

ROCKET STORIES

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FIREGOD

BY WILLIAM SCARFF

Some are born to greatness, others achieve the rulership of systems — but Merssu wanted to be a god. All he needed was a million years and a little luck!

"Your Majesty!"

D'hai Merssu, Emperor of All the Suns, Protector of the Galaxy, looked up calmly as his prime minister burst into the room. His lean, brooding face did not change expression as he watched the pale and perspiring man cross the flagstoned floor with a sharp, nervous patter of leather.

"Gently, Tors, gently," he said quietly, his eyes mocking under their overhang of dark eyebrow. "You're Prime Minister now—remember that. A prime minister doesn't come blundering into the palace looking as though the sky was falling. It creates unrest in the population. Try to remember that we're no longer a pair of obscure rabblerousers, trying to overthrow the Crown.

We are the Crown now. Try to act like it."

"D'hai, the sky *is* falling!" Tors burst out unheedingly. "I have word that the Earthmen are driving beyond the Rim and into the heart of the Empire itself! Their ships are irresistible. They're winning battle after battle! And the people are restless! They say it's time the False Emperor's rule was overthrown. Some of the garrisons are rebelling!"

Still the Emperor's expression did not change. "So," he said calmly, "the Earthmen were not bluffing when they said they'd maintain the rights of the old Emperor."

"Yes! You said they wouldn't, D'hai. What are we going to do?"

"I was wrong, Tors," Merssu

said evenly. "No matter. As for what we are going to do, why, I suppose you'd better arrange for another broadcast. Tell the people we have weapons ready if the situation becomes serious, that they have nothing to fear."

"But the situation is serious! And what weapons?"

"No weapons, Tors," Merssu explained patiently. "But the story will serve to keep the people calm—and, perhaps, make them think twice about revolt. Now go. Hurry!"

The prime minister's feet pattered over the floor again. The door to the room closed.

Merssu smiled quietly. He rose, and opened the concealed door behind his chair. Closing it behind him, he slipped into a passage of which no one knew, and ten minutes later he was in a private tubeway that led half-way across the continent into the heart of an old and barren mountain range.

As he sat comfortably in the padded upholstery of the tube car, Merssu smiled again. Poor Tors! So excitable. Always the hysterical—a perfect rabblerouser, perhaps, but not a clever man. No, never a clever man. A clever man knew when the game was over. And Merssu laughed.

The game had been worth it. Five years ago, he had been a revolutionary, slinking through

the alleys at night, always in danger—and always clever. Four years of that, and then—Empire. Absolute rule over the entire Greater Magellanic Cloud. Now he was once again in danger. But it was a danger he had long ago foreseen, and planned for. And the past year had been worth it. He laughed again. Poor, addle-witted Tors! Left with the empty bag in his hands.

The spaceship rested like a crouching bullet in its chamber. As he slid the tubeway door shut behind him, Merssu admired the savage sleekness of its lines once again. Even more, he admired his cleverness in having it built. A clever man always has a back door. He crossed the hangar floor unhurriedly, and climbed into the ship.

The control room was small, but efficient. A hundred controls lay closely around the padded chair, some of them for the standard drive, others for the hyperspatial warp.

The hyperspatial warp! Merssu smiled. There was his escape—and more. Here were the means for his future rulership over nothing so small as the Cloud—here were entire galaxies waiting for his hand.

Hyperspace! There was something to make a man think! Another universe, not beyond, but

alongside his own, hidden in the complex byways of Reimannian geometry and the mathematics of Einstein. A universe where time itself ran slower, where a year of normal time encompassed centuries. A ship could twist itself into that universe and travel just below the speed of light, the limit which, in normal space, was the barrier no ship could cross. But, in hyperspace, while the same barrier existed, a man from normal space could travel for centuries, covering great distances, while, for him, only a few months passed.

Merssu chuckled. Behind him, stored in the great holds of the ship, were working models of every machine and weapon the Cloud civilization possessed. There were plans, manuals, instructions, all translated into basic symbology that any intelligent being could understand. Packed into this ship was an entire civilization, ready to be brought to whatever people Merssu chose. He had only to enter hyperspace and lose himself where no Earthman or rebel could follow, and there he would find a primitive race, barely beginning to rise out of the mud. He would bring them civilization. In return, he would have—Godhood!

They would worship him, those primitive people. He would be

Merssu the Firegod, thundering out of the sky, bringing with him the gift of civilization. And once the gift was given, he would climb back into the sky on a pillar of fire, promising to return when his people were ready.

He laughed aloud, the deep bass sound echoing through the control chamber. Why not? He could fly back into space and spend a year, waiting, while centuries passed on the primitive world. When he returned, that world would be his, and soon afterward the entire universe would bow before the name of Merssu, the immortal Firegod, for there is no force so strong, no loyalty so great, as that of men for their gods.

Still laughing, he blasted the ship out of its hangar into the darkness of space, and a little later, into hyperspace, while the big blue ships of Earth smashed his discarded Empire behind him.

In a month, he had found his planet, and his people. They were almost human in appearance, but shorter. So much the better. He was like them, but just different enough to be a god.

He brought his ship roaring down through the atmosphere, trailing a streamer of flame. As he passed over the sea that covered most of the world, the wash

of his jets kicked the water into froth, and the sound of his passage echoed through the sky.

The village rested on the shore of the sea. The mud huts trembled as his ship sank down, resting on its jetstream until it settled slowly to the ground.

Smiling faintly, Merssu put on his spacesuit, strapping his antigravity harness on over it. He flew out of his upper airlock, carrying a gun in his hand.

He hovered in the air above the village. He pointed the gun into the air and fired. A cone of flame shot toward the sky. He pointed the gun at the sea, and towering curtains of steam rose to hang over the village.

Merssu descended, and found his people groveling in the mud.

Weeks passed. A stream of men carried the ship's cargo into a great sprawling building that Merssu carved out of a stone cliff with a subatomic cutter. The lintels of the building were sanctified with the blood of virgins. A new class of people arose in the village—the Priests of Merssu, the Firegod.

And as the ship rose up into space again, on its journey back into the normal space where Merssu would wait his year and the centuries would pass for his people, the priests chanted over their altars.

"He will return. Merssu goes

to his kingdom in the sky, but he will return, bearing flame in his hands. Merssu the Firegod—Merssu, the immortal Bringer of Fire—will return."

And the centuries passed.

Merssu brought his ship out of the sky, tearing the air as he came, the growl of his jets thundering over the mighty city on the sea. The sound echoed back from the carved face of the Temple of Merssu, and beat against the spreading buildings.

The ship settled to earth. Merssu strapped on his antigrav unit, and flashed out into the air above the city. He fired his gun into the sea, and the steam-curtain rose once more. He pointed the gun skyward, and the heavens danced with flame.

A low, snarling car bearing the sign of Merssu's priesthood drove up to him as he touched the ground. Two men got out and walked toward him, one of them dressed in the somber black of the priesthood. Merssu stood waiting, his eyes lighting with triumphant fire.

"Who are you?" the priest asked.

Merssu stared, the pose broken. "Who am I? Kneel, fool! I am Merssu, the Firegod."

The two men looked at him speechlessly for a moment, then burst into laughter.

"Merssu!" The priest wiped

his eyes. The other man's laughter trailed into anger.

"Watch your tongue, blasphemer!" he said curtly, drawing a gun from his holster.

"Merssu!" the priest repeated, "You're the fool, stranger. At least the others who've tried to claim his godhood had the sense to disguise themselves to resemble his pictures."

"Pictures change, rash priest!" Merssu thundered. "I am the Firegod! Look on my power!" Once more he fired into the sea, and once more the steam pillars rose. "I am the God of Fire. I fly in the hands of flame. I walk on the air. I burn the land and the sea. I am Merssu!"

The priest's face lost its tolerant amusement. His mouth twisted in scorn.

"Walk on the air, do you? In a Mark XI Antigrav belt, yes. Burn sea and land, eh? With a sungun, certainly. Fly in hands of flame? If you wish to be picturesque about it, yes—but so does every drunken fool of a spaceman."

"*I tell you, I am Merssu!*" Merssu screamed. "*Bow down and worship!*"

"*Silence!*" The priest's voice was dangerous. "You will come

with us to the temple. There you'll see how we worship importers!"

"I'll kill you!" Merssu shouted, raising his gun.

The priest motioned with his hand. The man with him blew Merssu's head off.

"Blasphemer!" the priest spat disdainfully, his voice filled with disgust. He and his retainer turned back to the car, leaving the body to be carted away later.

Every evening at sunset, the priests of Merssu stand over their altars and intone the words.

"He will return. Merssu the Firegod—Merssu, the immortal Bringer of Fire—will return."

And the people of Merssu's world intone in reply, "He will return." Throughout the galaxies of hyperspace, wherever the men of Merssu's world may wander, there are other priests, and other races that respond, but the ritual is always the same.

"He will return."

And the city waits. The planet waits, and the other planets about the other stars through all the galaxies of hyperspace wait.

They always will.