

PLANET STORIES



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Jonah of the Jove-Run

By RAY BRADBURY

They hated this little beat-up old guy. Even if his crazy cosmic brain could track a meteor clear across the Galaxy, why did he have to smash the super-sensitive detectors?

NIBLEY STOOD IN THE changing shadows and sounds of Marsport, watching the great supply ship TERRA being entered and left by a number of officials and mechanics. Something had happened. Something was wrong. There were a lot of hard faces and not much talk. There was a bit of swearing and everybody looked up at the night sky of Mars, waiting.

But nobody came to Nibley for his opinion or his help. He stood there, a very old man, with a slack-gummed face and eyes like the little bubbly stalks of crayfish looking up at you from a clear creek. He stood there fully neglected. He stood there and talked to himself.

"They don't want me, or need me," he said. "Machines are better, nowadays. Why should they want an old man like me with a taste for Martian liquor? They shouldn't! A machine isn't old and foolish, and doesn't get drunk!"

Way out over the dead sea bottoms, Nibley sensed something moving. Part of himself was suddenly awake and sensitive. His small sharp eye moved in his withered face. Something inside of his small skull reacted and he shivered. He *knew*. He knew that what these men were watching and waiting for would never come.

Nibley edged up to one of the astrogators from the TERRA. He touched him on the shoulder. "Say," he said. "I'm busy," said the astrogator. "I know," said Nibley, "but if you're waiting for that small repair rocket to come through with the extra auxiliary asteroid computer on it, you're wasting your time."

"Like hell," said the astrogator, glaring at the old man. "That repair rocket's got to come through, and quick; we need it. It'll get here."

"No, it won't," said Nibley, sadly, and shook his head and closed his eyes. "It just crashed, a second ago, out on the dead sea bottom. I—*felt*—it crash. I

sensed it going down. It'll never come through."

"Go away, old man," said the astrogator. "I don't want to hear that kind of talk. It'll come through. Sure, sure, it has to come through." The astrogator turned away and looked at the sky, smoking a cigarette.

"I know it as a fact," said Nibley, but the young astrogator wouldn't listen. He didn't want to hear the truth. The truth was not a pleasant thing. Nibley went on, to himself. "I know it for a fact, just like I was always able to know the course of meteors with my mind, or the orbits or parabolas of asteroids. I tell you—"

The men stood around waiting and smoking. They didn't know yet about the crash out there. Nibley felt a great sorrow rise in himself for them. That ship meant a great deal to them and now it had crashed. Perhaps their lives had crashed with it.

A loud speaker on the outer area of the landing tarmac opened out with a voice: "Attention, crew of the Terra. The repair ship just radioed in a report that it has been fired upon from somewhere over the dead seas. It crashed a minute ago."

The report was so sudden and quiet and matter-of-fact that the standing smoking men did not for a moment understand it.

Then, each in his own way, they reacted to it. Some of them ran for the radio building to verify the report. Others sat down and put their hands over their faces. Still more of them stood staring at the sky as if staring might put the repair ship back together again and get it here safe and intact. Instinctively, at last, all of them looked up at the sky.

Jupiter was there, with its coterie of moons, bright and far away. Part of their lives lived on Jupiter. Most of them had children and wives there and certain duties to perform to insure the longevity of said



Nibley raised a trembling hand and waved it at nothing.

children and wives. Now, with the speaking of a few words over a loudspeaker, the distance to Jupiter was suddenly an immense impossibility.

The captain of the Rocket Terra walked across the field slowly. He stopped several times to try and light a cigarette, but the night wind blew it out. He stood in the rocket shadow and looked up at Jupiter and swore quietly, again and again and finally threw down his cigarette and heeled it with his shoe.

Nibley walked up and stood beside the captain.

"Captain Kroll..."

Kroll turned. "Oh, hello, Grandpa—"

"Tough luck."

"Yeah. Yeah. I guess that's what you'd call it. Tough luck."

"You're going to take off anyway, Captain?"

"Sure," said Kroll quietly, looking at the sky. "Sure."

"How's the protective computator on board your ship?"

"Not so hot. Bad, in fact. It might conk out before we get half way through the asteroids."

"That's not good," said Nibley.

"It's lousy. I feel sick. I need a drink. I wish I was dead. I wish we'd never started this damned business of being damned pioneers. My family's up there!" He jerked his hand half way to Jupiter, violently. He settled down and tried to light another cigarette. No go. He threw it down after the other.

"Can't get through the asteroids without an asteroid computator to protect you, without that old radar set-up, captain," said Nibley, blinking wetly. He shuffled his small feet around in the red dust.

"We had an auxiliary computator on that repair ship coming from Earth," said Kroll, standing there. "And it had to crash."

"The Martians shoot it down, you think?"

"Sure. They don't like us going up to Jupiter. They got claims there, too. They'd like to see our colony die out. Best way to kill a colony is starve the colony. Starve the people. That means my family and lots of families. Then when you starve out the families the Martians can step in and take over, damn their filthy souls!"

KROLL fell silent. Nibley shifted around. He walked around in front of Kroll so Kroll would see him. "Captain?"

Kroll didn't even look at him.

Nibley said, "Maybe I can help."

"You?"

"You heard about me, captain! You heard about me."

"What about you?"

"You can't wait a month for another auxiliary computator to come through from Earth. You got to push off tonight, to Jupiter, to get to your family and the colony and all that, captain, sure!" Nibley was hasty, he sort of fidgeted around, his voice high, and excited. "An' if your only computator conks out in the middle of the asteroids, well, you know what that means. Bang! No more ship! No more you. No more colony on Jupiter! Now, you know about me, my ability, you know, you heard."

Kroll was cool and quiet and far away. "I heard about you, old man. I heard lots. They say you got a funny brain and do things machines can't do. I don't know. I don't like the idea."

"But you got to like the idea, captain. I'm the only one can help you now!"

"I don't trust you. I heard about your drinking that time and wrecking that ship. I remember that."

"But I'm not drinking now. See. Smell my breath, go ahead! You see?"

Kroll stood there. He looked at the ship and he looked at the sky and then at Nibley. Finally he sighed. "Old man, I'm leaving right now. I might just as well take you along as leave you. You might do some good. What can I lose?"

"Not a damned thing, Captain, and you won't be sorry," cried Nibley.

"Step lively, then!"

They went to the Rocket, Kroll running, Nibley hobbling along after.

Trembling excitedly, Nibley stumbled into the Rocket. Everything had a hot mist over it. First time on a rocket in—ten years, by god. Good. Good to be aboard again. He smelled it. It smelled fine. It felt fine. Oh, it was very fine indeed. First time since that trouble he got into off the planet Venus... he brushed that thought away. That was over and past.

He followed Kroll up through the ship to a small room in the prow.

Men ran up and down the rungs. Men who had families out there on Jupiter and were willing to go through the asteroids with a faulty radar set-up to reach those families and bring them the necessary cargo of machinery and food they needed to go on.

Out of a warm mist, old Nibley heard himself being introduced to a third man in the small room.

"Douglas, this is Nibley, our auxiliary computing machine."

"A poor time for joking, Captain."

"It's no joke," cried Nibley. "Here I am."

Douglas eyed Nibley with a very cold and exact eye. "No," he said. "No. I can't use him. I'm computant-mechanic."

"And I'm captain," said Kroll.

Douglas looked at Kroll. "We'll shove through to Jupiter with just our leaky set or radar computators; that's the way it'll have to be. If we're wrecked halfway, well, we're wrecked. But I'll be damned if I go along with a decrepit son-of-a-witch-doctor!"

Nibley's eyes watered. He sucked in on himself. There was a pain round his heart and he was suddenly chilled.

Kroll started to speak, but a gong rattled and banged and a voice shouted, "Stations! Gunners up! Hammocks! Take-off!"

"Takeoff!"

"Stay here!" Kroll snapped it at the old man. He leaped away and down the rungs of the ladder, leaving Nibley alone in the broad shadow of the bitter-eyed Douglas. Douglas looked him up and down in surly contempt. "So you know arcs, parabolas and orbits as good as my machines, do you?"

Nibley nodded, angry now that Kroll was gone:

"Machines," shrilled Nibley. "Can't do everything! They ain't got no intuition. Can't understand sabotage and hatreds and arguments. Or people. Machines're too damn slow!"

Douglas lidded his eyes. "You—you're faster?"

"I'm faster," said Nibley.

Douglas flicked his cigarette toward a wall-disposal slot.

"Predict that orbit!"

Nibley's eyes jerked. "Gonna miss it!"

The cigarette lay smouldering on the deck.

Douglas scowled at the cigarette.

Nibley made wheezy laughter. He minced to his shock-hammock, zipped into it. "Not bad, not bad, eh?"

The ship rumbled.

Angrily, Douglas snatched up the cigarette, carried it to his own hammock, rolled in, zipped the zipper, then, deliberately, he flicked the cigarette once more. It flew.

"Another miss," predicted Nibley.

Douglas was still glaring at the floored cigarette when the Rocket burst gravity and shot up into space toward the asteroids.

MARS dwindled into the sun. Asteroids swept silently down the star-tracks, all metal, all invisible, shifting and shifting to harry the Rocket—

Nibley sprawled by the great thick visiport feeling the computators giving him competition under the floor in the level below, predicting meteors and correcting the Terra's course accordingly.

Douglas stood behind Nibley, stiff and quiet. Since he was computant-mechanic, Nibley was his charge. He was to protect Nibley from harm. Kroll had said so. Douglas didn't like it at all.

Nibley was feeling fine. It was like the old days. It was good. He laughed. He waved at nothing outside the port. "Hi, there!" he called. "Meteor," he explained in an aside to Douglas. "You see it?"

"Lives at stake and you sit there playing."

"Nope. Not playin'. Just warmin' up. I can see 'em beatin' like hell all up and down the line, son. God's truth."

"Kroll's a damned fool," said Douglas. "Sure, you had a few lucky breaks in the old days before they built a good computator. A few lucky breaks and you lived off them. Your day's done."

"I'm still good."

"How about the time you swilled a quart of rot-gut and almost killed a cargo of civilian tourists? I heard about that. All I have to say is one word and your ears'd twitch. Whiskey."

At the word, saliva ran alarmingly in Nibley's mouth. He swallowed guiltily.

Douglas, snorting, turned and started from the room. Nibley grabbed a monkey-wrench on impulse, heaved it. The wrench hit the wall and fell down. Nibley wheezed, "Wrench got an orbit like everything. Fair bit of computation I did. One point over and I'd have flanked that crumb!"

There was silence now, as he hobbled back and sat wearily to stare into the stars. He felt all of the ship's men around him. Vague warm electrical stirrings of fear, hope, dismay, exhaustion. All their orbits coming into a parallel trajectory now. All living in the same path with him. And the asteroids smashed down with an increasing swiftness. In a very few hours the main body of missiles would be encountered.

Now, as he stared into space he felt a dark orbit coming into conjunction with his own. It was an unpleasant orbit. One that touched him with fear. It drew closer. It was dark. It was very close now.

A moment later a tall man in a black uniform climbed the rungs from below and stood looking at Nibley.

"I'm Bruno," he said. He was a nervous fellow, and kept looking around, looking around, at the walls, the deck, at Nibley. "I'm food specialist on board. How come you're up here? Come down to mess later. Join me in a game of Martian chess."

Nibley said, "I'd beat the hell out of you. Wouldn't pay. It's against orders for me to be down below, anyways."

"How come?"

"Never you never mind. Got things to do up here. I *notice* things. I'm chartin' a special course in a special way. Even Captain Kroll don't know *every* reason why I'm makin' this trip. Got my own personal reasons. I see 'em comin' and goin', and I got their orbits picked neat and dandy. Meteors, planets *and* men. Why, let me tell you—"

Bruno tensed somewhat forward. His face was a little too interested. Nibley didn't like the feel of the man. He was off-trajectory. He—smelled—funny. He *felt* funny.

Nibley shut up. "Nice day," he said.

"Go ahead," said Bruno. "You were saying?"

Douglas stepped up the rungs. Bruno cut it short, saluted Douglas, and left.

Douglas watched him go, coldly.

"What'd Bruno want?" he asked of the old man. "Captain's orders, you're to see *nobody*."

Nibley's wrinkles made a smile. "Watch that guy Bruno. I got his orbit fixed all round and arced. I see him goin' now, and I see him reachin' aphelion and I see him comin' back."

Douglas pulled his lip. "You think Bruno might be working for the Martian industrial *clique*? If I thought he had anything to do with stopping us from getting to the Jovian colony—"

"He'll be back," said Nibley. "Just before we reach the *heavy* Asteroid Belt. Wait and see."

The ship swerved. The computators had just dodged a meteor. Douglas smiled. That griped Nibley. The machines were stealing his feathers. Nibley paused and closed his eyes.

"Here come two more meteors! I beat the machine this time!"

They waited. The ship swerved, twice. "Damn it," said Douglas.

TWO HOURS PASSED. "It got lonely upstairs," said Nibley apologetically.

Captain Kroll glanced nervously up from the mess-table where he and twelve other men sat. Williams, Simpson, Haines, Bruno, McClure, Leiber, and the rest. All were eating, but not hungry. They all looked a little sick. The ship was swerving again and again, steadily, steadily, back and forth. In a short interval the Heavy Belt would be touched. Then there would be real sickness.

"Okay," said Kroll to Nibley. "You can eat with us, this once. And only this once, remember that."

Nibley ate like a starved weasel. Bruno looked over at him again and again and finally asked, "How about that chess game?"

"Nope. I always win. Don't want to brag but I was the best outfielder playing baseball when I was at school. Never struck out at bat, neither. Damn good."

Bruno cut a piece of meat. "What's your business now, Gramps?"

"Findin' out where things is goin'," evaded Nibley.

Kroll snapped his gaze at Nibley. The old man hurried on, "Why, I know where

the whole blamed universe is headin'." Everybody looked up from their eating. "But you wouldn't believe me if I told you," laughed the old man.

Somebody whistled. Others chuckled. Kroll relaxed. Bruno scowled. Nibley continued, "It's a feelin'. You can't describe stars to a blind man, or God to anybody. Why, hell's bells, lads, if I wanted I could write a formula on paper and if you worked it out in your mind you'd drop dead of symbol poison."

Again laughter. A bit of wine was poured all around as a bracer for the hours ahead. Nibley eyed the forbidden stuff and got up. "Well, I got to go." "Have some wine," said Bruno. "No, thanks," said Nibley. "Go ahead, have some," said Bruno. "I don't like it," said Nibley, wetting his lips. "That's a laugh," said Bruno, eyeing him. "I got to go upstairs. Nice to have ate with you boys. See you later, after we get through the Swarms—"

Faces became wooden at the mention of the approaching Belt. Fingers tightened against the table edge. Nibley spidered back up the rungs to his little room alone.

An hour later, Nibley was drunk as a chromium-plated pirate.

He kept it a secret. He hid the wine-bottle in his shock hammock, groggily. Stroke of luck. Oh yes, oh yes, a stroke, a stroke of luck, yes, yes, yes, finding that lovely fine wonderful wine in the storage cabinet near the visiport. Why, yes! And since he'd been thirsty for so long, so long, so long. Well? Gurgle, gurgle!

Nibley was drunk.

He swayed before the visiport, drunkenly deciding the trajectories of a thousand invisible nothings. Then he began to argue with himself, drowsily, as he always argued when wine-webs were being spun through his skull by red, drowsy spiders. His heart beat dully. His little sharp eyes flickered with sudden flights of anger.

"You're some liar, Mr. Nibley," he told himself. "You point at meteors, but who's to prove you right or wrong, right or wrong, eh? You sit up here and wait and wait and wait. Those machines down below spoil it. You never have a chance to prove your ability! No! The captain won't use you! He won't need you! None of

those men believe in you. Think you're a liar. Laugh at you. Yes, laugh. Yes, they call you an old, old liar!"

Nibley's thin nostrils quivered. His thin wrinkled face was crimsoned and wild. He staggered to his feet, got hold of his favorite monkey-wrench and waved it slowly back and forth.

FOR a moment his heart almost stopped in him. In panic he clutched at his chest, pushing, pulling, pumping at his heart to keep it running. The wine. The excitement. He dropped the wrench. "No, not yet!" he looked down at his chest, wildly tearing at it. "Not just yet, oh please!" he cried. "Not until I *show* them!"

His heart went on beating, drunkenly, slowly.

He bent, retrieved the wrench and laughed numbly. "I'll show 'em," he cried, weaving across the deck. "Show them how good I am. Eliminate competition! I'll run the ship myself!"

He climbed slowly down the rungs to destroy the machines.

It made a lot of noise.

Nibley heard a shout. "Get him!" His hand went down again, again. There was a scream of whistles, a jarring of flung metal, a minor explosion. His hand went down again, the wrench in it. He felt himself cursing and pounding away. Something shattered. Men ran toward him. *This* was the computator! He hit upon it once more. Yes! Then he was caught up like an empty sack, smashed in the face by someone's fist, thrown to the deck. "Cut acceleration!" a voice cried far away. The ship slowed. Somebody kicked Nibley in the face. Blackness. Dark. Around and around down into darkness...

When he opened his eyes again people were talking:

"We're turning back."

"The hell we are. Kroll says we'll go on, anyway."

"That's suicide! We can't hit that Asteroid Belt without radar."

Nibley looked up from the floor. Kroll was there, over him, looking down at the old man. "I might have known," he said, over and over again. He wavered in Nibley's sobering vision.

The ship hung motionless, silent.

Through the ports, Nibley saw they were based on the sunward side of a large planetoid, waiting, shielded from most of the asteroid particles.

"I'm sorry," said Nibley.

"He's sorry." Kroll swore. "The very man we bring along as relief computator sabotages our machine! Hell!"

Bruno was in the room. Nibley saw Bruno's eyes dilate at Kroll's exclamation, Bruno knew now.

Nibley tried to get up. "We'll get through the Swarm, anyway. I'll take you through. That's why I broke that blasted contraption. I don't like competition. I can clear a path through them asteroids big enough to lug Luna through on Track Five!"

"Who gave you the wine?"

"I found it, I just found it, that's all."

The crew hated him with their eyes. He felt their hatred like so many meteors coming in and striking at him. They hated his shriveled, wrinkled old man guts. They stood around and waited for Kroll to let them kick him apart with their boots.

Kroll walked around the old man in a circle. "You think I'd chance you getting us through the Belt!" He snorted. "What if we got half through and you got potted again!" He stopped, with his back to Nibley. He was thinking. He kept looking over his shoulder at the old man. "I can't trust you." He looked out the port at the stars, at where Jupiter shone in space. "And yet—" He looked at the men. "Do you want to turn back?"

Nobody moved. They didn't have to answer. They didn't want to go back. They wanted to go ahead.

"We'll keep on going, then," said Kroll.

Bruno spoke. "We crew-members should have some say. I say go back. We can't make it. We're just wasting our lives."

Kroll glanced at him, coolly. "You seem to be alone." He went back to the port. He rocked on his heels. "It was no accident Nibley got that wine. Somebody planted it, knowing Nibley's weakness. Somebody who was paid off by the Martian Industrials to keep this ship from going through. This was a clever set-up. The machines were smashed in such a way as to throw suspicion directly on an innocent, well, almost innocent, party. Nib-

ley was just a tool. I'd like to know who handled that tool—"

Nibley got up, the wrench in his gnarled hand. "I'll tell you who planted that wine. I been thinking and now—"

Darkness. A short-circuit. Feet running on the metal deck. A shout. A thread of fire across the darkness. Then a whistling as something flew, hit. Someone grunted.

The lights came on again. Nibley was at the light control.

On the floor, gun in hand, eyes beginning to numb, lay Bruno. He lifted the gun, fired it. The bullet hit Nibley in the stomach.

Nibley grabbed at the pain. Kroll kicked at Bruno's head. Bruno's head snapped back. He lay quietly.

The blood pulsed out between Nibley's fingers. He watched it with interest, grinning with pain. "I knew his orbit," he whispered, sitting down cross-legged on the deck. "When the lights went out I chose my own orbit back to the light switch. I knew where Bruno'd be in the dark. Havin' a wrench handy I let fly, choosin' my arc, naturally. Guess he's got a hard skull, though . . ."

THEY carried Nibley to a bunk. Douglas stood over him, dimly, growing older every second. Nibley squinted up. All the men tightened in upon it. Nibley felt their dismay, their dread, their worry, their nervous anger.

Finally, Kroll exhaled. Turn the ship around," he said. "Go back to Mars."

The crew stood with their limp hands at their sides. They were tired. They didn't want to live any more. They just stood with their feet on the deck. Then, one by one, they began to walk away like so many cold, dead men.

"Hold on," cried Nibley, weakening. "I ain't through yet. I got two orbits to fix. I got one to lay out for this ship to Jupiter. And I got to finish out my own separate secret personal orbit. You ain't turnin' back nowhere!"

Kroll grimaced. "Might as well realize it, Grandpa. It takes seven hours to get through the Swarms, and you haven't another *two* hours in you."

The old man laughed. "Think I don't know that? Hell! Who's supposed to know all these things, me or you?"

"You, Pop."

"Well, then, dammit—bring me a bulger!"

"Now, look—"

"You heard me, by God—a bulger!"

"Why?"

"You ever hear of a thing called triangulation? Well, maybe I won't live long enough to go with you, but, by all the sizes and shapes of behemoths—this ship is jumpin' through to Jupiter!"

Kroll looked at him. There was a breathing silence, a heart beating silence in the ship. Kroll sucked in his breath, hesitated, then smiled a grey smile.

"You heard him, Douglas. Get him a bulger."

"And get a stretcher! And tote this ninety pounds of bone out on the biggest asteroid around here! Got that?"

"You heard him, Haines! A stretcher! Stand by for maneuvering!" Kroll sat down by the old man. "What's it all about, Pop? You're—sober?"

"Clear as a bell!"

"What're you going to do?"

"Redeem myself of my sins, by George! Now get your ugly face away so I can think! And tell them bucks to hurry!"

Kroll bellowed and men rushed. They brought a space-suit, inserted the ninety pounds of shrill and wheeze and weakness into it—the doctor had finished with his probings and fixings—buckled, zipped and welded him into it. All the while they worked, Nibley talked.

"Remember when I was a kid. Stood up to that there plate poundin' out baseballs North, South and six ways from Sundays." He chuckled. "Used to hit 'em, and predict which window in what house they'd break!" Wheezy laughter. "One day I said to my Dad, 'Hey, Dad, a meteor just fell on Simpson's Garage over in Jonesville.' 'Jonesville is six miles from here', said my father, shakin' his finger at me. 'You quit your lyin', Nibley boy, or I'll trot you to the woodshed!'"

"Save your strength," said Kroll.

"That's all right," said Nibley. "You know the funny thing was always that I lied like hell and everybody said I lied like hell, but come to find out, later, I wasn't lyin' at all, it was the truth. I just *sensed* things."

The ship maneuvered down on a wind-

less, empty planetoid. Nibley was carried on a stretcher out onto alien rock.

"Lay me down right here. Prop up my head so I can see Jupiter and the whole damned Asteroid Belt. Be sure my headphones are tuned neat. There. Now, give me a piece of paper."

Nibley scribbled a long weak snake of writing on paper, folded it. "When Bruno comes to, give him this. Maybe he'll believe me when he reads it. Personal. Don't pry into it yourself."

The old man sank back, feeling pain drilling through his stomach, and a kind of sad happiness. Somebody was singing somewhere, he didn't know where. Maybe it was only the stars moving on the sky.

"Well," he said, clearly. "Guess this is it, children. Now get the hell aboard, leave me alone to think. This is going to be the biggest, hardest, damndest job of computatin' I ever latched onto! There'll be orbits and cross orbits, big balls of fire and little bitty specules, and, by God, I'll chart 'em all! I'll chart a hundred thousand of the damned monsters and their offspring, you just wait and see! Get aboard! I'll tell you what to do from there on."

Douglas looked doubtful.

Nibley caught the look. "What ever happens," he cried. "Will be worth it, won't it? It's better than turnin' back to Mars, ain't it? Well, *ain't* it?"

"It's better," said Douglas. They shook hands.

"Now all of you, get!"

NIBLEY watched the ship fire away and his eyes saw it and the Asteroid Swarm and that brilliant point of light that was massive Jupiter. He could almost feel the hunger and want and waiting up there in that star flame.

He looked out into space and his eyes widened and space came in, opened out like a flower, and already, natural as water flowing, Nibley's mind, tired as it was, began to shiver out calculations. He started talking.

"Captain? Take the ship straight out now. You hear?"

"Fine," answered the captain.

"Look at your dials."

"Looking."

"If number seven reads 132:87, okay. Keep 'er there. If she varies a point, coun-

teract it on Dial Twenty to 56.90. Keep her hard over for seventy thousand miles, all that is clear so far. Then, after that, a sharp veer in number two direction, over a thousand miles. There's a big sweep of meteors coming in on that other path for you to dodge. Let me see, let me see—" He figured. "Keep your speed at a constant of one hundred thousand miles. At that rate—check your clocks and watches—in exactly an hour you'll hit the second part of the Big Belt. Then switch to a course roughly five thousand miles over to number 3 direction, veer again five minutes on the dot later and—"

"Can you see all those asteroids, Nibley. Are you sure?"

"Sure. Lots of 'em. Every single one going every which way! Keep straight ahead until two hours from now, after that last direction of mine—then slide off at an angle toward Jupiter, slow down to ninety thousand for ten minutes, then up to a hundred ten thousand for fifteen minutes. After that, one hundred fifty thousand all the way!"

Flame poured out of the rocket jets. It moved swiftly away, growing small and distant.

"Give me a read on dial 67!"

"Four."

"Make it six! And set your automatic pilot to 61 and 14 and 35. Now—everything's okay, Keep your chronometer reading this way—seven, nine, twelve. There'll be a few tight scrapes, but you'll hit Jupiter square on in 24 hours, if you jump your speed to 700,000 six hours from now and hold it that way."

"Square on it is, Mr. Nibley."

Nibley just lay there a moment. His voice was easy and not so high and shrill any more. "And on the way back to Mars, later, don't try to find me. I'm going out in the dark on this metal rock. Nothing but dark for me. Back to perihelion and sun for you. Know—know where I'm going?"

"Where?"

"Centaurus!" Nibley laughed. "So help me God I am. No lie!"

He watched the ship going out, then, and he felt the compact, collected trajectories of all the men in it. It was a good

feeling to know that he was guiding them. Like in the old days. . .

Douglas' voice broke in again.

"Hey, Pop. Pop, you still there?"

A little silence. Nibley felt blood pulsing down inside his suit. "Yep," he said.

"We just gave Bruno your little note to read. Whatever it was, when he finished reading it, he went insane."

Nibley said, quiet-like. "Burn that there paper. Don't let anybody else read it."

A pause. "It's burnt. What was it?"

"Don't be inquisitive," snapped the old man. "Maybe I proved to Bruno that he didn't really exist. To hell with it!"

The rocket reached its constant speed. Douglas radioed back: "All's well. Sweet calculating, Pop. I'll tell the Rocket Officials back at Marsport. They'll be glad to know about you. Sweet, sweet calculating. Thanks. How goes it? I said—how goes it? Hey, Pop! Pop?"

Nibley raised a trembling hand and waved it at nothing. The ship was gone. He couldn't even see the jet-wash now, he could only feel that hard metal movement out there among the stars, going on and on through a course he had set for it. He couldn't speak. There was just emotion in him. He had finally, by God, heard a compliment from a mechanic of radar-computators!

He waved his hand at nothing. He watched nothing moving on and on into the crossed orbits of other invisible nothings. The silence was now complete.

He put his hand down. Now he had only to chart that one last personal orbit. The one he had wanted to finish only in space and not grounded back on Mars.

It didn't take lightning calculation to set it out for certain.

Life and death were the parabolic ends to his trajectory. The long life, first swinging in from darkness, arcing to the inevitable perihelion, and now moving back out, out and away—

Into the soft, encompassing dark.

"By God," he thought weakly, quietly. "Right up to the last, my reputation's good. Never fluked a calculation yet, and I never will. . ."

He didn't.