring them to their space ship and the conference building beside it. From above the dim starlight barely pierced the absolute gloom of a Lunar night. Hours later a giant black object loomed suddenly before them – the conference building.

Dos-Tev gasped. “The space ship! It’s gone!”

Mea-Quin accepted the fact resignedly. “The Wrongness of Space either destroyed it or hid it, probably the latter, fearing our allies might come here and find it.”

“Sires!” burst in Bullo, “we go down to the lair of the fiend?”

“Right, Bullo!”

Descending the long shaft that led to the heart of their mortal enemy’s domain, cushioned by the force-plane projector, the three Lemnisians felt a suspense that grew as they neared their mark. What if the alien green being were watching them, chortling in glee, waiting for their arrival to again foil them? Did he have some instrument warning him of their approach? The saurian-like creatures who lived in the attenuated air that here obtained became numerous as they approached the bottom, and they kept a wary eye peeled for one that might prove formidable. In the ghost-light of phosphorescence they descended as rapidly as they dared, and finally came to where the shaft opened into its bulbous terminal, unchallenged and unhindered. Dos-Tev allowed the force-beam to push them against one wall, and they traversed the last hundred feet clinging to hanging vegetation. Bullo was the first to see the space ship, reposing to one side of the strangely-shimmering, other dimensional Hemisphere palace of the Wrongness of Space.

“Tor be praised!” exclaimed Mea-Quin softly. “He did not take our ship into his own dimensions. It is there for the taking, if we are not detected.”

Skirting the roof of the cavern so as to avoid the disc shapes which were their enemy’s sentinels, the adventurers, heart in mouth, neared their ship. It was the crucial moment. If they were spied now, it would be their doom. Visually they were not discernible in the pale shimmer of the cavern, but what if the green demon from Lxyza noted their presence by the effect of their force beam on delicate instruments?

Then they were there, on the floor of the cavern. Dos-Tev snapped off the projector with a sigh of relief, and silently, swiftly, they ran toward the ship. Bullo, last to enter, took a last look toward the Hemisphere. A sudden chill struck his heart as he noticed several of the disc shadows coming with increasing speed toward the ship. What irony – in the last moment they had detected the Lemnisians!

“We are seen!” he shouted, dashing in full tilt, causing his companions to turn startled. “The discs, the sentinels, they are hovering about above us!”

“What can we do?” panted Dos-Tev, paralyzed by the unwelcome news. “We have no time to convert the force-plane projector at the ship’s nose!”

“A gamma bomb!” suggested Bullo.

“Too late,” returned Mea-Quin. “Our enemy is by this time prepared against it.” His tones were bitter. Success had been snatched away at the last moment. A margin of a half hour would have seen them prepared to blast the Wrongness of Space to eternity in his dimensional world. Now—

“Wait.”

The word came sharply from the scientist. “Bullo, turn on the air-valves full.”

In a few seconds the interior of the ship was habitable and at a sign from Mea-Quin, they removed the space suits, to revel in the feeling of physical freedom.

“Now we can talk without detection,” continued the scientist, “whereas with the suits on, our radios kept Krzza in contact with us. There is yet one hope.”

“And what is that?” cried Dos-Tev and Bullo together.

“We must outwit the Wrongness of Space,” returned Mea-Quin rapidly. “We cannot attack him, true. But at the same time to capture or destroy us, our enemy must either come into our dimension, or draw us into his, as he did before. I have a subtle intuition that—“

Mea-Quin spoke a while longer, and a look of understanding came into the eyes of his companions. Without delay they dashed from the central living quarters, and crawled to the gunner’s nest at the very nose of the ship. Here Dos-Tev crouched before the force-plane projector – a giant compared to their hand ones – and Bullo lovingly caressed the trigger of the projectile gun which was loaded and ready for the use. Mea-Quin operated the lever that swung the nose-cap of the ship free of the muzzles – and they froze to alert waiting.

On one slim chance rested their scheme – that the Wrongness of Space would use his fourth-dimensional opener as a spy beam to locate the Lemnisians, preparatory to yanking them helpless into his own palace and dimension. For long minutes they crouched, mute and slick with apprehension. If Krzza should decide to come into their dimension, or if he should suspect a trick and take precautions, their doom was sealed.

Suddenly Bullo nudged the prince and scientist and jerked his head to the back of the cubicle, where one section of the wall seemed to melt suddenly and become a misted shadow. It was the Wrongness of Space, searching for them thru his fourth dimensional eye!

“Get ready!” breathed Mea-Quin.

Dos-Tev beaded his eyes at the spout of the projector, which lined with the center of the palace, and tensed his hand at the lever. Let but the slightest flicker of transparentness come over the muzzle and he would fire – straight at the Wrongness of Space thru the fourth dimension. Out of the corner of his eye, Dos-Tev saw Bullo’s shoulder suddenly become light and shadowy. The next instant, as tho the Wrongness of Space knew he had found his prey and wanted to transpose them into his presence, the whole cubicle and all in it flickered fantastically and Dos-Tev felt the wrench of the alien dimension.

But the instant before this sensation, the prince of Lemnis jerked over his lever. There was a soundless concussion, a dazzling flare of green – and then merciful darkness.

Dos-Tev came to his senses to find Bullo kneeling beside him, chafing his hands frantically, with a look of great anguish. The prince of Lemnis framed an immediate question. “The Wrongness of Space–?”

“—is no more!” finished Bullo, his face changing to a look of exultance. “That shot was timed just right. It blew the Wrongness of Space and half his castle to Kruaz in Hell! I saw it in one brief glimpse as we were looking thru the fourth dimension. It was like a corridor. At its far end sat the mad Krzza, gloating and confident on his ebony throne. I saw him manipulate his dimension-opener, felt the first pull of the warping of our surroundings – then a look of fear came to his face. He saw in that instant the muzzles of both your and my gun pointing at him. I don’t know which of us two fired first. But of a sudden there were green and black vapors and torn flesh flying at the other end of the corridor, and then the scene flicked out and I saw no more. The concussion that knocked you out I escaped by instinctively gripping the bars of my gun.”

“Thank Tor!” said Dos-Tev, “that our scheme worked. But can we be sure the Wrongness of Space is really destroyed?”

“Yes,” nodded Bullo. “Because the Hemisphere – as we saw Krzza’s palace thru our eyes from our dimension – has utterly disappeared, and no disc shadows hover about that spot.”

“Mea-Quin!” cried the prince suddenly remembering. “Where is he? Did he perhaps get hurt or—“

Bullo’s face fell as he pointed to the scientist lying unconscious on a wall bunk. “When I picked him up in the gun-room, he was moaning deliriously. Now he has fallen into a coma. I fear—“

As tho at a signal, Mea-Quin’s voice, low and pained, came to them. “Dos-Tev! Bullo! Must leave! Must reach earth fleet and warn then – Ay-Artz probably in striking distance. Must carry on!”

The scientist’s voice mumbled a few more indistinguishable words and then died to complete silence.

“It is true,” cried Dos-Tev. “Now that we are done with the insane Krzza, we must carry on against Ay-Artz! The radio, or the Thi-Ranley Radiator—“

Bullo shook his head. “Both completely demolished by the Wrongness of Space while we were gone.”

“Then we must fly to earth as fast as possible. Must find the solar system’s fleets. And if they were destroyed, we will carry on the fight ourselves!” Dos-Tev set his jaw firmly, ordered Bullo to attend to the old scientist, and sprang to the controls of the ship.

It took masterful piloting to guide the space ship up the narrow shaft and its flaming atomic jets seared the sparse lunar vegetation to cinder. Dos-Tev breathed easier when free of the shaft and shot the ship out into space at four gravities acceleration, a well-nigh killing pace in their present condition. He had plotted his course while ascending the shaft, figuring to reach earth’s vicinity on the sunward side, which would bring the ship in a line with the false course given to the earth fleet by Krzza. If fate had been kind and saved them, they would meet not far from Mercury’s orbit. Then—

It was an agonizing trip with no chance to sleep or relax. More than once Dos-Tev felt he had reached the end of his endurance, only to be heartened by Bullo’s stolid strength and courage. Their four-gravities acceleration had to be transformed to almost five gravities of deceleration, due to an error in their original course. Sweeping closer and closer to the sun, atomic jets flaming valiantly, the Lemnisians swept over the false course of the earth fleet.

Thru red-rimmed eyes Dos-Tev spied the earth fleet. “Bullo! Apply six gravities deceleration or we will swing past them! I – I’m done!”

With a gasp, the prince of Lemnis slumped unconscious as the engine roared to higher power. Bullo himself, a monument of endurance, was barely able to cut the power a little later before the terrific strain of six gravities brought him exhausted oblivion. Mea-Quin, unconscious all thru the trip, lay as one dead.

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# Chapter 17 – Armageddon in Space by Edmond Hamilton

AUTHOR OF: ‘THE SARGASSO OF SPACE,’ ‘WITHIN THE NEBULA,’ ETC.

Ferdinand Stone sprang forward quickly as he and Alan Martin, Flight Director of the Earth Fleet, saw in the visiplate of their flagship, the Washington, the strange little approaching ship.

“Better order our beamers to stand ready to blast that craft,” Stone advised. “It may be another trick of the robots.”

“No, wait,” Alan Martin said, peering keenly into the instrument. “I’ve seen that ship before.”

“It’s Dos-Tev’s little ship!” he exclaimed a moment later. “I saw it when we attended the Copernicus conference.”

He turned swiftly to Captain Malcolm. “Something’s wrong. We’ve got to contact that craft at once.”

The grizzled veteran instantly barked orders into the communication-phones and the great Washington rapidly changed its course and speed in space to allow the little craft to come alongside.

Ferdinand Stone, meanwhile, had been watching the craft’s progress in the visiplate, and now breathed an exclamation of wonder.

“Great heavens, they’re using at least six gravities deceleration! They must all be dead long ago from the terrific effects.”

Within a few minutes the little cigar-shaped ship of Dos-Tev and the huge dirigible-like bulk of the Washington were driving side by side in space. Attractive beams stabbed out from the flagship’s side and drew the strange little craft quickly to it.

Down in the airlocks of the boat-deck, Marin and Ferdinand Stone and Captain Malcolm waited tensely as the crew of the flagship sought to enter the little craft which was now attached hermetically to the great ship.

A sweating junior officer emerged from the knot of men and saluted to Alan Martin. “We can’t open its space-door from outside, sir. And they must all be dead inside, for no one has tried to open it from within.”

“It’s opening now!” came a sharp cry from one of the men at that moment.

Martin and the others sprang forward. The round door of the little ship was turning, with infinite slowness. Inch by inch its rim went round, protruding further out each turn.

Then suddenly the screwing stopped, and the door was slowly swung open on its hinges, by a shaking hand. The watching earthmen were as tho frozen as they saw a quivering, swaying shape rise painfully inside the door, and crawl out into the airlock.

His body racked, crushed and broken by the terrific effect of the unusual deceleration, Dos-Tev’s face was a mask of appalling agony thru which his eyes glittered with unearthly, superhuman determination.

Not one of the earthmen could have spoken in that moment had their lives depended on it. Then Dos-Tev’s voice sounded.

A high, shrill, pain-taut rasp, his words came as tho by more than human effort, his eye’s holding Alan Martin’s.

“Ay-Artz – nearing edge of solar system now! Will come in past Pluto—”

The awful rasp faltered, as the racked body swayed, then more words came: “Ay-Artz has – has mightier weapons – than you think. Destroy him utterly, or he will – he will destroy your system.”

Then into the agonized voice of Dos-Tev came a strange change. Pride and triumph flamed in it, beating back the pain.

Slowly, stiffly, incredibly, that crushed body raised itself erect before the eyes of the watchers. For a breathless moment Dos-Tev stood at full height.

His eyes distended, his face flaming, he shook his clenched fist out toward the enemy he could not see.

“Do you hear me, Ay-Atrz? Dos-Tev still rules!”

He crashed to the floor like a fallen tree a moment later, and lay still.

Released from the spell that had bound them, Martin and the others sprang forward.

“Dead!” exclaimed Ferdinand Stone. “God in heaven, the man must have been all will to live like that long enough to give us his word.”

“The others in the craft are both dead, sir,” reported a white-faced officer to Martin.

Martin jumped to his feet from where he had been stooping over the dead form.

“Dos-Tev has done us his last and greatest service,” he said. “Now we of the solar system must fight without aid of anyone.”

“Ay-Artz is at this moment nearing the system, and will have entered it before we can meet him. The battle we’ve been expecting these many months is on us.”

His voice blared to Captain Malcolm. “Order a course laid for Pluto. Our fleet is to head there at the utmost speed that we can stand and live!”

Within minutes the hundred great battleships of the Earth Fleet, in open space formation of three columns, were blasting outward on the course broadcast by the computers.

In the bridge room of the flagship, Alan Martin hurried to the visiphone, to call the commanders of the five other fleets of the solar system forces.

His first call was to Venus, and in a few moment the handsome face and steel blue eyes of Zinlo, Torrogo of Olba and commander of the Venusian fleet, looked out of the visiplate at him.

“Martin speaking,” rapped the Flight Director. “The force of Ay-Artz is nearing the system, and all the solar system forces are to rendezvous near Neptune.”

He gave the coordinates of the appointed rendezvous. “You will need to depart instantly. Your ships are ready?”

The steel blue eyes flashed hard light as Zinlo gripped the hilt of his scarbo.

“By Thorth, they’re coming at last?” he cried. “Good! The ships of Venus sail in ten minutes!”

The hairy, unhuman face of Fax Gatola of Mars was next to confront Martin.

When Martin gave him the word, the Martian’s little oval eyes too gleamed with the light of battle.

“We will be there before you of Earth,” he promised. “My warriors have been lusting for this fight.”

The Flight Director’s next call was to Callisto, and there the leonine head of Parlece was flung back abruptly as he heard the call.

“My children and their ships will follow me to the rendezvous instantly!”

“So far, so good,” muttered Martin, his keen face taut. “Fifty ships from each of those three planets and our own hundred make two hundred and fifty we’re sure of.

“But what’s the matter?” he exclaimed a moment later as he waited for the visiphone. “Why haven’t they given me a connection with the Saturnians?”

The voice of the Washington’s communications officer intruded quickly.

“The Saturnian fleet is not on Saturn, sir! We called then there but they only know the fleet encountered trouble out in space, and stopped communicating suddenly.”

Alan Martin turned to Ferdinand Stone, his eyes suddenly foreboding.

“Something’s wrong there, then! What could have happened to the Saturnians?”

Stone shook his gray head. “They may have been sent off on a wrong course as we were, and destroyed.”

Martin’s jaw set. “I’ll call up Neptune and warn it’s fleet before we try to trace the Saturnians.”

But that attempt too proved fruitless. Neptune could report only that its fleet, like the Saturnian one, had left the planet, reported danger, and then suddenly stopped communicating.

Alan Martin strode to and fro in the bridge-room nervously. Stone watched him calmly, seemingly unperturbed.

Martin turned suddenly. “We can’t afford to lose those two forces!” he exclaimed. “An essential part of our fleet!”

At that moment came the excited voice of the communications officer.

“Call coming from someone off Jupiter, sir! It seems to be a Saturnian.”

“Put him on, quick,” Martin directed.

In a moment the grotesque shape of a Saturnian appeared in the visiplate, the jell of his weird body flaming green with excitement.

“I am Kama-Loo, now commanding the Saturnian fleet,” he reported. “Pross Mere-Mer is dead, and we Saturnians have just saved the Neptunian contingent from falling into the red spot on Jupiter.”

Quickly he related what had happened. And when he heard Martin’s quick words, his jell went black with emotion.

“The enemy is that close? But I must tell Steepa, the Neptunian leader.”

“Never mind, I’ll tell him myself,” Martin answered.

In a moment the gaseous form of the Neptunian replaced the Saturnian in the visiplate.

“Ay-Artz and his twenty ships must be very close now to the edge of the system,” Martin said rapidly. “See if you can project a visibeam that will disclose him – comb the whole quadrant outside Pluto.”

“Very well, we’ll try it,” Steepa answered, and clicked off the screen for the time being.

Martin waited nervously. Ten minutes later the Neptunian re-appeared.

“We have located the enemy, but cannot see him. He has force-screens out that make his position just a blank in space as far as our visibeams are concerned.”

“All right, follow the position of that blank,” Martin ordered. “Give me the coordinates of his present position, then wait with the Saturnians at the rendezvous until we all arrive.”

When the Neptunian had complied, and vanished, Martin studied the coordinates given for a few moments. Then he turned to Ferdinand Stone, his face drawn with anxiety.

“Ay-Artz is closer that I imagined! We’ll barely have time to rendezvous off Neptune before he’ll be coming in past Pluto.”

His eyes narrowed. “And when we do meet him, what then? Somehow I have an awful feeling that we are simply struggling against the inevitable, that he will brush us aside like flies.”

Ferdinand Stone shrugged. “It may very well be that he will. But we’ll make him aware that flies can sting before he accomplishes it.

“Brace up, boy,” he added, putting his hand on Martin’s shoulder. “You are feeling the responsibility of the coming battle, of this leadership of yours in it, and that makes you gloomy.

“After all, even if Ay-Artz’s ships are super-powerful, there are only twenty of them. And we have two hundred and fifty.”

“Yes, I know,” Martin said broodingly, “but I can’t forget Dos-Tev’s dying words. ‘Ay-Artz has mightier weapons than you think’.”

“If the fight were only on even terms, I’d not be so afraid, for the crews of our two hundred and fifty ships are fighters all and will fight like demons for their solar system. But if the enemy unlooses wholly new forces on us—”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” Ferdinand Stone said calmly. “Meanwhile, we’re certainly making time. We’ll soon be crossing the orbit of Venus at this rate.”

With the great Washington in the van, the three columns of the Earth Fleet were hurling themselves away from the sun at the highest possible velocity. Far ahead of them in the black of space burned the tiny green speck of Neptune, their present goal.

On and on thru the spaces of the solar system raced the armada of Earth. And far ahead of them, they knew, the fleets of Venus and Mars and Callisto were hurtling out toward the rendezvous also. Two hundred and fifty mighty battleships of space, speeding out to join the others for the great battle that was to decide the fate of the system.

They roared past the orbit of Venus, and soon past the orbit of Earth, too. Crushed by the terrific speed they were maintaining, drawing each breath in pain, still the men and officers of the Earth Fleet could not without emotion watch the gray old sphere of earth and its shining little moon drop behind. Every heart hardened in resolve to save that world and the others from the alien invader.

As they crossed Mars’ orbit, and started the ticklish passage of the dangerous asteroidal zone, Alan Martin kept in constant visiphone contact with the fleets ahead. Already the Callistans had come up to the rendezvous where the Saturnians and Neptunians waited, he learned. And the Neptunians reported Ay-Artz’s forces now decelerating speed as they approached Pluto.

Martin could not rid himself of the feeling of impending disaster. As Ferdinand Stone had said, he felt the awful weight of such responsibility as had never before rested on any being in the solar system. For on Martin, Flight Director of the solar system forces, rested the destiny of the system itself.

All that had been accomplished so far, the epic flight of Dos-Tev to bring warning to the system, the herculean preparations that had been made on Mars and Callisto and Venus and Saturn and Neptune, the awful struggle against the robots of Earth and against that weird, ghastly thing that had laired inside the moon – all this was lost if he now mishandled the forces in the coming battle.

Soon the Earth Fleet was racing close past Saturn, the colossal ringed planet slowly dropping behind on their left.

Beyond in the black gloom glittered the green-gleaming little globes of Uranus and Neptune, and farther beyond, and on a different plane, the dim, dark spot of Pluto, their revolutions having brought the four outer planets in the same quarter.

Martin, gazing ahead with Ferdinand Stone, turned as the face of Fax Gatola appeared in the visiplate.

“Martian Fleet reports arrival at the rendezvous,” the Martian told him. “The Callistans have arrived also.”

“Good! Lay there in space formation until the Venusians and our own contingent join up with you,” Alan Martin ordered.

He called the Neptunian leader again. “The position of Ay-Artz’s forces now?”

“They will be coming in past Pluto by the time you reach the rendezvous,” Steepa replied.

“Then we’ll meet then between Neptune and Pluto,” Martin said. “Keep your visibeams on them constantly.”

Moon-encircled Uranus dropped behind them now. And as they drew nearer the green sphere of Neptune, the Earth Fleet began to decelerate the terrific speed that had brought them across the system.

By the time they were close to Neptune, its emerald disc filling half the heavens, the Venusians had joined the assembled forces. Slower moved the Earth Fleet, until ahead of it appeared a flat swarm of metallic object, in five rough divisions. The five fleets, awaiting the sister-fleet from Earth.

The Earth Fleet drove over them in space, slowed until it floated without motion in respect to the others.

Steepa reported instantly by visiphone, “The enemy has passed Pluto. And now they’re open to our visibeams.”

“That’s right, Martin!” exclaimed Ferdinand Stone. “Look here!”

In the plate connected to their projected visibeams, could be seen twenty colossal, silvery objects of cylindrical shape rushing thru space.

These cylinder ships of Ay-Artz, Martin saw at once, were so huge as to make his own battleships seem puny. They were advancing in a compact triangular group, passing dark, icy Pluto.

“They’ve cut off their visibeam screens, they’re letting us see them purposely,” Martin muttered. “Does that mean they want us to find them and fight them?

“What does Ay-Artz have up his sleeve, anyway? He must be able to see that, big as his ships are, our forces are stronger.”

He shook loose from that clinging foreboding, and rapidly gave order for disposition of his forces.

“We will advance to meet the enemy in formation of five columns,” he snapped. “Assume that formation, a thousand-mile interval between ships.”

Quickly the dirigible-like battleships ranked up as he ordered, the Earth Fleet forming two columns, the other fleets each one column.

They waited for the order. And there came to them again Martin’s voice, deep, a little tremor in it.

“You all know what depends on this fight. I do not have to exhort you to fight to the last of your strength.

“But I do wish to emphasize that my orders must be obeyed instantly as received. Only by doing so can we smash Ay-Artz.”

Then, with a long breath, Alan Martin spoke the single word, “Advance!”

Propulsion tubes blasted white atomic fire as two hundred and fifty great battleships of space leaped forward thru the void as one.

In their formation of five columns they roared toward the oncoming enemy. Above the formation of columns flew the flagship, the Washington, from which Alan Martin peered tautly ahead, Captain Malcolm and Ferdinand Stone tense by his side.

The visibeams showed the fleet of Ay-Artz much closer. When a brief time, the twenty monster ships would be in sight to the unaided eye.

Martin snapped, “Scout squadrons ahead!”

Out from the head of each of the five columns dashed the assigned Scout squadrons, fifty of the swiftest ships.

They flashed ahead of the main fleet, spread out in a broad fan before it, with flankers out on either side and above and below.

That Ay-Artz was using his own visibeams was instantly made apparent by the spectacle of three of his own mighty ships dashing out ahead of the others.

“Use your torpedoes on those three ships as soon as you come within range,” Martin ordered his scouts. “If they have no effect, engage directly with beams but break off at once when I order.”

To Ferdinand Stone he added swiftly, “If we press those three ships hard enough, it may make Ay-Artz show his hand.”

A moment later came report from the scouts, “We are in range, sir, but torpedoes prove ineffective. We are about to engage with beams.”

“He’d naturally have screens out to ward off torpedoes,” Ferdinand Stone commented. “We’ll see what beams can do.”

“There they go now – they’re fighting!” cried Captain Malcolm, pointing thru the bridge-room windows.

Far ahead in the black vault, little spurts and flickers of light were stabbing and dying all along a broad horizontal line.

They whirled to the visiplate, and on it the distant battle leaped clear and close to their eyes.

The fifty scouts had dashed forward upon the three monster cylinders of Ay-Artz’s van, and were savagely attacking them with every possible beam.

Like sharks hanging upon three great whales, the scouts pressed as close to the cylinders as their force-screens would permit, pouring terrific concentrated forces upon them in an effort to smash thru their protection.

The ships of Ay-Artz answered! Long beams and broad fans of force slashed and sliced the attacking ships. Seven or eight of the scouts had already perished, but had not yet managed to break down the protective screens of the cylinders.

But now the seventeen other monster cylinders raced forward as tho to succor their hard-pressed comrades.

Instantly Martin gave order for the scouts to give over the attack.

“Rejoin main body at once!” he ordered.

As the scouts raced back, Martin turned a moment to his companions.

“In a few minutes our main body will meet the enemy,” he said. “I am going to have half our forces hold back until we have engaged with the rest.”

“Bad strategy to divide our forces now, sir!” warned grizzled Captain Malcolm.

“I still think Ay-Artz is trying to trick us,” Martin rejoined. “I daren’t risk all our ships until we know for sure.

“He’s used nothing new so far but that may only be to lure our main body within reach. If we could only find out whether he had any unknown weapons!”

“We can try to get into one of his ships with a visibeam,” Ferdinand Stone suggested swiftly. “If we put enough power behind it, we might be able to drive it thru his screens.”

“All right, try it but be quick!” Martin urged. “In a few minutes we’ll be meeting them.”

All the power of the Washington’s mighty generators was momentarily turned into a visibeam that stabbed toward the foremost of the approaching cylinders.

But tho the terrific power of the beam drove it thru the cylinder’s protective screens, it failed to penetrate the outer, silver-like skin of the cylinder itself.

“No use, he’s got a skin on his ships absolutely proof to any visibeam we can project!” Stone exclaimed.

“Then I’ve got to follow my plan of dividing forces,” Martin said.

He gave his orders rapidly. “Columns divide in half, two columns of twenty five for each fleet, four columns for Earth fleet. Five columns stay back as reserves. Attacking division will form up in ten parallel columns.”

In response, the hundred and twenty-five designated ships dashed forward ahead of the others, forming as ordered.

They raced forward to come to grips with the enemy, and Martin saw the twenty huge ships expand into a broad line to meet them.

His own ship, the Washington, led the Earth forces of his right wing. Alan Martin set his teeth as he saw the onrushing cylinders of Ay-Artz take form in the black gloom ahead.

The two armadas met. Immediately there was fighting all along their line of contact, the smaller ships of the solar system curving around the monster cylinders and loosing their beams and torpedoes, while the cylinders replied in kind.

The blackness of space was slashed by the vicious flare of the deadly beams, striving to pierce the defensive screens, and by the flashing explosions of torpedoes.

Captain Malcolm, commanding the Washington in the battle, had swooped with a half-dozen other Earth battleships upon the cylinder at the end of the enemy line. He shouted orders for his beamers to concentrate their rays upon one portion of the cylinder’s screens, in an endeavor to break thru them.

Alan Martin and Ferdinand Stone, gripping the edge of the visiphone plate as the Washington pressed forward, saw the huge cylinder looming only dimly thru the blinding dance and flare of the forces loosed upon it. The flagship reeled and quivered constantly from the shuddering recoil of its auxiliary guns.

The cylinder replied viciously to the attack, its beams cutting out and searching for its attackers. One of the Earth ships near the flagship, its defensive screens faltering for a moment, was smashed into metallic rags by those beams instantly.

In the flaring hell of this hot struggle at the end of the line, Martin did not lose touch with his forces as a whole. His visiplate showed him the battle all along the line.

Hard fighting had developed on the left wing, and Fax Gatola’s Martians were being roughly handled by three or four of the monster craft there. The Martians had already lost a dozen ships but were hanging grimly on, pounding their huge antagonists with every force they could release.

Martin snapped an order and the Callistans extended their line a little to the left, relieving the Martians of the attack of one of the cylinders they faced. But Parcele’s forces, in turn, began to feel the brunt of Ay-Artz’s attack.

“They’ve not sprung any surprises on us, Martin,” exclaimed Ferdinand Stone. “If we don’t bring up the rest of our forces now, we might as well quit.”

Alan Martin nodded. “If Ay-Artz had anything up his sleeve, he’d surely have revealed if by now.”

Martin now proceeded to unloose his forces in his main attack.

He ordered the waiting reserves to come up and fall with him on the enemy’s left wing.

The Martians and Callistans were to continue the unequal battle along the rest of the line while Martin attempted to crush the end of Ay-Artz’s line by a sudden onslaught of immense forces.

The waiting reserves had been chafing to join the battle, and now dashed forward at top speed.

Before the enemy was aware of the maneuver, the two hundred great ships bore down upon the left wing thru the blinding haze of battle, and then the system’s forces were falling upon the four cylinders at that wing.

Space almost instantly seemed choked with attacking ships around the big cylinders. Some seventy or eighty ships concentrated on each of the two end cylinders, and as their beams drove at the two craft, it was target for unthinkable torrents of vibratory force.

No defensive screens could withstand such forces, and the screens of the cylinders gave way. With the swiftness of light, there flashed thru a storm of beams and torpedoes that smashed, rended, crumpled up and exploded the cylinders into tiny fragments.

“Two gone!” Captain Malcolm cried. “By heaven, we’re going to beat them!”

“Concentrate attack on the next two cylinders!” Alan Martin cried into the visiphone to the exultant forces.

Then suddenly he cried, “Wait! Wait—”

For with the unexpected destruction of two of his cylinders, Ay Artz had finally unmasked his real attack.

Out from every one of his cylinders there stole pale, ghostly beams so dim as to be hardly visible.

The ghostly fingers of light passed thru the defensive screens of the solar system’s forces as tho they did not exist, and touched a score of ships.

Instantly those ships puffed into blinding flares of light – and vanished. And were other ships were close to them, they too were caught by the flare, and puffed out in dazzling flashes.

“It’s Ay-Artz’s real weapon!” Martin yelled. “Disengage battle and retreat at once!”

Puff! Puff! – blinding flares now were leaping and dancing destroyingly along the solar system’s line as the ghostly fingers of death reached and touched more and more ships.

Zinlo’s Venusians were all but annihilated, thirty ships flashing into nothingness in a heartbeat. A quarter of the rest of the fleet were annihilated, before they could obey Martin’s frantic order to break off the fight.

They zoomed up in space at a dizzy angle, Saturnians, Neptunians, Earth ships and others mixed together in the mad recoil from the death being loosed upon them.

The cylinders made no attempt to follow. And high overhead, as Alan Martin reformed his shattered forces, he found that two fifths of his entire armada had been wiped from existence.

“Great heavens, what was that!” cried Captain Malcolm. “It was like no beam ever heard of – simply whiffed ships out of existence in a flash.”

“I knew Ay-Artz was trying to trap us!” Martin cried. “Remember Dos-Tev’s dying words.”

Ferdinand Stone said excitedly, “Martin, that ghostly beam he uses must be one that transmutes the atoms of whatever matter it touches into pure force. You know, an atom is simply confined force and that pale beam releases it.

“And when the atoms touched by the beam explode into force, they touch off the atoms next to them, and so on until all the atoms on that place of matter are touched off. Just as a whole magazine will go when one bag of powder is fired.”

“Even ships that weren’t touched by the beam flared and vanished when the flare of other ships struck them!” the captain exclaimed, and Stone nodded.

“Each ship, melting suddenly into force, flares out for a great area, and touches off anything the flare touches.”

“However it works, it’s been fatal to us,” Martin told them. “Look, they’re simply disregarding us now.”

For there far below them in the void, Ay-Artz’s eighteen monster cylinders had again resumed formation and now were calmly moving onward thru space.

They were moving straight toward the great green disk of Neptune, which filled a whole quarter of space.

From the visiphone came the suddenly agonized cry of Steepa, the Neptunian leader. “They’re going to land on Neptune, make it their base here! They’ll ravage my world!

“We’ve got to stop them, sir! We can’t let them destroy my people!”

Alan Martin looked helplessly at the others. “The Neptunian’s right. We’ve got to prevent that at all costs.”

“But against those deadly dematerializing beams we’ve not a chance in the world,” Ferdinand Stone protested.

“Don’t I know that?” said Martin bitterly. “But we’ll fight Ay-Artz while we’ve got a ship left.”

“Form up in four columns!” his voice flared at the visiphone. “The four divisions will then approach Ay-Artz’s force from different quadrants simultaneously.

“That will make it a little harder for him to use the dematerializing beams on us,” he said to Stone. “And we may be able to smash more of his cylinders this time.”

The four columns separated, the Earth Fleet in one, and the decimated Martians and Callistans, with the few battered Venusian ships left, in the other three divisions.

Martin’s Earth division retained its position above the enemy until the other three columns had sped to different quadrants. Then when all were ready, he gave the order and they dashed again upon the enemy.

Down like swooping falcons of the void swept the Earth ships toward the cylinders, while from three other directions the three other forces of attackers came in.

Ay-Artz was ready for them. As they charged, his cylinders swiftly assumed a square formation, the four sides of the square facing the four attacks.

Again beams and torpedoes choked the void as the attackers dashed upon the invaders. But even before they came within range – Puff! Puff! the solar system ships were flashing and going as Ay-Artz’s pale death fingers searched among them.

Still the attackers surged bravely forward, hoping to get close enough to concentrate attack on some cylinder and smash its screens. But the death fingers flashed them into nothingness in increasing numbers as they came on.

Less than sixty ships were now left of the whole solar system fleet. Alan Martin saw the futility of continuing this sacrifice, and gave the order to retreat again. His sixty ships gathered together, the battered, scorched remnants of the proud armada of so short a time before.

“We’ve shot our bolt!” Captain Malcolm said decisively. “With those deadly dematerializing beams, that can do just what they want to do.”

“If we only could have beams like those to meet them with!” cried Alan Martin. “Stone, isn’t there any chance of duplicating those beams?”

Ferdinand Stone shook his head. “Not unless we got a look at the mechanisms that produce them. Then I might be able to duplicate them. But that’s out of the question – our visibeams can’t penetrate the skin of those cylinders, as we found out.”

“Look, Ay-Artz is landing on Nepture!” cried Captain Malcolm.

In the visiplates they saw that the invader, leaving four cylinders out in space as guards, was swinging in with his other fourteen cylinders thru the atmosphere of the great green planet.

The horror that followed was enacted before their stricken eyes in brief moments. Ay-Artz’s cylinders sped around the surface of Neptune and as they sped, rained destruction on its people.

Using their ordinary vibratory beams, the cylinders smashed the glassite cities of the Neptunians into glittering fragments, crushed their swarming inhabitants beneath the debris, even tore thru the surrounding jungles great lanes of destruction.

Then the cylinders, having completed their slaughter of the Neptunians, settled down in a spot on the equator of the planet, apparently chosen as a base for the further conquest of the solar system.

From the visiphone came the agonize voice of Steepa.

“My people – my cities! Wiped out of existence forever!”

“Unless I’m mistaken, they’re only the first,” Ferdinand Stone said grimly. “Saturn will probably be visited next by the invaders, when they have established themselves strongly on Neptune.”

“No!” Martin cried. “By heaven, we’ve still got a chance if we can find out how those dematerializing beams are produced.

“Listen, this is what we’ll try. We’ll attack one of those four guarding cylinders out in space. Our ships, except this flagship, will endeavor to smash that cylinder’s screens and smash its outer skin.

“If they succeed in doing that, our flagship, lying off from the battle, will instantly drive a visibeam into the shattered cylinder and get a look at the apparatus that produced the dematerializing beams. Then Doctor Stone may be able to duplicate the apparatus.”

“It’s a long chance,” Stone muttered. “You’re giving me a big order, even if we do get a visibeam inside.”

“It’s the one chance left and we’ve got to take it,” Martin replied. “Everybody willing?”

“Yes, anything to keep the cursed invaders from spreading further!” came the answer.

“Very well, attack that nearest cylinder at once,” Martin ordered. “Remember, try above all to smash thru the outer skin of the cylinder.”

The fifty odd ships dashed forward instantly, heading toward the nearest of the four cylinders which cruised out in space around Neptune.

In mad, headlong attack they dashed at that cylinder, which back in space lay the Washington, Martin and Ferdinand Stone standing ready at the visiplates, the communications men below taut to hurl their strongest visibeam at the cylinder.

When the ships neared the cylinder, its ghostly fingers reached out and blinding flares edged one another in space as attacking ships went to death. But more than forth remained and these, falling upon the cylinder, smashed loose with every beam and force they possessed at its defensive screens.

The screens could not stand the terrific fury of this concentrated attack, and gave way. In thru them tore the bolts of force from the attackers, ripping along the side of the silvery cylinder and slicing it cleanly away.

Instantly the visibeam from the Washington played over the interior of the shattered cylinder. Ferdinand Stone ordered it concentrated on upon a huge cylindrical mechanism that was apparently the generator of the fearful dematerializing beams.

The visibeam, driving into the interior of the huge mechanism, revealed its every detail to Stone’s piercing eyes. Meanwhile Alan Martin ordered the forty remaining ships to return, as the three other cylinders guarding Neptune were quickly up.

When the cylinders came up, they immediately turned a pale beam upon their shattered comrade. It vanished in a flash of light.

Ferdinand Stone cried, “They did that because they must have known we’d have a visibeam on the interior.”

“Did you see enough?” Alan Martin cried. “Could you build a generator of the dematerializing beams, like that one?”

“I’m pretty sure I could,” Stone replied. “The generator and its projector, it was evident were not made of matter at all, since the beam generated would have destroyed them, but of captive forces resembling matter to the eye.

“I could do it, but what would be the use? With one generator, what chance would we have against those seventeen huge cylinders and their equipment?”

“We’ll have a chance, all right, if we can just build the one generator,” Martin assured him. “But we must be quick.”

A few hours later, the remnants of the solar system fleet having lain in space that time at the same position, Ferdinand Stone raised a sweating, exhausted face from the interior of a big cylindrical mechanism.

The mechanism seemed to the eye to be made of solid metal, but in reality was built up of captive forces which would be immune to the beam generated. So was the projector to be used with it.

“I think that finishes it,” Stone panted. “We’ll try it, anyway.”

They hooked the generator to the projector and turned on the power. Out into the black vault shot a pale little beam.

Instantly Martin turned it off. “It works!” he cried. “And with it we can destroy Ay-Artz’s entire forces at one blow!”

“Are you crazy?” Stone demanded. “We might get one or even two of his cylinders with this, but the rest would get us.”

“You don’t understand,” Martin told him. “Ay-Artz’s forces are all on Neptune, except the three guarding cylinders cruising close to Neptune.

“Suppose we run past those guards, and turn this beam on the surface of Neptune itself. What would happen then?”

Ferdinand Stone went white. “God in heaven! So that’s your idea!”

“What’s the idea?” demanded Captain Malcolm. “I can’t see that just dematerializing a part of Neptune’s surface would do any good.”

“It wouldn’t be just a part of Neptune’s surface,” Martin said. “Don’t you remember what Stone said, that when the beam strikes any atoms it touches them off into force, and their out-flash touches off the next atoms, and so on until every atom in that piece of matter explodes into force in one great flash.”

The captain’s tanned face blanched. “You mean that if you did that, all of Neptune—“

“All of Neptune would be dematerialized in one tremendous flash, yes!” shouted Martin. “And Ay-Artz and his cylinders and everything else on it would be annihilated, as they annihilated Neptune!”

Ferdinand Stone caught his arm. “Martin, it would go farther than that. The tremendous out-flash of force from Neptune and its moon would involve Pluto also, and possibly Uranus.

“Pluto and Uranus, of course, are uninhabited, and their destruction would mean nothing. But if Uranus went, Saturn also would probably go, and that would mean that nothing could save the rest of the solar system.”

“Do you understand what that means? You’re taking a chance of destroying our whole solar system in one tremendous spreading explosion, by doing this!”

“I’m willing to take that chance, rather than let Ay-Artz destroy our peoples and conquer the system!” Martin shouted in return.

“I don’t think the flash will spread beyond Uranus. But even if it does, if all our planets and the sun go, then that’s a better way to end than tamely letting ourselves be conquered and killed!”

“I say the same!” came the cry of Zinlo, the Venusian, from the visiphone.

“And I! And I! And I!” cried the Martians and Saturnians and Callistans.

“And I too,” came the voice of Steepa, the Neptunian, throbbing with hate. “But my ship shall be the ship that carries the generator and looses that dematerializing beam.”

“Your ship?” repeated Martin. “Don’t you understand that the ship that looses the beam will itself be destroyed in the tremendous out-flash of force?”

“I do realize it and that is why I demand that we do it,” the Neptunian replied. “Do you think that we few Neptunians who are left desire to outlive our race who are gone forever?”

“No, we wish to die as they have died, and to die in bringing death upon their slayers. Let us carry the beam!”

Stone plucked Martin’s sleeve. “It is his right, Martin,” he said simply.

Within a brief time, the big cylindrical generator had been transferred from the Washington to the ship of Steepa.

From the visiphone came the voice of Steepa for the last time, as his ship started toward Neptune.

“Farewell, comrades in arms! We have fought a good fight together. Now you shall see how Neptunians can die.”

The Neptunian ship was out of sight almost instantly, racing headlong toward the distant green planet.

Stone caught Martin’s arm. “We’d better retreat as far as Saturn’s orbit,” he warned. “The flash will get us out here, if Uranus goes.”

They sped back at highest speed until they reached the vicinity of the great ringed planet.

There, calling a halt in space, Alan Martin and Stone tensely watched by their visibeams the progress of the Neptunians.

Steepa’s ship had almost reached Neptune by this time. Now they had been sighted by the cruising cylinders on guard around the planet.

Martin and Stone held their breath as the cylinders darted in pursuit of the Neptunians. Then they saw an act of mad heroism.

“He’s going to make it – cut the visibeam, quick!” cried Ferdinand Stone, reaching for the switches.

The plate went blank and Stone sprang for the lead-glass goggles they had used for observation of the sun.

Even as they clapped the goggles to their eyes, the thing happened.

Out there in the black of space, the green speck of Neptune suddenly expanded into an awful explosion of blinding light that dazed their optic nerves even thru the opaque goggles.

The colossal out-flash puffed out in an oval form, the bigger end of the oval marking where Triton, Neptune’s moon, was caught by the flash and added to it.

Tremendous waves of electrical force flung the watching ships upon their beam ends, made lightning-like violet brushes spray from the metal of their interiors.

Gripping a stanchion, Alan Martin and Ferdinand Stone watched with blinded eyes that could barely see. The saw the awful puff of light expand fiercely into sudden greater size.

“Pluto’s gone!” Stone shouted. “It’s coming toward Uranus!”

The titanic explosion of released force, of hellish light, was expanding toward them, toward the green globe of Uranus and its moons.

Martin cried out in pain of tortured eyes, and Ferdinand Stone choked out a hoarse exclamation, as the terrific light-flower suddenly bloomed still greater, filling the heavens before them with a sea of raging released force.

“Uranus went there!” Stone yelled. “Saturn here will be next, and then the rest of the planets!”

“It won’t reach Saturn – it won’t!” cried Alan Martin as they clung to the side of the wildly-whirling ship.

The light-flash now completely filled the firmament before them, save only for a narrow rim at the edges of their vision. That rim narrowed further as the colossal out-flash of force reached toward ringed Saturn.

Closer and close it came, advancing with awful rapidity, its fringe seeming already almost to touch the many-mooned planet’s resplendent rings. At the very brink it paused, burning in space with its edge but a few million miles from the outermost rings.

Then, sick, blinded, struggling to stand, Alan Martin cried out and pointed.

It had reached its farthest extent, had just fallen short of touching Saturn, and now was passing as swiftly as it had appeared.

Back, back, it retreated, withering, dwindling, and then suddenly it was gone. Snapped out of existence, and there in space before the eyes of Stone and Martin was only blackness.

Pluto was gone, Neptune was gone, Uranus was gone – all gone forever. But gone forever too were Ay-Artz and his cylinders, the menace of dread invasion.

“God, it’s over,” choked Ferdinand Stone dazedly. “And I thought there it was the end, that Saturn, all the planets, the sun, would go.”

“But they didn’t, and we’ve won!” came the cry of superhuman triumph from Alan Martin’s sick, shaken body.

“We of the solar system gambled our system itself on victory. And we won! We won!”

THE END