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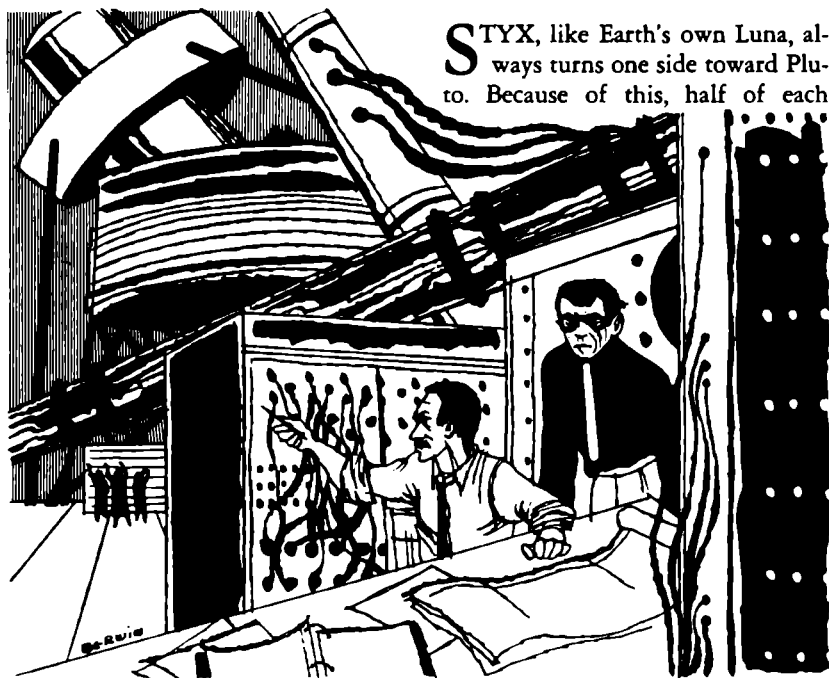
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***I*ntruder on the Rim**

by Milton Lesser

IT'S HARD TO FERRET OUT SECRETS ON THE

RIM OF THE SOLAR SYSTEM . . . BUT IT CAN BE DONE.



STYX, like Earth's own Luna, always turns one side toward Pluto. Because of this, half of each

month on the ninth planet's only satellite sees the thermometer dip as close to absolute zero as it does in deep space itself. Even the thermometer on Styx is a tricky affair, measuring as it does absolute molecular activity in an environment where molecular activity is almost imperceptible.

"Stop it," said Trudy Adams, spinning around to frown prettily at her husband, while her long chestnut hair behaved like a miniature billowing cloak. "Tell me one more thing wrong with Stryx—just one, and that's a promise—we'll turn around and rocket back to Earth."

Craig puffed his pipe with a completely exasperating confidence. "Not if I know my wife, we won't. The chance to cover Operation Zero for every teleo in Interplanetary Telliance won't be missed by Mrs. Trudy Adams, especially since this is the first time civilians ever got close enough to look, let alone teleo the whole operation all over the Solar System."

The beginnings of a smile threatened to unseat Trudy's frown. "Still as cocksure as the day you—well, never mind. What gets me is the sudden relaxation of security restrictions. Anybody know why?"

"That's the intriguing thing about it. One year no one's permitted beyond Neptune's orbit—though what they planned on doing some time in the future when Pluto's lop-sided ostrich-egg of an orbit swung her in

closer than Neptune, I don't know—anyway, the next year they gave the whole mysterious operation more publicity than the Interplanetary Olympics. As a result, we got the Telliance option to do this thing up brown."

"Styx still doesn't sound like a honeymooner's paradise..."

"So we're not honeymooners."

"But you said we'd always—"

"I was drunk or lying," Craig told her. "But don't feel sorry for yourself, honey. Feel sorry for Telliance. If Operation Zero turns out to be a big brass bust, Telliance will have laid the biggest egg in Interplanetary Telio history. They spent ten million dollars on publicity alone."

"Maybe Telliance has some inside info telling them Zero's as big as it's cracked up to be."

Craig shook his head, forming the thumb and forefinger of his right hand into a large nothing. "That's, exactly what Telliance knows, at least according to Avery. They're taking a chance that all this security the past twenty years adds up to something big."

"Oh yeah? Then why forget about the security all of a sudden?"

"That, my pet, I don't know. That's why we're here. I can guess, though. With elections coming up, maybe someone's lobbying himself a return trip to Capitol Crater by cracking the security barrier. Anyway, security's been lifted, so maybe we'll find out why."

"Well—" But Trudy stopped in mid-sentence when a blinker flashed red-green, red-green on the panel to her left. "Now why do you suppose anyone should be radioing us?" Flicking a toggle, she faced the panel and spoke: "Adams, Spaceship *Or Bust*. Identify yourself."

The voice came in crystal clear, resonant, quite military. "Better identify *yourself*, young lady. You are in security space."

"Don't be ridiculous," said Trudy. "This isn't security space any longer. We're Adams and Adams of Interplanetary Telio Alliance, here to cover Operation Zero."

"Now who's ridiculous?" Incredulity had removed some of the crisp formality from the voice. "This has always been security space, still is security space and as far as I know always will be security space. If coming out here was some kind of gag, I'm afraid you are in serious trouble."

"See here—" Trudy began indignantly, but Craig prodded her away from the panel receiver and sat down in her place.

"Craig Adams," he said. "Who are you?"

"Colonel Tansley, Assistant Security Officer, Operation Zero. Was the woman serious about Interplanetary Telio Alliance? They asked for partial relaxation of security, were turned down."

Trudy was furious. "That isn't what they told us. If you think we came barrelling out here three and

a half billion miles to be sent home, Colonel, you've got another guess coming."

"Shut up!" Craig hissed in a stage whisper. "This guy's a big fish. We'll be free-lancing on the Martian Syrtis if we get Telliance into any trouble."

"But they said—"

"Shh! Uh, Colonel, we have clearance from Tycho Station as well as our credentials from Telliance, of course. Shall we land and present them?"

"Yes," the Colonel agreed. "Since you're here, ride the radar into Styx. But I'll tell you in advance: if you have clearance of any kind, it's counterfeit."

And the radio light blinked off.

"When I get my hands on that stuffed shirt . . ." Trudy wailed.

But Craig was too busy seeking and holding the radar beam to offer any answer. Tight-lipped and pensive, he spiralled the *Or Bust* down toward frozen Styx in narrowing concentric loops.

"Landing always gets me dizzy," Trudy finally said to break the silence.

"Your imagination. Because you know we circle a moon, slowing down below the speed of escape and finally spiralling to planetfall, you get dizzy. But the circle's too large; your equilibrium is too concerned with the ship and not the satellite to make you dizzy. As I said, your imagination."

"So, people get seasick and—never mind. Craig?"

"Umm?"

"Craig, I can't figure this thing out. I mean, if everything got squared away though Telliance and now this Colonel what's-his-name tells us there's no such animal . . ."

Craig shrugged, but not indifferently. "We know absolutely nothing about Operation Zero, so we can't be expected to know about the things which make it tick. Let's wait till after planetfall."

"Who doesn't know anything about Operation Zero? I read in the *Martian Monthly*—"

"Sure, and in the *Zurich Zephyr*—"

"There's no such paper!"

"I know, but you get the idea. All lurid scandal sheets afflicted with sensation-itis. They don't know any more about Zero than Telliance does—and take it from me and Avery, Telliance knows nothing."

"At least we'll soon find out for them, sweet."

"Don't forget Colonel Tansley. I wouldn't be too sure."

A few moments later the *Or Bust* belied its name by settling down without a quiver on the bleak, frozen methane-ammonia surface of Styx.

No brass bands greeted them. Nor top brass with warm handshakes, nor speechmaking on the occasion of the first civilian craft to planetfall on home base for Operation Zero—nor anything of the sort, for the matter.

At least they did not have to wear the clumsy, cumbersome spacesuits of five years ago. In a sense, the passing of the spacesuit marked the end of an era: spelling finish as it did for the age of space pioneering, of swashbuckling from planet to planet when each new world challenged brave men with the unknown. Gone was the bulky insulating equipment, the necessity for moving about like a third-rate robot, the need for electrical power to supplement over-burdened muscles. In its place: the almost-ubiquitous forcefield, a milinch of perfect insulation, complete protection—invisible, weightless, allowing absolute freedom of movement. Except for a rather light oxygen tank with hose and mask, the forcefield sufficed for space gear.

Garbed in field and mask now, Craig and Trudy left the lock of the *Or Bust*. Trudy wore the briefest of halter and shorts, pale ice-blue and iridescent ash of rose. Women affected the scantiest of garments on the outworlds not because they had gone exhibitionist, Craig realized, but because it was a natural reaction to the shapeless spacesuit era. Not all women naturally: for some the long skirt, the kirtled bathing suit, the inflated undergarments were an understandable necessity. But Trudy's fine young figure curved pettily and alluringly in the right places, leaving a wake of loud whistles and staring eyes on the outworlds.

"Adams and Adams?" A burly

provost marshal sergeant demanded, attempting with some success to maintain his military dignity while ogling Trudy.

"Right," said Craig, his voice carrying clearly over the tiny microphone imbedded by plastisurgery in his palate. "I believe Colonel Tansley wants to see us about—"

"About some mistake his office made!" Trudy finished indignantly.

"Yes, Ma'am," the sergeant assured her. "A mistake on someone's part. Won't you follow me, please?"

Craig led the way, followed by Trudy. The sergeant must have changed his mind, for he brought up the rear, making a careful and apparently happy scrutiny of the swing-hinged arrangement of Trudy's hips and pelvic bones.

Stryx's glass-smooth surface offered absolutely no traction. And since no one had yet figured out how to sandpaper a force field, Craig and Trudy felt they were on ice skates. The sergeant had grown accustomed to the situation; he chafed at their slow, tightrope progress. He seemed relieved when they entered an air-lock, leaving the faintly purple atomic flares which lit Stryx's frozen surface behind them. However, his eyes still lingered on a derriere view of Trudy's anatomy.

Air hissed into the lock, a quartz-enclosed sign blinked on and off with the words "Earth Normal." Craig clenched his fist, fingering the flat disc surfaced in his palm. He shed

his force field merely by dispersing the interatomic binding forces of which it was composed into air. When the inner door opened, revealing a well-lighted hallway, they all filed through.

"Someday they'll figure out a way to wrap a force field around an entire building," predicted Trudy. "Or a city, or a planet." She frowned petulantly. "But first they'll have to straighten out men like Colonel Tansley; his type have a way of making civilization walk a treadmill."

"Hey, you're bitter," Craig smiled. "Haven't even met the man yet."

"You're about to, sir," the sergeant informed them, gesturing toward a door on which appeared the words:

HEADQUARTERS COMMANDANT
OPERATION ZERO
OFFICE OF THE
SECURITY OFFICER

A chunky enlisted woman, approaching middle age too rapidly to adjust herself, snickered slightly at Trudy's wisps of ice-blue and rose-ash garments, then conferred impersonally with the sergeant.

"This way, please," said the sergeant, opening still another door and saluting smartly the figure seated behind a huge desk in the otherwise bare and windowless room.

Makes you feel uneasy just walking in here, Craig thought. Perhaps that was the idea. Bare of anything but the great quasi-oak desk the long coffin-shaped room offered a feeling of no warmth whatsoever. Stark

gray walls rose grimly from obsidian black floor to slate-colored ceiling. The room's great, unbroken length—thirty-five feet of empty black floor Craig guessed—gave a tapering impression. It appeared as if you were looking at the figure behind the desk through the wide end of a funnel with reversed binoculars.

Colonel Tansley aided the impression. Barely tall enough not to be accused of dwarfism, he had a pale, gaunt, square-boned face with big, nervous eyes, an Apache shock of white hair, a huge hyper-thyroid Adam's apple. He jumped up nervously after returning the sergeant's salute, offering his small chair behind the large desk to Trudy. When she declined it, he sat down again, settling himself with a series of graceless jerks until only that part of him from the big Adam's apple up appeared over the desk top.

"I am Colonel Tansley," he said unnecessarily, his voice almost making up for what his face and dwarfish body lacked. A deep resonance surrounded his words with the suggestion of an echo. He enunciated every syllable crisply, clearly, with a natural ease that precluded affectation. He looked the smallest of small men, yet he spoke like an empire builder.

"Sergeant," he said. The sergeant left. "Now then," he said.

Trudy extracted a cigarette from some miraculously concealed pocket. "I hope you've checked on your mis-

take and cleared things for us, Colonel."

"There was no need to check, young woman. I know. I *know*. The area beyond Neptune's orbit is still security space. You have violated it."

"That's fantastic," Trudy said in spite of Craig's warning look.

To amend her cold assertion, Craig told the Colonel, "We have our papers. Everything's in order as far as I can see."

"Umm," said the colonel, taking the sheaf of papers Craig offered. The colonel had a way of making even a curt, wordless syllable seem meaningful. Craig could picture how he climbed to his eagle's wings in his voice, while the rest of him stood as a barrier keeping the coveted general's star out of reach.

"The first one is our contract with Telliance," Craig explained. "The second is clearance from a Major Whiting out here."

"Never heard of him," said Colonel Tansley, pressing a stud on his desk and speaking into the panel receiver. "Personnel? Tansley. What do you have on a Major Whiting? Of course. Yes. Uh, I thought so."

"Well?" Trudy demanded.

"There never was a Major Whiting at this Headquarters. Let me see the other one. Um. Charles Avery, eh?" There was an awkward silence while Colonel Tansley placed a sub-ether call through to Telliance on the moon. Finally: "I'd like to speak with a Mr. Charles Avery, Military

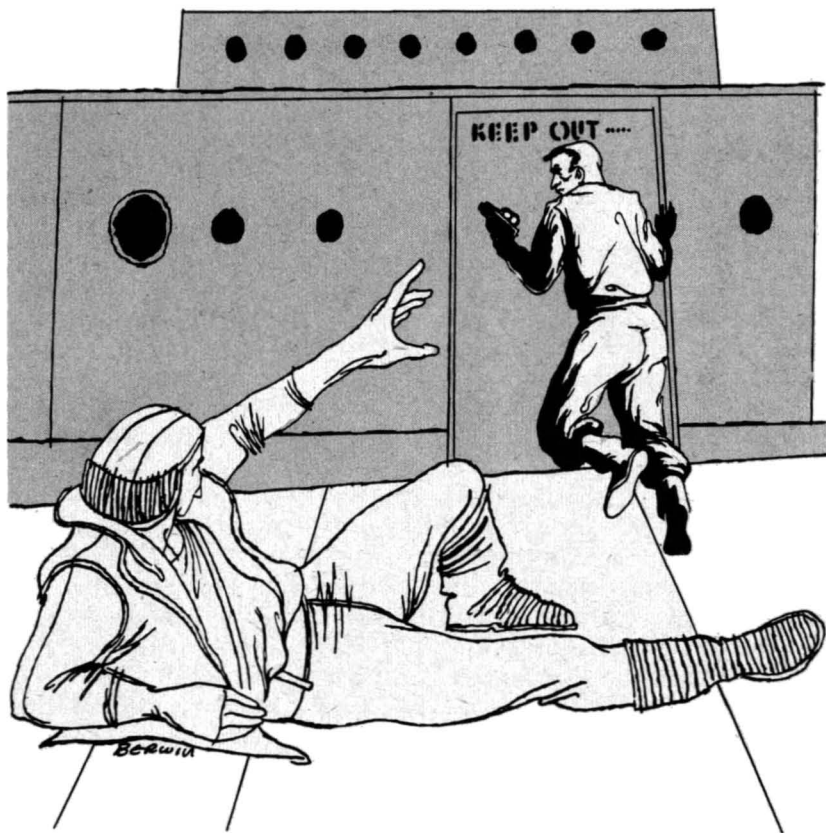
Liaison Section You are sure?
Very well, thank you."

"Well?" Trudy asked again, pleading more than demanding this time.

"See here," said Tansley, "we don't have a Major Whiting. I knew that but I checked with Personnel to make sure. As for Telliance, they never heard of Charles Avery. What kind of a hoax do you think you're

pulling with your clever forgeries, Mr. Adams?"

Craig bristled. He had to take the colonel's word on Major Whiting, but Charles Avery he had known for years. Moving up through the editorial-executive hierarchy of Telliance, Avery had been, for the past three years, chief of the important Liaison Section, a man everyone at Telliance



knew. A hoax was in the making all right, but Craig had no part in it.

Tact often vents itself in ridiculous cliché. "There must be some mistake," said Craig.

When the colonel laughed without vocalizing, the power of his voice was forgotten. If you closed your eyes when he spoke, you heard authority. If you looked at him when he was silent, you saw a mean, petty old man. All of this Craig thought in a split second, sufficient time for him to lose his temper under the circumstances.

"If you just stopped laughing and started trying to do something about it, this business might still make sense. Three billion miles is too far to come on a wild-goose chase."

"Attaboy!" Trudy cheered him.

"No one asked you to come," the colonel reminded him coldly.

"Charles Avery and Major Whiting asked us."

"As far as I can ascertain, they have no existence. But all this is quite pointless. Styx lies deep within security space. You have violated security by coming here and because you are civilians you do not fall under the jurisdiction of a military court. Under Solar System Law 174, however, you can be tried in a civilian court. There remains but one thing, first: we will have to erase all convolutions from your brains for the past thirty days."

"Never," Trudy said firmly, the

suggestion making her feel somehow unclear.

"You can't leave Styx until we do. That's the law."

With a device which stemmed from the twentieth century's electroencephalogram, specified synapses in the brain could be short-circuited, Craig knew, causing no injury beyond a complete lapse of memory for the specified period of time. But if that happened, they'd be trundled back toward Earth. Not only would they fail to cover Zero for Telliance, they'd wind up on trial as well. The consequences could be serious under the specifications of the law.

"What you say is true, Colonel," Craig agreed. "We can't leave Styx unless we undergo your brain treatment."

"I'm glad you're sensible, Mr. Adams."

"On the other hand," Craig went on, enjoying himself, "it is against the law for you to force us to undergo the treatment."

"And we refuse!" Trudy cried.

"That's right. We refuse. You can't out-space us without the treatment; you can't force the treatment on us; looks like we'll stay here on Styx forever—or until this mess is cleared up."

"To our satisfaction," Trudy added. "Have someone arrange quarters for us, please."

The colonel's spare-featured face contorted briefly. But the ugly scowl vanished in a fraction of a second,

sweeping his features so quickly that all but a careful observer would have missed it entirely. "I will call Billeting," he told them. "Whenever you change your mind, I'll make a car available to take you to the space-field."

"Watch our ship," Trudy told him. "The *Or Bust* has some mighty expensive equipment in it."

"I'll call Billeting," said Colonel Tansley, looking stony-faced at a spot on the wall midway between Craig and Trudy.

Assigned a large room in an unused wing of Bachelor Officers' Quarters, Craig and Trudy began their wait. Three days later, they were still waiting. They slept in officers' quarters, ate at officers' mess, passed the day's civilities with the junior and senior officers they encountered at mealtime. But they never pierced the barrier of social amenities. It was as if they were a species of animal distinct: to be catered to, tolerated, provided for, possibly humored.

"We could spend a hundred years here like this and learn nothing about Operation Zero," Trudy told her husband.

"Don't I know it. Best vacation we had in years, though."

"Ooo, Craig! How could you? Interplanetary Telliance isn't paying us to take any vacation—if sitting around on your rump and doing nothing is what you call a vacation."

"Far as I know," Craig told her dryly, "they're not paying us for anything. Avery doesn't exist, remember."

"Well, I've had exactly all of this I can take. Sit around if you want, I'm going outside to find out what's going on."

"Why don't you just wait, honey, and—"

"*You* wait. I'm going."

"Well, okay. I don't think you'll get very far, or I'd go with you. Be careful."

She looked at him scornfully, he thought, then left. Craig shrugged. If he had thought Trudy would get very far he either would have accompanied her or made her stay. But he'd seen the provost marshal men everywhere; he suspected strongly he and his wife were under some sort of house arrest. If Trudy had to take a look see—and knowing Trudy, he knew she had to—he could at least remain behind over a period of time convincing the p. m. men they didn't have to worry about him. That way, should the occasion arise, he'd disappear more readily.

Trudy returned in five minutes, under escort. It was the same burly sergeant who had conducted them to Colonel Tansley's office, and Craig wondered briefly if the man had wangled this new assignment to be where he could see Trudy in this woman-starved world.

"I'm sorry, sir," the sergeant said. "Please tell your wife she has the run

of this wing of the BOQ, the Mess Hall and the Exchange. You're both forbidden to go outside or into any of the other wings of the building."

"Forbidden?" Trudy snapped. "By whom? By what authority?"

"By Colonel Tansley, Ma'am. I wouldn't know about the authority; I take my orders from the colonel. But he said to tell you, you could space out any time you decided to take the treatment."

"Well, you can tell him—no, I'm a lady. Don't tell him anything."

"It won't happen again," Craig said blandly.

Trudy looked at him, colored. "You . . . mouse!" she squealed.

Someone's got to play the straight man, Craig thought, hoping he'd at least remain on speaking terms with his wife until whatever happened happened.

Granting them the polite suggestion of a salute, the burly sergeant about-faced and departed, his eyes on Trudy until the door slid shut.

"Well," said Trudy.

"Well, what?"

"Do you plan to retire out here or something? We've got to do something, but I can't carry the ball all by myself."

"You're missing the boat on giving it a pretty good whirl."

"You can talk! Well, how do you mean?"

Craig gestured toward the door. "Our friend the sergeant."

"I'm listening."

"The guy's got a crush on you big enough to squash a dinosaur."

"I know. Cute too, in a way."

"Huh?"

"I can't help it if he finds me . . . attractive," Trudy smiled demurely.

"Well, anyway—now, I don't know . . ."

"What were you going to say?"

"That you should cultivate it, that's all. Maybe the sergeant could do us some favors when the time comes."

"What?" Trudy gasped. "Sell myself? Sell myself—for a story?"

"Yeah. There are limits, honey, and I was thinking—"

"I'll put my own boundaries around this operation, thank you," said Trudy tartly. "It was your idea."

Craig regretted his idea almost at once. Having to put up with the antics of a sergeant, whose former civilian occupation could be listed as infant, wasn't exactly stimulating. But Trudy managed it somehow, for the sergeant visited every day both officially and unofficially. And it wasn't long before Trudy would disappear with him for hours on end, always at night, always bundled in cloak and hood he provided for the purpose. She remained secretive about where they went. She smiled coquettishly and when Craig could no longer keep the torrent of questions back, she told him to stop nagging.

"Okay," he said wearily one night

after she had returned. "At least tell me this: are you getting any place?"

"That's a good question. The answer is according to what you mean."

"You know what I mean. Are you learning anything about Zero?"

"It's like pulling teeth," Trudy admitted. "You see, the sergeant and I have different objectives. His amuses me."

"I don't find it so funny."

"Neither does Herman."

"Herman!"

"Herman is deadly serious about it. But I found out something, hon. Did you know why they call this Operation Zero?"

"Umm—no. I never thought about it."

"Because they're playing around with absolute zero, that's why. Herman took me on a guided tour of a big place with a device in it that looked like the biggest centrifuge I ever saw. But Herman said it was no centrifuge. It was a machine for slowing down molecular activity."

"That's funny," said Craig. "If the average layman thought about it, he'd say produce the cold first, then slow down your molecules—or let the cold do it for you. According to what you could glean from what's-his-name, here they worry about molecular activity first."

"Right. If they can slow it to a standstill, they'd have absolute zero. Herman heard some technicians talking, he said. The reason they could never get absolute zero before was

they were tackling the thing backwards. So, it looks like we're getting somewhere."

"Except that we don't know why they're so interested in absolute zero. I always thought it was a laboratory problem, nothing more. But twenty years of top secrecy on a hush-hush problem doesn't sound like a laboratory exercise to me. Does Herman know anything about it?"

"I wouldn't bet on it, Craig. Trouble is, Herman's reached the point where he wants to trade information for well—"

"Listen," Craig said. "Go with him again tomorrow. I'll follow you, so if you want to let Herman get frisky, go ahead. I'll be right there."

"My hero. Thank you. How do you know I want to let Herman get frisky?"

"Don't worry. I'll be there."

"Is that so? How do you know I *don't* want Herman to get frisky?"

Women, thought Craig. *Females*. "You go with him. Now, shut up. I'll be there. Good night."

And Craig stretched, turned over, fell asleep and had a nightmare about Herman. They were engaged in a death struggle on the mirror-smooth surface of Styx. Every time Craig got the upper hand he slipped on what was worse than a world of banana peels, stumbled to his knees and froze there while Trudy's voice floated to him from some offstage part of the dream, laughing and saying "absolute zero" over and over again.

The next night, Craig waited thirty seconds, squeezed his force field into place and followed Trudy and the sergeant outside. No sound carried across the airless surface of Styx, and with only the aid of purple nightlamps on their tall, wraith-thin poles, one could not see very far. Once or twice Craig melted back into the shadows of the long one-story BOQ when officers hurrying on one errand or another approached him. But doggedly he managed to keep Trudy and the sergeant in view.

After a time, they cut away from the BOQ's sheltering darkness and went out across a broad, night-purple tract of Styx's smoother-than-glass surface. Cursing softly to himself, Craig followed. Discovery might bring serious consequences. Still the sergeant's leisurely gait instilled confidence. Breathing more easily, Craig concluded the way lead along a little-used path.

Soon a low cluster of buildings loomed up out of the purple dusk. They were squat and as completely graceless, Craig observed, as most military structures. Trudy and the sergeant were lost in the gloom and Craig began running. He reached the first building in time to see its door sliding shut. Fuming, he tugged at the opening lever, in vain realizing that a snap lock held the door fast from inside. He braced his feet against one side of the casing and his back against the other. Craig was on the point of trying to force the

door along its runners despite the lock when a voice purred in his receiver.

"Hold it, please." There was no hair-pulling, no ranting, no jumping up and down. But calm authority in just three words can set a person's heart to pounding all the harder.

Craig released the handle, slumped. His feet slid from the door casing to Styx's tractionless surface. He lost his balance, skidded, fell flat on his stomach and slid along, losing virtually none of his inertia, until his groping hands encountered a pair of boots. Calm authority surrendered before a stream of invective; someone tumbled on top of Craig and they skidded together, finally coming to a stop fifteen yards from the doorway.

Boots served about the same function under a force field as long underwear in the Venusian swamplands, but the provost marshal lieutenant who untangled himself from Craig and tried to stand up wore boots.

"My foot," he groaned, more in confusion than pain. "I can't stand."

Craig squinted in the dim light. Despite the boot, he could see the man's misshapen lower leg. From the looks of it, the man had suffered a compound fracture. "Call for help," the man told Craig. "Incidentally, you are under arrest." He fingered clumsily the holster at his left side.

He was kneeling, Craig was sitting. Craig came up at him in a mo-

tion as quick as Stryx's surface would support. They rolled over again, the officer moaning, and when Craig tumbled clear he had the compact weapon in his hand.

"You can't do that," the lieutenant said a few times, his voice now a childish treble. "I know all about you, Mr. Adams. Thought you had us where it hurt; but now you attacked me, you're subject to military justice."

"Shut up," said Craig, "and listen to me. First, do you have the key to this place?"

The lieutenant screwed up his face and made a lewd gesture.

Unfortunately, Craig knew, the man knew what he was talking about. After this, Tansley would have him cold. Thanks to the Army's refusal to accept the tiny, plasti-surged radios in place of standard gear, he might have a few hours in which to act. After that—he didn't know.

Deftly, Craig jerked the lieutenant's radio transmitter away from the fallen man's head. He dropped it, then stepped on it, grinding his heel until a small mound of black and silver debris lay at his feet. "Now, listen to me. You can hear, but you can't talk back. Do you good for a change, I'll bet."

The lieutenant's response, necessarily mute, made up for what it lacked in sound by the wealth of hatred in facial expression.

"I want that key if you've got it.

If you make me search you, I'm going to play rough, starting with your broken leg." It was all a bluff. Craig had nothing against the lieutenant, was feeling sorrier for the man and his badly fractured leg every moment.

Doing everything but sticking out his tongue, the lieutenant reached into a pocket, withdrew a ring of keys, threw it on the ground.

Craig retrieved it and said, "It should take you a good long time to crawl away for help. If they want to get me they'll have to come in after me." Craig tried one key after another from the ring until he found the right one. As he entered the airlock he glanced back at the lieutenant, who was dragging himself away, foot by painful foot, trailing the injured leg behind him.

Fidgeting while he waited for normal pressure and atmosphere, Craig had time to wonder how Trudy was faring with her would-be swain. It suddenly occurred to him he might extricate himself from any serious trouble by claiming the whole thing as an affair of the heart. Which would probably leave the poor sergeant with more bad time to serve than he had years left in military service. Well

And then the "Earth Normal" sign blinked on, admitting Craig to the building proper.

The voice he heard when he shed his force field was decidedly feminine, but the words were as unlady-

like as any he'd ever heard. The voice was shouting and it belonged to Trudy.

Craig sprinted down a corridor, guided by his wife's voice. He found an unlocked door, slid it open, rushed through. Something met him head on, charging in the other direction. Craig tumbled over backwards, his head striking the floor with sufficient force to stun him.

He blinked his eyes, shook his head. In a daze, Trudy was just scrambling off him, nursing her own head. "Craig, for God's sake—"

"Stay where you are, both of you." It was the provost marshal sergeant,

standing in the doorway, the twin of Craig's weapon in his hand. Hair disheveled, scratches on his cheek, uniform in disarray, face flushed—he wasn't fooling.

Craig shrugged, sat where he was. "What happened?"

Trudy grinned, after fighting down a half-pucker. "You decided to come in just when I was going out. We were both in a hurry, that's all."

"I've been played for a sucker long enough," said the sergeant, whose name, Craig remembered, was Herman.

"I'm a married woman," Trudy protested.



"That didn't seem to bother you till tonight."

"You didn't try anything to make it bother me till tonight."

"Yeah, well now I know what you were after—what you really wanted."

"Amazing," said Trudy.

"You're married, all right. You and your husband both—to a mess of trouble."

"Is that so?" Craig demanded, getting to his feet.

"I warned you to sit still."

"Come off it, Herman. Put that sticker away. If you think we're in trouble, you're crazy. Anything you try to convict us with will implicate you so deeply they'd have to dig clear through to the other side of Styx to find you."

"You are trespassing," Herman said desperately.

Craig nodded. "Sure. And just what were you doing?"

Herman's already crimson face purpled.

Craig drove his point home. "First, you were seen in the company of a woman, confined to quarters, outside her quarters. You were escorting her."

"Yeah? Y-yeah . . . Well, who saw me?"

"I did, if you're going to press charges. Second, you but why don't we let Mrs. Adams tell it?"

"He assaulted me," said Trudy. "He tried to—"

"Yeah . . . sad Herman, doubtlessly viewing himself in a prison-

er's uniform, doing a tour of forced prospecting on one of the asteroid stockades.

"That's number two," Craig told him cheerfully. "Number three, if Trudy wanted to see the inside of this building, I suspect it's off limits—to you as well as us."

"Darling, how right you are," said Trudy.

"Yeah," said Herman in horror.

"And finally," Craig broke the sergeant's spirit with every word, "I had a little run-in with an officer outside. He's disabled, but not so much he can't fetch help. He'll be here soon, with every military cop on Styx. Is that clear?"

The sergeant gaped.

"Yeah," Trudy said for him.

"Sixteen years of service shot to hell," groaned Herman. "Sixteen years."

"Don't just stand there!" Trudy cried. "You're doomed, if you do. Get out; go on—beat it. You forget everything, we'll forget everything. Right, Craig?"

"Right," said Craig.

Herman looked at them, moved past them slowly, in a daze. By the time he was a dozen feet away, he'd broken into a run.

Trudy stared at Craig. Craig stared back. It was Trudy who smiled first. Presently, they started to laugh and kept right on laughing for a good three minutes, until tears ran down their cheeks, until they sat there, feeling weak.

Finally, Trudy managed to say, "You didn't mean what you said about that officer bringing help."

"Unfortunately, I did."

"Umm. How much time have we?"

"Very little, I'm afraid. Is there another way out of this place?"

"I wouldn't know, Craig. We came in this way, Herman and I. I—I saw what we're after, I think, and then Herman got scared. The first thing he did was, well—he demanded payment. Poor boy."

"Poor boy," said Craig. "What did you see?"

"Craig, it's fantastic. You probably think you know what Operation Zero is about."

"Sure, we discussed it before. They're trying to produce absolute zero, the temperature at which all molecular activity ceases."

"They've already produced it."

"What?"

"That's right. Years ago. They're after something much bigger than that—although absolute zero makes it possible."

"Weapon?" Craig demanded.

"Hold that for later. Transportation. How to go further than we've ever traveled before. Thousands of times further."

"Thousands . . . interstellar?"

"Interstellar."

The idea left you breathless. If you spoke to a man about interplanetary travel forty or fifty years after the first airplane shuddered a few

yards through the air, he might feel that way. A way to bridge the abyss—it might as well have been infinity—between the stars.

"Interstellar," said Trudy again. "You see—"

"No, I don't. I don't see a lot of things. I wish I did, but not now. Now isn't the time. This isn't the place. They'll be flocking here any minute. We've got to get away and—"

"And what, honey? This is Styx. We'd never reach the *Or Bust* or any other ship. What good would running away do? They'd find us inside of hours."

"They'll find us inside of minutes if we stay here. But what's on your mind?"

"I think we ought to stay—until we can get the proof we need."

"Proof?"

"The military's botching things something awful. This could be the greatest stride science has taken in decades. But it won't be—if the military has anything to do with it."

"But you said they were interested in interstellar travel."

"They? You mean the military? No, not really. There are some scientists here—"

"Civilians?"

"Yes."

"But I thought—"

"—That no civilians were permitted beyond Neptune's orbit. Me too, but that's wrong. Scientists working on the project are permitted, a couple

of hundred of them from what I could find out. You should see those scientists, Craig. I met three of them tonight. They want to travel between the stars so bad it almost makes them cry."

"You saw them tonight?"

"Yes, here in this building. They live down below."

"Why didn't you say so? Maybe they can hide us. Maybe—"

"Hold on," said Trudy. "We'll cross that bridge if we have to. So, these physicists, chemists, biologists—cream of the solar system crop, no doubt—are working on interstellar travel. That's what they think! Oh, Craig, it isn't hard to pull the wool over someone's eyes when he's concentrating so hard on one thing he hasn't got time for anything else. The military—"

"You sure have grown a healthy dislike for the military!"

"It isn't all of them, Craig. Just that group in charge here. You wouldn't believe me if I tell you what the scientists think—and also, incidentally, that's why they wouldn't do us much good hiding us. They're about in the same boat. Under house arrest, you might say."

"Okay, what do the scientists think?"

"That Colonel Tansley and his crowd are planning some kind of coup. They might do it, too, given enough time and provided what they have the scientists working on is a success."

Craig's head was swimming. He almost felt like an audience of one, viewing a play which unfolded something new and startling every time the scene shifted. And he wished passionately that he hadn't let Trudy go on her Herman-sponsored outings without him, for getting this information second hand was in some ways worse than not getting it at all.

"What kind of coup do you have in mind?" Craig wanted to know. "Surely they wouldn't dare try to take over the colonial government on Pluto. There aren't many dome-cities, I know, but the colonial government represents the Solar System Federation."

"I didn't have the Pluto government in mind, Craig. I was thinking as these boys are thinking—of the entire solar system."

"You're joking." *Ring down the curtain*, he thought. *Ten minute intermission while the audience sweats it out. A crummy little colonel with a big man's voice taking over the solar system.*

"I wish I were. You asked about a weapon. They'll have a weapon all right."

"I don't see where interstellar travel—"

"That's to mollify the scientists. At the same time, they're working on something else for Tansley and his boys. Incidentally, Tansley figures to be third in command if the coup works though. From what I've heard,

he wouldn't be beyond killing off the other two."

"How I wish I were young and pretty and Sergeant Herman Whosiz had a crush on me!"

"Craig, what happens at absolute zero?"

"Why, all molecular motion ceases."

"Correct. Let me ask you two more questions. What's the deadliest weapon we've ever produced?"

"The Hydrogen Bomb. But it's too damned costly, the materials too damned rare. Only a few of them exist."

"Good. What's number two on the hell parade of weapons?"

"The atom bomb, naturally. Relatively inexpensive, but comparatively limited in power because you can go right on building a hydrogen bomb to any size, but you can't keep on adding to an atom bomb. It contains two pieces of fission material. When they reach critical mass—ka-bloom! So they have to be pretty small."

"Well, what would happen if your atom bomb were built and stored at absolute zero?"

"So that's it!" Craig laughed easily. The growing tension within him relaxed. "Don't worry, Trudy. Their theory is all wet. Sure molecule action ceases at absolute zero, but subatomic action doesn't. When the atom bomb material reaches critical mass, as I said: ka-bloom."

"Wrong, at least in practice, if not

in theory. There should be an explosion, but there wouldn't be—because an explosion is concerned with molecular movement. Doesn't matter what the source of the explosion is, it's still molecular movement. Maybe an explosion would exist, in limbo. The blow up would come if your bomb got itself warmed.

"See what that means, Craig? No limit on the size or power of atomic weapons. Keep on building and building and building. Make the equivalent of cheap hydrogen bombs, in quantity. Craig, I'm scared."

"What's all this got to do with interstellar travel?" Craig asked weakly. He was no scientist—but if the boys with the gray matter here said it was so, it was so.

"Not a blessed thing. The Tansley group gets one for the other. And the scientists here are a pathetic lot. Every time they waiver, Tansley dangles the stars in front of their myopic eyes. You can't blame them."

"I suppose so." If Tansley held Trudy and told Craig to finish some work or else, Craig would finish it. It wouldn't be stretching a point to say the stars were the scientists' Trudy. "Then Tansley can demonstrate his weapon, prove it functions, convince the world it can be produced in quantity at a cost which isn't prohibitive, start demanding more and more—and wind up with the solar system in the palm of his hand."

"That's what I was thinking."

"Well," mumbled Craig.

"Don't just sit there saying 'well.' I've got you up to date. Do something. Think of something. Anything. Please."

"How far have they got?"

"Too far. Almost finished. Maybe another year until it's too late for everything."

"Hey!" Craig cried, rising from lethargic acceptance of what might be pending horror. "We're not completely alone."

"The scientists are stuck here, just like us."

"I'm not talking about them. There's Charlie Avery—and Major Whiting, whatever happened to him. Apparently, some people wanted to expose this thing, and maybe they thought if a couple of reporters with a nose for news smelled this thing out and could somehow get it across to the solar system . . ."

"You're whistling in the dark. Tansley called Telliance. They never heard of Avery. Major Whiting doesn't exist."

"We've been a couple of fools! How do we know Major Whiting doesn't exist? Tansley appeared to call Personnel. Tansley said so. How do we know Telliance disavowed Avery? Same reason. Tansley said so. Damn it, Trudy, he took us for a couple of yokels—and that's what we were. I'll bet Major Whiting's sitting around here someplace either wondering what happened to us or trying to contact us. And Charlie Avery

must be frantic. If only we could get through to Charlie—"

"If only we could don Icarus' wings and fly from here, careful not to approach the sun too closely because Icarus—"

"Cut it out; I'm serious. All the equipment we need is in the *Or Bust*. We could get in touch with Charlie, maybe even broadcast a warning, maybe let the system know what's going on."

"Sure, but the *Or Bust* might as well be sitting on Neptune. We'd never get out of this building, let alone reach it. Shh!"

"I didn't say anything."

"No, I thought I heard something. There, listen!"

From far away came the sound of footsteps: many feet, running briskly.

"That would be the broken-legged lieutenant's reinforcements."

"Craig, what can we do?"

"Start conjuring up your scientists."

"Huh?"

"Hurry up. Lead the way to them."

"All right, but—"

"We'll discuss the pros and cons later. Move."

They got up, Trudy leading the way across the threshold into a large bare room, the walls of which were one great, continuous filing cabinet. "I've seen some of those records," Trudy said. "You'd be amazed—"

"Later. Move."

She moved. The footsteps approached them rapidly. Voices shouted. She moved faster.

Trudy led the way in anxious silence through the great empty room, out through an archway beyond it, down a flight of stairs. For a while at least, the voices and pounding feet behind them receded. Craig realized it was a temporary reprieve, for Tansley's men probably had strict orders to take them.

Hardly pausing at the bottom of the stairs, which stood at the apex of a v-shaped forked corridor, Trudy set off down the left passage at a fast trot. In a matter of minutes they reached a heavy metal door. She knocked impatiently and abruptly the door swung in away from them.

Sleeves rolled up, a two-day stubble of beard on his face, myopic eyes squinting from behind thick spectacles ludicrously askew on the bridge of his nose, a plump middle-aged man stood in the doorway.

"Ah," he said, "the reporter woman. Perhaps we can continue our conversation now."

"Well—" began Trudy.

"You see, not too many people would think to connect absolute zero with interstellar travel, but it's merely a question of cooling a living organism to absolute zero in the right space of time—then preserving it indefinitely that way. A man can remain in suspended animation that way indefinitely, and since interstellar flight is completely automatic ex-

cept for the taking off and the actual planetfall, a live crew isn't a necessity. It might take us twenty years to reach Alpha Centauri, young woman, but we can reach it."

"You told me all that," said Trudy, "but we're here to see—"

"Strange that they don't forget this other thing, this bomb-freezing, at least long enough for us to continue our experiments. We've been promised some experimental animals to work with but we're always being put off. Every day it's something else, I don't know what. Who's your friend?"

"My husband, Dr. Lusker. Craig Adams, Dr. Lusker."

"How do you do, young man?" The scientist adjusted his spectacles to see more clearly. "Are you a reporter too?"

"Damned right," Craig told him. "We can blow the lid off this whole phony set-up, too, with your help."

"Blow the lid—?"

"What he means," Trudy explained, "is that the military establishment out here doesn't give two hoots and a holler for your work with interstellar travel, and—"

"That's just what Dr. Rankow has been saying, but Rankow is young and prone to irritability."

"Rankow's right," Craig declared. "All Colonel Tansley and his men want is a bigger atomic bomb. You're giving it to them, too."

"I know, I know. And then we'll have military cooperation and gov-

ernment expenditures to build the first interstellar spaceship."

"We went through all that before with Dr. Rankow," Trudy told him. "It's incredible you can't see the wool being pulled over your eyes, Doctor."

"Well, now, I don't know. I'm a bio-physicist, not a politician. But if you can prove what you say—"

"Right now," Craig almost shouted, "Tansley's men are out gunning for us. They'd like to take us alive because there'd be a pretty big stink otherwise, but I think they'll take us however they can, one way or the other."

"Why? What are you talking about?"

"Because we know too much. Because we came here to get a story and Tansley reneged. Did you ever hear of a Major Whiting?"

"Whiting? Whiting? Why, yes—nice chap. Very interested in our work, the most cooperative of them all. Surely if Major Whiting is representative of the military men behind Operation Zero, you're all mixed up, Mr. Adams."

"That's just it. Whiting's disappeared. Tansley claims he doesn't exist. You see, it was Whiting who gave us permission to come here."

"Peculiar, if true."

Exasperation mounted in Craig. They couldn't even broach the subject of protection, let alone help, until Dr. Lusker saw at least part of the situation for what it was. By the

time he climbed down from his ivory tower, it might be too late.

Suddenly, Craig heard the sound of many feet on the stairs. Tansley's men were on the way down.

"Get inside!" he cried, and Trudy tugged at Dr. Lusker's arm.

"My dear child, please. I'll stay and see what all this is about."

Their orders would be to take the prisoners alive, Craig thought. Yet if a demonstration of violence could make Dr. Lusker act, trickery might prove excusable, especially since a lot more than their own hides might depend on what happened here on Styx. Dr. Lusker was in earnest conversation with Trudy when Craig saw the vanguard of the military policemen turn up the corridor, weapons drawn. Craig fingered his own paramatic clumsily, then raised it, deliberately aiming over the heads of the onrushing soldiers and firing. Several return volleys hissed harmlessly off the wall on all sides of them, a little too close for comfort.

"See?" Craig roared. "They're firing at us in cold blood. Get inside before you get killed!"

"Hmm. Dr. Rankow's thesis certainly has been fortified."

"Get going."

Another volley hissed closer. Craig almost flung Dr. Lusker bodily within the room, banging the door shut behind them.

"I must find Dr. Rankow and tell him about this," said the unabashed Dr. Lusker.

Trudy still had hold of his arm. "How strong is that door?"

"Stronger than the wall it is embedded in. You see, in seeking an alloy for the rocket tubes of the interstellar ship we discovered an amazing thing. Steel, when smelted with mol—"

"Never mind," Craig cut him short while locking the door. "Is there any other way out of this place?"

Someone was banging on the door, but according to the scientist, nothing short of a major explosion could jar it loose, so Craig happily ignored the noise.

"Certainly. We have another exit opening out behind the Administration building, I believe. We don't use it much."

"Administration!" Trudy cried in delight. "That's adjacent to the space-field, as I remember. Craig, are you thinking what I'm—"

"I'm way ahead of you. Lead on, Dr. Lusker."

"Eh? On to where?"

"That other exit of yours."

"I do want to find Dr. Rankow and—"

From someplace high on the wall of what Craig now saw was a large ante-room, a loudspeaker blared. "Dr. Lusker! Calling Dr. Lusker."

"Lusker, please," said the scientist, shouting unnecessarily since the receiver was extremely sensitive.

"This is the Security Office calling," said the voice in strident, reso-

nant tones: Colonel Tansley. "A radio report indicates you are harboring two people here on Styx illegally, who have broken their confinement, ruthlessly attacked one of my officers and have made accessible to themselves top secret material concerning the Operation. Unless they're marched outside within five minutes, you are an accessory after the fact, Lusker. If you remain one, you have never been further from the realization of interstellar travel."

Colonel Tansley was most effective that way, when you couldn't see him. Automatically your mind would draw pictures of one of Michelangelo's paintings of Zeus or at the very least one of El Greco's tall, grave demigods.

"You'll have to go," said Dr. Lusker. "I'm sorry."

"We'll go, all right. through the other exit," said Craig. "They'll kill us if we set foot in the corridor." It was a lie, of course, since Tansley would take them alive if he possibly could. Craig spoke in a whisper, for the receiver might pick up anything louder.

"That makes it difficult for me. Uh, just a moment, Colonel. Dr. Rankow, calling Dr. Rankow," he shouted at a grid on the wall. "This is Lusker. Come here quickly."

"Five minutes," said Colonel Tansley's voice. "Why don't you give up, Adams? We'll erase your mind and send you back with a recommendation you don't stand trial."

"Thanks," Trudy said bitterly.

A tall young man, freckle-faced and long-nosed, entered the room from the other side. "Lusker? And the reporters. Thank God."

"You look as if you've seen a ghost," Dr. Lusker exclaimed.

The tall young man—Dr. Rankow—wore a coat of freckles on his face, and they stood out sharply against his pale skin. He was trembling slightly. "Not a ghost, a corpse. Major Whiting is dead."

"Oh, no," Trudy moaned.

"Fraid so, Miss. I found him quite by accident, out near the space-field. I had to visit Administration on a routine errand and a big crowd had gathered there, near the reporter's ship. A parabeam got Whiting—at full intensity."

"Now Tansley's a killer," Craig told the young scientist, "along with everything else. Whiting probably realized he couldn't get through to us, tried to send some kind of warning himself by using our equipment. Or maybe he just wanted to contact Avery and tell him what was going on. Dr. Rankow ."

"Yes?"

"Keep it down to a whisper, please. Tansley's probably listening."

"You have two minutes to make up your mind," said Tansley's clear voice.

"Dr. Rankow, you're on to all of this, aren't you?"

"I'm not sure, but as far as I can see Tansley and his men want to

build bigger and better bombs and ride with them into power. As of today, I stopped working for him, but there isn't much I can do except of a passive nature."

"The devil there isn't!" Trudy hissed in an almost shrieking whisper.

"Just lead us to the *Or Bust*," Craig told him. "Give us ten minutes. In a pinch, make it five. Every Congressional Committee in Tycho Crater will be breathing down Tansley's neck."

"Well, I could take you to your ship, I think. But if there isn't anyone alive to prove what you claim, Tansley will have sufficient time to hide things. All the scientists here could meet with an accident, since we play with some terribly lethal stuff, I'm afraid."

"I see your point. But not if Tansley thinks you're all on his side, Doc."

"Eh?" said the now bewildered Dr. Lusker.

Rankow shrugged, "What do you mean?"

"Just follow my lead and start shouting," Craig whispered, then said, "Is that so, Dr. Rankow? Well, let me tell you something, wise guy. This paramatic in my hand says you're going to do exactly what I say. Yeah, that's right, barricade that door—"

"You'll never get away with it!" Dr. Rankow said, just a shade too theatrically. Realizing this, he grinned and toned down his ap-

proach. "How long do you think you can keep us here as prisoners?"

"I'll hold you as hostages, you mean. Let Tansley try to get us then."

Tansley's voice boomed: "Good man, Dr. Rankow. But don't let him intimidate you."

"Shut that guy's voice off!" Craig shouted, then slapped his palms together twice.

"Ow!" Dr. Rankow moaned. "Please, it won't shut off. It can't shut off. You're hurting me."

"Now really," Dr. Lusker began, but Trudy clapped her hand to his mouth and whispered, "You keep out of this before you wind up never getting that Nobel Prize."

"We're sending reinforcements," Tansley's voice came almost cheerily. "We'll have the laboratories hemmed in from both sides, so you need not worry."

"Now!" Craig hissed. "Lead us out of here."

Dr. Rankow nodded, wheeled about, motioned them to follow him. Lusker threw his arms up almost convulsively and followed them.

With reinforcements coming by way of the Administration building, they had but moments to act. Perhaps even now it was too late. Craig and Trudy, who had literally chased down a hundred stories on a hundred worlds, could run tirelessly, but the two scientists began to wheeze and pant as they hurtled through the laboratories.

"Wasn't cut out for

this!" Dr. Rankow grinned ruefully.

"No comment!" gasped Dr. Lusker. "Let's . . . just . . . get this . . . marathon over with, shall we?"

Craig's heart pounded, not from exertion, when they reached a flight of stair. If Tansley's men had made good time, they might already be trapped. If that were the case—with both exits covered—Craig knew he and Trudy could do nothing but throw in the towel. They'd find themselves in a mess of hot water, but somehow it did not seem important, with the whole solar system possibly at stake. *Maybe we'll be heroes, unless we're killed in the process*, Craig thought with grim amusement which surprised him. He could almost feel the pages of history beckoning on the one hand and a burial in deep space on the other.

Up the stairs they darted, Dr. Rankow shoving the door open. They stood briefly in an airlock, squeezing on their force fields while the lock adjusted. They plunged outside.

Someone shouted. A parabeam zipped through air, almost fanning Craig's cheek. *When they're close and they sting*, he remembered reading somewhere, *they're at low intensity. If they feel numb and cold, brother, start praying.*

Notching his own gun down to its low beam, Craig turned half around and fired. A dozen military police, charging toward them from the spacefield, were shouting and wav-

ing their arms. One of them fell like a stone, was trampled and left behind.

Trudy yelped.

Craig saw her falling, applied a quick brake to his own fast-pumping legs and almost tumbled head-first himself. He caught her up and she was like a sack of grain, not rigid as some of the adventure writers mistakenly claim. Shouldering his burden, Craig ran on, turning to fire upon their pursuers only occasionally.

Dr. Lusker giggled in childish satisfaction. "It's like . . . the telios!" he cried. "Whatever have . . . I . . . been missing?"

The gap had closed considerably, but they'd also halved the distance between themselves and the *Or Bust*, which Craig could see far out across the field, caught in the glare of a battery of floodlights. Two more of the police went down; Dr. Rankow struggled under the burden of the now inert Dr. Lusker.

"Don't go on!" Craig cried. "We were taking you with us as hostages, see? Fall, damn it!" The scientists left behind wouldn't fare too well if Rankow and Lusker went with them, Craig suspected. "Go ahead, and thanks . . ."

It wasn't necessary. A parabeam caught Dr. Rankow, pole-axing him

to the ground. He fell heavily, Lusker atop him, and Craig hardly had time to wonder if any bones had been broken. He plunged ahead with Trudy across his shoulder, not looking back at all now. Instead, he ran in a zig-zag path toward the *Or Bust*, darting, when someone thought to flash a floodlight on him, like a drunken firefly.

The *Or Bust* loomed up suddenly large. A uniformed figure bellowed and came at Craig, arms swinging. He fell before the paramatic and then Craig had flung the airlock of the ship open and leaped inside. He deposited Trudy unceremoniously, had to fire outside and drop some of the police—it was that close—before he could lock it. *I didn't slip once*, Craig congratulated himself. *All that slippery stuff out there, and...* He tripped over Trudy's still form, reached out wildly, and began to fall. His head struck the instrument panel and he sprawled atop Trudy, trying to get up once and then fainting.

"Hey, now! Do I have to do all the work? Get up."

It was Trudy's voice and Trudy's face, caressed by all that fog which was barely beginning to disperse. "Quick!" Craig cried. "Out space the ship or—"

"We are now one hundred thousand miles off Styx, rocketing for Neptune's orbit as fast as the *Or Bust* can carry us. Any questions?"

"Yeah. Are they chasing us?"

"Sure, but so what? Charlie Avery fitted this ship out to get us to Styx in the shortest possible time. They'll never catch us."

Craig got up dizzily, stumbled to the radar screen and watched briefly the angry little pips which hovered way off in one corner of it. While he watched they worked themselves clear off the close-range screen and he had to focus for fifty thousand plus.

"Satisfied?"

"I'll say. Now I'll have to call Avery and—"

"I already have him for you. He's holding the line and busting a gut at the same time."

Swearing, Craig made his way to the radio. "Charlie, Charlie, that you?"

"You're double-damned right it's me. Where did you disappear to, you lame-brained excuse for a reporter? We've had the hook-up waiting. We called and called till we were blue in the face, but a Colonel Tanslitt or Tannhauser or—"

"Tansley."

"Yes, a Colonel Tansley said he never heard of you and were we sure we had a clearance for you, so I told him that—"

"Charlie, never mind. Charlie, listen."

"You listen to me. That's what I get for giving my friend an assignment. Keep it strictly business, the wife always tells me. By George, Craig, you've ruined me. Oh, yes, the

new contract is cancelled. Good-by."

"Wait! Listen, darn it. You got a taper handy?"

"Well . . . yeah, okay. Shoot."

"People sleep on all the worlds of the solar system tonight," said Craig, "unaware that they very nearly lost the freedom they cherish so much. This is Craig Adams of Interplanetary Telliance reporting to you from Pluto's only moon, the satellite Styx. Well, almost, because I'm leaving Styx now—with half the Solar Army in pursuit.

"They found something on Styx which can make bigger and better atomic bombs, if that's what you happen to want out of life. Oh, they

could make really big ones and blow up whole minor planets at one time. Before you get any wrong ideas, don't blame the Army. What we've seen of Styx indicates the Army was the unsuspecting tool of a few power-mad men. But maybe there's a warning in it after all: don't give too much power to any organization which holds a monopoly on arms and armament—it could be tragic.

"If all this is confusing to you, let's put it this way: the military's top secret Operation Zero turned out to be the gravest threat to man's freedom and security since World War III. Armed with a secret weapon you'll be hearing a lot about once

Congress starts investigating Styx, a few power-crazy officers decided they could take over the Solar System or at least make the try. One man was murdered in the attempt and others might be before Congress has a chance to act.

"That might be the price we pay for too much secrecy. There is nothing the military does—short of actual tactical maneuvers in an actual tactical war—that is so secret civilian agencies can't be informed of it. That's something to remember, all of you, because if something has a chance to go in the wrong direction too long, we might not find ourselves so lucky the next time."

Trudy smiled at him, lit a cigarette, placed it in his mouth.

"I have a hunch you who are hearing my voice aren't as interested in atomic bombs, hydrogen bombs, the whole gummy alphabet soup of destruction, as certain people believe. And I'll tell you this: there was something else developed on Styx, despite the worst efforts of a paranoid little would-be dictator to stop it, which could revolutionize our entire outlook on the Universe. It's the sort of thing mankind is really after, if he ever stops to think about it. It's the sort of thing which typifies the spirit which took humanity from the first damp, cold cave to the outside world, to tree houses and dugouts, to huts and towns, and ox-carts and automobiles and copters and jets and rockets and, well, you name it.

"But I'll let you hear it from Trudy Adams, who knows a lot more about *Operation Interstellar* than I do."

Craig leaned back, satisfied, puffing contentedly at his cigarette. There would be a lot more to do later, hard work, incredulous brass hats to convince, lobbies and ornery congressmen and lawsuits and the works. And maybe more talking than he'd ever done in his life. But Congress would investigate. Telliance was big enough to force that, and an investigation, launched soon enough—Avery could swing it—would catch Tansley, if not with Major Whiting's corpse on his hands, then with a bunch of scared, angry, fed-up scientists who could be mighty convincing in their professional wrath.

"What's all this about?" Avery barked. "If half of what you say is true—"

"Did I ever let you down?"

"Umm. No."

"You have the biggest story that ever broke since Telliance got into business. Wait till I reach Earth."

"Craig, boy! Knew I could count on—"

"Shut up, son, and switch that tap-er on. Trudy'll break the *good* news."

"You mean there's something good in all that?"

"You listen to Trudy, but I tell you what, if you need a couple of crack reporters to cover the landing on one of the Centaurian planets, Trudy and I could use a long sleep after this thing anyway." * * *