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# ASTEROID

By Lee Gregor

The monster came down on their homes, sucking them in to a hot and horrible death. And all they could do was to give the men a headache.



THE SUN was setting on Ansen, and the reflecting light made a jewel of the planetoid. The jagged mineral crystals scattered the slanting beams in a shower of iridescence.

Sinsi floated, swaying slightly at the summit of a slender peak, watching the last sparkles die out of the mountain tips across the tiny valley. His body, an impalpable swirl of tenuously bound atoms, glowed a placid hue, a color that was three places past violet in the spectrum. Of a sudden there came a change, an agitated vibration of the tinge in his extremities. He leaped a little, and whirled about, then saw the two who approached.

Aio was smaller than Sinsi, and of a paler shade. Emonit was older than the two, and his violet was nearly in the visible range. The trio pulsed in greeting,

with an undercurrent of something that was deeper. Aio flew to Sinsi, and the two coalesced vibrations, while Emonit hovered near and edded a satisfying bass note.

Sinsi male; Aio female. What was Emonit, with that curious third-member relationship? Emonit, the elder, who, once upon a time, had been the active member in a triplet.

"Sinsi," Emonit pulsed, after the pair had completed greeting. His hue was somber and his tone serious. "I feel something wrong in space. There is a vibration that does not belong there, and it comes closer."

"You were always more sensitive than I," Sinsi said. "I have felt nothing."

"It is faint." Emonit suddenly gave a nervous jerk and flew lightly around the mountain tip. "But it will not be faint for long."

**T**HE ASTEROID was black and white like a too-contrasty photograph. George Hames kept looking at it through the port. "I never thought that Mitchell was batty. You don't accumulate as much money as he has if you're not all there. But what he sees in a hunk of rock like that to make him spend a million dollars for habitizing is more than I can understand. Why come all the way out here when you can get what you want right on Earth? 'Build your summer estate in the heart of the Himalayas,'" he quoted — roughly — from an advertisement. "'Midst dizzying heights and awesome depths you can commune with nature in her most glorious state. The sweeping lines . . .'"

"Mitchell said I'd know it when I saw it." Arno Murray stood at the port also. He kept looking at the asteroid, but where Hames hadn't expected to see anything, and hadn't seen anything, Murray was looking for something, but he couldn't find it.

"Know what?" Hames finally turned away from the port and walked over to the machine that paneled the wall, where he studied for the hundredth time the plotted course that was automatically carrying the ship to an orbit around the asteroid.

"I don't know." Murray kept looking out at the asteroid. "Mitchell said I was to landscape the place. He said I'd know what there was about it as soon as I saw it, and then I'd know what to do. He didn't say any more."

"A screwball! A million dollars worth!"

"Ah-hhhh" It was an abrupt indrawn sigh, like of pain. The sudden explosion of light that sparkled from the asteroid reflected from Murray's eyes brilliantly. The sun was on the crystals, and they shimmered and flowed like they were incandescent.

Murray didn't move for fifteen minutes after that. Hames left him alone. To Hames the glory was a lot of light reflected from shiny rocks. But Hames was an engineer who did the landscaping that Murray designed. Murray was an artist, and Murray saw things that Hames couldn't. Murray stood motionless and silent for fifteen minutes, while in his mind was building a picture of what that land of scintillating crystals could be with the engineering and manipulating of Hames' crew and machines.

**F**EAR WAS a sibilant whispering in the ether. The people of Ansen milled about in agitated eddies, shrieking their fright of the cylinder of metal that had come blasting out of space to circle their little world.

In the chant-like speech of their kind, they shrilled panic and stirred space with frenzy.

"The monster comes!" they called, and the fear went around the planet in a hysterical wave.

"The monster comes and kills our peo-

ple! It is hot, almost like the sun itself. It propels itself against the ether, and when space warps to slacken its speed, our people are caught in the vortex and hurled to annihilation in the furnace! Emonit, tell us what to do!"

Emonit was there. From the tall peak he had shimmered down, trailed by Sinsi and Aio. His colored was disturbed, and his vibrations tense with thought. He swept up to the center of the fear-stricken mob, and flashed sharply.

"Quiet!" His emanation sped outward. "This puzzle will be solved. The monster is impossible by all we know, but it is there, so it must be. It is hot, of a temperature that cannot support life. But there are life vibrations there. Many of them. Vibrations and vibrations all uncontrolled and intermingled so that I cannot separate one from the other. All I know is that there are life vibrations, and where they are—then they can be destroyed."

"How?" All asked as one.

Emonit's shade grew tinged with a hue that was rarely there. He sank back a little.

"It is fearful. . . ." he began.

And chaos was awhirl in space. The hot and dense cylinder of metal shrieked through the ether above; the braking grasp of forces that tangled in the fabric of the universe caught the followers of Emonit, and tugged them into the dissolution of heat. Shrieks of pain shrilled out, and then the mass was gone into the distance below the horizon, and there was silence, save for the whisper of space itself.

One by one they straggled back—those who had managed to flee before the grip had become too strong. Emonit was still there, and those left flurried their colors in relief, for he was their wisest, and the only one who could know what to tell them. Sinsi and Aio timorously floated back along the ether breeze, entwined with each other.

Emonit quivering with horror, was sil-

ent for a long time. Those about him, waiting for him to say something. . . .

And then horror was gone. Sometimes horror is not enough. Sometimes there can be worse than horror. Emonit's color grew deeper. It deepened until it was almost below ultra-violet. Almost until those who were in the monstrous metal cylinder might have seen it.

For from the other side of the planetoid messages had come to him. Messages of such urgency that in their shrieking crescendo they had reached him through the insulating rock and around the shifting currents of space—before breaking off.

"It has landed! It has landed, and from its base has come streaming forces and currents of power that are of a magnitude vast enough to break the rock atom from atom and electron from proton and combine it again into vapors that blast outward and overwhelm us with their fury and incandescence!"

MURRAY looked at the thermopyle and said: "It's cold down there."

"Darn right it's cold." Hames declined to lift his face from the computing machine he was ticking away at. "What did you expect? We're practically incandescent compared to what they call hot down there. Now go away and let me get some work done. Did you ever think what kind of arithmetic I have to go through so dopes like you could walk around on asteroids without getting their toes frostbitten? Figuring mass and specific heat, and rates of absorption and radiation, and air insulation—and figuring what disintegration proportions to go into air and how much into heat and how much condensed into lining for the central chamber. . . . Wouldn't it be fun without a shipload of machines to do the work on? Go away to your paint-box, now, and let me work."

If Murray could stand and look through portholes all day long, Hames could spend

his time with his nose in the calculators. They were accomplishing the same thing, but each in his own way—one dreamt and made beautiful pictures in his mind. The other dreamt with figures and equations and turned the beautiful pictures into solidity.

It needed both.

The control board burped, and winked coquettishly at Hames with a solitary pink light. A half dozen meters jiggled as the drive dug its toes into the fabric of space and set the ship to decelerating. Hames kicked and rolled half-way across the room in his swivel chair so he could give his attention to the orbit-setting. The ship spun around the planetoid in a narrowing circle.

In night for a half hour, the darkness was stark. The rapidly rising sun, though far away, was refracted and reflected into a glorious sight by the crystals, and Murray could not take his eyes away from it. Then a day of bare rocks, jagged peaks, and two tiny valleys. Briefly. And night again.

The ship spun and spun, and its speed became less, with its kinetic energy absorbed by space. The landing jarred a little, and Hames cursed the instruments. Then he was leaping downstairs and cursing the crew into their space-suits.

He didn't waste a second. He had the converters roaring before the machines were set up for the other work. The beam bit fiercely into the rock below, exploding it into a mixture of heat and expanding air. The remainder went into a dense, glassy slag that lined the tube which was beginning to extend into the center of the planetoid. The artificial atmosphere was running away, but later a gravity machine would be working down there, holding it in.

The ground heated incandescent and then bubbled vigorously for a yard around. And heat started to seep through and through the interior of the planetoid.

“TO CANCEL a vibration—the cancelling wave must be destroyed also.” There. Emonit had told what the sacrifice must be. He had said what had to be done, and now he stood there in silence, and all the others stood in silence around him. There was no more torturing of space with hysteria. No more wailing and shrieking with agonized fear. Emotion was beyond that.

The deadly, annihilating heat was seeping through the asteroid. The ship, at the center of the inferno, was on the other side of the world. Half the people of Ansen were destroyed. Soon the heat would reach this side, and there would be no more people of Ansen. No more. All would be gone. And the subtle color harmonies that sparkled from the sun-lit crystals would no longer be seen—by anybody. For the optic instruments of the invaders were too gross to catch the delicacy of the flavor in the light that came from the crystals.

Horror had gone beyond horror, and the heat was approaching.

“Who shall try first?” The whisper seeped vaguely through the group, coming from no one in particular, from everybody in general.

Silence again, while each seemed to shrink into himself. Then a convulsive movement in the corner of the crowd. A swirl of frightened light darted up and off to the horizon.

“Brave one.” Emonit's faint thought followed him. “Remember what I said. Choose a life vibration. Attune your own to it. Absorb energy from space. Blanket the other vibration. Destroy it. You must be strong. Strong without measure. For the strange ones have power that we know not.”

THE CONVERTER was running at pitch, boring out the guts of the asteroid. The soil machines were pulverizing the hard rock and turning it to fer-

tility that would grow lush plants of a design to match the hard, brilliant crystals. Murray was at his drawing board, dragging pictures out of his head, and putting them down onto the white. Hames patrolled the control room, surveying the multitude of recorders that had been constantly at work—many eyes and ears and fingers to detect what was happening, visibly and invisibly, in space, and partly out of space—and leaving them on the tape so that Hames could see them when he wanted to.

The room was about as silent as it usually was. The generator made a far-off drone that was so quiet it was almost a hush. The little clickings of the instruments as they pattered away at their endless tasks. The pop of a relay every once in a while. Little tiny mechanical noises that all put together made silence. Then there came another noise that was not mechanical, and it intruded. It came from Hames, and it was a whistle. It started high, and it came down in a glissando that ended when he reached the bottom of his range. When that happened he kept his mouth puckered, and his hand came halfway up to his chin, and then stayed there.

"Hey, Murray!" he called, softly.

No answer.

"Murray, come here." Louder.

"What do you want?" Murray's frame intruded itself in slow sections through the door. His voice was peevish.

"Look at the counter tape." Hames didn't notice the frown that was on Murray's face. "At hour eleven we hit a flock of gamma rays. They kept averaging five times normal. Sometimes more. And at sixteen thirty the counter went wild, like somebody stuck a can of radium down its gizzard."

"So what?"

Murray wasn't usually dense like that, and Hames shot him a curious glance.

"Don't you see? Eleven was when we started digging in with the brakes. Six-

teen thirty was when we started with the converter. We've stirred up something."

"What do you do for a headache?" Murray's contributions to the conversation were becoming unusually brilliant.

"Gawd!" Hames felt the height of frustration. "I make discoveries, and he bothers me with headaches. There's a medicine chest. Take whatever you want."

"I never had a headache before."

"TWICE—and both failed." Emonit had felt the death of the pair, and a cloak of gloom spread itself over the few remaining of Ansen. They gathered more closely to Emonit, and their chanting mass-voice whispered. "Too strong. Too strong." Over and over. And there was nothing but despair, for the asteroid was being disemboweled to give heat, and the heat was leaking through the miles of rocks to find them wherever they might hide, and leave nothing where they had been.

"I'll go." Sinsi suddenly rose. "If it requires more power, I am the strongest. I can do it."

"No!" Aio fluttered to him, her color livid.

"No!" Emonit towered over them all. "None of us is strong enough. Not even you, Sinsi. You must not be sacrificed. Not you."

Sinsi quivered. "Why not I, as well as others?"

Emonit faltered. "Let that not matter. We know that one cannot go alone. Many might."

"Many might—yes! Many, each in tune with the other, totalling enough power to damp the life vibrations of the monster. Who will come with me?"

"You?" Aio danced in protest.

"Why not me?" Sinsi was defiant.

"Do you think I could stand here and let others die to save me? It is not a mere danger of dying, but it is death itself."

Emonit wearily put in his voice. "Can you forget the heroics of youth? Can you think of the future? Rather that I should lead the attempt than you. For I shall not last long anyway, and you must survive to be the leader of our people. Born to that. . . ."

"Born to nothing!" Sinsi glowed furious. "Leaders mean nothing. While you waste time preventing each from sacrificing himself, all will be destroyed when the heat comes. I'll go myself, and any who want to come can follow."

A shrieking and howling of ether made a crescendo around the group. A swirl of tenuous shapes arose.

"Sinsi. You stay." The tone was sharp and decisive. "Emonit is right." Sinsi fell back from where he had risen. "You must stay and we must go. Let us hope that we win."

And the horizon rose high behind them.

"Will." Emonit's thought flew fiercely out to them. "Your will and the forces of your life to destroy the monsters. Make your vibration a mighty power that will be withstood by nothing."

Sinsi stood there, agitatedly. Aio hovered about him, but he would not be calmed. "I should have gone," he kept saying. "To stay here while they blast away their lives. To do nothing while they save us. . . . Oh, yes, Aio. I know that we three belong together, and that we must not be separated, but can that overpower the knowledge that we stay in safety, while others meet terror for the sake of us? To take sacrifices from others is harder—so much harder—than to make sacrifices oneself."

Aio flew to him, and they were as one, comfortingly.

• "If the time comes," Aio was fierce and soft, "we shall go together."

"IT'S NOT only irrational, but it's insane. It's not only illogical, but it's batty. It's nuts. It's screwy."

Hames paced like he meant it. He paced the little room, glaring at the meters that goggled coolly into his face at the end of each lap, and raising a fuss like the insides of a rocket motor.

Murray stood at a porthole, looking through it. He'd been standing there for an hour now, while Hames had been gently going mad tearing through all the books on atomic physics in the ship's library. Now Hames was deadlocked, and Murray still stood looking through the porthole at the landscape outside. It got on Hames' nerves.

"Haven't you seen enough of that bunch of colored glass out there?" he yapped, irritably. "You haven't done anything since we've landed but stand and look through the porthole."

Hames was a bunch of nerves. Murray was lax, and he hardly moved his face to answer.

"I've got a headache," he said. "I never had a headache before, and it bothers me."

"Well, why in cosmos don't you take something for it?"

"I dunno." It was with a loose little sigh. "The crystals are so beautiful. The colors—I'd almost swear there are some I'd never seen before." He closed his mouth, and looked out through the port, while his hand went up to his hurting head.

Hames gave up and went back to his books. The engineer couldn't see things that Murray saw, and it irritated him. They thought too differently.

He mashed his book shut, and started pacing again. While the drone of the converter made an accompaniment to the click of his shoes.

The converter, blasting atoms apart, and boring away down into the center of the little world. . . .

"We come close to the planetoid and dig in with the brakes, and the Geiger counter jumps to five times the average." Hames roared it out as he pounded the

floor. Maybe if he made a lot of noise about it the answer would come from somewhere. "We start digging with the converter, and counter acts like somebody dropped a ton of radium on it. Maybe the force fields touched off some radioactive substance around here. Maybe the stuff is right underneath, and the converter beam is multiplying its rate of disintegration. But it ain't, because the stuff coming through is all gamma rays, and no alphas or betas. And there's no direction. It comes from all around. Enough gammas to singe our hair if we weren't shielded. From all around. Look at the counter jump!"

Hames made a prayer to the little gods that inhabited that section of the universe in thanks for his not being outside the shield, where the counter units were.

"I never had a headache before," Murray whispered, vaguely. "I don't like it."

"You and your headaches and your blasted colored crystals." Hames turned fiercely upon Murray. "You don't know what a headache is like until you've tried to untangle a problem like this."

It roused Murray. "Scientific observations and deductions—" Caustic! "Why don't you make something out of my getting a headache as soon as the digging started and the rays began to come in?"

**I**T WAS a weary little group that gathered around Emonit and Sinsi and Aio. The bottom was gone from their universe, and there was no longer any future for their world-line. "They failed. They failed." Reiterated over and over again, the words were dug into their consciousness, and there was no answer to their fate.

"Power." Sinsi was bitter. "What good is the most power we can get against a wall that cannot be broken through?"

"Perhaps power is not all." Aio hesitated in saying her thoughts. "Maybe the three of us. . ."

"The three of us?" Sinsi puzzled. "Why three any better than a score or a hundred?"

"*We* three." Emonit saw, quickly. "The bond that is between us. The subtler vibrations that only play among us, because we are a special three. Not unique. This grouping of three is the basis of life, but each is special to itself. And being special. . ."

"And futile, unless we do something." Sinsi, impatient lest courage seep away entirely. "Come, and stop wasting talk."

Space whispered to itself. It was like the whistle of a wind that has traveled far distances of desert and sea, and now breathes with a sibilant voice through tree branches, so softly telling a portent of something that is to come.

The three felt the whisper gently caress them as they sped around the circle toward the cylinder that lay there like a blood-sucking insect. This was finality.

**M**MURRAY'S eyes were bloodshot.

"Good Lord," thought Hames. "This is going too far. An artist might visualize differently than I do, but Murray looks like he actually sees things that are different. Maybe even different from what *he's* supposed to see. Maybe he's cracking."

Murray saw Hames looking at him. "Whatever you're thinking, it's not so."

"I'm not thinking anything," Hames lied. "But your eyes look strained. Maybe you've been using them too much."

"I don't see a damn thing." How did Murray seem to keep knowing what Hames was thinking? "But I feel funny." He shivered.

A great flare of gammas hit the counter, and the tape reeled merrily off the spool. Hames bent over to watch closely, and abruptly a gasp hissed from his mouth.

"They've stopped! The gammas have stopped, and the counter's back to normal cosmos. The converter is still running.



Why should they stop, and after the big flareup?"

He was bent over, eyes fixed on the counter tape, and not seeing anything, for he was thinking, and when you think you don't see. Hames was thinking. His mind was pacing at red speed, and he didn't see Murray.

Murray's face looked like it was going to cry. It twisted, and its eyes were bright, and suddenly words exploded from it. "*Oh—you engineers just can't feel—what you're doing.*"

And Murray ran out of the room, slamming the door behind him. Hames sat and stared at the space where Murray had disappeared, as if his eyes could see through the metal. The footsteps clicked down the corridor, and then there came a rasp and a whirr.

"MURRAY-Y-Y-Y!" Hames bel-  
lowed.

The door was behind his leap, and the corridor seemed to drag unendingly beneath his running feet, but the inner airlock valve was irrevocably sealed, and the hiss of the opening outer came through to the inside.

Murray was a shapeless mass that staggered, hopped, floated, and fell lightly to the bottom of the cold vacuum.

"Good Lord. Why did he do it? Why did he do it?" The question channeled into Hames' brain and burned like fire there.

Hames stood looking through the porthole. He tried to see what Murray had seen there, but all he could see was what looked like a lot of jagged colored glass sticking up in a crazy pattern that had no

meaning. Artists saw things differently. That's why they were artists, and not button pushers. They thought differently. Hames stood looking through the porthole, and he wondered what Murray had meant when he had burst out: "*You engineers just can't feel. . . .*"

Hames hadn't felt anything. What had Murray felt? What had his mind, more delicately organized than Hames, felt to drive him mad and send him with twisted face through the airlock?

THE UNENDING whisper of space hissed gently about the asteroid. The little people who had shimmered in the delight of bathing in the ether breezes were not there to feel the whisper, nor to see the strange colors of the crystals. They had been as a wall of soft mud holding back the tide of the sea. They had been like children hammering at a massive bronze door to break it down.

And now they were gone, and space was empty of their strange life. They had fought bravely, and with that might of spirit and that curious love they had. Now they were gone, and their utmost power had been like the touch of the breeze against the side of a battleship.

But had they accomplished anything? What had Murray meant when he said, "*You engineers just can't feel!*"

HAMES looked out of the porthole at the blotch that had been Murray, and began to frame the words of his new thesis:

"Report on the form of gamma-particle radioactivity found on the asteroid Ansen."