

The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

DAVID WRIGHT O'BRIEN and Robert Moore Williams engaged in a duel in this issue, both having long stories which have your editor guessing as to which will win the nod as "best" from you readers. Confidentially, if you can definitely pick one or the other, you are sticking your neck out further than we are willing to!



Creegar pushed frantically at the heavy door as the tube-car hurtled toward him.



DARES TO DIE

by **DAVID WRIGHT O'BRIEN**

Death meant nothing to Creegar when he came out of prison. He had something to do, and he did it!

CREEGAR felt the cold wind on his face as he stepped across the threshold of the great doors and stood at last outside.

Five years ago he might have wept.

Five years ago he might reasonably have buried his head in his hands and sobbed forth the torrents of bewildered bitterness that welled inside him.

But now, save for a slight squinting against the whipping blasts of cold, there was no trace of emotion in the bitter, gray young face. There was no

kindling of any spark behind those coal black eyes. No expression of any sort in that tightly set young jaw.

One of the guards, gray faced and bulky in a drab blue tunic, nervously touched the holstered atomic pistol hanging at his side and shuffled closer to a companion to whisper something the wind carried to Creegar's ears.

"A bad one, that youngster. He'll break his exile and soon be back here to die. I'll lay you odds."

Not even in Creegar's coal black eyes was there any indication that he had heard. Instead he buried his toil calloused hands deep into the pockets of his coarse gray tunic and spread his feet a little as he stood there waiting

for them to bring his stake.

An orderly from the warden appeared beside him a moment later.

"Creegar?" the orderly asked.

It was the first time Thorne Creegar had heard his name spoken in five years. And for a flickering instant he felt as though a choking lump in his throat would betray him. Then the emotion that had almost rocked him from his shell of granite vanished.

"Yes," Creegar said tonelessly.

"This belongs to you," the orderly said briefly. "Good luck and goodbye." He placed a rough, bulky duffle bag in Creegar's arms and turned away.

His stake. Regulations back inside those bleak gray walls provided that every convict released from the interplanetary penal bases was entitled to a stake on discharge. An extra set of cheap tunic clothing, a personal kit, enough money to take him off the penal planet and keep him drunk for several weeks after that.

The guards were moving back to their stations before the doors. Creegar



Creegar started down the rocky hill

felt their eyes watching him. He turned for an instant, staring full at the gaunt, gray walls that had held him from the

rest of the world those five terrible years.

Hatred, hard and scorching, flamed into his coal black eyes for an instant. Then it was gone, and Creegar, throwing his duffle bag over his shoulder, turned away and started down the rocky hill that led to the dirty space wharfs a mile below—

IN THE large, luxuriously furnished drawing room of the magnificent seashore residence, a girl stood before the huge, wall-sized window that looked over the vast blue expanse of tranquil ocean.

She was a slim girl, with raven hair that fell straight to her soft shoulders, delicate, beautiful features, and luminous hazel eyes. She wore a tunic gown of a soft, saffron, slightly metallic fabric.

Utterly motionless, she stood there, staring out at the ocean below her unseeingly, her mind a million miles away.

Apparently she didn't hear the door open behind her at the other end of the room. And it wasn't until the massive red faced, gray haired man stepped across the threshold into the room and closed the door behind him that she was aware of his intrusion.

And then she turned, slowly.

The massive, red faced intruder smiled, teeth very white, and started toward her, walking with the swift agility of a jungle cat for all his tremendous size.

"Are you still being silly about him, Sherry?" the man asked. Beneath the pleasant basso of his heavy voice there was an iron controlled rage.

"You haven't lied to me, Judson? He will be released today?" the girl called Sherry asked. Her voice was like her beauty, warm, rich and honest.

The man she called Judson stood

before her now, still smiling. He placed his big hands on her shoulders.

"I didn't go back on our bargain, Sherry. I told you I wouldn't," he answered.

The girl seemed to tremble slightly, shudderingly, beneath the large hands on her shoulders.

"And there's no one waiting for him as he leaves today," Sherry said dully.

"But he's free," Judson's voice broke in, the tinge of anger growing.

"Yes, he's free, poor Thorne. Free and alone, and filled with bitterness," Sherry said.

"The bargain has been carried through on my part, Sherry," the massive Judson reminded her. "Now we'll make the arrangements for our wedding. Forget Thorne Creegar. Forget him forever, do you hear?"

"I'll never forget Thorne," Sherry said. "That wasn't part of the bargain, Judson. I'll marry you, but I told you before that I'll never forget Thorne."

Judson's hands tightened on her shoulders for an instant before he took them away. He stood back. The grip of his powerful fingers had left white marks on Sherry's shoulders that were now turning red.

"I understood all that. We covered that ground before," he declared! "But you'd be wiser, for your own peace of mind, to make the best of our bargain."

Sherry's small hands tightened into fists, her nails biting into her palms.

"I'm making the best of it, Judson. Thorne is free, at least. That's what I wanted. Don't worry about my part of the bargain. I'll see it through. Within ten days I'll be Mrs. Judson Bellham." She was fighting back tears. Her lower lip trembled over the last few words.

Judson Bellham smiled unpleasantly. "That's correct, Sherry. You'll see it

through, and I'll spend my life making you forget him. I promise you that much."

The girl turned her head away.

"Please," she said softly, "please go now, Judson. I, I don't feel as if I can talk about it any more at present. I—" Bellham's voice was hard. "Very well, Sherry. I'll leave if you wish. But Thorne Creegar was, and is, a killer. The Court of Justice proved that much. It was only for your sake that I used my influence to have him released earlier than he should have been."

Sherry's voice was shaken, anguished. "The Court of Justice found him guilty, I know that. But he is innocent, Judson. I am sure of it. I, I, would stake my life on it. But for what you've done, I'll try to make you a good wife, if that's what you wish."

JUDSON BELLHAM'S voice went silken. "Sherry, you'll understand eventually. I can make you forget him. I *will* make you forget him. As my wife, legally, there will be more I can do to help you. More I can do to wipe out your unfortunate memory of Creegar. I'm not a fool, Sherry. I know that you are marrying me only because it was part of the bargain I arranged in return for my aiding Thorne Creegar. Perhaps I played my cards bluntly, even harshly, Sherry. But I'm a hard man. I know only one kind of game when I'm after a prize. But all I want is the chance to prove, as your husband, that I can bring happiness back to you, that I can erase the blot that Creegar left on your life."

Sherry looked at him dully, making no attempt to conceal the tears that dimmed her hazel eyes.

"You'll understand some day," Judson Bellham concluded. "I know you will."

"But he's so alone, so completely alone," Sherry said faintly, unheard.

Judson Bellham fought back a sudden surge of red rage. With difficulty he kept his mouth smiling.

"I'll see you at dinner, Sherry," he said. He turned then, and swiftly strode to the door.

Sherry still stood there motionless until the door closed behind Judson Bellham. Then softly, aching, she began to sob . . .

THE fat, blue jowled Venusian space cargo ship captain, stood in the inspection office at *Balhaka*,* rolling a rank cigar around in his puffy lips.

The customs inspector of *Balhaka*, who sat behind the desk the captain faced, was small, lean, bald and firmly crisp in his manner.

"I am very sorry, captain," he declared. "You cannot discharge any penal exiles in our port. Those are orders."

"But I did not know that when he took passage at his penal planet," the Venusian captain protested. "He is only one man, after all. Here at *Balhaka* he will perhaps be able to obtain employment in your duralloy mines. I cannot keep him aboard my ship forever!"

The customs inspector shook his head with crisp finality. "There are other planetary outposts where you may drop him. But *Balhaka* is restricted against his kind. He is no more welcome here than he would be at Earth."

"But what am I to do with him?" the Venusian space freighter captain protested.

The customs inspector shrugged. "He has been discharged from a Federation penal planet. All such discharged convicts are thereafter banished from Earth, or any planets under its Federation's direct control for the rest of their lives. Take him anywhere else, captain, but Earth and the Federation planets, such as *Balhaka*, want no part of him."

The captain sighed in defeat.

"He was told," the customs inspector stated flatly, "that his return to Earth, or to any Federation territory, will be punished by his immediate return to the penal planet from which he was discharged, or, in extreme cases, in his death."

The captain shrugged, turned, and waddled toward the door. It was going to be increasingly difficult to tell his passenger, the young man with the gaunt gray face, and the bitter, coal black eyes, that he had again been tagged as a pestilence and was unwanted. These Earthmen had stupid systems and laws. Why, if their convicts were thus treated on release, didn't they save themselves time and worry by killing them in the first place? In Venus there would be no such stupidity.

When the Venusian space Skipper returned to his ship, a dirty little space-radio operator handed him a communication slip. On it was a brief, cryptic message.

"Communicate with me immediately in regard additional cargo but recently acquired. Have plan for disposal of same.

J. D. B."

Waddling thoughtfully into the narrow quarters of his dirty stateroom, the Venusian captain arched his very black eyebrows in curious contempla-

* *Balhaka*—A small planetary outpost located on the fringe of the space penal planet belt. A duralloy mining center, operated by Earth Federation, and thus under its immediate jurisdiction.

tion of the message. . . .

CHAPTER II

Bellham Builds a Frame

JUDSON BELLHAM drummed his heavy, well manicured fingers on the shining surface of his *platenoid* desk impatiently. After a minute of this, he reached for the button of the *tela-board* that gleamed at his elbow, and flicked it up.

A girl's face appeared on the suddenly silvered screen of the *tela-board*. Her lips moved.

"Yes, commissioner?"

"How about Hudge, has he come in yet?" Bellham demanded.

"No, commissioner. But the moment that he does, I'll send him in to you," the girl replied. "He said he'd be back at this time."

"Do that," Bellham snapped.

He flicked off the switch below the *tela-board* screen, and the secretary's face faded off. Bellham leaned back in his chair then, and reached for a thick brochure of papers that lay before him on the desk. He picked it up, and idly began to thumb through it.

Electrotyped on the cover of the brochure, was the heading:

"*The Creegar Case*"

The reports in the brochure were lengthy, detailed. But Bellham could have closed his eyes and recited the details by memory. For they were, after all, the implications and webs that he had cunningly evolved and skillfully woven together single-handedly. The snares and situations which he had personally conceived to send Thorne Creegar off to the penal planets.

It had not been an easy job. For as commissioner of law, Bellham himself had been very much in the public eye. He'd had to work with the utmost cau-

tion, the greatest secrecy, to railroad Creegar into the trap he had set for him. And Creegar, as a consular officer serving under Bellham in the Law Commission, had presented a prey exceptionally difficult to stalk.

Thorne Creegar had, for a time, been Bellham's right hand man. The Federation officials had looked on the young consular officer as a man with a brilliant future, great promise. It had taken quite a little while for Bellham to maneuver, ever so subtly, Creegar into duties away from his post as Bellham's sub-lieutenant.

But even as Bellham had cleverly assigned young Creegar to jobs farther and farther afield from him, he had worked skillfully toward his ultimate purpose. And by the time he had finally maneuvered Creegar into precisely the situation he wanted, Bellham had cunningly contrived to keep himself totally out of the proceedings that brought the young consular officer before the Court of Justice.

It had been another consular officer, one Lee Hudge, who had started the investigation of Thorne Creegar's case. And the tipoff that started Hudge in his relentless prosecution had come—even though Hudge himself was unaware of it—from Bellham.

Even in this detail, Bellham had worked with magnificent cunning. For there was no more relentless, thoroughly merciless officer in the Law Commission than Lee Hudge. Hudge was cold, an instrument of steel, brutal and uncompromising. And he held an instinctive hatred for Thorne Creegar.

He had gone after Creegar tooth and nail, disregarding food and sleep until he'd carried through his prosecution of his young fellow consular officer. And as the circumstantial evidence Bellham had so deftly planted against Creegar became more and more apparent to

Lee Hudge, the relentless fury with which he waged his prosecution became more intense.

Hudge had been certain of Creegar's guilt. And this certainty served to give him his first concrete self excuse for his hatred of Creegar. For if there was the recognition of God in the soul of Lee Hudge, that God was Law and Order. It was his very life, his single driving purpose—the service of the God of Justice.

The fact that Hudge had spent his youth in bitter struggle; alone, orphaned at six, and been kicked about the interplanetary wharfs unmercifully during his early years until the time he'd finally joined the Federation Police as a terribly earnest and doggedly determined rookie, was part of the background that had forged him into the uncompromising slave of justice that he now was.

AND his same early years of pain and privation, struggle and near starvation, had been additionally instrumental in forging the instinctive hatred he held for Thorne Creegar. For Creegar had been the product of a wealthy environment, an exclusive university. Creegar's youth and his had been at exactly opposite poles.

Thorne Creegar had been appointed to the post of consular officer in the Law Commission on his graduation from the exclusive university. Lee Hudge, on the other hand, had served with the Federation Law Commission for fifteen years, starting at the very bottom as a private in the Space Police Forces. He had fought and bled and lived for the day when he finally won his promotion to consular officer.

And Creegar, though brilliantly deserving of his post, had stirred an instinctive and deep-rooted hatred in Lee Hudge's steel heart by so easily attain-

ing all that Hudge had been forced to battle for.

THERE were other reasons, too, Bellham reflected, for Hudge's hatred of Creegar. Hudge, of course, served justice and the Law Commission like a slave. It was a vital part of his very being. Justice was the one tangible element he could cling to in a life that had been brutally marked by the world's injustice to the child, Lee Hudge. Justice, cold, hard, unyielding, had been his master. And the fact that Creegar served this same master with such brilliant ease and at the same time could maintain another rich and social life, was more than Hudge could understand. This lack of understanding welled into bitterness.

Bellham put the brochure back on the desk, still smiling as he recalled Lee Hudge's cold, almost insatiate fury when he began to suspect that Thorne Creegar was not serving his god justice honorably.

That Thorne Creegar could be guilty of besmirching the mantle of justice, the mantle Hudge wore with fanatic worship, made Hudge's prosecution of the case Bellham had framed around Creegar even more relentlessly bitter. And this wrathful vengeance further served Bellham's purpose in that it kept the chance of Hudge's ever suspecting the case as a frame-up as negligible. For Hudge was an excellent hound of the law, and if he hadn't been quite so fanatical in his pursuit of Creegar, he might possibly have scented trickery and fraud even in the cunningly planted circumstantial evidence Bellham had woven around his prey.

And Hudge had never once had an inkling that he was prosecuting an innocent man. In the bitterness and cold steel of his uncompromising mind and heart, Lee Hudge had never doubted

that the tangled web of evidence leading to Creegar's imprisonment was anything but genuine.

Thinking back on that prosecution, Bellham felt smug satisfaction in the realization of how perfectly he had trapped Thorne Creegar.

Bellham still smiled as he recalled his own feigned shock, horror, and amazement when Lee Hudge had come to him to demand a prosecution of Creegar. Bellham had even called Creegar in, after he had been held for trial, to talk to him.

"But I want to help you, Thorne," Bellham had told the bewilderedly defiant Creegar. "I can't believe that you are guilty, completely. There must have been extenuating circumstances to explain your actions. Tell them to me, Thorne, and I'll do my very best for you."

Bellham had appeared at the Court of Justice to speak in Thorne Creegar's behalf. Deliberately, he had let his testimony be brought around to matters which, reluctantly, he had to admit served only to be all the more damning to young Creegar.

Lee Hudge, never more effective in prosecuting a case before his beloved Court of Justice, had demanded the ultimate penalty for Thorne Creegar's crimes.

He had almost been given his request. Almost, that is, until Judson Bellham reappeared dramatically to plead for some slight leniency for Creegar. That plea, plus the fact that Bellham had involved Creegar only deeply enough to suit his purposes, saved his young ex-consular officer's life. It cut the penal planet sentence which Thorne Creegar was given to ten years, and a lifetime exile when the sentence was served.

No one who witnessed or heard of that dramatic plea failed to be im-

pressed. Bellham, to the very hilt of his treacherous stab, had enacted his role excellently.

Even Sherry Bennet had been impressed and tearfully grateful.

Sherry and Thorne were to have been married shortly after the trap was sprung on Creegar.

And Bellham's perfidy had, just as he'd intended it would, torn those plans of marriage asunder. For Bellham wanted Sherry himself. Wanted her badly enough to have engaged in the treacherous betrayal he conceived. For nothing had ever blocked Bellham's way to what he wanted for long. And it was merely unfortunate for Thorne Creegar that he happened to be standing in the way of Bellham's ruthless desire to have Sherry Bennet.

Thorne Creegar had been grim lipped, white faced, and stunned. Sherry had been sobbingly inconsolable, then dully anguished. Bellham expected that. He had foreseen the results of his scheme, and had counted heavily on time playing into his hands. Time with Creegar behind the grim gray walls of a penal planet. Time with Sherry to console. Time, five years of it, to begin to build the impression that he was at last convinced of Creegar's guilt, and that it was no more than his duty to convince Sherry that she must forget the young man who had been torn from her.

Here his plans had not materialized as well as he had expected.

He had driven Thorne Creegar from his path, but he couldn't remove the faith for him which Sherry Bennet held in her heart.

Few men ever survived ten years on a penal planet. A young man like Thorne Creegar might live through six, seven, even eight. Most of the few who emerged from the grim silence of those walls had left sanity behind them.

Sherry Bennet was willing to do anything for Thorne's release. Willing, even, to promise to try to forget him, and to pledge her hand in marriage to Judson Bellham.

And with that pledge, Bellham had again pulled wires, manipulating the release, after five years, of Thorne Creegar.

BELLHAM'S reflections were suddenly jarred by the buzzing of the *telaboard* on his desk. He leaned forward and snapped the switch below its screen panel.

His secretary's face appeared on the silver screen.

"Consular Officer Lee Hudge has come in, Commissioner," she declared.

Judson Bellham nodded in satisfaction.

"Fine, send him into me immediately."

He snapped off the switch and the face faded from the screen. He picked up the brochure on the desk and leaned back in his Venusian red leather chair.

Thorne Creegar was free again, and even though he was forever condemned to exile, Bellham was going to take care of him for once and for all. He was putting Hudge back on Creegar's trail. . . .

CHAPTER III

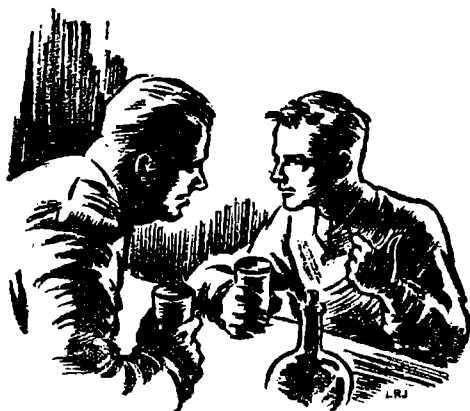
Building a Snare

IN THE smoky quarters of the captain's cabin aboard the tramp Venusian space freighter, two men faced one another across a makeshift table of *duralloy* planking.

One sat on a scarred and battered bunk, and he was fat, blue jowled, and wearing a dirty uniform tunic indicating his position as master of the void vessel.

He was the Venusian captain who had faced the Customs Inspector at *Balhaka* some seven hours previously.

The other, considerably younger and very much leaner, wore a rough gray tunic. He sat on a weatherbeaten stool of platenoid composition, firmly bolted into the floor. His face was grim and unsmiling, his eyes coal black and burning with hard bitterness.



"I've taken a fancy to you, boy."

A bottle of cheap Venusian rum lay on the *duralloy* plank between them. It was a round bottle, and squatted toad-like between the two half-filled glasses on either side of it.

"Look, boy," said the Venusian captain, "I've taken enough fancy to you to know that I wouldn't like to see you dead. You can't try to jump ship and slip onto Earth Federation without getting a death ray through your hard young head. You're foolish to want to try."

Thorne Creegar shook his head grimly.

"I'm going back," he said flatly. "All hell can't keep me away."

The Venusian captain shrugged. "You should know what you want to do with your hide. It belongs to you, of course. But I'd advise you to stick here aboard my space-going refuge until we hit Venusian territory. You'll

have a chance there."

Thorne Creegar shook his head again, and in the smoky light of the small cabin, the line of his clean young jaw went hard.

"I've got a score to settle on Earth," he declared stubbornly. "I'm going back there. Your planetary packet is putting in at the Western Hemisphere Second Base in another two days. Just give me a chance to slip over the side at nightfall, that's all I ask."

The Venusian captain said nothing. He reached for the squat round bottle of his planet's celebrated rum and filled both glasses to the brim. He put the bottle down, and picked up his own glass.

He looked curiously over the brim of the glass at Creegar.

"You don't give up very easily," he said.

"You can get up a lot of willpower in five years of a penal hell," Creegar replied. "Here's to the hell I left behind me." He lifted his own glass. "It gave me nothing, if not time to do a lot of thinking."

The Venusian captain clinked his glass against Creegar's.

"You Earthmen," he said, "think too hard, too long, about things. That's the trouble with you all."

Silently, the two drained their glasses. The captain put his back on the duralloy plank with a metallic thump. He wiped a dirty uniform tunic sleeve across his puffy wet lips.

"But then," said the captain, "I suppose that's why you Earthmen dominate the rest of us in the interplanetary system." He rubbed his blue stubbled chin in rueful reflection.

Creegar ran his tongue along his even mouth, looked down at his empty glass. The captain sighed, picked up the bottle and once more refilled both glasses.

"Then you'll do it?" Creegar demanded.

The Venusian captain sighed heavily, his huge paunch moving like a large balloon. He shook his head sadly.

"Yes," he said. "I suppose if I didn't, you'd grab an atomic pistol from one of my crew and try to take over my ship forcibly. Even," he added warningly, "though such a stupid gesture would probably cost you your life."

"You'll do it?" Creegar repeated again.

The captain nodded. "Yes. I suppose if you've got to die, I'd rather have someone else kill you."

"You're the first one I've met with those sentiments in quite some time," Creegar said with dry bitterness.

The captain's fat bulk shook in mirth at this irony. He picked up his glass and tossed it off once more, planking it down even more loudly this time.

"Do you have any plans?" the captain asked. "Or are you just going to be stupid and heroic?"

"A man can make a lot of careful plans in five years," Creegar said.

"Have you allowed for the changes five years can make?" the captain demanded.

"I've allowed for the changes a hundred years can make," Creegar answered. "I started planning this thing four years ago—a year after I'd been in that damned silence. It's surprising to think that it took me a year to figure everything out, all that had been done to me, and by whom. From that moment on, I planned. Planned for nothing but my movements after those damned doors opened for me."

"You have money?" the captain asked.

CREEGAR shrugged. "A little. My stake, what's left of it. It should be enough."

The captain fumbled beneath the waistcoat of his tunic, and an instant later he was thumping a money belt of astonishingly heavy dimensions on the duralloy plank.

"Here," he said. "I have plenty. Take as much as you like."

Astonishment filled Creegar's eyes. He wet his lips for an instant, looking at the money belt on the table.

"Why," he asked the captain softly, "do you want to do this for me?"

The Venusian shrugged, colored in embarrassment.

"Maybe," he said, "it is because I am getting to be an old fool. Maybe it is because I see in your eyes the same thing that was once in the eyes of a hell raising Venusian space bandit. Maybe it is because someone once gave that young Venusian swashbuckler the chance to fight back when he seemed licked. Maybe he'd like to return the favor, pass it on to another who isn't afraid to fight back when the universe seems lined against him."

Creegar ran a hand across his eyes in a sympathetic gesture.

"Maybe," he said softly, "the universe isn't completely rotten."

The captain opened three compartments of the money belt and dumped out three stacks of Martian *klekas*.

"This is roughly two hundred Earth dollars. It is more easily exchanged than Venusian money. You shouldn't have trouble exchanging it."

"No," Creegar admitted, taking the stacked *klekas*. "No. It should be easy to exchange, once I get safely onto Earth."

The Venusian captain scratched the blue stubble of beard on his fat jowls. He reached for the bottle again.

"If you get safely onto Earth," he corrected. "If you get by them." He filled his glass to the brim, raised it significantly . . .

AT THE door of Commissioner Judson Bellham's office, Lee Hudge paused briefly, rapped lightly on the door twice, then pushed against the smooth panel and stepped across the threshold into the room where his chief sat behind a massive *platenoid* desk.

Hudge was a small, thin man, nearing middle age with stringy blonde hair growing slightly bald at the peak of his forehead. In his unobtrusive blue tunic, a first impression of the man seemed to indicate that he was mild, unimpressive, harmless.

But there was something about the way he held his head, something that glittered in his pale blue eyes, something in his stance suggesting he was poised on the balls of his feet, that enabled your second glance to recognize a hidden, surging power in that small lithe body; a driving, relentless purpose in those all-knowing eyes.

Lee Hudge was no larger than a small atomic cannon. He was also just as deadly.

"Step right in, Lee," Bellham boomed in his rich basso.

Lee Hudge paused to turn and shut the door behind him. He did this in the manner of a man who leaves no details unattended to. Then he turned back and advanced to within two feet of Bellham's desk.

"You have an assignment, Commissioner?" Lee Hudge asked. His voice was a trifle thin, a little high. There was little inflection in his question. He delivered it more like a statement.

Bellham leaned back in his chair, taking the brochure from the desk before him and flipping idly through its pages.

"You remember the Thorne Creegar Case?" Bellham asked.

Lee Hudge nodded. Save for the flicking of his eyes to the brochure, there was no expression on his face.

"You always claimed it never should have been closed, if I recall rightly," Bellham said. "I know you always believed I was wrong in pleading for Creegar before the Court of Justice. You maintained for a long time after that that he had the death sentence coming to him, didn't you?"

Hudge nodded again. "I did, and I still say the same thing. Creegar was a swine. They gave him too much of a break." There was no mistaking the sudden fanatic glitter that came into his pale blue eyes.

"I've finally come to agree with you," Bellham said. "And it seems that I've almost been too late in seeing the truth of the matter. Thorne Creegar was released from his penal planet two days ago. He'd only served half his sentence. The Federation Pardons Board gave him a conditional release."

Bellham did not bother to add that the four men he controlled on the Federation Pardons Board had been pressured into their move by no one less than himself. Lee Hudge would never discover that.

Hudge suddenly stepped closer to the desk. He raised his fist and brought it down with a bang on the *platenoid* surface.

"Why in the hell didn't they inform me of their consideration of his case?" Hudge demanded in sudden shrill fury. "I'd never have recommended a sentence severance for that skunk in a million light years!"

Bellham raised his hand. "Calm down, Lee. They went forward with Creegar's release without even notifying me. When I learned about it, it was too late."

"Too late," Hudge snorted. "It was too late when they didn't give him the death sentence."

"But it isn't completely too late," Bellham broke in. "There are several

things we can do about Creegar, Lec. Several things that can amend the errors already made in his case."

"And what are they?" Hudge demanded.

BELLHAM shifted his massive frame in his chair. "We can keep him under scrutiny, and reopen his case."

Hudge licked his small, thin, dry lips. He half closed his eyes. Then he opened them again.

"It has been five years," he reminded Bellham. "A case can grow plenty damned cold in five years."

Bellham held up the brochure. "The witnesses are all still alive, and what is more important, I'm certain Creegar will try to get back here. In fact, the information I've already gathered, shows, that he's on his way to Earth right at this moment."

"It's a return to a penal planet for life, or summary execution if he's caught," Hudge declared reflectively. "I don't think he'd dare try it."

"He'll be back for revenge, or I don't know Creegar," Bellham said.

"Revenge?" Lee Hudge raised his eyebrows.

"Against those who testified against him," Bellham said. "But he'll never get that far. I know the tramp Venusian freighter he's aboard. I checked on his movements after leaving the penal planet. I got in touch with the Venusian captain of that space tramp. Under my instructions, he's agreed to help Creegar try to slip through the Guards at Western Hemisphere Second Base when he puts in there two days from now. He'll keep us informed of Creegar's plans and tip us off in time to nab him."

Lee Hudge's pale eyes lighted in appreciation. "Good," he said.

Bellham grinned. "It cost money. The Venusian captain's palm took quite

a bit of greasing. But he'll sell out on Cregar and deliver him to us on arrival." Bellham paused. "You'll nab him," he added . . .

CHAPTER IV

The Web Tightens

SHERRY BENNET looked listlessly at the silver tunic gowns spread before her. Her raven hair framed a face that was fixed in an expression of white resignation. Her hazel eyes were lusterless, apathetic.

"I don't know," Sherry said half aloud. "The gown on the right, I suppose. It doesn't matter, really." She caught herself suddenly, flushed momentarily, and amended. "They are all lovely, and I imagine that one will be best."

The lean, angular young woman who stood beside the gowns looked curiously at Sherry, but only said,

"I agree with you. That is the loveliest. I shall have it set aside. You will make a lovely bride in such a gown."

"Thank you," Sherry said automatically.

The large, gray haired woman standing beside Sherry broke in.

"You may take them away, please," she instructed.

The angular young woman began packing the gowns. After a few moments she picked up the boxes into which she had put them and left the room. The large, gray haired woman beside Sherry put her hand sympathetically on the girl's shoulder.

"Do you think you should go through with it, Sherry?" she asked.

"I must, Nana," Sherry said lifelessly. "I must, for Thorne's sake."

"Thorne has been freed," the woman called Nana declared.

"But only because of Judson."

"Bellham," Nana spat. "I detest that man, Sherry. He's a beast!"

Sherry shook her head. "He loves me, Nana. And though I could never love him, I must repay him for all he has done for Thorne, and for me."

"He's forced you into this," Nana declared with bitter resentment.

"You don't really understand Judson, Nana," Sherry said. "It is his way to be blunt, even crude, at times. He was thinking of me, and knowing the life that would be mine until I died if I were to go along as I have been."

"You'll never forget Thorne. You'll never change your feeling for him at all," Nana said. "You can't run away from that, anymore than you can run away from yourself."

"Thorne is lost to me," Sherry said dully. "I'll never see him again."

The large, gray haired Nana stood before Sherry, her big red hands on her plump hips. Her eyes flashed.

"You're lying to me, Sherry," she snapped. "You're even trying to lie to yourself. Your fear has driven you into this bargain. You are afraid of Judson Bellham, afraid of what he might do to Thorne if you didn't comply with his wishes!"

Sherry's face went whiter. Her lips trembled.

"It's the truth, Sherry. Every word of it. You're doing this in desperation. You're doing it because you're helpless, because there seems to be no other solution."

Sherry's voice was low, shaken. "I, I am doing what is right, Nana."

"Are you doing what Thorne would wish?"

Sherry's hazel eyes filled with tears. Her white, even teeth bit into her soft underlip.

"Do you think Thorne would want his freedom, would want his life, if he

knew the price you were going to pay for it?"

Sherry rose, impulsively, burying her lovely face in Nana's ample breast. Her slim young body became convulsed by sobs.

"Oh, Nana, Nana," she cried. "Nana, I *must* do as I've planned. I must!"

The large gray haired Nana put her big arms comfortingly around the girl's shoulders. In her deep brown eyes there was a fierce, hard hatred.



"We can pray, Sherry," she said

"There are still eight days, Sherry," she said softly. "Eight days. And Thorne is free for those days. We can pray, child. We can pray!"

The girl's sobs continued unabated, as though they'd gathered beyond the endurance of the courageous dam she'd built against them . . .

THORNE CREEGAR paced restlessly back and forth on the enclosed dirty deck of the Venusian tramp space freighter. For the past forty-eight hours he had slept little, eaten only enough to keep the fires of strength and determination burning in his lean young body. He had been counting off the seconds, the minutes, the hours until his arrival within the Approach Zone of Western Hemisphere Second Base.

Beneath his feet, the vibrations coming through the duralloy plating of the

deck, told him that the rocket speed of the vessel had been cut three-quarter propulsion. The first sign of arrival in the Approach Zone of W. H. Base 2.

Inside of another thirty minutes, Thorne knew, the vessel would be slipping securely into mooring at the first Inspection Landing Platform. And in half that time, Thorne Creegar should be ready and waiting to effect a getaway through the crowded space harbor.

His plans, made long ago and carefully, he had passed on to the fat, blue jowled Venusian space skipper. And with but several minor alterations suggested by the captain, Thorne was now waiting grimly, eagerly, to carry them through.

His gear, what little of it was absolutely necessary to the fulfillment of his plans, lay waiting for him at the stern of the vessel. It was over the stern that he was to accomplish his getaway.

Now, pacing the dimly lighted stretch of deck that was beside the ladders to the rocket tube rooms, Thorne steeled himself against the action that would be soon in coming. He did this by thinking back. Such reflection gave him purpose, and a grim determination.

In particular, Thorne remembered his first sight of that small, steel walled room that was to beckon him toward the fringes of insanity for five awful years.

A room large enough to contain a cot and a small, rusted imitation *duralloy* bucket. A room with a thick, sound proof door. A door that opened once every twenty-four hours.

The opening of that cell door had been the only measure Thorne had of time. It was his only method of gauging eternity. And from the first day he had been wise enough to begin his record of the times it opened.

There had been a narrow hallway outside that door. Thorne was permitted to pace the confines of that hallway with every daily opening of the cell door. Pace the hallway for a period of time that was somewhere between fifteen minutes and half an hour.

Food capsules—a day's rations, were left for him after his return from those limited daily exercises. His return to the screaming silence of that solitary cell.

The first few months had been the worst.

The pain, and the tears, the bitter, burning, horrible anguish had been at its most desperate pitch during those first months. It was then that his sanity teetered. A weaker will, a less steeled mind, might easily have cracked under the strain of those initial days.

Somehow, Thorne had realized this. Realized this even through the torrents of rage that swept him, the all engulfing waves of anguish that smashed relentlessly against the bulwarks of his reason. And in this realization Thorne had fought desperately. Finally, he had won.

The silence was not as loud after that.

The bitterness was turned to channels of determined revenge. Hour on hour, Thorne had turned the pages of the past before him, examining them with a grimly searching keenness that brought much to light. And finally he had learned fully of the treachery, the cunning perfidy that had brought him there.

He had finally seen, with bitter clarity, the cunning web of circumstances that had been woven around him until there was at last no escape from the inevitable results of his so-called "crime." He saw himself, unwitting dupe, carrying on investigations concerning a mysterious smuggling ring—

operations at which he was secretly placed by Bellham. He saw, too, the additional clever webs that were woven to lead him to believe that Sloan, the other consular officer assigned with him on the case, was behind the nefarious ring of contraband smuggling.

And Thorne Creegar had slain his fellow officer, killed him in a brief gun-duel that was the result of the hideous mistaken complications that had been engineered by Judson Bellham. Too late did Creegar realize that Bellham had forced Sloan into a similar suspicion, and that Bellham's cunningly nurtured suspicions had driven Sloan to the gun play he thought necessary on Creegar.

It was a masterful frame-up.

Even through the trial, Thorne had been bewilderedly unaware of what had been done to him. It was later, in the solitude of his disgrace and banishment, that Thorne had taken the case apart, piece by piece, to reassemble the parts that pointed to but one conclusion. His rage had hardened into bitter, unswerving determination after that.

And from that moment forward he had planned.

With no voice save his own, with no thoughts save those that came to him for the very solitude of his confinement, Thorne Creegar had sustained himself and his sanity on the wells of his contemplated revenge.

HE HAD thought himself halfway through his ordeal, once he had marked the day before the end of the fifth year on the scarred surface of his hard, *duralloy* cotside. And then, to his astonishment, a guard had come to him.

There had been the quarters of the warden, then, and the sound of the first voices beside his own that he had heard in half a decade. The warden had

made a few remarks. Thorne hadn't caught their meaning. He was listening too intently to the very sounds of the syllables that came from that person's lips.

And then the meaning of those words had struck home to him. They'd left him dazed, uncomprehending. But the words had been fulfilled that following day. The doors had opened, and he'd felt the cold wind on his cheeks. He'd found himself free.

"Lad!" the word broke sharply in on Thorne's recollections.

He wheeled, to see the bulky figure of the Venusian captain coming along the dimly lighted stretch of deck toward him.

Creegar took a deep breath.

"We are almost ready?" he asked.

"Take your position in the stern," the Venusian captain ordered. He extended a pudgy paw.

Creegar took the Venusian's hand. A gesture he had almost forgotten.

"Good luck," the fat space skipper said.

"Thanks," Creegar replied, "for everything."

The Venusian captain took his hand away and grinned. "Don't mention it," he said with sly irony, "to anyone."

Creegar turned away then, starting toward the stern of the space packet. The Venusian captain stood there, his thick arms behind his fat body, a curious expression on his face.

The captain turned away then, and went back in the direction from which he had come. Halfway down the deck, he turned in through an open door over which was marked, "*Communications Room.*"

There was a long table inside the narrow room. On it was a maze of complicated apparatus of wires and screens and buttons. The communications officer was absent from the chair

placed in the center of this table.

The Venusian captain slid his fat bulk into this empty chair and bent forward toward the large *vizascreeen* on the table before him. He made several slow adjustments of the switches and apparatus on the panel below the screen.

A reddish haze transfused the screen for a moment, then it turned a light blue.

Half a second later a face appeared on the screen. A lined, bespectacled, middle-aged face. The owner of the face was wearing a brown uniform cap.

"Hello," the Venusian captain said, "hello, W.H. Base 2."

"Communications operator, coming from control room of Western Hemisphere Space Base Two," said the face on the screen.

"Captain Treowlan, Venusian space freighter, *Verieshu*, coming in," answered the blue jowled captain.

"Harbor facilities open, captain," said the face on the *vizascreeen* wearily. "Proceed on schedule."

"An Earth Consular Officer is waiting in your control room for a message from me," the Venusian captain said. "Would you put him on?"

The face disappeared from the screen. Moments passed. Then another face appeared. Its owner was wearing a civilian tunic. He was a small, thin, almost ineffectual looking man with stringy blonde hair that was growing slightly bald at the peaks of his temples.

"Consular Lee Hudge, Law Commission, acting for Commissioner Bellham," said this new face.

"You are prepared to make your arrest?" the Venusian captain asked.

"As scheduled," Lee Hudge's image answered from the screen.

"You have other officers with you?" the Venusian captain answered.

"I'm taking him in myself," said the image of Lee Hudge on the *vizascreen*.

"I'd advise you to meet my vessel at once in a harbor patrol ship," the Venusian captain said. "I'll have your prisoner ready to turn over to you."

The image on the screen licked his thin lips in satisfaction.

"Fine, I'll engage a vessel immediately. Expect me inside of another ten minutes. You say you'll have the prisoner ready to turn over?"

"Yes," the Venusian captain declared, "as promised." He reached forward, then, and made switch-off adjustments on the panel below the *vizascreen*.

The light blue color of the screen faded into a reddish tinge once more, and finally back to a dull silver.

The Venusian captain lurched his heavy bulk out of the chair and stepped back out onto the dimly lighted deck. His glance traveled sternward. Thorne Cregar was waiting down there in the darkness. Just as the captain had instructed him to.

The captain smiled. He patted the side of his tunic jacket. Concealed on a holster inside was an atomic pistol.

"Necessary item," the captain said half aloud, "if I'm going to take care of a prisoner. Especially such a dangerous prisoner."

Smiling to himself, the Venusian captain turned and waddled toward the stern of his vessel. There was a matter to be attended to if he were to carry out his part of the agreement.

A matter in which the atomic pistol would come in more than handily . . .

CHAPTER V

The Trap Is Sprung

LEE HUDGE stood beside the pilot of the harbor patrol rocket craft

as it picked its way through the darkness and space craft tonnage that lay cloaked and moored everywhere around the tiny vessel.

His pale blue eyes were half shaded by almost hairless lids as he savored inwardly this moment of exquisite anticipation that would lead to an even more exquisite moment of triumph and revenge.

The pilot, still looking intently forward through the fore screen of the vessel, said from the corner of his mouth:

"I think that's the Venusian tub dead ahead, sir."

"Good," Hudge said in his thin voice.

"They see us, sir," said the pilot. "They're making preparations to take you aboard, dropping a gangway tube over the side."

"Then I'd better get ready," Hudge decided aloud.

"Through that forward compartment, sir," the pilot said. "It'll lead you to the top deck from which you can board her."

Hudge nodded and stepped toward the forward compartment. Instants later he stood on the enclosed surface of the top deck. It was easier to see the Venusian freighter looming up on their comparatively tiny craft from here.

A few more minutes passed, in which the pilot of the harbor patrol rocket craft maneuvered his vessel expertly in toward the side of the bulky Venusian space tramp, and Hudge waited impatiently beside the air lock door that would be brought beside the gangway boarding tube that hung from the side of the other ship.

In those fleeting moments it seemed to Hudge as if he would never be aboard the other craft. And then at last he was opening the airlock door before him and ascending the ladder in the

gangway tube that hung from the side of the Venusian vessel.

And at length he faced a smiling, fat, blue jowled Venusian in a drab and dirty captain's tunic.

"I'm Hudge," he said. "Consular officer. You have the prisoner ready?"

The Venusian captain still smiled as he said, "Of course. Quite as promised. Follow me, please."

The Venusian captain turned away, and Hudge stepped swiftly after him. They marched along a poorly lighted deckway, and suddenly the captain turned to say: "Right here, officer. In my cabin. It was the safest place to hold him while waiting for you."

The captain stepped aside, gesturing with his hand at the door he'd pushed slightly open.

Hudge ran his tongue along his dry lips. One instant more and he would face Cregar. It was almost too magnificent to bear. He stepped ahead of the captain and into the narrow little stateroom.

He heard the captain follow him in.

And then Hudge was peering bewilderedly around the bare, unoccupied little room.

Hudge wheeled instantly. His mouth open. "He's gone—" Hudge started to exclaim.

AND then his eyes looked down into the barrel of an atomic pistol. An atomic pistol held unwaveringly in a pudgy hand. The hand of the Venusian captain.

"Relax, consular officer," the captain said smilingly.

"What is this?" Hudge demanded wrathfully.

The Venusian captain raised his eyebrows. "It should be apparent to a consular officer," he said in mock surprise.

Hudge's thin mouth worked. His jaw went hard.

"You were paid to turn over a man to me," he grated. "Put down that weapon and take me to him."

The Venusian captain smiled again.

"I'm afraid that's impossible," he mocked.

The muted throb of a small rocket ship came to Hudge's ears at that instant. He cocked his head.

"Your intended prisoner has just departed," the Venusian captain explained.

"You won't get away with this," Hudge flamed.

The Venusian shrugged amiably. "Perhaps I shall. I have been able to get away with a great deal since I was born, especially when it came to tricking stupid Earth officers."

Hudge started forward.

The Venusian captain raised the barrel of the atomic pistol. His twinkling eyes went suddenly hard.

"Don't be foolish, consular officer," he advised.



Hudge looked into the barrel of a pistol

"I'm telling you," Hudge grated, "you'll be sorry."

"There is no statute in Interplanetary Law, even though it was conceived principally by Earth legislators, that permits you to board a Venusian vessel

unless she is actually moored in an Earth space port. My vessel is not so moored," the captain said softly.

"Money was put into your hands," Hudge began, "to turn—"

"The money was most deeply appreciated. I still have it. I intend to keep it," the Venusian was smiling again. "It is the only good I ever received in a transaction with Earth officers. I shall look back on the transaction fondly in my old age."

Hudge said something obscene. His face was livid with rage and humiliation.

"Of course you didn't come aboard equipped with a Warrant of Search. Interplanetary Laws make that formality necessary. I felt sure you'd take too much for granted, and come without such a warrant. Thus you are an intruder. I can hold you here indefinitely, until it pleases me to turn you over to the patrol in which you arrived," the captain said.

Hudge's eyes fixed inexorably on the Venusian's, as though marking the captain indelibly in his memory book of revenge.

"By the time you are released," the captain continued matter-of-factly, "your intended prisoner will be through the harbor guard and safely on Earth."

"For that, for aiding an ex-convict to return from his exile, you'll get a sentence that'll tear your soul loose," Hudge raged.

The captain smiled again. "Oh, didn't I tell you? I tried to stop him. I did my utmost. My efforts were unsuccessful. My crew, to the last man, watched me trying to prevent his escape from our vessel. Naturally, they'll all swear to that."

Hudge's hands clenched and unclenched at his side. Then suddenly he seemed relaxed and his lips moved.

He spoke almost inaudibly, as if to himself.

"Okay, Creegar," Hudge said softly. "Okay, you win this round. But there's more to come. Plenty more to come. And your neck is out now farther than I'd ever hoped to see!"

The Venusian captain smiled. "I don't think he can hear you," he declared with polite sarcasm.

Hudge's eyes focused calmly on the captain. But though suddenly his lips smiled, those pale blue eyes brimmed with hate . . .

THERE was only one other person on the small liferocket craft with Thorne Creegar, and that other person was a short, bandy-legged Venusian spaceman from the freighter they'd left minutes before.

The bandy-legged little spaceman was at the controls of the craft, and his blunt jaw worked soundlessly on a cud of Junovian tobacco as he stared out through the *vizapanel* above the nose of their ship into the inky blackness of the surrounding harbor.

Thorne was wearing a fresh tunic, given him by the Venusian captain before he'd slipped into the waiting craft at the stern. At his hip was strapped an atomic pistol, another present from the fat and smiling space skipper. His personal gear was now reduced to but brief essentials, compact enough to be carried in the small kitsack he wore slung over his left shoulder.

In that kitsack was the money which also had been given him by his Venusian spacefaring benefactor.

Ahead of him lay Earth. A scant five minutes ahead through that blackness.

Thorne turned to the bandy-legged spaceman at the controls.

"What point do we put in at?" he asked.

The spaceman continued expertly to guide the little craft passing the looming hulks of the larger vessels crowding the harbor. He considered the question in apparent reflection, spat a stream of junovian tobacco juice on the *duralloy* planking of the deck.

"Hah," he said, "an old unused wharf landing post."

"You know the spot well?" Thorne asked.

"Should know well," the bandy-legged spaceman answered tersely. "Been smuggling into that space dock plenty long time."

Thorne's eyebrows lifted. Smuggling—so that was the Venusian freighter's occupation!

He grinned in humorless amusement. It was odd that the first person to give him a break in over five years should be not only a Venusian, but a smuggling leader as well.

He'd been lucky, nothing more in finding such a vessel as the Venusian craft on his departure from the penal planet. And it was still luck, and nothing more than that, that had made the Venusian captain the sort who held a strong enough contempt for the forces of Federation Law to help him run the exile blockade.

Creegar grinned again, bitterly.

Minutes passed, and suddenly the gnarled little spaceman at the controls of the craft cut the power of the single rocket tube completely.

"Are we—" Thorne began.

The bandy-legged little pilot held up his hand for silence.

"Easy," he hissed. "We're coming up to the wharf!"

Creegar's heart began to hammer excitedly against his chest. The palms of his hands became wet, and he found himself digging his nails into them.

Expertly, the bandy-legged spaceman continued to bring the little craft into

mooring on the rusty and deserted wharf. Thorne saw the little man's gnarled hand reach swiftly for the degravitator brake. Then they settled slowly to the surface of the wharfside.

The bandy-legged little pilot pointed toward the bulkhead door to his right.

"That way," he hissed. "Quick. And good luck!"

Thorne stepped to the bulkhead door. He waved a hand at the pilot. He found the door release. It answered to his pressure. He stepped out, and dropped nimbly three feet to the rotted planking of the wharf.

AND even as Creegar's feet hit the planking, the single tube of the tiny rocket lifecraft *pluffed* into life again, and the small craft shot up and away.

Thorne looked left, then right, swiftly, eyes knifing the darkness. Then, unhesitatingly, he turned to the right and raced quickly across the uncertain planking to the concealing shelter of a warehouse.

The warehouse, like the wharf, was deserted, long unused. Thorne's fingers, exploring the surface of its side, led him eventually to a small, broken door.

Creegar stepped inside the warehouse. He needed time to get his bearings, to catch his breath. His heart was pounding furiously from excitement, and he had taken his atomic pistol from its holster on his hip.

This was Earth, he realized. Earth—after five long years! And other thoughts came to him. Capture here meant return to the penal planet or execution. For though he was a part of this Earth, a creature born to it, he was unwanted, stalked, an outlaw in the midst of those who had once been his own!

The burning bitterness returned to

Thorne Creegar. Returned to stamp out the spark that had flamed but momentarily within his earthbound soul. Again, he recalled his purpose here, and again his clean young jaw went grim in the realization of the task that lay ahead of him.

For a few moments longer Creegar stood there, fighting back the tenseness that came instinctively to his hard young body. And at length, when his muscles had returned to a degree of calm coördination, he stepped back through the warehouse door and out once again to the open wharfside. As he moved, he returned his atomic pistol to its holster. Calmness, an unhurried alertness, now, were necessary.

Fortunately, the arrival and departure of the single rocket lifecraft which had delivered Creegar to the wharf had apparently gone unnoticed by the patrols that would undoubtedly be covering the harbor in routine inspection.

An as Thorne began to stride unhurriedly along the deserted space dock, he rechecked mentally the directions the Venusian captain had given him to go by on his arrival here.

Creegar had a general concept of the surroundings into which he had been thrown. But that concept had been formed by infrequent visits to this space base well over half a decade ago. Details changed in five years, even though general outlines endured.

And if anything would trap Thorne, it would be some minute detail that had been altered over those five years.

Then Venusian captain, however, seemed to have schooled Creegar expertly in the changes that had occurred here. Obviously his knowledge had been more than casual, inasmuch as Thorne had but a few minutes before learned that the fat Venusian skipper was a smuggler.

Creegar continued along, following

the mental map he had compiled from the captain's data. Minutes passed, many of them, and he had still not encountered signs of human presence.

It would be necessary to leave the space base behind him as quickly as possible. The likelihood of his falling under suspicious eyes was greatest there. Once free of this danger zone, the going would be comparably easier. His new tunic garb, plus a casual front, would attract no more attention than any other casual traveler might.

There was a road some ten miles away from the space port, and three hours later Thorne, traveling through thick Cultivation Fields,* stepped out upon its metallicly glittering surface.

Even in the darkness it was apparent that the roadway in either direction and as far as Thorne could see, was deserted. Nevertheless, Thorne kept close to the side of the Cultivation Fields fringing the roadway, unwilling to risk the chance passage of *rockabouts*** or commercial vehicles.

* *Cultivation Fields.* At the turn of the twenty-third century, the Federation Governments were finally able to bring into actuality an agricultural planning system which sectioned off the best crop soils in every locality of Earth, using each exclusively for the product judged scientifically most suited to its soil. This, in many instances, forced a reshuffling of residential areas which were found to be built on ground of agricultural value, and resulted in large developments springing up at the very doors of some of the greatest cities. At the time this remapping scheme was put into effect, Earth, and numerous other heavily peopled planets, faced food shortages unless a scientific readjustment of agricultural lands were brought about. Over a period of twenty-five years, however, the readjustments were successfully made, resulting in estimated guarantees of plentiful food supplies through the next four centuries.

** *Rockabouts.* Streamlined passenger cars adapted to the tremendously high speed traffic of the twenty-third century super-highway systems webbing Earth and the larger more populated planets. Name derived from the fact that they operate on condensed rocket power. Generally similar, with the exception of extreme utility design, in appearance to the streamlined racing cars driven today by Malcom Campbell and other record breaking pioneers in the automotive field.

FORTUNATELY, too, these Cultivation Fields were given over to wheat, affording Thorne quick shelter, if needed, in their tall concealment. Ahead of him, a distance of some four hours by foot, lay the local Transcontinental Tube System Depot.†

There, according to the plan he had worked out, Thorne would be able to board a *tubetrain* for New York, his first preconceived destination.

For in New York, nerve center of Earth Federation, lay the central offices of the Federation Law Commission.

And Judson Bellham presided there.

Thorne trudged onward, while again and again he went over the plans in his mind.

An hour might have passed, conceivably more, before the first vehicle roared down the metallic stretch of roadway toward Thorne. He heard the sound of its approach even before he could see it in the distance. Immediately, he sought the shelter of the wheat fields on the side of the road.

There he crouched, holding his breath unconsciously, watching the dot on the highway grow larger as it sped in his direction. The vehicle, whatever sort it was, came from the direction of the space port. This in itself was enough to make Thorne decide to keep in hiding.

It roared on toward him until at last he was able to tell from its outline that it was a passenger vehicle, a *rockabout*,

long, low, streamlined and powerful.

Something in that swiftly approaching outline caught a cog in Thorne Creegar's memory. But it wasn't until the vehicle blasted past his place of concealment that he realized what that tugging at his recollection signified.

The *rockabout* was of the extremely rakish design and red coloring of the staff cars belonging to the Law Commission Consular Force.

Tight-lipped, Creegar watched the vehicle blur into a grayish black dot in the distance. And only until it had vanished from sight did he emerge once more from his hiding place and resume his arduous walk.

Someone from the consular force had been at the space port. Someone, quite possibly, anticipating his daring entry. But if they had checked his movements, if they had expected him to try to gain entry here, why hadn't they been able to stop him?

Surely, Creegar reasoned, there were no more than four or five space ships putting in during the past five hours at the space port. It would conceivably have been easy enough to watch those ships with more than usual caution.

He shook his head, perplexed. If his attempt had been expected so soon—and he had counted on its being unexpected—someone botched the job of watching for him. He shook his head again, dismissing the thought. It couldn't have had any connection with his entry. Undoubtedly that car had been at the space port on business other than the task of preventing his entry.

Creegar continued to march doggedly onward. The distance to the tube depot was now less than three hours away. He had his plan made for getting aboard a *tubetrain*. A simple plan, and a daring one . . .

†*Transcontinental Tube System*: Established at the turn of the twenty-second century, the Transcontinental Tube System, an underground railway running cable trains powered by rocket motors, replaced the antiquated railroads of the day. Completely circling Earth, this system hauled billions of tons of freight and passengers monthly, cutting the travel time and expense of such operations down to a quarter of the previous records established by railroads.

CHAPTER VI

The Black Network

SOME six hours later, a flushed and angry Lee Hudge stood in the central offices of the Federation Law Commission, grimly weathering the storm of abuse an invective heaped upon his unflinching brow by an irate Judson Bellham.

"Slipped right through your famous fingers, eh, Hudge?" Bellham stormed, striding back and forth before his ornate desk. His deep voice was heavy with sarcasm.

"You were the one who arranged for the pick-up," Hudge defended himself. His thin, high, voice was knife sharp. "You were the one who settled the affair with the Venusian captain. Had your plans gone as you'd intended them to, as I had a right to expect them to, I wouldn't have needed any additional precautions in picking him up!"

Judson Bellham colored more deeply. "He's loose, now, Hudge. Loose with hell in his heart. Undoubtedly he's heading this way. His only purpose in returning, in risking his neck, is revenge. Did you ever stop to think who'll be the first person his revenge will seek out? It'll be you, Hudge, no one but you."

Lee Hudge ran a thin hand through his stringy blonde hair. His pale blue eyes showed no acceptance of fear. His thin lips were tight in a line of scornful acceptance of a challenge.

"A lot of murdering swine would like to even the score with me," he said flatly. "It's never bothered me before, and it doesn't bother me now. I'll get Creegar, and he won't have to come to me. I'm going after him!"

Bellham seemed to be regaining his composure. His voice was more normal as he said: "I'm counting on you

to get him, Lee. You did it before, and you're the one man who can do it this time."

Into Hudge's pale blue eyes there came a gleam of shining fanaticism.

"I didn't catch up with him," Hudge answered harshly. "Law caught up with him. Law and justice. Justice won't be tricked, ever. It will catch up with Creegar this time just as certainly as it did the last. He's one man on a planet of millions. One man outlawed by the decent members of the society of those millions. He's one man against the entire forces of the Federation Law Commission. He hasn't a chance!"

Judson Bellham moved his massive frame to a chair behind his desk and deposited himself lightly in it. He reached out and snapped the switch below the *telaboard* on his desk.

"Send me in anything that's been picked up on the Creegar reentry case in the last hour," Bellham barked into the *vizascreen*. He flicked off the switch and leaned back.

"How many men did you post to watch the entries to New York?" he asked.

"A dozen," Lee Hudge answered. "One at each of the ten terminals and two men to check back along the route from the space port."

Bellham frowned. "You should have posted more."

"They're my best men," Hudge snapped. "If he can get by them, he can evade the entire Federation Law Commission."

Bellham found expensive Venusian cigars in a container by his elbow, selected one for himself and without proffering any to Hudge, clamped the lid back on the humidor and lighted it with an *electralite*. He filled the air with blue circles, half closing his eyes.

"I'm going to have to rely heavily on you in this Creegar case, Lee," Bell-

ham said. "My first hunch, on his release, proved damnably correct. I knew he'd try to get back."

Lee Hudge nodded noncommittally.

"I'll be unusually tied up during the next several weeks," Bellham went on. "My forthcoming marriage will keep me away from an active prosecution of this thing myself. I'll have to leave the case entirely in your hands."

Hudge looked narrowly at Bellham. "Have you considered the fact that your, ah, marriage might be jeopardized by Creegar's return? Sherry Bennet was the girl Creegar was ready to marry."

Bellham's face was expressionless as he answered. "I have considered that angle, Hudge. It provides another reason why the apprehension of Creegar as swiftly as possible becomes increasingly important. I wouldn't want his twisted mind to seek vengeance on Sherry."

"How do you think he'll look on you?" Hudge said with thin sarcasm. "His vengeance would hit at you before Sherry."

Bellham shrugged with elaborate casualness. "Perhaps," he said. "At any rate, he'll be caught before another twenty-four hours have gone by."

A secretary entered, left a sheaf of papers on Bellham's desk, and departed. Bellham picked up the sheaf. His eyes flicked along the first pages, then he flipped quickly through the remaining pages. He held out the sheaf smilingly to Lee Hudge.

"Nice work, Lee," he said. "Your operatives are already within an inch of bringing Creegar in. His trail has been picked up. They're tracking him down now, getting closer any minute. He hasn't a chance to elude them."

His small face expressionless, Lee Hudge took the proffered report. He scanned it briefly, handed it back to Bellham.

"Good," he said matter-of-factly . . .

ON the *tubetrain* for New York, Thorne Creegar sat quietly in the small compartment near the rear of the front section, eyes staring unseeingly out the window at the blurred darkness of the gigantic transportation tube through which he sped.

Creegar was remembering the faint suspicion in the eyes of the ticket agent at the depot where he'd paid his fare. The clever imitation of a slightly sotted space tar going into New York for a weekend before returning to duty in the space lanes had been well enough received. The ticket agent had smilingly made out Creegar's pass, while Thorne weaved in feigned drunkenness and fumbled for the purchase price.

The drunkenness had been Creegar's ruse to distract attention from his physical and facial characteristics. And it had succeeded, keeping the agent's attention on his besotted gyrations rather than his appearance. But Creegar had made one mistake in fumbling for his fare. In his too expert weaving, he fumbled at the wrong section of his money belt, revealing for the briefest fraction of an instant the hoarded *klekas* the Venusian captain had given him. Too much money for a common space tar to be carrying. The suspicion had flickered momentarily in the agent's eyes then, and Thorne, becoming instantly aware of it, had taken his ticket and moved away as swiftly as possible.

Mentally, he had prayed that the agent would refrain from any carrying out of his suspicions until the *tubetrain* came through. And fortunately, he hadn't, for Creegar was able to board the conveyance unmolested.

But now, counting the minutes as he stared unseeingly out into the blackness, Creegar was aware that, if his en-

try had been discovered, his movements had already been checked from the space port to the *tubetrain* depot and thence to this train.

And by now Creegar had reason to believe that his entry had been discovered, and that even now his whereabouts was known to the forces of the Law Commission.

For the green tuniced conductor of this particular section of the *tubetrain* had already passed back and forth before Creegar's compartment eight times. And on each occasion, Creegar had felt his secretive glance. It would be natural for his pursuers to notify the conductors of this *tubetrain* to be on the alert for the man they wanted. His description, flashed to them, would easily enable them to single him out and to keep him under watch.

At New York, the next depot stop, consular officers would be waiting to take Creegar from the train. And as soon as they came within twenty minutes of New York, Creegar knew, his compartment would be automatically locked, keeping him prisoner.

But Creegar had planned against this. Planned against each step with a counter step. And it was his knowledge that the conductor would fear rousing his suspicions until approximately that time, that gave Creegar what little sense of security he now felt. For the *tubetrain* was still better than an hour out of New York. And as far as they knew, Creegar was still unaware of the fact that he was followed.

Creegar's hard young mouth gave a grim imitation of a smile. They'd get him eventually, perhaps, but not before he'd accomplished what he'd set out to do. And his plans for that accomplishment were well and carefully constructed. So carefully constructed that even his own mental gauging of

the time transpiring in this journey was important.

In five years of solitude, a man can learn to gauge time with astonishing facility. Thorne Creegar had so trained himself.

AND now at last satisfied with his mental time calculations, Creegar rose and began methodically to strap his essential gear together. From the small kitsack he took an atomic pistol, presented to him by the Venusian captain. This he placed beneath his tunic coat. Then, securing the rest of his gear tightly to his shoulder, Creegar stepped out of the compartment and into the narrow aisle of the *tubetrain*.

As he had expected the aisle was not deserted. The conductor stood at the far end. And as he caught sight of Creegar, his jaw fell slack, his face whitened, and he stepped back as if to wheel and make for the next section.

Thorne Creegar's voice, low, calm, cold, arrested him.

"Stay right as you are," Creegar demanded. His hand darted swiftly beneath his tunic coat and brought forth the atomic pistol. He waved it at the white faced conductor ominously, and started down the aisle toward him.

Frightenedly, the conductor watched Creegar advance. Slowly, and without command, he raised his arms above his head, eager to show he was unarmed.

Creegar surveyed him coldly from a distance of several yards.

"Step forward," Creegar commanded, "slowly."

The green tuniced conductor advanced shakily. He was two steps from Creegar when he lunged wildly toward the gun trained on him. It was a frantic, a desperate effort. The effort of a man who considered himself already doomed by one who'd been described

to him as a wild killer.

His expression still unchanged, Creegar met the lunge by stepping back and bringing the barrel of his atomic pistol down hard on the base of the conductor's skull.

Mouth open in choked pain; the conductor fell face forward and unconscious to the floor of the aisle. Creegar stood looking down at him for a moment, then he stepped forward and bent over the unconscious form.



Creegar looked down at the conductor

When he rose a moment later, Creegar still held the atomic pistol in his right hand. But in his left he now held a set of percussion valve brake keys. Emergency keys, designed to halt the *tubetrain* in case of accident or breakdown in any of the mechanism.

Creegar placed these keys in his tunic pocket, then bent over again, grabbing the conductor by the collar of his green uniform and dragging him back down the aisle to the compartment he himself had occupied moments before.

Placing the conductor in his compart-

ment, Creegar found straps to bind and gag the fellow. He left him there two minutes later and went again into the aisle. This time Creegar's movements were sure and well timed. At the end of the section he found the percussion valve brake compartment. There he quickly went to work with the keys he'd taken from the conductor.

Slowly, carefully, Creegar cut off the *tubetrain's* rocket power, meanwhile twisting the brake keys in coordination. Imperceptibly the *tubetrain* slowed shudderingly to a stop.

Creegar had counted on the time it would take for the conductors of the other sections and the *tubetrain's* rocket engineers to signal the apparent breakdown to each other. And he used this time to race to the rear of the first compartment where he found the emergency exit. He smashed the *glasscade* apparatus that set the door's automatic mechanism into action, and stood back while it opened slowly.

Then Creegar was leaping down to the floor of the transportation tunnel, hard rocky terrain that was covered with slippery moisture.

THE tunnel was completely dark save for the scant illumination that streamed from the now stalled *tubetrain*. And Creegar utilized this darkness to the fullest, moving far to the other side of the tunnel until his hands touched the cold wall.

Now Creegar started back in the opposite direction from that in which the *tubetrain* had been traveling. If his calculations had been correct, an emergency exit from the tunnel itself would lie less than a mile off.

Creegar ran, slipping and stumbling on the surface beneath his feet. Not once did he look back, for every second was now important. The delay caused by a wasted minute might mean his life.

For should a *tubetrain* rocket through the tunnel in the other direction, he would be directly in the path of it. The suction and concussion blasts of the rocket tubes could kill him instantly.

Sweat stood out in beads on Creegar's forehead, and his lungs were choked in the heavy dampness of the darkened tube tunnel. But five minutes later, gaspingly, he arrived at the emergency tunnel exit. And even as his hands tore for the lever of the heavy *duralloy* door that would lead him above-ground, Creegar heard the distant *thrumming* of a *tubetrain* approaching from the opposite direction.

Creegar threw his weight against the lever, and the door opened. Clean air swept down into his face, and he pulled himself up onto the steps, blinking in the faint pinpoints of light that danced down into his eyes from the screened aperture above him.

Minutes later Creegar stepped out of the tunnel exit and onto a moonlit stretch of roadway. His face was grim in satisfaction. They might wait for him at the New York terminal, but it would do them little good now.

For this much of his scheme was now completed. And his pursuers, certain that he was aboard the *tubetrain*, would have relaxed their vigilance on the ordinary highways leading into New York. Relaxed long enough to give Creegar time to gain entry.

Creegar looked right and left along the highway now, and then, as if deciding on the safer course, he turned his back on the road and set out resolutely through the fields. . . .

CHAPTER VII

Hudge Closes In

SHERRY BENNET moved nervously back and forth before the window

of her dressing room, her face whitely composed, her eyes alone revealing the anxiety she felt.

Nana appeared at the doorway, her plump red cheeks shining, her old eyes troubled.

"It is late, Sherry," Nana said remindingly.

"I know, I know it is, Nana. But, I," Sherry paused putting her hand to her forehead, "feel as if something dreadful is going on. I feel as if someone—"

"Thorne?" Nana broke in understandingly.

Sherry Bennet nodded. "Nana, I feel as if Thorne is near, and as if he is in grave danger. I, I can't account for it, but something seems to tell me, to shout warning to me—"

"I understand, child," Nana said, crossing the room to her side. "But he's safe, Sherry. Safer now than he ever was those past five years."

Sherry sighed tremulously, and sat down weakly. "But he's alone, Nana, so awfully alone! If only I could have gone to him— If I could only have met him when he was released—"

Nana placed her hand on Sherry's shoulder in silent understanding.

"It's late, child," she said a moment later. "You should be dressed by now. That, that," Nana seemed to choke on the name, "Bellham will be here for you shortly to take you to the dinner party."

Sherry looked up at Nana. "You think I'm wrong, don't you, Nana?"

Nana shook her head. "It's not my decision, Sherry. It's you who must go through with it. It's you who must sit beside him tonight while the announcement of your marriage is made. I don't know if the bargain you made was a just one, child. Only time will tell that."

"I know I'm right, Nana," Sherry said softly. "It is at least something

done for Thorne. Something I was powerless to do alone."

Nana didn't answer. She moved heavily over to a row of soft tunic gowns and busied herself in preparing them . . .

AT NEW YORK'S central *tubetrain* depot, Lee Hudge waited restlessly in the dispatcher's office. To the clerk in charge of the office, Hudge said for the tenth time:

"What's holding that damned *tubetrain*?"

The clerk looked up in irritation. "I don't know, sir. I've told you we haven't had a report from it as yet."

Hudge drummed savagely on the edge of the *glasscade* railing at his elbow, his clawlike fingers repeating and repeating a rhythmic tattoo.

The *vizascreen* below the office dispatch board crackled into silver luminescence. The clerk sprang before it. Hudge looked up with tense expectancy.

A rocket engineer's face appeared on the screen.

"Tubetrain twelve, proceeding to New York after emergency stop," he said. "Details in report on arrival."

The screen crackled again, and the face faded from it.

Lee Hudge, smashing his hand flat against the railing, cursed disgustedly.

"Report on arrival!" he snorted. "Doesn't he realize consular officers are waiting for his arrival? Doesn't he realize that the information concerning the dangerous criminal he carries on that *tubetrain* is more important than his efforts to regain his schedule and make up lost time?"

The clerk, shrinking slightly from Hudge's wrath, remained silent.

"Get back in communication with that *tubetrain*," Hudge blazed. "Find out the details of that delay. I'll be

back here in a few minutes. I'll expect a report!"

He stalked from the office and out into the crowded depot waiting terminal. Shoving unceremoniously through the crowds that milled the huge hall, Hudge found his way to the pair of deputy consular officers he'd stationed in wait for the *tubetrain*.

"Evans," Hudge snapped at one. "Communicate with the office at headquarters. Tell them I want a special detail assigned to the highway entrances to the city—at once."

To the other deputy, Hudge said: "Stay here another five minutes. If I'm not back in that time return to headquarters and join a highway watch squad."

He fought his way back through the milling crowds to the dispatcher's office. The clerk inside waited expectantly, a little frightenedly, with the information he'd obtained.

"Well?" Hudge demanded.

"The prisoner you were waiting for, sir," said the clerk. "He slowed the train after knocking a conductor unconscious. It was near a tunnel emergency exit. He must have made his escape through there."

Hudge swore bitterly. "Just as I'd feared!" he grated. "A damned bunch of incompetent jackasses. I shouldn't have expected anything else!"

The clerk backed slightly away from Hudge's wrath, as though his words had physical force.

Lee Hudge stepped quickly over to a *communaboard* panel on the wall of the office. Swiftly, his finger flicked the dial numbers below the panel to the combination he desired. The panel screen grew saffron, then silver.

A girl's face appeared on the panel. Bellham's secretary.

"I want the commissioner," Hudge snapped.

"I'm sorry, Officer Hudge," the girl's image declared. "He's left his office. I don't think he'll return. He has a dinner engagement at his estate in several hours. You might reach him there, if you try."

Hudge's lips went tight. "You get in touch with him for me, I haven't the time. Tell him I said Creegar gave us the slip once more, that he's still at large."

Hudge flicked the switch below the panel and turned away, starting for the door.

"Officer," the clerk said stammeringly, "if there's anything we can do—"

Hudge cut off the sentence with a savage glance of contempt. Then, wordlessly, he slammed out of the office . . .

THORNE CREEGAR walked several miles through the fields until he found the highway stretch he sought. Then he stepped out onto its hard shining surface, confident now that he'd thrown off any chance of a last minute pursuit.

He walked on perhaps a half mile along this stretch before he heard the approach of a *rockabout* in the distance, and then, grimly satisfied, he stepped to the center of the roadway and turned to face the direction from which the vehicle was coming.

When the *rockabout* grew into an increasingly larger blur in the distance, Creegar began waving his arms in signal. He continued this as the blur took shape and hurtled toward him.

Creegar knew now that he could be seen by the occupant, or occupants of the *rockabout*, and increased the frantic signals he directed toward it. Satisfied, he saw that it was slowing. He was directly in its headlights when at last it rolled to a stop less than five

yards from him.

Creegar stepped out from the glare of the headlights and went around to the side of the *rockabout*. It was a sports model, driven by a sallow, pimple faced youth in a multicolored tunic jacket.

"Something wrong, buddy?" the youth asked, leaning out and peering out through the darkness at Creegar.

"Very much so," Creegar said. He drew his atomic pistol. "I'm urgently in need of a conveyance, my friend. I'm going to borrow yours. Hope when you get it back its still in one piece."

The youth's jaw fell slack, his face going ashen.

"Get out," Creegar ordered.

Frantically, the youth scrambled from the *rockabout*, obviously eager to do as he was told.

Creegar waved him contemptuously over to the side of the highway with his atomic pistol. He climbed into the machine and behind the controls.

"Don't worry too much," Creegar advised him. "I think you'll get this back!" Then he gunned the rocket exhausts experimentally, shoved the atomic pistol back beneath his tunic jacket, released the pressure brakes and shot off. The white and startled face of the pimply youth in the multi-colored tunic coat faded behind him. Ahead, in the darkness of the horizon, he could see the vast encompassing glow that haloed the metropolis of New York. His jaw set in a tight line. He was closer, and every minute that passed would bring him still closer to the fulfillment of his burning vengeance . . .

LEE HUDGE, moving swiftly along the line of powerful red colored scout *rockabouts*, which comprised the emergency squad of the Law Commis-

sion's Highway Patrol, gave his final instructions to the deputies behind their controls.

"All possible avenues of entrance are to be scoured," Hudge declared emphatically. "Not a vehicle is to be allowed to pass without a search. You all have descriptions of the man. You're instructed to bring him in dead, if that's the only way you can do it. But bring him in you must, or God help you!"

He stepped back to his own staff patrol *rockabout*, climbing in beside the uniformed driver who sat behind the wheel. The long line of *rockabouts* blasted into life, the flame from their tubes spitting through the darkness.

Hudge licked his thin lips in unconscious anticipation . . .

CHAPTER VIII

Inside New York

WHEN Judson Bellham left his ornate offices in the Federation Law Commission buildings, he was unaware that Lee Hudge was at that moment unsuccessfully trying to get in touch with him from the dispatch office of the *tube-train* terminal.

Preoccupied with the thoughts of the dinner party to which he was already slightly late, Bellham hastily ordered his *rockabout* run from the building's storage ramp, and waited impatiently for it on the sidewalk of the crowded thoroughfare.

And it was less than a minute before the attendant brought his *rockabout* to the curb, when the seedy little man in spacefaring garb of soiled raggedness nudged him.

Bellham looked down, startled, and then into his red face there came a deeper crimson flush of anxiety and swift rage. But there was recognition, too, in that glance.

"Important," the little space tar murmured, looking away from Bellham. He was bandy-legged, gnarled. His face was space seamed. "Important," he repeated. "Shipments arriving tonight. Skipper has a case of jitters."

Bellham, taking a cue from the little space tar, turned his head slightly, scarcely moving his lips in the hot retort he hissed.

"Damn you, why in the hell are you insane enough to come here?"

"Important," the little man hissed fiercely this time. "There was no other way to get in touch with you. Didn't risk the regular channels." He paused. "Skipper didn't dare. Jittery, I tell you."

"The double crossing Venusian swine!" Bellham spat. "This sounds like another underhand move. I'm not forgetting his handling of the assignment I gave him today!" There was venom in his voice.

The gnarled little space tar still pretended to look the other way, casually squirting a stream of Venusian tobacco juice onto the curb.

"Take your choice," he hissed. "The skipper just didn't like the way you tried to make him run small-time errands. But he's dumping the shipment tonight. Space port. Smart thing to get down there."

Bellham was fighting hard to control the vast surging rage which sent the blood pounding to his temples.

"Tell him I'll be there. Tell him one more double-cross will sign his death warrant!"

The *rockabout* pulled up before them, then. The little space tar strolled casually onward, not looking back. Crimson faced, Bellham forced himself to keep his rage in check, forced himself to climb in behind the controls of his *rockabout*.

Savagely, he threw the throttle for-

ward, shattering the air with the deafening concussion of the rocket tubes' blasting. The *rockabout* shot from the curb and out into the roaring traffic lanes. Bellham, hands gripped tightly to the controls, realized that his palms were damp, his forehead beaded with sweat.

Wrathfully, he cursed. But his overwhelming rage did nothing to ease the horribly nibbling doubt. He threw the throttle still farther forward, and the *rockabout* leaped onward with ever mounting speed . . .

THORNE CREEGAR, still speeding through the darkness toward the city, saw the headlights of the *rockabout* roaring toward him after he'd been behind the controls of his own commandeered vehicle less than thirty minutes.

And abruptly, the moment his eyes picked out the pinpoint of light that pointed out the other *rockabout*, he eased down the throttle lever gradually back. Moments later, when the pinpoints of light roaring down the highway toward him had grown larger, his mouth went tight in satisfaction and he slowed his own machine to a stop along the right side of the highway.

Creegar clambered out of the *rockabout* swiftly then, pausing once to glance again at the approaching machine. Then he crossed swiftly to the other side of the highway, taking cover in the concealment of a narrow underpass abutment.

He waited there, as the *rockabout* continued to bear down toward the stalled machine he'd left on the other side of the highway. Less than two minutes later the headlights of the approaching vehicle picked out the silhouette of the stalled machine.

The approaching *rockabout* slowed cautiously, easing up on the deserted

vehicle suspiciously. It halted ten feet from the *rockabout* Creegar had left there, almost directly opposite Creegar's hiding place.

The outline of the machine, and its scarlet coloring, told Creegar even before the uniformed consular patrol officers emerged from either door, that his suspicions in regard to its identity had been correct.

There were only two of the patrol officers, however, and now both of them were advancing on the deserted *rockabout*. They both carried drawn atomic pistols, and stepped in at the stalled machine from opposite sides.

Creegar tensed himself. He heard a startled exclamation from one of the officers.

"Strange—no one here!"

The second officer muttered something conveying equal surprise. The first jerked the door of the *rockabout* open. Creegar edged out slightly from his concealment.

"Take a look in the other side," the first officer called. The second stepped forward, opening the other door. Creegar tensed himself.

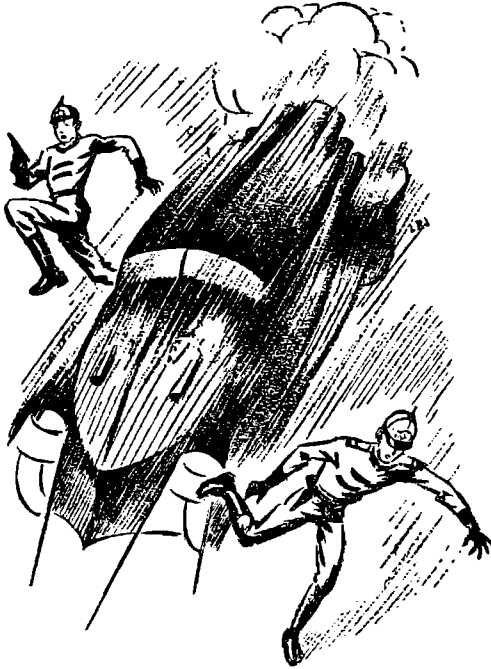
The pair stuck their heads into the deserted *rockabout*. This was like a starter's gun to Creegar. He leaped from his concealment, dashing with head lowered toward the consular patrol *rockabout* only fifteen feet away from him and directly in his path.

He made the door as he heard the shouted exclamation from one of the officers.

"There he is!"

And then Creegar was in the patrol *rockabout*, his fingers finding the throttle lever and flicking the rocket tubes to instant life. One of the officers had left the deserted vehicle and was running toward the patrol *rockabout*. He was waving his atomic pistol indecisively.

Creegar bent his head low behind the shield before the control panel.



The officers leaped frantically aside

He thundered the *rockabout* directly at the figure of the officer standing in the center of the highway. He had a blurred vision of that worthy's body leaping frantically to one side, and then Creegar swung the machine sharply about, rocketting back just in time to repeat the process on the second officer, who was also forced to leap aside to save his life.

Now Thorne Creegar was headed for New York, and in a machine that could run the gauntlet of patrol without question. He knew the speed of the rockets beneath him, and found additional comfort in the knowledge that it would be impossible to try to pursue him in the machine he had abandoned.

Time, now, was the only object standing between Thorne Creegar and his goal. And every second lessened that . . .

LEE HUDGE cursed impatiently as he looked at the chronometer of the control panel of the patrol *rockabout* in which he sat. His driver, eyes riveted to the shining stretch of roadway before him, squirmed slightly in anticipation of the outburst that seemed due.

"More time wasted," Hudge snapped irritably. "I'm beginning to wonder what in the hell sort of efficiency this damned outfit has." His pale eyes were frosted in anger. "One man against the entire local forces of the Federation Law Commission, and he's still at large. Get in touch with the other squads again."

The driver reached forward to the panel and took the communiphone from the hook. Controlling the machine with one hand, he held the instrument with the other, speaking into it.

"All call," he said into the mouthpiece. "All call. General report to central patrol headquarters."

Hudge gazed impatiently out at the roadside whipping by, while his driver waited for the answering reports to come in from the other *rockabouts*.

Several minutes passed, then the driver placed the communiphone back in place before the panel. Still keeping his eyes on the roadway ahead, he said to Hudge: "Others reporting in, sir. No trace as yet. All patrols accounted for excepting number twelve. No report from that *rockabout*, Sir."

"No report?" Hudge's voice was harsh.

"No, sir."

"Try that patrol again," Hudge ordered.

The driver once more took communiphone from the panel hook. He spoke into the mouthpiece. "Special, patrol twelve. Report at once to central *rockabout*. Report at once."

The silence was heavy for fully thirty

seconds while Hudge and his driver waited.

The driver took his eyes from the roadway, glancing at Hudge for the first time. There was alarm in his voice.

"Still no answering report from twelve, sir."

Hudge, with ominous quiet, said: "Try once more." His lips were set tightly in a thin line.

Again the driver repeated the call. Again the silence. His voice, this time, was definitely shaky.

"No answer, sir."

"Take me back to the Law Commission offices immediately," Hudge snapped. "Get in touch with patrol ten. Tell them to cover the route assigned to twelve. Tell them to call in at the Commission offices the instant they learn anything about the maneuvers of that other patrol."

The driver swung the *rockabout* to the left and up a steep incline that would come around toward the direction Hudge had ordered. Once on the highway above, he bent toward the communi-phone panel hook.

"Calling," the driver said. "Calling. Ten. Ten. Ten. Take over patrol route of twelve. Report to Commission offices the moment anything is learned." He placed the instrument back on the panel.

"There's little doubt," Hudge said half aloud and to himself, "that that's where he's heading if he's gotten through us." Then, grimly, he settled back, eyes half lidded, as the *rockabout* sped back toward the Commission offices in New York . . .

CREEGAR deserted the crimson patrol *rockabout* on a third layer highway in the downtown heart of the metropolis. He waited only to watch it lifted on the ramp parking apparatus, then he turned off, found the lift

moving down to the pedestrian lanes,* and stepped into it.

It was only a matter of four blocks to the buildings which housed the offices of the Federation Law Commission, and Creegar found himself unconsciously pausing now and then to look about at the towering splendor of the metropolis. Five years on a tiny hell hole of a penal planet had almost completely erased his recollections of the familiar sights of New York.

But now this very alien feeling served to evoke bitterness and increased determination rather than nostalgia. This was the world from which he had been barred. This was the world from which he was even now an exile. This was the society, the civilization, that had torn from him his last vestiges of hope, respect, decency.

He could see the towering central structure of the Federation Law Commission ahead of him, stretching two hundred stories into the glare of the starless sky. He could see the highways, layers on layers of them, ribboning and spiralling around the five hundred foot statue that crested the smallest, and oldest of the Federation Law Commission buildings. The statue of the Goddess of Justice.

Creegar's lips went flat against his white teeth in a humorless and sardonic grin. Justice, the symbol of this world of super perfection—this civilization without error—the civilization that weighed, and judged, and cast from it the unworthy elements.

Once he had been a part of it. Now

* *Pedestrian lanes.* Twenty-third century civilization solved its traffic difficulties with a graduated highway system for all mechanical traffic. The ground level pedestrian lanes, walled off from mechanical traffic were accessible through elevator systems at every block and intersection. Thus, people leaving vehicles merely had to step into these elevators to be taken down to the pedestrian, or ground level, lanes.

he was an outcast, an alien. These people who thronged past him even now. These smiling, laughing, chattering people had once been warm and friendly and alike. But that was before their era of perfection had cast him from them.

It was four minutes later when Creegar arrived at the central building of the Federation Law Commission.

Creegar moved through the crowds unnoticed, stepping into the vast lobby of the central building and into a compression elevator moments later. At the hundred and fiftieth floor, he stepped from the elevator and into a deserted corridor. The feeling that assailed him as he walked down the corridor was once again bitter and alien in the recollections it brought back.

At the turn of the corridor there was another passage, narrower and briefer than the one before. Another elevator was at the end of this smaller passage. An orderly, gray tuniced and wearing an atomic pistol holstered importantly to his side, stood before this single lift.

He saw Creegar approaching, his eyes noting the plain shabbiness of Creegar's tunic, the kitsack strapped to his shoulder. He moved forward toward him.

"Sorry," said the orderly, "you must be on the wrong floor. Nothing but Commission offices above this floor."

He was a thickset, squat and burly shouldered fellow. His tone was unnecessarily authoritative.

"You haven't given me any startling information," Creegar said quietly. "I know where I am and where I'm going."

The orderly's face reddened, he stepped swiftly up to Creegar, his hand dropping to his holstered atomic pistol.

"Listen, space bum," he began.

He had a weapon half out of the hol-

ster when Creegar's slicing left hook caught him on the chin. Expressionlessly, Creegar watched the orderly reel back against the wall. Then he stepped in and caught him with a right uppercut, vicious, final. The orderly slumped to the floor, eyes closed.

Creegar lifted the orderly to his feet, and dragged him to the door of a maintenance closet. He opened this, shoved the inert body of the orderly inside, closed it, and snapped the outside lock. Then he stepped over to the automatic power percussion elevator.

This was the private lift used only by consular officers of the Federation Law Commission. Creegar himself had used it so many countless times that his operation of the mechanism now was automatic. It stopped at any one of ten floors spaced through the fifty remaining stories to the roof. But in between the ninth and the tenth stop, Creegar knew, there was another. A little known and seldom used outlet for the private purposes of the commissioner.

Creegar set the mechanism for this floor, and the outlet that would lead him directly to Bellham's private offices.

When the elevator arrived at this secret floor stop, Creegar set the mechanism so that it could not be used again until he released it. He stepped out, then, into a thickly carpeted little corridor at the end of which there was a heavy door paneled in *Junovian* ebony. Silently, he moved down the corridor to this door. Cautiously, he placed his hand on the entrance panel and felt the door give behind the weight he put against it.

He listened for an instant. Listened to see if any sound came from the luxurious private office on the other side of that door. There was only silence.

Creegar pushed the door full open, stepping swiftly into the softly lighted

room. In his hand he held his atomic pistol ready.

THE luxuriously furnished room, Judson Bellham's private office, was deserted.

Creegar closed the door noiselessly behind him, and still holding the atomic pistol before him, moved to the center of the room.

There was another door at the far end of the room. A door which, Creegar knew, led to the general offices where Bellham's secretaries worked.

Creegar stepped across the room to this door and stood there a moment listening. From the faint buzzing sound that came to his ears, he was aware that only the communications board was in use, and that the only person out there would be one of the secretaries busily taking the messages for the following day. He opened this door slightly, peering out into the other office through the crack. His assumption was correct. The only occupant of that office was a secretary, absorbed in detail work at the far end of that large room.

Softly, Creegar closed the door again, snapping the *electrolock* switch on it as he did so.

Then Creegar turned back to survey Bellham's office. Grimly, he stepped over to the desk in the center of the room and began quickly rifling the drawers. One sheaf he came across, labeled, "The Creegar Case," he flicked through with bitter contempt, then tore crosswise and threw on the floor.

There were other papers, most of them official in nature, some of them personal. But none of them contained what Creegar sought. He finished his search through the desk and stepped over to a series of wall files. These, too, revealed nothing of the evidence he sought.

Creegar stepped swiftly over to one

of the ebony paneled walls. He thought a moment, recalling to mind the panel he sought, then his fingers pressed hard against it. It swung inward, revealing a small safe.

Five years before, Creegar had been the only man other than Judson Bellham who knew the combination of this small safe. Now, frowning, he searched his memory, and after several minutes began expertly flicking the dial along the electro-combination units. An instant later, and he was swinging the safe open.

And at that instant, just as Creegar was groping for the papers inside the safe, he heard the sudden *clacking* of the *wordagraph* machine in the corner of the room.

Creegar wheeled, looking at the machine as it continued to jump along inside its *glassicade* confinement, his eyes gazing puzzledly at the message ribboning forth from the paper roller it contained.

That was Bellham's private machine. It was not connected with the communications board in the outer office, Creegar recalled. It received private messages from outside the city. It was obvious that whoever was sending the message *clacking* forth from the machine at this instant imagined Bellham to be in the office.

Creegar left the safe momentarily and stepped across to the *wordagraph*. He looked down at the message rolling forth just as the machine stopped.

"REPEAT. SPACE PORT
VITAL. DON'T FAIL."

There was no signature. Creegar frowned, rereading the message. Obviously it was meant for Bellham. But what did it mean? Who was its source?

Creegar shook his head frowningly, then left the side of the machine and went back to the wall safe. Again he was groping his hand toward the pa-

pers inside, when another sound arrested him.

The sound of a voice behind him.

A voice he would never forget.

"Stay right as you are, Creegar, until I tell you to turn!"

The high, hard, grimly triumphant voice of Lee Hudge!

CHAPTER IX

Hudge Strikes

THORNE CREEGAR felt his heart grow cold inside him. His palms were suddenly damp, his forehead moist. His stomach went through a series of swift acrobatics.

Hudge, from the sound of his voice, was coming across the room toward him.

"That's right, Creegar. Just hold that pose. No tricks."

Then Creegar felt Hudge's hands flicking expertly, swiftly, through his tunic pockets. They found the atomic pistol and removed it.

"Now," said Hudge. His voice this time indicated that he had stepped back a pace. "Turn around, slowly."

Creegar turned around, gazing into the muzzle of Hudge's atomic pistol. Above the gun, Hudge's gray face was haloed in unholy exaltation of triumph. His pale eyes were hard and bright, his mouth sadistically tight in pleasure.

"Been a long time since I've had this pleasure, Creegar," Hudge said in his high thin voice. "I heard you dropped in on this planet, and I've been awfully impatient waiting to see you."

Creegar's lips went flat against his white, even teeth. His eyes were hard with contempt.

"Go ahead, bloodhound," he spat. "Pump some atomic slugs into my stomach. Burn an arm off if it pleases your fancy."

Lee Hudge smiled thinly. "Why should I, Creegar? Justice will take care of your case from now on. Justice almost erred when you were released. But that will soon be rectified. It was probably just as well you were released. It put your neck right where it ought to be. Now the job will be done thoroughly."

"Where is Bellham?" Creegar asked tonelessly.

Hudge gave another thin imitation of a smile. "You'd like to top off your rotten record by murdering him, wouldn't you?" He paused. "Bellham is at his estate. As soon as his dinner party is through, I'm sure he'll be delighted to know you asked about him. He'll probably even pass on the word to Sherry Bennet."

Hudge's sentence cut deep into Creegar's chest. There was a swift, sharp, horribly wrenching ache, and the pain of the lash was mirrored in his eyes.

Lee Hudge read this instantly. He grinned.

"That dinner party tonight is to announce the forthcoming marriage of Sherry to Judson Bellham, Creegar. I have a hunch you aren't aware of that. I don't imagine they let you keep up with the social news in the home you occupied for the last five years."

If the very mention of Sherry's name had been a lash to Creegar, this tore raggedly into his soul itself. His face went hard in disbelief, then deadly rage.

"You lousy swine, Hudge!"

Hudge shrugged. "Anyway you like it, Creegar. Just because I try to keep you abreast of the social whirl is no reason for blowing your brains out in rage."

Creegar seemed to reel. His eyes were clouded with nameless aching emotions. He put his hands to his face. Against the rage that was dying inside

him grew a sickening, overpowering realization that what Lee Hudge was saying was the truth.

Hudge waved the atomic pistol in his hand.

"Step away from the wall, Creegar. Move over to that door." He pointed to the door that led to the outer offices. The door through which he'd entered to surprise Creegar.

Blindly, Creegar started across the room. His hands hung limply at his sides. His gait was uncertain. His shoulders had slumped brokenly. A red torrent of pain and rage was swimming wildly around in his brain.

HE was passing the desk when something inside him broke asunder, releasing the tidal wave of hate and fury and anguish that had welled behind the walls of his indomitable will for five hideous years.



Creegar hurled the heavy box

Thorne Creegar went temporarily insane.

Wheeling, he grabbed for the wireless communication box on Bellham's desk. He didn't hear Hudge's shouted, startled warning as his hands closed around it. He heard nothing but the raging swelling torrent of madness that thundered inside his brain.

Hudge shouted warning a second time before he fired.

But Creegar hurled the heavy box at Hudge's skull instants before the atomic pistol blasted forth. And then through a red screen of rage, Creegar saw Hudge's face, bloody and anguished, sinking to the floor.

Creegar stumbled toward Hudge's prostrate form. Stumbled forward with his hands working madly in the impulse to take that scrawny neck between his strong fingers and choke the life from that body.

And as suddenly as it had come upon him, the madness washed away. And Creegar stood there, reeling drunkenly, the smell of his own burned flash acrid in his nostrils.

It was then he realized numbly that his left shoulder was throbbing violently, and that Hudge's single shot had blazed deeply into the flesh there.

Creegar looked down at Hudge, then. The little consular officer lay sprawled face forward on the thick rug, blood pooling from a deep gash—caused by the side of the box—on the side of his head.

Lee Hudge didn't seem to be alive.

Creegar shuddered. Then he stepped around the body and picked up the atomic pistol that had fallen from Hudge's hand. He straightened up, then, and staggered over to the door that opened onto the outer offices.

They were deserted. Hudge had apparently come alone. The communications board operator had fled, undoubtedly for help, when she'd heard the struggle.

Like a man in a trance, Creegar turned away, stuffing the atomic pistol in his tunic, and moving back across the room to the door by which he'd entered.

He found the elevator at the end of the small corridor. He stumbled dazedly, weakly, into it . . .

JUDSON BELLHAM'S white, even smile concealed the nervous tension that mounted inside him as he stood in the drawing room of his luxurious country manor receiving the guests for his dinner party.

Attired impeccably in formal tunic garb, Bellham smilingly nodded to a guest, made a general answer to a general remark, then abruptly murmured an inaudible apology, excusing himself.

Swiftly, Bellham moved from the drawing room through the other rooms already crowded with guests until at last he closed the door behind him in the seclusion of his study.

He mopped his brow, then, and stepped to his desk, where he pressed an electronic buzzer. A moment later, clad in the striped tunic of a butler, a short, bald, wiry little man appeared.

"You want me, chief?"

Bellham nodded. "Anything else on word from the space port, Mecks?"

Mecks shook his bald head. "Nothing. But I'm standing by for another word from 'em. It should be coming shortly." He paused, then: "What're you going to do about that deal, chief?"

Bellham's eyes were troubled, even though his voice was harsh. "I'll settle that double-crossing swine, Mecks. I'll settle him for good. It's nothing more than a damned hold-up. He thinks he can get away with it, but he won't."

Mecks smiled in anticipation of action. "You'll need a few of the boys, then?" he asked.

Bellham nodded. "I'll want you along. You can bring Hapes, and any two others who'll be able to keep their mouths shut." He paused. "Go upstairs and see if Miss Bennet is ready yet, Mecks. She's been up there ever since she arrived. She'll have to take over the welcoming of the guests while I'm at the space port."

Mecks' face was inscrutable. "Sure, chief. How long you think the job'll take us?"

"Not long," Bellham promised, "if we work fast."

Mecks disappeared, and Bellham rose, lighting an expensive Venusian cigar. He took three or four draughts from it, then threw it violently to the floor, crushing it into the rich rug with his foot.

He wondered what had happened to Hudge, and why he hadn't heard from him by now. Cursing, he started from the room . . .

IN the Captain's cabin on the dirty little Venusian space cargo craft, the bandy-legged little space tar sloppily saluted his fat and blue jowled skipper who sat on his bunk holding a bottle and a glass.

"You pass the word on to him?" the Venusian captain asked.

The space tar nodded, grinning. "He almost blew his mental rockets right there on the street."

The Venusian captain laughed heartily, blue jowls shaking.

"That's fine. Fine. Were you able to learn how the lad is progressing?"

"I found out that they haven't nabbed him yet. He's still at large. Slipped out of four traps laid for him already."

The Venusian skipper nodded in satisfaction. "Good. I like that boy. I think he'll be able to take care of himself. Even with Bellham's bloodhounds

on his scent."

The space tar started toward the door. He paused.

"When do you want the cargo brought topside?" he asked.

"Not until we're ready to unload," the space skipper answered him. "I think it will prove very damned embarrassing to the law commissioner, eh?"

"He'll come ready to play the game for big stakes," the space tar said reflectively. "Our hides won't be worth a damn if he has anything to say about it."

"We'll be waiting for him, and we'll be ready," the Venusian skipper said reassuringly.

"We're losing a damned fine thing by this," said the bandy legged little chap.

"You boys maybe want to back out on me?" the Venusian space skipper asked, the humor leaving his eyes.

The tar shook his head rapidly. "You've never let us down yet. We're with you, every last one of the crew." He suddenly grinned. "Hell, where would we be stepping out on you now, even if we wanted to?"

The Venusian captain laughed. "Good sense," he commended. Then: "Get word to Bellham's estate over the private outlet. Repeat our message. We can't afford to let him miss this landing."

The bandy legged little space tar made another sloppy salute and stepped out of the cabin . . .

CHAPTER X

Hudge Returns

THORNE CREEGAR felt the wind whipping his cheeks, and was aware that the cowl of the *rockabout* he'd commandeered was open.

He realized, too, numbly, that he was speeding along a stretch of suburban highway and that there was an automatic destination commanding his dazed mind.

And then, after four more miles, he was aware that the highway was turning in a familiar series of graduated curves, climbing high along a cliff side overlooking the sea.

Miles after that, Creegar saw ahead of him the huge, brightly lighted mansion.

Judson Bellham's country estate.

Bellham was there. Hudge had said he was to be there. And Sherry. Creegar closed his eyes against the thought of Sherry and the bewildering pain it brought.

There was one thought blazed searingly into Creegar's mind. The destruction of Judson Bellham. He would kill him, throttle him with his bare hands.

Creegar's fingers tightened convulsively around the controls of the *rockabout* at this thought.

Then, minutes later, he was bringing the *rockabout* around through the seaside driveway that led to the grounds of the mansion. This was the rear entrance. His selection of it had been automatic.

In the shelter of thick trees, Creegar halted his machine and climbed out. From his tunic he tore the atomic pistol he'd taken from Lee Hudge.

From the open windows of the brightly lighted mansion as he advanced cautiously across the wide stretch of lawn, Creegar could hear soft music, human voices, laughter.

Creegar made his way to the wall length window that opened before an unoccupied veranda. There, in the concealment of the darkness, he looked into the brightly lighted interior of the Bellham drawing room.

It was filled with formally attired men and women. Bellham's guests. Creegar recognized many of them. But his eyes paused nowhere, continuing to search that crowd for the hated form of Judson Bellham.

Bellham was not there.

Creegar went on then, furtively, to other windows. Bellham was in none of the other rooms. And then Creegar saw the light in the large second floor window. Bellham's study.

Judson Bellham would be up there.

Creegar went around the house until he found a trellis strong enough to hold his weight.

Moments later, he stood on the ledge outside the window of Bellham's study. The heavy drapes, although showing light, kept him from seeing into the room. Hesitating only a moment, Creegar raised his arm, holding the atomic pistol by the barrel.

He brought it crashing into the glass-icade pane of the window. Once, twice, he smashed against that surface as it splintered beneath the blows. Then he was kicking the remaining segments of glassicade away with his foot, stepping into the room.

CREEGAR stood in the room, atomic pistol held in his hand, staring at the startled girl who faced him.

Sherry Bennet!

"Thorne!" the name was torn from Sherry's lips in a startled exclamation of incredulity, terror and anguish.

"I never knew," Creegar said thickly.

"Oh, Thorne!" Sherry started toward him now.

"Stand back!" Creegar's words were like blows. He raised the atomic pistol, training it on Sherry.

White faced, her hazel eyes welling in bewildered fear, Sherry paused.

"I never know," Creegar said

harshly, "that you'd be with the rest of them. I never imagined that you'd been in on the scheme from the start. I thought it was all Bellham's doing. You might have thought of a less horrible manner of eliminating me, Sherry. You might have—" His words trailed off, and he swayed slightly as the pain in his shoulder stabbed searingly across his dazed mind.

Then, thickly, Creegar demanded: "Where's Bellham?"

"Thorne," Sherry sobbed, "you're wounded!"

"I killed Lee Hudge," Creegar said thickly. "Now it's Bellham I want. Where is he?"

Sherry's cheeks were wet with tears. "Oh, Thorne, Thorne," she sobbed. "What have they done to you? What have they made of you? Please, please let me help you. Put down that gun. I beg you, Thorne. Let me help you get away from here before it's too late."

"Where is Bellham?" Creegar repeated.

"He's not here, Thorne," Sherry said desperately. "I don't know where he's gone. But he'll be back, and then they'll crucify you. Leave, please leave!"

In the corner of the study, a miniature, *glassicade* enclosed *wordagraph* started clacking.

Creegar looked at it dazedly, and still keeping the atomic pistol trained on Sherry, stumbled over to it. The clacking ceased as he reached its side.

The message that had just come through swam before his eyes as he tried to bring it into focus.

"REPEAT. SPACE PORT VITAL. DON'T FAIL."

Creegar rubbed his left hand across his eyes, then he turned from the machine. This was the same message that had come through on the larger *wordagraph* in Bellham's office, he realized

foggily. Space port. Space port.

He waved the atomic pistol at Sherry.

"You'll come with me," he declared thickly. "You'll come with me. Bellham is at the space port. I can't leave you here to spread the alarm. You'll come with me."

Sherry gazed at him, then decision came into her torment filled eyes.

"Yes, Thorne. I'll go with you," she said softly.

Creegar motioned to the shattered window. "There. Only exit. Go ahead of me."

Sherry hesitated an instant. Creegar waved the gun in mute command. Sherry moved over to the window. Creegar followed behind her . . .

THROUGH the blackness of the space harbor, the tiny flotilla of six single rocket lifecraft nosed carefully along toward the landing wharfs.

In the lead craft, the Venusian captain, a rank cigar between his fat lips, softly issued orders to his bandy-legged little helmsman.

"Cut rocket," he said quietly.

"A harbor patrol in sight?" the little pilot asked.

The Venusian captain shook his head. "No. Bellham wouldn't risk that. He'll have to handle this himself. We don't have to worry about patrols. But we can't risk drawing attention from some of the larger space craft in the harbor. They might do their own looking around."

The craft glided along on the momentum remaining, and the others in the small flotilla behind it also cut off power.

Minutes later, the Venusian captain said: "All right. Open rocket power again. Wharfside three bursts off."

The bandy-legged space tar gave the tube a triple throttle, then cut it abruptly. His hand found the degravi-

tator brake, and the small space craft settled slowly downward.

"Good," the Captain commended. "Make temporary mooring, and we'll get the others unloaded."

Scant minutes after that, ten grizzled space tars, under the swift and quiet direction of the Venusian captain, were unloading thick crates onto the rusted planking of the dark and deserted wharf.

When the cargo was finally transferred to the wharf, the fat space skipper called his men before him.

"You know the instructions," he said softly. "A brief display of resistance, then surrender. Have several crates half-opened by the time they arrive. Be apparently at work on the others. Good luck. Stand by."

He turned, motioning the bandy-legged space tar who had piloted his own craft. The two of them clambered back into the lifecraft. Thirty seconds later, it coughed into rocket power and shot up and away from the wharf-side . . .

JUDSON BELLHAM, in the first of the two *rockabouts* shooting along the super-highway toward the space port, hunched grimly forward beside the wiry, baldheaded little Mecks.

"He'll be expecting conversation, maybe a deal, a pay-off," Bellham said angrily. "But that's where he'll make his mistake. There won't be any pay-off. I'll shut his mouth the easy way. The sure way."

"What about the stuff?" Mecks said. "It'd be a crime to let it go to waste. Couldn't the boys bring it in?"

Bellham shook his head. "Not this time. Not under these circumstances. Too risky. Leave it there. The bodies will be found around it, and I'll see that the commission interprets the

whole thing as a hi-jack attempt gone wrong."

"You'll be cutting off a good entry for future use," Mecks reminded him.

"There are other entries," Bellham said. "And even this one will only be cut off temporarily."

Mecks said nothing. The *rockabout* thundered down on a cross maze of graduated highway levels.

"Take the rear road to the old wharfs," Bellham instructed his driver.

They swerved off sharply into the narrow underpass Bellham had indicated. Behind them, Bellham noted in the *vizapanel*, the other *rockabout* continued to follow.

Minutes after that, Mecks suddenly cut the power on the *rockabout*. They were moving through almost inky darkness in the unlighted underpass now, and proceeding at half the former speed.

"Only a quarter of a mile ahead," Bellham said suddenly. "Halt it in another hundred yards."

They came to a stop. Bellham was the first out of the *rockabout*. The machine behind them was just drawing to a stop. Mecks was out beside Bellham now.

Three men climbed out of the second *rockabout* and joined them. All had swarthy, pock-marked skin, the almost inevitable identification tags of Saturnians.

Bellham took a large, vicious looking atomic pistol from his tunic. Mecks had already brought his own into view. The others displayed similar weapons.

"I'll approach the wharf from the right, with Mecks," Bellham said. "You three come up from the left, but delay for two minutes after we start. When you step in, shoot if you have to; but only if you have to. I don't think they'll resist at first. They expect bartering."

Bellham started off through the darkness with Mecks at his side. Ahead of them, faintly, they could hear muffled voices coming from the abandoned space wharf.

"The swine are already there," Bellham grated. . . .

CREEGAR was fighting hard against the sick dizziness that assailed him with every necessary motion of his badly injured left shoulder. The roadway ahead of him blurred dangerously into silver mist with ever succeeding second, and it required every last ounce of his tortured will power to keep the thundering *rockabout* on the stretch of highway.

On the seat beside him, Sherry Bennet lay gagged and bound. Her hazel eyes mute testimony of the anguish and terror she was enduring.

Creegar didn't see the approaching maze of graduated super-highways until it was almost upon him, and then, acting merely by instinct, he threw the *rockabout* into a sharp, twisting turn, thundering into a darkened underpass. It would be at the deserted wharfs, he realized thickly through the pain. The wharfs were all such—

The outlines of the two *rockabouts* ahead of him abruptly cut off his chain of dogged rationalization. He cut the power of his rocket motors, braking hard to a halt behind the two other machines.

Creegar climbed from his *rockabout* with painfully difficult exertion. His knees, as he hit the rusty wharf planking, seemed for an instant to refuse to support his tortured body. And then he found balance, and moved lurchingly, almost blindly, to the machines ahead of him.

He had the atomic pistol once again in his hand, and he held it in readiness as he came up behind the first of the

two *rockabouts*. It was deserted.

The second was the same.

Swaying there in the darkness, atomic pistol held tightly in his right hand, Creegar fought off another sharp, terrible wave of nausea and weakness. Then he started forward.

Faintly, coming from the wharfs ahead of him, Creegar could hear voices. They grew more audible as he moved on. The burning, blinding agony that seared his senses prevented him from making anything coherent from them, even when he was but five feet from the wharf landing platform of a decrepit warehouse.

But one thing Creegar caught from those voices. One of them belonged to Judson Bellham!

He leaned against the side of the decrepit warehouse, gaining what precious strength he could, steeling himself against the action that was to come. Several minutes he remained this way, and then he straightened up, forcing himself through sheer strength of will, to move unfalteringly.

Creegar stepped around the corner of the warehouse onto the wharf landing platform.

TIME hung in eternity in the instant that Creegar's vision focused the scene for his brain.

Around a group of crates, some of them opened, stood five men with atomic pistols trained on a knot of ten men. These holding the others at bay, backs to Creegar, were unaware of Creegar's entrance. Bellham commanded these. Encircled by Bellham's men were ten, ragged space tars, hands upraised.

"We'll wait," Bellham was saying, "until your captain arrives. Then we'll take care of the lot of you."

Then Creegar heard a voice barking commandingly, "Drop those pistols.

Turn slowly!" The voice was his own.

Six weapons clattered to the rusty wharf planks. Judson Bellham was the first to turn. His face went ashen as he saw Thorne Creegar. His lips moved soundlessly. His hands, above his head, twitched spasmodically.

"Be careful, Bellham," Creegar said raggedly. "Be very careful, unless you want to die five minutes sooner than I've planned."

"Creegar!" The name came from Bellham's lips like a hoarse ejaculation.

"Back from hell—looking for recruits," Creegar snarled.

In Bellham's glance, Creegar read a swift appraisal. Bellham had noted the fact that he was badly wounded, had noted, too, that only sheer dogged will and flaming hatred held Creegar still on his feet.

Creegar saw this, and fought to steady himself. The effort brought additional beads of cold sweat to his brow.

"No ideas, Bellham," he warned. "No ideas, or I'll—"

Creegar saw something else in Bellham's eyes, then—something swift, flickering, hopeful.

And then Creegar heard a voice behind him. A high, hard, thin voice. The voice of Lee Hudge!

"Put down that pistol, Creegar!"

And even as that voice rang out, Judson Bellham crouched swiftly, retrieving the atomic pistol on the wharf planking. He had it trained on Creegar in one, swift gesture. His face was frozen in hatred.

Thorne Creegar fired at the same instant that Judson Bellham did. Fired twice before the heavy blow from behind knocked him aside and down.

And as Thorne Creegar sprawled to the wharf planking, his will gave way before the forces of pain and weakness that had battered so long for entrance.

Darkness swam in around him. There was no resisting it this time.

But before the ebon tide engulfed him completely, Creegar had the infinite satisfaction of seeing Judson Bellham, smoking atomic weapon still in his hand, pitching forward, face frozen in a death mask of hate and astonishment. . . .

IT WAS many hours later that Creegar emerged from the torrent of nightmarish fever, to find that Sherry's face was bent above his own. Her cheeks were wet, her hazel eyes misty, her lovely mouth forming a tremulous smile of joyous relief.

Creegar sensed that the whiteness around him was the antiseptic whiteness of a hospital ward. He heard Sherry's voice saying one sentence over and over again to him.

"It's all right, darling. It's all right."

He closed his eyes then, and his groping hand found Sherry's, and the darkness that returned to him was merciful now.

Sherry was there the following morning, when Creegar again opened his eyes. He had the strength, now, to move his lips. He formed a question.

"Later, Thorne," S h e r r y said. "Later, when your strength is back."

It was exactly five days later that his questions were answered. And they wheeled his bed out into the sun drenched solarium, while Sherry sat beside him.

"You didn't kill Hudge, Thorne," she told him. "Poor bloodhound that he is, it would take an atomic cannon to kill him."

To the question in Creegar's eyes, she replied.

"He found the incriminating evidence on Bellham in the safe you'd left open. The evidence you'd left there is your frantic pursuit of Bellham. It

was probably just as well that you were badly dazed from your wound. You might have taken it with you otherwise."

"But instead, he found it and read it, eh?" Creegar said.

Sherry nodded. "I imagine it must have been a tremendous pill for him to swallow. But he was straight. Justice was his god. As much as he hated you, and in spite of the fact that Bellham was his superior, his unswerving fealty to the god justice made him set out for Bellham."

Creegar nodded briefly. "And as I did, he must have seen the message from the Venusian smuggling captain on the *wordagraph* in Bellham's office. So when he arrived at the Bellham mansion, to find Bellham gone and the window of the study smashed, he read the second identical message to Bellham on the *wordagraph* there. Being a rather excellent bloodhound, he set out for the space port. He'd probably filled in lots of gaps by then."

Sherry broke in. "He found me in the *rockabout*, in the quite confined condition you'd left me. He dashed for the wharf landing platform in time to find you holding the entire group at bay. He had his own pistol ready when he ordered you to drop yours."

Creegar shuddered. "And if he hadn't knocked me aside, I'd probably have been caught by Bellham's fire, instead of vice versa."

Sherry nodded. "I arrived, then. Hudge had the situation well in hand. Evidence and all. It almost killed him when the Venusian captain and a dozen of his smuggling crew stepped up and took over. He was livid with rage."

CREEGAR grinned. "I can picture him. Justice being tampered with was probably enough to drive him to

insanity." His face suddenly went sober. "But why do you suppose the Venusian captain went to the front for me?"

"He explained, Thorne; and told me to pass it on to you. In one of your bitter drinking bouts with him, you revealed everything about the frame-up that had railed you to the penal planet."

Creegar frowned. "That's right. I did blow my mental rockets to him one night."

"Well," Sherry resumed, "one of the smugglers killed in the frame-up that resulted in your banishment was the captain's younger brother. He had never known that Bellham had been responsible for that, even in the ten years he'd been working the outside mechanism of the smuggling group for Bellham. He decided immediately that Bellham would pay. That's why he double-crossed him and set you on Earth. That's why he arranged a faked blackmail scene on the wharf, just to bring Bellham there in person."

Creegar was silent. His black eyes were thoughtful.

"So the captain got his satisfaction, through your shooting of Bellham. He saw to it that he and his crew could safely get out of the space port, and then he turned Mecks and the other

thugs of Bellham back into the hands of Hudge."

"Q.E.D." Creegar said softly.

"Yes, Thorne, Q.E.D.," Sherry said quietly.

Creegar found her hand.

A nurse appeared. "There is a visitor for you, Mr. Creegar."

Lee Hudge, stony faced in embarrassment, stepped out onto the solarium. He gulped, nodded. He wore a bandage on the side of his head.

Creegar grinned. "Hello, Hudge."

Hudge cleared his throat. "I just want to tell you, Creegar that I, ah," his thin voice faltered, "I, ah, hope you feel better pretty quickly."

"Thanks," Creegar said sincerely.

"Ah," Hudge looked doubtfully at Sherry. "Hell, Creegar," his face was suddenly wreathed in self-contempt, "what I really want to tell you is that I was wrong. Justice wasn't wrong. I was wrong. And, hell, I'm sorry."

Lee Hudge turned and walked rapidly out of the solarium, never looking back.

Thorne Creegar grinned up at Sherry. "Well," he said. "I'll be damned. Now I can die in peace. Nothing can climax that scene, ever!"

Sherry Bennet took his hand, smiling knowingly.

THE END.