

SUPER-SCIENCE

FICTION

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CONTENTS

NOVELETTE

- PLANET OF THE ANGRY GIANTS *by Dirk Clinton* 62
The natives were huge, and their wrath was terrific!

SHORT STORIES

- THE HORROR IN THE ATTIC *by Alex Merriman* 2
It was a hideous, horrible THING on a gruesome errand
- MONSTERS THAT ONCE WERE MEN *by Eric Rodman* 18
They were ghastly, utterly repulsive creatures
- BIRTH OF A MONSTER *by Richard Stark* 36
The doctor was frightened—as well as he might be!
- MAN-HUNTING ROBOT *by James Rosenquest* 44
Was Jon just the victim of a cruel, sadistic sport?
- WORLD OF CREEPING TERROR *by J. W. Rose* 94
Why was the young Earthman attacked so viciously?
- WHICH WAS THE MONSTER? *by Dan Malcolm* 110
Don't judge a being just by the appearance
- SPECIMENS *by George H. Smith* 126
The space ship was automatic. The aliens noticed this

FEATURES

- SCIENCE SHORTS *by Edgar P. Straus* 17
- TOWARD ABSOLUTE ZERO 43

COVER by Emsch

ILLUSTRATIONS by Emsch.

W. W. Scott — Editor

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MAN-HUNTING ROBOT

by JAMES ROSENQUEST

One man alone on a planet of death. — A deadly robot made especially to pursue a human being. Was it just a cruel sport devised for some bloodthirsty pleasure?

HE gasped for breath, and its auditory cup picked up the spasmed inrush of air, a thousand yards away.

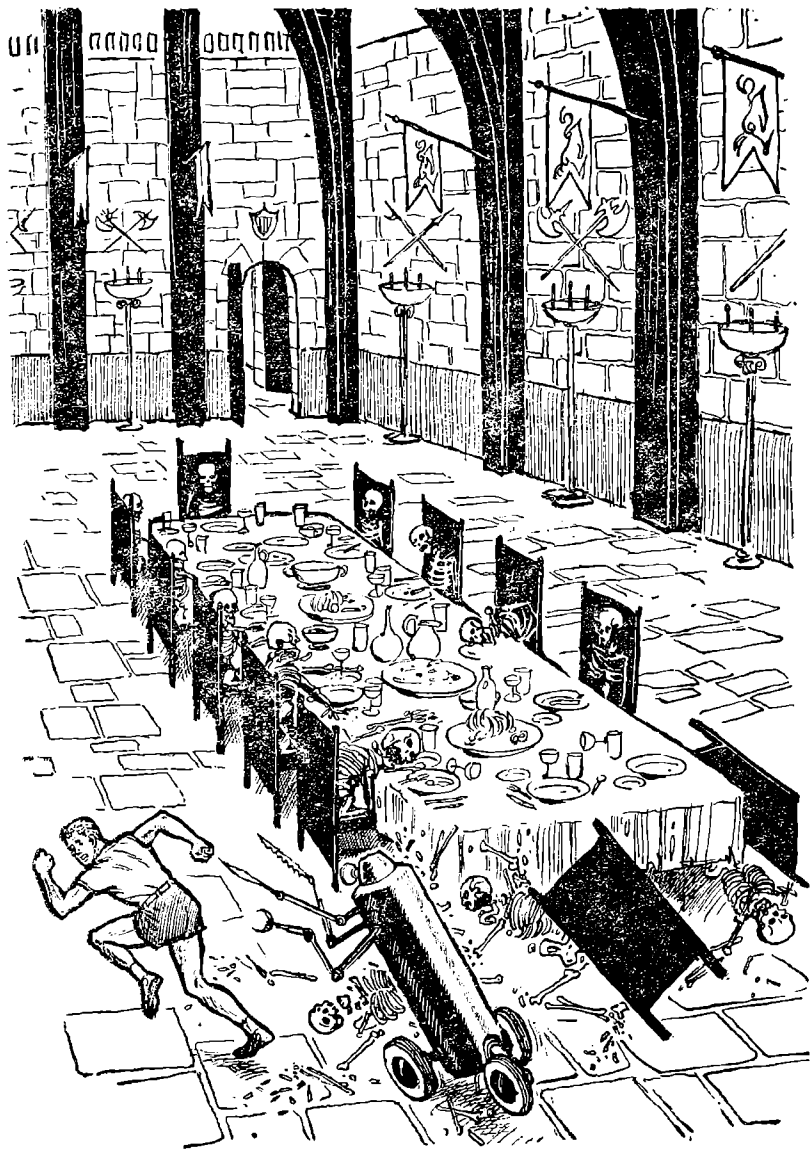
He sweated, and a vagrant current of wind carried the sticky molecules of human fear to its organic receptors.

He fled on padded feet, but the judas-call of a snapping twig betrayed his course.

He tried standing very still and holding his breath, but in the cold and brittle air of the surface level his heated body unfurled invisible banners of infra-red; its special photocells responded eagerly to 98.6 Fahrenheit and it struck out toward him once more like a blindfolded rattlesnake.

Then he heard the silken swish of rubberized wheels and the mocking chuckle of gears and relays. He peered through

the thorny limbs and leaves of the stinking mephitic-bush in which he had thought to find concealment, and saw the gleaming barrel body with the tiny insect-head top the nearest rise of lichened ground. It paused momentarily as if to savor victory (*foolish anthropomorphism*, Jon Pierce thought wildly, *for it's only a machine—but therein lies the very horror of its scientific sadism, devoid of pity and pleasure alike, like the medieval executioner to whom the screaming creature on the rack is just one more task in the day's routine of fire and blood*), then gathered speed as it swept down the gentle slope toward his futile refuge, flailing the air with its four-fold complement of surgical appendages: scalpel, scissors,



bone-saw and clamp.

Caution followed courage in swift desertion of a lost cause, and he bolted for open ground, leaving shreds of flesh and fabric on a dozen spiked branches. But panic had anesthetized him, and he was unaware of the ruby goutts that welled out through the holes in his tunic.

At the top of the opposite rise he glanced back over his shoulder at the hunting robot. Luck was with him for a change. The automaton was efficient, but it lacked flexibility and judgment. Charging straight for the spot where it had lately detected its fleeing prey, its own momentum carried it straight into the dense bush.

It ground to a stop with a mighty crash of irresistible metal against stubborn branches and became entangled, its three wheels spinning furiously into ruts in the soft earth. The wheels stopped momentarily, then went into reverse as it sought to back out of the obstruction, but they only cut deeper into the loamy soil.

Jon Pierce glanced at his wristwatch hopefully, then

despairingly: one more hour to go. One hour had already passed—sixty minutes of running nightmare, dodging, twisting and turning. Hiding like a hunted animal in this super-game of hound and hare on the blasted surface of the former pleasure planetoid of Sybaris.

He looked up at the sky. A silvery shape hung suspended a thousand feet up, like a vulture in chrome waiting to pick the bones that the robot would leave. This was the space yacht of Seigneur Duplessis, as he liked to call himself, one of the richest men of the Solar System, and powerful enough to indulge almost any whim.

Surrounded by his courtesans and courtiers, he was no doubt watching the play with bored amusement. Pierce shook his fist at the sky and cursed him, then dropped his arm limply in futility. No use blaming Duplessis. He had brought this on himself.

THE ad had said: *Wanted, young man, daring and courageous. Ten thousand credits for two hours' work. And a telephone number.*

Pierce applied. Few people worked anymore; the machines did everything. Nobody went unfed either; the welfare state provided for all. But it was not enough for him. He hated his plebeian status with all his soul and thirsted and hungered for the luxuries and freedom of the elite.

In his circle of friends they talked often of the ways of getting there: you hired yourself out for amusement purposes, or you joined one of the hit-and-run fleets of pirates that nibbled at the outer fringes of the System, or you were accepted by the Federated Worlds Police or one of the semi-official vigilante groups of private citizens.

Early in the twenty-first century, the double explosion of earth population and space travel had ripped the fabric of world society apart. Anarchy and hedonism competed with tyranny and puritanism. Automation rose on an exponential curve, until there was plenty for all and jobs for none.

A few became enormously wealthy in the exploitation of Mars and Venus. The growth

and confusion was beyond any real control. Economies and governments collapsed; super-states coalesced, dissolved, and reformed.

With the discovery of the Heisenberg antigravity field, chemical propellants were no longer necessary; escape velocity was a problem that no longer existed.

Space vehicles were turned out on the assembly line like cars; this was inevitable. And so it was also inevitable that craft would be stolen, and that thieves would get together, form marauding packs that preyed on interplanet commerce, and lose themselves in the depths of space, dodging through the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter or hiding in the honeycomb of vast caverns that underlay the lunar surface.

In one of the major battles of the marauders and the FWP, a band of space pirates had seized and used the pleasure world of Sybaris for a stronghold, and the gaudy planetoid had been ruthlessly razed in an indiscriminating holocaust of cursing outlaws

and screaming sybarites as the pleasure palaces collapsed in a sea of atomic fire. And now, on desolated Sybaris, he had put his life in jeopardy for two hours.

Out of a roomful of desperate, bored, greedy, grim-faced men, Pierce had been selected.

"I like your style," the Seigneur had said, permitting his granite visage the rare luxury of a thin-lipped smile. "But of course you realize that you may not come out of this alive?"

Jon had swallowed and whispered, "Yes, sir."

"Of course," his employer continued with a negligent wave of a thin hand, "if you succeed in eluding the robot for two hours, you have won a not inconsiderable sum—plus *entree* into upper society." At this, Jon's eyes had wavered to a nearby divan, where a stunning brunette was smiling at him encouragingly, her eyes taking in his lithe young form with undisguised interest. And so he had accepted.

HE heard a snapping and crackling sound, and

looked toward the bush. His heart sank.

Using its powerful clamp and saw, the robot was methodically clipping away the thorny branches that entangled it and dropping them into the ruts to form a firm matting, traction for its wheels. Jon swore again, bitterly. He knew that no robot was that adaptable or even programmed for such a contingency in its miles of magnetic tape and massed banks of tubes and transistors.

Quite obviously, the Seigneur Duplessis had no intention of losing either his prey or the ten thousand. New directions were being beamed into the monster from the circling space yacht.

Pierce shielded his eyes from the sun and looked toward the sharply curving horizon of the little world. Half a mile away, barely distinguishable from the surrounding hillocks, a cluster of eroded ruins glinted redly in the waning afternoon of the planetoid's short day. Without waiting to see if the hunting robot succeeded or failed in its efforts

to escape, he started to sprint. Half way there, he stopped to rest, regardless of the risk of lost time and space.

His heart pounded as if it would escape from its ribbed cage, and his lungs were bursting as they fought for oxygen in the cold, thin air of Sybaris. A red haze formed behind his eyes.

Five minutes elapsed, and then he saw once more, on a distant hillock, the ominous gleam of polished metal. The robot was free again and in full pursuit. He pumped his shaky legs with the leas of will power and continued his flight. Strength was gone, and only sheer nerve kept his legs pumping up and down, up and down, though his feet were so numb now that he could not feel the ground beneath him, and he laughed hysterically, briefly at the thought that he had become one robot fleeing from another.

He reached the ruins of the former pleasure city and flung himself into the dark maw of a shattered doorway and dodged behind the sagging lintel, just in time to see the robot wheel

into sight over the last elevation of ground and halt in a puzzlement that seemed almost human.

It was too good to be true, too fortuitous that he had outrun it again and found another shelter. He could not shake off the feeling that he was being played out like a fish on a line, in order to prolong the sport.

He heard a faint humming and peered upward through a crack in the wall. The yacht had swung low and was circling over the ruins, while the horrible insect-like head of the robot, bristling with antennas and detection apparatus, flickered with many-colored lights and gave off whirring and whistling noises.

More new programming. Time was running out, for the hunters as well as the hunted. Pierce looked again at his watch: forty-five minutes left. And he found himself again repressing the doubt that Duplessis would live up to his word.

He had been disillusioned once already. At the outset of the hunt, which seemed hours

ago instead of a mere seventy-five minutes, he had entertained the fatuous hope that it was just a grim joke, morbid but not fatal. *Surely they would not let the robot kill him if it caught up with him, so he thought.*

Until he saw the rust-red stains on the surgical claws—clues as to how the last hunt had ended. Obviously they had left the stains on, to disabuse him of any false hopes of last-minute mercy. They wanted him to put up a realistic struggle for survival. They found no thrill in make-believe. In this latter-day Roman arena, there were no *paper-mache* lions.

He took advantage of the one-way conversation between the robot and the yacht to look around the interior of his latest hideout. The rotted, crumbling walls still held patches of bright, radioactive paints, fragments and hints of former frescoes that would have put the notorious walls of ancient Pompeii to shame. But Pierce had no time or inclination to contemplate the varied diver-

sions that they flaunted before his restless eyes.

It had been a great banquet-and-orgy hall. Around the great table that ran its dusty length—a once-groaning festive board weighed down with all the delicacies of three worlds—charred skeletons sat or sprawled in the positions in which sudden death had joined them at the feast, over fifty years before; their huge and shadowy eye-sockets gazed down in eternal hunger at the sooted platters set before them, heaped high with crumbling cinders spiced heavily with ashes and dust.

As his eyes adapted to the interior gloom, Jon made out the shape of a grand staircase at the far end—a flight of blackened marble steps leading to some upper floor or suite. Grimacing with distaste at his grim company, he tiptoed past the rows of silent, fleshless guests.

Even here, in the ruins of former opulence and grandeur he felt out of place, uninvited, and the feeling forged his softening will into a new steeliness. What they had enjoyed, he

would enjoy, and nothing would stop him. He looked at his watch: forty minutes to go.

His footsteps muffled by the thick layers of dust that overlay the mosaic floor, he made his way to the staircase and ascended. Near the top, one of the crumbling risers gave way beneath his weight, and he barely succeeded in grabbing the wrought iron balustrade, pulling himself up hand over hand until he stood, shaking with fatigue, on the upper level.

He heaved a sigh of relief. Surely it could not follow him up here, on wheels, and with the stairs in that condition—they would not support the weight of five hundred pounds of robot. But he would take no chances. He sank to the floor as gently as he could and lay on his side, breathing in quick, soft gasps, and watching the dim outline of the entrance on the floor below.

IT had not lost much time. He heard the crunch of wheels on rubble; moving and stopping, then moving again,

as its battery of detectors picked up his spoor. Then there was a sudden glint of metal in the waning light outside the doorway, and a dreadful bulk stood limned in the sickly glow of twilight, a half-shadowy nightmare form whose very obscurity aroused more imagined horrors than if it had been in full sunlight.

He thought he could make out impatient twitchings of its surgical limbs, somehow like the palsied tremblings of an eager old man, half-witted but cruel and cunning, longing for the feel of trembling flesh. He could hear faint humming and clicking sounds, as if it were talking to itself.

Then—catastrophe. Jon sneezed.

A small but blinding beacon sprang into life on top of the knobby bulge that served as a head and swept over the charnel hall. Motors sprang into action with a muted roar that sounded like an exclamation of triumph, and the robot rolled forward, swinging its light in frenzied sweeps around the great hall so that blinding light alternated with sooty darkness

in Jon's eyes; until the painted figures on the walls seemed to writhe in an obscene dance and the skeletons twitched in their rotting chairs.

The automaton swept forward to the staircase, its flailing arms smashing at the startled dead until splintered bones flew through the air and skulls skidded through the dust and ashes.

It halted its triumphal march at the foot of the staircase and swept the new obstruction with its beam of polarized light. From his vantage point, Jon could look down on the busy control center of the death machine, closer than he had ever been to it since the hour when both had been set loose on the surface of Sybaris. From here he could make out a camera-like aperture with a great, gleaming lens of an eye, and knew that television pictures were being transmitted to the mother ship outside.

The message was received and the invisible answer sped back through the ether. There came a series of sharp clicks and then the three wheels fell away, revealing short, stumpy

legs terminating in broad discs for feet. The robot began to mount the stairs, slowly, inexorably, with ground-shaking tread, like the terrible golem of ancient times.

Jon did not wait to see whether the steps would support its weight, nor if it would negotiate the jagged hole that had opened up under his own feet.

He leaped to his feet and ran down the long corridor to the end, where three closed doors were barely visible in the thickening gloom. The first two were locked. The third opened to his fumbling touch and he almost fell inside. He slammed the door shut and groped for a bolt or lock of some kind, found a heavy metal bar and shot it home.

He leaned against the inside of the door, breathing heavily. Outside, silence had fallen again; he could not make out whether the robot had been stalled at the hole in the stairs or now stood on the upper landing and tried to pick up his trail.

He struck a match to inspect

the condition of his barricade, and in the flickering light saw something white and oblong tacked to the heavy oak panelling of the door. He held the match closer, and felt as if he had been plunged into ice-water. It was a small card, containing an inscription in a neat hand:

ABANDON HOPE ALL
YE WHO ENTER HERE!

The match sputtered and died, and the darkness that then descended was no blacker than his despair.

In a sudden frenzy, lighting match after match, he ran from wall to wall, exploring the surface concealed by heavy black drapes. Behind one of them he found a small door and flung it open eagerly and found himself in a once luxurious bathroom with a sunken bath of black marble. But this too was a dead end. The search was futile. Both rooms were windowless. The chase was nearing its end.

And as if to mock him again, another dusty little placard winked at him from a tarnished mirror over the wash basin:

POISON INSIDE WITH
THE COMPLIMENTS OF
THE HOUSE.

He realized now that they had anticipated every move. How many hunted predecessors of his had wound up in this cul-de-sac? The placards indicated that the trap had been set up long ago and used before, perhaps many times. It was a perfect coffin into which the killers had driven him. Duplessis could well afford to give his solemn promise to pay off—if. He had nothing to lose. The match went out and left him in darkness.

Jon sank to the floor in despair and buried his face in his hands, his mind full of paralyzing images of himself in the unbreakable clutch of the robot, bathed in the cold and merciless light of its headlamp, while the grisly instruments did their work before the television eye.

And doubtless, in the hovering pleasure yacht, the thrill-seekers would lol on silken cushions, feasting on rare viands while his flesh was torn and drinking red wines while his blood was spilled.

THEN, when he thought he had hit rock-bottom in his courage and resources, he began to rise to the surface again. A cold rage electrified his brain and steeled his weary body for a final effort. First, he would need a steady light of some kind in order to set up his defenses.

He felt his way out of the bath into the main room, struck one of the few remaining matches, and saw the bookcase he had passed over before in his desperate search for an exit. He snatched one of the books from the shelf, ripped out a number of dry and yellowed pages, crumpled them into a heap on the floor and set them afire.

In the corner near the bookcase he found a small wooden chair and smashed the dry and brittle wood into kindling, which he then fed carefully into the little paper fire. The flames ate greedily at the bone-dry wood and caught on; the fire grew larger.

On top of this, in turn, he placed rungs from the chair in criss-cross fashion and blew on them tenderly, almost lovingly,

until they too were crackling briskly. Now he had a fairly good source of light to work by.

He stood up and looked around. Everything now must be grist to the mill of his racing mind. There was nothing that could not serve some purpose, if only it was viewed with the right *gestalt*, or coordinating frame of thought. Everything was a tool to be used. Only trial would determine its adequacy.

He thought to look at his watch again and felt a thrill run through his veins. Only twenty minutes to go! Then he shrugged the thought aside as being of only academic interest. He could not afford to rely on the element of time or on the plighted word of gentlefolk, with whom he had heretofore not the slightest acquaintance.

He grinned tightly as he recalled the airy promises of Duplessis and the enigmatic smile of the gorgeous brunette. To hell with them all! But enough of that for now...

In the flickering light of the small bonfire, he surveyed hi

resources with a cynical eye: one bookcase, a heavy brocaded divan (quite useless as a barricade, he knew—the five hundred pound robot would easily push it aside), one other fragile wooden chair—

The floor quivered beneath his feet, and at the same time the heavy clumping resumed at the far end of the upper floor and approached his hiding place, growing louder as it neared, until it took on the dimensions of distant thunder. It had negotiated the shaky stairs and then detected the heat from his fire, and that was clue enough for it. . .

—and a number of large and heavy drapes. A plan formed swiftly in his mind. He panted and sweated in the smoke-filled atmosphere as he dragged the heavy divan to the nearest wall. He mounted it gingerly, clouds of dust rising beneath his feet from the rotting cushions, but the springs did not give way. His heart leaped as he heard a tentative scratching at the outside of the door. His mechanical nemesis was trying to turn the latch.

Exploring the tops of the

drapes, he found that they hung from traverse rods on heavy metal hooks. He detached three of them, dragged them over to the door, and hung them precariously by their hooks from the broad lintel. He gave an experimental tug and, to his immense satisfaction, they came loose easily and collapsed at his feet in heavy folds.

Then he heard the sound of retreating robotic feet, and knew that the monster was drawing back a short distance in order to gain momentum and smash its way through the door. He quickly replaced the drapes in front of the door and then, calculating rapidly, drew back the bolt and stepped to one side.

“Be my guest,” he gritted out between clenched teeth.

The retreating footsteps stopped; there was a moment of portentous silence, and then the thing hurled itself rapidly down the corridor in a floor-shaking run and crashed against the door. It gave way with an ease that was unexpected and swung wide on its hinges. There was a moment

of breath-stifling terror while the barrel body loomed huge in the doorway and its many-jointed appendages reached out eagerly. Then—the drapes fell, covering the robot from head to foot, extinguishing its light, tangling in its limbs.

Its own momentum carried it on into the center of the room, where it whirled about angrily, buzzing and clicking, while the appendages struggled to be free of the blinding, hampering drapes. Jon coolly stepped through the open door and closed it behind him.

WHEN he emerged into the corridor and descended the grand staircase, night had fallen on Sybaris. He picked his way almost light-headedly through the great festive hall, treading on bones and kicking skulls from his path. He stepped outside at last and breathed deeply of the chilly air, ridding his lungs of smoke and spitting the taste of death out of his mouth.

The artificial moonlet of Sybaris, still glowing after half a century with its atom-powered luminescence, spun

lazing five miles overhead and tinted the silent ruins with an eerie green.

Jon made his way down the fissured streets until he found another building more to his liking—one with several floors and many windows, from which he could jump if necessary. He did not know yet whether the chase was truly over.

He sat in an open window from which the panes of glass had long since vanished, and gazed up at the space yacht, which seemed to be circling about uncertainly, as if wondering what had happened both to the robot and its prey.

At last the distant humming grew louder and Jon could make out a row of lighted portholes as the ship settled to the ground just outside the ruins. A larger hole appeared in the side and poured out light, and a ramp swung out and down until it touched the ground.

Several figures emerged and descended, among them a tall figure that Jon assumed to be Duplessis. They entered the death trap he had so recently

escaped. It was then that he thought to look at his watch again, and in the green glow of the little moon saw that the two hours had elapsed, plus five minutes.

Shortly after, the figures emerged again from the wrecked building, followed by the robot, whose appendages seemed to hang dejectedly at its sides for all the world as if it had been chastised for its failure. The figures huddled in a group just outside the ship as if in consultation, and Jon could hear the faint murmur of voices. Then somebody went inside. A few seconds later a loudspeaker blared out.

"JON PIERCE, YOU HAVE WON! PLEASE REVEAL YOURSELF!"

He smiled grimly, but kept his silence. The message was repeated, then was followed by the assurance that the agreement would be kept. Then a feminine voice followed, cool and velvety: "Don't be a fool, Jon. Please show yourself. Nothing will happen to you."

Five more minutes elapsed, and then the men outside the ship were joined by three

more, making six in all. They fanned out through the ruins, carrying flashlights in one hand and what seemed to be weapons in the other. Jon nodded grimly to himself. He knew it would be this way! And he didn't know how he would get away this time. Robots could be outwitted. Men were much more dangerous.

He waited until he heard cautious footsteps on the floor below, then lowered himself out the window, hung briefly by his fingertips, then let go. The two-storey drop almost knocked the wind out of him, but he picked himself up and discovered that no bones were broken or ligaments torn. He crept on cat feet down the alley between two buildings, keeping to the bilious shadows cast by the green moonlet. He ducked into a doorway as a swinging light approached, waited until it disappeared from sight.

A few hundred feet away, a man's voice called out again: "If you can hear us, Pierce, for God's sake come out and show yourself! We can't leave you behind to starve!"

A good point, thought Jon. If he succeeded in eluding them, and they left him behind, he had only put off the end for a little while longer. He had to plan on action of some sort.

Working on the assumption that all the male members of the crew were out looking for him, he doubled back and headed for the pleasure yacht. Once inside, he could force the woman to pilot the craft for him; or, if she did not know how, he could hold her as a hostage and allow the admittance of one competent pilot. Once he was safely back on earth, one of the crew could return to Sybaris and pick up the members stranded there.

He almost succeeded. He stood in the doorway of the ship, congratulating himself on his stratagem and enjoying the startled look on the brunette's face, when he heard a tiny *zing* and felt a needle-sharp something nestle between his shoulder blades.

The prick was almost instantly replaced by an area of numbness that spread with astonishing rapidity—indeed, be-

fore he could even turn around or cry out—and plunged his brain into swift sleep. He barely had time to complete the indignant thought that this was not fair—not fair at all. . .

HE woke up with considerable surprise. He was still alive! He felt a cot beneath him and a light blanket thrown over him. There was no sensation of weightlessness. He could only assume he was back on earth. He sat up and surveyed the cubicle that confined him, when the door opened and Seigneur Duplessis entered, followed by the brunette and one other man.

Jon was startled. They were all clad in simple, form-fitting grey tunics. No jewels, no furs, no silks. And the languid expressions had vanished from their faces, to be replaced by a new look, one of grim determination and supernormal alertness.

Jon stood up, surprised by his own clear-headedness and re-found strength. He said in a clear voice: "Seigneur Duplessis, I have passed the trial by terror successfully beyond the

two hour time limit. I claim the reward of ten thousand credits, sir."

The older man smiled. "Sit down, son," he said, and pressed Jon firmly but gently back on the cot. "You'll get the ten thousand credits, but in twelve installments."

Jon looked blank, then indignant, and started to protest. The Seigneur turned to the brunette. "I think it is time for correct introductions."

"With pleasure," she acquiesced quietly. "Jon Pierce, meet *Colonel Duplessis* of Federated Worlds Police, Mars department." She gestured to the second man. "His aide, Captain Rademacher. And I am Lieutenant Hardinger—Sandra for short, if you wish."

"*You're from the FWP?*" Jon gasped.

"I'm afraid so," Colonel Duplessis admitted.

"Then what in the name of heaven was all this—this—hunting business?" Jon sputtered, half angry, half disappointed, as he saw his dreams of luxury and high society fly out the window. "Why did you try to kill me?"

"Look," Captain Rademacher interposed, nodding apologetically at the Colonel for the interruption, "the Solar System is in a desperate state—the earth is just one part of the big worry picture. Outlaws band together and tear and nibble away at the fringes of interplanetary society, like packs of rats. Local tyrants set themselves up wherever they can on the outer planets and moons and defy the Federation.

"On top of that, unscrupulous money-grabbers have been selling weapons and even small space craft to the Venusian natives—we can soon expect trouble from that corner. We can barely keep the lid on the whole bubbling mess."

"I feel for you," Jon broke in impatiently, "but come to the point."

"The point, Exactly." The brunette turned a dazzling smile on him. "The Federated Worlds Police is always in need of good men, for replacements if nothing else, let alone augmenting the present forces. If we fail, the whole System collapses in chaos. Law and or-

der and unity would break down, and in the not distant future, wars between the planets would be the next step."

"So I have been selected to volunteer?" Jon replied with sarcasm. "No thanks! I didn't bargain for a uniform!"

"I think you should know," the Colonel said softly (but Jon could detect the iron beneath the velvet glove), "that I have extraordinary powers of decision and action—*soldier*," and he emphasized the last word significantly. "You can volunteer your services, or you can be compelled. Considering your performance on the—ah—field of battle, we would rather have you as a volunteer than as a draftee."

"But why the elaborate rigmorole?" Jon asked, this time with more respect in his voice.

Colonel Duplessis sighed. "If you had had time to think it through, you would realize why. The challenges to the FWP are on a superhuman scale and demand the services of rather unusual men—men of great energy, determination, stamina, and intelligence. All of which you showed in good

measure, I might add." Jon felt a warm glow suffuse his body at this praise.

"Now," the Colonel continued patiently, in the manner of a man who has told the same story many times before, "in order to find men of this type, we must put potential applicants through the most stringent tests, demanding of them the last ounce of courage and skill. Hence the farce of the sadistic nobleman and the hunting robot.

"If the selected—ah—rookie is the word I believe they used two centuries ago—if he knew that he was being tested for a position with an agency of law, he would blithely assume that he was never in any *real* danger, and that at the very end he would be snatched from the jaws of death. We would never know the man's reactions to genuine stress and danger, nor whether he was demonstrating his true potentialities."

Jon looked at the weary but strong face of the Colonel, the youthful energy of his aide—and, last but not least, the sincere and lightly smiling eyes of

Sandra. He frowned in the expectant silence that had fallen among the four of them, feeling his resentment melting away and his indecision giving way to a feeling of respect and camaraderie for these people.

He kissed his adolescent dreams goodbye, and became a man. "I accept," he said simply.

The Colonel slapped his thighs with satisfaction and stood up. "Signed, sealed, and delivered," he exclaimed. "Good boy!"

Captain Rademacher and Sandra followed their chief to the door. "Tomorrow," added the Colonel, standing in the doorway, "you will begin your *real* training, and will be introduced to the other members of your squadron," and he turned to leave.

"Er—sir?" Jon called after the tall, gaunt form.

Colonel Duplessis looked over his shoulder. "Yes?"

Jon frowned. "What if I had taken the poison that was supposed to be in the medicine

chest in that damned bathroom back on Sybaris—or was it really poison?"

The colonel's eyes grew very piercing, and his voice was like a rod of steel. "We had measured our man and knew he would not take the coward's way out. Oh yes, there was a deadly drug in the vial. This is not a game for children." He shrugged. "But we could probably have got to you in time, made you puke with a shot of emetine intravenously, and in due time returned you safe and sound to your little flat and your mess of pot-tage."

Jon shuddered a little. "And the robot," he added quickly, before Duplessis could leave; "the robot—would it really have tried to slice me up if it caught me?"

"Well," the Colonel replied, with a thin smile, "since it didn't happen, you'll never know for sure, will you?"

He went out, closing the door quietly behind him.

THE END