

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

JUNE, 1955

Vol. 3, No. 5

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FANTASTIC UNIVERSE, Vol. 3, No. 5. Published monthly by KING-SIZE PUBLICATIONS, INC., 471 Park Ave., N. Y. 22, N. Y. Subscription, 12 issues \$3.75, single copies 35¢. Foreign postage extra. Reentered as second-class matter at the post office, New York, New York. The characters in this magazine are entirely fictitious and have no relation to any persons living or dead. Copyright 1955, by KING-SIZE PUBLICATIONS, INC. JUNE, 1955. PRINTED IN U. S. A.

in
the
still
waters

by . . . Lester del Rey

The spaceship *Midas* was like the famed frigate, *Old Ironsides*—glorious to schoolboys, but with all of its banners furled.

ZEKE WATCHED the red light on the panel fade, then listened to the unnerving chatter of the relays as the ship searched its way back to its course. The pip on the screen had disappeared into a background of snow which the anti-noise circuits could no longer blank, even though the sun was a remotely blazing disk half the diameter of his thumb. He dropped his eyes to his hands that lay on the board, staring bitterly at the knuckles that were swollen with arthritis and covered with coarse hairs that had begun to turn grey.

Behind him, he heard Mary sigh softly. "Those blamed blow-torches," she said, but her voice was as tired as he felt, and the old anger at the smaller, direct-drive ships was almost automatic. "He might have looked where he was going."

"He did," Zeke told her. "There wasn't any danger, Mary."

She smiled at him, and he knew that she thought him the most capable of men—wise, resourceful, always in complete command of him-

Lester del Rey has scored so many science-fiction triumphs in the past few years that he deserves to be the recipient of some highly individualistic award. One labeled "For General Excellence," perhaps—with a few laurel leaves added tinted with the glow of worlds uncharted and unknown. For explore such worlds he will, as he has in a sense done here with this brilliantly perceptive story of a space veteran's heroic struggle to regain the dignity and the splendor of a career cut off in midstream.

self and his ship. Why couldn't she understand that there really had been no danger? The blowtorch must have spotted the huge bulk of the *Midas* well in advance, for the great, new-model ships were equipped with radar systems which never missed.

He stared at his hands again. He'd known there was no need for an emergency blast, and had been reaching for the controls when the automatics went on. But, like the screen, age had let too much noise creep into the messages along his nerves. His fingers had reacted too late, and had fumbled, precisely as the *Midas* had done in over-blasting needlessly.

An old man, he thought bitterly, in an old ship. But lately it almost seemed as if he were growing old faster than the ship. Once, he'd liked it best when they were farthest from the planets. Now he'd found the trip in from Tethys tormentingly long and wearying. He was actually looking forward to berthing at Callisto where there would be no alarms to wake him from the fitful sleep of a man past his prime.

He heard the control-room door close softly, and knew that Mary had gone to make tea. Their habits had become as automatic as those of the ship, he thought with another twinge of bitterness. But he reached for his pipe and began filling it, unconsciously muttering the words that had become a symbol of their needs: "A good smoke

and a pot of tea never hurt anyone."

If their boy, Allen, had lived, things might have been different. Zeke sighed heavily and got up, heading back for his regular tour of inspection before tea. As he passed the three other empty seats in the control room his weariness and despair increased.

Bates had died on Venus, Levitchoffsky had sold out to join a blowtorch company, and Ngambu had gasped out his life from a sudden stroke only three years before, leaving the *Midas* entirely to Zeke.

Somchow, it had been harder and harder to get younger men to replace the missing ones. Now he had become resigned to doing everything himself. He'd had years enough in which to learn since he'd first been taken into the group as head engineer.

He went back through the empty crew quarters, past the equally empty passenger rooms, and through the holds with their small loads of freight, until he came to the great engine that drove the *Midas*. There, for the first time that day, he relaxed. Elsewhere, the brightwork had long since dulled, but the huge fusion converter was the one thing he never neglected. It purred on smoothly, turning a trickle of the hydrogen in ordinary water into huge floods of power, and it gleamed with weaving lights and shadows under his approving glance.

They weren't building engines

like that any more—not since the blowtorches had taken over. A complete blowtorch weighed far less than the seven thousand tons of power equipment the *Midas* carried, for Zeke's ship had been constructed when space craft had cost so much to build that their engines had been designed to last almost forever. The ship could fall to pieces around its fusion converter or he could be forgotten for countless generations before that nearly eternal source of power began to fail.

Then his brief, prideful satisfaction passed. Even the engine had one fatal weakness. Someone had to feed it and to give it a minimum of care. Once he was gone, the engine would die with him. With the blowtorches controlling the space lanes, nobody would be interested in an old ship, no matter how well the engine could convert hydrogen to power for the great ion blasters to hurl out in magnificent driving force.

Reluctantly, Zeke turned from the engine room, and proceeded on back toward the complexities of the driving tubes. He moved slowly now, putting the depressing task off as long as he could. The blast that had been wasted in trying to avoid the blowtorch had been too strong. Somewhere, some part of the controls had malfunctioned, and now . . .

It could have been worse. The drivers were still functioning, at least. But the imbalance that had

been creeping up had become more pronounced and the strain of the needless correction had crippled the *Midas* more than a year of normal use could have done.

Zeke moved methodically about, avoiding enormous busbars and giant electronic parts in the huge but crowded section out of old habit. He could make up for the damage to some extent, by inhibiting the less worn sections. But it would be, at best, only a temporary expedient. The *Midas* was more than ever in need of drydocking and repairs. It could no longer be delayed.

Mary had the tea ready when he wearily opened the door of their cabin. She was bending over the small serving table, peeling the foil from a jar of candied fruit, but she straightened abruptly when she saw his face. "Is it bad?" she asked.

He nodded. He'd never been one to talk much, and with Mary it hadn't been necessary. "Shot!" he told her. "How much have we left?"

She found the bankbook, and handed it to him. With grim urgency he added the figure to the freight fee he'd collect at Callisto, and remembered that there was some insurance he could borrow against. But he knew it wouldn't be enough.

"Maybe Mr. Williams will give us something on account against next year's contract," Mary suggested. "You've never asked him for an advance before." She stared at

him, the worry in her voice less for the ship than for him. "Zeke, why don't you lie down for an hour? It'll do you more good than the tea."

He shook his head stubbornly. "Can't," he answered. "I've too much figuring to do."

The *Midas* would need babying for its landing, with the drivers so badly out of condition, and the need embraced finding exactly the right landing orbit. And while he needed pampering just as badly because of his own condition, that particular kind of solace would have to wait.

There'd be time for that, maybe, after he talked to Williams.

II

It had been five years since Zeke had dropped into Callisto to discuss the last contract renewal with Williams, head of the Saturnus Mineral Corporation. Now, after resting from the long, cautious landing, he found Zeus City disturbingly changed. The exact nature of the change eluded him at first, but as he walked down Main Street it began to register.

Human coldness was the key.

The city itself was the same but for the first time in forty years he could walk for blocks without meeting a single man who recognized him. And there was a new look on the faces he passed. The old, wild expression of the spaceman had given place to a businesslike air he

had never seen beyond Mars before.

At Saturnus, there were more changes. The receptionist was a young chit of a girl who kept him waiting for nearly half an hour before admitting him to the President's office. And then it wasn't Burt Williams who greeted him, but an official who was a complete stranger to him.

"Mr. Williams died three years ago, Captain Vaughn," the new President said. He hesitated a second, then stood up and held out his hand. "I'm Julian Hathaway. I used to be treasurer here, as you may remember."

Zeke had a dim memory of a far younger man, more relaxed and amiable. The middle-aged Hathaway wasn't exactly fat, but he'd added a solidity usually called respectable. Now he seemed vaguely uncomfortable.

"I suppose you came to collect what is still due on your contract, Captain Vaughn?" he asked.

Zeke nodded slowly. "And to discuss renewal," he said.

He was still adjusting to the change. He'd never been close enough to Williams to be seriously hit by the man's death, but all his figuring had been done in terms of the former president's friendliness and flexibility. He had no idea of how to broach an advance to this frigidly formal and guardedly polite stranger. Williams had always made it easy to talk to him, but...

Hathaway, fidgeted uncomfort-

ably, clipping and lighting a cigar, and giving some seemingly quite unnecessary instructions to his secretary through the intercom. Then he reached into a drawer of his desk, and drew out what was obviously the former contract. He compared it with a sheet in front of him. Finally he shrugged, and cleared his throat.

"According to my figures," he said, "we owe you eight thousand, four hundred dollars, and thirty-one cents, plus a three-hundred-dollar retainer to the end of this month. I've already had a check made out. And there's a separate check for five hundred, since Mr. Williams had you listed on the employee roll. That means you're entitled to automatic termination pay in that amount after fifteen years. Here."

He passed over an envelope. Zeke fingered it open, and stared uneasily for a moment at the checks. Then his eyes snapped back to Hathaway.

"Termination? But—"

Hathaway looked more uncomfortable, but he nodded. "Unfortunately, we can't renew the contract, Captain Vaughn."

"But Williams told me—"

"I know. And I'm sure he meant to keep you under contract as long as you were in business. I don't know whether he ever told you, but he served for a year on one of the old ion-drive passenger liners, and he was quite sentimental about all ion-drive ships. He had contracts

with five, in fact, at one time—though the other four have all been retired.

"But he had a constant fight with the stockholders over it. As a new president of the company, Captain Vaughn, I don't have the authority that he had."

"I don't get it," Zeke said. The man was practically telling him he'd been a charity case. And that made no sense. "I charged less than the blowtorches! And freight rates went up last year, too."

Hathaway looked like a man caught beating a dog. His voice was unhappy, but there was no uncertainty in it. "That's part of the reason. When the rates went up, Hermes Freight offered us a contract at the old rate, in return for exclusive rights. And since that represents an annual saving to the company of several million dollars, we couldn't turn it down. I'm sorry, Captain Vaughn, but it was out of my hands."

"Yeah." Zeke stood up slowly, putting the envelope with the checks into his pocket. He held out his hand, trying to smile normally. "Thanks, Mr. Hathaway. I'll get the *Midas* off the Saturnus section of the docks as soon as I can."

"No need to do that. Until the end of the month, your ship's technically entitled to berth there, and I'll see there's no trouble. Good luck, sir."

Hathaway shook Zeke's hand almost gratefully, and saw the older man out through the office and to

the entrance. He was still watching as Zeke turned a corner two blocks away.

At the bank Zeke deposited the checks and inquired about his balance, hoping that Mary's records had been wrong. But he knew better, without the confirmation of the young teller. Then he headed back to the rocket field, avoiding the hotel where he and Mary had engaged rooms.

The *Midas* loomed up huge among the smaller blowtorches scattered about the field. They had never succeeded in building a blowtorch drive larger than the original, for the formidable technicalities involved in phasing more than one such drive had ruled out all possibility of multiple drive. Originally, the small ships had contained less than half the cargo space of the *Midas*, though they'd stepped up the efficiency until it was now about the same.

When the direct conversion of a tiny, intermittent fusion blast to propulsive drive had been invented, the spacemen had laughed at the ships designed for it. They had seemed little more than toys. And the inability to increase their power beyond certain limits had already been recognized. Obviously, with a few more improvements in the reliable, proven ion-drive and fusion motors, the tiny blowtorches would never have a chance.

Spacemen, Zeke now knew, had guessed right in everything but their knowledge of economics. The

big power generating motors and the ion-drive could have been improved, and ships far better than the maximum for the blowtorches could have been built. But they never were. A ship like the *Midas* had cost over twenty million dollars to build. The huge motor alone had cost sixty percent of the total cost. And for the same monetary expenditure, forty of the direct-drive ships could be completed.

In every way except one, the ion-drive was more efficient. But that one way was the determinant. It wasn't economically efficient to tie up twenty million dollars and its interest when two blowtorches would yield the same return for a single million! The ship companies stopped contracting for ion-blast ships, and the progress that could have been made still remained only a possibility.

For a while, during the brief currency exchange flareup between Mars and Earth, when it had seemed that interplanetary war might occur, Earth had suddenly grown interested in the big ships again. The Government had bought them up, planning to arm them.

Then the war scare had blown over, and they had been dumped onto the surplus market, since no freight company was still equipped to use them. Bates and Levitchoffsky had scraped up the price of one, taking Zeke in as engineer and Ngambu as pilot with equal shares for their skills. A lot of other spacemen had done the same.

But that had been forty years ago, and now apparently the *Midas* was the last of the old ships. Zeke had seen some of the others, scrapped on the outer planets, or blown up because the old engineers had died or quit. They just weren't training men now to service the big motors properly.

III

Zeke reached the ship finally and climbed slowly up the ramp. Forty years! He wondered how often he'd climbed that identical ramp, and then tried to remember how he'd felt ascending other ramps in his youth when he hadn't been compelled to pause and wheeze asthmatically before the last step, even on the light planets.

Callisto had been an outpost then, the point beyond which the big companies and the blowtorches dared not venture. Zeke and men like him had built the outplanet colonies and when the blowtorches could go no further ships like the *Midas* had been the lifeline for all colonization projects beyond Jupiter. Even now, there was an extremely realistic engraving of the *Midas* on the planet seal of Neptune.

And kids had wanted to grow up to handle such ships. They hadn't been able to land without a bunch of kids—and grown-up kids, too—streaming out to admire them, and to ask to go inside, to gasp in awe at the engines.

Now there was only the estimator from the repair company Zeke had consulted on landing. He was standing doubtfully in the main lock, and he swung quickly as Zeke came in.

"Oh, hello, Captain Vaughn. I was just coming to look you up. How soon would you want her rebuilt?"

The man's manner was brisk.

Zeke frowned. It was a foolish question, but it apparently wasn't meant for a joke. "As soon as possible, naturally. But—well, how much—"

"Impossible!" Now the estimator seemed to think Zeke was being foolish. He grinned doubtfully. "We don't keep stuff here to fabricate all this. In fact, you're lucky we've got a man who can handle the job. No other company this side of Earth would touch it. We'll have to send to Mars for scrap parts for some of it, and maybe get other parts specially tooled at Detroit. Look, you sure you want her dry-docked?"

"How much?" Zeke asked again.

The man shrugged. "I haven't the foggiest idea. It will take three months to get estimates on the parts alone. In round numbers, maybe a million dollars for parts, plus shipping and labor—if you want a complete overhaul. A quarter of that just to work on what you've got wrong with the drivers, if we disregard minor defects. Your engine looks sound. And you might get by a few more years on the con-

trols. Aren't you feeling well, Captain Vaughn?"

Zeke shook the man's hand off. He'd been foolish to think it could be done for what he had. With a bitter grin at himself, he took out his bankbook, and passed it over.

The estimator whistled.

"That's it," Zeke told him.

"Umm." The other stared at the older man, and then shrugged. "All right, I'll level with you, Captain Vaughn. I was padding it just a bit. I like a fat commission as well as the next. But I wasn't padding it *that* much. Not by a tenth!"

He pulled at one ear-lobe, staring about at the ship. Then he shrugged. "Maybe there's something we can do, though," he suggested at last. "We've got a few old parts, and we can jury-rig a little more. For twenty-five thousand, we can retune those drivers enough for you to pass take-off inspection here.

"Hell, since I'm one of the inspectors, I'll guarantee that. It should take us maybe two weeks. Then you can take the ship across to Venus. They're short of metal and paying top scrap prices. You could probably get enough for this outfit to pick up a fairly good used blowtorch—or to retire on. They jury-rigged a couple of scrapped ion-blasters on Earth and crawled across with them recently, so they must fetch a good price there. How's it sound?"

Zeke brought a trembling hand up to a big wrench on the wall.

"Get off!" His voice was thick in his ears. "Get off my ship, damn you!"

"What the heck gives?" The inspector took a backward step, more as if humoring Zeke than in any fear. "Look, I'm trying to help you. You crazy, Captain?"

The brief anger ebbed back into the general dullness, and Zeke let his arm drop limply. He nodded. "I don't know. Maybe I am. I must be, landing on Callisto without finding they had take-off inspection now. All right, fix her up."

There was nothing else he could do, of course. It would leave him enough to buy supplies, at least. And fuel was no problem—he'd learned places to find frozen water years before, and the fuel tanks were nearly full.

But with the contract with Saturanus ended, getting freight enough to keep going was certain to be tough. If the *Midas* had been in top condition, he could probably get a fat contract for the new mines on Pluto, since it was hard to get blowtorch pilots who would stick to the long haul so far from any recreation.

But the mines wouldn't risk their ultra-precious ores without a full inspection of the ship. They'd turned him down five years ago. Now it was out of the question.

He headed back toward his hotel, trying to figure out what to tell Mary. She'd know he was lying, of course, but she'd feel better, somehow. Then he'd have to go looking

for work. There had to be something.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," he quoted to himself, trying to believe it. Then he stopped. His mind found it too easy to twist what came next. Green pastures and still waters! He might be old, but he wasn't ready to be turned out to pasture; nor was the ship going to be becalmed in still waters, out of the current, to rot and decay uselessly!

IV

The ship behaved slightly better on the take-off from Callisto. He'd been nervous about that, after watching the fumbling, sloppy work of the men. And Mary had her own worries, probably inspired by her contempt of anyone who would foul up the passageways without cleaning them. It had taken her hours, while he inspected the work, to restore the *Midas* to livable condition. But once beyond the planetary limits, they both breathed easier.

"I'll fix the tea, Zeke," she said. Then she smiled faintly. "He was such a nice young man. He was really concerned about us."

Zeke knew she was thinking of Hathaway, and nodded. He had to admit she was right. Hathaway couldn't get the contract renewed, but he'd done all he could, as it turned out. He'd come to their hotel to tell them he'd gotten them a small job for another minerals

company, carrying an emergency inspector to Ceres.

The payment had been ridiculously low, but it was something, at least; and Hathaway had suggested there might be work for them on Ceres for a few trips. With the last of their money gone, the offer had saved them from utter disaster.

It had been their only chance, for Zeke had tried every employment office in Zeus City only to be told there was no work available for a wornout ion-blaster.

Hathaway had been almost a different man, as if a big load had been lifted from his conscience. He'd been as nice as Mary thought. Too nice, Zeke reflected bitterly. They were carrying a passenger now and making enough to pay for the trip, but he knew it was only because of Hathaway's charity. He'd won the job because the younger man had put on pressure to help him, and not on his own merits. Then he remembered that Williams had given him fifteen years of contracts, and that act of generosity, he now realized, had been almost charity on Williams' part!

He picked up his pipe and began filling it as he went on his routine tour of inspection. The door to the passenger cabin was closed, and he felt almost grateful, uncertain about how much the young engineer knew of the situation. He made his way back to the driver compartment, groaning again as he saw the shoddy workmanship that had been done.

They hadn't even bothered removing the rust from salvaged parts. And he remembered that there had been no guarantee of the work's quality—only that the ship would pass take-off inspection. Just possibly the work would hold up for another year, but beyond that, it would probably fail with a complete finality. From ten feet away, he could detect heat still leaking from damaged insulation.

But there was nothing he could do. He'd been one of the best space-ship power engineers commissioned in his day. He could control the big generator to almost perfection, and could have taught its operation at any accredited school, or to any younger man who might have been willing to learn. But drivers were far too complicated for one man to balance, and he had no repair parts.

He shrugged, and turned back toward the huge engine, where the smooth flow of unceasing power would almost certainly soothe some of his worries. He was surprised to find Grundy, the engineer-passenger there, studying the bulk of the motor. The blond young man looked slightly embarrassed at being caught snooping.

"I had to take a look at her," he explained hastily. "I've never seen a fusion motor before. I meant to, while I was still on Earth. But it was always too much trouble getting into the sections where they are."

Zeke nodded. He'd heard that

the projected fission motors for general use hadn't been built, since the solar-energy converters had been developed to near perfection. There were plenty of the fusion generators in existence, but they were confined to places where sunlight was unreliable. When a layer of solar-batteries could be sprayed on cheap cloth like paint, capable of extracting nearly a hundred percent of the energy of sunlight and when the new capacity-storage cells could handle several days' accumulation of power, why should men bother with gigantic machinery?

Of course, on the planets beyond Mars, sunlight was too weak. But there, the expense of freighting had made all but the biggest installations choose the much simpler and smaller uranium-fission power units, for it was cheaper to pay for uranium than to pay interest on a fission motor.

"Glad to show her to you," he told Grundy.

The engineer shook his head. "No, thanks. I just wanted to take a look. I already know the general theory. Too bad these things couldn't be built smaller and cheaper. With uranium getting scarcer and more expensive, it's making it tough on some of the settlements."

"You a power engineer?" Zeke asked.

"No, mining," the younger man answered. He gestured up at the *Midas'* creaking installations. "Wasn't this the same ship that Levitchoffsky was on when he found the

uranium lode which gave him his start in building up Solar Freighting?"

Zeke nodded. It wasn't exactly the truth, but it was close enough. Levitchoffsky had bought an asteroid claim from a passenger to Saturn who'd given up trying to live on its mineral deposits. Then when he and the others on the *Midas* had landed on the asteroid they had accidentally taken samples at just the right place, and discovered the Solar System's richest source of uranium. Levitchoffsky had promptly sold the claim to a speculating firm, and two years later, after he'd lost his profits in other worthless claims had disposed of his interest in the *Midas* and joined Solar Freighting.

The engineer stood around a few minutes longer, and then wandered back to his own cabin, more impressed with the fact that Zeke had known Levitchoffsky than with the *Midas* itself.

Zeke started to follow him, and then stopped. Levitchoffsky! Zeke hadn't been in touch with him for years, but the other would still remember him. He might be president of Solar Freighting and respectable now. But he wouldn't have forgotten. If he knew that Zeke was in trouble, he'd do anything he could to help.

Zeke dropped onto the base of the huge motor, carressing it softly as he thought it over. There were still scrapped ion-blasters on Earth, and men trained to work with al-

most anything of a technical nature. They could fix up the *Midas*—probably for a fraction of what it would cost on Callisto.

Then, with a ship like new, there was almost certain work at good rates on the Pluto run. If Levitchoffsky would lend him the money, he could probably pay it back in five years—even paying some younger man a high enough salary to entice him to help.

It wasn't an alternative he liked. It was trading on old friendship. But if he had to have help, he'd rather have it from Levitchoffsky than from anyone he knew. And it wouldn't really be charity. He was good for at least ten more years, with a repaired ship and some kind of help.

He was still considering when the alarm sounded harshly. One look at the auxiliary control panel in the engine room sent him running painfully back toward the driver section.

But it was all over before he reached it. The insulation on the main steering driver section had finally blown. It must have been over within microseconds as the searing ions blasted out and the lagging cut-off had deactivated that section. But the damage was beyond any hope of repair!

It was the section supposedly repaired on Callisto. Zeke couldn't tell whether it had blown because of defective work or because the greater relative strength of the newer parts had put too much strain

on old sections. It didn't matter. Now he had only the emergency steering power left.

That was good for perhaps a couple of landings and take-offs, if he nursed it. After that, the *Midas* was through.

Zeke sighed in bitter despair.

There was no longer any doubt. Once he reached Ceres, he'd have to cable Levitchoffsky. And now that it was settled beyond a doubt, he began to wonder. Thirty years is a long time. The young man he'd known would have done anything for him; but he'd seen others change with prosperity and time. He suddenly wondered whether Levitchoffsky would even accept the collect cable.

V

Zeke was lucky that the little planetoid had so low a gravity. He was able to conserve on his use of the auxiliaries, without too rough a landing. He sat recovering from it and watching the engineer go hastily down the ramp. The young man must have been angry at the jolting, from the way he walked. But if he'd known it, he was lucky to be in one piece.

The field looked bleak. Ceres had been a regular stopping place for the *Midas* once, but that had been long ago. He had remembered it as a beehive of activity, bustling with the business of its great germanium mines. Now the field seemed deserted, and the great warehouses

were dark in the faint light of the sun.

And it seemed even gloomier when Zeke stepped out of the *Midas* and headed toward the cable office. As he passed nearer the line of warehouses, he saw a few men moving about, but it was not comparable to the feverish activity of two decades before. Behind them, the processing mills were busy, with the little trucks hard at work. But there was none of the gaiety he had associated with busy miners. And a glance at the loads they were carrying explained why.

Low-grade ore! Even the fabulous mines here were wearing out. He'd heard a rumor that they'd suddenly come to the end of the rich stuff, but he had been reluctant to believe it. Now he could see with his own eyes that it was true.

Ceres probably had enough low-grade ore to supply the colony's needs for generations, but its commercial greatness had been built on nearly pure ore, and this seemed a starvation diet by contrast.

The tragedy seemed even worse than the circumstances warranted, however. Few lights were on, and he saw men in one of the stores wearing heavy clothes, as if they were conserving on heat. If there were a smiling face among the fifty thousand inhabitants of the planetoid, Zeke had yet to find it.

Even the air in the plastic bubble that covered the town seemed old and weary. Zeke shivered, realizing how cold it had become. But it was

more than the coldness that increased the ache of his joints. Age had crept up on him and the *Midas* and now seemed to be pressing down on even the worlds he had known, as if the whole universe was running down, sinking by slow degrees into the stagnation of senility.

Age should be a period of peace and contentment—the still waters the Psalm mentioned, where everything was calm and serene. But here, as on board the *Midas*, the stillness was stagnation and decay, like a pool left behind the flood, when the current has ceased.

His steps lagged as he neared the cable office, partly from the general gloom surrounding him and partly from something else. Damn it, it wasn't really charity he was asking of Levitchofsky. He repeated it to himself, but he couldn't quite believe it.

Here and there he recognized a store, but he felt no desire to go in. Even if the same men owned them, they would have changed too much since he'd known them, as Levitchofsky might have changed. Grim of aspect, he continued on.

Then a sudden friendly greeting swung him slowly around.

"Zeke!" The man was grey and bearded, and at first Zeke didn't recognize him. Then his memory turned up the face in younger form, strong and confident, the eyes brimmed with a boastful arrogance. It was Aaron Cowslick, who'd been Ceres' chief blacksheep and general

hellraiser. They'd been on binges together often enough, before Zeke had married and quieted down.

"Well!" The man caught Zeke's hand, and now he recognized the scar over the left eye, won in a tavern brawl.

"I wondered, when the *Midas* dropped, whether you'd still be on her," Aaron exclaimed, his hand-clasp tightening. "I thought you'd died long ago. We missed you around here. How are you, Zeke?"

Zeke tried to shake off his gloom, cursing himself for not thinking to look Aaron up. "Well enough," he lied, feeling sure the companion of his youth knew better. "How does it happen you're not in jail."

Aaron laughed, his dark eyes flashing. "I run the jail, Zeke. I'm mayor here!" At Zeke's incredulous expression, his grin widened. "Nothing stronger than coffee now, and the doc tells me to cut down on that."

He grabbed one of Zeke's arms and began leading him toward a little restaurant. Zeke felt almost grateful for the stop. And when the coffee arrived, it helped dispel some of the cold. He sat sipping it, while Aaron ran through all the anticipated questions. He tried to answer them casually, but the truth must have been obvious.

The mayor sighed, and pointed outside. "It was a great time, when the *Midas* was still full of fire and fury and this town was booming." He stared out, his face losing all its expression. "Don't lie to me,

Zeke, and I won't try to deceive you. It's bad. Unless young Grundy sends back the right message to his company, we're in serious trouble."

"The mines?" Zeke asked.

"The mines. One of our men thinks he's found what may be a formation that would lead to a rich lode. I wish I could believe it. We've about reached the end of the rope. We can't cut down on power much more, and uranium is going higher and higher. That last discovery on Neptune turned out to be a bust—just a freak pocket. Now they've raised the ante on U-235. We can't afford enough to keep going. And without sufficient power on a world like this, we can't do anything.

"Food, water, air—it's all U-235 to us. Besides, the processing plants need more power for low-grade stuff than for the high-quality ore. Even if we could afford the uranium, we'd still have to run our power plant too hot, and it wouldn't last forever. Looks like you might have some business if you're cheap enough."

"Resettlement?" Zeke asked.

The other nodded soberly. "Exactly. Vesta Metals says we can be split up among the Trojans—they've got booming mines there. If we can pay passage for ourselves and what we have to take, they've offered work and housing. We may have to take it, too."

"I can't take you," Zeke told him. He sucked at the last bit of coffee, then put the cup down heav-

ily. "Steering drivers are shot, Aaron. Even your young Grundy is going to have to get back to Callisto on the first blowtorch that comes along. Until I get repairs, I can't risk carrying passengers or freight."

The mayor seemed almost relieved, though his voice was sympathetic. "I guessed it might be like that when I saw Mary," he said. "Well, it'll all work out somehow. We'll have to get together for dinner at my place. My wife's a first-rate cook."

"Bring her out to the *Midas* for a return engagement then," Zeke suggested. "We've still some Martian turkey in the freezer. Bring the whole family, if you've got kids." He waited, smiling, for a reply.

Aaron grinned. "One—a girl. She teaches school here. Which reminds me, when she heard there was an ion-blaster landing here, she got all set to descend on you with her class. She's never had a chance to show them a ship like that. Okay?"

"Sure," Zeke said automatically. "What time does the cable office close, Aaron?"

A glance at Aaron's watch assured him he had just time enough. He shook hands with the mayor again, almost relieved to drop back into his own thoughts. Normally, a chance to relive the old days would have been a gift from the blue. But right now he didn't want to be reminded of all the years that had passed.

VI

Inside the cable office, a girl took Zeke's cable slip and frowned when she saw the check in the collect square. She glanced over it, came to his signature, and stopped to look up quickly.

"Captain Vaughn?"

He nodded.

"There's a message here for you. It came two days ago and we've been holding it. From Mr. Levitchoffsky! Maybe you'd better read it first."

Zeke stared at the envelope in blank amazement for a second, before the mystery resolved itself. Mary, of course! She must have sent a cable to Levitchoffsky during the dark weeks of uncertainty on Callisto, probably warning the man not to let Zeke know she'd cabled: She had known him, of course, and thought of him long before Zeke did.

He ripped the envelope open with trembling fingers. It was a long cable, obviously sent with no regard to cost. Zeke skimmed over the cover-up for Mary—how Levitchoffsky had been trying to get in touch with him and had finally heard of his landing and trouble on Callisto.

It was enough to know that the man was obviously filled with the same friendship he'd had so long ago, enough to know that the words carried a genuine delight at being in touch again. Then he came to the important part.

"I'd like nothing better," the message went on, "than to put the old *Midas* back in shape. What a ship she was! But aside from getting a pig-headed man like you to let me do it, there seems to be no way. The only place where the necessary shops and skilled work can be found is right here on Earth. And since one of those taped-together scrap jobs broke up on the way to Venus, inspection here won't let another ion-blaster land. I've tried getting them to wink at the law, but it's no dice.

"Anyhow, I'm sending my private blowtorch to Ceres on the double. Get back here where the money grows on the trees, Zeke. I've got a top job wide open beside me. I needed a good engineer I could trust for years and couldn't find one. It's all yours, and I don't have to tell you how glad I'll be to see you and Mary again."

Zeke dropped the cable onto the desk and stood gazing at it without seeing it. The girl waited inquiringly.

"Will there be any answer?" she asked. "It's to go collect, unlimited."

He shook his head and started for the door. Then he changed his mind. He had to answer, of course.

But it was hard work inventing the words to explain about the repairs being good enough for him to get the job on Pluto. Lying wasn't easy for him. And nothing could have stopped Levitchoffsky, obviously, if he'd known the truth.

Later he sat in the control room with Mary while she read and re-read the message and his copy of the answer. At last, she put it down.

"It's good, Zeke," she assured him. "I think he'll believe it."

He ran his hands over the controls, cutting on the panel lights that seemed too dim, as if the bulbs were about to fail. Under them, the hair on the back of his hands seemed more grizzled than ever as he filled his pipe.

"Maybe he did need an engineer," he said at last.

"Maybe," she agreed. Then she reached a hand out for his. "It was a good cable you sent him, Zeke."

From below, there was the sound of Grundy gathering his things together. The news that Zeke had no intention of taking off again had sent him into a rage. But when Zeke had shown him the ruined drivers he'd turned white and apologized. Now his steps started for the ladder to the control room, then hesitated.

"He's still upset," Mary said.

Zeke went to the door. "Sorry, Mr. Grundy," he called down. "Maybe you won't have to wait long. I hear there's a blowtorch coming here in a couple of days. How were the mines?"

He'd meant to ask the question before, but it had slipped his mind.

Grundy grunted in disgust. "Rotten. The lode's completely shot, and there's not a thing my company can make any advances against. Why?"

"I was just curious," Zeke answered. "Well, so long."

He shut the door and watched Grundy carrying his suitcase across the field, noticing that the pickup on the rear telescreen was growing weak. But that wouldn't matter now.

Forty years, he thought again. Forty years while he and the old *Midas* earned their way and helped to keep men moving out to new frontiers. Now they had grown old together, and some of those frontiers were old and ready to be abandoned.

"There's still Venus," he said slowly. "I guess we could retire on what she'd bring for scrap. And it wouldn't be charity."

Mary nodded, but said nothing. Then she shook her head, and he sighed in sudden relief.

"We won't retire," he said.

Above them, the sky was the black of space, with the hot pin-points of stars burning through it. Zeke had read stories in his youth about ships that would someday cross the immense distances that separated the Solar System from the nearest of those stars. But so far, nobody had found a drive that would make that vision resplendently possible during the span of one lifetime.

He'd even imagined that he might be on such a ship, when he'd been young and foolish. And now, maybe, he was old and foolish. Maybe a man began to get crazy notions when he was old. But what

was crazy about it? There was nothing else, quite so sane.

"Mary," he told her quietly, not knowing how to discuss it, "you married a fool."

She followed his gaze upwards, and made a funny, choking sound in her throat. Then, surprisingly, he saw her smile. "As long as a couple of fools stick together, Zeke, I guess it doesn't much matter, does it?"

And somehow, it was settled. Zeke reached for the big power switch and cut it on. From below there was the instant soft murmur of the great engine, eager as always to go, unmindful of the weakness of the failing, aged drivers. He stretched out his hands toward the controls, and then stopped.

VII

Below, on the field, the failing screen showed a group of people coming up under the big ship and heading for the ramp that he hadn't yet lifted. Zeke couldn't take off with them in the path of the blast.

His legs trembled slightly as he stood up, but he reached the lock before they were up the ramp. In the glow of the *Midas'* morning light he saw a young, rather pretty woman with a group of perhaps thirty boys and girls following her. And behind the children came Mayor Aaron Cowslick.

The mayor heaved his way up, puffing a little. "Meet my daughter

Ruth," he said, proudly nodding toward a shy, and rather pretty little girl who came forward hesitantly. "Did you hear about the mines?"

Zeke nodded. "I heard. Rotten luck, Aaron."

"It's hardest on the kids. The word leaked out, and they got wind of it this afternoon. It's always tough on kids when they've grown up on one world, and suddenly find they've got to get out. Ruth thought they might be cheered up a bit if you'd let them go through a genuine ion-blast. They've been as excited as jumping beans all the way here."

"Bring them in," Zeke said, smiling. It had been a long time since he'd been a kid, aching for a chance to get into a real ship. But he could remember some of it. In their case, though, he supposed it would be like going into the pages of an historical novel to investigate a real pirate ship.

"Mary's up topside, if you'd like to join us," he said. "And don't worry—they won't hurt anything."

"I'll show them around. I've read up on these ships," Ruth told her father and Zeke. "Dad, you don't have to come."

Aaron breathed an obvious sigh of relief, and followed. But from below, there came the sound of yells of excitement that couldn't be blotted out. He had a picture of the young woman filling the children's heads with nonsense and misunderstanding. How could she answer their questions when she

had no first-hand knowledge of ships and the men who piloted them?

At last he stood up and went down again, leaving Aaron with Mary. Once, other kids had swarmed around the *Midas*, when everything except the children had been younger. If this had to be the last time, the old ship was going to be handled proudly and justly!

And it would have to be the last time. He'd been working it out as the minutes slipped by. They could risk one more landing and take-off, out on the wastes of Pluto. There was buried ice there that could be used to fill the fuel tanks and the cargo holds—enough to power the *Midas* for two years of steady drive, or a year with sufficient power left to operate her equipment indefinitely.

And on board was a store of food that would last for a long time, if they used the products of the air-replenishing hydroponics tanks to supplement it. Enough, certainly, to keep two old people until death found them naturally.

It wouldn't be suicide, after all. They'd go further out than any ship had ever gone before, and after they died, the *Midas* would coast on forever, or until she reached some star system that could trap her. She'd go on and on, and there was no known limit to the frontiers she might reach. Her steering drivers were shot, but the main drivers were all she'd need to build up an unthinkable speed.

There would be no still waters. Instead, there'd be what Tennyson had called "such a tide as moving seems asleep, too deep for sound and foam . . ."

He had almost reached the great engine compartment before he stopped to collect himself, wondering what nonsense Ruth would be telling the children.

Then he blinked in surprise. Amazingly, she'd gotten her facts correct. She was trying to answer every sensible question they asked, and making a good job of it.

He stood listening, nodding with approval. Most of her knowledge *hadn't* come from books. She was repeating his own words, quoting him, as Aaron must have done many times in the past.

"As much power as a uranium plant?" an eager twelve-year-old asked.

"More," she told him. "More than two plants like the one we have. And a lot bigger, as you can see. Why, one of the ships the spacemen call blowtorches couldn't even lift a power plant like this. It has to be powerful, just to lift its own weight."

"Boy!" It was a piping masculine voice, filled with awe. Zeke could see the boy, staring up at the huge motor, touching it with an almost reverent finger. "Boy, I wish they still used this kind of ship. Then I'd be an engineer. I'd sure like that!"

Zeke watched him touch the motor again, and the great power plant

seemed to purr under his fingers, as Zeke had fancied it purred in response to his own ministrations. Zeke's eyes began to shine.

He turned softly toward the control cabin, no longer worried about what Ruth would tell them.

Aaron and Mary were still sitting in the semi-darkness, but they turned as he came in. He walked to the control board and cut off the panel lamps, turning on the main dome light. He didn't need darkness now as he swung to face them.

"Aaron," he asked quietly, "if I landed this ship in a good, school ground locality, do you reckon your engineers could help me hook your power lines to the big engine that's now going to waste? And do you think you could use a good engineer to teach some of your youngsters how to handle fusion engines?"

It was the only answer, of course. He had a motor that would work for a thousand years at least, at al-

most no cost for fuel; and Ceres had everything except the power such a motor could supply. It was economically inefficient, of course, to consider using such motors today. But sometimes, courageous age was more important than economics, whether on worlds, or in the minds and hearts of men.

He saw surprise give place to slow understanding. Mary beamed at him through the tears that were suddenly coursing down her cheeks, and Aaron came to his feet with a celerity surprising in a man well past his first youth.

He nodded, and his hand reached for Zeke's. "We'll always be able to find a use for good men, Zeke," he said.

They would be in still waters, after all—settling into one place on a quiet little world old enough to have lost its roughness. But not all waters had to be stagnant, once the current had passed. Some could be serene, useful—and wanted!
