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BRADBURY**

**ALFRED
COPPEL**

**ETERNAL ZEMMD
MUST DIE!**

*"Oh Zemmd-beware the Outcast's
daughter. Beware the Convict from
cold Mercury. These two speak death!"*

Novel by **HENRY HASSE**

PLANET STORIES



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ETERNAL ZEMMID MUST DIE!

By HENRY HASSE

WE HAVE REMAINED
indecisive too long! You must un-
derstand this! The future, perhaps
the very existence of the Federation hangs
in the balance unless we can correlate all
that has happened and decide upon a
course of action NOW . . .

DeHarries, Correlator for Earth, paced
alone in his suite far beneath the Council
Room. He held a sheaf of papers—his
intended speech to the Planetary Dele-
gates. Now he crumpled it viciously, flung
it to the floor. What good were speeches?
Already he anticipated their arguments,



Curt swept the radian. beam with devastating effect.

Lancing out of the void at light-speed, it stabbed deep into the Solar System—and vanished. Then began corruption . . . poison and hate creeping from world to world. Too late men learned a death blow had been delivered!

the protests and questions. He, himself, had a question or two.

"Course of action," he muttered grimly, "What sort of action? Action against what?"

He strode to the immense tele-globe, flicked it on. Its radiant surface reflected the austere Council Chamber above. Already the six delegates were entering. Soon they'd become restless waiting for him. But still DeHarries watched.

Aladdian, Empress of Venus, was there, fragile and lovely despite the grave look

on her alabastrine face. She at least was aware of the threat to the System which had grown apace during the past few years. In Aladdian, DeHarries knew he had an ally to the startling proposal he was going to make. He would need a majority of four. He couldn't count on Mars. The other two votes must come from Mercury, Jupiter, Perlac, or the Callistan colonies.

Leaving his suite by a secret exit, DeHarries stepped into a lift which brought him near the Council Room above.

SIX PAIRS of eyes fastened upon DeHarries, as he stood at the head of the table. He was a striking figure, six-foot-two and white haired, yet with a perpetual tightness of the jaw and a hint of fire in the dark eyes that belied his great age.

"You are wondering why I asked for an Emergency Council, particularly since our Federation has ridden a crest of peace for the past hundred years. Our various governments were never more in accord." He paused for effect, watching the puzzlement grow in their eyes. "Nevertheless, I am convinced that we face the greatest crisis we have ever known! I ask for your fullest co-operation. Any data you can submit—*anything*—may well be a part of the pattern!"

Kraaj, the Jovian emissary, shifted his huge bulk nervously. "Pattern? Pattern for what? You speak in riddles, DeHarries!"

"A pattern so diabolic it's frightening. A pattern I'm convinced is weaving about us all. For example: Earth's complex civilization, atomic-powered industries and commerce, would be irreparably damaged if we were cut off from the Uranium isotope we receive from Mars. You can realize the seriousness when I point out that the annual shipment which should have arrived a month ago—did not arrive."

Jal Tagar of Mars was instantly on his feet, his heavy-lidded eyes blazing. "I submit that my government is blameless! As you well know, the shipment was dispatched as usual! Your own Earth representatives were aboard—"

DeHarries turned a smiling countenance upon Jal Tagar which left the Martian Overlord abashed.

"No accusation has been made," DeHarries said softly, "and none is contemplated. I think we all agree that Mars is blameless."

Aladdian arose to her full height of four-feet-eleven.

"DeHarries is right. We have delayed too long. I have felt that there is a strange force at work among us. As you know, Venus has long held the secret of allotropic metal, which makes any space fleet in-

vulnerable. We have guarded it carefully——"*

She placed tiny fists upon the table. "Yet—our most secret documents, concerning the processing of this metal, have disappeared from the vault in our Royal Laboratories!"

"A matter which need not concern us," growled Rehlek, the Callistan Leader. "Has it not been the Federation policy for each planet to solve its own internal problems?"

"Save where those problems may effect the status of the Federation!" Aladdian countered. "I submit the theft of our allotropic process as a part of the *pattern* DeHarries mentioned. Have you nothing to report, Rehlek?"

"Nothing that would have any bearing——" The Callistan hesitated, then his eyes became worried. "Yes! Simply that during the past year there has been an alarming traffic in *tsith-stems* among our people. We thought we had this drug traffic stopped, but now it's growing out of hand. We can't trace how it's being entered and distributed. Under the influence of this drug our workers become restless, and easily incited to revolt." Rehlek wet his lips nervously. "Begging your pardon, Aladdian . . . these *tsith-stems* come only from the K'Yarthan Swamp of Venus!"

rasping sounds had been issuing from Sarik, the sun-hardened little Mercurian. Now he lifted his shell-like body from the chair. His faceted eyes glittered angrily.

"We are newest in the Federation. We have tried to co-operate in every way. We even permitted the location, on our planet, of the Federation Prison for Outlaws and Irreconcilables. If what I have to report is a part of your *pattern*, DeHarries, make the most of it.

"Recently our vast Solar Reflectors—which protect our cities from the sun—were found to be tampered with! If our engineers had not discovered certain discrepancies in time, thousands of my people would have died under merciless radiations. We are still investigating this foul

*Alcatraz of the Starways, Planet Stories, May, 1943.

piece of work. It was deliberate, not accidental." Sarik glared about the table. "I hardly need remind you—we can easily convert our Solar Reflectors into powerful weapons should the need arise!"

AT this open threat, such a clamor of protests arose that DeHarries pounded for order. He gave the floor to Jal Tagar.

"DeHarries . . . I see the reason for alarm. Similar incidents have occurred on Mars. In return for our Uranium, Earth supplies us with engineers for the maintenance and development of our Canals. As long as a year ago, there began a series of breakdowns in our Canal system! Already the desert has reclaimed vast areas of our irrigated lands!"

Carver, the Earthman from Perlac, rose to deliver the final bombshell. Using the Frequency Tuner, he had traversed the route from his adopted planet in a mere two weeks. The strange world beyond Pluto, to which many of Earth's scientists had migrated, was becoming a power and an asset to the Federation.*

Now Carver announced simply, "We have lost the Frequency Tuner. The detailed plans of this power unit, which we intended to share with the Federation, have been stolen."

DeHarries broke the stunned silence.

"And Venus had announced that the secret of allotropic metal should be shared by the Federation. Each planet knew this. Each would benefit. It doesn't seem likely that any planet individually could be behind these thefts and outrages."

"There's a frightening purpose behind it all," Rehlek of Callisto said worriedly. "Someone or *something* is seeking to cause disunity. Creating suspicion . . . It may easily lead to war!"

Jal Tagar said, "You have a theory, DeHarries?"

"A theory and a plan. It's my conviction that in our various governments, in places of highest trust, *are men who are not what they seem!*" He glanced about, saw that the others did not fully grasp the idea.

"I mean that literally!" DeHarries went on. "*Men whose minds have somehow been seized; who are now under the control of—of an alien intelligence! Something not of our Federation!*"

Sarik waved a disdainful hand. "Men whose minds have been seized? That is fantastic!"

"Is it? How much do you know of the members of your own Inner Council, Sarik? Just one alien intellect planted there could cause inestimable damage! What do you *really* know of Jal Tagar, here, beyond what you see? Or of Aladdian? Or of me? I may be an alien—though I deny it. Any one or any several of us may be *other than what we seem!*"

Aladdian shuddered, glancing around. "It's an eerie thought—and one to ponder upon! But you said you have a plan, DeHarries?"

"Yes." He glanced from face to face in the growing silence. "A very simple plan. But I like to think it will work . . ."

II

CURT EMMONS paused in his cautious stride. With a supernal sense of keening, he knew he was not alone in the darkness. He threw his shoulders aside. The *energast* recoil was no more than a soft sigh, but the beam passed so close to Curt's face he could feel the swirling heat of it.

With a muffled cry, Curt let himself crumple and fall. The muscles of his broad shoulders went tight as he pressed against the hard prison pavement. Weaponless, he realized his only chance was the element of surprise! He saw a darker shadow detach itself from the wall and come toward him. A lone Guard. The man stared down for a moment, then, relaxed, bent over the prone figure.

Curt propelled himself upward. With an oath the Guard tried to leap back, bring the *energast* into position. Curt clawed for the gun wrist. His fingers tightened. The Guard was Jovian, Curt realized in an instant of panic. His other hand found the wrist, his feet moved swiftly, then he threw all his strength into the leverage. Bone snapped, and the

* Passage to Planet X, Planet Stories, Winter, 1945.

seven-foot bulk sailed backward into the wall.

But Curt knew these Jovians! He leaped forward as the Guard tried to rise, brought his knee up under the chin with a sickening crunch. Blood bubbled from the man's lips. Curt sprang upon him, thrust an open hand into his face. He brought the other hand in a vicious, slicing blow across the hard throat muscles. The Jovian plunged forward and lay still.

Curt came to his feet, breathing heavily. It seemed unbelievable that other Guards were not attracted to the scene! But all he heard was the steady, hollow sound of the pumps supplying air to the Prison Dome. He groped for the *emergast* gun, but couldn't find it now. There was no time to waste!

He hurried forward, keeping one hand outstretched against the wall. He sought to pierce the darkness ahead. A few minutes later he paused again, as another figure loomed. Curt wished now that he'd found the gun, but it was too late for that!

"Emmons? . . ."

Curt let out a slow breath of relief as the whisper came to him. He hurried forward to greet another Earthman.

"You're late," the second man said. "What happened?"

"A little trouble. How about the helmets? Get them?"

"Wouldn't be here otherwise!"

"The Martian. Did he make it?"

"Yeah, but I don't see why *he*—"

"Never mind that, Rikert," Curt snapped. "Let's go."

They reached one of the gates. The Martian was waiting. Curt stumbled over another Guard, but this one was dead. A tiny *bak*-glass needle protruded from his throat.

"We had some trouble too," Rikert explained.

Curt wondered which of them had the needle-gun, but he said nothing. When they had donned the oxygen-helmets, Curt produced a triggered electronic key.

"I managed to smuggle this. It's the only way we'll make it out of here! Don't worry about the alarms, just stay close to me. I have a plan."

Once in the exit lock, Curt had a mo-

ment of foreboding as he watched the huge inner doors close behind them. Again he applied the electronic key. The outer doors opened. They stepped into the unending lava waste of Mercury's nightside.

No sound reached them now. But Curt knew that already, in the Prison Dome behind them, the alarm was being given. He hugged the outer *crystyte* wall, hurrying along it away from the exit. The others sped after him. Rikert clicked on his speaker.

"Emmons, what the hell! This is crazy!"

"Is it?" Curt didn't stop his half running pace. "You two agreed I was to handle this! They won't think to look for us so close!"

They stopped at last, huddling against the wall. A half mile behind them the lock was opening again. Two of the surface-cars, on caterpillar treads, blasted out and away. Searchlights slashed the ragged terrain.

"They won't spend too much time," Curt said. "They figure we're dead men already." Never yet had a prisoner succeeded in reaching the Mercurian cities, hundreds of miles away on the twilight-strip. Curt's face went grim as he thought of *their* chances. They weren't trying to reach a city! Their destination was the little mountain-range somewhere on the nightside.

Ten minutes later the surface-cars came back. The Prison lock opened and closed. Grimly, the three fugitives headed into the wastes.

There'd be no pursuit now.

RIKERT strode forward purposeful as an automaton, and he was much like an automaton in other ways. As silent and grim. As big and hard, and as cold. The square lines of his face were unmoving beneath the *crystyte* helmet.

Kueelo was smaller, but he managed to keep pace. His eyes burned brightly in his finely chiselled face. Only the high-pitched, mad little tune on his lips seemed to keep him going.

Curt Emmons, perhaps more than the others, knew the chances against them. His gray eyes flicked worriedly to the

dial inside his helmet. It registered slightly over half, which meant they had two more hours of oxygen. It would be close! He set his lips tight, glanced at his companions.

He knew Rikert would bear up. It was Kueelo who worried Curt. The little Martian was leg weary, keeping pace on sheer grit alone—grit that stemmed somehow from that eerie little tune eternally on his lips!

"We're a little ahead of schedule," Curt lied. "Let's take five."

Kueelo sank down gratefully on the hard rock. Even Rikert eased his bulk down. Then in annoyance he thrust a hand against the Martian.

"Damn it, Kueelo, turn it off!"

Abruptly the tune died on Kueelo's lips. He stretched out, gazed with infinite longing at the black sky and myriads of mocking stars. He searched for Mars.

Curt stared back across Mercury's lava-waste. The Prison Dome was well behind them now. He wished he could say how far ahead their objective lay, the little mountain-range that straddled half the planet.

"Last chance," Curt told them grimly. If either of you wants to change his mind, you've just enough oxygen to make it back! They may let you in again—if you want a month of solitary at the radite mines. What about you, Rikert?"

The big man raised his head, laughed nastily. "Go back to that hell hole? I'd rather die a quick death out here. *You* getting cold feet, Emmons?"

Curt flashed darkly. He'd only made the suggestion for Kueelo's sake.

"You, Kueelo? There's a chance of our missing Landreth. We've been delayed, and he said he'd wait only ten hours with the spaceship."

The little Martian's face showed white in the darkness. His voice was soft, very soft and musical as always.

"Thanks, Emmons. But I've waited years for a chance like this. If it were a million to one I'd still say go on." Curt nodded. Sure, he knew. Kueelo was a Martian political, an "irreconcilable," exiled to Mercury six years ago when Jal Tagar's government had taken over Mars.

As to Rikert, Curt knew even less. The man had been sentenced for murder or space-piracy. It didn't matter now.

What mattered was that these two knew even less about him. He wondered how long he'd stay alive if they learned his real status!

DeHarries had taken into his confidence a mere half-dozen of his most trusted operatives. They were given widespread assignments. None knew what he would find, or where. And Curt's assignment, the Federation Prison, was toughest of all. Not even the Prison overseers knew his true identity! Curt worked with the hardened criminals of all planets, enduring the privations and hardships and awful radite rays.

Gradually, Curt became one of the select group of prisoners who helped unload the supply ship which arrived twice a year. On its last arrival, just a few days ago, a crew member had slipped a folded note into Curt's hand! The message stated that *Landreth* would be waiting on the dark-side, and would take three men—any three. It set the time and the place.

Landreth! Curt could scarcely believe his luck. That elusive pirate had disappeared, and was thought to be dead. Apparently not! What new scheme was he hatching now—and more important—did it have a bearing on the unseen forces which DeHarries felt were at work?

Curt selected Rikert for the escape because the man was big and tough and could handle himself well in a showdown fight. Kueelo he selected for a different reason. It was partly sentiment—but more than that, Curt had a deep-rooted suspicion that Kueelo was more than an ordinary "political"!

CURT gave the signal, and they continued across the dark uncertain terrain. Jagged rock cut into their boots. Soon they were forced to circle wide around crevices large enough to swallow a man

Curt watched the hand on his oxygen gauge drop lower and lower. There could be no turning back now! If they didn't find Landreth's ship within the next hour. . .

Rickert spoke, worry creeping into his

voice. "We ought to be getting close, Emmons! How about using a signal flare?"

Curt peered ahead at the cobalt sky. The horizon dropped sheerly away. He shook his head.

"Only got two flares, can't waste them! Wait 'til we sight the mountains."

Rikert grumbled, but Curt saved his breath. Half an hour later they glimpsed a serrated line of cliffs low on the horizon. Curt released one of the flares in that direction. They watched it rage in a fiery arc across the darkness for perhaps twenty seconds . . . then it disappeared.

They awaited an answering signal. Anything to guide them! But nothing appeared. The darkness pressed in, almost tangible.

Despair washed over Curt like a cold wave from the sea.

"Better set your oxygen flow to one-half," he advised. They hurried the pace now, heedless of sharp rocks and dangerous gullies. Once Curt pulled Kueelo back from a steep brink just in time. The little Martian was staggering.

Could Landreth have given up hope on them, and hoisted gravs? At the thought, Curt hurriedly brought out the remaining flare. With a prayer on his lips he aimed it, this time in a higher arc.

Then Kueelo was clutching at Curt's arm, pointing far off to the left.

There was the answering signal—a thin pencil of light slicing upward. It flashed on and off at intervals, but it seemed a long way!

Already, sharp pains were slicing through Curt's lungs. He stayed close to Kueelo—but the Martian's fatigue seemed to have left him now! He was giving voice again to the peculiar little aria in the higher octaves which Curt had come to know so well. In that strange tune was a challenge, a promise—and something more. It was pagan. It was strength. It got into a man's soul!

It seemed an eternity. They were nearing the cliffs, stumbling into a rocky ravine. They saw the spaceship, Landreth's ship! But the scalpels of fire in Curt's lungs were unendurable. The spaceship and all the terrain danced and faded away. His legs were leaden. Kueelo staggered

against him, and somehow he managed to hold the little Martian upright.

A vague impression . . . a spilled square of light out of which a helmeted figure came leaping. Kueelo collapsed, sliding slowly away. Curt plummeted forward, gasped for air where there was suddenly none, then utter darkness claimed him.

III

THERE WAS AIR NOW. Great gulps of it. Someone had thrown back Curt's helmet, and he could hear the steady thrum of the airostat. It was beautiful music.

Kueelo had recovered, and Rikert. And a fourth man was there. As Curt came to his feet he heard Rikert's voice, a little suspicious, addressing the stranger.

"You! You're not Landreth. I thought we were going to meet——"

"Disappointed? Get going then! Back where you came from!" The stranger's voice was like a whiplash. He held an electro in his hard-knuckled fist. Rikert became silent.

"So. You'd like to see Landreth, eh?"

Rikert grinned, wet his lips a little. "Sure would! Don't get me wrong, mister. There's one man I'd like to join up with, if he's operating again!"

Curt watched the stranger, saw him grin as though secretly amused at Rikert's words.

"Later!" the man said. "Right now get this through your heads, all of you. Your lives were forfeit at the mines, and that isn't altered by your being here! I'll blast the first one who makes a wrong move." He gestured with the gun, surveyed them coldly. "Good. Now you will strip. Put your clothes over here."

He went carefully through their clothes, found nothing in Curt's or Kueelo's. But from a secret pocket in Rikert's leather suit he brought forth a deadly needle-gun. A smile creased his dark, thin face.

"You won't need *this* where you are going." The spaceman pocketed the needle-gun then turned suddenly on Curt, sharp eyes going over him. "Up! Up with that left arm!"

Too late Curt remembered the thin disc

fastened under his arm-pit, identifying him as an investigator for the Federation Prison-Board. He had adopted that merely as a cover-up. Actually his mission for DeHarries was far more important! Now Curt shrugged, tore the disc away from the paper-thin duroplast fastening.

"So," the spaceman purred, examining it. "You were sent here by the Prison-Board! And we thought no one was aware of the missing prisoners."

"Well I'll be damned," Rikert said, half in anger, staring at Curt. "If I'd known who you really were, Emmons——"

"You'd have come just the same!" Curt said icily.

"It really doesn't matter who you are," the man with the gun said softly, surveying Curt's well-muscled figure and clear eyes. "Yes, I'm glad you came. You're the type we need. This one too," he nodded at Rikert.

He turned his gaze upon Kueelo. "But I can't understand why you brought *this* one! Well, we shall find a use for him."

At the insult, quick points of fire appeared in Kueelo's eyes. Curt flashed him a warning look. Kueelo set his lips tightly.

"My name," the other was saying, "is Jeffers. Dress quickly now. Captain Landreth will want to see you, then we'll be on our way."

It became apparent to Curt that this was no ordinary spacer! It was small and trim, with a suggestion of untold speed. If the ship carried weapons, they were kept well under cover. Jeffers led them along a single corridor with staterooms on either side.

"Where's the crew?" Rikert asked.

"You three are the crew. Beyond that there's just me—and Captain Landreth." Again Curt had the feeling that Jeffers was secretly amused. He ushered them into a compartment near the control-room.

Curt stood quite still for a moment, staring around. The room was a dream. Magnificent tapestries, interwoven with *kra* plumes, covered the walls. Beneath his feet an imperial Martian rug was a splash of vari-colored splendor. He saw furniture of extinct *fragua* wood, inlaid with mosaics of semi-precious stones.

Then Curt's eyes widened, as he gazed

across the room and saw the person who rose to greet them.

She was tall, for a girl. Auburn hair brushed smoothly back from her forehead fell in waves to the shoulders of a close-fitting uniform. Her eyes were blue but unsmiling, her lips smiled thinly but didn't mean it.

"I am Lorine Landreth," she said without emotion. "If you must be amazed, please do it quickly. We have work to do!"

CURT was beyond being amazed. Thoughtfully his gaze took in her trim figure, the pale but determined face, the electro held loosely in a belt at her waist. She gave the impression of knowing how to use it.

"Captain Landreth, I presume." Curt's voice was serious. "George Landreth's daughter?"

"Correct! On both counts." She turned to Jeffers. "You made it clear that their status is not altered by their being here?"

"Of course. Don't worry, I'll see that they remember it, Lorine."

Her eyes blazed quickly. "Captain to you! See that you remember *that* Jeffers!"

He nodded, smiling with faint insolence as he leaned against the door. The girl turned back to the three prisoners.

"There is one difference. At the Prison mines you worked hard. And for a lifetime. And you died. You will work where we are going, too—perhaps not so hard, but dangerously! You may die, but at least I offer you a chance. If we succeed in our mission, you are free men. Free to change your identities and go where you will."

"That's okay by me, miss!" Rikert was enthusiastic. "Er, I mean—Captain. But look! Don't we get to see Landreth, George Landreth? I was counting on——"

The girl turned a gaze upon Rikert which reduced him to silence.

"It is my wish that we all may see George Landreth! I may as well tell you now. The purpose of our mission—is to find my father." For the merest instant, Curt saw a deepening look in her eyes which dissolved the mask of hardness. She turned quickly away, seized a sheaf of

papers. "We are wasting time here! Jeffers! Show them their assignments." Kueelo and Rikert followed the man from the room. Curt hesitated, then stepped into the control-room where the girl had gone. He may have been mistaken, but for a moment she had shown signs of being almost human.

Curt stood silent, watching her at the navigator's table. She consulted pencilled data on the papers, then swiftly, with practised fingers, she adjusted the sliding sheathes on the robot control. At last it was finished. She glanced up, saw him watching.

"Venus!" Curt exclaimed. "So that's where we're going!"

Her blue eyes surveyed him coolly. "So. You can read a robot-wheel, can you? What else can you do?"

"Around a spaceship, almost anything. Tubes, controls, magnibeam, calculations and differential, any weapon you care to mention—"

"That will do." Her narrow eyes narrowed. "I don't like men with me in space who know more about a ship than I do! Suppose you help Jeffers in the rocket room."

"Very well, Captain. But about your father—"

"Later!"

Curt nodded, looked at her a moment, then hurried to the rocket room. Jeffers said brusquely, "Do you understand magnetic stabilizers, Emmons?"

"Sure."

"Help me with these, then."

As Curt worked, his mind went back across the years, tying together threads of stories he had heard. Stories about George Landreth, one of the first men to open up the rich new territory on Callisto. He had brought his wife there from Earth. He struck a rich iridium vein and worked it slowly, alone. Until the Earth Corporations stepped in. Landreth defied them to the bitter end. His wife died unpleasantly . . .

There the stories varied. Some said that Landreth placed his daughter in the hands of relatives on Earth, before he turned pirate. Others said the girl stayed with her father, learning every trick of the

spaceways. One thing was clear: throughout the years Landreth gathered lawless men about him. More than one Corporation had gone to ruin under the incessant attacks of an enemy who had achieved a ruthlessness equal to their own! Then the attacks ceased. Landreth seemed to have disappeared.

CURT thrust these questions from his mind. At last the stabilizers and rocket-feeds were ready. Jeffers signalled the control-room, and a moment later they swept upward. Endless miles away, near the twilight-strip, Curt could see a faint pinpoint glow of a Mercurian city. He turned to Jeffers.

"One question, Jeffers. What happened to the other men you rescued from the Federation Prison?"

"We've only pulled this stunt once before. The others died."

"On Venus?"

Jeffers looked sharply at Curt, then shrugged. "Sure, on Venus. We'll arrive there in exactly three days."

Rikert came up, wiping his hands on a piece of waste. "You know," he grinned, "even at the Prison word had a way of reaching us. Any truth to these stories about Aladdian throwing a guard around Venus?"

"We may run into the Imperial Guard. But I doubt if they'll have many patrolers where *we're* going."

"Yeah? Where is that?"

Jeffers' dark face grinned at them. "Right into the K'Yarthan Swamp!" A sudden cry reached them from beyond the rocket-room. Lorine Landreth's voice! Curt was first to reach the corridor, then he stopped dead in his tracks.

They saw Kueelo, standing spraddled in the middle of the corridor. An electro was in his hand. He turned it quickly toward the three men, and they fell back.

"He sneaked behind me and got my gun! Watch him, Jeffers, he'll use it!" The warning came from the girl. Curt saw her crouching out of range near a state-room door, on the other side of Kueelo. "He can't cover us both. Easy, Jeffers."

"Get his gun, Emmons. Quick!" The Martian's voice came in an excited high pitch.

Curt saw Jeffers easing behind him, away from the line of fire; glimpsed his hand as it went for his gun. Curt whirled away, sliced his hand downward into Jeffers' wrist. The electro flamed once, then clattered to the floor. Jeffers leaped for it, but Curt threw his broad shoulders into a block that hurled the man aside. Then he came up with the gun, and backed towards Kueelo.

"Nice going, Emmons. Get to those controls! I'll keep them covered."

They were not quite free of Mercury's gravity, Curt realized as he felt the spacer surge erratically, threatening to go into a spin. He saw the tight smile on Kueelo's lips.

"Hurry, Emmons! We've got the ship now!"

Curt surged past the Martian. Then he whirled, clamped his free hand across the frail wrist holding the electro. A single twist, and Kueelo's fingers opened. Curt held both weapons.

"Get to those controls!" he snapped at Lorine Landreth.

She stared at him in blank astonishment, then leaped to the controls. A moment later the ship straightened out, and they were in free space. Kueelo's eyes were blazing pools of hate as he gazed at Curt Emmons.

Curt ignored him, turned to Jeffers and tossed him his weapon. "Here, put this away. I guess Kueelo can't wait to get back to Mars—but I'll settle for the K'Yarthan Swamp."

Curt shrugged, walked forward and Jeffers levelled the electro. "The other gun, Emmons. It goes to Captain Landreth! Quick!"

Curt shrugged, walked forward and handed it to her.

She flashed him a smile. "Thanks for what you did, Emmons." She came and faced Kueelo, surveyed him coldly. "Little man, can't you wait to die? Let me assure you—another trick like that and you'll never see Mars again!"

Kueelo stalked away, eyes still blazing hatred.

IV

LORINE LANDRETH PROVED A canny navigator. She set a course far beneath the ecliptic, and for two days they did not encounter a Patrol. Curt had noticed the spacer was painted solid black and carried no insignia; an old trick of George Landreth's.

Was George Landreth connected in some way with all the far-scattered events which DeHarries called the *pattern*? Had he allowed his gnawing hate to encompass the entire Federation? All else was relegated to unimportance in Curt's mind beside this single throbbing question. War between the planets was imminent, as more and more monstrous happenings occurred without reason. Curt doubted that Landreth himself could be behind it all; it was too far-reaching and purposeful. But Curt was resolved to follow his present lead, and hope for a way to report back to DeHarries.

And there was another question. Kueelo.

Late on the second day Curt was off duty when there came a soft rap on his stateroom door, and Kueelo entered.

"The girl is studying maps of the K'Yarthan Swamp," he announced. "Jeffers and Rikert are at the controls. I think they will bear watching, those two."

Curt nodded. He studied Kueelo. The little Martian was over his anger, but now he seemed strangely perturbed.

"I've been waiting to speak to you alone, Curt Emmons. Remember, Jeffers couldn't understand why you brought *me* along? I've wondered the same thing. From the very first. There were many others to choose for the escape, strong ones like Rikert."

"You made it, didn't you?" Curt snapped. "Before this is over, you may wish you were back at the Prison mines."

"That doesn't answer my question. Why did you select *me*?"

Curt hesitated. "All right. If you must know, I always had a feeling you didn't belong at the Prison. Sure, I knew you were a 'political.' But no ordinary one! And I don't think your name is Kueelo!"

He watched the other's face, saw emo-

tion ripple across the chiselled features.

"So," the Martian said softly. "I thought you might have guessed. Was it the tune, the little aria I always sang? Many times I could feel you listening. I sensed that you knew . . . but I could not keep it within me, Emmons!"

"Doesn't that aria occur somewhere in the *Deimian Cabal*?"

"So you know that! But for you—for any Earthman——"

"I know very little about it," Curt said quickly. "I've heard that it's rooted in your religion somehow, but the thing's meaningless to me."

KUEELO stood still and straight. Curt could almost see the emotion welling up inside him like a slow ocean tide. Then Kueelo made up his mind. He spoke rapidly and without pause. "You are right. My name is not Kueelo. I am Tor Ekkov, Supreme Co-ordinator of the Society of Deimos on Mars! This cannot mean much to you, an Earthman, so I'll tell you only this—when the occasion demands we can, and often have, served as a balancewheel in the politics of Mars. Jal Tagar knew this when he took over Mars six years ago. Oh, he planned well! The twelve CoOrdinators throughout Mars were simultaneously arrested. It was a paralyzing blow. And Jal Tagar took me, the supreme Co-ordinator, by a most treacherous ruse——"

The little Martian paused. Hate blazed in the indomitable black depths of his eyes.

"So Jal Tagar completed his *coup*, and Mars was under his heel. He deemed that death was too good for *me*. Only the Mercury mines would do, for that was a slow death."

"You paint a dark picture, Kueelo, or, rather, Tor Ekkov, but all this was six years ago! The Federation has recognized Jal Tagar's government. He has ruled well, and Mars has co-operated in every. . ."

Tor Ekkov paced the floor, stopped in front of Curt.

"Do you really believe that, Emmons? What can anyone believe—*now*? He noticed Curt's start of surprise. "Yes, I have heard of the strange forces at work in the System! And let me assure you: when

dark events are brewing, you'll find Jal Tagar's hand in it somewhere!"

Curt waved a hand wearily. "Man, don't you know we're going into the K'Yarthan Swamp? You'd better start thinking about that!"

"I believe *your* mission is greater than you pretend, Curt Emmons. You're no prison-board Investigator! Why did you stop me when we had control of this ship? We could have gone back to Earth—or Mars."

"Don't ask questions, Tor Ekkov."

Tor's eyes were steady on him. "We've got to trust each other," he urged. "If I can't return to Mars, it's imperative that I get to a Tele-Magnum!"

Curt laughed outright at that one.

"We're going into K'Yarthan, and you speak of Tele-Magnums!"

"I must get my voice through to Mars!" Tor's eyes seemed like black jewels in the pallid face. "There are those of my Society who believe I still live—and when they hear my voice, hear my aria, you will see a new Mars!"

Curt shrugged at Tor's babbling: In the face of what was happening throughout the Federation, what did he care about a new Mars? But the mention of a Tele-Magnum struck a sudden note. Lorine Landreth must have a secret base in the K'Yarthan Swamp! If there should be a Tele-Magnum there, powerful enough to contact Earth . . . Curt came back to his senses, laughed mirthlessly at such a remote chance.

In the next instant he was on his feet, as the clangor of the emergency alarm rang through the ship. For a moment he stared at Tor's startled face, then rushed into the corridor with the little Martian pounding after him.

THEY found Lorine and the others in the Control Room. The girl was calm, impassive, bending over the open receptor as a voice sliced through.

". . . have had you in our beam for the past five minutes! As you carry no insignia, you will go into a drift immediately while we approach! Venus Guard calling. . . ."

Jeffers' dark face broke into a grin, but

Lorine remained serious. "They never patrolled this far from Venus! Jeffers, look to the emergency tubes. We may need some speed!" She turned to Curt. "Get on the V-Panel, will you Emmons? See if you can pick them out."

The crystyte panel came to life. Curt grasped the directional-finder, swung it in eccentric parabolas. Star pinpoints arced to and fro. A touch on the Magni-lens brought the blackness swimming into closer view, then they sighted the Guard. Six formidable spacers emblazoned with the Imperial Venus Emblum.

Curt glanced at the proximity dial. They seemed a comfortable distance away, but he knew what a tremendous area the network of "finder-beams" covered!

"Last warning," the voice razored. "Nullify your control immediately, or we blast!"

"They're bluffing," Lorine decided.

"They can't reach us yet. If we can get away from those finder-beams they'll never pick us up again. Jeffers, prepare for emergency blast!" She hurried to the control-console.

"This will give our position away!" Curt exclaimed.

She glanced at him impassively. "Just stay on that panel, Emmons." The little spacer vibrated anew. Rockets thundered on full power, then the spacer leaped forward, executed a wide parabola that carried it miles out of position. Almost at once Lorine cut all rockets, and they sped forward on the momentum.

"Safe," she smiled thinly. "They'll never spot us now, a solid black ship!"

Again Curt centered the Panel. The Venus Guard had broken formation, widening the area of search. Magnetic beams, pale green and swirling, criss-crossed miles of space.

Then Curt peered intently, puzzled, as a new kind of beam appeared. It seemed to uncoil across space, carrying a little bubble of brighter color before it. Suddenly the bubble burst. An expanse of blinding white light illumined the depths of space! It continued to spread outward. One edge of the perfect light-sphere very nearly touched their speeding ship!

Startled, Lorine jabbed at the rocket

studs. Once more they swept into a parabola before she cut power. Dozens of the strange light-spheres were appearing behind them now, dotting space for a thousand-mile radius, expanding, shoving back the darkness. Three more times Lorine used rockets, changing direction, before they were out of the danger zone. Then their ship was a silent black ghost speeding away.

"Fine thing!" Jeffers exploded as he watched the scene behind them. "Springing a new stunt like that. What a target we'd be if we got caught in one of those things!" He grinned at Curt. "What won't they think of next, eh?"

"Yeah," Curt said wryly. "A guy just ain't safe any more. If I were you I'd write 'em a letter about it!"

V

VENUS, MYSTERIOUS AND cloud-obscured, rolled up like a rounded ghost below them. They had approached from the extreme south polar side, and there, Curt knew, lay the K'Yarthan Swamp—a vast unexplored region some eight hundred miles across.

As they entered the first strata of clouds a curtain of hot rain swept about them, slashing across their ports and dissolving into vapor. Then they broke through, and Curt felt his insides twisting up into cold knots.

The swamp was a festering sore across the planet. A miasmic nightmare shrouded in viscous yellow fog that seemed alive as it curled up to touch the low-lying clouds. Jeffers put into play a penetrant beam that partly dissolved the fog. Lorine drove the ship relentlessly forward.

They swept lower through membranous foliage and corrupted fungi-growth reaching hundreds of feet high. There was a moment of terrible uncertainty. Then Curt saw a clear space spreading out below. A low-structured building occupied the exact center. Lorine set the craft down with no more than a slight roll, then turned to the new men.

"We have to wear protective suits here. You'll understand why. Jeffers will show you how to get into them."

The suits were of flexible beryllium-mesh, with tough rubberized helmets fitting snugly around the neck. Curt noticed that the duroplast face-plates were equipped with ingenious filter units.

"When you leave the ship," Jeffers told them, "be fast! Just stay close to me." The outer lock opened, they leaped to the ground and raced toward the building.

Curt knew instantly that the atmosphere was laden with millions of microscopic spores. The heat was insufferable. He hadn't taken ten steps, when sweat began trickling into the close-fitting collar. It burned.

He heard a sharp *zing* past his ear. Then another. Something struck his meshed arm with enough force to half spin him around. He saw a tiny, wickedly metallic beetle fastened in the mesh. More of them struck him, and others sang past liked winged bullets, to flatten against the building. He heard Rikert cry out.

Lorine was at the building now, inserting a long triggered key. There came a crackle of sparks and the door was open.

"Welcome to Venus!" Jeffers said, as they flung themselves inside—then he saw that Rikert was hit. One of the beetles had imbedded itself in his wrist where he'd failed to fasten down the mesh garment.

Jeffers tore it away, crushed it underfoot. He hurried to a wall cabinet, came back with a box of evil-smelling unguent to spread over the wound.

"That'll heal soon. We must have stirred up a nest of those damned *jung* beetles!"

Curt sang down limply. Fire still burned in his lungs. So this was K'Yar-than Swamp! He found it hard to believe that far to the north were three hospitable continents with modern cities, verdant lands and mountains rearing into clean air.

Kueelo moved beside Curt and whispered, "No Tele-Magnum here, unless *that's* one!"

Curt followed his gaze. Lorine was unlocking a metal cabinet, but it was definitely not a Tele-Magnum. A bank of curious power tubes was connected with sets of coils. The girl made several adjustments, the tubes leaped into silver radiance

and the coils sang a cadence that ascended the scale beyond the audible.

Curt came over to watch. Then he stepped to a window. In the fog overhead he noticed a fine-laced canopy of wires. They came alive now, singing gently and sending down a power that dispelled the fog until only a faint obscurant mist remained.

"How long do we stay here?"

"Only tonight. Tomorrow we trek into the Swamp, but we have to wait for the Phibians."

"Phibians!" Curt stared at her.

"Creatures who live deep in the Swamp," she explained. "We couldn't get to where we're going without them."

THE STATION was stocked with food in plasti-sealed containers. They prepared their meal over a tiny atomic stove, and it was a welcome repast for the men from Mercury Prison! When they had finished, Lorine lost little time in explaining the set-up. "Now that we're here, you men have every right to know what to expect. Our task isn't easy! But we have the protective suits and weapons, the Phibians are friendly and will guide us part of the way." She moved with quick little strides about the room, as if impatient even at this brief delay. "You, Rikert. You're still anxious to see George Landreth?"

"Nothing I want more!"

"Then stay alive! That's all I ask of any of you—to stay alive." She paused "You have questions. I'll answer them."

Rikert asked the obvious question. "How do you know George Landreth is here?"

"Because he built this Station! Jeffers and I found it here just as you see it. And I have other proof."

"That's right," Jeffers nodded. "This Station is identical to the one Landreth built at his secret base on Io. I was there with him a long time, in fact I was second in command——" He hesitated.

"Go on," Lorine waved a hand. "Tell them the story."

"About three years ago," Jeffers said, "observers reported a strange spaceship plunging in from the orbit of Pluto. Well, we watched it from Io. And I can tell you

this—it was travelling faster than anything we had at the time——”

Curt recalled the event. Astronomers had found it difficult to keep the strange object in sight. Some said it wasn't a spacer at all, but a meteor. Jeffers' voice went on:

“When this thing neared Jupiter, the planet's gravity slowed it down. We tried signalling it, but no answer. That's when Landreth determined to go out and meet it! He was that kind of man! None of us wanted to go with him—we'd braved many things in the spaceways, but this seemed foolhardy. Landreth laughed at us. He would have gone alone, but finally three of the men volunteered.

“They set out in the fastest cruiser we had—and they never came back. I never saw Landreth again.”

There was pounding excitement in Curt's brain. “I remember it now! This ship, or whatever it was, escaped Jupiter's gravity. It accelerated and plunged toward the sun. But you believe it crashed here, in the K'Yarthan Swamp?”

“Crashed, or else Landreth brought it safely here. We know, now, that he didn't die.”

“My father escaped alive,” Lorine nodded. “*Because I saw him once shortly after this!*”

Curt started. “You—saw him? You're sure it was *after?*”

“Yes! He came to Earth. Understand, I hadn't seen my father since I was fourteen, and he hadn't set foot on Earth in years.” Her blue eyes were haunted as she paced the room. “But he risked capture just to come there and talk to me. He said it was extremely urgent that I find Jeffers—and give him this!” She showed them a crude map of K'Yarthan Swamp, with a route leading south. “He seemed strange and different. Frightening! Not as I'd ever known him!”

“Different? How?”

“I—I can't explain it. He seemed under some stress. A terrible urgency, as if he hadn't much time. Before I could question him, he was gone!”

“An urgency,” Curt repeated. “An urgency to come back here!”

“I'm sure of it. I set about finding Jef-

fers, and it took me months. I finally located him on Ceres. We came here, made friends with the Phibians, even went deep into the Swamp with them. But there's a place miles from here beyond which *they* won't go. “I'm sure my father is there!” She paused. Anguish brimmed in her eyes. “Two people could never make it, though. Together we might We'll have to fight our way.”

Curt watched this girl in growing wonderment. By some strange alchemy her mask of hardness was gone, something of pain and lost uncertainty rose in her shadowed eyes. Curt found himself suddenly being glad she wasn't criminal; at least she hadn't been with her father in the later years! Then a thought fastened upon his mind like a patina. The girl was guilty of removing criminals from Federation Prison! Such an act was punishable by death, and Curt was an agent under direct orders of DeHarries. . . .

He cursed inaudibly. What was happening to him? He had a far greater mission here! He had stumbled upon one thread of DeHarries' *pattern*, and it might result in unravelling the entire skein of monstrous events which had plagued the planets for the past two years!

“We'd better all get some sleep,” Jeffers was saying. “Tomorrow'll be a tough day, and I mean tough!”

CURT tossed restlessly in his bunk. It wasn't the steady hum of the ionization screen outside that kept him awake. He had a preternatural awareness of something impending. He sat up, and saw that someone was moving about.

Curt swung himself silently to the floor, just as silently crossed the room. It was Lorine. Curt saw the outer door open and close behind her.

Quickly he followed. The jungle clearing was free of fog now. Lorine was hurrying toward the spaceship. Curt followed her inside, then forward to the control-room. He watched her manipulating the V-Panel. Bits of outer space swept into view, together with pin-point gleams that were stars. At last she centered on one. A tiny disc of bright blue. It was Earth. She leaned forward, gazing at the

screen. Curt was startled at the clear-cut radiance of her face. He saw the glint of tears in her eyes, and the lengthening glimmer of one that rolled down her cheek. He came forward softly.

"It is beautiful, isn't it?"

"I miss Earth," he said simply, looking up.

"All of us feel that, out here. A yearning to get back. But you——"

"I've never been back. Not since I started searching for father, two years ago." She turned her face to the screen, was silent for a moment. "It must have been terrible for you, Curt Emmons. How long were you at the Prison?"

Curt started. It dawned on him that she still regarded him as one of the regulation prisoners. But Jeffers knew better! There must be a reason why he hadn't told her!

"A long time," he answered her question. "Suppose we do find your father," he said slowly. "His life is forfeit anywhere in the Federation. I guess he and Jeffers will start their reign of outlawry again——"

Her face was troubled. "I suppose so, but I've got to find him, Curt! He's in desperate trouble here, and he's still alive. I feel it!"

Curt nodded. Then he was suddenly alert, as a sound reached his ears. It came as a faint hum far above the jungle roof. The propulsion beam of a spacer! It came louder and nearer. Curt raced for the outer lock, stared up into a far-away patch of fog. For the merest instant the fog eddied furiously, as a great bulk that seemed a silvery ghost flashed through. Then it was gone, the deafening drone diminished.

Curt whirled upon Lorine. Her face had gone white.

"The other times you were here! Did you ever see a spacer?"

"Never! I can't believe——"

"Come on." He hurried back to the control-room, clicked off the V-Panel, then began ripping away the wires leading to the directional-finder.

"Man, are you mad? What are you doing?"

"That spacer was coming in for a

landing, don't you understand? Here in the Swamp! I'm going to find out where! Quick, bring me a tool-kit."

She hurried to comply. In a few minutes Curt had the directional-finder uncovered. Twin coils of thin, sensitized metal tape were revealed. He unrolled one, stretched it across the room, attached it to the terminals of the starboard magni-plates imbedded in the hull.

"A little trick I once learned. The agni-plates act as a sounding-board, the vibration is carried across this tape to the finder, and recorded. If that ship hasn't landed yet we ought to get an approximate position!"

He clicked on the magni-plate feed, Powerful coils hummed, the tape stretching across the room began to undulate gently.

"We're getting something!" Curt hurried to the finder, turned it on. The second metal tape began unwinding to a rear spool. Aberyllium needle scratched a continuous, wavering line along the sensitized surface.

"The spacer's still in flight," Lorine murmured.

"It was heading due south. It's going to berth somewhere in the Swamp!" For five minutes they watched the lengthening line, as the tape slowly unrolled. Ten minutes. Then it stopped abruptly.

"There we have it." Curt spun the tape carefully back into place. "We can follow the route now!" He stared at her. "That ship must have come down at least fifty miles from here! And we were going to fight our way through this jungle?"

"Jeffers and I flew over the Swamp dozens of times," she explained. "We've criss-crossed it from one end to the other, without spotting a single place to land! Except here." She examined the route on the tape, excitement showing in her eyes. "But we'll try it again now. This will save us days!"

It was still a few hours until dawn, but there was no sleep for Curt now. He'd had but the briefest glimpse of the mysterious spacer, but one thing he was sure of. The sound. It hadn't been the sound of a rocket-propelled ship!

His mind went back to Carver of Per-

lac, found murdered in space, the Frequency Tuner stolen. Curt was certain the silvery spacer he'd just seen was powered by a Frequency Tuner!

VI

NEVER SAW THIS DONE before, Emmons. It's a mighty cute trick!" Jeffers examined the route on the finder-tape. "But how does this guide us?"

"You'll see. We set up a circuit and run this directly to the rocket-feeds! We can't go astray."

At last all was ready. With Lorine again at the controls, the spacer rose into the heavy shrouding clouds. It was ticklish business, and Curt admired the way she upped gravs.

Here there was no dawn. Morning had come as a mere paling of the mists, but hot rain blanketed them as the little spacer drove forward.

Tor Ekkov began an endless, nervous pacing, but Curt and the others huddled over the tape, watching its undeviating movement. In a matter of minutes, Curt realized, they'd reach the place where the unknown spacer had berthed. Perhaps it were best if they didn't set down too near—

Within ten minutes their guiding tape had nearly run its course. Curt hurried to Lorine, spoke something, and she nodded. They began the descent, broke through an under-strata of clouds and were speeding over a limitless expanse of vegetation.

Curt began to understand what Lorine meant. Nowhere could he see a break in the corrupted fungi-growth and giant, spiked ferns that reached above the blanketing steam. Some of those ferns were large enough to impale a spacer!

But luck was with them. As they began a criss-crossing route Curt spied a thinning area through the haze. A narrow, slate-dark opening appeared in the jungle roof, deep and straight as though made by the slice of a giant hand.

Steadying in its course, the ship nosed toward it. There was little room to spare. A yellowish-green gloom engulfed them as

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they levelled off with a thrust of underhull rockets. Mud and matted vegetation sprayed high about the ports. They sloughed to a stop.

"Nice landing," Curt commented.

"Any landing here is a nice one," Lorine said wryly. She glanced at the totally dark ports. "I wonder if we're below the Swamp! Jeffers, turn off those rocket-feeds!"

Once more they donned the protective suits and helmets. Lorine opened a locker, handed each of them an electro pistol.

"I'll feel better with this," Jeffers said grimly, lifting a long duralloy cylinder with a lens-covered bore. "Radiant gun," he explained. "Transforms matter into radiant energy, by an instantaneous stripping of electrons. Landreth used to have these at Io Base, but I worked out this smaller model myself."

THEY stepped down into soft, glutinous muck. Vision stopped five yards away. Curt expected the gloom to come alive with motion and sound and unseen terrors, but there was none of that here. A terrible quiet enfolded them.

The matted-walled chasm seemed to extend interminably. They proceeded along it, finding their vision gradually improved. Curt hurried forward, stayed close beside the girl.

"You mentioned something about a region where these—these Phibians wouldn't go. Did you ever find out why?"

Lorine nodded. "They claimed that far in the Swamp was a god that spoke to them! They were afraid of it."

"Spoke to them?"

"Yes. With the voice that has no sound. Warning them back."

Curt was startled. "The voice that has no sound. Telepathy! But it's strange we've felt nothing!"

There was no sight or sound of a living thing, but hot blasts of wind from above brought a miasmatic swamp odor. It became almost an opiate to their senses.

Curt noticed the tangled walls on either side were beginning to widen away. And there was something else, as he felt his mind preternaturally alert despite the cloying odors. He imagined he felt the faint-

est thought-impression impinging on him, subtle and eerie, almost a feeling of being under surveillance. He glanced about at the others. They were feeling it too.

Suddenly the loom of jungle broke. They emerged into a downward sloping place that seemed all swamp; a vast circular area black and quiescent, with jungle rising on all sides. Descending toward it, they noticed a vague glistening shape protruding just above the area of muck.

"The spacer!" Tor Ekkov exclaimed. "Must be the one you saw, Emmons—it crashed here!"

Curt peered closer, then shook his head. He pointed out greenish swamp tendrils entwining over and about the hull, mute evidence of time.

"It's a spacer all right," Jeffers was taut with excitement. "It's the one Landreth boarded near Io, three years ago! By all that's holy, we've found it!" They could only make out the stern, but the very size of it indicated that the rest of the hull must be gigantic, far beneath the primordial ooze.

Lorine clutched at Curt's arm, pointing. The Swamp moved. The black surface was surging up in a horrible turgid mass. In one place and then another, dark tentacles broke the surface. A central body began to emerge, huge and bulbous beyond belief! It was octopoid—ghastly and gelatinous, the body itself some fifty feet across, with tentacles sprawling the entire diameter of the swamp. It pulled its greenish-gray shape toward the protruding stern of the spacer. Like an ominous guardian it draped itself entirely around and over the polished hull. There it lay, pulsing gently, lord of all it surveyed.

And it surveyed them well! Curt found himself staring into orange-tinted eyes a yard in diameter. Clammy uneasiness took hold of him. Those eyes were bright and alert with meaning! 1

Curt felt overtones across his mind, saw Rikert's hand flash to his electro. But never reached it. A huge tentacle lashed out. Curt fell prone as it slashed over his head, Rikert ducked away too—but the tentacle seized Jeffers, tightened, lifted him in a sweeping arc.

The others hurried out of danger as more tentacles lashed out. Curt rolled from beneath one of them, threw up an arm against another, and felt his arm go numb from the impact. He stumbled over the radiant cylinder which Jeffers had let fall. Curt seized it, took careful aim.

Radiant energy, Jeffers had said. The beam that lashed from the lens-covered bore was radiant indeed, and it saved Jeffers' life! Curt slashed it squarely across the octopoid bulk and across the eyes. They blanked out in a flash of disorganized electrons. Jeffers came plummeting down, scrambled to safety as Curt swept the radiant beam with devastating effect. In a matter of minutes the haughty guardian of the swamp ceased to move. . . then a strange thing happened.

From the tangle of disrupted flesh and shredded integument, a tiny globule of light rose lazily up. Electric-blue, sentient, scarcely a few inches in diameter, it hung poised and gently pulsing.

Rikert took careful aim. Curt whirled, knocked his hand aside. "Don't fire! I want to see where it goes!"

Seeming to lose interest in them, the light drifted, still pulsing, toward the far edge of the swamp. There seemed to be a clearing of some sort. Suddenly the strange light dipped toward the ground and disappeared.

"Should've let me take a shot at that thing," Rikert growled.

"That was an intelligent entity! It may lead us to something."

THEY circled the swamp area in the direction the light had taken. There was still an eeriness about the place, a brooding overtone they couldn't shake off. At last they reached the opposite side, saw a smooth aisle extending into the jungle. But that's not what brought them up short, staring.

A hundred yards beyond was a milky-white mistiness reaching from wall to jungle wall. And this was not Venusian fog! It remained quiescent. An unearthly blue radiance seemed to shine beyond, giving an impression of vast distance.

Curt said brusquely, "Wait here. Keep out of sight!"

He hurried forward, keeping to the tangled jungle wall wherever possible. As he neared the barrier, it tended toward a semi-translucence. The bluish light beyond seemed to have no source, and Curt had the impression of a vast grotto that reached interminably above, curving away into the fog.

Now he could see vague outlines beyond, towering and bulky. Other shapes moved about, appearing to Curt as shadows seen through faintly frosted glass.

"Buildings — and people!" Undoubtedly, the silver spacer had come here; there was probably an overhead entrance. Curt moved closer, and heard the faintest murmur of sound beyond, as of men and machines at work.

Excitement caught at his brain. Now he knew, with sharp certainty, that he'd found the thing that DeHarries and other planetary leaders were seeking! Only for some inimical purpose would men, whoever they were, band together in so secret and inaccessible spot as K'Yarthan Swamp! Curt examined the barrier. It was some sort of power screen; he felt a dangerous radiation that decided him against trying his electro on it. He hurried back to the others.

"Can't tell how far it extends," he told them. "It's an Electronic Curtain, that's for sure! And there are men and buildings behind it."

"We've got to find an entrance somewhere." A terrible grimness took hold of Lorine, as she thought of her father. But Curt shook his head doubtfully.

"If we tried our electros on it——" This came from Tor Ekkov, and Curt laughed mirthlessly.

"Sure, you try that, if you're tired of your present identity. It would turn you into a billion disorganized electrons!"

"I have an idea." Lorine turned back to the swamp edge. She stood pondering, staring at the stern of the alien spacer. "How far would you say that goes beneath the surface?"

They saw her meaning, as she pointed out the angle of the stern. The spacer was gigantic, and the other end should almost certainly reach somewhere beneath the Electronic Curtain!

They set to work at once. By strewing thick foliage across the mud they formed a path that bore their weight. With electros at pencil-thin sharpness, they began on the spacer hull.

The metal was strange and tough, uncorrosive. Its atomic structure resisted. But after a long while it began to soften, then to melt away in radiant froth. A circular section gave way, fell slowly inward. Flash-beams revealed a long empty corridor sloping gently down.

A kind of grill-work along the floor gave them foothold as they passed slowly along the central corridor. Gradually it widened out. They saw row upon row of arched cross-corridors, with walls curving far overhead into interlacing spans and beams. Ceiling globes of green radiance cast a macabre glow along their route.

If George Landreth had boarded this spacer, there was no evidence of it now! They walked on, staring around at the widening walls that sent back solemn echoes of their footsteps. The ship was a colossus! Curt was estimating that they'd come a good quarter of a mile already, when they reached a bulwark directly across the corridor.

The wall was massive, coppery, engraved with thousands of inter-twining figures. Rikert raised his electro to burn a way through, but Lorine stopped him.

"We'd best save our weapons! They're already weak."

Good advice, Curt thought grimly. They were rushing headlong into trouble. It was Tor Ekkov at last who found the mechanism, a row of tiny hidden studs. There came a faint droning sound as he fumbled at them. Then slowly, ponderously, the entire wall slid upward.

Weapons held in readiness, they waited. But no motion or sound came from beyond. They stepped through, found themselves in a vast circular room so startling in its content that they were held taut in amazement.

HERE WERE MACHINES, OF every sort and description, every size and purpose. Bewildering units which somehow, seemed to form a definite pattern. Rows of them stood against the

circular wall. Tier upon tier of switchboards, coils, banks of tubes, reached to the ceiling.

Here, Curt knew, was the spacer's central control! But close examination showed that much of this equipment was smashed irreparably. The forward wall itself was crumpled and twisted. Then Curt noticed many bank niches about the wall, indicating that some of the machines had been removed. He frowned at that.

Tor caught Curt's eye. The Martian was standing before a towering instrument. It was alien too, but there was something familiar in the arrangement of the huge power-tubes and the coils leading up to a faceted screen.

"Tele-Magnum!" Tor whispered fiercely. "Or something mighty similar! Seems to work on the same etheric principle that we—"

Curt cut him short. Despite everything, Tor had but one thought in mind—getting his voice through to Mars!

"There's another door over here!" Rikert called.

The only mechanism on this door was a two-inch disc that swung back to reveal a small opening, interlaced with silver wires. Then, in a rack near by, Jeffers spied a tiny metal tube. He lifted it out gingerly.

"Take a chance," Lorine nodded. "This may be the exit we're looking for."

Jeffers aimed the tube into the opening. A beam of red light lanced through the wires. They heard a faint ripple of music, then a soft whirr as the door swung back.

It was no exit, however. They stared into a room where hundreds of crystalline coffins reposed, row upon row. They were cube-like, perhaps two feet in dimension. Within each cubicle was a drift of almost colorless substance which might have been either fluid or gaseous.

But what held their gaze were the things deep within the substance!

They were globules, gelatinous, teardropped in shape with the tapering ends down. They gently swayed and pulsed, and deep within them could be seen a central core of *electric-blue* with an interlacing of tiny filaments.

"They're in some sort of suspended ani-

mation!" Curt took a step into the room. A feeling of incredible age was about the place. Curt walked between row after row of the cubicles, making closer examination of the strange life-forms. Beyond all doubt, these were identical to the pulsing globe of light which had emerged from the body of the octopoid creature!

"Emmons, come back," Lorine called from the door. "I—I don't think this place is safe!"

Curt didn't think so either. They returned to the room of machines, closing the door carefully. Lorine stared around, perplexed.

"There must be an exit somewhere!"

Quite right, young lady. And now that you are here, I'll be glad to show you."

It was a strange, mocking voice that came from behind them. They whirled about, peering into the shadows.

FROM a little alcove beneath a tier of machines stepped an Earthman. He was tall, young, blond. Four electros swung instantly up to cover him.

Only Curt didn't hold an electro, and now he snapped, "Put those guns away!" He peered again. "I know this man!"

The stranger's smile vanished. Puzzlement came across his face as he turned gray eyes upon Curt. He seemed searching his mind, trying to recall something deeply imbedded in the matrix of the past.

"Robert Frane," Curt said. "Good lord, man, don't you recognize me? Curt Emmons! You knew me at Government Spacer School—"

"Robert Frane . . . yes. That is my name." It seemed an effort for him to recall it. It was apparent he didn't recognize Curt. Curt gave it up for the moment, studying him, wondering at the strange, puzzled look of the man. Frane spoke in clipped phrases.

"You killed our guardian. Of course. That's how we became aware of your presence. But how could you have known of this place? How did you come here?"

"We'll ask the questions, Earthman!" A strength seemed to rise in Lorine as she came a step forward, eyes blazing, electro held high. "Is George Landreth here? Answer me that!"

"George . . . Landreth." Again that strangeness about Frane, a shadow across the eyes. "I believe that such a one is here."

"Then you will take us to him. At once!"

"Presently," the man contradicted. "Just now I will take your weapons, please. All of them." It was not so much a command as a statement, seeming so ridiculous that a loud guffaw came from Rikert]. Lorine came forward, not smiling, and thrust the electro hard against Frane's side.

"Enough of this talk. Your choice! Take us at once to George Landreth or I'll blast you here and now!"

The man seemed unconcerned. "That you will never do. Look about you."

From beneath the machines a dozen men had silently entered the room. They were unarmed, except for the nets they carried—nets that flowed as if woven of fire.

"Magna-webs!" gasped Lorine. "Back, back Curt!"

But she was too late. Before Curt and the others could react to her panicked words, the strange men flung the nets at them. They only lifted their arms and released the magna-webs, which floated through the air with deceptive swiftness.

Curt grabbed Lorine to hurl her back. And then the glowing nets settled over their shoulders, the fiery strands sending numbing tingles deep into their flesh. Curt tried to reach his electro, but his hand was nerveless. Scalpels of fire sliced through his brain. He felt a vast tiredness in the instant before a rushing darkness came.

IT could only have been minutes. Curt found himself struggling up, fighting against a numbness that clung to his limbs. He saw Lorine and the others stagger erect. Frane's men were confiscating the weapons.

"I hope you will not make this necessary again," Frane said without emotion. "Believe me, it could be fatal."

Curt believed him. He set his lips grimly. Without further ado, the newcomers were hurried through one of the secret exits. Tor Ekkor gave a last, longing look at the Tele-Magnum device.

They passed through a long, illuminated corridor with walls of shining substance, leading directly away from the prow of the alien spaceship. Curt forced his way ahead to walk beside Frane.

"You're Robert Frane, all right," Curt glanced at the man's face. "Sure you don't remember me, Frane?"

The man turned colorless eyes upon Curt. A shrug was in his voice. "I may have known you once."

Curt gave it up. He turned his mind to that terrible combined potential which had struck them down. These men were possessed of a power that was more than telepathic. The octopoid creature had been telepathic too. Curt recalled the strange life-form rising from the mangled body of the octopoid, and the hundreds of similar life-forms inside the spacer. A truth was dawning that left Curt numb with horror.

He let his hand brush the bare forearm of the man walking next to him. He felt a faint tingling through his fingertips that was something more than electrical.

A car awaited them, its dark blue hull gleaming and translucent. They crowded in. A propulsion beam hummed, and they rose straight up with sickening speed.

Again Curt spoke to Frane, "Where are you taking us?"

"To our Leader! The Zemmd!" Emotion came into Frane's voice, a tone of such awe that Curt was startled.

"The Zemmd," Curt repeated, not liking the sound of it. The car came to a halt. The door slid smoothly back.

They stepped into an area aglow with a gentle radiance, ineffable blue as a summer day on Earth. Curt glanced around. They were beneath the Electronic Curtain! It reached above them in a shallow dome of indeterminate diameter. The clang of metal on metal reached their ears, and a faint sound of atomic furnaces. A few buildings were seen, and groups of men at work—Martians and Jovians, Venusians and Earthmen alike.

The captives were hurried toward a central domed building that towered above the others. Before they quite reached it, Tor stopped dead in his tracks. Across his face came an indescribable look of hate as he uttered a word. A name.

"Jal Tagar!"

A group of men had come from a nearby building, and among them was Jal Tagar, the Martian Overlord! In that split second of recognition a bitter taste of hate seemed to rise up in Kueelo. He would have leaped forward. Only Curt's fierce grip held him back.

Impatiently, Frane motioned them on. They entered the central building, passed into a huge circular chamber that seemed alive with a violet color reaching from floor to ceiling and wall to wall. Here there was utter stillness. Even the floor was soft and cushionly, absorbing the sound of their entrance.

Frane and his men seemed waiting for something. As their eyes became slowly adapted to this room they saw a patch of deeper color across the far wall. It moved. Gradually it changed size and shape. Purposeful, deliberate, it drifted slowly up. Then, somehow, as if by a mental as well as visual perception, they saw it clearly.

Here was a super creation, huge and wondrous beyond belief! The thought leaped instantly to Curt's mind. It was more than mere color. It seemed composed of thousands of the smaller, radiant tear-drop shapes, yet a complete entity in itself and infinitely more alive! Beyond doubt it was self-created, could add or subtract from itself at will. Here was the thing Frane had referred to so reverently as the Zemmd!

Spinning, gently pulsing with some inner sentience, it was a thing of horror yet surpassing beauty. It drifted toward them. It probed at them with fingers of violet light.

FRANE and his men threw themselves to the floor in an attitude of worship. The sight disgusted Curt. No doubt remained now! Inwardly they were as alien as the composite thing drifting there above them. It went beyond mere worship. Here was on undeniable *affinity!*

Rikert was muttering. Then he acted with the stupid bravado of his kind. He flung himself toward one of the prone men, grabbed an electro and whirled toward the drifting bulk. Lorine screamed

a warning, a shrill lance of sound in the soundless room.

For the merest instant the great radiant shape tumbled back. Almost, it seemed afraid. Then it came drifting forward, fast, swirling angrily. In a blur of motion Curt whirled upon Rikert, swung a heavy fist to the man's jaw. Rikert dropped to the floor, and Curt kicked the gun from his hand.

Zemmd's drifting bulk paused, as if surveying this scene with some inner faculty. Slowly the radiant anger died away. Rikert came up from the floor, muttering balefully, and Curt gripped his arm.

"Quiet, you fool! If you value your lives, don't move, any of you!"

But the entity seemed to have lost interest in them, for the moment at least. Its probing light resolved into a blanket of soft color that reached down to encompass Frane and the others. The men came to their feet. Now they seemed in mental *rapport*, doubtless recounting the story of these newcomers.

Then a part of the light focussed, reached out. Curt steeled himself against it. It was cold but not unpleasant. It merely brushed over them, clung for a moment, then drew away. Curt had the fleeting impression that it was dismissing them because it knew, already, all there was to know about their basic life-principle and their science as well!

Curt was almost sorry. He would have liked to study this entity more. But the thing drew a veil of deepest purple about itself and drifted back into the dim recesses of the chamber. Once more Frane and his men made obeisance, then herded the captives from the building.

THEY were taken this time across the compound, away from the area where the work was going on. Curt noticed that most of the activity centered around one particular building. He wondered if the silver spaceship he'd seen could be there! Like a jig-saw puzzle, the reason for all this activity was beginning to take shape in his mind.

He flashed his companions a warning look, said tentatively to Frane, "What happens to us now?"

Frane answered him obliquely. "Already we are aware of all that led to your coming here. It is unfortunate. There must be no interruption of our plans now—so I think you will become a part of us."

Curt had a pretty clear picture of what becoming a "part" of them meant! To have one of the radiant life-forms somehow enter his body, take possession of his mind until all that was individualistic, all that was Curt Emmons, would be gone! To be under the encompassing control of that entity they called the Zemmd! It was evident that every man here, Earthman or Martian or Jovian, was merely a controlled unit. But for what ultimate purpose? Curt felt a chill along his spine as he remembered the hundreds of alien forms waiting patiently, in suspended animation . . .

Tor's voice, bitter with hate, broke upon his tumult of thoughts. "Become a part of you—just as Jal Tagar did? A traitor to everything that we——"

"You have no choice," Frane replied in cold, unhuman tones. "Every man here is part and substance of the great Zemmd. Just as the sum and total of all that is in your brains will become a part of him." He turned his gaze upon Rikert. "Even this one, who sought to defy the Zemmd, will become a part."

"Yeah? We'll see about that!" Rikert laughed unpleasantly.

They were silent then, under the watchful guidance of Frane and his men. Once more they were taken below the level of the compound, then ushered into a plainly furnished room.

"You will not lack for comfort," Frane said, "but you must remain here until time for the transition. I promise it will be soon!" There was pride in his tone, as though conferring a great honor upon them. He employed a metal device in the arched doorway. A sheet of crackling color passed across it, effectively barring the entrance.

Rikert leaped forward in a last effort, but a searing heat from the barrier stopped him. Bitterly he turned back.

"Fine thing, Emmons! If you'd let me blast that hunk of brain-trust when I had the chance——"

"You'd be dead now, and the rest of us with you! Can't you ungroove that brain of yours, Rikert?"

Rikert surged forward, fists clenched, but Jeffers stepped between the men.

"I don't know, Emmons," Jeffers said slowly. "I think Rikert had the thing scared there for a minute. Didn't you notice the way it moved back from the electro——"

"It was a darn fool thing to try, and this kind of talk isn't helping us!" Curt turned abruptly, began examining the room.

Walls, floor and ceiling seemed to be of solid-hewed stone with no break of any kind. The arched doorway failed to reveal the source of the radiant barrier; it was electronic, Curt was sure.

Lorine was a pitiful figure, despair making an unreal mask of her face. All the fine courage that had carried her this far, seemed to fail her now.

Once more Tor hummed the high-pitched aria which Curt hadn't heard since they left Mercury. The tune seemed to sustain the little Martian in times of trouble. Jeffers and Rikert were aimless automatons pacing the room.

Curt sank down and let despair wash over him. Yet a thought, half-formed, struggled to emerge from the recesses of his mind; something he had noticed about that entity, Zemmd; an idea that danced away as he sought to remember.

He couldn't quite grasp it. It was maddening.

Such a weariness of body and mind came upon Curt that he fell into a fitful sleep. His last conscious thought was of the sentient entity, of which they were to become a part.

All would be over then.

CURT DREAMED. A great arctic wind, alive as if with a snapping intelligence, seemed to roar about his huddled carcass. Far away a door whispered open and closed with a sigh. A stranger seemed to have entered the room, a great towering figure with silvery hair, who stood looking down at them and then paced away in the gloom like the going of a breeze.

Curt rolled over, mumbling in his sleep.

The wind crept back like a padding cat, whispering in his ears. It resolved itself into a voice, a human voice very real and urgent. Curt sat up abruptly. This was no dream, the towering stranger was still there.

Somehow he had passed through the electronic curtain across the doorway . . .

Curt leaped to his feet as he recognized George Landreth.

VII

THE OTHERS CAME QUICKLY awake. Lorine stared, then with a sob threw herself into her father's arms. Landreth comforted her, his face twisting strangely. He had aged greatly, Curt knew, he was still a dominant figure of a man.

"Why did you do it, child, why?" Landreth spoke with a great effort. "You should never have come here!"

Startled, Jeffers was staring at the electronic barrier. "Man, you came through that curtain! How is it done?"

Rikert said fiercely, "Are you one of these things, too?"

"I'm one of them, heaven help me, but soon I won't be! You must listen carefully now. I haven't much time!" Landreth paced the room with great uneven strides, face still twisting, his voice coming with an effort.

"They call themselves *Energons*. Their life-principle is ionized protoplasm, that's as near as I can describe it! They subsist on the energy-source fields that originate within all planetary bodies. Electric, magnetic, gravitic, call it what you will. They left their System, far beyond Pluto, because it's in a state of disintegration for lack of the energy-magnetic source——" Landreth's features had gone pale and tight, as if some ghastly struggle were occurring within him.

"I and three others boarded their ship. It drove toward the sun . . . we couldn't stop it. We barely managed to bring it to a crash, here. In the crash some of the *Energons* were released, they took possession of our unconscious bodies . . . and they evolved their plan . . . they must be

stopped!" With a great effort Landreth managed to hold his body erect.

Curt's mind raced. He saw the rest. Landreth and his three men were only the beginning. *Through them, completely Energon-dominated, the net had spread!* Other men had been captured out of space and brought here. The *Energon* life-forms had been taken secretly to other planets, to seize upon bodies and bring them into *Energon* control! The plan had taken two years, but they had selected well. Jal Tagar of Mars had been reached, and doubtless others among the highest officials and scientists in the Federation! This explained it all, the growing havoc and sabotage——

Curt saw the ghastly pattern, then he saw Landreth collapse against the wall as if all strength were being drained from him. Lorine hurried to his side, but Landreth waved her away.

"No, child, don't worry about me now! Heaven knows I've hated Earth. . . I've done some terrible things in my time . . . but nothing so terrible as allowing these creatures to get foothold here . . ." He pulled himself erect. "Jeffers! Has the Federation plunged into war?"

It was Curt who answered. "They're on the verge of it!"

"That is their plan. Already they have the secret of all our weapons. They have the Venus allotropic metal. They have the Frequency Tuner! With it, they can return to their System and be back here within a year! They'll bring hundreds of thousands of *Energons* . . . They hope we'll be at war . . . our planets will be easy pickings!"

"The silver spacer!" Curt snapped. "They're leaving in it?"

"In a few days. The Frequency Tuner has been installed! Some of the men took it for a test flight yesterday." Again Landreth staggered, as if fighting a battle within. "The spacer is well guarded, but I might get you weapons . . . as for me . . .

"Then hurry, man!" It was Rikert, eager. "Just let me get my hands on an electro again!"

"Two of you come with me."

Curt and Rikert stepped forward. Landreth looked at his daughter as if there was

much more he wanted to say. But there wasn't time. He held her close for a moment, then thrust her away. "Take care of her, Jeffers!"

Lorine's eyes were red-rimmed, as if she knew she'd never see her father alive again. They all knew it.

Landreth inserted a three-pronged device near the doorway. The curtain vanished. The three men stepped through, and Landreth tossed the key back to Jeffers.

CURT observed the man closely, as they reached a car which sped them toward the compound above. Landreth seemed drawing upon his last energy-reserves. Curt wondered how the man kept going! And if he was *energon* controlled, why had he come to help them?

"The *tsith-drug*," Landreth gasped, as if sensing Curt's wonderment. "It allows you to regain your identity . . . but only briefly. I didn't want Lorine to know. . . that I'm dying!"

Curt was aghast. Only Callistans could withstand the ravages of this drug, and eventually it destroyed even them. Landreth must have taken enough to kill two ordinary men! Now the *Energon* force within him was regaining control. Tiny particles of light came from his bare face and hands, similar to radium disintegration seen under a powerful microscope.

"Landreth! Will electros kill these men?"

"The Earthian bodies—yes. But not the *Energons*. Watch out . . . for the potential! That one they call the Zemmd . . . there is no——"

His words were suddenly cut off as he clutched at his throat. Their car reached the upper level. Here the pervading blue had deepened to a simulation of night, but still they heard the sounds of work going on.

"Hurry, man! The weapons first!" Rikert was urging.

Landreth nodded. Even that was an effort for him now. He seemed suffering untold tortures. Supporting Landreth between them, they neared a low-structured building which he indicated. But Landreth fell. He was a dead weight in their grasp, then he crumpled to the ground.

"The spaceship—wait until——" He tried to say more, but the words came slurred and unnatural.

They left Landreth there, hurried on to the building he had pointed out. They pushed into a large shadowy room. It seemed a storeroom for tools, as well as strange machines similar to those in the smashed *Energon* spacer.

"Here they are!" Rikert spied the weapons, apparently the same ones Frane had taken from them. These *Energon*-controlled men were so contemptuous of Earth weapons that these had been tossed aside! "What next? Try and get to that spacer?"

"Too many men about! We'll have to wait." Curt felt that was what Landreth had tried to tell him. Rikert grumbled; with an electro in his hand he felt he could overcome any obstacle. Remembering Lorine and the others, Curt thrust three electros in his belt and cradled the lensed radiant-gun. They hurried from the room.

LANDRETH was dead. But now, with a feeling of danger, Curt suddenly straightened away from the body. It glowed, as is from a weird inner aura! The aura seemed to coalesce, take definite form. An *Energon* emerged directly upward from the earthly remains! Spinning, crackling angrily, it hung poised for a mere instant then darted straight at the two men.

With an oath, Rikert swung his electro up and sent a charge at the six-inch globe. It connected, sent the thing buffeting back—but that was all. It swept beneath the beam and darted upon Rikert. It fastened just below his throat. Rikert screamed, clutched at the vibrant shape, but his fingers seemed to sink through it. Then the *Energon* was gone—had completely entered his body!

The event was so swift that Curt stood numbed with horror. To fire would have meant hitting Rikert. Now Curt saw the man stiffen, saw the startled expression leave his eyes. A queer emotion rippled across Rikert's features . . . then he whirled upon Curt, the electro uplifted.

"Rikert, you fool!" Curt's cry was in-

instinctive as he flung himself aside. The electro-beam passed so close to his face he could feel the swirling heat of it.

"Rikert——" But Rikert was no longer Earthian, he was *Energon*! The thought stabbed at Curt even as he brought the radiant beam around in a swift arc. It slashed across Rikert's body. A sickness rose within Curt, but it was his life or Rikert's now! He held the beam fast, saw Rikert go down in a mass of disintegrant flame. In seconds it was all over. Curt waited tensely, but this time there was no sign of the *Energon* form.

Could the radiant beam have destroyed it too? But here was no time for speculation. Through the deepening gloom he saw a group of men approaching. If they'd seen the flash of the gun——

Curt seized what was left of Rikert's body, shuddering as it seemed to fall apart in his hands. But he managed to drag it into the building's shadow, then did the same with Landreth's. The men were coming nearer. Curt crouched back in the shadows, gun ready. They passed him by, heading toward some rough stone buildings that apparently served as barracks.

Now other men were heading toward the barracks, as the sound of work died away. Apparently they needed rest, despite the *Energon* forces. Curt peered toward the central building where the Zemmd reposed. Did it sleep too? Curt doubted that. At all costs they must avoid the supernal power of the thing!

He remembered. Frane's words, "You will become a part of us; I promise it will be soon."

He must get back to the others! Curt waited until the way seemed clear, then darted across the compound to where Landreth had left the car. Seconds later he was descending to the lower corridors.

A GLOW from the electron curtain showed him the room. Curt raced forward, a single thought hammering at him now. They had weapons! It meant a fighting chance, if they could avoid the thing that happened to Rikert . . .

Then Curt stopped. The curtain still crackled across the doorway, an impenetrable barrier. But he heard Jeffer's voice.

"I tell you it's true! Emmons is an official agent of Earth government. Suppose we do pull out of this, what'll your life be worth? He'll take you back for trial——" A pause, then:

"That spacer is allotropic metal! And we'd have the Frequency Tuner—think of it! We could build up the organization again, you and I, Lorine. We know all the secret bases, and how your father operated. He'd want you to go on, Lorine ——"

Through the rage that rose up to choke him, Curt called out to them. He saw the blurred figure of Jeffers move toward the door, then the curtain vanished as Jeffers used the key. Curt stepped quickly inside.

"So that's your game, Jeffers! Back to space-piracy, and you think you'll use the spacer the *Energons* have built here! You'd even talk Lorine into it with you."

Jeffers' dark face creased in the barest semblance of a smile.

"Landreth told me to take care of her, didn't he? After all, she used to be part of our crew, and before I see *you* take her back for trial——"

Curt turned to the girl, spoke softly.

"Your father is dead, Lorine. I'm sorry." He saw her features tighten. She seemed a mere automaton, beyond all emotion or grief. Jeffers had taken advantage of this in trying to talk her into his plan. Curt touched one of the electros at his waist."

"I should burn you!" he told Jeffers in a cold, tight voice, and Jeffers went pale. "As it is, we're a hell of a way from being out of this spot, and we'll need you! We'll have to make a try for that spacer." He tossed an electro to Jeffers, handed one to Lorine.

"What happened to Rikert?"

"He's dead too." Curt didn't explain further, for he suddenly knew what was wrong here. He whirled upon Jeffers.

Tov Ekkov! Where'd he go? Why'd you let him leave here?"

"He insisted on it. Something about a Tele-Magnum! He was driving me crazy with that damned tune of his——"

Curt swore inaudibly. "How long has he been gone?"

"Not long. You've only been gone twenty -minutes." Jeffers shrugged. "Anyway, he acted crazy. Why worry about him?"

"Why? He'll ruin whatever chances we have! We've got to stop him!" Curt raced from the room, with Jeffers and Lorine pounding after him.

At the far cross-corridor Curt paused uncertainly, staring around.

"What's it about, Emmons?" Concern was in Jeffers' voice now. "What's that Martian up to?"

"Back there in the spacer—he spotted a Tele-Magnum! If he manages to operate it, the Zemmd is going to know it! We won't have a chance!"

VIII

CURT HURRIED TO THE RIGHT, not sure of his direction now in this underground place. But he stopped abruptly at the next corridor. His heart leaped. Huddled against the angle of the wall was the body of a man.

Curt turned him over. It was the man he knew as Frane! Twisted tightly around his throat, cutting into the flesh, was a plasticoid belt that Curt recognized as Tor's.

Jeffers was right. Tor had gone fanatical crazy, determined that nothing would stop him from reaching the Tele-Magnum and getting his voice through to Mars! But now another thought sliced into Curt's mind. The *Energon-form* which had inhabited Frane's body! There were two alternatives. Either it had emerged and seized control of Tor, or had sped back to give the alarm.

There was no time to waste! At the end of this corridor Curt saw the crumpled prow of the alien spacer. He hurried toward it, Jeffers and Lorine running to keep pace beside him. Curt squeezed into the low-arched doorway, beneath twisted and tumbled metalloy beams. Again he was in the room where they'd seen the array of machines, including the one Tor thought was a Tele-Magnum.

And Tor Ekkov was there. Curt knew it, as the angry sound of an electro beam sang close. It splashed against a bulkhead

beside him. Curt waved Jeffers and the girl back, then pressed forward.

He saw Tor. The man was still Martian, Curt could tell that; the *Energon* hadn't reached him. But a glint of madness was in the depths of his eyes, as he held an electro in his tight-knuckled fist. He must have taken it from Frane, Curt thought.

And he solved the secret of the Tele-Magnum! Curt heard a faint hum, saw the glow of the selector screen as selenic cells poured power into the trans-etheric beam. Curt came a step nearer, into the room.

Again Tor's electro splashed fire at him.

"So it's you, Curt Emmons. No, don't come any closer!" The Martian's eyes darted to the lensed radiant-rifle Curt held cradled in his arm. "Throw that thing on the floor. I mean it! I'll blast you!"

Curt did as he was told. The Martian had gone mad. Helpless and weaponless, Curt glanced at the screen. A shifting blur was focussing—Turibek, capitol city of Mars! Tor had managed to get the beam through!

"Don't try to stop me, Emmons. We'll never get out of this alive, I realize that now! But I swore I'd get my voice through to my people! Six long years I've waited——"

Curt tensed, almost leaped forward, but Tor held the weapon steady upon him. It was then that Curt felt a pronounced overtone across his mind. He knew the Zemmd had contacted them!

"Curt!" It was Lorine's whispered voice in the doorway behind him. He felt the grip of an electro pressed into his hand.

"We had a fighting chance, Tor," Curt grated, "but you've ruined that! The Zemmd has contacted us. He'll send his men down here. Yes, we'll die!" He brought the electro unobserved to his side. "And you'd leave the entire Federation prey to these things because of your damned stupid fanaticism about Mars!"

"Don't try to stop me!" With his free hand Tor brought the Martian scene sharper into focus. Nothing else mattered to him.

"A last chance, Tor! You can reach

Earth on that thing. Let me contact Earth and warn them of what goes on here! Even if we die, they can send the Fleet and blast this place——”

Curt saw it was no use.

He brought his gun around fast, tried a snap shot from the waist. But Tor was faster. He swayed aside, then his own electro sent its beam.

Curt's arm went numb from wrist to shoulder, as the Martian's beam caught his gun squarely and sent it spinning from his grasp. Curt dived low, in a try for the radiant-rifle a few yards away. Again Tor blasted. A spray of molten froth from the floor sent Curt tumbling back. He poised for another try. To think of failure now was to think of death!

But he had failed. This was death!

He heard Lorine cry out, heard Jeffers cursing behind him, as a rush of feet came toward them down the corridor!

JEFFERS was battling for his life. A score of men were converging upon them. Jovian, Martian, Earthmen alike, they had but one purpose as they rushed forward under Zemmd's mental command.

That purpose was to kill!

But it was they who died, as Jeffers swept his beam in a deadly crossfire. Lorine had retrieved the electro, and she joined the battle, crouching beside Jeffers in the narrow doorway. Luckily it offered a measure of protection. A few of these men were armed. Beams slashed and glanced from the walls. In a matter of seconds the place was a hell of heat and blinding light.

Tor was intent upon the Tele-Magnum now. Curt sprang for the radiant-rifle, came up with it, whirled to join the battle. But already the men were falling back out of range! They left four of their dead upon the corridor floor.

In the brief respite Curt remembered Landreth, and the *Energon-form*. The same thing was happening now! The bodies coalesced with an inner aura of electric blue. Four *Energons* emerged swiftly and hung poised, spinning, crackling with angry radiance. Then they darted forward.

“Don't let them touch you!” Curt hurled

Lorine aside, sprang forward with rifle upraised. Before he could touch the firing stud, the *Energons* were tumbling back, Wildly—as if in panic!

Curt stared. It wasn't his weapon they feared——

Then Curt knew!

It was Tor Ekkov's voice behind him, sending his strident, high-pitched aria into the telelector-beam to Mars. Sound! These things feared super-sonic sound!

Lorine screamed, clutched at Curt's arm.

Far down the corridor, reaching almost from wall to wall, the huge bulk of the Zemmd itself sped toward them. Streamers of angry violet splashed before it, illumining the scene. The Zemmd's own men tumbled pell-mell out of the way.

The four smaller *Energons* sped toward the parent bulk, touched, and merged. But the Zemmd never paused. Tor's high-pitched tune seemed not to affect it!

A heavy potential rose crackling from the walls. Lorine crumpled and went down. Jeffers, reeling upon his feet, still blasted with the electro but to no avail. Part of the potential washed upon Curt and sent him staggering . . .

Curt hurled himself back into the room, jabbed the rifle at Tor before the Martian knew what was happening.

“Sing, damn you, keep singing! Send your song to Mars! You were right after all!”

Tor's eyes went wide, but he needed no urging. He sang! The Martian sibilants were meaningless to Curt, nor did he care. Tor's voice reached the higher octaves, far higher than any operatic star of Earth! Down the scale, then up, and up, endlessly, Tor sang his message to Mars. It took on a savage note, something of the pagan was in it—and something of fright.

For now it was Curt who had gone mad with fanatical purpose!

“Sing, damn you, or I'll blast you where you stand.” He reached to Tor's side and lifted the electro. He reached to the Tele-panel and fumbled at the controls.

Suddenly the sound amplified a thousand-fold. It flooded the room, reverberating, rebounding into the corridor from wall to wall, as selenic cells poured additional power into the instrument.

"Sing!" Curt shouted. And Tor nodded. Sanity seemed to come back to him, and he realized what was happening.

Curt hurried to the corridor. Already the Zemmd's potential was diminishing! The great bulk was tumbling back, trying to escape the waves of strident sound that washed upon it.

Now Curt could feel the shrieking crescendo, like a file rasping over naked nerve-ends. And the Zemmd seemed to disintegrate! The color died away. It broke apart into hundreds of the smaller *Energon* shapes.

They were dull and disorganized now, moving aimlessly, crashing into the walls where they clung, then slid to the floor.

But a few of them retained their inner life-force! They came surging forward. Curt threw up the radiant-rifle, spread a swath of disintegrant power that sent them buffeting back. Gradually they blanked out, until nothing moved in the length of corridor. The Zemmd's men had long since vanished from the scene.

IT WAS OVER in minutes. Behind Curt came a harsh roar, then a crash of tubes and metal as the Tele-Magnum failed under the overload of power. But Tor still sang.

Curt stepped warily forward, touched one of the grayish translucent shapes. It was warm. A decided shock, more than electrical, went through his arm.

"These things aren't finished yet! We've got to hurry!" He stared at Lorine. "What happened to Jeffers?"

She shook her head. Horror was still mirrored on her face. But Jeffers was gone! Somehow he had managed to make his way out!

All weariness vanished, as Curt raced back through the corridors with Lorine hurrying after him. He had a chill premonition of what Jeffers was up to!

A deathly silence settled over them. Tor's singing had stopped. Not until they reached the lifts did Curt notice that Tor had caught up with them. The little Martian was deathly pale but his eyes fever-bright, as he shook his head drunkenly and clutched at his throat.

Curt paid him no heed now. They tum-

bled into one of the cars. A propulsion beam hummed, and they rose swiftly toward the upper compound.

Jeffers was there, battling his way past a score of the Zemmd's men. But there was a great difference in these men now. They seemed disorganized and aimless without the co-ordinating, driving power of the Zemmd!

Jeffers was heading toward a hangar-like building. The spaceship with the Frequency Tuner! The man's scheme was obvious now; he had given up on Lorine, decided to try it alone!

Curt hurled himself forward, and a path opened for him as the men scurried to cover before the blast of the radiant-rifle. At all costs he must reach Jeffers—

He was too late. Already Jeffers had reached the building fifty yards away. He fumbled at the door, then disappeared. Curt was there seconds later. A gorge of despair rose in him, as he found the door barred from the inside.

There might still be time! Jeffers would have to find the secret of the Electronic Curtain reaching above them. Frantically, Curt blasted at the door. The metal resisted stubbornly, but gradually it began to melt away.

Then, from within, came a smooth droning sound. It increased in tempo. The building trembled against the full reverberant power. The Frequency Tuner! Jeffers was going to try to drive through the Electronic Curtain.

Curt realized his danger, and whirled away. The building smashed apart like an eggshell, hurling debris in all directions. Curt plummeted forward, caught a glimpse of the silver spacer streaking obliquely up on the whining power of the Tuner . . .

But it wasn't enough! It struck the Curtain and penetrated part way, and there it dangled. There came a scintillant hell of fire and flaming metal. In seconds, the spacer's hull became cherry red and then white. Huge molten blobs of it dripped down, then an explosion sent them scattering across the compound.

What was left of the spacer came slipping out of the gaping rent in the Curtain. Gravity took it. It fell in a fiery tangle of wreckage.

Curt was scarcely aware that his legs propelled him away from the scene.

He caught sight of Lorine and Tor Ekkov, and hurried toward them. They huddled in a doorway and looked out upon the scene. Flames crackled up from a few of the buildings. None of the other men were in sight; they had scurried somewhere to safety.

"There went our last chance! Jeffers fixed everything!"

Curt's voice was a well of bitterness. These *Energon* forces weren't finished by any means, and Curt knew it. Their work would go on . . .

But his mission for DeHarries was finished. The secret of this place was still secret.

The fate of the Federation had rested upon Curt's shoulders, and he had failed.

AS IF in answer, a blaze of violet light appeared far across the compound. It was the Zemmd again!—a smaller entity now, but Curt knew it would increase in power as more and more of the *Energons* revived to join it!

It moved slowly, as if searching. *Searching for the Curtain—and Lorine.* It disappeared, appeared again, and once more vanished from sight.

"No use fighting that thing." Curt looked down at his hands, then laughed bitterly. He had lost the radiant-rifle somewhere. Even his electro was gone. "Maybe if we keep out of sight, it'll think we perished in the spaceship!"

"Curt!" Lorine's huddled figure came suddenly erect, she stood taut with excitement. Then they all heard the sound. Somewhere overhead, but coming nearer. The sound of a spacer!

It sped past the broken rent in the Curtain a hundred feet above. It returned, braked, hovered on underhull repulsion beams. Then it eased through the hole in the Curtain with little room to spare, trailing part of the K'Yarthan fog with it.

Already Curt was racing toward the spacer, as it settled down. A man stepped from the lock, others crowding behind him.

"Back! Back there, you!" The man levelled a deadly power-rapier at Curt.

"Who are you, and what is this place?"

"Never mind who we are," Curt grated, "lift us out of here!" He recognized the Imperial Venus Emblem on the man's tunic.

"We were Tele-casting, and a strange beam cut into our etheric channel! The Empress Aladdian ordered that it be traced. Our directional-finders brought us here." The Venusian Guard stared around at the flaming holocaust.

"Man, if you value your lives, get us in that ship and lift grav's!"

Something of Curt's urgency caught at the man. He nodded, turned and gave swift orders. The radiant bulk of the Zemmd came into sight again and Curt saw it speeding, whirling toward them.

They tumbled into the ship. The lock closed, and seconds later they were lifting up, carefully, through the Curtain. There the spacer poised. The Venusian stared through the under ports at the blazing, angry bulk of the Zemmd.

Something of the truth mirrored in the man's eyes as he turned to Curt.

"Shall we try blasting it? We have neutros and Ingrams! We have——"

"No! It'll take super-sonic weapons to completely destroy these things. Powerful ones. Take me to Aladdian! I must contact Coordinator DeHarries of Earth."

TOR EKKOV paced endlessly, as they sped toward the hospitable continents of Venus. His glorious voice was gone, but his eyes had come alive and vibrant. He knew he'd soon return to his own people.

But Lorine . . . she was a forlorn and shattered figure. Her face had gone tragic, especially at the mention of Earth.

"You're still thinking of what Jeffers told you?" Curt said. "Yes, Lorine, I'll have to take you back to Earth. But I can get absolute amnesty for you now. I shall demand it! And there are other reasons, Lorine. There are reasons——"

A tightness in his throat made his voice sound strange.

She whispered, "Yes?"

Curt drew her to him, and she was happy in his arms.