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NOVEMBER

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MAC II

**COUNTER-PSYCH:** Complete Novel by Charles Eric Maine

**METEOR STRIKE !**

by Donald E. Westlake



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NOVEMBER, 1961 Vol. 35, No. 11

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Cover: ALEX SCHOMBURG

SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE: All subscription correspondence should be addressed to AMAZING STORIES, Circulation Department, 434 South Wabash Avenue, Chicago 5, Illinois. Please allow at least six weeks for change of address. Include your old address, as well as new—enclosing if possible an address label from a recent issue.

EDITORIAL CONTRIBUTIONS must be accompanied by return postage and will be handled with reasonable care; however publisher assumes no responsibility for return or safety of art work, photographs or manuscripts.

ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY

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Ziff-Davis Publishing Company

Editorial and Executive Office

One Park Avenue

New York 16, New York

ORegon 9-7200

Advertising Manager

MARTIN GLUCKMAN

Midwestern and Circulation Office

434 South Wabash Avenue

Chicago 5, Illinois

WAbash 2-4911

Western Office

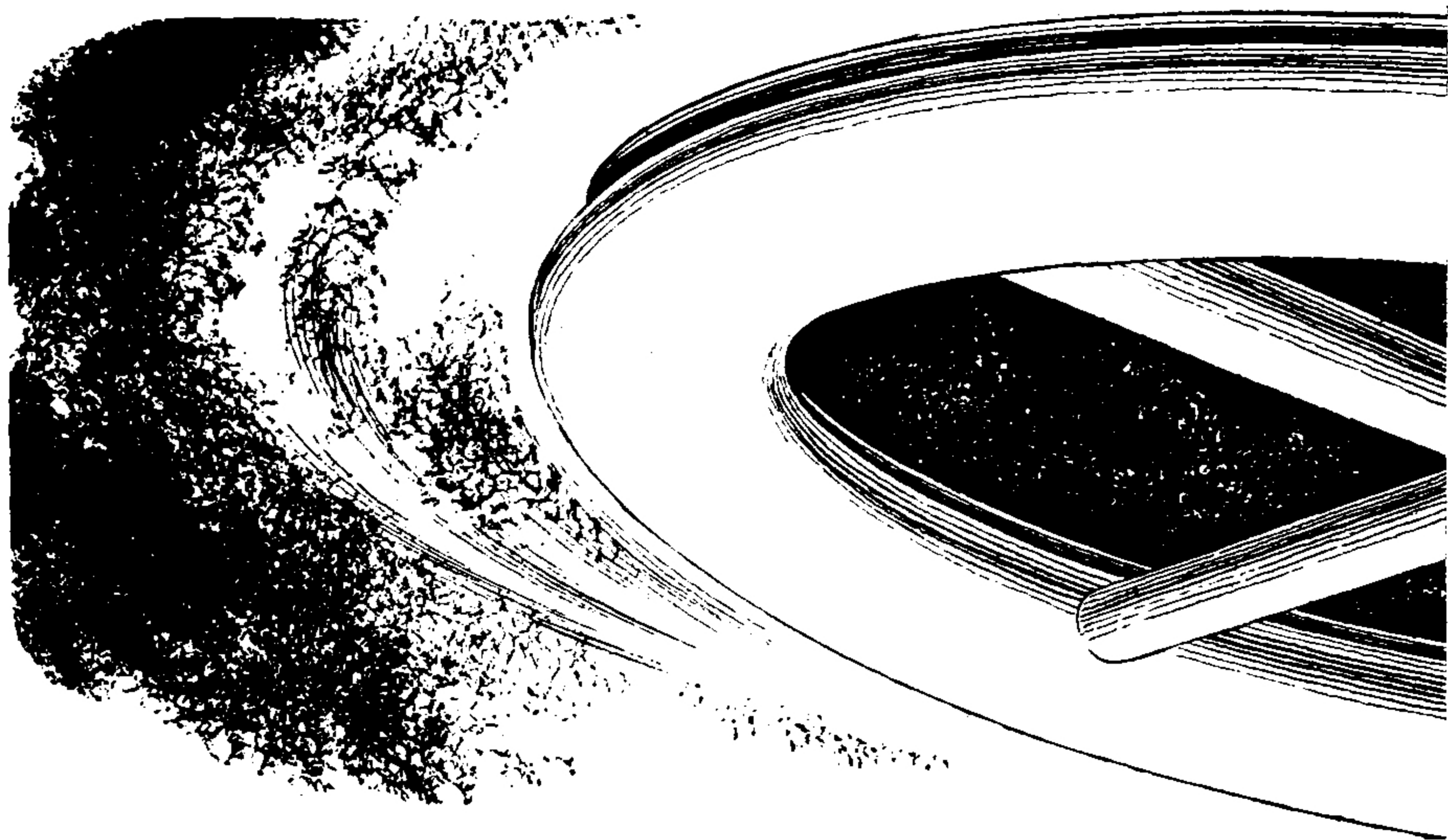
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# ***METEOR STRIKE!***

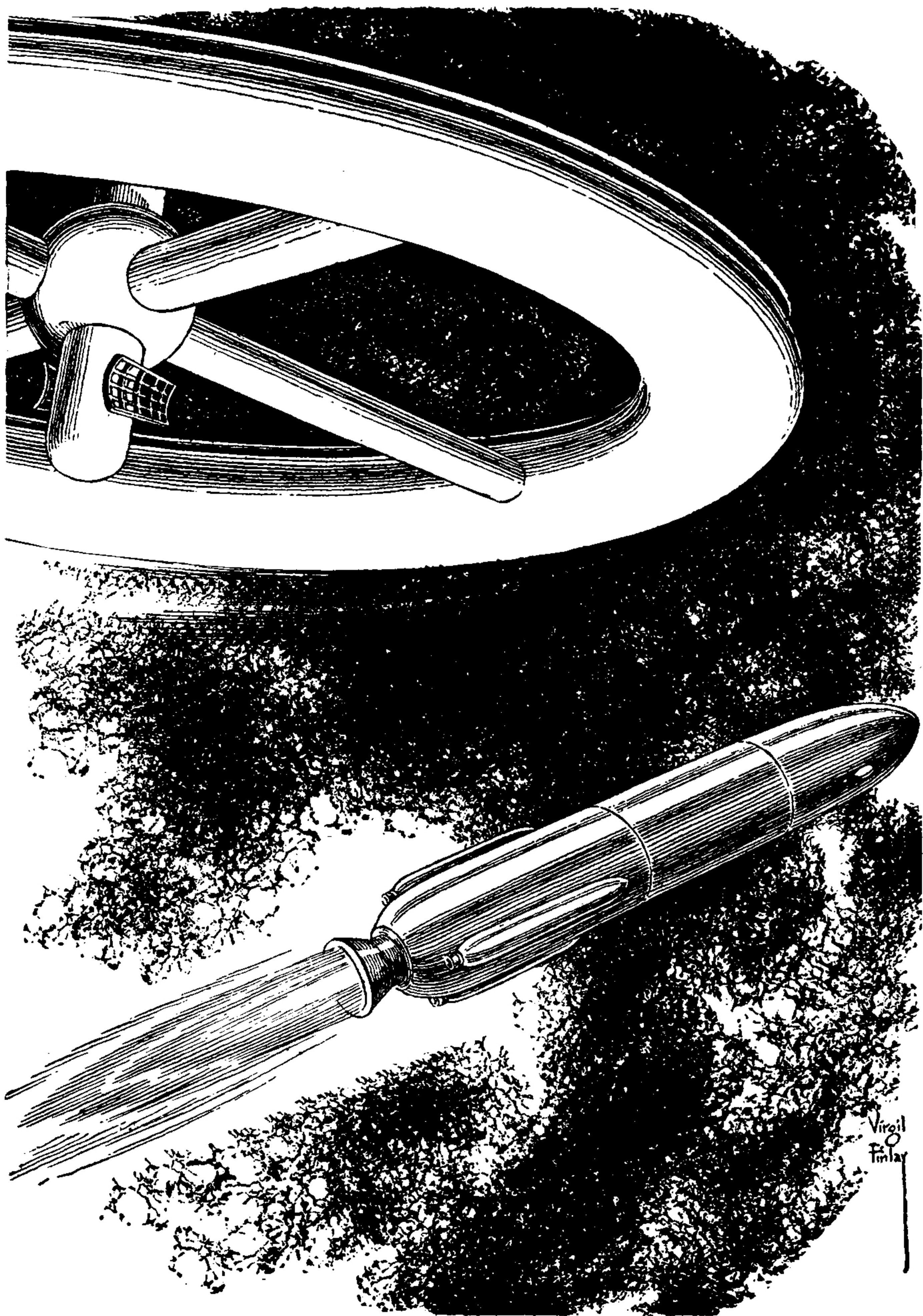
**By DONALD E. WESTLAKE**

Illustrated by FINLAY

***Harvey Ricks had always bit off more than he cared to chew. Somehow, he had always managed to chew, and swallow. Now, standing for the first time in the vacuum of Space, he wondered if this was the bite that would choke him.***

**T**HE CARGO was crated for delivery at Los Angeles, where the workers didn't consider it anything special. In the company where they worked, this particular cargo was of the type called a

Standing Repeater. That is, a new order was shipped out every six months, regular as clockwork. First the order department mailed off a suggested list of specifications to the General



Virgil  
Finlay

Transits, Ltd. main office in Tangiers. Next, the list came back, usually with a few substitutions inked in, and was sent down to LA, to the warehouse, for the specific items to be crated for shipment.

There were seven aluminum crates in the cargo, each a three-foot cube. Aluminum was still the lightest feasible crating material, and this cargo was destined for the Quartermaster Base orbiting the Moon.

The seven crates left the warehouse by helicopter and were flown north to the airport midway between LA and San Francisco. There they spent thirty-two hours in another warehouse before being flown to the Tangiers Poe. (Even in nomenclature, Man made it apparent that his thoughts these days were ever outward, away from Earth. The spaceport on Earth was called Tangiers Poe, which stood for Port Of Embarkation. The spaceport on the Moon was called Moon Pod, for Port Of Debarkation. It was as though Man didn't want to admit that he still had to make the round trip.)

The cargo arrived at the Tangiers Poe a day ahead of schedule, and spent one more night in a warehouse. Across the field, the four lighters from Station One were being unloaded. Their cargo was almost exclusively manufactured items from the factories on

the Moon. Manufacturers had discovered, to their astonishment, that the lighter gravity and the accessible vacuum and the ready availability of free raw materials on the Moon more than offset the additional cost of labor and buildings and transportation. In the last fifteen years, the Moon had become studded with heavily-automated factories, producing everything from delicate electronic equipment to razor blades. Though human exploitation of the Moon had begun as a military venture, back in the late nineteen-sixties, by 1994 it had been taken over almost completely by commercial interests.

A few of the cartons being unloaded across the field were samples or data from the scientific teams on the Moon. These teams, all affiliated with one university or another, were for the most part supported by the manufacturers themselves. As at all times in the past, commercial business success had been shortly followed by commercial philanthropy. A part of the profits of what one newspaper columnist had dubbed the Moonufacturers were shiphoned off to give scientists an opportunity and a freedom for research and investigation unavailable through any short-range Government grant.

There were as yet no tourist facilities either for travel to the Moon nor for a stay on the Moon.

A rumor was current that a number of hotel and restaurant corporations were banding together to found a Moon resort, but so far nothing had come of it.

The seven aluminum crates spent the night in the Poe warehouse, and in the morning were turned over to Glenn Blair, whose charge they would be for the next thirty-three days, until they reached the Quartermaster Base.

GLENN BLAIR was a big man, big-boned and fully-fleshed, with a short-cropped head of light hair. Thirty-four years of age, he had been for the last seven years one of the two Chief Cargomasters for General Transits, Ltd., the franchised operator of the Earth-Moon transportation system.

He came into the warehouse now with Cy Braddock, the Poe Cargo Chief, and the two of them compared the stacked crates half-filling the warehouse with the manifest flimsies attached to Braddock's, checking off each item as they found it. When they came to the seven crates from Los Angeles, Blair said, "Cargo for QB. Let's see, what's the specification?" He read the line on the manifest, and grinned. "I forgot it was time for another shipment. Six months already." He patted the nearest of the seven crates. "The

boys at QB will be happy to see you fellas," he said.

Braddock looked over his shoulder and read the specification. "What's so important about that stuff? I thought that was low priority."

"Check your regs, Cy. These fellas are priority number one. If they don't get to QB, there'll be hell to pay. Within a month, QB would be more dangerous than a cannibal village."

Braddock shook his head. "You people have a funny set of values," he said. "The more I know about you, the happier I am to stay right here. Come on, let's finish the checkout and get loading. Takeoff is scheduled for eleven-seventeen."

They finished the first checking of the cargo, and went on out of the shed and across the sunbaked tarmac toward the lighter. The Tangiers Poe was a great concrete oval, ringed by warehouse sheds and repair huts and administration buildings. All of Earth's space shipping was conducted here, close to the Mediterranean coast of North Africa, where perfect flight conditions were rarely marred by clouds or rain or cold. Where flight plans include three variables—a lighter moving from a moving Earth to a moving Space Station—no one can afford delays caused by bad weather.

In the shed, the cargo handlers

loaded small open-sided carts, which were then driven across the field to the lighter. The cargo for QB came out on the second cart, and Glenn Blair supervised its careful stowing and tying down in the hold, then made the second check after its specification line on the manifest. The first checkmark meant that he had found the seven crates in undamaged condition in the shed. The second one meant that he had accepted delivery onto the lighter. Eight more checkmarks would be made before the cargo was finally delivered to QB.

All cargo and personnel traveling between the Earth and the Moon made the trip in five stages. Stage One was transit from the surface of the Earth to the Space Station, aboard a torpedo-shaped ship familiarly known as a lighter. Stage Two was aboard the Station, during its fifteen-day trip from perigee, four hundred miles up, to apogee, eighty-four thousand miles from Earth. (Space Stations One and Two circled the Earth, one at perigee whenever the other was at apogee, so that a shipment left for the Moon every fifteen days.) Stage three was via a ship technically known as V-T-V (vacuum-to-vacuum) but informally called the Barbell, because of its shape. This stage also took fifteen days, and covered sixty-two thousand miles, terminating at

its meeting with Space Station Three, eighty-four thousand miles from the Moon. Station Three orbited the Moon every fifteen days, so that this lap of the trip, Stage Four, took seven and a half days. And finally Stage Five, via another lighter, was from Station Three at perigee two hundred fifty miles above the Moon to the surface of the Moon itself or, as in the case of the seven aluminum crates from Los Angeles, from Station Three to Quartermaster Base, the maintenance satellite for the whole system, in permanent orbit two hundred miles above the surface of the Moon.

Although it had taken four lighters, this trip, to bring down to the Poe the shipment of manufactured goods and scientific samples from the Moon, only one lighter was required for the return shipment. The Moon colony was not yet self-supporting, but the first steps in that direction had already been made. A part of the colony's food was home-grown, hydroponically. New plant buildings and new machinery were built right on the Moon, by firms whose only customers were other Moon companies. Clothing and furnishings were made of synthetics.

Most of the Moon-bound cargo was paperwork, of one sort or another. There was the fifteen days accumulation of mail for the

Moon personnel, sheafs of new product specifications for the managers of the Moon plants, financial reports, and so on. The rest, except for the cargo for QB, was primarily food, meat and dairy products and other foods unavailable through hydroponics. There were also three engineers, new employees of Interplanetal Business Machines, replacing three men whose two year contracts were ending and who would be coming back to Earth on the next transit.

BLAIR greeted the three men at the lighter ramp, checking their names and identity cards against the manifest and then saying, "My name's Blair, Glenn Blair. I'm Cargomaster on this trip, and you boys are part of the cargo. You've got any questions or problems, bring them to me. I'm liaison between you and the rest of the Transit personnel. Okay?"

One of the engineers said, "If we decide we can't take it we shouldn't bug the working types, is that it?"

"You're Ricks? Yes, Ricks, that's exactly it. None of you people have been off-planet before, so you can't make any sure statements about how you'll act. A good quarter of our first-time passengers are plenty scared. It's nothing to be ashamed of. If any of you feel it getting to you

come to me. Don't try to burrow your way through the wall, don't try to kill yourself, don't go running around screaming. We've had all of that, at one time or another, and it plays merry hell with the working day."

Ricks grinned. "If I need a shoulder to cry on, Mister Blair," he said, "I'll run straight to you."

"You do that. Come on, I'll show you your quarters."

Blair led the way up the ramp and into the lighter. The bottom half of the ship was engine and fuel-space, and most of the upper half was cargo hold, leaving only two levels at the top for human occupancy. The uppermost level was the control room, with passenger space on the level beneath.

The three engineers, Ricks in the lead, followed Blair up the inside ladder to the second level, a smallish circular room with twelve bunks, in tiers of three, around the walls. The center space was empty.

"There's only four of us," said Blair, "so we can all take middle bunks. The middle's best; there's less noise and vibration."

"Beds for the babies, is that it?" said Ricks.

Blair grinned at him. "You wouldn't want to be standing up when we blast," he said. "Now, you lie face down in these bunks. This indentation is for your

knees, and this pillow up here is for your chin. You hold onto these handles here, in front of the pillow, and you brace your feet against this bar back here. Just before we blast, you dig your chin down into that pillow hard. If you have your mouth open, you're liable to get up to the Station minus a few teeth. In front of each bunk here, you see these three lights. The green one means you can relax, talk if you want to, readjust your position, whatever you want. The orange one means a blast within one minute, and the red one means a blast within ten seconds. The red one stays on throughout a blast. Okay?"

Ricks said, "The company had us play with these cribs. They filled us in pretty good."

"I'm glad to hear that. I'm always pleased to get my human cargo to the Pod alive. Let's get into the bunks now and get ourselves ready. Blast is due in a couple minutes."

Blair saw to it that the three engineers were properly situated in their bunks, and then he crawled into the one nearest Ricks. He had the feeling that young man would be needing his hand held in just a few minutes.

**H**ARVEY Ricks was not a cry-baby. Way back in grammar school, he was known as the kid who couldn't be made to cry. A

lot of the other kids tried it, and some of them were pretty ingenious, but no one ever succeeded. Harvey Ricks was not a crybaby.

He didn't cry when he flunked out of MIT, either, in the first semester of his sophomore year. He wanted to, God knows, but he didn't. He simply packed his gear and went on home, and spent six months thinking it over. Until the MIT fiasco, schoolwork had always come readily to him. He'd never had to do much studying, and so he'd never learned the methods or picked up the habit. He'd managed to breeze through his secondary schooling with natural intelligence and smooth glibness, and he'd tried the same technique at college. It hadn't worked.

During those six months at home, he'd learned *why* it hadn't worked. He still had his textbooks, and he spent a lot of time with them, not so much out of a desire to learn as out of a nostalgia for the school that had rejected him. Gradually he began to see where he'd gone wrong. He was at a level of learning now where natural intuition and glibness weren't enough. There were facts and concepts and relationships in those textbooks that he just couldn't pick up in a rapid glossing of the subject matter, and there were other things in the textbooks that he couldn't even understand until he had a

sure grip on the earlier work.

Six months of brain-beating in his own home finally did for him what thirteen years of formal schooling had not done; it taught him *how* to study, and it taught him *why* to study. At the end of that time, he was accepted by a lesser engineering school in the northeastern United States, and this time he did it right.

In this second school, however, he was known as the boy who'd flunked out of MIT. It was much the same as his reputation for non-crying in childhood. He hadn't really wanted, then, to be known as the boy who wouldn't cry—all he'd really wanted was for people not to try to make him cry. But he hadn't known how to manage that, and so he'd built up a brittle sort of bravado, a challenging attitude that was actually only the other side of the crying coin.

The bravado was still his only defense when he was known as the boy who'd flunked out of MIT. His whole attitude seemed to say, "So what? I'm still a smarter better engineer than all the rest of you clods combined, and that goes for you fourth-rate teachers, too." As a result, he had plenty of time for studying. No one at school was particularly anxious for his company.

The funny part of it was that he was right. As a child, the other kids *couldn't* make him cry.

As an engineering student, he *was* better than anyone else in his class. After two semesters, with a string of 'A' marks to his credit, he re-applied at MIT and was accepted on a probationary basis. He graduated seventh in his class—held back only by his poor freshman marks—and was immediately snapped up by Interplanetal Business Machines.

Interplanetal ran him through the normal engineer trainee courses, familiarizing him with the company's line of equipment. He sailed through, fascinated by this actual concrete usage of what had been only theoretical knowledge at school, and since he finished first in his class he was given his choice of geographical area of assignment.

By now, bravado was an ingrained characteristic of Harvey Ricks. Interplanetal maintained a Moon Division, which built computers and office equipment for lease to the other Moon industries, and all personnel there were volunteers on a two-year contract. It was inevitable that Harvey Ricks would volunteer.

THROUGHOUT his life, bravado had made him do what he could but didn't want to do. He *could* hold the tears back, though he didn't want to have to, and his attitude had forced him to prove it, time and time again. He *could* buckle down and study, though

he'd have preferred to loaf, and his own challenge to his classmates had forced him to do it. He *could* spend two years on the Moon, though he would much rather have lived that time in New York or San Jose, and so here he was on his way to the Moon.

He tried to stop himself from being such a wise guy, but he always failed. Before he knew what was happening, he'd have his mouth wide open and his foot in it up to the knee. Like with this Cargomaster, Blair. He hadn't *wanted* to bait the man, he hadn't wanted to show off and act the smart-aleck, but he'd done it just the same. If, at any time in the next month of the journey, he felt himself slipping, he'd have no one to stiffen his backbone for him but himself. If he'd only kept his mouth shut and minded his own business, he could have relaxed, knowing that an older and wiser hand was always there, ready and willing to help him keep his balance. This way, as usual, he had put himself in the position where he had to rely totally on himself.

Lying face down in the bunk, chin on the squarish foam-rubber pillow, he eyed the three lights in front of him grimly and silently cursed himself for forty-seven kinds of fool. He was the reverse of the boy who cried wolf too much. He cried wolf too

seldom. One of these days he would send all the hunters away and a wolf would come along too big for him to handle by himself. That day, Harvey Ricks would have his reckoning.

He wondered if the day was coming sometime in the next month.

The orange light flashed on.

Behind him, the voice of the Cargomaster came softly, talking to them all. "You fellows take it easy now," he was saying. "Breathe deep and slow. Don't get all tensed up. Don't hold on to those handles so tight you bunch your shoulder muscles all up. Don't try to kick those foot bars right off the bunks. Just relax. If you tense your bodies all up, you'll take a lot worse licking than if you just lie easy. You can get yourselves a broken bone just by being too tense when we blast. Inhale slow and easy, now. Exhale slow and easy. Just keep a light grip on the handles, lie easy and relaxed, like you were going to doze off in a minute."

The voice droned softly in the small room, and Ricks knew the man was trying to relax them just by the sound of his voice. But for Ricks, with his perverse bravado, it had just the opposite effect. His body kept tensing up and tensing up, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. His hands, gripping the chrome-plated handles as though they

would snap them in two, were sweating already, and his shoulders were aching with strain. His feet pushed so hard against the bar that his knees were completely off the bunk.

*I'm going to panic, he thought, I'm going to scream. I'm going to jump up off this bunk and get myself killed when we blast.*

Only shame kept him in the bunk, only shame kept the scream unsounded in his throat. He had acted the bigshot with the Cargomaster, acted the know-it-all. He *couldn't* give in, he *couldn't* turn around and show himself a phony and a weakling.

The red light flicked on.

Sweat ribboned down his face. The back of his shirt clung to him, soaked through with perspiration. His collar was too tight, cutting off air, and his belt buckle was grinding into his middle.

He pushed his chin down into the pillow, and stared at the red light. He had to swallow, his mouth was full of saliva. But he was afraid to. If he was swallowing when the blast came, he could strangle. That had happened in the past, more than once. Perspiration stung his eyes, but he was afraid to blink. He had to keep staring at the red light, staring at the red light.

A heavy iron press slammed into his back, grinding him down into the bunk, stomping his feet

down off the bar, shoving his face into the pillow. His mouth was full of saliva, dribbling out now between his lips, staining the pillow, mixing with his perspiration. The bunched muscles of his shoulders whined in agony, and his hands, numb now, slipped from the handles and lay limp, fingers curled, before his eyes.

THE red light was still on, waving and changing as he tried to keep watching it. His eyes burned and, despite himself, the lids came down, as though weighted with heavy magnets.

With closed eyes came nausea. He had no equilibrium any more, no balance. There was no longer any up or down, there was only himself, crushed between the bunk and the heavy iron press.

He held his breath, closed his throat, kept it down. Breakfast swirled and lumped in his stomach, wanting to come up, but he kept it down. He couldn't have it, he couldn't stand it, to have the Cargomaster see him lying in his own sickness. He kept it down.

The iron press went away, with a suddenness that terrified him. He could breathe again, he could swallow, he could move his arms and legs, he could wipe the sweat out of his eyes and look at the blessed green light.

The Cargomaster was on his

feet in the middle of the room, by the ladder, saying, "Okay, fellows, that's it for a while. We'll be at a steady one-G for a while now. There'll be another little jolt in maybe twenty minutes, when we come into phase with the Station. In the meantime, you all can rest easy."

One of the other two, Standish, said timidly, "Excuse me, are there any—do you have any, uh, bags?"

"Sure thing. Right in that little slot under the light panel."

"Thank you."

"Don't feel bad. You haven't really been initiated into space till you've lost at least one meal. How are you other two doing?"

"Okay, I guess," said Miller, the third one.

"Fine. And you, Ricks?"

"I'm doing just lovely. This is a great little old roller-coaster you've got here."

Blair grinned. "I thought you'd like it," he said.

Harvey Ricks had proved himself again.

**STATION** One was leaving perigee, hurtling around the Earth on the long elliptical curve that would take it, fifteen days from now, eighty-four thousand miles towards the Moon. The lighter came curving up from Earth into the path of the Station's orbit and fifty miles ahead. As the Station overtook it, it

slowly increased its speed, until the two were neck-and-neck. Slowly, the lighter pilot maneuvered his ship closer to the station, until the magnetic grapples caught, holding the ship to the curving grid jutting out from the hatchway in the high center of the doughnut. A closed companionway slid out along the grid, attached itself to the airlock in the side of the lighter, and formed a hermetic seal. The lock was open, and the Station cargo handlers came aboard for the unloading.

The seven aluminum crates of the cargo for QB were stacked on a powered cart, driven across the companionway to the Station proper, and taken by elevator down two levels, thence down one of the three interior corridors to the outer ring, and were finally stowed in Section Five, with the rest of the shipment.

Glenn Blair and the Station Manager, Irv Mendel, oversaw the unloading, making the appropriate row of checkmarks as each item was transferred from lighter to station. Blair then went back up and got the three engineers, all of whom seemed a little shaken by this first stage of the journey, though Ricks was doing his best to hide it. "Don't worry," Blair assured them, "the worst part of the trip is done with. From now on, it's quarter-G all the way."

Standish, who had so far been sick twice and who was now holding tight to the nearest support as though afraid he might float up and out of sight any minute, grinned weakly and said, "I don't know which is worse, too much gravity or too little. Do people really get used to this?"

"In a couple of days," Blair told him, "you'll be running around as happy as a feather in an updraft. Once you get used to it, there's nothing in the universe as much fun as weighing only one-quarter what you're used to."

"I hope I get used to it soon," said Standish, "before I starve to death."

Blair led the way down the ladder and through the companionway to the Station. The three passengers were introduced to Irv Mendel, who told them how much they'd enjoy quarter-G in a couple days, and then they were shown their cubicles, in Section One, which would be their home for the next fifteen days. Their luggage—thirty-eight pounds permissable—had preceded them into the rooms, which were small but functional. There was, in each room, a bed and a chair and a small writing table, a lamp and a narrow closet and a tiny bathroom complete with shower stall and WC. The floor was uncarpeted black plastic and the walls and ceiling were cream-painted met-

al. It took the engineers a while to get used to the idea that the floor was *not* what they would have thought of as the 'bottom' of the Station from the outside. The floor of their cubicles was, on the outside, the outer edge of the Station. The center of the Station was not to the left or right, it was directly overhead.

The outer ring of the Station was divided into twelve sections. Sections Nine, Ten and Eleven housed the permanent Station personnel, including the weathermen and television relay men and so on. Sections Five, Six and Seven were cargo holds, and Sections One, Two and Three were transient quarters. (The three engineers were in Section Two.) Sections Four, Eight and Twelve contained the utilities, the sources of light and heat and air, as well as the chow hall and food storage. At the bulkhead separating each Section, floor and ceiling met at an angle of thirty degrees. A man could do a loop-the-loop simply by walking dead ahead down the main corridor until he came back to his starting point.

Once the three engineers were safely settled in their cubicles, Blair took the elevator back up to the center of the Station, where Irv Mendel was waiting for him in his office. Blair went through the same sort of paperwork as he'd done with Cy Brad-

dock, and when they were finished Mendel said, "How are these three kids? Going to give us any trouble?"

"I'm not sure. Standish has a pretty weak stomach, it may take him a while to get adjusted, but I think he'll just grin and bear it. Miller's all right. I'm not too sure about Ricks. He's pushing himself a little hard, one of these guys who wants to be an old salt before he ever gets into the water. If he cracks, he may do it in style."

Mendel leaned back in his chair, arms behind his head. "You know," he said, "when I was a kid, all I ever wanted was to get out here in space. I grew up reading about Moon-shots and orbiting satellites and I thought, 'By Golly, there's the frontier of tomorrow. There's where the adventurers are going to be, the explorers and the prospectors and the soldiers of fortune. That's the place for me, boy.' Romance and adventure, that's the way I saw it." He grinned and shook his head. "I forgot all about the twentieth century's most significant invention: Red tape. It never even occurred to me that space would be a job like this. Paperwork all over the place, schedules to meet and financial reports to make out, young fuzzy-faced kids to be nursemaided. It never even occurred to me."

"If you hate it so much," Blair told him, "why not go on back to Earth?"

"Are you kidding? Do you know what I weigh down there? Two hundred and fourteen pounds. Maybe more by now, I'm not sure. Besides, it's even worse down there. Paperwork up to your nose. It's only half that high up here. If you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean. Lighter gone?"

"Long gone. Halfway back to Earth by now. Left while you were with your Boy Scouts."

"So we're on our way again." Blair got lazily to his feet, and stretched. "After a couple days on Earth," he said, "quarter-G feels like a good quiet drunk. Think I'll go lie down in the rack and think about philosophy. See you later."

"Right. Hey, by the way."

Blair turned at the door. "By what way?"

"This is your last round trip, isn't it? Your two years are up."

"It was up last trip. I re-contracted."

Mendel grinned. "Member of the club now, huh? I thought you'd do that. Welcome aboard."

Blair shrugged self-consciously. "You know how it is," he said. "Every time I go back, Earth gets a little heavier. Besides, I like the soft life."

"You want it *really* soft," Men-

del told him, "you put in for station duty. All we do is float around and around, draw our pay, and look at the pretty scenery."

"If that boy Ricks blows up," Blair said, "we'll *both* have plenty to do. I'm going to rack out, I'll see you later."

"See you, nursemaid."

Blair took the elevator down to the outer ring, and went to his cubicle in Section Two, next to the one occupied by Ricks, across the corridor from Standish and Miller. He stretched out on his bed and half-dozed, as his body gradually got reoriented to quarter-gravity.

Twenty minutes later, the meteor hit.

**I**T SHOULD never have happened. The Station had full radar vision, and so the meteor should have been seen long before it struck. The Station was powered, and should have been able to goose itself out of the meteor's path. So it should never have happened. But it did.

It was one of those million-to-one shots. The meteor, a chunk of space-rock about six feet in diameter, had come boiling across the Solar System, past the sun and the two innermost planets, headed on a near-collision course with Earth. It had actually dipped into the Earth's atmosphere, which slowed it somewhat,

but not enough for it to be captured by Earth's gravity. It had shot out of the atmosphere again, moving more slowly than before, now redhot from atmospheric friction, and shortly thereafter it plowed into the Space Station from behind.

From the moment it had first become a potential danger to the Station, it had been unseeable. It was directly between the Station and the massive ball of Earth. It was the one thin segment of space where the radar's vision was unclear, and it was out of that segment that the juggernaut had come.

The impact could have been worse. In the first place, the meteor was not now traveling at its normal top speed. In the second place, the meteor and the Station were traveling in approximately the same direction, so that the Station, in effect, rolled with the punch. The space-rock broke through the outer hull. Whether or not it penetrated the inner hull no one was immediately sure.

The strike was in Section Five, containing the cargo, with it the seven aluminum crates for QB. At the instant of impact, even before the meteor had ground to a halt, an alarm bell rang in Section Five. The bell meant that the bulkhead doors to that section would be closed in ten seconds.

There was only one person in Section Five at the time, a crewman named Gilmore, who'd been checking the security of the lashings on the cargo. Constant strike drills had made his reaction immediate and instinctive: he ran for the nearest door. He made it, too, all but his left shoe. The bulkhead door neatly snicked off the heel of the shoe as it slammed across the doorway and sealed shut. Gilmore's shoe was ruined and his sock slightly grazed, but his foot was untouched.

Throughout the rest of the Station, another bell was ringing, this one with a deeper tone and a two-beat rhythm. Harvey Ricks heard it and leaped up from his bunk, forgetting the discomfort that hadn't yet abated, despite the cheery words of the Cargomaster and the Station Manager. The bell rang on, and Ricks stood quivering in his cubicle, body tensed for fight or flight, mind bewildered and frightened.

The cubicle door jolted open and Blair's face stuck in long enough for him to shout, "Suit up! It's under your bunk!" Then he was gone again, and Ricks heard him delivering the same call to Standish and Miller, across the corridor.

Ricks, incredibly grateful for any excuse to be in motion, lunged across the cubicle toward

his bunk. He misjudged the force of his leap, with the lesser gravity, and tumbled head over heels across the bunk and into the metal wall. He lay crouched on the bunk, gripping his knees, and whispered desperately to himself, "Take it easy, take it easy, take it easy."

When he could move without trembling, he got to his feet and dragged the spacesuit out from under the bunk. In the company course, preparatory to leaving on this trip, he'd learned how to don a spacesuit, and he clambered rapidly into this one, closing the inner and outer zippers, and then searched under the bunk again and dragged out the helmet. As he got to his feet, the bell stopped.

**R**ICKS bit down hard on his lower lip, willing himself to be calm. Carefully, he donned the helmet and went through the series of safety checks he'd been taught. Faceplate open, he put his fingers to the row of buttons at the suit's waist. First finger, left hand; helmet lamp: It worked, he could see it shining against the opposite wall. Click off. First finger, right hand; air intake: It worked, he could hear the faint hissing below his right ear. Cautiously, he closed the faceplate and inhaled. The oxygen mixture was rich, but good. Click off, faceplate open. Second finger, left

hand; heat unit: It worked, he could immediately feel the suit warming against his legs and arms. Click off. Second finger, right hand; water intake: It worked, a thin dribble of lukewarm water emerged from the tube in the corner of his mouth. Click off.

So far, so good. He hunched his left shoulder forward, and read the small dials there: Oxygen tanks, full. Water tank, half full. Battery, fully charged. Temperature inside the suit, sixty-eight degrees.

Was the air in the cubicle getting foul? Ricks snapped the faceplate shut, pushed the air intake button. This air was cleaner, he was sure of it.

Where were the others? Where was Blair? He couldn't hear a sound. The suit cut out all external atmosphere, but not all external sound. He reached up under the helmet chin and switched on the suit radio. A faint crackling of static told him it was on, but other than that there was no sound.

He looked around the cubicle. Was there any air in it now? He could be standing in total vacuum, there was no way to be sure. He could be the only one still alive in the Station.

"Blair?" His own voice, confined within the helmet, sounded harsh and croaking in his ears. The radio gave no answer.

Unwillingly, he moved toward the door. In here, the sound of his pounding heart was magnified, frightening him more than the radio's silence or the thought that the Station might now be airless. He pushed open the door, and saw Blair standing in the corridor, wearing his spacesuit but holding the helmet casually in his left hand.

Blair looked at him and grimaced, then motioned for Ricks to open his faceplate. Ricks reached up, switched off the radio, and removed his helmet. He managed a grin. "Kind of nice in here," he said. "Set up a bar, put a couple of chairs around, it could be real liveable." But he heard the tremor in his voice, and he knew that Blair heard it, too.

Blair said, "Get on down by the elevator with Standish and Miller. If you hear another bell, a few notes lower than the first one, with a triple-beep in it, clap the helmet on. Otherwise, keep it off. You don't have canned air to waste."

"Watch for the triple beep," said Ricks jauntily. "Aye aye, sir."

Blair grunted, and turned away, heading down the corridor in the opposite direction. Ricks watched him go, glaring at his back. 'I'm a better man than you, Harvey Ricks,' said that back. 'You'll break down, you'll flunk

my course, you'll never match me or even come close."

Blair disappeared, through the bulkhead doorway to Section Three, and Ricks turned the other way, walking down the corridor and right to the elevator. Standish and Miller were standing their, helmets on but faceplates open, and Ricks felt somewhat better. *His* helmet was in his hand.

As he came up to them, Standish said, "What do you suppose it is?" His pale face was even paler now, his large eyes larger.

Ricks shrugged. "It's probably just a drill. Get us new boys all lathered up, just in case we weren't taking it all seriously."

"I thought I felt a tremor just before the bell started," said Miller. "We may have been hit by a meteor or some such thing."

Ricks shrugged again. "Whatever it was, it doesn't seem very urgent. Did Papa Blair tell you two about the triple-beep?"

"Sure," said Miller. "He was sore at you, because you were late getting out in the hall."

"I was running my suit-check," said Ricks easily.

"Omigosh!" cried Standish. "I forgot!" He started the check, right then and there.

Watching Standish run through his suit-check, Ricks felt a *lot* better. *He* hadn't forgotten.

BLAIR found Mendel at the sealed bulkhead between Sections Four and Five. Mendel waved to him and grinned sourly. "I thought you'd be along," he said.

"What is it? The cargo section?"

"Right through there, boy. Sorry. We've had a meteor strike. Son of a gun came at us on the blind side."

Blair glanced quickly at the gauges beside the bulkhead door. "Pressure's up," he said. "Looks like it didn't break all the way through."

"No way to tell yet," said Mendel. "It might be a slow leakage."

"Then we have time to move the cargo."

Mendel shook his head. "Sorry, Glenn, no can do. Open this door here, it might joggle the air pressure just enough to make a slow leak a fast one. If that happens, it won't be this door that slams shut, it'll be the one way over there, between Three and Four."

"So you wait in Three. I'm willing to take the chance."

"I'm not. And it isn't your pearly white skin I'm worried about, it's my pearly white Station. If we have one Section in vacuum, we'll have trouble enough keeping equilibrium. With two Sections out of whack, we'll wobble all over the damn Solar System."

"Irv, my whole cargo's in there! The cargo for QB is in there!"

"I can't help it. Besides, vacuum won't hurt that stuff for QB".

"Irv, if there's a break through the inner hull, and that meteor shakes loose, the QB cargo won't be *in* the Station any more, it'll be scattered halfway from here to Mars. Did you ever see stuff come flying out of a room that goes suddenly to vacuum?"

"Yes, I did. Did you ever see a *man* that's gone suddenly to vacuum?"

"Irv, look at your blasted pressure gauge!"

"It's down."

"It's down less than half a point, Irv, and that's because you've stopped pumping air in there. Listen, that QB cargo isn't hermetically sealed. If it doesn't get good air, it can rot."

"It can rot right now, for all of me. I'm not touching Section Five or anything in it. We'll get in touch with QB, and let them send a couple of reeps up here. It's their job, not ours."

"Irv, don't you realize what that cargo means to the boys at QB?"

"Sure, I do. But do *you* realize what this Station here means to *me*? The boys at QB can re-order another batch. I can't go out and re-order another Station."

"Irv, listen. The ground-pounders don't realize how important

that stuff is. Without it, the crew at QB will be at each other's throats in a month. This is no exaggeration, Irv, the whole QB operation will fall apart within a month. And if QB falls apart, the whole system falls apart, because it's QB's job to run maintenance for the rest of us."

"I know that," said Mendel, "I know it well. Every word you say is absolutely true. But I still say they can re-order."

"And *I* say it'll take three months at the very least to fill the new order! We can't even put the order in until we can prove to the ground-pounders' satisfaction that this batch is destroyed, and we won't be able to do that till the reeps get here and patch the hole. So that's ten or fifteen days right there. Then they'll fool around another half a month or more, figuring out costs and tax breaks and whatnot, wanting to know why QB can't make do till the next regular shipment, and bogging down in a lot of red tape. Then they have to put the order in, out of sequence, so it'll take longer to fill it. And every single item has to be double-checked and approved by the psycho department and half a dozen other departments. It'll be *more* than three months!"

Mendel doggedly shook his head. "I'm not going to argue with you, Glenn," he said, "I'm going to tell you. That cargo is

your responsibility, but this whole Station is mine, and I'm not going to risk this Station for you or QB or anybody. Period, finish, end of discussion. Now, I'm going to go on up and call QB and have them send us a couple of reeps. Want to come along?"

"I want to boot you in the rump, Irv, I swear."

Mendel grinned. "I feel like doing some rump-booting myself. Take it easy, Glenn. It'll all work out."

"Hot diggity," said Blair sourly.

"Want to come up to the office with me?"

"No."

"Suit yourself."

Mendel left, and Blair stomped angrily back down the corridor to Section Two, where he found the three engineers still waiting by the elevator. He glared at them and snarled, "What the devil are you clowns doing? Get out of those idiot clown suits, the party's over."

The three of them stared at him in astonishment. Ricks looked as though he might smart-talk, and Blair waited hopefully, fists clenched, but something about his stance gave Ricks second thoughts and he turned away without a word, red-faced and frowning.

QB was the Quartermaster Base, a large satellite in per-

manent orbit two hundred miles above the surface of the Moon. It was shaped somewhat like the three Space Stations, though with a thicker outer ring and a less intricate inner section. This base held all of the equipment for maintenance and repair of the entire General Transit system, the three Space Stations, the two barbells, and the Moon-based lighters.

Attached to QB by a simple hook-and-ring mechanism were six repair ships, familiarly known as Reeps. Reeps were small blunt rounded one-man ships, with payloads made up exclusively of fuel. Protruding from the front of each reep were four jointed arms, operated by the arms and legs of the pilot. The reep had one large rocket exhaust at the rear, which swiveled to allow turning maneuverability, and four small swivelled exhausts around the body, permitting the reep complete close-range maneuverability. An experienced reep pilot could operate his ship as though it were an extension of his body, backing and sidestepping, working the four arms as readily as he used his own arms and legs.

There were two kinds of reeps, and three of each kind. There was the gripper reep, with arms designed for holding and manipulating, and the fixer reep, with arms for welding and cutting.

When the call came in from Station One, QB was three-quarters around the Earth-side of its orbit. The radioman on duty got the approximate dimensions of the meteor now jammed into the outer edge of the Station, and its approximate placement, and passed this information on to the Dispatcher Office. A call then went down to the Supply Department for Part X-102-W, outer hull replacement panel. This piece, eight feet by eight, was delivered to the Dispatch Delivery Point, at the inner rim of the doughnut.

Meanwhile, fixer reep 2 and gripper reep 5 were fueled and piloted. Spacesuited QB crewmen put the replacement panel in position for the gripper reep to get hold of, and the two ships broke away from the satellite, headed toward Earth.

The radioman at QB got in touch with the radioman at Station One and told him to expect the two reeps in fourteen days, approximately twelve hours before the Station was scheduled to make contact with the barbell from Station Three.

For everyone concerned, it was a long fourteen days. Irv Mendel watched the air pressure creep downward in Section Five, and gnawed his lower lip. Glenn Blair thought of the cargo for QB, and snarled at everyone he saw. Harvey Ricks thought of his two mo-

ments of panic, and waited for the chance to shove Blair's superior attitude down his stinking throat.

**T**IME in space is arbitrary. There are no seasons in the gulf between the planets, and there is no day and night. The sun, incredibly bright and fierce when seen without the protection of miles of atmosphere, glares out eternally at its domain, heating whatever it touches, leaving to frigid cold whatever lies in shadow. The twenty-four hour day is a fact of Earth, not a fact of the universe. In the void between the planets, the day is singular, and will end only with the death of the sun.

No matter how much he wills it otherwise, Man is a parochial creature, a native of a planet and not of all space. Whatever else he leaves behind him when he roves beyond his own globe, he takes with him his ingrained ideas of night and day. In every room and office of Space Station One there was a clock, and every clock pointed simultaneously to exactly the same time. The time was that of the Greenwich Meridian, the time of England and Ireland and Scotland and Wales. When Big Ben tolled twelve o'clock noon, the spacefarers of Station One ate lunch. When Big Ben, thousands of miles away in London, struck twelve o'clock

midnight, the spacemen obediently went to bed.

The reeps arrived at four twenty-two p.m., the fourteenth day out from Earth. The gripper reep, still clutching replacement part X-102-W, slid into a soft elliptical orbit around the Station. The fixer reep closed gently against the personnel hatch grid. Spacesuited crewmen fastened it to the grid by metal lines through the two rings, one at the reep's top toward the rear and the other at the bottom near the front. The reep pilot pumped the cabin air into the storage tank, adjusted his helmet, and opened the magnetically-sealed clear plastic cockpit dome. A Station crewman helped him out onto the grid, and escorted him inside for a conference with Irv Mendel and Blair.

Mendel greeted him at his office doorway, hand out-thrust. "Welcome aboard. Irv Mendel."

The pilot grinned and took the proffered hand. "Ed Wiley," he said. He nodded to Blair. "How's it going, Glenn?"

"Lousy," Blair told him. "Did you see the strike?"

"Yeah, it's a nice one, a real boulder. Which section is that?"

"Five," said Mendel. "Glenn's cargo is in there, that's why he's so peeved."

"It's QB's cargo," snapped Blair, "not mine."

Wiley frowned. "Ours? How so?"

Mendel explained, "Your six-months' goodies are in there."

"Oh, fine. In what condition?"

Blair said, "This fat character here won't let me in to find out. The whole section's at half-pressure by now."

"Then he's right," said Wiley. "I hate to admit it, but he's right. Double the pressure all at once, you're liable to knock the meteor right out of the hole. If pressure's going down that slow right now, it means the meteor's partially plugging the leak."

"And what happens when you guys yank the meteor out? Same difference."

"Not the same," said Mendel. "This way, nobody gets killed."

Blair shrugged angrily.

Wiley said, "Maybe we can work something. Vacuum won't hurt the goodies, will it?"

"It may explode the cases," said Blair. "That shouldn't do too much damage. I'm worried about it being flipped outside. The cases'll burst, and the whole shipment'll be scattered to hellangone."

Wiley nodded. "We'll try to lower the pressure slow and easy. Have you cut off the air supply in that section?"

"First thing," said Mendel.

"Good. We'll need two guys on the outside to give us a hand. Do you want to, Glenn?"

"Damn right," said Blair. He got to his feet. "I'll suit up."

Wiley stopped him at the door. "Don't worry, boy," he said. "Nobody's going to blame you if it goes wrong."

Blair studied him, then said, "Tell me, Ed. If that shipment doesn't get out to QB, will it be a very pleasant place to live the next few months?"

Wiley returned his gaze a moment, then shook his head. "No, it won't. We'll have to hide the razor blades."

"How do you feel now, Ed?" pursued Blair. "Happy in your work, content with the job and the pay and the living conditions? How are you going to feel two months from now?"

"I know that, Glenn. Believe me, I know exactly what you mean. Don't forget, I *come* from QB. If there's any way at all to fix that strike and save the cargo, I'll do it."

"What do you figure your chances, Ed?"

"It's hard to say, before we get a closer look. Maybe fifty-fifty."

"If I open the Section Five door and go in there and get that cargo out, what are the chances of the meteor being knocked out? Fifty-fifty?"

"Less than that, Glenn. You've only got half-pressure in there, you tell me." Wiley patted his shoulder. "We'll work it out," he said.

"I'm glad to hear it."

BLAIR left the office and took the elevator down to Section Two and his cubicle. As he was getting into his suit, there was a knock at the door. He grunted, and Ricks came in.

The two had been avoiding each other for the last two weeks, Ricks more obviously than Blair. Whenever one entered a room—mess hall or library or whatever—the other immediately left. When they passed one another in a corridor, they looked straight ahead with no acknowledgment.

Ricks now looked truculent and determined. Blair grimaced at the sight of him and snapped, "All right, Ricks, what is it? I don't have time for hand-holding right now."

"You're going outside," said Ricks, "to help fix the strike. I want to go out with you."

"What? Go to hell!"

"You're going to need more than one man out there."

"We'll get an experienced crewman. You've never been outside in vacuum in your life. This isn't any training course."

"How did you do the first time, Blair? Did you make it?"

"You aren't me, sonny."

"I've been taking vitamins."

"If you want that chip knocked off your shoulder, you better try somewhere else. I'm liable to knock your head off with it."

"Try it afterwards, Superman. I'm a better man than you are

every day in the week and twice on Sundays. Give me a chance to prove it."

"No."

Ricks grinned crookedly. "Okay, big man," he said. "It's your football, so you can choose up the sides."

He started toward the doorway and Blair growled, "Hold on a second." When Ricks turned, he said, "You're a grandstander, Ricks. You knew there wasn't a chance in a million I'd let you go outside with me, so it was a nice safe challenge, wasn't it?"

"Then call my bluff!"

Blair nodded. "I'm going to. Get into your suit. But just let me tell you something first. This isn't a game. If you flub, it counts. You're going to be living on the Moon for the next two years. That's a small community; everybody knows everybody else. If you flub, those are going to be two miserable years for you, sonny. You're going to be the boy who lost the cargo for QB, and nobody'll let you forget it."

Ricks' face was pale, but his grin sardonic. "All right, Cargo-master," he said. "I can handle that job, too. I can be your whipping boy." He spun around, and out of the cubicle.

Fists clenched tight, Blair glowered at the empty doorway.

Ricks nervously followed Blair and Wiley out through

the personnel hatch and onto the grid outside the Station. His meeting with Wiley had been a simple exchange of names, with no questions asked and no explanations given. Apparently, Wiley had no idea he was merely a passenger on the Station, and not a crew member. Irv Mendel, on the other hand, had pointedly ignored him. Ricks got the impression that Mendel and Blair had argued about him, and that Mendel had lost. Blair himself simply looked grim.

It was the first time Ricks had seen the exterior of the Station. He was standing now on a grid extending from a semi-conical section which itself protruded upward from the ball in the middle of the Station. The ball contained the administrative and recreational rooms of the Station, and the cone above it contained the radio room, the control room, and cubicles containing the meteorological equipment of the weather team.

Standing on the grid, Ricks looked up and out, toward the stars, toward the vast emptinesses, and all at once he felt microscopic. He was as small as an ant beneath a redwood tree. Smaller than that, smaller than an amoeba in the ocean, smaller than a single grain of sand on the Sahara. He was a weak and tiny speck of fury and indecision, a flea riding a lily pad down the

Mississippi. He could cry out, with all the strength of his lungs, and it would be no more than a faint peeping in the bottom of the deepest well of all.

Wiley's calm voice broke into his awe and wonder, crackling tinnily from the helmet radio: "We'll go on down and take a look at the damage first. It's the section just to the right of that spoke."

Blair's voice, oddly depersonalized by the radio, said, "Right. You lead off."

Wiley, calm and sure-footed in his magnet-soled boots, stepped off the grid onto the curving side of the cone. He marched down it, looking to Ricks like a man walking calmly down a wall, and thence across the bulge of the central ball to the spoke. Blair followed him, moving just as easily and effortlessly, and Ricks came last.

There was no gravity out here. The Station spun beneath them with what seemed lazy slowness against the distant backdrop of the stars, and the only gravitic force was the centrifugal action of the Station, trying lazily to spin them off and out into space. Above them, the gripper reep arced by in its orbit; the pilot waved.

Ricks gritted his teeth and followed the other two, imitating their actions. The magnetic boots were tricky things; you had to

step high, or all at once the boot would click back against the Station with a step only half-completed. And it took a sliding knee-bending movement to release the boot for another step.

The three men moved in slow Indian file across the rounded bulk of the spoke, up across the first inner bulge of the rim, and then out on the rim's top. They stepped carefully over the metal ridge that marked where, inside the Station, Section Six was separated from Section Five. Then there was a four-foot drop to the curve of the outer surface of the rim. If the rim of the Station had been an automobile tire, they would now have been standing on its side, out on the edge where the tread begins. The meteor was imbedded in the tread-area itself, below the curve.

Wiley and Blair stood close to the meteor; Ricks hung back a step, watching them, moving only when and as they moved. No one had spoken since they left the grid. Then, over the earphones came an unfamiliar voice: "Hows it look, Ed?"

"Not sure yet, Dan. We're just beginning to look it over."

Ricks looked around, baffled, then realized that Dan was the pilot in the gripper reep, now hovering a little ways off, circling as the Station circled, keeping approximately even with the meteor break, the replace-

ment part awkward in its long arms.

"Here it is, here," said Blair suddenly. He squatted carefully, keeping both boots firmly in contact with the Station metal, and pointed to a spot at the jagged intersection of rough meteor rock and frayed bent metal.

Ricks moved in closer, to see what Blair was pointing at. Sunlight glinted momentarily from whatever it was.

Wiley crouched down beside Blair, cutting off Ricks' view, as Dan asked, "What is it?"

It was Wiley who answered. "Little bit of ice here. We've got a slow leakage. Looks like there's probably a small puncture of the inner hull, with the meteor itself plugging it most of the way. Little bit of air gets out, dissipates between the hulls, and a smidgen of it gets out through here and freezes solid."

Blair's voice sounded, saying, "Does Dan know what's in this section?"

"I don't know a thing."

Wiley explained it, and Dan said, "We'll have to take it nice and easy, then. If that stuff gets loused up, I'm not going home."

Blair straightened, turning, and said, "Okay, Ricks, you can make yourself useful. Go on up with Wiley and help him unrig his ship."

"Sure."

BLAIR waited by the meteor while the other two went back across the spoke and up to the grid. Wiley said, "There's these two wires to disengage. Wait till I'm in and set, and I'll give you the highsign."

"Okay."

Wiley clambered into the reep, sealing the dome shut and adjusting the air pressure to fill the cabin. Then he turned off the suit's air supply and opened his faceplate. Hands and feet ready on the controls, he nodded to Ricks. Ricks released the moorings, and the reep drifted out and to the left, falling slowly away from the spinning Station. Its rear rocket flashed, and it moved away more rapidly, beyond the Station's outer rim.

Ricks walked back to the rim. When he got there, Wiley's ship was in place, two of the side rockets firing sporadically, keeping it still in relation to the motion of the Station. The two side arms clung to jagged tears in the rim metal, next to the meteor, while the top and bottom arms, working to the pre-measurements of a small computer tape, inched across the metal, cutting implements extended, scoring not deep enough to cut completely through the hull. Just behind each cutting edge, a small nozzle marked the line of the score with a thin line of red.

Finished, Wiley retracted all

four arms, and allowed the reep to drift back away from the Station. The other reep came in closer.

Blair said, "Got something else for you to do, Ricks." He removed from a clip on the waist of his suit what looked like a coiled length of narrow cable. "You can hold the replacement panel," he said, "while Dan clears the meteor out. Help me unsnarl this thing."

"Right."

Unwound, the coil proved to be four lengths of cable, about fifteen feet long, joined together at one end and terminating at the other end in broad curved clips. While Dan hovered as close as he dared, Blair attached these clips to the edges of the panel, near the corners. Ricks held the other end, where the cables met.

"It's going to want to drift to the left," said Blair. "Make sure it doesn't. Keep all four cables taut. It's the same as flying a kite. If you let it dip, it'll crash into the rim here. If it's crumpled, we can't use it. And we don't have any spares handy."

"I'll keep it up," promised Ricks.

Dan backed the gripper reep until the cables stretched taut from Ricks to the panel, and then released his hold on the panel, which immediately drifted to the left, not maintaining the speed of the Station's spin.

Holding the joined part of the cable tight in his gloved left hand, Ricks tugged with his right at individual lines, trying to keep the panel above him. Behind him, Blair and Dan were ignoring him, working at their own part of the problem. Ricks could hear Blair instructing Dan, guiding him as he came slowly in and fastened his four gripper arms to the meteor. Two of the reep's auxiliary rocket exhausts fired briefly, and then again, as Dan tugged tentatively at the meteor.

Ricks wanted to turn and watch the operation, but he couldn't. The eight-by-eight replacement panel swayed above him with maddening slowness, inching away from him, curving down toward the Station. Trying to move too quickly, he pulled on the wrong cable, and the panel dipped sharply, the uppermost cable falling slack, threatening to snarl the others.

STEPPING back quickly, almost losing his boot-grip on the hull, Ricks yanked desperately at the slack cable. The panel shuddered, stopped perpendicular to the hull and scarcely two feet above its surface. Then the force of Ricks' yank took over, and it sailed slowly toward him, curving up and over him, moving now in the direction of the Station's spin but somewhat faster. When it was directly above him,

Ricks tried to stop it, but it curved on, angling down now directly toward the meteor and the arms of the gripper reep.

This time, Ricks managed to tug the cables properly, reversing the drift without too much trouble. He was beginning to catch on to the method, now. It was impossible to keep the panel stationery above him. All he could do was keep sawing it back and forth, forcing its own sluggish motion to follow his commands. Once he had the right idea, it wasn't too difficult to keep the thing under control, but it didn't take long at all for his arms to feel the strain. He didn't dare relax, not for a second. His arms and shoulders twinged at every movement, and his neck and back ached from the necessity of his looking constantly directly above him.

From time to time, he chanced a quick look at the progress of the other two. Blair was standing now at the very edge of the scored section, guiding Dan both with words and with arm and body movements. Dan was tugging slowly, first to the left and then to the right, and gradually the meteor was being inched outward. At one point, Blair glanced over at Ricks and said, "How's it going, Ricks?"

"Just dandy," said Ricks, grunting with effort. "Just fine. Almost as good as you."

Blair frowned, then turned his attention back to the meteor. Half a dozen times since they'd come out here, he'd been at the point of telling Ricks to go back inside, to have Mendel send out a crewman instead. He wasn't sure what had stopped him. It wasn't the way Ricks saw it; he wasn't looking for a whipping boy, to take the blame for him if he lost the cargo. Glenn Blair didn't pass the buck, he never had and he never would. He'd been given this job in the first place because he was a man who could handle responsibility, whose pride lay in his ability to complete his own jobs, not in any ability to oversee the work of others.

He had, he knew, lost the dispassionate approach necessary in his work. Ricks and the cargo for QB had both become too important to him, though in far different ways. With Ricks, he seemed somehow to have become ensnarled in some idiotic sort of contest, in which only Ricks knew the rules and the scoring, in which only Ricks could know or care who had won and who had lost. Ricks had kept him off-balance, thinking with his emotions rather than his brains. In so doing, he'd underestimated Ricks' own concern with the contest. He'd agreed to let Ricks come out here partly out of a desire to throw the guy into a situation where he would lose his own con-



test under his own rules, and partly out of a desire to call Ricks' bluff. It had turned out to be no bluff, and Blair, thinking with his emotions, had been unable to withdraw the agreement.

And the fight with Mendel had only served to harden the cement. Mendel had been instantly and loudly opposed to Ricks' going outside, and Blair had responded just as quickly and just as loudly. Mendel's opposition had finally only intensified Blair's determination to go through with it.

Outside, he had had no choice but to put Ricks to work. There were only the two of them out there, and both were needed. He'd kept for himself the intricate job of guiding the removal of the meteor—the reep pilot was too far back and too involved with the operation of his ship's controls to be able to do the job by himself—but that had left for Ricks the scarcely-less intricate job of holding onto the replacement panel. Blair had kept an eye on him throughout, ready to step in if it looked as though Ricks would lose control, but Ricks had done surprisingly well, after bobbling the ball a bit to begin with.

Now, as Blair kept up a steady drone of low-voiced directions, Dan gradually eased the meteor out of the jagged hole it had made in the hull. The whole

scored segment was now bulged outward slightly, and the saw-tooth edges of the hole were scraping out and back, with the motion of the meteor.

Then, all at once, the reep jerked backward, as the meteor rasped loose. The hull vibrated beneath Blair's feet, and then quieted.

Blair waited, cautiously watching the jagged tear, but after the second's vibration, there was nothing more. They'd managed it, working and tugging and twisting the meteor in such a way that the remaining air in Section Five was released slowly enough to be of no danger.

Dan's voice came over the helmet radio: "I'll take Junior on home."

"Right."

THE gripper reep shot, turning, up and away from the Station, carrying the meteor far enough away so that it could safely be released without being drawn right back to the Station. Blair watched it go, then stepped cautiously across the scored line and looked down through the hole at the inner hull, five feet away. It was too dark in there to be sure, but he thought he could see the marks of a tiny jagged tear.

Wiley's voice came through the earphones, saying, "Okay, Glenn, I'm ready to slice 'er up."

"Come ahead." He backed out

of the scored section again, and watched as the fixer reep came in close, once again clutching the edges of the hole with the side arms while the other two arms carefully sliced through the scored lines, this time cutting all the way through, leaving only thin uncut segments at the corners to keep the whole piece in place.

As the fixer reep backed off, the gripper reep returned, empty-armed now, and slid into place, grabbing the serrated edges of the hole. Blair took the small powered hand-cutter from its loop at the waist of his suit, and carefully sliced through the remaining segments. The gripper reep backed away, holding the cut-off square.

Blair crouched at the edge of the cut, and held tightly to it as he lifted both boots clear of the hull. His body swung slowly around, over the hole, and he pulled himself down into it, until his boots clamped to the inner hull.

The space between the hulls was a maze of braces and supports, five feet wide. One diagonal brace had been crushed by the meteor, and would have to be replaced once both hulls were repaired. For now, Blair was concerned to affix a temporary patch to the outside of the inner hull. The final repair job on that would be done from inside the

Station. All he had to do was put on a patch that would allow Section Five to be filled with air again, so the inner repair work could be safely done.

Once his boots were firmly braced against the inner hull, Blair released his hold on the outer hull and moved through the constricted space to the cross-braced wall between Section Five and Six. A tool-and-patch kit was bolted to the wall, beside the round small entranceway to the between-hulls of Section Six. From this kit Blair took a small hammer and a foot-square rubberized metallic patch. He then returned to the spot where the meteor had broken through.

The hole in the inner hull was a ragged oval, less than half an inch in diameter at its widest point. The edges of the tear had been pulled outward by the removal of the meteor, and Blair first hammered these flat, then removed the protective backing of the patch square and pressed the square firmly over the hole. Its inner side was covered with a sealant designed to work in vacuum, binding patch and hull together at the molecular level. It was not a permanent repair job by any means, but it would hold for at least twenty-four hours of normal pressure inside Section Five.

The patch job finished, Blair came back out in much the same

manner as he had gone in. Ricks, a little ways to the left, was still maneuvering the replacement panel back and forth, though his arms seemed to be sagging somewhat by now. Blair said, "Okay, Ricks, bring it in."

"Anything you say, Admiral."

Blair helped him ease the panel down close enough for each of them to grab an edge. They released the cable clips, and Blair one-handed bunched the cable together until he could slip it back onto the catch on his suit. Together, they turned the panel around and held it flat. On Earth, this reinforced thickness of hull would have weighed nearly two hundred pounds. Here, it seemed to weigh less than nothing, since the only force on it was trying to push it *up*, away from the Station.

They carried the panel over to the hole made for it, and Blair said, "Lower it easy. It should be a snug fit, flush with the rest of the hull. If we set it in flat, we won't have any trouble."

"No trouble at all, Commander."

"Don't play the smart-aleck!"

Surprisingly, Ricks' answer was subdued: "All right. What do we do now?"

"Lower it. Don't hold it on the edge, hold your hands flat on the top, like this. There's no danger of it falling."

Ricks laughed nervously. "It's

like a table-raising at a seance."

They stood on opposite sides of the hole, the panel flat between them, their arms out over it, gloved hands pressing it slowly down. The fixer reep rolled gently in toward them, and Wiley said, "Let me know when you're ready, Glenn."

"Just a minute now."

The panel was a little too far over on Ricks' side. Together, they adjusted it, and lowered it to match the hole. They stood crouched opposite one another, holding the panel in place, while the fixer reep edged into position, and the welding arm reached out to the bottom left corner. "Turn your face away, Ricks," warned Blair.

"Right."

**I**T TOOK ten minutes to weld the new piece into place. In the meantime, the gripper reep returned from dumping the scrap section, and Blair sent Ricks up to the grid to help Dan moor his ship. Ricks and Dan came back carrying two tool kits and, when the welding job was finished, Blair and Ricks stood aside as Dan power-sanded the new weld and did a quick spray-painting that removed the signs of the patch. Straightening, he said, "There you go. Good as new."

"Fine," said Blair. "Let's see how the cargo made out."

The three men returned to the

grid, where they moored Wiley's ship across from Dan's, and then the four of them went on back inside the Station.

Mendel was waiting for them inside the lock, brow furrowed with worry. He glanced back and forth from Blair to Ricks, then said to Blair, "How did it go?"

"Fine."

"Just peachy," said Ricks. "I get my merit badge, don't I, Cargomaster?"

Blair shook his head at Mendel, and went on toward the elevator without answering Ricks.

He headed immediately for Section Five. Three crewmen were already at the bulkhead, which was still sealed shut. Blair looked at the pressure gauge, and saw that the dial was above the halfway mark and noticeably climbing. He talked with the crewmen a few minutes, discussing the strike and its repairing, and then at last the bulkhead door slid back into its recess, and they went on in. The crewmen went to work on the permanent repair of the inner hull, and Blair checked his cargo. A few of the food cartons had exploded when the section had gone to vacuum, but he gave them hardly a glance. He found the seven aluminum crates for QB. All had split open, releasing interior air, but their contents looked to be still in good condition. Blair grinned to himself with relief.

QB was the maintenance base. As such, it had a permanent crew of eighty-four men. These men were on thirty-minute call at all times, and were fulfilling a two-year contract with General Transists. They spent every moment of those two years inside the QB satellite. Most of the time, they had little work to do, but the size of the crew was the statistical minimum required for any foreseeable accident to any part of the General Transits lifeline between the Earth and the Moon. When there was any sort of breakdown, such as this meteor strike on Station One, they went to work. The rest of the time, they were completely on their own. Their world, for two years, was a small metal ring nearly a quarter million miles from home. They couldn't leave it, and they had little to do inside it.

That was why the contents of the seven aluminum crates was so important. Four cartons of motion picture film and three cartons of microfilmed books. Six months of entertainment, of distraction. The only way the men of QB could keep from going stir-crazy in their two years of self-imposed imprisonment, the only way to last through the inactive days and weeks between the infrequent calls for their skills and labor.

With no books, no motion pictures, no cheerful distractions

for their minds, the men of QB would falter. Irritations would mount, squabbles would turn to hatreds, aggravations to bloody vendettas. Efficiency would collapse, morale disappear. Statistically, there would be within the first sixty days five suicides and eight murders.

Entertainment. Tinsel. But, to the men of QB, as vital as food.

Glenn Blair patted the aluminum crates, and grinned with relief.

NOW that it was over, Harvey Ricks was terrified. Before he'd gone out, he'd been too full of the challenge he'd hurled at Blair; while he'd been outside, he'd been too busy. Now it was over, and he had time to realize the extent of the risks he'd taken, and he was terrified.

He spent the next four hours in his cubicle, staring at the wall, vowing great resolutions of reform. From now on, he would mind his own business, accept his limitations.

Then, after four hours, the barbell arrived from Station Three, and the transfer of cargo and passengers was made. There were five men coming back to Earth, there was stack after stack of cargo. The huge hold of the barbell was emptied, and then the shipment for the Moon—and the cargo for QB—was loaded aboard, and the three passengers

for the Moon left Station One, carrying their one-suitcase-each to the new cubicle, where they would live another fifteen days of their lives. Ricks looked around at the new room, and already the retroactive terror was receding, already he was thinking of his exploit in self-congratulatory terms. He'd done well. He'd showed the Cargomaster that Harvey Ricks was a good man to have at your side, a man who can do the job right the first time.

After a while, Blair knocked at the cubicle door and entered, smiling hesitantly, saying, "I didn't get a chance to thank you, Ricks. You did a good job out there."

Ricks smiled, the old self-confident challenging smile. "Why, any time, Cargomaster."

Blair's face tightened. "Well," he said. "So I've thanked you."

"So you have, Cargomaster."

Blair left without another word.

Ricks settled back on his bunk, arms behind his head, and smiled at the ceiling. He'd made it again. He'd sent the hunters away, and when the wolf had come he'd tromped it all on his own. He still hadn't run across the wolf he couldn't handle.

But there was time. There was still plenty of time for Harvey Ricks to have his reckoning.

Two years' worth. **THE END**