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DREADNOUGHTS OF DOOM



by HENRY ANDREW ACKERMAN

Silent, watchful, a stowaway waited for the space gods to grant him the moment a world had prayed for—a chance to die, that his planet might live forever!

ON THE morning of 2114, Sol 8, a Lunite ore ship sighted a large cluster of wreckage drifting in space several thousand miles off Luna. Upon inspection, they found it to be a fused mass of metal, the remains of some ill-fated spaceship—apparently of foreign

manufacture, although of this the crew of the ore transport could not be certain. No sign of a survivor was apparent.

A little later on the freighter picked up other drifting pieces of flotsam, over a rather wide area. The crew of the ship came to the conclusion that perhaps more than one ship had been wrecked. Just before landing on Luna, the freighter contacted a scout ship of the Satellite Patrol. They reported their discoveries and, after giving the Patrol men the derelict's location and approximate ether-drift figures, they forgot about the matter.

The Patrol ship, after the transport had made its planetfall, proceeded immediately to the spot where floated in space the unidentified wreckage. They had smiled a bit grimly but had said nothing when the freighter's crew ventured the opinion that there must have been at least two or three ships wrecked.

Grimly and systematically they destroyed the bits of spaceship wreckage. . . . And so it was that Earth did not learn, until later, how close it had come to sudden destruction and swift conquest in the early dawn of 2114, Sol 8. But the Space Legion knew—and the Space Legion had been ready.

EXACTLY a week before, the Kinetogen-powered, Terran, ether-mining ship, *Gold Dust*, had been cruising along lazily above Luna. Although everything was running smoothly on board, Captain Bart, her skipper, was in a stormy mood. The *Gold Dust's* storage holds were annoyingly empty of the precious dust. To be exact, they were empty of any kind of metallic dust, although the ship had been out a full week now. He blamed two things for this condition. One was the Jovian mining fleet, which was seriously depleting the void around Luna of its invisible treasure of the precious dusts. The second, every time the *Gold Dust* did locate a good min-

ing area, this dunderhead, Joel Rogers, would order full speed ahead, and the *Gold Dust* would go shooting off on another tangent, apparently without rhyme or reason.

Jefferson Bart was a good captain, which meant he could take orders as well as give them, but he was making stormy weather of his present unhappy situation of having somebody else bossing his charge.

Just before the *Gold Dust* had made the leap into space, a tall, broad-shouldered young man, dressed in sailor's dungarees, had come aboard, presented himself to Captain Bart, and said briefly, "I'm Joel Rogers. Here's a note for you from the owners."

The note—Bart had been careful to check its authenticity—had merely said that Joel Rogers was to go along as a member of the crew, but that any suggestions or orders he gave were to be followed implicitly. That was that, as far as Captain Bart was concerned. The owners apparently knew what they were doing.

But he wondered morosely, as he stood in the control room now and watched with grudging admiration the way Joel Rogers deftly handled the congested rows of switches, levers and what-not before him—did this young fellow know what he was doing?

Bart's natural taciturnity would not permit him to ask questions, but he couldn't help a sarcastic dig at what he considered a colossal waste of good mining time.

"Well," he said glumly, as though talking to himself, "we haven't been to Luna yet."

Joel Rogers looked at him quickly. "What do you mean by that?"

"It's about the only place we haven't been since we left port," Bart snorted. "Running all over blue space, like a—like a cat chasing a rat."

"I haven't seen any rats yet," Joel said

equably, "unless that's one ahead of us there." He gestured toward the televisor.

Captain Bart peered at the screen, then swore roundly.

"It's another of those damn floating tin cans from Jupiterm," he said. "Why can't those red devils stay at home and mine their own section of space, instead of coming clear across the Solar System and grabbing our supply?" He banged the nearest port with an angry fist. "And why in blazes doesn't the World Federation or the Space Legion drive 'em out!"

"You forget the niceties of interplanetary law, Captain," Joel Rogers said drily. "Federation space areas extend only to the thousand-mile limit, and we're a good fifty thousand miles away." His eyes turned back to the televisor screen, and suddenly hardened.

"Speaking of rats—" he muttered under his breath. Then he straightened, clipped out a brisk order. "I'll take over the control room now, Captain!"

Bart started to protest, realized in the same instant that this mysterious stranger was not asking him to leave the control room, but commanding it—in the tones of one accustomed to unquestioning obedience.

With a half-angry, half-defiant glance at Joel Rogers, the captain stalked down to the main deck.

There, leaning against the hull and staring moodily out a port, Captain Bart grumbled to himself as he watched his ship draw near the Jovian miner—then grumbled aloud as he saw that Joel Rogers, at the controls, was taking the *Gold Dust* dangerously close to the other craft.

Suddenly he snapped erect, bellowed up at the control turret, "Hey, you, up there! Watch where you're going! Change your course!" He was off at a run, bounding up the ladder to the control room again. Aboard the ship from Jupiter there arose a similar clamoring and running about,

for the nose of the *Gold Dust* had suddenly swerved, cutting over in an arc and heading straight for the other ship.

Captain Bart flung himself into the control room, shoved Joel Rogers aside from the instrument panel and pressed the buttons that would change their course—too late. The needle-nose of the *Gold Dust* missed the Jovian, but the beryllium sideplates of the Earth ship, still swinging in an arc, sideswiped the landing fins of the other ship, leaving them a tangled mass of wreckage against the stern, almost wiping out the name, *Agfah*, painted there on its side.

"Now you've done it!" Captain Bart shouted at Joel Rogers, jumping up and down in his fury. "You've wrecked us both, you damned fool!"

Joel, apparently unconcerned over the collision, was staring intently at the gesticulating, shouting figures that suddenly appeared on the televisor screen, the *Agfah* officers.

"Only a few dents in your side, Captain," he said deprecatingly, "and the Jovian ship only lost her landing fins. Sorry I lost control."

"But now we'll have to tow them with the magnetic grapples into port for repairs!" Captain Bart stormed.

"Yes," Joel said quietly, "we'll have to tow them into port for repairs, just as you say. That fin will be a cradle job." He turned, stepped lightly to the door. "I'm going below now, Captain. You may notify me when we reach port. By the way, Captain, I'd tow them to an Earth port if I were you—Niagara, say."

In the instant before he started bellying orders to his crew, Captain Bart stared wonderingly at the retreating back of Joel Rogers.

"Lost control, hell!" he snorted. Then he muttered speculatively, "Maybe he does know what he's doing!"

And Lieutenant Joel Rogers, World Federation of Earth Space Legion Intel-

ligence, playing a lone game in which the safety of Earth was the stake, nodded grimly to himself as he sped toward the crews' quarters. No question about it. That ugly red face, that had stared so imperturbably from the control room of the *Agfah*, had been the face of the man he sought—Phox Sci, captain in rank, the most dangerous man in the Jovian espionage service. . . .

STILL dressed in the nondescript garb of a space sailor, Joel Rogers sat across the desk from his chief in the latter's office at the Niagara Legion Base. Captain Hubbard looked up from a sheaf of papers on his desk, appraised Joel keenly.

"So far so good, Lieutenant," he said crisply. "The *Agfah*, as we suspected, is merely a fast commercial ship, in no way fitted for warfare. Her engines and short-wave set are powerful, but we can't challenge her on those grounds. Repairs have been completed on her landing fins, and she makes the jump-off at midnight for space."

"The device has been attached to the hull?" Joel asked.

Captain Hubbard nodded. "Yes, on the hull, towards the stern, at the base of the lateral fin."

He cleared his throat and continued, "And what is more important—the Jovians are not aware of it. The key, connected to the device by a wire, is on the underside of the left handrail in the main deck corridor, just aft of the captain's stateroom. Our plans are now complete. The men at the Sentinel Cylinder have been ordered to stand by for action. As soon as the *Agfah* passes Luna, the Meteors will blast and will keep on blasting."

He glanced at his wrist watch. "It is now five o'clock. You have your orders. You know where to go, what to do, if you can possibly do it."

He stood up and Joel rose with him. "You know what it means to Earth if you fail," Captain Hubbard went on.

"I do, sir," Joel replied.

"And you realize what your own fate will be if you succeed?"

"Yes, sir."

The captain held out his hand impulsively. "A brave lad," he murmured. Then he snapped to attention, saluted first, Joel returned the salute.

Captain Hubbard could well afford to disregard legion etiquette by saluting first, for he was saluting a man who was about to die. If Joel succeeded in his plans for the next few hours, his death was a foregone conclusion.

IT IS a matter of public record that before the Red Men of the monster planet set out to conquer all of the outer planets of the Solar System in 2111, to weld them into the huge Five World Entente, there were more than three hundred thousand of them living on Earth. Many had undoubtedly returned to their native world, to fight for glory and the dictator, by 2112, Sep, but many thousands had remained behind.

The majority of those in Niagara, Joel Rogers knew, still constituted a little world to themselves in the squalid maze of slums about the spaceship terminal. It was toward that unsavory region that Joel headed as he left Intelligence Headquarters.

Joel's first action, just as dusk was settling down over the space port, was to buy a bottle of cheap *Hoases*. He stepped into a darkened alley, gargled a mouthful of the fiery liquid and spat it out, then doused the rest of the malodorous stuff over his clothing. Reeking like a barfly, he staggered out of the alley and down the street. Like a man who had been on a three-day jag, he reeled uncertainly through the door of the Red Spot Tavern, a favorite hang-out of Jo-

vian characters and space sailors.

Joel slapped a five-dollar bill on the bar and ordered drinks for the house.

"Set 'em up," he said with a flourish to the bulbous-eyed alien behind the bar. "The drinks 're on me. I'm a guy that's just struck it rich!"

If his intrusion was unwelcome, he didn't seem to notice it, and when the glasses of the half-dozen scowling Jovians scattered about at the tables had been filled, Joel raised his glass in unsteady fingers, declaimed owlishly, "To the Sentinel Cylinder!" and tossed off the drink.

If he had been expecting a reaction, he got it, although only his trained eyes would have noticed it. As he peered through half-closed lids over the rim of his up-turned glass, he saw an electric tremor of surprise pass over those scarlet masks. The low hum of conversation stopped for a split-second, then went on steadily. The barman's naturally bulging eyes took on an even more pop-eyed aspect as his gaze flashed to Joel's flushed face, then dropped to the bar he was polishing.

Joel realized, tautly, that he had struck home. Closely as the Space Legion had guarded its secret—the secret on which it had been working for many years—word of it had seeped out to espionage agents from other planets. The 'Sentinel Cylinder, Earth's mightiest defensive arm, was known by name, at least, to these chunky men who envisioned themselves as future rulers of the Solar System. Just how much, he wondered grimly, did they know about it? That was what he must discover tonight.

Joel sloshed down a second drink and a third, then picked up his change and turned to go. The bulky bartender hurried up, pushed a bottle across the bar.

"You have drink on me this time," he said. When Joel had taken that one, the barman urged another on him.

"You know something about the Sen-

tinel Cylinder, eh?" he said with what was meant to be an affable grin but which utterly failed in its intended effect. Joel shuddered a little as he saw this facial abortion.

The Earthman winked a bleary eye at him. "Plenty," he said, "plenty." Then he straightened himself with a jerk. "But I'm not talkin'."

"Maybe," the maroon-skinned lump from Jupiter went on persuasively, "you'd like to make some money—a lot of money?"

"Not talkin'," Joel mumbled, and staggered toward the door. He knew they wouldn't try to take him there—the place was too public—but they wouldn't let him out of their sight. As he stumbled along toward Sun Spot Way and the spaceship cradles, he saw, from the corner of his eye, the flitting shadows that gradually encircled him.

When the attack came, they wouldn't hurt him—too much. They wanted him alive. But Joel knew how *Ka-lang*, the Jovian art of wrestling, can permanently disable a man who isn't expecting it. When the shadows did close in, silently and swiftly, at the mouth of an alley, Joel swung into the fray with both fists and both feet.

He cursed and fought like a drunken sailor, but they were hauling him down by sheer force of numbers when a lumbering figure in blue came pounding up. It was a cop, Joel saw with an inward curse—a fighting cop.

"Scatter, you imps from hell!" the patrolman shouted. He began flailing away so furiously with his nightstick that the tide of battle turned in an instant.

Desperate at this interference with his carefully laid plans, Joel swung a wild roundhouse right and, apparently by accident, caught the cop squarely on the chin. As the cop went down, Joel fell with him, and the two of them were promptly pounced upon. Joel felt suddenly sick as

he saw a scarlet heavyweight aim a kick at the cop's face. Then he could see nothing more, for adhesive was quickly slapped over his eyes and mouth; his wrists and ankles were strapped.

THEY carried him, running, to what he judged was the other end of the alley. He could tell that they were forcing his helpless body into the fuselage of a rocket plane. There followed a hurried, short ride; then Joel felt himself being carried again, up endless stairs, along interminable corridors. Finally he was dropped to the floor, the bandages ripped roughly from his eyes and mouth.

Joel looked up belligerently at the circle of his captors, started to curse them drunkenly, but a brutal kick in the side silenced him.

"This foolish one babbled of the Sentinel Cylinder, so we brought him to you, Captain Sci," said the giant red man who had kicked Joel. "The low Earthling is stupid with drink."

"There are ways of making even drunken men talk," came a quietly derisive answer, and Joel lifted his head to leer up at the saturnine, masklike countenance of Phox Sci, captain of the Jovian espionage service.

"Let me up from here," Joel growled, "and I'll talk for you plenty—with my fists." Then his head lolled back, and he hiccupped.

"Quick!" Sci ordered. "Bring matches before he becomes too drunk to talk!" He knelt swiftly beside the prostrate Earthman, seized a handful of Joel's hair, jerked his head up.

"Tell me!" he commanded. "What is the Sentinel Cylinder?"

"Go t' hell," Joel muttered thickly, and closed his eyes sleepily.

Someone thrust a book of matches into Sci's hand. Dropping Joel's head, the man from Jupiter tore a match from the book, jabbed it viciously under Joel's

thumbnail, lit it. As the flame curled down, licked around the nail, Joel opened one eye drowsily, flickered the match loose with a shake of his hand, closed the eye again.

With a snarled curse, Sci lit another match, seized Joel's head firmly and held the match to his cheek.

Joel almost cried aloud at the searing pain, but he did not quiver. Then, as the odor of burned flesh struck his nostrils, nauseating him, and the torture seemed more than he could bear, he opened his mouth—and snored.

Phox Sci, with a cry of rage, sprang to his feet, and just in time, for Joel could not have endured that gnawing flame an instant longer without crying aloud.

"The stupid fool is unconscious from liquors," Sci hissed, and he spat in Joel's face. That, even more than the torture he had endured, filled Joel with a furious desire to lunge upward into battle, but Phox Sci's next words forestalled any such foolish action.

"We have no time to waste on him here. Zero hour is rapidly approaching, and we must embark for space. Come; we can work on him at our leisure aboard the *Agfah*. Bring him along."

That, Joel Rogers realized, was just what he had been waiting and praying for. Had he tried to stow away on the Jovian ship, he would undoubtedly have been discovered and unceremoniously pitched out the airlock. Now he was going aboard at their insistence, and it was all-important, for Earth's sake, that he be aboard when the ship took off, even though torture and death awaited him.

LUNA is more than two hundred thousand miles away from Terra, yet when Joel Rogers woke up from his brief cat-nap, the *Agfah*, traveling with the speed of a destroyer, was already past it. Joel had been flung into

a cabin bunk to sleep off what the Jovians thought to be his drunken stupor. He had managed to snatch some sleep, for he knew he would soon be needing all of his strength and mental alertness.

It was not two hours later, however, that the cabin door was opened, and two armed sentries entered, prodded Joel to his feet, and curtly ordered him to fall in between them. As they escorted him forward towards the captain's cabin, Joel noticed that the *Agfah* had undergone a startling transformation.

Gone were the slovenly sailors and metal extractors who had swarmed her decks when the *Gold Dust* had sideswiped her. Now the men were dressed in the natty black uniforms of the grand Jovian space fleet, and they stepped about their duties in the brisk manner of trained fighting men.

Captain Phox Sci had also changed in appearance and manner, and was now resplendent in the uniform of a high officer of the Greater Jovian Fleet. He sat behind his massive desk and studied Joel with satisfaction.

"So our tipsy Earthling has regained his senses?" He motioned the sentries aside, waved Joel to a seat.

"In your drunkenness last night," he went on suavely, "you mentioned the phrase, 'Sentinel Cylinder'. What do you know about it?"

The eyes of the two men from different worlds met, challenged each other, and the gaze of neither Jovian nor Earthman flickered for a minute.

Then Joel spoke, with quiet finality. "Never heard of it," he said.

The sardonic smile did not leave the corners of Sci's mouth. "As you may have heard," he went on, "the Jovians are noted for their—er, persuasive methods of loosening unwilling tongues."

"You might try some of them," Joel told him tonelessly.

Sci's eyes narrowed a trifle. "There

are men," he admitted stonily, "who cannot be coerced by pain or force. Perhaps you are one of them. The man does not live, though, who will not listen to reason. It is important, though not vital, that the Jovian high command have more definite information of this thing you call the Sentinel Cylinder. Important, I say, but not vital. Earth is safely doomed!"

The beady, protruding eyes blazed and the high-pitched voice rose in a crackle of excitement as Sci went on, "You do not believe me? You think I boast? Then step to that porthole and tell me what you see!"

The throbbing Kinetogens of the *Agfah* had slackened and quieted as the two conversed, and Joel knew, as he strode across to the port, that the ship was coasting on its momentum.

Joel peered through the port—and his heart threatened to leap into his throat. Dead ahead were hundreds of long silvery objects, very sleek, very graceful in the sunlight that struck them. No mistaking those trim lines. They were heavy-duty fighting ships.

"What do you see?" Phox Sci demanded.

"I see space covered with a screen of warships," Joel replied. "A hundred or so—no, closer to five hundred of them."

"Look closer," said Sci. "What else do you see?"

"I see a vanguard of cruisers and scout ships," muttered Joel.

"Do you see the battleship squadrons?"

"Yes," Joel admitted.

"Do you see the troop transports, the mine layers?" pressed Sci.

"Yes," Joel's face was white now.

"You see more than that," said Phox Sci, as Joel turned away from the port. "You see the greatest space armada ever assembled. You see three hundred of the fastest, most destructive destroyer-cruisers ever built. You see the space fleet that will descend just before dawn on your planet to wipe her proud cities off the

map!" Sci's thin lips twisted in scorn.

"Your stupid Legion has been so busy playing games about the Asteroids it has forgotten to watch the fourth quadrant of space—the shortest route by far from Jupiter to Earth. While your Satellite Patrol has been sniffing like curious dogs at the Jovian mining craft, which have been annoying your miners near Earth, this fleet has been collecting here. Those ships near the planet actually did engage in ether-mining—to lull the suspicions of your espionage agents. When, by a clumsily feigned accident, the *Agfah* was disabled and towed to port so she could be inspected, your spies found her to be just what she assumed to be—a floating ore-ship. But these ships will mine the ether in a different manner."

"Why do you tell me all of this?" Joel demanded.

"Because anything you learn here will be of no avail to you until it is too late—and because I wish to show you the futility of refusing to aid us by supplying information."

"What makes you think Earth won't fight back?" Joel asked. His gaze was cool.

"Earth will not be able to fight back," Sci asserted. "The destroyer divisions strike at dawn, laying every important military space port, arsenal and spaceship factory to waste. At three a.m., Earth time, a fleet of our mine layers begins mining the space above Tycho, bottling up your puny Satellite Patrol stationed there, so we can bomb it at our leisure." He nodded, expression impassive.

"That is but the first step. Before the Earth can recover, before the main body of your fleet can blast back to prevent it, one hundred thousand crack Jovian troops will have been landed at your capital, New Washington, from those troop ships that you just saw. One hundred thousand fighting men—one third as many as your entire Planet Guard—and that is just the

first contingent. When they have gained a foothold, other thousands will come, backed up by the Second Jovian Battle Fleet. In the meantime, these three hundred destroyers will be sweeping over the entire planet. Within a week, Earth will have surrendered—or she will be in ruins!"

"But," Joel Rogers interrupted quietly, "what of our fleet? It will exact a terrible revenge when it does return from the Asteroids. And how about Mars, Venus and Mercury? Do you think they would stand by and see the only other democratic planet in the System humbled?"

Phox Sci's eyes now burned with the fierce light of the fanatic. "Democracy!" he snarled. "Democracy is about to be wiped from the face of the System! When we strike, our allies, Neptune, Uranus, Saturn and Pluto, strike. The moment word is flashed of the success of our attack, war fleets from all four worlds will swoop down to demolish Mars, Venus and Mercury. Democracy ends at dawn! As for the return of your fleet! Hah! The fools will bump right into the mine areas we have so cleverly planted in the course they must take. They will be devastated by the most destructive mine field ever laid! And you, Earthling," he said, glaring at Joel, "have a decision to make—quickly." He paused, as if to emphasize the importance of what he was about to say.

Our spies have mapped every gun of your defenses, every one of your space ports, big or little. Only one thing has escaped us, a thing we have heard of only by rumor—the Sentinel Cylinder. We believe it to be a warship base, but we are not sure. You proved, by your drunken talk last night, that you know of its existence, probably its location. I have gone to great pains to show you the hopelessness of your position. You will tell me, now, where it is. In return I offer you, on the word of the Dictator, complete amnesty,

safe escort to any planet you choose, and—ten thousand dollars in platinum.”

“If I refuse?” Joel said.

“You go out the airlock immediately with only two hours’ oxygen supply in your air tank!”

Joel shifted uneasily in his seat. “That’s a hard thing to ask a man, Captain,” he said, “a hard decision to make. You’ll give me a few minutes to think it over?”

“I give you exactly five minutes,” the Jovian replied smoothly, sure of his man now.

“Mind if I walk around the deck a bit while I’m thinking?” Joel asked.

“You may,” the Jovian replied. “At the first false move, of course, you will be shot in your tracks.” He beckoned the sentries, rapped out an order in their tongue.

FIVE minutes . . . would it be enough? The two hulking red men alert at his heels, Joel strode up and down the short length of corridor that was the main deck. Finally he sauntered over to lean against the wall. With extreme nonchalance he proceeded to light a cigarette, all the while watching the two guards narrowly. To all outward appearance, he seemed to be lost in deep thought.

He leaned his weight against the wooden rail that jutted out from the wall and slouched a little. He let his left arm slide carelessly on the polished rail until he could feel the underside of it, Nothing there. Carelessly, drawing his hand back and forth, he edged slowly toward the captain’s cabin, and three feet farther along he found it—a little metal projection that gave slightly when he pressed on it.

The two sentinels, watching him, must have thought him a very nervous man, for his hands as they gripped the rail seemed to twitch agitatedly, endlessly. The middle finger of his left hand gave a final nervous jerk.

He straightened up, drew a long breath.

“All right,” he said to the guards, “I’m ready.”

“You have decided to be sensible?” Phox Sci said with a smile of satisfaction as Joel re-entered the cabin.

Joel nodded bleakly.

“The Sentinel Cylinder is a hidden military space port?” Sci went on quickly. “You will lead us to it?”

Joel nodded again, slowly. “Yes,” he said, “the Sentinel Cylinder is a hidden Legion base. The Meteors are quartered there. I’ll lead you to it.”

“Good!” Captain Sci could not conceal his elation. “You will go with me in my own destroyer when the time comes. Now I must ask you to return to your quarters.”

As Joel Rogers, lieutenant in the Space Legion, stepped along between his guards, he held his head high. It didn’t matter so much now that he had but a few hours left to live. He had played his part, played the game to the hilt with Captain Sci—and he had won.

TWO hours before it would be dawn on Earth, they came for Joel, marching him to the airlock where Captain Phox Sci, dressed in a clumsy balloon-like suit, used for exposure in airless space, stood waiting.

“We go now,” the Jovian said, and he handed Joel a space suit similar to his own. After Joel had donned the bulky suit, he turned his attention to what was happening outside the ship.

Through the thick glassite of an observation port he watched a cruiser approach, her sunward side gleaming like the head of a comet. Power blasts shot alternately from forward, rear, and lateral vents as the pilot eased the other spaceship closer to the *Agfah*. In a moment both ships were flashing along at equal velocity, side by side.

Captain Sci said, “Follow me,” and

flung over the lever that operated the inner door of the air lock.

Once Sci, Joel and his two guards were inside the lock, the inner door was closed and the outer lock opened.

Joel saw that magnetic-grapple lines had already been fastened to the destroyer and it was along them, hand over hand, that the captain led the way, Joel and the two guards following.

As they slowly pulled themselves along the lines toward the waiting ship, Joel marveled at the scene about him. Space, it seemed, for an area of tens of cubic miles, was filled with twinkling ships' lights, and every ship that he saw was a grim-looking destroyer, with row upon row of tubes for the self-accelerating rocket torpedoes.

But the ship to which they were transferring was different from the others. It, too, was a super-arsenal, but, if Joel knew anything about ships, it was one of the fastest ever to leave a planet.

When they were in the other ship, Captain Sci wasted no time in leading them to the control turret. With Sci at the controls, the ship increased its acceleration and seemed to leave the rest of the fleet behind. As Joel watched from a side port, he saw the huge swarm of destroyer-cruisers swing into smooth, coordinated movement below, maneuvering, climbing, rising up to form into a solid phalanx of spitting power vents and scintillating mirrors—a cloud of doom.

Sci circled high above until the armada, three hundred strong, was in alignment beneath him, then dipped his ship down and shot ahead to take up the spearhead of the formation. Joel, sitting tautly in the seat behind the wily Jovian, wondered grimly if his months of careful plans and stratagems would work out to the split-second he had timed them, if his message had gone through . . .

On through the starry void the dreadnoughts of doom swept, straight toward

sleeping Earth. As minute followed minute, and the ships clipped off fifty thousand miles, a hundred thousand miles, Joel Rogers prayed with the fervency of a condemned man for the countless lives of his fellow countrymen. Time after time, he looked backward and upward, searching, probing the depths of space.

Then he saw the thing for which he was desperately seeking, and his gasp of relief and exultation brought a sharp look of inquiry from Phox Sci.

"Something troubles you?" the Jovian asked caustically.

"Nothing troubles me now," Joel replied. He paused a minute, then leaned forward, speaking slowly, distinctly. "Sci, I told you I'd lead you to the Meteors. I'll do better than that—I'll bring them to you. Before you meet them, though, there are a couple of things you might like to know." His face was grim now.

"First, I think you've bitten off a bigger chunk than you can chew when you try to swallow democracy at one gulp. Second, never underestimate your opponent. You Jovians started planning this attack five years ago. Earth started plans to thwart it ten years ago."

In reply to Sci's quick, incredulous glance, Joel went on, "Yes, we knew you had a bee in your bonnet for ruling the entire Solar System, but we didn't see it that way. Then, years ago, the Legion quietly began its search, seeking the most strategic spot to build a super-space port, the most powerful in the System. So quietly and carefully did we work that when this monster hornet's nest was completed, the spies of other planets had been able to discover no more about it than the fact that it probably did exist and it was known as the 'Sentinel Cylinder.'" He shook his head.

"Our next step was to criss-cross space from Mars to Earth with a system of detection stations. These had automatic thermoscopes, or delicate thermo-couples,

for locating ships by their intrinsic heat, and radio-sounding devices for measuring distances. The stations immediately flashed full information to Earth—direct to Legion Headquarters—whenever any ship came in range of the delicate instruments." Joel's smiles became grimmer now.

"You thought your ships were massing, unnoticed. Not so. We knew the craft were there, and we guessed that their intent was not peaceful. What the ships were up to we did not know, nor when they would strike, nor how. That was why it was important that one of your ships—we selected the *Agfah* because you were on it—be forced to visit a Terrestrial port, so that our skilled mechanics could attach a short-wave transmitter to its hull. That was why it was so important that I be put aboard the *Agfah* when it left Earth—so I could tap out my information for the Sentinel Cylinder to pick up, after I had learned what I could of your plans."

AS CAPTAIN SCI listened, his face showed first contempt, then alarm, then black fury, and he half-rose from his seat. But Joel Rogers went on unhurriedly. "Three hours before this fleet of yours started for Earth, the Meteors had left the Cylinder, accelerating fast and true, and much swifter than your ships can speed, straight toward you. The Meteors are here now, Captain Sci!"

"You talk insanities," snarled Sci. "I see no Meteors."

"One seldom sees a trap until it is too late," Joel said. "You have led your men and ships into one of the most disastrous traps in the history of space warfare! Do you know, Captain, we Earthmen have concocted a compound that can be made into a paint that will not reflect light, any light, even that of the sun? And did you know that the term 'Sentinel Cylinder' is not a name chosen merely to mystify? The Cylinder is actually that, a real cyl-

inder of beryllium steel, covered with a coat of our non-reflecting compound and used as a destroyer base by our Legion. The Cylinder is not ahead of you, Captain, on Earth, as you were deluded into thinking. It is behind you, in space itself. But the Meteors aren't behind you any more. They've caught up with you! *Look up there!*"

With a cry of consternation, Captain Sci whirled around, stared upward and back. There, swooping from the interstellar gloom and looking like phantoms of space because of their non-reflective coating, was a tight V-shaped wedge of monster destroyers, plunging down and forward with swift ferocity at the rear of the Jovian phalanx!

Cursing furiously, Sci jammed the controls of his ship over, barked a series of orders into the microphone in front of him. As the Jovian armada started to swing about, to reform in battle alignment, Sci flung a contemptuous taunt at Joel Rogers.

"A paltry hundred ships!" he sneered. "We will blast them from the ether!"

"Will you?" Joe asked quietly.

Then a strange thing happened, happened so swiftly, so disastrously, the Jovian leader could only stare in open-mouthed wonder at what he saw.

The Space Legion ships were still more than five miles away. The Jovians were only half through their reversing maneuver when, in the next instant, a mighty simultaneous jet of furious flame burst from a hundred torpedo tubes. Even before the light of that concerted blast had died from Joel's eyes, the front rank of the closely-packed Jovian ships disintegrated in a blinding blaze.

In one terrific explosion, one hundred Jovian destroyers were torn into shattered wreckage, sent spinning and flying through space in twisted fragments. Again that sheet of flame swept out from the Legion ships, and the Jovian phalanx,

shaken like a cyclone-struck wheat field, began to melt away, dissolve into nothingness.

On and on came the Legion squadron in never faltering line, hurling its barrage of death before it. Now half of the proud Jovian armada had been destroyed—two thirds of it. Panic-stricken, a few of the Jovian pilots turned to flee, but the long arm of death, reaching out from the Meteors, caught them, hurled them into incandescent oblivion.

With a cry of despair Captain Sci watched this cataclysm of destruction taking place so swiftly, and he suddenly cried out in bewilderment, "What is it?"

"I'd say it was our new invincible torpedoes," Joel Rogers answered him quietly.

"But even torpedoes require great skill in aiming, and every one that has been fired has made a direct hit!" the Jovian

shrieked. He was now nearly insane.

"Our torpedoes require no aiming," Joel said with a grim smile. "You see, they are light-attracted. The glare of enemy power vents sets off photo-electric cells; relays guide the torpedo relentlessly to the source of the light." He regarded the frantic Jovian. "And you thought Earth was going to be a push-over," he said musingly.

"You!" Sci screamed. "You are responsible for this!"

He clawed at the service automatic strapped to his waist.

Joel Rogers arose from his seat, stood erect. "It is an honor," he said quietly, "to die for one's planet." He stood at attention, saluted. But it was not the red man he saluted—it was the tri-colored insignia of Earth on a destroyer-cruiser.

Joel Rogers was still standing at attention when the torpedo struck.