

# SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION

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W. W. Scott — Editor

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# CASTAWAYS OF SPACE

by DAN MALCOLM

*illustrated by* ORBAN

It was McDermott's job to rescue the Robinson Crusoes of the star lanes — whether they wanted to be rescued or not. Sometimes these castaways wanted to stay lost

**L**IEUTENANT McDermott was having a couple of drinks in the Nine Planets Bar on Albireo XII when his wristband bleeped, telling him to report to Patrol headquarters for assignment. McDermott scowled. This was his time off, and he didn't give a damn *what* Headquarters said. He cupped his hand tightly around the drinkflask and took a long slug. The wristband bleeped again, impatiently.

McDermott waited a minute or two and finished his drink. Then he switched the band to audio and said in a sour tone, "McDermott reporting. What is it?"

The thin, edgy voice of the Officer of the Day said, "Job for you, Mac. There's been a kidnapping and we want you to do the chasing."

"I'm off duty. Get Squires."

"Squires is in sick-bay having his head sewed back on," was the acid reply. "Get out of that bar and get yourself down here in five minutes or—"

The threat was unvoiced, but McDermott didn't need much persuasion. He knew his status as a Galaxy Patrol Corpsman was shaky enough, and a couple more black marks would finish him completely. He didn't like that idea. Getting booted out of the crime-prevention unit would mean he would



have to go back to working for a living, and at his age that wasn't nice to think about.

"Okay," he rumbled. "Be right there."

He pulled a platinoid five-credit coin from his pocket, fingered its embossed surface lovingly for a moment, and spun it down on the counter. The bartender slid two small coppers back at him in change. Pocketing them, McDermott grinned apologetically at the gray-skinned Denebian floozie he had been making plans about until the call to HQ, and shouldered his way out of the bar. He walked pretty well, considering there was nearly five credits' worth of straight Sirian rum under his belt.

McDermott held his liquor pretty well. He was a big man, six-three and two hundred sixty pounds, and there was plenty of alcohol-absorbing bulk there to gobble up the stuff as he poured it down his throat.

His car, with the official nova-emblem of the Galaxy Patrol Corps, was sitting outside the bar. He tumbled into it, jabbed the start-button fiercely, and shot away from

the curb. The trip to Headquarters took him twenty minutes, which was pretty good time considering that the building was halfway across town.

Sergeant Thom was at the night desk, a wizened little Aldebaranian who looked up as McDermott came through the door and said, "Better leg it upstairs, Mac. Davis is on tonight and he wants you fast."

"He's waited this long," McDermott said. "He can wait a little longer. No sense rushing around."

**M**CDERMOTT took the gravtube upstairs and entered the Officer of the Day's cubbyhole without knocking. The O.D. was Captain Davis, a forty-year veteran of the Corps who lived a model life himself and who had several times expressed himself rather harshly on the subject of McDermott's drinking.

Now he looked at McDermott with an expression of repugnance on his face and said in his tight little voice, "I'm sorry to have found it neces-

sary to pull you off your free time, Lieutenant."

McDermott said nothing. Davis went on, "A matter has come up and at the moment you're the only man at this base who can handle it. A girl named Nancy Hollis has been kidnapped—an Earthgirl, visiting this world on a tour with her parents. The father is a big-wheel diplomat making a galactic junket. She was plucked out of her hotel room and carted away in a Model XV-108 ship by a man identified only as Blaine Hassolt of this city. Know him?"

McDermott shook his head.

Davis shrugged. "Well, no matter. The girl left a scribbled note and we got on the trail pretty fast after the snatch. Hassolt was heading outsystem with her and we slapped a spy-vector on the ship. We followed it as far as we could. It disappeared pretty fast and as far as we can compute it crashlanded on Breckmyer IV. We saw the ship in orbit around that world and we saw a small lifeship detach from the main and skedaddle down to the planetary surface. Lifeships land, but they don't

take off. That means Hassolt and the girl are somewhere on Breckmyer IV. Get out there and find them, Mac."

Moistening his lips, McDermott said, "You're sure it's Breckmyer IV?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

McDermott knew that planet. It was a stinking hot one, whose moderate zones were intolerable and whose tropical zones were sheer hell. It was inhabited by primitive humanoids and there were no Terran settlements anywhere on the planet. He was being handed a lousy job, maybe even a suicide job. But the kidnapped girl's father was a big-wheel diplomat, and policy dictated making at least a token effort to get her off Breckmyer IV, if she had survived the landing. The Corps *had* to send someone down there to look around—and the least valuable member of the local base was a rumsoaked Corpsman named McDermott.

"You'll leave at once," Davis told him. "You won't stop at your bar for booze. You won't stop to take a shave.

You won't stop to do any old damn thing."

"Yes, sir," McDermott said stonily.

"We're fueling up a ship for you at the Corps port. It'll be ready for blasting in fifteen minutes. Heaven help you if you're late."

"I'll be there on time, sir."

"You'd better be."

**M**CDERMOTT got to the spaceport in time for the blasting. He had made one tiny stop, at an all-night package store just outside the spaceport area, but Davis didn't have to know that. And the mass margin of the ship was a thousand pounds; nobody would mind if he brought a small brown bag containing a couple of bottles on board.

The ship was all ready for him. Under the floodlights the service flunkies bustled around, piping in fuel and checking the instruments. McDermott wondered why they were going to so much trouble. This was a sacrifice flight anyway; he wasn't going to find that girl in the jungle, and he'd be damned lucky if he

ever got back alive after making a landing on Breckmyer IV.

But he didn't say anything. The groundside flunkies looked at him with the worship and wonder in their eyes, the way they looked at any full-fledged Corpsman no matter how seedy he was, how disreputable. As far as they were concerned, McDermott was a Corpsman, and the glamor of that rank eclipsed completely any incidental deficiencies of personality he might possibly have.

He climbed into the control cabin of the ship. It was an XV-110, a four-man ship with auxiliary boost. That would make landing and taking off on rough terrain easier, and there would be room for him to bring back both Hassolt and the girl if he could find them.

McDermott stowed his three bottles of rum in the gravholder near the pilot's chair, headed to the galley and found a nipple-top in the galley stores. He opened one of the bottles, fastened the nipple to it, and took a quick slug. Then he strapped himself in for

blastoff position while the count-down went on outside.

"Ready for blast, Lieutenant McDermott."

"Ready," he snapped back.

The automatic pilot was ready to function, too. A glittering metallic tape dangled loosely from the mouth of the computer. McDermott knew that the tape would guide him faithfully through the hyperwarp across the eighteen light-years that separated him at the moment from Breckmyer IV. The trip would take a day and a half, ship time. If he budgeted himself properly, those three rum-bottles would see him through the round trip.

If there was a round trip.

"Blasting in eight seconds, Lieutenant."

"Check."

He touched his fingers to the control board and switched on the activator for the autopilot. From here on he was just so much baggage. The ship would fly itself without any help from him.

Reaching out, he made sure his precious rum was secure against blastoff. He leaned back, waiting. He knew no one gave much of a damn whether

he reached Breckmyer IV safely or not, whether he found the girl safe and sound, whether he got back to the Albireo base. He was being sent out just for the sake of appearances. The Corps was making a gesture. Look here, Mr. Hollis, we're trying to rescue your daughter. See?

McDermott scowled bitterly. The last number of the count-down sounded. The ship rocked back and forth a moment and shot away into space. Eleven seconds after the moment of blastoff, the autopilot activated the spacewarp generator, and so far as observers on Albireo XII were concerned McDermott and his ship had ceased to exist.

A day and a half later, the autopilot yanked the ship out of warp, and in full color on the ship's screen was the system of Breckmyer—the big golden-yellow sun surrounded by its thirteen planets. McDermott had finished one full bottle of his rum, and the benippled second bottle was drained almost to its Plimsoll line, but he had had time to look up the Breckmyer system

in the ship's ephemeris anyhow.

Of the thirteen planets, only one was suitable for intelligent life, and that was the fourth. The first three were far too hot; the fifth through the eighth were too big, and the outer planets were too cold.

The fourth, though, was inhabited—by tribal-organized humanoids of a Class III-a civilization. There were no cities and no industries. It was a primitive hunting-and-agricultural world with a mean temperature of 85 in the temperate zones and 120 in the tropics. McDermott meant to avoid the tropics. If Hassolt and the girl had landed there, McDermott didn't intend to search very intensely for them. Not when the temperature was quite capable of climbing to 150 or 160 in the shade—and a hot, muggy, humid 160 at that.

He guided the ship on manual into an orbit round the fourth planet at a distance of three hundred thousand feet. That far up, the mass-detector would function. He could vector in on the crashed ship and find its whereabouts.

Snapping on the detector, he threw the ship into a steady orbit and waited. An hour later came the beep-beeping of a find; and, tuning the fine control on his detector plate, he discovered that he had indeed located the kidnap ship.

It had crashed in the temperate zone, for which McDermott uttered fervent blessings. The little lifeship had landed no more than a couple of miles from the stolen vessel. Presumably Hassolt and Nancy Hollis were somewhere in the neighborhood.

His subradio came to life and Captain Davis' thin voice said, "Come in, McDermott. Come in."

"McDermott here, sir."

"Any luck? Are you in orbit around the planet yet?"

"I'm in orbit," McDermott confirmed. "And I've found the ship, all right. It's down below me. I'm making ready for a landing now."

"Good luck," Davis said, and there wasn't much friendliness in his voice. "The girl's father sends his best wishes to you. He says he'll take good care of you if you bring his daughter back safely."



"Members of the Corps are not allowed to accept emoluments in the course of duty," McDermott recited tiredly, knowing that Davis was just testing him. "If I can find the girl I'll bring her back."

"You'd better," Davis said coldly. "There'll be all kinds of trouble if Senator Hollis' daughter doesn't get found."

The contact died. McDermott shrugged his shoulders and took another quick pull of the rum. It warmed his insides and buoyed him with confidence. Moving rapidly, he set up a landing orbit that would put his ship down not far from the crashed vessel.

He threw the relays back. Slowly his ship left its orbit and began to head groundward.

**T**HE landing was a good one. McDermott had been in the Corps for fifteen years, and in that time you learned how to make a good landing in a spaceship. You have to learn, because the ones who didn't learn didn't last for fifteen years.

He fined the ship into a pin-

point area a mile or so broad, which is pretty much of a pinpoint from three hundred thousand feet up. Then he brought her down, aiming for the flattest spot, and by skilful use of the auxiliary boost managed to land the ship smoothly without crisping more than a few thousand square feet of the jungle with the exhaust of his jets.

His jungle kit was all ready for him—medications, a Turner blastgun, a machete, a compass, and such things. He slung it over his back and slithered down the dragwalk to ground level. He leaned against the ship and pushed, but it didn't rock. It was standing steady, its weight cutting a few inches into the ground. Good landing, he told himself. Hope takeoff is just as good.

The thermometer in his wrist-unit read 94 degrees, humidity 89 percent. It was clammiily moist as he started out on his mission. His mass-detector told him that the crashed spaceship lay two and a half miles to the west, and he figured he had better start out from there in his search

for Hassolt and Nancy Hollis. The lifeship was somewhere further to the west; his portable detector was not powerful enough to locate it more definitely.

He began to walk.

McDermott was wearing regulation alien-planet costume: high boots and leatheroid trousers, thick teflon jacket, sun helmet. Because Breckmyer IV was a reasonably Earth-type planet, he did not need a breathing-mask.

The jungle all about was thick and luxurious. The plants went in for color here. Stout corrugated-boled palm trees rose all about him, and their heavy fronds, dangling almost to the jungle floor, were a blue-green hue ringed with notches of red. Creeping and clinging yellow vines writhed from tree to tree, while a carpet of flaming red grass was underfoot. The vegetation seemed to be sweating; beaded drops of moisture lay quivering on every succulent leaf.

McDermott walked. He had to cut his way through the overhanging thicket of vines with backhand sweeps of his

machete every five or six steps, and though he was a big man and a powerful one he was covered with sweat himself before he had traveled a quarter of a mile through the heavy vegetation. He resisted the temptation to strip away his jacket and shirt. The forest was full of droning, buzzing insects with hungry little beaks, and the less bare skin he exposed the better.

He had seen what jungle insects could do to a man. He had seen swollen and bloated corpses, victims of the cholla-fly of Procyon IX, killed by a single sting. And though it was oven-hot here, McDermott kept his uniform on until it stuck to his body in a hundred places. Dead men didn't perspire, but he preferred to perspire.

Jungle creatures hooted mockingly all around. Once, twice he thought he saw a lithe figure shaped like a man peer at him from between two trees and slip silently off into the darkness, but he wasn't sure. He shrugged his shoulders and kept going. He wasn't interested in the native life. They were pretty skilled with

poisoned blow-darts on Breckmyer IV, he had been told. He felt an uncomfortable twitch between his shoulderblades, and pressed grimly on, cursing the man who had sent him out here to sweat.

An hour later he reached the wrecked spaceship. It had oxidized pretty badly in the atmosphere on the way down, and there wasn't much left of it. Certainly it could never take off. Hassolt would probably beg him to take him back to civilization, if he were still alive.

The lifeship had landed a mile further west, and that meant nearly thirty minutes of weary slogging. McDermott's breath was coming fast and he had to stop every few minutes to rest and mop the sticky sweat out of his eyes; it rolled down into his thick brows and dripped maddeningly onto his cheeks.

The lifeship sat on its tail in a little clearing. It had landed well. McDermott looked at it. The lifeships were hardly bigger than bathtubs—rocket-equipped bathtubs. They were big enough for two

people, three if they were willing to crowd together, and they were capable of coming down through a planetary atmosphere and making a safe landing. That was all. They could not be used for taking off again, but they would get their occupants safely down.

McDermott stood by the lifeship a moment, looking around. The grass was pretty well trampled here; a good sign of a village in the neighborhood. Most likely Hassolt and the girl were in the village.

He started to walk again. In ten minutes the village appeared, a nest of randomly-arranged huts on high stilts, circling loosely around the banks of a jungle stream. Advancing cautiously, McDermott saw a few of the natives, slim catlike humanoid creatures whose bodies were covered with a soft yellow fur. He made sure his blastgun was where he could reach it, and activated his verbal translator.

He stepped forward into the village.

**T**WO or three of the natives edged out from their huts

and came to meet him, padding silently over the beaten-down grass. There was no fear in their gleaming blue eyes, only curiosity.

McDermott started to say, "I'm looking for a couple of my people who crashlanded here."

Then he stopped.

An Earthman was coming out of the biggest and most magnificent hut in the village. He was grinning. He was a tall man, though not as tall as McDermott was, and his face was very thin, with hard angling cheekbones. He was wearing lustrous robes made from the hide of some jungle animal, thick, handsome robes. On his head he wore a kind of crown made from ivory.

"Are you Blaine Hassolt?" McDermott demanded.

The other nodded with easy familiarity. He spoke in a pleasant drawling voice. "I'm Hassolt, yes. And you've come to get me and bring me back?"

McDermott nodded.

Hassolt laughed. "How thoughtful of you!"

McDermott said, scowling, "I don't give a damn if you rot here or not, Hassolt. I'm

here to get the girl. You can come back and stand trial or you can stay here in the jungle."

One of Hassolt's eyebrows rose quizzically. "I take it you're a Corpsman?"

"You take it right."

"Ah. How nice. There was a time when I was actually praying that we were being followed by a Corpsman—that was the time when the controls blanked out, and I had to crashland. I was very worried then. I was afraid we'd be cast away forever on some dangerous planet."

"You like it this hot?" McDermott asked.

"I don't mind. I live a good life here." Hassolt stretched lazily. "The natives seem to have made me their king, Lieutenant. I rather like the idea."

McDermott's eyes widened. "And how about the girl—Nancy Hollis?"

"She's here too," Hassolt said. "Would you like to see her?"

"Where is she?"

Instead of answering Hassolt turned and whistled at the big hut. "Nancy! Nancy, come

out here a moment! We've got a visitor."

A moment passed; then, a girl appeared from the hut. She, too, wore robes and a crown; underneath the robes her body was bare, oddly pale, and she made ineffectual attempts to conceal herself as she saw McDermott. She was about nineteen or so, pretty in a pale sort of way, with short-cropped brown hair and an appealing face.

"I'm Lieutenant McDermott of the Corps, Miss Hollis," McDermott said. "We put a spy-vector on Hassolt's ship and traced you here. I've come to take you back."

"Oh, have you?" Hassolt said before the girl could speak. "You haven't consulted *me* in this matter. You realize you propose to rob this tribe of its beloved queen."

McDermott's scowl tightened. He gestured with the blastgun and raised it to firing level. "I have a ship about three miles from here," he said. "Suppose you start walking now. In an hour or two we can be there, and in a day and a half we'll all be back safe and sound on Albireo XII."

"I don't want to be rescued," Hassolt said deliberately. "I like it here."

"What you like doesn't matter. Miss Hollis, this man forcibly abducted you, didn't he?"

She nodded.

"Okay," McDermott said. He nodded over his shoulder in the direction of the ship. "Let's go, Hassolt."

"Put the gun down, McDermott," Hassolt said quietly.

"Don't make trouble or I'll gun you down right now," McDermott snapped. "I'm more interested in rescuing Miss Hollis than I am in dragging you back to court."

"Miss Hollis will stay right here. So will I. Put the gun down. McDermott, there are four natives standing in a ring thirty feet behind you, and each one is holding a blowdart pipe. All I have to do is lift my hand and you'll be riddled with darts. It's a quick death, but it isn't a nice one."

McDermott's broad back began to itch. Sweat rolled in rivers down his face. He cautiously glanced around to his left.

Hassolt was right. Four slim

catlike beings stood in a semi-circle behind him, blowpipe poised at lips. McDermott paused a moment, sweating, and then let his gun drop to the ground.

"Kick it toward me," Hassolt ordered.

McDermott shoved it with his foot toward the other. Hassolt hastily scooped it up, stowed it in his sash, and gestured to the aliens. Two of them slipped up behind McDermott and relieved him of his machete. He was now unarmed. He felt like an idiot.

Hassolt grinned and said, "Make yourself at home and keep out of trouble, McDermott. And remember that my bodyguards will be watching you all the time."

He turned and walked away, heading back toward the hut.

**M**CDERMOTT stared after him; finally he muttered a brief curse and looked at the girl.

"I'm sorry I got you into this," she said.

"It's not your fault, Miss. It's mine. My fault for joining the Corps and my fault for

taking this assignment and my fault for not shooting Hassolt the second I saw him."

"It would have done no good. The natives would have killed you immediately."

He looked around, at the village. Two or three natives skulked in the distance, ready to transfix him with darts if he showed any sign of trouble.

He said, "How did all this happen? I mean, Hassolt being king and everything?"

She shrugged. "I hardly know. I met him one afternoon at the Terran Club and he bought me a couple of drinks—I thought he was interesting, you know. So we went for a drive in his car, and next thing I knew he was forcing me aboard a ship and blasting off."

McDermott looked at her. "With what purpose in mind?"

"Ransom," she said. "He told me all about it as soon as we were in space. He was heading for the Aldebaran system, where he'd cable my father for money. If Dad came through, he was going to turn me over to the authorities and vanish. If Dad refused to pay, he'd—

take me with him as his mistress. But we were only a little distance from Albireo when I grabbed control of the ship and tried to head it back. I didn't succeed."

"But you did foul up the controls so thoroughly that Hassolt had to abandon his original idea and crashland the ship here?"

"Yes. We came down in the lifeship and the natives found us. Hassolt had a translator with him, and it turned out they wanted us to be their king and queen, or something like that. So we've been king and queen for the past few days. The natives do everything Hassolt says."

"Do they obey you too?"

"Sometimes. But I'm definitely second-fiddle to him."

McDermott chewed at his lip and wished he had brought his remaining bottle of rum along. It was a nasty position. Far from being anxious to be rescued, Hassolt was probably delighted to live on Breckmyer IV. He wasn't willing to leave, and he wasn't willing to let Nancy Hollis go either. Nor was he going to let McDermott

escape alive and possibly bring a stronger Corps force to rescue the girl.

He eyed the blowpipers speculatively. Unarmed as he was, he didn't dare risk trying to escape, with or without the girl. The ship was too far from the village, and beyond a doubt the natives would know shortcuts and could easily head him off at Hassolt's command.

Sneaking up behind Hassolt was equally impossible. As king, Hassolt was thoroughly guarded. Belting him from behind and making a run for the ship with the girl would be sheer suicide.

McDermott sat down on a grassy rise in the turf.

"What are you going to do?" the girl asked. She was looking at him in the starry-eyed way that teenage girls were likely to look at Corpsmen who came to rescue them from alien planets. She didn't seem to realize that this particular Corpsman was overage, overweight, and didn't have the foggiest idea of how to rescue either her or himself.

"Nothing," M c D e r m o t t

said. "Nothing but wait. Maybe some other ship will come after *me*. But I doubt it."

McDERMOTT spent the next few hours wandering around the village. Evidently some sort of council-meeting was going on in Hassolt's hut; McDermott heard the sounds of alien words from time to time.

The blowpipers ringed in the village. There was no way out. He wondered if Hassolt intended to keep him prisoner indefinitely.

No, that was unlikely, McDermott, as a Corpsman, was a potential danger to Hassolt at all times. Hassolt undoubtedly would get rid of him as soon as the business at hand was taken care of.

And the girl was looking at him so damned *hopefully*. As if she pegged her life on a serene inner confidence that the Corpsman was going to engineer her rescue somehow.

Somehow.

The afternoon was growing late and the big golden sun was sinking in the distance when one of the aliens came

noiselessly up to them, and proffered each of them a bowl of some sort of liquid.

"What is it?" McDermott asked, sniffing the contents of the bowl suspiciously.

"Something alcoholic," she said. "They make it out of fermented vegetable m a s h. Hassolt drinks it and says it's okay."

McDermott grinned and sampled it. It was sweet and musky-tasting, not at all bad. And potent. Two bowlsful this size could probably keep a man in a pleasant alcoholic stupor half a day.

He finished the bowl off hurriedly and realized that the girl was looking at him in surprise and—was that disgust? Her image of him as a super-boyscout was fading fast, he thought. He had guzzled the liquor just a bit too greedily.

"Good," he said.

"Glad you like it."

He started to make some reply, but he heard an approaching footfall behind him, and turned. It was Hassolt. He was holding McDermott's blastgun tightly in his hand and his face had lost the sophisticated,



mocking look it had had earlier. It seemed drained of blood now, a pale white sickly color. It was pretty plain that Hassolt had just had a considerable shock. Something that had rippled him to the core.

He said, in a voice that was harsh and breathy, "McDermott, how far is your ship from here?"

McDermott grinned. "Three miles. Three and a half, maybe. More or less due east."

Hassolt wagged the blast-gun. "Come on. Take me to it."

"Right now?"

"Right now."

McDermott stared levelly at the kidnapper for an instant, and let some of the euphoria induced by the alien drink leave his mind. Narrowing his eyes in unbelief, he said, "Are you serious?"

"Stop wasting time. I want you to take me to the ship *now*."

The girl was staring in bewilderment at him. McDermott said, "You sure got tired of the kinging business fast, Hassolt. You loved it here two hours ago."

"I didn't know two hours ago what I know now. You know what they do to their king and queen at the end of the year? They throw them into a live volcano! It's their way of showing thanks to the volcano-god for having brought them safely through the year. Then they pick a new king and queen."

McDermott started to chuckle. "So it's the old savage story, huh? Treat you like a king for a year and chuck you to the lava!"

"I happened to come along a few days after the old king and queen had been sacrificed," Hassolt said. "Usually they choose the new ones from their tribe, but they prefer to have strangers. Like the girl and me."

McDermott continued chuckling. "But what's your hurry? If the new year's only a few days old, you have plenty of time."

"I don't care to stick around. Take me to your ship now, McDermott."

"Suppose I don't?"

Hassolt stared meaningfully at the gun. McDermott said

calmly, "If you shoot me, I can't guide you to the ship, can I?"

Tightly Hassolt said, "In that case I'd find it myself. You can either take me there and stay alive, or refuse and die. Take your choice."

McDermott shrugged. "You have me there. I'll take you."

"Let's go, then. Now."

"It's late. Can't you wait till morning? It'll be dark by the time we get there."

"Now," Hassolt said.

"How about the girl?"

"She stays here," Hassolt said. "I just want to get away myself. The two of you can stay here. I'm not going to take any more chances. That she-devil wrecked the other ship."

"So I guide you to my ship and let you blast off, and I stay here and face the music?"

"You'll have the girl. Come on now," Hassolt said. His face was drawn and terror-pale.

"Okay," McDermott said. "I'll take you to the ship."

**H**E could understand Hassolt's jittery impatience. The natives might not like their king taking a runout pow-

der, and Hassolt intended to get out while he still could. His ransom project didn't matter, now; having found out what the real function of the king was on this planet, he wanted off in a hurry, at any cost.

Which, McDermott reflected, leaves me and the girl here. And I'm the substitute king.

And a boiling volcano waiting for me at the end of my year-long reign, he thought.

They left the girl behind in the village and slipped off into the thick jungle as the first shadows of night began to descend. McDermott led, and Hassolt, following behind him, made it plain that he was keeping the gun not very far from the small of McDermott's back all the time. The Corpsman hacked stolidly forward into the jungle, retracing his steps.

"It was only three miles, you say?"

"Maybe four," McDermott replied. "Don't worry, Hassolt. I'll take you to the ship. I'd rather be a live coward than a dead hero."

They pressed on. After a while they passed the lifeship

and the wreckage of the mother ship, and McDermott knew they were on the right path. The sun dropped below the horizon; the sky darkened, and two small jagged moons, bright and pitted, drifted into the sky. The air was cooler now, McDermott thought of the girl, back at the village. And of the volcano.

"You thought you had a pretty good deal, eh, Hassolt? Servants and food and booze and a girl, all set up for the rest of your life. You don't think you might have gotten tired of it after a while?"

"Shut up."

"But then they let you know what was waiting for you, and you decided to run out. Lucky for you that I came along with my nice shiny ship," McDermott said. He was thirsting for a drink of any kind.

Half an hour later, they reached the ship. McDermott turned and saw Hassolt staring at it almost lovingly. He said, "You know how to operate it?"

"I'll manage. You come aboard and show me."

They boarded the ship, which stood silently in the

forest as night descended. Hassolt prowled around, looking at the controls. It was obvious to McDermott that the kidnapper was not familiar with the XV-110 model.

He turned to Hassolt and said, "Look here—you don't know how to run this ship and I do. Why don't you let me stay on board as pilot?"

Hassolt chuckled. "You think I'm crazy? Take a Corpsman aboard? Look, that girl wrecked the other ship, and I'm going to travel in this one alone. Show me which button to push and then clear off."

"That's definite, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Come here."

He led Hassolt to the control panel and gave him a brief rundown on the operation of the ship. The beady-eyed kidnapper took it all in with deep interest.

The rum-bottle was still sitting in the grav-holder next to the pilot's seat, where McDermott had left it for consumption on the return journey. In the darkened ship, it looked like some control lever to the left of the chair.

"Now, this lever over here," McDermott said.

He grasped the bottle firmly as if it were a control. Suddenly he ripped it from its holder and in the same motion swung it back into Hassolt's skull. The bottle broke with a loud crack, and Hassolt dropped to the ground as if poleaxed. McDermott bent over him and took the blast-gun from his hands. Hassolt was still breathing.

Tenderly he scooped Hassolt up and dragged him out of the ship, across the clearing, and propped him up against a tree outside of the firing-range. Then McDermott stood for a long moment, thinking.

It was dark now. Jungle-beasts honked and hooted in the night. It was a seven-mile hike round trip back to the village to get the girl, and when he got there he probably would be swarmed over immediately and held. By now the natives probably had discovered that their king and the newcomer had vanished. They wouldn't let him slip out of sight a second time.

McDermott shook his head

regretfully. He climbed back into the ship and readied it for blastoff.

Too bad about the girl, he thought. But it was suicide to go back to get her.

He thought: it wouldn't be such a bad life—for a while. He'd be waited on hand and foot, and there'd be plenty of that pungent liquor, and of course he would have the girl. But at the end of the year there would be the volcano waiting for both of them.

Better that one of us should escape, he thought. Too bad about the girl. I'll tell Davis that the lifeship blew up on landing, and that both of them were killed and their bodies beyond salvage.

*You ought to go back and get her*, something said inside him. But he shook his head and began setting up the blasting pattern. If he went back, he'd never get a second chance to escape. *No boy-scout stuff, McDermott; you're too old for that. Pull out while you can.*

And Hassolt and the girl would meet the volcano in a year. He shrugged sadly and

jabbed down on the button that activated the jets.

The ship sprang away from Breckmyer IV. McDermott felt a pang of sadness for the girl, and then forgot her. The rescue mission had failed; leave it at that. His chief re-

gret was that he had needed to use the bottle of rum to club down Hassolt. It was the last bottle. It was going to be a long dry voyage back to Albireo, McDermott thought mournfully.

THE END