

# PLANET STORIES



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# Crash Beam

By **JOHN BARRET**

Dan Kearns, sick and shaking, could already hear them talk: "Yeah, come in on the Kearns beam—it's a new way to die!"

**I**T happened so fast that for a minute he just stood there absolutely incapable to taking it in. One instant the big Earth-Venus rocket freighter was sizzling through the fog to a perfect landing on the field below. Then suddenly she dipped, undershot the field and vanished in a flash and a thundering explosion that shook the observation tower.

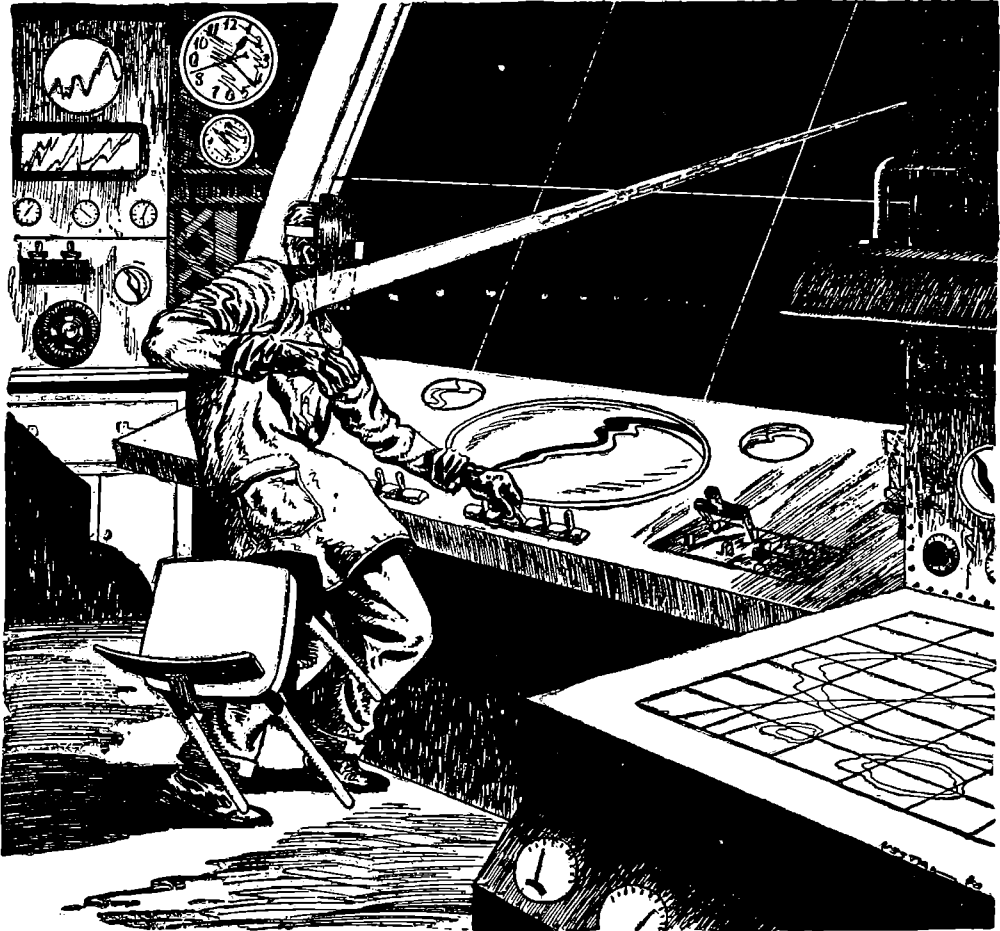
In the dream-like quiet that followed, Dan Kearns heard the faint yells of the landing crew. He saw the big searchlights switch on, cutting wide swaths of light through the boiling fog. Tiny white-coated

medics crossed the patches of light, running frantically. Dan sat down in the chair feeling sick and very tired. Then the door of the tower room opened and Rawlins, the supervisor, stepped in.

"All right, Kearns," he said curtly, "you're through. And if anyone asks me about your ability as an electronics engineer, I'll write out the blackest recommendation I can think of."

Dan got up slowly. "How many were killed?"

"Two!" Rawlins glared. "Two of my best pilots!"



*Suddenly . . . a beam of purple light!*

Dan's shoulders stiffened. "Listen, Rawlins, I'm just as interested as you in breaking Roehm's monopoly on Earth-Venus rockets."

"Get out!"

"I can't get out. Don't forget you have another rocket due in twenty minutes—a passenger rocket."

Rawlins' face went pale. "My God! I'd forgotten." He threw up his hands. "Turn 'em back," he shrieked. "Send 'em back to earth! It's suicide to land on that guide beam."

"I can't send them back to Earth," Dan said quietly. "They haven't enough fuel."

"Then send 'em to one of Roehm's field. It's an admission of complete defeat, but we can't kill 'em."

Dan swallowed. "You're forgetting that Roehm uses invisible light for landing—not ultra short waves. Anyway, do you think Roehm would miss such a chance to crash one of our rockets?"

Rawlins sat down with a groan. "Where in thunder did I ever get the idea we could bring in a ship through that magnetic murk on ultra short waves?"

Dan lifted his head. "There's nothing the matter with my guide beam. It brought in the experimental rocket yesterday and magnetic conditions were even worse."

"I see." The smile on Rawlins' lined face was cynical. "In other words you're trying to pass the buck to Stevens, your control room operator."

The door of the observation room swung open and a wild-eyed mechanic burst in.

"Mr. Rawlins, the control room is still locked. Stevens is sitting in front of the table and he won't answer us."

DAN tore down the stairs and across the catwalk two steps ahead of Rawlins. He hammered on the door. Through the thick glass he could see Stevens hunched over the lighted control table.

"Stevens! Stevens!" He turned to Rawlins. "We'll have to cut the lock. Get a torch—and get a doctor!"

It took a minute with a high torch before they crashed into the room.

"He's been dead several minutes," the doctor said as he took his hand from Steven's forehead.

"I'm sorry, Kearns," Rawlins said. He looked at the doctor. "Well, I guess that

explains everything. He must have lost control just as she was coming in. What was it? Heart attack?"

The doctor shook his head. "Some sort of convulsion. Muscles violently contracted. Funny he didn't fall to the floor. Must have affected the whole nervous system. Even the eye pupils are down to pin points." He looked around at Rawlins. "I may be sticking my neck out, sir, but off hand I'd say Stevens was killed."

"Killed?" Rawlins blinked at the form in the chair. "But that's impossible. The door was locked. The room hasn't been disturbed and there aren't any holes in the glass. Nothing could get in here except light."

Dan walked to the big windows. He examined the ledge and the joints. He came back to the control table and tested the switches. Suddenly he leaned over Stevens' huddled body and pulled the log book from under his stiff fingers.

"Look at this!"

Scrawled across the pad in big jerky letters were the words "*Purple light beam . . .*" The pencil had torn through the sheet in a violent final contraction.

Rawlins rubbed his chin. "We don't use any purple beams. It doesn't make sense."

"Maybe it does," Dan said. He turned to the doctor. "Wasn't there some experiments made by a Dr. Aren Linden several years ago on the injurious effect of certain kinds of light on the nervous system?"

The doctor frowned. "Yes, I think there was, but the experiments were never completed."

"That's right. The foundation refused to up his salary, so he went to work for Roehm." Dan swung around to Rawlins. "It was Linden who helped work out the invisible light landing system that Roehm uses on his Venus rocket ports."

"Seems to me you're jumping to some pretty wild conclusions, Kearns," Rawlins said slowly.

Dan looked at him. "Suppose Linden has found the exact wave-length of the most potent ray. It would be simple for anyone to climb the framework of one of the buildings and shine that light in here."

Rawlins straightened up. "I'll search every tower on the field."

"But you haven't time. That passenger

rocket will be here in five minutes."

The supervisor sucked in his breath. "What's your idea?"

"I'll sit at the control table myself. You can do the preliminary locating in the observation tower." He ran to the door. "Where's the welder that cut the lock?"

**T**HE DOCTOR and a medic were carrying out Stevens when he came back a few seconds later. Dan was slipping on the welder's helmet.

"Keep everyone away from the control-room level," he said to Rawlins. "And you better have the crash trucks and the flame quenchers standing by on the field."

Rawlins stared at him. "And what happens to you?"

Dan licked his lips. "I—I don't know. I'm going to try something."

Rawlins smiled. He reached out his hand. "Good luck, Dan," he said. He clapped him on the shoulder.

When they were gone, Dan dropped the helmet over his face. He walked slowly across the room with his hands in front of him like a blind man. Finally he lifted up across the room with his hands in front of the helmet and knocked out the dark glass in the eye slot. Then he slipped it back on. From one of the drawers in a small desk beside the control table he lifted out a small rectangular object and slipped it in his pocket. He seated himself before the control table.

The dials on the edge of the table glowed dimly. In the center of the flat top was a large circular graph with white lines that pulsed like a network of capillaries. He looked across the table through the big window. Everything except one nearby tower was hidden in swirling mists.

The speaker at his side clicked on. He heard Rawlins' voice. "I picked 'em up Dan. They're coming in at minimum speed—seventy point two nine five degrees. I didn't mention the freighter."

Dan flicked a small switch on the table edge. A straight white line of light shot out across the graph, then swung slowly back and forth through an arc of ten degrees like a searching feeler. Suddenly it steadied and an orange bead appeared at its terminus. Dan watched the bead travel down the line, across the pulsing capillaries. He reached out and grasped a small

lever sticking out of the table top. As he pressed the lever to one side, the line moved around the graph like a pointer, carrying the orange bead with it. He watched it till the bead reached the center of the graph, and then glanced up through the window. Above the far end of the field he could discern the dim orange glow of a rocket's keel jets.

Suddenly he jerked back his head. A beam of purple light was playing back and forth across the table. It swept over his gloved hands, across his arms and chest, and moved upward toward his face. He jumped up, keeping hold of the lever and studied the angle of the small beam. The reflection on the dark cloth of his jacket was making him dizzy. He reached into his pocket. . . .

From the observation tower Rawlins watched the rocket sweep toward the field with keel jets blazing. As it reached the strip it seemed to falter and dip. Rawlins clenched his hands and swore. Then it steadied and slid in to a perfect landing.

The intercommunication telaudio flashed on. He saw Dan Kearns' haggard face under the uplifted welder's helmet.

"Rawlins. The roof on tower three. Check it right away. I think . . ." Kearns' body abruptly went rigid; he fell across the control room table.

**D**AN KEARNS came to on the floor of the control room with the doctor working over him.

"How do you feel?" the doctor asked.

"Like I've been sitting in an electric chair."

"You'll be all right," the doctor said. "Compared to Stevens you got a mild dose."

Dan looked around him. He saw Rawlins' boots and glanced upward. "Did you check the tower?"

"Yep, we found him—dead. Just like Stevens. He was one of Roehm's men all right. He had a flashlight. We tried it on one of the doc's white rats." Rawlins shook his head. "Stevens must have gone through hell." Suddenly he stared down at Dan. "But how . . .?"

Dan smiled. He lifted up his gloved hand. In it was a small rectangular signaling mirror.

"I reflected it right back at him."