

Galaxy

MAGAZINE

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196

PAGES

APRIL 1959

THE CITY
OF FORCE
by

DANIEL F.
GALOUYE

• KINGSLAYER
by

J. T.

McINTOSH

• THE MAN IN
THE MAILBAG
by

GORDON R.
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• THE ATLANTIC
MISSILE RANGE

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WILLY LEY

• LOVE CALLED
THIS THING
by

AVRAM
DAVIDSON

and

LAURA
GOFORTH

And Other Stories



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Cover by WOOD showing a full house beats togetherness.

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Piloting one routine sightseeing space jaunt

was all he had done . . . and it landed him in a

one-man peep show billed as the notorious . . .

KINGSLAYER

By J. T. McINTOSH

Illustrated by WOOD

THE Spurcans behind Allan Simber in the control cabin of the little ship were whistling excitedly. Shaped rather like balloons shaped like human beings, they had no backbone and virtually no bones, and the sibilant way they spoke showed they had no teeth either.

The members of the royal party were happy. They were delighted and relieved that this brief trip into outer space, just to be able to say they'd been, had gone so smoothly.

It was one of the least queer charters Allan had ever taken, for a private charter space pilot gets a lot of queer jobs. Except for the passengers, it was completely routine.

On landing at Spurc with a one-shot cargo from Rigel, he had been





asked if his ship was absolutely safe and if he was fully competent to handle it alone. He said yes, of course, was asked if he would so state in an affidavit, replied he would, signed the aforesaid affidavit — and was given a contract to take King Phunk and several members of the royal retinue out into the void to see what it was like. One of the King's titles was King of Heaven, so it was only natural that he should want to take a close look at his own property.

Now, having flown around Spurc's two small satellites, the King and his retinue were not at all sorry to see the surface of their own world in the screens, gently coming up to meet them. This they understood. Though the Spurcans had never developed space travel, they had been using flying machines of one kind or another for centuries.

POTIN, the only member of the royal party who could speak English, lollapped up to Allan and asked in a whispered whistle if he was going to be able to land anywhere near the palace at Pluc.

"Sure," Allan said. "I mean yes. In the courtyard, if you like."

"Take no risks," warned the Spurcan. "Do it gentle, please, and agitate not the King."

"This landing," Allan said reas-

suringly, "will be as gentle as—"

He didn't get a chance to complete the simile. The ship lurched abruptly and began to spin violently. Checking his controls, Allan found that a braking jet had failed, and the compensator which was supposed to fix such a situation had failed too.

It took five minutes' desperate work that demanded all his considerable skill to get any sort of order into the story his dials told him, and by that time he knew that the landing wasn't going to be gentle at all, but exceedingly hard. Also there was no longer any guarantee where they would land. He'd settle for any kind of landing, anywhere, that left the ship in one piece.

He glanced over his shoulder. The bulbous little Spurcans had clustered protectively round their King and there was no more whistling. They didn't have to be told there was something wrong. Well, there was nothing he could tell them that would make any difference. They'd just have to take their chances, like him and the ship.

He still couldn't understand the ship? Potin and the other Eng-failure. Could some political enemy of the King have sabotaged lish-speaking Spurcans had pooh-poohed any suggestion of putting a guard on the ship in which the King was to travel. The idea that

a Spurcan should wish to harm King Phunk was unthinkable, and Potin refused to consider it.

Allan wasn't so sure. And he wished cordially that any disgruntled Spurcan subject who felt a pressing need to liquidate his monarch could have arranged it without involving Allan Simber and his ship.

An instant before contact, Allan shouted: "Now!" and curled himself into shock position.

The long slim ship landed on hard rock on a single fin. The fin crumpled, but its resilience had been enough to bounce the ship back in the air, where she fell over like a leaping salmon and crashed back on her belly. This time, as she bounced again, she turned nose-down and plunged at the rock, piling up on a broadening base of crumpled metal.

Deafened and bruised, but still conscious, Allan looked around the mangled cabin. The King and his retinue were smears of various sizes, shapes and colors on the floor, walls and ceiling.

THE conditions of imprisonment on Spurc varied with the crime and the degree of guilt. A Spurcan decidedly guilty of a small crime was kept in an exceedingly confined space. Anyone only potentially guilty of a large crime was kept in an exceedingly large space.

Allan Simber, accused of the murder of King Phunk, was potentially guilty of so vast a crime that the only fit place for his incarceration was the palace at Pluc. It was duly emptied of all its occupants and sentried by all ten thousand members of the Royal Guard.

He wasn't badly treated, and, having the entire palace to roam, he didn't feel too restricted. True, the largest couches or beds were less than four feet square, and the whole place had an overpowering scent of Spurcans, but men who spend their working lives in small spaceships, ferrying every conceivable cargo under the suns, get used to cramped bunks and sour air and learn to bear them philosophically.

He knew he could expect no help from Earth. It always took the attitude that Terrans who insisted on going to other worlds would just have to take pot-luck with the local laws and the local legal system. But Allan still wasn't worried about the outcome.

No doubt it was inevitable that any pilot under whose care the King came to an unpleasant end should be formally charged with negligence. Allan's case was clear — anyone who had evil designs on the King logically wouldn't risk killing himself merely on the off-chance that he'd escape and King Phunk wouldn't.

Besides, these little Spurcans were reasonable enough creatures, though they had some queer ideas — housing a major defendant in a vast prison, for example. Yet even that made sense of a sort. The reasoning was that it was an insult to accuse any man of any crime, and the bigger the crime, the bigger the insult. Consequently, though someone suspected of a mammoth crime couldn't be allowed to roam around loose, he was given as much freedom as possible and treated with respect and consideration.

The only disturbing feature was that nobody told him anything and nobody came to see him. He was left alone in a palace which could house twelve thousand people.

The first day he amused himself by painting **SIMBER** ➞ at strategic points on the walls all over the palace, the arrows pointing to the suite he had reserved for himself. After all, if the Spurcans didn't want their palace desecrated, they shouldn't have left any paint about.

On the outer door of the suite he painted:

ALLAN H. SIMBER
CHIEF PILOT
KNOCK AND ENTER

The second day he was wondering what to do when he heard footsteps — human footsteps — ring-

ing in the corridors far away. They paused, presumably while the visitor looked for another arrow. Then they restarted again, presumably when he had found one.

Presently there was a knock and John Carruthers entered.

A FEW hundred humans, gabroids and minscols lived in the cosmopolitan quarter of Pluc, trading or studying the customs, law, psychology, history, topography or botany of Spurc. Allan had seen Carruthers at the spaceport, but had no idea what exactly he was or did.

Anyway, he was glad to see him now. Carruthers was unbelievably British. He wore riding breeches, though there had never been a horse on Spurc, and spoke with an accent which would have made most people think of Oxford or Cambridge, except possibly graduates of Oxford or Cambridge.

"Well, old boy," said Carruthers genially, "you do seem to have got yourself into a spot of bother."

"I do," Allan admitted. "What are you—counsel for the defense?"

"No," said Carruthers apologetically. "There's no defense, you see. Actually, I'm your American ambassador."

"American?" Allan automatically echoed, though it was what Carruthers had said first which was occupying his mind to the exclusion of all else.

"American—also British, French, Chinese, Italian, German, Norwegian and Dutch. The other countries have made no arrangements to be represented."

Allan went back to the main point. "What do you mean, there's no defense? You mean they're not proceeding with the charge?"

"No, my dear fellow. I mean you're guilty. You are, you know. Incidentally, before you start unburdening your soul, perhaps I'd better point out that the whole palace is probably wired."

Allan shut his mouth abruptly. Was that a warning that Carruthers himself couldn't say what he liked, that he had said Allan was guilty simply because the Spurcans might be listening? No, that was ridiculous.

"I'm guilty?" Allan said incredulously.

"Oh, indubitably! You must have been out of your mind when you signed that affidavit, old chap. You did nothing less than make yourself personally responsible for the safety of the King and his party."

Allan remembered the affidavit with misgivings. "But surely—"

"These people have no spaceships of their own, you know—just whatever old barges we can fob off on them. All they know about space is what we've chosen to tell them. We, of course, are the experts. When you said your ship

was sound and an accident was practically impossible — naturally, if the King was killed, you murdered him."

SLOWLY, Allan realized the full import of what Carruthers was saying. "You mean they're not even going to *try* me?"

"Oh, there'll be a trial tomorrow. You won't be there. It'll be formal, with a verdict of guilty. I came to talk to you about your punishment. Thought you'd better know what to expect."

Allan sank weakly on one of the four-foot-square couches. Surely if all this was true, Carruthers would hardly be so breezily cheerful about it all.

"Is this some kind of a joke?" he asked.

"No joke at all, old boy. I must say you asked for it. Everybody knew for days that you were going to take the rajah up. That you'd promised it was safe. That there was no guard on the ship. Anybody who had any reason to want the old gentleman out of the way had only to—"

"But that's exactly it!" Allan exclaimed. "That's precisely what must have happened! When the ship cracked up I — well, I was ninety-five per cent certain there had been sabotage. Surely I can bring this up in court and . . ."

He stopped. Carruthers was shaking his head. "Apart from the

fact that that's not legally relevant, it just isn't so. Take it from me, old boy, I've been here ten years and if anybody knows the Spurcans I do. Some murders are relatively unimportant. I expect Phunk had quite a few characters knocked off in his time, so I daresay he only got what was coming to him. But no Spurcan — absolutely none — would kill his King, any more than you'd throw a million dollars into space. The King is valuable, you see. You'll be punished not because these people felt great affection for King Phunk, but because you destroyed a valuable property."

"But . . ."

"Anyway," Carruthers went on cheerfully, "even if you don't take my word for it, the fact remains that the line of defense you planned holds no water, so to speak. You made yourself responsible for the King. He's dead. That's all that matters in Spurcan law. Now about your punishment. There will be three penalties—"

"Is that all fixed too?" Allan asked dazedly.

"More or less. The first punishment is starvation. For five hours."

ALLEN frowned. "Five hours?" "That's inflexible—you know the Spurcans have to eat or drink something every half-hour or so. You're lucky. After five hours'

starvation, a Spurcan is three-quarters dead."

"And they won't modify this for a human? Are you sure?"

"Quite sure, for all of us here run foul of their laws at one time or another and are sentenced to the first two penalties. No non-native has ever been sentenced to your particular third penalty so far. You'll be making history, my dear fellow. The three penalties—"

"Look," said Allan, making up his mind. "You may be right about all this, but I'd rather wait for the verdict."

Carruthers was surprised and pained. "You don't want me to tell you any more?"

"Not now."

"But don't you want to know about—"

"Is there anything I can do to get out of this? Anything I personally can do?"

"Fraid not, old chap."

"All right then, I've got to leave it to you. You'll do what you can?"

"Naturally, but . . . This is most embarrassing. You see, there's absolutely nothing I can do."

Allan's brain raced. "Just a moment. There are humans here, and some gaberoids from Deneb and Merkat, and a few minscods from Mars, Sirius and Cephis. Right? What if one of them wanted to murder the King? They might have sabotaged the ship."

For the first time, a hint of mild

irritation crossed Carruthers' face. "Can't you get it into your head," he said, "that it wouldn't do you any damn good even if you could prove that somebody tinkered your ship? Suppose I went into court tomorrow and said I burned half your braking fin off. They might put me on trial too, but that wouldn't do you the slightest good. You still would be guilty of regicide."

"I see," said Allan. "Oh, well. Can you come tomorrow and tell me what's been decided?"

"Of course. You don't want me to tell you about . . . ? No, I see you don't. Still, there's one thing I must tell you—"

"If you don't mind," said Allan, "I'd rather wait."

"But this is—"

"Look," said Allan, "I learned a long time ago to take things as they come. I'd have terrified myself to death a dozen times if I'd assumed the worst, and the worst after that, and the worst after that. Right at this moment, nobody's slapping me on the belly with a wet fish. Let's leave it at that —okay?"

Carruthers shrugged, hurt.

FOR now, at least, the Spurcans certainly weren't starving him. Every third or fourth room had tables covered with fruit, sweetmeats, salads, cold meat, drinks of all kinds, and Allan let as

little of it as possible go to waste.

Long ago he had found out that one man's meat was very seldom another man's poison, at any rate on worlds of similar metabolism. The Spurcans were warm-blooded, carbon-based oxygen-breathers. Most of their food suited humans. The rare exceptions looked, smelled or tasted unpleasant.

Eating with considerable enjoyment, Allan reflected that there was a lot to be said for Spurc. The climate was excellent and the food was wonderful. The little Spurcans, though definitely non-human, were by no means repulsive and they were pretty reasonable. He had found no difficulty in getting along with them.

The present situation was awkward but unlikely to be fatal. True, it was pretty silly of him to have signed that affidavit. Somebody should have told him. He admitted fairly, however, that he could easily have sought out the ambassador for advice, and hadn't.

Every pilot who takes a small ship around the Galaxy alone must be an optimist. And every pilot who has done it reasonably successfully for five years must have good reason for his optimism.

At least twenty times in the past five years, Allan Simber had been in situations from which the only person who expected him to emerge alive had been Allan Simber. And if a thing goes on hap-

pening long enough, one develops skill in waiting it out.

For something to do, he searched for the concealed microphones and wires against which Carruthers had warned him. He found no sign of any such thing. Apparently he was under no direct supervision. Ten thousand Spurcans guarded the entrances, exits and walls. Within the generous boundaries of his prison, he was free.

The only thing that irked him was the silence. Poor little King Phunk had liked silence, apparently. Every room was sound-deadened; there were no windows in the palace and every ventilator seemed to have a sound-trap fitted. If Allan wanted to hear a sound, he had to make it himself.

It was because of the blank stillness that he heard something he would normally have missed. Someone or something was moving in the corridor outside. Not boldly, openly, like Carruthers, but stealthily, so silently that a breath of wind or even a ticking clock might have covered the soft padding.

Maybe they were guarding him closely after all. Yet the furtive sound didn't suggest Spurcans to Allan. They made a kerplunk, kerplunk, kerplunk on their short, heavy legs, no more capable of tiptoeing than bipedal pigmy elephants.

Whoever or whatever was trying to conceal its presence must be trying to conceal it from Allan. So he stood behind the door and waited for a while to surprise his visitor if it elected to come in.

Allan wasn't excited, merely interested. As he waited, he wondered whether to throw himself on the visitor the instant the door opened, if it did open. Might as well, he thought. If it was something he couldn't handle, at least he'd probably manage to bowl it off its feet — providing it had any feet.

Whatever it was, it could hardly be friendly.

Seconds passed and there was no sound. Allan was sure that the visitor was on the other side of the door, also listening. Well, in any contest of patience, Allan would win. Space pilots are unbeatable at waiting for nothing to happen.

The door opened a crack, then opened wider.

Allan sprang. Under him was something wet, slippery, but not repulsive.

It was a completely female feminine human mammal. He could see that with both eyes.

AS he helped her up apologetically, Allan began to wonder who was crazy.

The girl was a tall, well-stacked blonde with curves about which

her two-piece swim suit was not reticent. Despite the swim suit and the water glistening on her skin, she was anything but an Amazon. She was definitely the crinoline, powder-and-patch type, the type whose bathing suit seldom gets wet.

In fact, she looked like an actress making an improbable appearance in a not very good movie.

"Don't tell me," he said. "You've come to rescue me."

She was still gasping and rubbing her diaphragm, with which Allan's knee had made violent contact.

"As a matter of fact, I did," she said in an injured tone.

"Did what?"

"Come to rescue you. I know a way out."

"You think you can get me out of here?" said Allan incredulously.

"I know I can, but not now. Follow me."

He did so, willingly.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Dawn Clifford. As if it matters."

"I think it matters."

She was almost running through the corridors. Once Allan steadied her as her bare foot slipped on the polished floor.

Right in the center of the palace, they came to a fountain in the floor.

"Ah," he said softly.

"I came this way," said Dawn,

"and I'm going back the same way. Can you swim?"

"Yes."

"Under water?"

"Yes."

"Then you're okay. Only you can't come now — we'd have to come up in the middle of a public pool. It'll have to be at night, and not tonight either. I'm busy. I'll come for you tomorrow night."

"Can't I make it myself?"

"Not without a guide. Don't try. You'd drown."

She slipped into the fountain and began to lower herself toward a grating in the clear, cool water.

"Wait," Allan protested. "Why are you doing this? What—"

"I haven't time," she said nervously, not looking at him. "I've got to get back to the pool before I'm missed. See you tomorrow night."

Drawing a deep breath, she dropped under the surface to the grating. It was hinged. Once she had pushed herself through the aperture, the grating closed firmly behind her.

CARRUTHERS made his second appearance the next day.

"Well, old boy," he said apologetically, "it was just as I told you."

"You mean the trial's over?"

"Such as it was. You were guilty. All that was needed was a verdict. It's the three penalties, of

course. The first one will begin immediately I leave. You get no food for five hours."

"You mean that really is the same for me as for them?"

"Yes. They like to regard themselves as a very just race, and all aliens on Spurc are subject to exactly the same law and exactly the same penalties as a native. The second penalty is three in one. It's the Three Unwishes."

"The which?"

"That's a literal translation. The Three Opposites-of-Wishes. The third penalty is—"

"Hold on. Let's stick to the Three Unwishes. What are they?"

"They'll find out the three things you most desire, reverse them and do them."

"How would they learn things like that about me?"

"By asking you, by truth drugs and other methods, they'll find out the three things you want most. You won't be able to stop them. Then they do the opposite."

He shrugged. "There are certain semantic difficulties, but I'm afraid a prisoner isn't allowed to argue his case. You have to accept their version of what's opposite. Suppose, for example, you wanted to be able to play Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto. Some people might say that the opposite was *not* being able to play Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto and that consequently

they wouldn't have to do anything about it. I'm afraid that in such a case, however, the Spurcans would probably take the view that to prevent you ever being able to play Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto, they'd have to break your fingers or cut off your hands."

Allan shuddered.

"It may not be so bad," said Carruthers encouragingly. "I had to undergo the Three Unwishes once and nothing happened to me. Depends if you can get them to accept comparatively harmless desires or not. Obviously if what you most want is to live forever, the Three Unwishes could be pretty serious."

"I thought you said I wouldn't be able to stop them finding out the things I most want."

"You won't, but you might be able to finagle a little, knowing what's going to happen. I did."

"When does this start?"

"After your five hours' starvation are over. They'll find out your three main desires tonight and begin to punish you tomorrow."

Tomorrow. That meant that if Dawn Clifford succeeded in helping him to escape, he had nothing to worry about.

"They won't take me away from here?"

"Certainly not." Carruthers' gaze became quite keen. "Has anything happened since I saw you last?"

"What could happen?"



"There might have been some spurious attempt to rescue you, for example. Probably by a girl of about your own age or a little less."

Allan stared at him in open dislike.

"I wanted to tell you," said Carruthers virtuously, "but you wouldn't let me. Traditions count for a lot on Spurc. Just as we see to it that people are defended in court whether they deserve it or not, Spurcans have attempts to escape. It doesn't seem decent to them that while a man is awaiting sentence, his friends and relatives, and particularly his wife or girl friend, shouldn't make any attempt to have him released. So they see to it that jailbreak attempts are made."

"But in the case of a human, how could they get another human to cooperate?"

"Easily enough. For money. If there was any such attempt — and I can't imagine there not being one — I think I can guess who you saw. Dawn Clifford."

Allan felt himself growing hot under the collar. He didn't necessarily trust Carruthers and he had no intention of betraying anything to him. Nevertheless, he couldn't help saying bitterly: "How could any human collaborate with those inhuman little balloons to torture another human?"

"If you mean how could Dawn

do it, I'll tell you. She's an actress. Came here two years ago with a touring company. Fell foul of Spurcan law and isn't allowed to leave. Q.E.D."

"Why does any human ever come here?" Allan exploded.

"I don't know. Why did you come here?" Carruthers inquired politely.

THAT night the doctors, psychologists and scientists arrived at the Simber suite. None of them could speak English except the interpreter, whose job was simply to interpret anything the Spurcans wanted translated, not to enable Allan to say all he felt inclined to say.

They fastened plates against his skin, measured his blood pressure, checked his brain patterns. Technologically, they were several hundred years out of date, but that merely meant the methods were crude, not the results. Allan could be sure that since they were dealing with an alien, comparatively unfamiliar life-form, they had consulted the official intergalactic organism standards and consequently would be able to interpret his reactions only a little less accurately than human psychologists.

The first thing they established was that he particularly wanted to get out of Spurc. They didn't say anything, or at least the interpreter didn't translate anything.

But it needed very little imagination to see that that would mean he was to be kept a prisoner for life on Spurc.

Now Allan remembered what Carruthers had said about Dawn Clifford. She had fallen foul of Spurcan law too, had been sentenced to starvation and the Three Unwishes — and naturally one of the things she most wanted had been to get away from Spurc.

It must be a not uncommon circumstance among visitors to Spurc who happened to get into legal trouble.

The second thing Allan desired was the most beautiful girl in the Galaxy. The third was a million dollars.

Three simple, straightforward desires. He wondered what they would make of the last two. Make him a present of the ugliest woman in the Galaxy? Claim that he owed them a million dollars?

The interpreter was speaking. Would he accept Dawn Clifford as the most beautiful girl in the Galaxy?

His thoughts raced. They knew he knew her. Therefore Carruthers was right — she had been hired to act a part. There had never been any real prospect of escape. The Spurcans had fixed the whole thing.

He felt sick. How could a girl like that do a thing like that?

The interpreter repeated his question. Would he accept Dawn

Clifford as the most beautiful girl in the Galaxy?

Obviously it was in his best interests to say no. Then they'd have to find somebody else, somebody he would accept. There couldn't be many human girls in Spurc, and it would be a long time before any girl elsewhere could be persuaded to work for them in whatever way they planned. Maybe he could stall them for years over this. But what would he gain by stalling?

In a sudden spurt of impatience, he said, "Yes." Let them get on with it. Whatever happened, the sooner the better.

After that, they left him. And that night Dawn Clifford didn't come.

He climbed into the fountain into which she had disappeared, and found all the gratings as solidly latched as the back and side doors of the palace.

NEXT day he had an official visit, not from Carruthers this time but from Verin, the public prosecutor. He looked exactly like all Spurcans except that he had the brownness of extreme age. There were about thirty members of the Guard with him to protect him against the dangerous alien creature who had murdered King Phunk.

The Spurcans arranged themselves in V formation, with Verin

at the apex of the V, farthest from Allan. Then he passed sentence in a musical whistle, and the interpreter interpreted.

"Allan Simber, human, regicide, this is your punishment. Having already been starved near to death—"

"Near death?" Allan exclaimed.

The interpreter wasn't allowed to do anything but interpret. "Having already been starved near to death—"

"When?" Allan asked. He didn't remember any five-hour fasting period. Then he realized that he'd slept most of the previous afternoon. They must have counted that. Well, if that was typical of the way they were going to punish him for his terrible crime, it was a good thing he hadn't lost any sleep worrying about it.

"Okay," he said. "I follow you. Go ahead."

"Having already been starved near to death," the interpreter continued, "you are now sentenced to the following Unwishes: One, you will remain on this world forever. Two, you will spend this night with the most beautiful girl in the Galaxy and will not possess her. Three, you will not be given a million dollars."

ALLAN burst out laughing. He didn't want to live the rest of his life on Spurc. But though they'd been able to keep Dawn Clifford a

prisoner for a couple of years, they'd find it harder to watch over a competent space pilot.

He had no particular objection to spending a night with Dawn Clifford, even if that was all he was allowed to do. And the idea of not being given a million dollars didn't terrify him. It didn't even disappoint him. He hadn't ever counted on getting those million dollars.

"The third penalty," said the interpreter, "is death according to the manner of the crime."

Allan stopped laughing. "Huh?" he said.

"The third penalty is death according to the manner of the crime," the interpreter repeated obediently.

"Wait a minute," said Allan. "What's this all about?"

The Spurcans turned and trooped out, Verin in the lead now.

This time, when he'd have liked Carruthers to come and explain things to him, Carruthers didn't come.

The first penalty he hadn't even noticed. The second, the Three Unwishes, didn't seem to amount to anything except that he was never to leave Spurc — and he had his own ideas about that.

But a sentence of death — that was no joke. Semantic differences didn't stretch far enough to make it anything else but capital punishment.

THAT night Dawn came to him. She entered wearing a long black cloak and stood across the room from him. No Spurcans came with her.

"I hope you're pleased with yourself," said Allan bitterly.

She didn't give the impression of acting a part now. "I'm sorry," she said, not sounding very sorry, "but I had no choice. Just as I have no choice now. You have my sympathy, but I have much more sympathy for myself. Frankly, I'd sacrifice you without uncurling a hair if I could get off this world."

He liked her better for that. When people were honest, at least you knew how you stood with them.

He looked around. "Where are the Spurcans?"

She shrugged indifferently. "Behind the walls. You've been under closer watch than you knew all the time you've been here."

"And what happens now?"

"Nothing unless you touch me."

"Then what?"

"I don't know. But something will. You'll have to try it to find out."

"I will. Later. Mean to say we just stay here all night, and as long as I don't touch you, nothing happens? That it?"

She shrugged again. "I guess so." He saw now that for all her lovely face and figure, she was a beautiful monomaniac with one ambi-

tion, one interest in life — to get away from Spurc. She really would sacrifice him or anybody or anything to do so.

"I like the Spurcans," Allan observed. "They really are fair, according to their lights. Carruthers gave me the idea they'd be pretty tough in their interpretation of the three Unwishes, but they seem to have been honest enough. They—"

"Don't talk to me about them!" said Dawn with suppressed passion.

"Why not? We're on their world."

"I hate them! I loathe them! My skin crawls when I'm near them!"

"Why, what have they done?"

"They didn't have to do anything! I just hate them!"

She shuddered, and Allan saw with interest that she could barely control her physical loathing of the Spurcans. It must be like some people's dread of spiders, or rats, or snakes.

HE began to feel sorry for her in his turn, imagining what it must be like to be imprisoned on Spurc with so strong an aversion to the bulbous little Spurcans.

"Why did you come here then?" he asked.

"How could I know? I'd never seen any of them on Earth. Look, I said let's not talk about them."

"Tell me one thing. After the



Three Unwishes, they say I'm to die according to the manner of my crime. What does that mean?"

"I don't know. For Pete's sake, don't get the idea I'm in their confidence. I just do what I'm told. All I want is to get back to Earth."

"And if you work for them long enough, they let you go — is that it?"

"The hell it is! When they sentence you to stay here forever, they mean it. I do as I'm told because I've got to, that's all. I don't get anything out of it but my food and shelter. Now shut up about the Spurcans, will you? Talk about Earth if you must talk."

With a casual movement, she undid the strings about her throat.



The black cloak fell from her.
"Do you have to do *that*?" Allan
exclaimed.

She nodded composedly. "Sure.
You're supposed to be driven mad
with desire, rush to embrace me,
and then they do whatever it is
they're going to do."

She started to walk about the
room with slow, voluptuous steps.

"Do you have to do *that too*?"
Allan asked in a strangled voice.
"Of course. You don't have to
look."

Allan bore it for a few seconds.
Then he stood up. "I'm going to
find out," he said. "Do you mind?"

She shrugged her shoulders. She
was always doing that. "Doesn't
make any difference whether I

mind or not. I hope they remember it's you who's supposed to be getting punished, not me."

Allan leaped at her and took her slight but curvy body in his arms. Instantly everything went black.

When he came to, he was on one couch and Dawn was on another, about two feet away, so that when he opened his eyes he was staring at her.

She opened her eyes a few seconds after he did, looked around and shuddered.

"If you have no objections," she said, "I'd rather you didn't do that again. After they knocked us out with the beam, they must have come in and lifted us here. I don't mind you touching me, but the Spurcans . . ." She shivered. "Let's just accept the situation, shall we?"

"Okay," Allan sighed. "It's accepted."

They weren't allowed to sleep. Bells rang when their heads drooped, and once, to Dawn's visible horror, a dozen Spurcans came in to shake her awake. She showed no desire to sleep after that.

They spent the night talking about Earth.

AS he took off, Allan was reasonably happy. If he had to die, he'd rather have it this way than any other.

The old, patched ship they had given him in place of his own handled like a tranquilized cow, but

nevertheless he'd have enough control when the time came to make the end as neat and instantaneous as anyone could wish.

The Spurcans had told him that he had enough fuel to get into space, no more. They hadn't told him what was wrong, how they had ensured that when the old ship fell back into Spurc's atmosphere, he wouldn't be able to land her. It wasn't difficult to guess, however. The braking fins would go, same as before.

That was what they'd meant by "according to the manner of the crime."

He hadn't seen either Carruthers or Dawn Clifford again. He had no particular desire to see them. It was more than possible that on any other planet, even in space, Dawn Clifford might be worth knowing. On Spurc, however, she was nothing but a cold, beautiful phonograph record which played nothing except: *Let me away from here! God, how I hate them!*

He'd been glad to see the last of the palace, glad to get out into the city of Pluc, where at least there were sounds, happiest of all to get into a ship — even this antiquated derelict.

If he could manage it, he proposed to blow up right in the middle of the palace — to spit his life, at least symbolically, in the Spurcans' face. The annoying thing was that he didn't think they

would mind particularly. They were more concerned that their version of justice should be done than over any damage he might succeed in doing.

The ship climbed. The drive had been set so that he could not cut it in less than ten minutes. Now, however, he found he could control it. He reached out to cut the drive, wanting to preserve as much fuel as he could.

"Don't," said a voice behind him.

He turned and saw Carruthers and Dawn Clifford. Dawn was smiling, happy. He hardly recognized her.

"Let it rip, old boy," said Carruthers. "I don't know how good a pilot you are, but if you're good enough, you may be able to get us to somewhere civilized."

"But..."

"We took care of the fuel. There's plenty. Also we patched up the damage they'd done before giving you this ship. Not very well, perhaps, but well enough to give you a chance."

Dawn was still smiling at him. "Hello," she said, offering her hand. "I'm Dawn Clifford."

"I know," he said, a little dazed. She looked like another person, with clothes on, and he found he liked this one better. She was bubbling over with happiness now, a warm, vital creature he had never seen before.

"No, you don't know me," she said. "We never met, did we?"

"I guess you're right at that," confessed Allan. "Pleased to meet you. And to my surprise, I mean it."

She laughed. "I'll go make some coffee," she said. "Spurcan coffee, I'm afraid. I don't mind any more. Oh, it's wonderful to be clear of that place!"

WHEN she went out, Allan turned to Carruthers. "What is all this? Are you telling me this ship is all right?"

"Anything but, my dear fellow," said Carruthers genially, "but there's no need to crash on Spurc. I knew the Spurcans wouldn't guard this ship any more than they guarded your own. Why should anyone tamper with a ship that's already been damaged so that it must blow up?"

"I guess I've a lot to thank you for," said Allan. "And if it can be done, I'll get you both away safely. But what are you doing here, Carruthers? I know how much Dawn wanted to get away, but how about you?"

"I told you," Carruthers replied, "that I'd fallen foul of the Three Unwishes as well as you. Sooner or later, every visitor does. And naturally one of the wishes is always to get away from Spurc."

"I see," said Allan. "This was the only way we could all get

away. You were pretty smart, Carruthers."

Carruthers nodded. "I was," he agreed.

"When did you get this idea?"

"Not long before you took the King up," said Carruthers blandly.

FOR a moment, Allan didn't understand. Then anger spread through him as he realized what Carruthers meant.

"So you —"

"Well, after all, I've been a prisoner on Spurc for ten years. I didn't come here to be ambassador. I took the job because I had to eat. Every time a ship has blasted off, they've searched her to make sure that people like Dawn and me haven't managed to stow away. It seemed to me the only ship that wouldn't be searched was a ship that was meant to crash. So I had to fix myself up with a pilot and a ship that was meant to crash. That meant . . . but I won't insult your intelligence by explaining the obvious."

"You sabotaged my ship so the King would be killed?"

"Of course. I knew you'd make some sort of landing and would probably get out unhurt. But these puffy little Spurcans wouldn't have a chance in a rough landing. With your affidavit and a little finagling in court by me, that meant the three penalties for you culminat-

ing in this. I had to get Miss Clifford's cooperation, but if you want to whitewash her, it's easy enough — I didn't tell her about the plan until after King Phunk was dead. By that time, there was nothing for her to do but play along with me."

Allan found himself relieved that Dawn hadn't been a party to the plan from the beginning. But his rage against Carruthers didn't lessen. Carruthers had murdered poor little King Phunk and all his retinue and landed Allan in deadly trouble just to get himself off Spurc. And now he was gleefully proud of himself.

"I feel like smashing this ship on the nearest lump of rock," Allan said viciously.

"But you won't," said Carruthers, unperturbed. "Not with yourself and Miss Clifford aboard. Particularly Miss Clifford. Her presence makes a difference, doesn't it?"

"Yes," Allan admitted. "I can't wring your neck without upsetting and maybe alienating her. Was that why you fitted her into your plan?"

Carruthers looked hurt. "Naturally," he said. "You don't suppose I'd leave a thing like that to chance, do you?"

He was shocked, horrified and still more hurt when Allan hit him.

—J. T. MCINTOSH