

★ PLANET ★

★ STORIES ★

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Cosmic Castaway

By CARL JACOBI

Within a year Earth would be a vassal world, with the Sirian invaders triumphant. Only Standish, Earth's Defense Engineer, could halt that last victorious onslaught—and he was helpless, the lone survivor of a prison ship wrecked in uncharted space.

STANDISH came back to consciousness, a dull pain surging in his head and a feeling of nausea in his mid-section. The room about him was strange:

grey *arclium* walls, a single light burning above the iron cot, and a low vibration that trembled the floor beneath his feet.

For a time he lay there, fighting off a

cloud of dizziness. Then he groped unsteadily to his feet. As he did, the vibration ceased, and far off he fancied he heard voices pitched in alarm. A bell clanged hollowly several times.

He recognized those sounds now, as his thoughts struggled to bridge the gap in his brain and the memory of past events came rushing to him.

He was on a Sirian prison ship!

The silence grew upon him, and he stood there uncertainly, listening. Some-

thing was wrong. There was no familiar drone of atomic motors, and there should be . . .

When the shock came, he was hurled completely across the room to the far bulkhead. Yet it wasn't a severe shock. It was as if the ship faltered suddenly and heeled over on her side.

Above him, Standish saw induction and exhaust pipes, coated with sulphur dioxide frost, writhe and twist like so many serpents. The explosion that followed was

Illustration by Paul



deafening. The floor buckled upward under the pressure. The door to the cabin was torn from its hinges, and a sheet of flame and a column of smoke gushed inward.

In an instant, Standish understood. The prison ship, well on its voyage from Earth, had entered the danger zone, that part of space swarming with planetoids and miniature planets. A sleepy pilot had failed to make the proper gravitational allowances. They had struck!

The ship was almost over on her beam ends now. It righted slowly, and Standish fought his way into the outer passageway, every muscle tensed for instant action.

The corridor was empty. Gas and smoke searing his nostrils, the Earthman made his way to the companion. Up he climbed. Emerging on the second level, he stood rigid, stark horror gripping him.

The cages were there. Tier after tier of them stretching into the bowels of the space ship as far as the grey light permitted him to see. In those cages, he knew, were men of his own race: Earth soldiers, prisoners of war.

But over each cage the heavy ceiling plates had been ripped free by the force of the explosion, and where the imprisoned men had been, only twisted bars and sheets of *arclium* steel were visible. The entire level was a tomb of silence.

Standish choked back a sob. His men all dead! Crushed like rats in a trap.

He crossed to the ladder leading to the third and main level, climbing slowly.

Reaching the crew deck, he rocked backward again with a cry of dismay. Here, too, the fearful destruction was evident on all sides. Uniformed Sirians lay dead in the scuppers. The entire bridge house was a mass of fallen girders and broken metal.

The officers' quarters had been crushed like an eggshell. Only the steering cuddy and control room had been spared. But here, too, Standish found death had not spared the occupants. A pintax bar, ripped free from its rocker arms, had jammed itself like an exploded cartridge into the pilot's skull. All in the control room had died of fumes forced into the chamber when the motors backcharged through the instrument pipes.

FROM cabin to cabin Standish went from the living quarters of the crew in the forecastle, to the ammunition chamber in the stern. Everywhere he found destruction and death.

And slowly the fact dawned upon him that he alone aboard was alive. He had been spared because he had been imprisoned in the lower hull, and that section of the ship had escaped damage. Slowly he sank onto a settee and tried to reconstruct his thoughts.

A few hours ago as defense engineer for Earth, he had generated a daring undercover attack against the Sirian's main base at San Francisco. For ten years—since 3010—the war between Earth and Sirius had been going on, with Earth the stage for all battles of the conflict. The cause of the war was long forgotten. Earth people only knew that the Sirians, greedy for more land, had successfully vanquished Mars and Venus and were steadily closing in on terrestrial territory.

Already Australia and Asia had fallen. With every known device of interplanetary warfare, the Sirians had captured district after district, until the American continent alone remained untrampled by the invaders.

But Standish's story had begun a week before. Through an operative in his vast espionage system, he had learned that the Sirians under command of the ruthless Drum Faggard, were preparing for the "big push."

With a dozen chosen companions disguised as Sirians, the Earth engineer had successfully passed through the enemy lines. He had hoped to capture Drum Faggard and a number of his officers-of-staff and race with them back to the Earth's front line breastworks at Omaha. It was a wild scheme; but Standish knew if Faggard were captured, the war would collapse.

The plan had failed. Counter-spies had warned the Sirians. The little band of twelve had been permitted to penetrate deep into Sirian territory, then had been overwhelmed. And after that—Standish's fists clenched—he had been brought face to face with Drum Faggard.

He was a renegade, this Sirian master of conquest. He had been born on Earth of low parentage, but at the beginning of

hostilities he had wormed his way into the graces of the Sirians and by cunning and force of will had risen to Chief of Command.

The Sirians were a wafter-headed race with featureless faces and short barrel-like bodies. Their legs were the same as those of the men of Earth, but their arms possessed tumor-like swellings above the wrists, secondary nerve centers. Faggard, a huge man with a gross face, pig-like eyes and thin lips, had smiled sardonically when Standish was brought before him.

"So your little plan failed, eh?" he said, swallowing a glass of Sirian whiskey and wiping his mouth with the flat of his hand. "Well, Standish, you may as well realize it, you're quite in our power now, and you'll be treated with no more consideration than the rest of the prisoners, unless you answer a few questions."

"What sort of questions?" Standish had demanded.

Faggard smiled again. "Now that your connections with Earth have been forever severed, it can be of little concern to you what happens to that planet. What I want to know is this: How many anti-rocket guns has Earth located at its Omaha base? What is the number of strato-cruisers stationed at Powerville? How heavy are the reserves in the Electra City sector?"

"Answer those question, Standish, and you will be virtually a free man. You will be released on our colony planet of Pluto, with five hundred *planetoles* in your pocket. That money will enable you to live a life of ease for the rest of your days."

For a moment Standish had stood there, face emotionless. Then like an uncapped bottle spewing forth, he had given in to blind rage. He lunged across the room, seized Faggard's thick throat and pounded his right fist into the smirking lips. Twice he had struck before a guard had rushed forward and pulled him off. Then something hard and heavy had crashed down upon his skull, and he knew no more.

He had awakened on this prison ship. But had not this accident occurred he knew well enough the fate that would have been in store for him. All prisoners captured by the Sirian army were transported back to Sirius where they were put

to work as slaves in the marsh fields, extracting hydro-carbon gas for use in the food-distillation plants. It was said a terrestrial man could live only one year there.

Only one thing puzzled the Earthman. Why had he been given special quarters on the prison ship instead of being placed in one of the cages with the other prisoners? To that he could give no answer, and as the ringing silence of space closed in on him, he got to his feet and made his way slowly back to the control room.

II

GLASS 5 showed that the forepeak and secondary chamber had been ripped open. Glass 5 also showed that bulkhead doors there had automatically closed. For the rest, excluding the motors, everything seemed in order.

The oxygen suppliers were functioning smoothly on auxiliary batteries. Likewise the heat units, one for each level, showed normal operation. All lights were lit.

Standish glanced out the port. Whatever the ship had struck, it was out of his vision range now. Propelled by the forward surge of the dying motors, the ship must have advanced a great distance since the fatal crash.

Now the ship was drifting. Drifting without steerageway.

"Derelict," Standish said slowly. "It looks like I've got a one-way ticket to eternity."

He took the elevator down to the lower level again and made his way along the grating to the engine room. Carefully he examined the six ato-turbines with an experienced eye.

Standish had grown up with atomic motors. He had served an apprenticeship at his father's solar plant at Sun City, and he had graduated from the New York School of Technology. As a boy of sixteen, he had built his first miniature atom smasher during vacation days.

Now he moved along the narrow catwalk between the motors, touching a wire here, an armature there. The two port engines, he found, were wrecked completely. Likewise the two starboard. Two forward machines remained, and of these he saw one had an inch-wide crack in its

combustion chamber. But the other . . .

Standish drew in a breath of satisfaction. The last motor was disabled but not beyond repair. Without further ado, he peeled off his coat, seized a Stillson wrench and fell to work.

It took him a long time, and the task drew his mind away from the horror about him. With the patience of long experience, Standish made his repairs. At length it was completed, and he paused with bated breath while he pressed the starting button.

The motor began, sluggishly at first, then faster and faster. Presently it was droning evenly as if nothing had almost wrecked it earlier.

"One motor isn't much," he told himself. "But it may be enough."

For the third time he returned to the control room. There, triumph met his gaze. The master indicator showed a definite forward movement through space. The crippled ship was moving, though slowly.

Standish turned his attention next to the visiscreens and emergency radio with which the liner had kept in contact with Earth and Sirius. Neither the transmitting nor the receiving sets showed any response when he turned on the control switch. A glance back of the panels showed shattered tubes and broken apparatus.

He went out on the deck and climbed to the pilot cuddy. One look through the three-directional glassite shield told a grim story. But it was a full minute before the significance of it all probed into him.

The view ahead was utterly unfamiliar. Strange stars and constellations glowed in the void. Far off to his left was the white radiance of a spiral nebula. To the right, the galaxies seemed to blend in a bewildering array of light and matter, stretching on into infinitude.

Standish's knowledge of cosmography was limited. He knew that straight lines connecting Sirius with Procyon and Betelgeuse would constitute a nearly equilateral triangle. He knew, too, that Betelgeuse, Sirius and Regal—all of the first magnitude—formed a lozenge-shaped figure, with Orion's belt in the center.

But try as he would, he could locate none of these stellar landmarks.

TURNING, he looked for the liner's log. With information as to the ship's time of departure from Earth and an average calculation of her speed, he might hope to chart his position.

The log, however, had not been filled out. The Sirians apparently had grown careless in their repeated trips through space.

Standish's teeth came down hard on his pipe stem. He was lost! Hopelessly lost! A solitary spark of life in a man-made projectile, wandering the immensities of the Universe.

Mechanically, the Earthman set the automatic directionscope for a larger spot of light far ahead and threw in the mass-meter which would effectually warn him of any body within collision-range in his path. Had the liner pilot paid attention to that dial, he reflected, the crash might have been avoided.

Stars paraded, swung past. The Big Dipper flamed away, curiously changed in outlines. Or was it the Big Dipper? Standish didn't know.

Material thoughts supplanted cosmic ones then. There was work to be done, ghoulish work which common decency demanded he perform. The dead must be disposed of.

It was a hard task, and he accomplished it by carry the bodies of the Sirian officers and crew to the baggage chamber in the stern and casting them free through the airlock. On the second level which had held the Earth prisoners the work was even more difficult. Heavy bars and plates had to be lifted free. But at length Standish stood alone on the ship.

He recognized the gnawing sensation in his midsection then as hunger. Finding the galley supplied with both fresh meats and vegetables as well as food concentrates, he ate well. The food served to restore some of his confidence.

When he returned to the pilot cuddy, he saw that the bright spot for which he had set the directionscope had enlarged to a great orange globe that covered the entire glassite shield. Even as he watched, the outlines of land and seas took form.

The needle of the massmeter began to

quiver spasmodically, but Standish held to his course. It had occurred to him that this world might possibly be inhabited and that he might obtain aid for his return to Earth, or at least the proper directions.

But as he drew closer, the land resolved itself into thick jungle and smooth eroded mountain tops, barren of any building or structure. The planet, on this hemisphere at least, was devoid of life.

A bell clanged above the massmeter, warning him the ship was in the danger zone. He seized the wheel and turned it hard over. At the same time he moved the power switch to the last notch.

The liner swung sluggishly. And then the thing Standish had feared happened! The single motor buckled under the strain and ceased. Without resistance, the ship swept full into the gravitational field of the planet and plunged downward.

Like a man in a dream Standish saw jungle rush up to meet him. An instant later there was a terrific crash, and he felt himself hurled into oblivion.

III

AN eternity seemed to have passed before he opened his eyes. He was conscious immediately of his left arm which was pinioned under a heavy rock. He wrenched it free and staggered erect, looking about dazedly.

His eyes opened in bewilderment. He lay on a shelf, a small escarpment projecting from the side of a cliff. Far below him, smashed and broken in two, amid jagged boulders, lay the prison ship. And sweeping on and on to the horizon was a dense matted jungle.

The trees resembled giant cat-tails. Without branches, the trunks towered up a full three hundred feet to form a huge green protuberance at the top. The rock of the cliff was neither igneous nor sedimentary. Instead it was smooth and almost translucent, like glass.

In the sky above, two suns blazed, one at the zenith, one a fiery ball dipping over the horizon. The air was warm and humid, and Standish knew the oxygen content must be almost the same as on Earth.

Nature-formed rock slabs led in stair formation down the cliff. While he stood there, slowly regaining his strength, the Earthman tried to trace the path of the crashing liner. He saw where it had struck, ripping open the entire side and casting him out. Then it had rolled end over end down into the ravine.

At length, Standish began his descent. The moment he swung his body over the edge to hang by his hands, he gave an exclamation of amazement. His body seemed to weigh nothing at all. This planet must be of smaller size than Earth, and, therefore, the gravitational attraction was less.

On the ravine floor he looked about him warily. Titanic rock, smooth and polished from erosion, littered the expanse but stopped at the jungle edge. The trees were all the same, of equal height and girth. They seemed to be arranged in corridors or galleries, the way between them dark and shadow-filled. Standish knew he must exercise caution until he could explore those depths.

The significance of his plight now swept upon him. He was alone on an alien planet. Even granting the Sirians would send out scouts to locate their prison ship when it failed to arrive, the chances of his being found were remote.

Yet on the other hand, he alone had been spared death. And he had come upon a world, one perhaps in millions, which had an atmosphere capable of supporting human life.

A sudden high-pitched drone broke the silence. Rising up from behind a pile of boulders a hideous winged shape shot toward him!

Half bird, half saurian, the thing's head was enormous with an inflated cobra hood. Even as the creature closed in with incredible speed, Standish wheeled and ran for the safety of the wrecked space ship.

He reached it and wormed his way through a gaping rent in the hull. The lizard-bird stopped short a few yards from the ship to stare perplexedly. Then with its queer droning cry still sounding, it zoomed into the air and flew out of sight.

"Holy Hell!"

Standish inhaled deeply. Dangers here

were imminent. He must take steps to protect himself at once.

Although the liner lay on one side with the three entrances and emergency airlock underneath, the hole through which he had entered was the only opening. The hull bottom had been crushed by the great impact. Yet the glassite ports and vision shield of the pilot cuddy were unbroken.

Standish crawled back along the passage to the officers' quarters. On the wall of one of the cabins he found two genithode pistols and a portable ray gun. He realized then that his first move toward self preservation lay in making the space ship livable and impregnable to outside attack.

He accomplished the latter by removing two bulkhead doors and jamming them across the opening in the hull. The last door he arranged on a swivel so that it could be locked from either side. Then, exhausted by the hours of activity, he fell asleep.

WHEN he awoke and went outside, he saw that the two suns had exactly altered their position. The larger was at the zenith now; the smaller, low on the horizon. The temperature was unchanged, and the air was crystal clear, with only a few fleecy clouds floating overhead.

Standish ate a hearty breakfast, then strapped one genithode pistol about his waist and headed across the ravine to begin his first trip of exploration.

The moment he entered the jungle he was conscious of an electric something that passed before him, telegraphed from tree to tree. The strange plants, neither cyads nor conifers, seemed aware of his presence, whispering among themselves.

Experimentally he touched one of the trunks. It quivered, the bark split apart, and a spongy tentacle whipped out to drive straight at his throat. Standish escaped the clawing coil by inches. The tree quivered again, and the tentacle returned to its hiding place.

He kept well away from the trees after that. But as he went on, he saw other forms of life, all manifesting an evolution in mixed stages of development. There was a low plant, brilliant purple in color

which gave off a mewling cry whenever he stepped on one of its fronds. There were small lizard-birds, and occasionally he saw bluish masses growing melon-like on the ground. These had a single eye in the center of a spongy body. They watched him as he passed.

Once a small animal darted out before him. But when he approached, the creature instead of running for safety, thrust one paw in the soft earth, and a whitish blossom leaped up on a wavering stalk from its head. Within the flick of an eye, the thing had changed from animal to plant life.

It was at high noon by his Earth-time watch that Standish emerged into the glade. He stopped short, staring, then uttered a short cry.

Before him were buildings, low mushroom-like buildings arranged in a semi-circle. Fashioned of the same translucent rock he had seen on the cliff, they resembled the igloos of his own north country. Overhead a network of thick yellowish wire ran back and forth, separated at intervals by heavy white insulators.

He saw then that the structures were old. The wires hung slack, and in many places were broken in two. A heavy silk-like grass had sprung up in thick clumps between the buildings.

With steps suddenly grown heavy, Standish advanced to the nearest house. The rotting remnants of a wooden door hung from elliptical hinges.

Inside was desertion. There were no furnishings of any kind. Over everything lay a heavy coating of dust.

There were twelve buildings in the glade, and he examined them one by one. In one he found a skeleton with a skull of enormous size and three leg appendages instead of two. In the last a strange looking machine, partially dismantled, was mounted on the wall. Every detail of it, from the mildewed control panel to the eccentric wheels and cogs were unfamiliar to him. On the floor was a stone tablet covered with hieroglyphics.

But that was all!

Depression swept over Standish as he mentally supplied the missing details. Some race had been here long ago; a foreign race, for the glade was undoubt-

edly a temporary camp. The wire entanglement and the machine had been constructed as some sort of protection against the animal life of this planet.

But whoever these people were, they had come and gone!

IV

STANDISH left the glade with a heavy heart and returned to the space ship. In the ravine, he made two discoveries. There was a spring of clear water pouring from a fissure in the cliff side. Growing about it was an edible variety of moss. Although he had concentrated food in the liner's galley to keep him for a long time, these finds were reassuring.

He also found that the combination of the mineral soil and the two suns affected growth tremendously. Planting a few dried kernels of corn, he was amazed to see them take root almost instantly and reach full maturity within a few hours.

He now set upon a task which he had been mulling over in his brain for some time.

There were ray cannon mounted on the space liner's stern. Two of these had broken muzzles, but the third was intact. Standish went down into the bowels of the ship and found a dozen old message projectiles. Cigar-shaped objects of heat-resisting corodite, these projectiles were a part of all space crafts' emergency equipment. They were used for distress signals when radio or visiscreen equipment failed.

In the hollow chamber of each of the twelve projectiles he placed the same message:

Castaway. Mason Standish. Lieutenant-defense-engineer Earth. On unknown planet, somewhere near Sirius-Earth Route. December 28, 3020.

He had no means of astronomical calculation. So he aimed the gun at twelve different points of the heavens and fired haphazardly. Chances of intelligent life ever finding those projectiles were millions to one against him. But whatever the odds, he must miss no opportunity.

Next he made a thorough survey of

the wrecked liner, carrying all usable objects to the forecandle, which swiftly took on the appearance of a storage room. As these articles began to grow in number, satisfaction and pride of ownership gripped him.

It was in the midst of these labors that he was suddenly struck with an idea. Why not construct a space ship from the wrecked parts of the liner? He had six atomic motors, and surely from their wreckage he could salvage enough to build one of half the trajectory power. And with a smaller ship, he might be able to find his way back to Earth.

Standish smoked a pipe over this. When morning came, he began the herculean task of dismantling the motors. Day after day he struggled with the cumbersome machinery. When this stage of the work was finally completed, he was startled to discover that six weeks of Earth time had slipped by.

He then found in the machinists' quarters an electric saw. The tool was dull, but he managed to cut free a dozen girders for the framework of his craft. To his dismay he found them too heavy to move even with block and tackle. There was no alternative but to cut them into sections and weld them together, hoping they would stand the strain.

That night the first warning of trouble came. Absently Standish had noticed a chill in the air, a more oblique slant to the twin suns. Suddenly from the jungle beyond the ravine came a low rumbling.

The earthman switched on a searchlight he had fastened on top of the forecandle. The white glare fastened itself on the wall of trees, revealed five figures advancing directly into the light.

ON all fours they came, huge beasts with long tapered bodies covered with heavy white fur. Their heads resembled the saber-toothed tigers of Earth's Upper Miocene.

A dozen appeared before Standish understood. This zone of the planet was advancing into its cold season. The animals were part of a migrating herd, coming down from the warmer districts.

He drew his genithode pistol and fired into their midst. The foremost of the creatures keeled over, and the Earthman

advanced boldly, firing as he went. Here was fresh meat, and with winter coming on, he intended to obtain as much of it as possible.

Standish was twenty yards from the hull of the liner when a coughing roar sounded behind him. He wheeled and uttered a cry of horror. If the creatures revealed by the light were giants in size, these others were titans. Nostrils picking up his scent, they came forward slowly, cutting him off from the ship.

He fired twice again, even as two of the monsters hurtled toward him. It was stark struggle then. With only the reflected light of the search lamp and the vague glow of the stars, Standish fought desperately. The pistol barrel became hot; the white-haired things went down in two's and three's.

And then abruptly there came a lull in the attack. The creatures halted listening. And an instant later the sound reached the Earthman's ears like the hum of an angry hornet. From above it came, rapidly drawing nearer. Stunned, he saw the saber-toothed monsters turn and slink quietly back into the jungle.

Up in the sky a light gleamed, and a series of red flashes split the darkness. Then a black ball-shaped shadow swept downward with incredible speed. There was a roar and a series of muffled reports as the thing hurtled over the roof of the jungle and swept to a landing at the far end of the ravine.

The sounds ceased. Standish stood there, frozen to inactivity. Then a hysterical shout and a peal of laughter burst from his lips. A space ship . . . a rocket ship, landing here on this planet. It . . . it wasn't possible!

V

BUT it was possible. As Standish ran forward, he saw a hatch open in the metal sphere and a man climb out. And yet it wasn't a man. The face and body were normal, but the arms and legs were vine-like appendages with segmented fronds for hands. When this person saw Standish, it recoiled and whipped a knife out from a scabbard at its waist.

Quickly the Earthman raised one arm above his head in the common symbol of

friendliness. A smile of recognition crossed the little man's face. He nodded and raised his frond-like hand in a similar gesture. Then he pointed to himself and said:

"Ga-Marr!"

The rocket ship now came under Standish's gaze. He saw that it was of a design foreign to any craft he had ever seen before. Spherical in shape, with a series of strange-looking fins along the sides, its stern rudders were formed of crude exhaust jettisons, and the several ports were formed of a transparent material that resembled quartz.

Ga-Marr—for it was evident those syllables formed the stranger's name—opened the hatch door and motioned Standish to enter. Without hesitation, the Earthman did so. Inside was a single cabin, with a control panel occupying two of the four walls. Ga-Marr pressed a button, and a panel slid open in the floor, revealing the motor chamber.

The stranger pointed downward, then shook his head violently. Standish nodded.

"Motors went dead on you, eh? Well, my friend, it looks as though you and I were in the same fix. Come along, and I'll show you my diggings."

But when Ga-Marr looked upon the wrecked space liner, he stared incredulously. He walked its entire length as if doubting its proportions.

"Yes, she's big all right," Standish smiled, aware that he was not understood. "But she's no good, the way she is now. Now, how about a little food?"

In his forecabin home, the Earthman set out a bottle of wine and some cakes. He noted that Ga-Marr used his front hands with great dexterity, but that he betrayed no surprise at Standish's own physical appearance.

Once the stranger had eaten, Standish began the necessary task of providing a common means of communication. He used the Corelli sound-system—a shortcut method of acquainting the ear and the eye simultaneously with objects of fundamental importance. Within two hours, he found he could converse with Ga-Marr with a minimum amount of difficulty.

Haltingly then, the stranger began to speak:

"I am from the city, Calthedra, of the planet Lyra, of the system Aritorius. My race was once a great people, but raiders from another planet destroyed our civilization. All we have left is a few rocket ships of the kind in which I came. These were built long ago by our ancestors, and only a few of us know how to operate them."

Standish nodded. "How came you here?"

"I was voyaging to visit my brother on our satellite, Zora, when those same raiders caught sight of me and gave chase. My space compass broke, and I became lost. I found my way here just as my rocket motors consumed the last of their power."

"I see." Standish lit his pipe and began to smoke slowly. "And these raiders—they come from near here?"

"From Sirius," Ga-Marr replied. "They raid us for funds to continue their war with a planet many light years away."

For a full moment Standish sat there rigid. Then the pipe fell from his hands, and he leaped to his feet.

"Sirius!" he cried. "So those butchers are not content to place in bondage all the solar system. They must plague other worlds also!"

He paced the length of the forecabin.

"Tell me," he said, whirling abruptly, "do you know of a Sirian leader called Drum Faggard?"

Ga-Marr's eyes gleamed. "Aye. The cruelest and most bloodthirsty of them all. It was he who led the attack against my people in which my brother was killed. It was he who directed the sacking of our city of Calthedra. My one hope is that some day we may meet on common ground."

THE next day Standish revealed to the newcomer his plan to build a smaller space ship out of the wreckage of the old.

"Your own craft is useless without power for its rocket motors," he told Ga-Marr. "Yet it contains parts that will be valuable. Have I your consent to dismantle it?"

The stranger nodded.

"To work then. And remember, if

we succeed, we may yet be able to strike at Drum Faggard."

It was the desire for revenge that spurred them on. Quickly they set about dismantling Ga-Marr's ship. Rivets were cut, bolts unscrewed, plates ripped off. Using the dismantled parts of the space liner's atomic motors, Standish fashioned a smaller but powerful engine. Gradually out of the mass a crude craft began to take form.

But they were working on counted time. Days were growing shorter; the nights, longer. Icy winds began to sweep across the ravine, bringing sleet and flurries of snow.

With the change in seasons came new dangers. Strange animal life, following the perverse migrational instinct of the planet, swept out of the jungle.

First came the lizard-birds, similar to, but larger than, the one which had attacked Standish. They came over the cliff in squadron formation, a dense cloud that blotted out the sky.

For two days the men were kept prisoners, while the flock stalked back and forth about the ravine like a vast Roman encampment.

A week later the thrads came. It was Ga-Marr who called them thrads. They were a tiny species of anthropoid, no larger than a squirrel, with bright red bodies. Inquisitive and bold, they hampered the two men as they gathered close to watch the work.

The ship was nearing completion. While Standish labored at the control adjustments, Ga-Marr carried in a supply of food concentrates from the wrecked liner. Along the length of the ravine an inclined runway was built for a take-off. At the end of this, Standish constructed a rifle-like catapult, using the parts of Ga-Marr's rocket motor and a quantity of trinitrate cellulose he found in the liner. If the device worked, it would multiply their initial trajectory power and quicken their passage through the planet's gravitational field.

At length Standish fastened the last bolt of the crude new ship in its place. Nervously, he pressed the starting button. The single motor began with a smooth powerful hum. The ship strained at its moorings.

"Ready, Ga-Marr? We'll give her a trial flight and see how she handles."

The little man grinned, shouted. "Cast off!" he cried. "Cast off!"

Standish severed the mooring cable of the ship with one shot from his genithode pistol. The two men yanked shut the hatch, screwed down the air lock. With a yank, the Earthman threw over the control lever.

Up from the ground the ship shot. Through the floor panel, Standish saw the ground receding.

"Take the controls," he told Ga-Marr. "I'm going to try and chart a course for your planet."

THE planet rose up before them like a great ripened peach. It had taken Standish long hours to calculate with his elementary astrophysics the location of their destination. Ga-Marr had supplied what information he could; but he knew only that the planet, Lyra, was bordered by a spiral nebulae on one side, and that it revolved about a sun some hundred million miles distant.

As they approached now, Ga-Marr betrayed no emotion. "The city of Calthedra is on the other hemisphere," he said. "I'll direct you to the landing."

They crept slowly along the surface, and the Earthman found himself looking upon a land similar in many respects to his own. Nostalgia seized him. Here were lakes and woods and broad fields in the state of cultivation. Here were lanes, roads and hedges, a tracery of browns and greens that was good to see.

But when a moment later Ga-Marr pointed out the port and said, "Calthedra," Standish's jaw set hard. The city had been devastated. Buildings stood in ruins. Towers were crumbling masses of masonry. Only one structure seemed to have escaped the fearful onslaught, a globe-shaped building, fashioned of some kind of black metal.

The Earthman saw the landing place and guided the ship downward. Below he could see people milling about excitedly, groups of them pointing upward.

The moment the ship came to a rest, Ga-Marr threw open the hatch and climbed out. Standish followed, to find an assemblage drawn up suspiciously in battle

array, their weapons ready for any hostile move of the newcomers.

In the foreground stood a taller man of Lyra, wearing a suit of copper-colored chain mail and a helmet studded with gleaming chips of yellow metal. At his sides were two men in white flowing robes. All had high brows, penetrating eyes and frond-like appendages in lieu of arms and legs.

Ga-Marr ran forward and embraced the man in the helmet.

"My father," he said, "this man is Mason Standish, a great warrior from the planet Earth. He has rescued me from certain death, and has brought me back to your empire at the risk of his life."

The Emperor paced forward, a benevolent smile playing across his lips.

"He who befriends my son has my gratitude," he said softly.

Standish was bewildered. Ga-Marr had made no mention of the fact that he was of royal birth. It was a long time before the Earthman found his tongue.

"Your son tells me that your people and my people are at war with a common enemy. May I ask how long since the Sirians made their last attack upon you?"

"Within the risings of twelve suns," the Emperor replied. "But come. Let us go to the palace where we may speak alone."

STANDISH missed no detail of his passage through the city. Calthedra, besides being hard hit by the invaders, was quite evidently in the process of decay. Streets were racked and unrepaired. House windows were broken and open to the elements. And on all sides the Earthman saw faces devoid of intelligence staring at him.

But when he climbed the steps and followed Ga-Marr and the Emperor into the black metal globe, he entered a different world.

A vast pillared hall stretched before him. On one side a balustrated ramp led to the upper levels. Opposite were a series of high triangular doorways, each opening into separate chambers. The air was cool and exhilarating and seemed to have a different chemical content than that of the street.

"This is our palace," Ga-Marr said, "built thousands of years before when our people were a great civilization. It alone has withstood all the attacks our planet has been exposed to."

"Why?" demanded Standish. "I should think this would be the enemy's first striking place."

Ga-Marr stook his head. "I do not understand the science of it myself. It is something in the black metal. It is an electron-stripped element, I believe, tremendously heavy and impregnable to any weapon of cosmic warfare."

They reached the last doorway and entered the royal quarters. The Emperor and his son sat down before a circular table and motioned Standish to a chair opposite. The older man removed his helmet and closed his eyes as if in weariness.

"Earthman," he said at length, "you come at a time when my planet is sorely in need of help. I don't know how much my son has told you, but if you will listen I will tell you the history of Lyra. But first I have something to show you."

He touched a button on the table, and a chime sounded melodiously in the outer corridor. A servant appeared in the doorway.

"Tell Thalia I would see her at once," the Emperor said.

A moment later light steps sounded and Standish looked up curiously. What he saw brought him out of his chair with a cry of pleasure and amazement.

The figure of a girl—an Earth girl of his own race stood there on the threshold.

VI

FOR a full moment as their eyes met, man and girl stared speechless. To Standish, who a few short weeks ago had thought himself cut off forever from his people, she was a vision of loveliness. Her hair was dark, and her face was a delicate one of natural beauty.

"This is Thalia," the Emperor said, "born on your planet, but brought here as a child. Perhaps you recall a liner, the Colossus, which was lost and never reached port some twenty years ago?"

"Glory, yes!" exclaimed Standish.

"The Colossus was destroyed by the Sirians. It was their first attack on an Earth craft, and I believe the initial act which led them on. Thalia was the only survivor when we came upon the ship, drifting, a derelict."

The girl stepped forward now shyly. "My greetings," she said.

Standish took her hand, and a strange thrill shot through him. Then the Emperor leaned back in his chair, lit a short metal pipe and began his story. . . .

Thousands of years before, the Sirians had come to raid this planet, Lyra, attracted by the wealth of minerals: coronium, thanium, margon, gold and silver. They had destroyed the libraries, the laboratories, the schools. They had killed the scientists and all men suspected of higher intelligence. For generations, the people of Lyra had been held in bondage.

Then an Emperor had come into power, gifted with a scientific reasoning far in advance of his time. He had constructed a warp in space on three sides of the planet. This alteration of the space-time coordinates served as an impregnable defense.

Until Drum Faggard had come upon the scene. With but one desire—to continue his war on Earth and the solar system, Faggard had broken through the space warp and destroyed the time machine that operated it.

"And so," concluded the Emperor, "we of Lyra today are but ghosts of our past. Our heritage has been stolen from us. We are far removed in space, so have been unable to obtain allies. Even your planet, Earth, does not know of our presence. The Sirians have told us that your observers believe Lyra unfit to support life. And the few rocket ships we have left are not capable of crossing that immense distance."

Standish sat in thoughtful silence. Abruptly the girl, Thalia, moved to his side.

"Will you help us?" she said. "You have knowledge, and knowledge is power. Will you aid Lyra in its fight for freedom?"

Standish stood up slowly, face a grim line of determination. "Yes," he said. "I'll do all I can."

HE began with a survey of the city of Calthedra. With Ga-Marr answering his many questions, Standish passed from street to street, building to building, no detail missing his sharp eyes. He saw the wreckage of the space warp machine, broken ray cannon, the debris-choked lower levels where once light-hearted Lyrians had their libraries and laboratories.

Then Standish spent two days devising an intelligence test as he remembered them from his Earth studies. The test, he instructed Ga-Marr was to be given to every able-bodied man in Calthedra.

He spent a week more checking the results. But at length from the mass of papers he selected twenty-four Lyrians whose IQ rating and general scientific aptitude seemed in advance of their fellows. The Earthman then revealed his plan to Ga-Marr.

"We're going to build a space ship," he said, "a super destroyer with the most powerful atomic motors I've ever designed. We're going to take this war into our own hands—attack, rather than wait to be attacked."

A call for workmen was broadcast. The response was overwhelming. All Calthedra, all Lyra wanted to help the man from Earth in the struggle to free them from bondage.

With the twenty-four picked men as overseers, the work began. A flat space was selected beyond the outskirts of the city. Food depots were thrown up, together with temporary housing quarters. Like a colony of ants, the workmen labored in three shifts. At night, the work went on by the light of solar-condenser lamps mounted on towers at every point of vantage.

The ship began to take form. A long cigar-shaped blue-black hull was fashioned out of *feloranium*, a metal peculiar to Lyra which Standish toughened by the addition of five alloys. At intermittent spaces along that hull, disappearing ray guns were swivel-mounted, operated and loaded by remote control.

The Earthman personally supervised the installation of the atomic motors. Each he had given the most strenuous block tests. Switched on, they purred like six

gargantuan cats, alive with effortless strength.

Finally Ga-Marr climbed out of the huge cabin and smiled.

"It is completed," he said. "Only the heat units remain to be tested. What now?"

"Now," said Standish. . . . But his words were never finished. From the roof of the palace the warning siren burst into a wailing clamor. Ga-Marr's face blanched.

"The Sirians!" he cried. "They'll destroy all we've done."

With a single leap Standish was across to the microphone of the field amplifying system.

"Wait!" his voice boomed out. "If you run, all your work will be for nothing. We still have a chance, but we must hide this ship. I want each of you to bring here every movable object you can find. Do you understand? Every movable object!"

The field saw strange activity then. While the siren continued to scream out its warning, an endless procession of Lyrians raced in and out of Calthedra, carrying stone blocks, furniture, doors, articles of every description.

"Looks like moving day back on Earth," Standish said to Ga-Marr with a lightness he didn't feel. His fists clenched. "We'll beat them yet."

He ran for the palace. Even as he raced up the inclined ramp of the rear entrance, he saw five Sirian battle cruisers land with a roar in the central square. Inside, Standish moved swiftly to the quarters of the Emperor. The old man was leaning weakly against a chair, eyes smoldering.

Without preamble the Earthman explained what he had done. Then he had barely time to leap through the doorway into the adjoining room.

HEAVY steps sounded in the hall. A moment later six men entered the chamber and strode belligerently to the Emperor. Five of them were Sirians. The sixth was a man of Earth—a tall broad shouldered man with a bullet head and a cruel predatory face. This was Drum Faggard.

He wore the Sirian uniform and a

flowing scarlet cloak hung from his shoulders. At his waist were holstered two long barreled genithode pistols.

"Your mines are lying idle," Faggard snarled. "Why?"

Through the crevice between the partially closed door Standish saw the Emperor shrug eloquently. "We have had troubles."

"What troubles?"

The Emperor hesitated. "Labor," he said. "My workers refuse to toil further when the results of their work are stolen from them. They see no reason to struggle for the benefit of murdering raiders."

Blunt anger crimsoned Faggard's face. He struck the Emperor hard across the face. "Watch your tongue, fool!"

Standish made fists of his hands. He had an overpowering desire to leap into the room and seize the renegade. To do that, however, he knew, would mean failure for his plans.

Drum Faggard paced to a window.

"What is the meaning of all that material piled outside the city?"

Quietly the Emperor continued to play his part. "We are moving to new grounds," he explained, "moving higher into the hills. The weather on Lyra is changing, growing warmer due to the planet's gradual approach to our sun. Surely your observers must have noticed it."

For a long moment the renegade stood there motionless, digesting this information. Then he crossed back to the table, slammed a mailed fist down upon it.

"Old man, I give you one more chance. Either those mines are worked and a double amount of ore made ready for us, or we level Calhedra to the ground. Do you understand? We will return later."

He turned on his heel, and the five Sirians followed puppet-like into the corridor. Darting across to the window, Standish saw them march pompously across the square and enter the space cruisers. A moment later, with a roar of rocket exhaust, the six armored vessels shot upward.

Standish turned and ran out the door, heading for the landing field. Half way he met Ga-Marr.

"The ruse worked," the Emperor's son exulted. "They've gone."

"Order the ship cleared!" Standish commanded. "We take off at once."

Quickly the screen of material was torn from the new ship. A vat of necessary water and a case of food concentrate were hastily carried into the storage chamber. The twenty-four chosen Lyrians took their places. In the pilot cuddy, Standish nodded to Ga-Marr and pulled down the microphone of the ship address-system.

"Close stern hatch!" he ordered.

A dial flicked on the panel before him, and from the loudspeaker a voice answered:

"Hatch closed, sir."

"Close midships-tower."

"Midships-tower closed."

"Gunner's mate!" Standish called. "Test all gun swivels, air locks and automatic loaders."

There was a moment's pause. Then:

"All guns tested, sir."

Standish motioned Ga-Marr to shut the pilot cuddy hatch. But before Ga-Marr could swing the hermetic barrier into position, a lithe figure leaped down the ladder. It was the Earth girl—Thalia.

"I'm going with you," she said. "This is my battle as well as yours."

Standish looked into her defiant black eyes and frowned. But the refusal that rose to his lips died unsounded. He nodded and motioned her to the settee on the far side of the cuddy.

In rotation then, he snapped on the six atomic motors. A dull tremor of life and power shook the ship. Then Standish seized an electro-welder left behind by some workman, flung open the hatch and ran outside to the stern of the ship.

Roughly, while Ga-Marr watched bewildered, he seared the name, *Phantom*, on the feloranium hull. He leaped back to the cuddy, slammed shut the hatch and threw over the acceleration lever.

The huge ship lifted from the field of its birth and roared up into the stratosphere.

VII

IT was Standish's plan to permit the six departing Sirian cruisers to cover sufficient distance that they would not associate him—immediately at least—with

the plundered planet, Lyra. With unleashed power at his fingertips, he planned to pass his quarry on a higher plane, then circle and return.

The *Phantom* functioned like a dream. Up through space she bored, annihilating distance, sweeping out into the star fields in hot pursuit. Warm clear air circulated out from the oxygizers. Each dial and gauge told its proper story. Even the heat units, which had not been properly tested, operated smoothly.

Standish pulled down the cosmoscope and surveyed the way ahead. He saw star clusters and constellations. Ahead, tail sweeping out in a blaze of glory, a comet crossed his path. But nowhere did he sight the Sirian cruisers.

"I'm afraid they've got too great a start on us," said Ga-Marr. Thalia drew in her breath sharply.

"That black speck ahead. . . ."

Standish threw over the accelerator another notch and twisted helm sharply. The *Phantom* answered her controls. The Earthman was maneuvering for position now. Far below him, he saw the six cruisers materialize in his vision.

And then, with a dull roar, the *Phantom* swung and leaped for the attack.

"They see us!" Thalia cried. "They're going into battle-formation!"

With Drum Faggard's flag ship in the lead, the six cruisers turned and headed toward them in squadron formation. It was evident that they were still unaware of the identity of the black ship. The visiscreen clicked on, and Faggard's face appeared in the panel.

"We are Section one, general Sirian Expeditionary Force, Sirius to Earth, heading for regular interplanetary lanes," he said, following the customary salutation. "Who are you?"

Standish flipped on his own microphone, but disconnected the vision panel so that no return image would be broadcast.

"Destroyer *Phantom*," he replied, muffling his voice. "Captain Ether commanding. Stand by for boarding or we open fire on you."

Faggard's gross face, crimson with rage, flashed back on the screen.

"Are you mad? We are six to your one. From what planet do you come? Show your colors."

"I'll show my colors," Standish muttered, a grim smile playing about his lips. He switched on the ship address system.

"Port gunner. Stand by for shot across enemy's bows. Elevation six. Trajectory five."

There was an excited reply. Standish twisted his helm a fraction of a turn.

"Fire!"

THE *Phantom* recoiled slightly, but there was no sound, no tell-tale streak of flame. Only on the Sirian flagship was there any evidence of what had happened. A gaping hole appeared in the vessel's hull. The ship faltered momentarily. Then, Standish knew, hermetic bulkheads automatically closed, and she swung on a wide arc.

"They're spreading out," Ga-Marr said. "They're going to attack from both sides."

The flagship shot into another plane. The remaining five cruisers surged toward the *Phantom*, firing as they came. Standish saw the strategy and realized he was pitted against no amateur fighter.

He signaled to fire both forward guns, holding his position boldly. At that moment, one of the cruisers attempted a maneuver old in space warfare. Charging head-on toward the *Phantom*, the cruiser's commander sought to frighten Standish into turning broadside.

Thalia uttered a scream. "They're going to ram us!" she cried.

The Earthman nodded. "Let them. If they do, they'll be in for a surprise."

On came the cruiser. The *Phantom* did not alter her course. And then, at the moment the Sirian realized the ruse had failed, Standish threw his helm, heading directly toward the enemy. The two vessels struck squarely.

In the pilot cuddy Standish, Ga-Marr and Thalia were hurled to the floor. The Earthman struggled erect, helped the girl to her feet.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

"No, but the ship. . . ."

"Look!" Standish pointed out the port.

A horrible sight met the girl's eyes. The *Phantom's* stout *felorianium* sides were unharmed. But the Sirian cruiser had broken into three sections. Even as she watched, figures were catapulted out into space, and the whole mass of debris be-

gan to rotate slowly around another enemy ship, forming a macabre satellite.

The remaining four cruisers circled and began to close in.

"All starboard guns," Standish ordered. "Elevation one. Double charge. Fire!"

The recoil was jarring. Two cruisers fell back, rocket motors stilled, huge rents in their forward quarters. And with that, Drum Faggard's flag ship and the other cruiser turned about and fled.

"They've had enough," Ga-Marr exulted.

"Faggard is the one I want," Standish said. "We'll come back and tow in those two disabled ships later."

But the Earthman had reckoned without the huge planetoid swarm which lay directly in their path. The two Sirian ships plunged into the midst of these miniature worlds and in an instant were lost.

Power control wide open, Standish zoomed in pursuit. But though he swung the cosmoscope to every angle he saw no sign of his quarry.

"He's slid through our fingers this time," he told Ga-Marr bitterly. "But our chance will come again."

Heavily he swung the tiller and returned to the area of combat. The two helpless cruisers and the portions of the third were drifting idly without steerage-way. Standish steered the *Phantom* alongside, shot out the magnetic grappling bars and secured the two derelicts.

Then he headed the big ship back to Lyra.

A great crowd awaited them. As the *Phantom* and its twin burden settled slowly downward, hundreds of Lyrians ran to the landing field. The court guard, resplendent in shining armor, took their places in formation, and the Emperor and his ministers hastily assembled on a raised pavilion.

Then the two wrecked cruisers were opened, and the prisoners led forth.

"You will be well treated," the Emperor addressed them collectively. "We do not subjugate our captives of war after your fashion; but until the Sirians cease their raids upon this planet, you will not be permitted to leave."

Standish ordered the *Phantom* inspected and such damage as had been inflicted

by Drum Faggard's guns repaired. Then with Thalia at his side, he moved slowly toward the palace.

"Some day," he said, "all this will be over. I don't know how, but I'm going to do everything in my power to bring this bloody war to an end. Then . . ."

The girl smiled and lowered her eyes. "Then?" she prompted softly.

But Standish colored and became suddenly silent. Even during the heat of the battle, his heart had not beat as fast as it was beating now.

VIII

SIX Lyrian months had passed since Standish and Ga-Marr had escaped from the unknown planet. During those months the fame of the *Phantom* had spread fast as light. From the constellation Cygnus to the twelfth and fifteenth magnitude stars, the name of Captain Ether, behind which Standish hid his identity swept through the interplanetary lanes. Transports from powerful and peaceful Alpha Centauri moved with extra convoys, ready for instant action. No one knew when the *Phantom* would strike. No one knew from what planet it came to attack like a black meteor without warning.

Yet Standish challenged no ship but those of Sirius. Haunting the lanes between Sirius and Earth, he seized enemy prison ships and troop transports alike with daring regularity.

The city of Calthedra was filled to overflowing with Sirian prisoners. But the man Standish wanted most, Drum Faggard, was never on a captured ship.

Desire to capture Faggard became almost an obsession as the Earthman went on. Through the powerful radio which he had built on Lyra, he learned of the situation on Earth, day by day.

The news was black. Canada, Mexico and Central America were now a part of the armed camp of the invaders. The Greater United States alone had managed to remain independent. Breastworks a quarter of a mile high had been erected on the Canadian and Mexican frontiers.

The only bright spot was the fact that Faggard's "big push" had failed. Often Standish smiled as he listened in on radio

messages between the Sirian government and Drum Faggard at his Frisco base.

"The *Phantom* has been sighted, lurking near Ganymede. Dispatch five cruisers to that satellite immediately."

And again: "The *Phantom*, it is learned on definite authority, comes from some point in future time. It is able to maintain a speed in excess of light, violating the Fitzgerald contraction, riding the fourth dimensional continuum."

To which Drum Faggard always snarled the same reply. "Whoever Captain Ether is, I'll get him. Give me time."

IT was the day of his return from his most successful raid; and Standish and Thalia were walking arm in arm through the palace garden on Lyra. Flowers were in the full bloom of the planet's early summer, and the sun glowed upon them warmly.

"The *Phantom* is not enough," the Earthman said. "Powerful as she is, she can only plague the Sirians like a single hornet. With all my efforts, I have not halted the war against Earth one iota."

Thalia shook her head. "You've done all one person possibly could do."

"I need an army and a fleet," Standish said. "Yet on all Lyra there will not be sufficiently trained men to furnish either for a long time."

The girl stood there, idly plucking the petals of a flower. Abruptly she turned.

"The Sirian prisoners! Even the private soldiers are equipped with scientific knowledge. Why not use them?"

But Standish shook his head. "They would refuse. We could force them to do physical work, of course. But that's all . . . I . . ."

"Listen." Excitement suddenly entered Thalia's voice. "In the laboratories in the lower levels there is a machine built by the early Lyrians long ago. No one understands its operation now. But it's some kind of an electro-hypnotic machine. Couldn't you use it on the Sirians and make them *want* to help us?"

A glitter in his eyes, Standish considered a moment, then leaped to his feet.

"Let's have a look," he said.

They left the garden, crossed the square and entered the ancient tunnel that led

to the old laboratories. In the first level the Earthman found nothing that answered the girl's description. But in a storage room far back in the second tier he came upon two of the strange machines, dust covered, in places red with rust.

Mounted on wheels, the instruments consisted of a small cart with twin panels and a confusing array of dials. Above each machine was a helix of tightly wound silver wire. At the bottom was a transparent globe still half-filled with a thick greenish liquid.

"According to Ga-Mar," Thalia said, "these machines were used by the early Sirians for medical purposes. They found in the principal of applied hypnosis a cure for a great many ills."

Standish nodded. Without further word, he took up a small wrench and removed the panel from one of the instruments, carefully examining the revealed wiring.

"They seemed to be constructed for use on ordinary electric power. But not the power supplied by Caltheda's dynamos. I'll have to step up the frequency."

He opened a wall switchboard and quickly connected two wires to the machine. On a table he found a transformer. Thalia stood by in silence while he hooked up wires, condensers, and a small loading coil. Presently he looked up with a nod.

"We'll give her a try and see what happens."

"Stand over there in front of the helix," Standish said. "I don't think there's any danger. Unless I'm wrong, the thing simply places the patient in an electro magnetic field and transmits an alternating vibration to the human brain."

He played with the dials a long time, twisted a rheostat experimentally.

"Notice anything?"

"Yes, I . . ." The Earth girl's voice died off. A vacant look entered her eyes. "What is your wish?" she asked suddenly.

Standish made a quick adjustment to the controls. "Sit down," he commanded. Obediently, Thalia moved across to a chair and sat stiffly erect.

"You have studied some mathematics," Standish said then. "Tell me, what is the principal of the algebraic curve?"

Without hesitation Thalia replied, "A

curve, the equation of which contains no transcendental quantities; a figure the intercepted diameters of which bear always the same proportion to their respective ordinates."

Standish uttered a low cry of triumph and threw over the reverse lever of the machine. An instant later Thalia stared at him in bewilderment.

"What happened?"

"It worked," Standish replied. "With that device and a hundred more like it I will build, I can control every last Sirian prisoner. I can make them help us build an entire fleet, using all their scientific knowledge."

Thalia's eyes glowed. "We'll be fighting them with their own people," she said.

IX

THE electro-hypnosis machines finished, Standish enlisted Ga-Marr's aid and proceeded to try them on a group of Sirian prisoners.

"After all," the Earthman said, "what we're doing is for the sake of your planet and mine. These prisoners will suffer no ill effect, but by organizing their efforts, we can aid a great cause."

He turned a control knob, and a low hum sounded in the machine. The green liquid in the globe began to bubble, and a column of mist climbed upward through the connecting tube.

Improved as they were by Standish, the machines immediately placed the Sirians in a mental state where they were receptive to all commands. Yet they retained full control of their mental faculties.

The work began. Frameworks for twenty space destroyers were laid. Like automatons the Sirians toiled, worked side by side with the men of Lyra. The twenty hulls were completed, and the atomic motors were being installed when Standish called Ga-Marr aside.

"I'm going to leave you in charge," the Earthman said, "while I take the *Phantom* out again. The more prisoners, the quicker we'll have a fleet. Besides the Sirians will have grown careless again by now."

This time, however, Standish steadfastly refused to take Thalia along.

"I'm going to skirt the very stratosphere of Earth," he told her, "and it'll be too dangerous. But I'll be back soon."

Thalia pouted, but Standish was firm.

With another Lyrian, Dar-ley, as his lieutenant, Standish took off. He headed at full speed for the interplanetary lane between Sirius and Earth. As he went on, suspicion assailed him. Not a single Sirian ship did he see. Once a slow-moving freighter from far off Protorus crossed his path. The freighter clapped on all speed in a frantic attempt to escape. But Standish viewed it without interest.

He was drawing close to Earth. Alert, Standish kept the moon between him and his home planet, advancing cautiously. But there was no sign of trouble. The spaceways were empty.

Now the cold expanse of the moon opened before him. The *Phantom* soared over Tycho, Aristotle and Petavius, dipped downward and came to a rest on a barren lava plain. Standish took down a space suit, and a small magno telescope and went out through the air lock. Pacing slowly across the frigid flat, he tried to fathom the growing puzzle.

A hundred yards from the ship he trained his scope on Earth, staring long and intently. But the range was too great and the scope too weak for detailed observation.

And then abruptly he stiffened. Through the powerful retinite lens a tiny dot focused his vision. A rocket ship! He adjusted the glass and studied her lines. Unquestionably she was Sirian and heading toward the moon on an oblique angle. Standish ran for the *Phantom*. The air lock closed; he threw over the control lever, and the big ship headed with a lurch for the enemy.

In the pilot cuddy Dar-Ley watched the cosmoscope and intoned the distance measurements.

"Thirty thousand miles. Enemy still following same course."

"Twenty thousand. No change."

"Eight hundred."

A frown crossed Standish's face. The Sirian ship must have seen them by now. Alone and without convoy, it should have turned and fled.

Puzzled, the Earthman ordered a shot across the enemy's bows. The Sirian

did not change her course. And then Dar-Ley gave a frantic cry.

"Behind us. Look!"

SIX Sirian ships were racing out from the surface of the moon in battle formation. Even as Standish looked, he saw four more cruisers join the others, spread out to cut off the *Phantom*.

He realized then that he had blundered into a trap. The Sirians had been waiting for him. The single cruiser had been the bait which he had swallowed blindly.

"We'll have to run for it," Dar-Ley cried. They're too many for us."

Standish's teeth came together grimly. "We'll give them a fight for their money first."

On toward the cruiser the *Phantom* raced. The ship staggered as the Sirian opened fire, and two of the shots glanced harmlessly off the *feloranium* hull. But with five well-placed shots Standish demolished the Sirian's guns and left her floating helplessly. Then the *Phantom* turned helm and ran alongside on the opposite side of the cruiser.

In an instant Dar-Ley saw Standish's strategy. The *Phantom* was now protected with the cruiser between her and the fleet. The Earthman flipped open his microphone switch.

"Rocket bomb. Full charge. Point four."

There was a deafening report as the bomb erupted from its cylinder. Through the port Standish saw the nearest Sirian ship explode into fragments. He smiled grimly and swung his helm far over.

"Here we go, Dar-Ley. If they catch us, they'll have to move."

But fast though the *Phantom* was, the fleet hung steadily in her wake. Finally the Earthman switched on the boosters, auxiliary machines which drew power from intra-spacial emanations and built up the speed of the atomic motors. Gradually the fleet dropped behind.

"Close call!" Standish breathed. "Faggard almost got me that time."

X

STANDISH had never believed in hunches, yet the moment he entered the stratosphere of Lyra he knew some-

thing was wrong. A moment later he was free of the cloud level and over Calthetra. A wave of despair shot through him.

The city was a ruin. Not a single building remained. The great palace was a mass of debris, and the choked streets were deserted. With a great fear he headed the *Phantom* for the landing field. Here a cry of dismay escaped his lips.

The sleek space ships which had dotted the level were no more. Twisted lumps of metal and scattered pieces of broken machinery were all that remained of the fleet.

"In heaven's name," cried Dar-Ley, "what has happened?"

"Drum Faggard," said Standish heavily. "He attacked while we were gone. It must have been only his lieutenants we met off the moon."

The *Phantom* dropped to a landing, and the two men climbed out, followed by the crew. A death-like silence reigned. As he stood there staring at the grim devastation, the Earthman's fists clenched. The Lyrians, the prisoners, the Emperor . . . had they all gone?"

And then he thought of Thalia!

He lurched into a stumbling run and headed for the ruined city. In the metropolis the destruction was even more terrible. Ray guns had leveled every structure to the ground. Dead Lyrians lay on all sides. Every labor-saving device which had been constructed through Standish's efforts had been shattered.

But an instant later, in the midst of this wreckage, he saw a familiar figure stagger toward him. Ga-Marr!

The Emperor's son's face was caked with blood and his clothing was torn to shreds, but he managed to gasp a single word:

"Water. . . !"

Standish dispatched Dar-Ley back to the *Phantom* for a canteen, then tore off his coat and rolled it into a pillow, forcing Ga-Marr to rest his head upon it. But when the Lyrian struggled up on one elbow and drank thirstily from Dar-Ley's canteen, Standish choked out the question that was uppermost in his mind.

"Thalia! Where is she?"

Ga-Marr's voice was a sob. "Drum Faggard! He surprised us with an en-

tire fleet while you were gone. He kidnaped my father, and he took Thalia."

A blur rose up before Standish's eyes. "And the others?" he demanded. "The rest of your people? Can it be they all are dead?"

Ga-Marr shook his head. "They fled to the hills. I alone remained here because I knew you would return."

It was time, Standish realized, for action. But what action? His fleet was gone, all his work destroyed. Even the girl he had come to love had been taken from him. He turned and stared helplessly at the black hulled *Phantom* resting on its mooring platform. Powerful as that ship was, he knew it was not enough. He might raid more Sirian ships, destroy more transports, but what would it avail him. He had played his hand, and he had lost. He was up against a blank wall.

AND then a single object on the far side of the palace ruins focused in his vision. Stone and debris were piled high there, but the little, crudely-built space ship with which he and Ga-Marr had escaped from the unknown planet had escaped damage. For a moment Standish's brow furrowed in thought; then he uttered an exclamation.

"To the *Phantom!*" he said. "There may yet be a way. . . ."

With Ga-Marr supported by Standish, they hurried down the debris-choked streets and across to the landing field. Reaching the ship, the Earthman turned his crew of twenty-four over to Dar-Ley, ordering them to leave at once for the hills where they were to aid the Lyrians.

"But what are you going to do without a crew?" objected Dar-Ley.

Standish's face was a block of granite. "I'm going to fight trickery with trickery," he said.

Then the Earthman and Ga-Marr entered the destroyer alone. Slowly, Standish guided the big ship over the ruins of the city of Caltheda. Above the palace, he suddenly shot out the magnetic grappling bars and secured the little space ship.

"What can you do with that?" Ga-Marr frowned. "The thing has little power and. . . ."

But Standish, lips set hard, was moving the controls with silent determination. Up the *Phantom* shot, boring forward like a hound to the hunt, carrying the crude little ship with it. Standish threw over the accelerator to the farthest notch and switched on both boosters. He motioned Ga-Marr into the control seat.

"Head directly for Earth. I'm going back and see if I can get a little more speed out of those motors."

Hour after hour the big ship plunged, rocketing madly across the star-filled heavens. Time and space were dropping behind them like falling grains of sand. Standish, returning from the motor chamber, saw the planes of Pluto and Uranus rise up far ahead. Then Earth came into sight, a pin-point almost at the limit of his vision.

The Earthman glanced at the chronometer on the instrument panel. It would be approximately midnight when they reached the North American continent, judging by their present speed. Unless the Sirians at their Frisco base were watching closely, they might be able to pass unobserved.

Earth grew. Now the *Phantom* was zooming down through the stratosphere. Over New California they swept, checking trajectory by reversing motors.

Over Omaha, Standish looked through the floor plate. Were the front-line breastworks still here? Or had his people been forced to retreat farther toward the Atlantic seaboard?

"I see lights," Ga-Marr said abruptly. "There seem to be fortifications below us."

With a sigh of relief Standish guided the *Phantom* downward. He was at home again.

XI

OFFICERS and soldiers formed a cheering circle as he climbed out of the hatch, followed by Ga-Marr. Old companions rushed forward to shake the Earthman's hand and bombard him with questions. Smiling, Standish pushed his way through the throng to the building marked GHQ. An orderly ushered him inside, and a moment later he was facing Attack-Engineer McClellan whose eyes were wide with amazement.

"Listen," Standish began without preamble, "I want to see a detailed map and an aerial photograph of the Sirian's Frisco base. Have you got one?"

McClellan bit into his cigar and nodded. He opened a cabinet and laid out two large sheets.

"The pilot who made these barely got out with his life," he said. "I don't suppose you'd care to tell me where you've been or what you've got in mind, Standish."

Without answering Standish gazed at the maps and the photograph. Presently he looked up.

"Prepare for a big push," he said. "Get all your guns and men ready for immediate movement. And keep your observers watching this point, Sector Five"—he indicated the area with his forefinger— "As soon as the firing stops there, go through."

He turned then and ran back to the ship.

Straight into the stratosphere Standish guided the ship. As he continued to climb higher into the night sky, Ga-Marr watched puzzled, but made no comment. One thousand, two, three thousand miles slid behind them. At length the Earthman turned.

"Set off the emergency rocket flares," he ordered.

Ga-Marr stared. "Are you mad, Mason? The Sirians will see us and. . ."

"Which is just what I want," Standish replied. "Hurry, man!"

Obediently Ga-Marr strode back along the passageway, began to push contact buttons at regular intervals along the bulkhead wall. As he did, long streamers of crimson fire erupted from the *Phantom's* side. In a moment the destroyer was a flaming mass. Standish set his controls and took down two space suits.

He donned one of them, motioned Ga-Marr into the other. Then he tied a rope to the lever controlling the magnetic grappling bar, trailing it across the floor to the air-lock.

"All right, Ga-Marr," he said. "Here we go."

The lock door slid open at his touch. Then and not until then did Ga-Marr understand. Directly below them, held to the *Phantom's* hull by the magnetic bars was their crude space ship. Balancing himself cautiously, Standish reached down and opened the hatch. He climbed in,

and Ga-Marr quickly followed. Then the Earthman gave the rope a jerk. The grappling bars released, and the two ships drifted apart.

Alone and unmanned, the *Phantom* swept downward, her exploding rockets a blaze of glory in the black sky.

"And there goes the fleet!" Standish said. "They've sighted the *Phantom*."

AWARE that hundreds of glasses must now be turned upward, he headed south beyond the outskirts of the city. He selected a flat open space by the ocean shore and glided quickly to a landing.

A hundred yards away the white expanse of a highway snaked through the dark countryside. No one apparently had noticed their descent. At a run, Standish headed for that highway. Twin head lights swept around a curve as he reached it, and a heavy gyro truck rumbled into sight.

The truck slowed to manipulate the curve. An instant later Standish and Ga-Marr leaped, clutched at the swaying tailboard and drew themselves aboard.

Before a large white building the two men dropped from the truck, darted across to the entrance. A Sirian guard stopped them armed with a ray gun.

"Halt!"

Standish used his pistol this time, smashing its barrel down on the Sirian's skull. Then a muffled voice sounded directly before them, and the Earthman leaped across to a door and ripped it open. On the threshold he stood rigid, staring inward.

The room was a richly furnished office. At a large desk in the center sat a familiar figure. It was Drum Faggard, cigarette between his lips, microphone in his hand.

"Put down that microphone, Faggard," Standish commanded. "If you speak so much as a single word, I fire."

"Standish!" Faggard gasped.

The Earthman dropped silently into a chair, while Ga-Marr pulled a small knife switch, disconnecting the microphone. Ga-Marr then paced to the window and drew the blinds.

A gleam of cunning crossed Faggard's face. He turned the knob of the radio and leaned forward. Then his right hand shot into the desk drawer and clawed forth a small genithode gun.

But Standish had been expecting that move. His hand clamped over the gun wrist, twisted the weapon free. Jamming his own gun hard into the Sirian leader's ribs, Standish said,

"Talk. Call your officers and tell them to stand by for important orders."

There were beads of perspiration on Faggard's brow now as he twisted a dial of the radio and began to speak slowly and haltingly. On the indicator panel on the far wall Standish saw little red lights flash on as outpost-officer after officer acknowledged the call. The entire Sirian army was listening in.

EVEN as he finished, a terrific vibrating roar sounded from a distant point of the city. The sound trembled the walls of the building, shook the floor beneath their feet.

"The *Phantom!*" said Ga-Marr. "She struck!"

Faggard's face was livid. "You fool!" he snarled. "Do you realize what you've done?"

Standish betrayed no emotion. "Perfectly. I've divided your army in half. I've cut an aisle through your defense, through which my people even now are beginning to advance."

Abruptly the Earthman's teeth clicked together. "Now what have you done with Thalia and the Emperor. Tell me or . . ."

Faggard's shoulders slumped in defeat. He groped to his feet like a blind man and stumbled across the room. "I'll show you," he said huskily.

He open a connecting door, and Standish saw two familiar figures in the adjoining room, an older man and a young girl. But in that instant Faggard acted. He lunged

across the room, reached up to a shelf filled with chemical tubes and vials. Seizing a bottle of colorless liquid, he threw it straight at Standish.

The bottle struck the door frame, and acid geysered in all directions. The Earthman felt a hot stab of agony lance across his left arm.

But Ga-Marr was not taken off guard. His genithode pistol exploded even as Faggard reached for a second bottle. The Sirian threw up his arms, staggered and pitched forward on his face.

Thalia was in Standish's arms then, sobbing. But in the outer corridor running steps sounded. A heavy fist banged on the door.

"In here," the girl cried. "This door. It leads to a tunnel that passes under the city. It's Drum Faggard's secret avenue of retreat. He has the key in his pocket."

As they sped to safety Standish felt a wave of elation sweep over him. He had won . . . !

THREE days later a small cruiser took off from Omaha, swept through the stratosphere and headed for the planet, Lyra, many light years distant. Four persons occupied her pilot cabin: Standish, Thalia, Ga-Marr and the emperor.

"It's all over," the Earthman said to the girl. "The war is ended. Sirius' power is forever broken, and even now the work of reconstruction has begun. Earth and the whole solar system can return to peace."

Ga-Marr nodded. "What now?" he asked.

"Now, we're going home." Standish drew Thalia close. "Your home and mine. Our future lies out there in the new frontier."



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