

PLANET STORIES



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They brought their electros into play.

MOON OF DANGER

By Albert de Pina

The huge ship from Mars bore on toward Earth with the last haggard survivors of a terrible plague. But Ric Martin hurtled to intercept the spacegiant, knowing it brought an evil far deadlier than even the relentless metal-spores it fled!

IN approximately two more hours," Dar Mihelson said, "the ionization towers will fail. Look well upon your world, for we may never return."

He was a huge, stern-visaged man, with the weight of his responsibility showing upon him, but his voice was soft as he spoke to his people through the ship's central televiser.

"This is our last chance for survival. Upon the success of this flight depends our very lives, and the preservation of the race. Venus is denied to us. Mercury has thrown up a barricade for ten thousand miles around their planet. Only Earth has offered us sanctuary—and even there a growing faction has risen against us in fear that some of the deadly spores may be transported to their planet."

Dar Mihelson paused, turned his bronze face to look out upon his world. His violet eyes brimmed with anguish. Only the walls of red metallic dust could be seen, the appalling clouds that had surged from the furthest reaches of the planet to wipe out most of the populace, destroying cities, crumbling everything metallic and thereby adding unto itself. It had been a race of their science against time. The Ionization Towers had held back the dust, only long enough for the huge spaceship to be completed.

"We want to go peaceably," Dar Mihelson continued, "but we are prepared for any contingency. Many of you have wondered about the Valiant's unusual construction; some of you have doubted that the ship is capable. True, its secret is known only to a few, but this much I can tell you

now: the *Valiant* is a fully-equipped fighting ship, and we will use it as such if the occasion arises!"

The lines smoothed from Mihelson's face, as he concluded, "You have all been assigned to your quarters. The take-off will be in thirty minutes. Let us spend that time in prayer to merciful Providence, to guide us safely through our crisis. . . ."

I

RIC MARTIN could feel the excitement already, as he eased his gyro closer to Mount Palomar and saw the great Observatory dome just below him. The night was dark, ideal for observation. The greatest minds of Earth would be here this night, to watch a world and its people in their death-throes.

Ric's face went grim at the thought of it. For weeks the tele-casts had been jammed with the news. Mars was dying, and Mars had been a friendly neighbor for decades. Earth had been helpless to act. No one, not even the Martians, knew where the mysterious Red Plague came from; it had appeared simultaneously in a score of places across the planet, quickly spreading and destroying everything before it.

After prolonged hesitancy, the Earth Council had agreed to accept the Mars refugees. Thereupon a brooding dread and mistrust had swept across Earth like a patina. A new political faction, the anti-Mars sect, had arisen and was gathering strength. There would surely be trouble . . .

A shrill siren blast brought Ric out of his reverie. He glanced back, saw a white-winged police 'copter descending upon him.

"Damn!" Ric set his plane down on the broad field atop Palomar, as the police 'copter came down beside him. Ric stepped out, straightened his uniform and waited.

"How'd you ever get through our lines?" the officer demanded suspiciously. "Don't you know this is the night of the Mars take-off? No one's permitted up here!"

"Sure, I know. But I have a special pass to this shindig." Ric produced a card signed by Professor George Broxted, and the name was magical.

"Very good, sir. Sorry to have detained you!" The officer stared after Ric's departing figure as though wondering how a Captain of the Interstellar Fleet could gain

admittance here where so many big-names had failed.

And even Ric didn't realize what an occasion this was until he reached the tower. Every outstanding figure in the scientific as well as the political world was here, gathered in tense groups about the huge tele-panel in the center of the room. This Mars take-off was certainly the most dramatic event in all Mars' history and perhaps Earth's as well!

Professor Broxted spied him, came over and shook hands.

"Good evening, Ric! I won't bother with introductions. No one cares about that tonight. Glad you could make it!"

"So am I, Professor. I wouldn't have missed this. How much time?"

"Take-off's in twenty minutes, but we've already got the scene in focus. We can bring it to a distance of a few miles, thanks to the new magni-beams. Come."

They threaded their way toward the huge screen to stare at the scene pictured there.

IT WAS a terribly changed Mars that Ric looked upon. The blood-red metallic haze covered all but a mile-wide strip of clear atmosphere; and along this strip Ric could see tiny dots of white light, which he guessed must be the Ionization Towers.

"There's the *Valiant*," Broxted said. "You can just see it on the lower edge of the screen."

Ric peered—then gave a gasp of disbelief. Even at this distance, it was apparent that the ship had tremendous bulk and stretched for fully a mile!

"They're going to hoist gravs in that? It will fall apart!"

"There are some here tonight," Broxted's voice lowered, "who hope that will happen. The *Valiant* was built in record time under supervision of Dar Mihelson. It's supposed to have a new type of anti-grav." Broxted paused. "I knew Dar Mihelson well, when I was at Mars University two years ago. A fine man, and I trust him still. He's given his word that not a spore will reach Earth, and every precaution will be taken!"

"It's a ticklish situation."

"Yes. And believe me, the anti-Mars faction here has grown more than anyone dreams! There've been secret meetings, and tonight may set everything off. Ric . . .

if the *Valiant* manages to up gravs, keep your eyes open! Wessell's here!"

Ric's brows furrowed, beneath his shock of blond hair. Yes, Wessell *would* be here. Felix Wessell was Supreme Commander of Earth's Interstellar Fleet, and he'd been particularly bitter in his denunciation of the Earth Council's decision to accept the Mars refugees. There had even been rumors that Wessell was holding the Fleet in readiness, if necessary, to prevent the *Valiant* from landing on Earth. The man wielded a powerful influence.

Ric looked about him now but didn't see his superior, Wessell, and didn't want to. He did see Lal Disbro, the Martian Ambassador. Disbro and his aides had been stranded on Earth when the sudden malady struck his planet. Now the man was a disconsolate figure who seemed to have aged ten years in as many weeks, knowing that only a few of his people were left and even their fate was an imponderable.

It was largely due to Disbro's frantic efforts that the Earth Council had agreed to accept the *Valiant*—and then only after appeals to Venus and Mercury had been coldly refused. Looking at Disbro now, Ric felt truly sorry for him.

IT'S ALMOST TIME!" Broxted touched Ric's arm. The telescopic sights were being set to follow the *Valiant* in its flight. There was tension in the room and sudden, deathly silence. Could the clumsy bulk of the *Valiant* really hoist gravs, or would it crack up against the wastes of Mars? The future of a race was in the balance.

The televisive took on a deeper glow. The entire planet of Mars was a backdrop across the screen. The seconds ticked off. Suddenly then . . . the *Valiant* moved! It seemed to shudder for a moment under unleashed power. Then it slid slowly forward across sand.

For a few seconds the scene wavered. The watchers couldn't tell what was happening. Ric gave a quick glance at Lal Disbro. The man's face had gone pale.

Now it was apparent that the great ship was rising as a bulk, to hang poised, fighting against gravity. Then the flash of rockets was plainly seen—literally dozens of

them, spaced in parallel rows across the long underhull.

The scene was silent and unreal. But there was no doubt in any man's mind, now—the ship had lifted gravs and was blasting! Slowly, the great lumbering shape widened the distance. The scene resolved to the blackness of outer space where a glitter of stars was seen. There the *Valiant* steadied on her course.

The worst was over. It had been dramatic, momentous. Ric heard sighs of relief about him. People were congratulating Lal Disbro, whose face was wreathed in smiles.

But there were men in this room who did not smile, who were strangely silent. Again Ric allowed his gaze to sweep about—and this time he spotted Wessell.

The man was tall, hard-featured, crisp of manner. His eyes were stern as he leaned a little forward to peer at the screen. Ric watched him. Wessell's only show of emotion was a slight twitching at the corners of his mouth. Now that the *Valiant* had gained free space he was studying it, studying it hard. His lips curled a little in disdain.

Ric glanced again at the screen. The Martian ship *was* clumsy, there was no denying it. On its slow and careful course it would take perhaps six days to reach Earth. Much could happen in six days. . . .

Then he saw Wessell rise. The man crossed to the private room where the communicators were kept. Through the partly open door Ric saw him lift a tube and speak into it with crisp authority.

"Trouble," Ric muttered. "I knew it!" And there were cold, coiling knots in the pit of his stomach.

When he bade Broxted goodbye a few minutes later, and headed back for the city, it was with a feeling of dark events brewing—events that were going to touch him whether he liked it or not.

II

IT CAME VERY SOON. The harsh buzzing of the ampliphone beside Ric's bed jerked him awake. "Hello," he said sleepily. "Ric Martin. . . ."

Then sleep was gone from him, as he listened to the voice of his Unit Commander.

"Very well, sir. Yes . . . yes, I understand. At once!" He slammed off the switch and began dressing quickly. This was it! He'd been called back to duty at two in the morning. In thirty-six hours the Coast Fleet was to join the Chicago Fleet at a rendezvous a hundred miles in space, and there prepare in battle formation.

"Wessell," he muttered. "I didn't think he'd really do it! Those poor Martians. . . ."

By the time he reached Government Spaceport, Ric's heart was bitter within him. How could the plodding *Valiant* hope to stand against even two Units of Earth's Fleet? True, Wessell's move was in direct defiance of the Council's edict, but he was moving swiftly! Ric had never reached a decision as to what he, as a Captain in Earth's Fleet, would do if Wessell attempted to carry out his high-handed plan. He had been trained to obey orders implicitly and unquestioningly.

But this was wrong and Ric knew it was wrong. He made his decision now. Setting down at the edge of the Spaceport, he hurried to the building housing the tiny Patrol cruisers. These ships were swift and secret, with tubes of the new allotropic metal recently found on Mercury. Access to them could be attained only by special Government pass.

As he neared the doors, a guard stepped out of the shadows. The man recognized Ric's uniform but he remained alert, hand hovering near his parala-gun, as he gave a challenge.

"Wessell's orders," Ric replied tersely. "Emergency!"

"Sorry, sir. You know this requires special—"

"All right," Ric sighed. "Here's my pass!" He saw the guard relax for an instant. Ric poised on his toes and unleashed a long left that sent the guard staggering against the building. The man righted himself, muttered an oath and came boring in. But already Ric was following through with a vicious right; it connected with the angle of the guard's jaw, and he went down. Then Ric was inside the doors, sprinting down the corridor.

He found the hangar of the *Falcon*, a swift three-man cruiser which he knew well. A glance at the power-board showed him that it was fueled and ready. A minute

later he was blasting upward, watching the city's lights drop swiftly away.

Once in free space, he set the robot-control. It would be thirty hours before he intercepted the *Valiant* somewhere in its plodding path for Earth. At least he could warn them! For he knew, now, that Wessell meant to go all the way—utter annihilation for the *Valiant*!

And this meant revolt—the overthrow of Earth's Supreme Council! Wessell had waited a long time for this, and there were men behind him, ready to back him to the hilt. The Mars crisis had provided a convenient spark.

But Ric wasn't thinking of Wessell now, nor the Earth Council, as he settled down to watchfulness. He was thinking of two thousand Martians, the last of their race, struggling to keep alive this last thin life-line of survival. He was thinking of death in space. Even if he warned them of Wessell's plan—where were they to go?

HOURS LATER, his probing magnifier picked out the *Valiant* from the depths of blackness. It was still vastly far away, a mere pin-point in his V-Panel, but Ric cut acceleration. He watched the Martian ship grow larger by the hour. He switched to his radio-beam and sent a message through, but it remained unanswered.

It was still unanswered when he drew close enough to cut his rockets altogether and go into a drift. Surely they were radio-equipped? There was only one explanation. They simply weren't expecting a spacer out here, so their beam was off power.

They wouldn't spot him, either. The *Falcon* was tiny by comparison, and solid black, undetectable against the backdrop of space. But he'd have to get aboard the *Valiant* some way! Slowly he brought his cruiser beneath the great ship's hull. He was more than ever impressed by the size of this Martian colossus.

And he was puzzled. There was something strange about this ship's construction. It was more than merely clumsy, it was grotesque! Carefully he eased along, examining it. For one thing there were too many air-locks, even for a ship of this size. Ric shook his head in puzzlement.

He began trying his tractor beam on those locks, tightening the beam slowly. The locks held. Still he persisted, easing

the *Falcon* along the hull; he had to gain an entrance somewhere! With any kind of luck. . . .

Then, somewhere amidships, one of the locks opened under the steady pull of his beam. Slowly it swung outward. Ric's hands flew to the controls. Carefully he eased the *Falcon* forward and into the lock. There was room to spare. The outer door closed and he heard generators humming, automatically building up an atmosphere. Finally they stopped and he knew it was safe. He leaped down from the *Falcon*.

The inner door was swinging back automatically. For a moment Ric hesitated; then he stepped through, saw that he was in some sort of control room. There were instruments such as he'd never seen in any spacer! He stared around uncertainly. Then from behind him came a queerly accented voice.

"Greetings, Earthman. But I won't say welcome, yet. You will please turn around—slowly!"

RIC turned. A Martian holding a heat-gun stepped from behind a bulwark. The Martian came forward and the gun got playful with the third button on Ric's tunic.

Ric had expected this. Naturally they'd be suspicious of an Earthman aboard—but he could soon explain things. He stepped back a little from the gun.

"I'm friendly. I must see Dar Mihelson at once! I come with urgent news!"

"So? What news?"

"Wessell's massing the Earth Fleet. In thirty-six hours they'll be out here to meet you. He'll never allow you to land on Earth!"

"So. Hear that, Kueelo?" He addressed a second Martian who was busy at work over a bank of levers.

This man looked up and grinned, and Ric liked him even less than the one crowding him. He especially didn't like the eyes. They were strange and colorless, not quite Martian.

"Yes, I heard. Take care of him, Luhor; we haven't much time!"

Luhor surged forward, bringing the gun up. Ric swayed to the right, his hands darted out and caught the man's free wrist; with the same motion he twisted, and brought Luhor sailing across his body to

crash into a metal beam, where he slumped and lay still.

Kueelo had whirled, muttering an oath that certainly wasn't Martian. Now he leaped for the free gun. Ric reached it a second faster, kicked it out of reach. He parried Kueelo's fist—then sent a left to the Martian's stomach and crossed with a right. The man was huge, and stood his ground.

Ric danced back as Kueelo came boring in. He realized joyously that this lesser, artificial gravity was an advantage. He sent a boxer's left, long and weaving, to Kueelo's face, then a second and third, that set the Martian off balance. Ric stepped in with a crashing right-cross. Kueelo's legs went rubbery. Another smashing right and the Martian's face lost contour; he whirled half around and slumped across the bank of levers. Ric rolled his body away and stood looking down.

There were thirty of those levers, all numbered. They were large and heavy, but just now they were all pulled up from their contacts, revealing masses of coils and wires. Ric frowned, wondering what it meant. He thought he knew!

Those wires could be easily fused or cut. Ric recognized sabotage when he saw it. . . .

He glanced at Kueelo. The man would be out for some time. He stepped to the one called Luhor, bent quickly over him. The man was dead, his skull crushed. Momentary panic flooded over Ric. After all, he could be wrong; if he'd blundered, he'd have to account for this!

He rose, looked around for an inter-communication system. He couldn't spot one. This ship was utterly alien to him. He did find another door, however, and stepped out into a corridor.

Ric gasped. This corridor extended for well over half a mile ahead of him, and as far behind—straight through the heart of the ship. This was a colossus indeed! Far ahead he could see a few men moving about, but if they noticed him at that distance they gave no sign of it. He started to walk in that direction, but a crisp voice stopped him.

"Hold it, Earthman!" Something hard and heavy jabbed into his back. "You are very careless, Earthman. Your blow stunned me, but Martians recover easily.

And you forgot to take the heat-gun."

Ric shot a glance over his shoulder. It was Kueelo all right, he of the colorless eyes.

"Martian? Phobian half-breed, you mean! Those eyes—"

"Never mind!" The gun jabbed harder. "No tricks with your hands this time, if you want to stay alive. Turn around—slowly! Let us march in the *other* direction."

THEY walked along the empty corridor. Ric's mind was in turmoil. A half-breed aboard this ship was unthinkable! They passed strange, curved bulkheads abutting on the corridor. Ric couldn't understand them either. Everything about this ship was puzzling.

"I'm really glad you came, Earthman. It makes my task easier!"

"You mean—"

"Yes. I shall leave the *Valiant* to the Earth Fleet. But when that happens *we* won't be there." He chuckled. "You don't understand? But you will—soon."

They paused before a bulkhead with "UNIT 26" blazoned on the door. Kueelo rapped sharply. After a long moment the door opened slightly. Kueelo thrust it wide, shoved Ric forward and stepped in quickly behind him. Ric caught a glimpse of a dozen people in this room, men and women alike. There were startled gasps as Kueelo waved the heat gun at them.

"Back! Move back all of you, and quickly! You, Earthman—get over there with them."

Ric joined the group, saw a slow grin come over Kueelo's face. The other Martians were stunned, speechless, partly at the sight of an Earthman aboard but mainly because one of their kind stood there waving a lethal weapon at them.

Then Ric heard a gasp from a Martian girl standing near him, and she clutched at the arm of her companion.

"Tal . . . it's he, the same one! He managed to get aboard!"

Kueelo flashed them a glance, bowed mockingly. "Yes. So our paths cross again, Tal Horan. How fortunate for me!" His smile faded. "Naric! You may come forward now. I shall need you."

A tall brooding Martian came from the group to stand at Kueelo's side. He too

produced a heat gun and helped to keep the others covered. He jerked his head toward the inner corridor. "How did things go?"

"This Earthman interfered. Luhor is dead. It doesn't matter now, we have to get away from here fast! Wessell is bringing out the Earth Fleet!"

Ric heard mutterings about him and knew that any moment these two renegades were going to have their hands full. Kueelo knew it, too. He opened the door again and motioned the group through, as he and Naric kept them carefully covered.

"You may stay and fight it out with your brave Commander," Kueelo told them mockingly. "*We* have plans a little less foolhardy . . . no, these two stay," he told Naric, indicating Tal Horan and the girl. "The Earthman, too!"

One of the Martians leaped forward, making a try for Kueelo's gun. Kueelo blasted him down calmly, the heat beam making a charred hole completely through the man's neck. The others dragged him out, the door clanged shut and the five of them were alone in Unit 26.

"Quickly now! They'll be giving the alarm! Naric, take the controls while I release the plates. But first . . ." Kueelo faced the three, holding a different type of gun, shorter and thicker. Without warning he aimed it at the floor near their feet. A projectile burst, a pinkish gas sprayed quickly up.

Ric tried to leap forward, but now he couldn't move! Intuition told him to hold his breath. He glimpsed Tal Horan trying to support the girl as she slumped to the floor. But Tal was going down too, slowly, his eyes burning hatred. Then things blurred for Ric. Somehow he kept himself erect as a shadow swayed toward him. His head seemed to burst, but he knew it wasn't the gas . . . it was Kueelo's gun crashing down. . . .

III

SOMEONE slapped his face, a voice sounded urgently in his ear. Ric opened his eyes and looked up at Tal Horan, whose lean face broke into a grin.

"That's better. Kueelo must have hit you pretty hard!"

Ric struggled up. His head ached. They

were somewhere in a tiny room, and he could hear a thin whine of rocket tubes under full blast. The Martian girl was standing near, her attention torn between the Earthman and a view-plate looking out into space.

Ric walked a bit unsteadily to the view-plate. Far away in space he saw the *Valiant* still plodding its course, but their Unit seemed to be blasting away from it at a sharp tangent!

"Dar Mihelson anticipated trouble with the Earth Fleet," Tal Horan answered Ric's puzzled glance. "No spores are going to Earth, but he's determined to fight if necessary. We only want a place to live, Earthman, until we can get back to Mars and wipe out that red plague!"

"The name's Ric Martin. But look, Tal . . . Mihelson mustn't fight! He can't possibly stand against Wessell's fleet!"

"I've counselled against it, but Mihelson is Commander and he's determined if it comes to a showdown—"

"Look!" The girl was pointing into the view-plate. Far ahead of the *Valiant*, across thousands of miles of space, they could see a tiny pin-point of moving light. The Earth Fleet was moving out fast.

"Tal . . . Ric Martin is right. It will mean annihilation for our people. But the *Valiant* has speed! If we could only get a message through to Mihelson. . . ."

Ric strode to the door, tested it. It was locked. He turned back to Tal. "Where's Kueelo and his pal?"

"Busy at the controls, I guess. They threw us in here."

Quickly Ric searched through his pockets, brought out a disc a few inches in diameter, with a milky-white crystallized facing. Inside were highly sensitized coils, and it was rimmed with a sliding sheathe.

"Short distance trans-telector," he explained. "Now if I can only get the *Valiant's* wave length!"

He clicked a switch and manipulated the dials with swift surety. A bit of crackling came through but nothing more. He increased the power. "Afraid we're out of range, and we're moving away fast! Wait. . . ."

The dial began to glow with an inner light. A man's face appeared there, rather fuzzy and indistinct. Ric moved the dials infinitesimally and a faint voice was heard.

"Quickly!" Ric held the disc to Tal Horan's lips.

But the girl came forward. "Allow me, Tal! It is time that Dar Mihelson knew. . . ." She spoke crisply. "Unit Twenty-six calling the *Valiant*! We're moving away fast so listen carefully, Dar Mihelson! You must not fight—it would mean destruction! Look to your magni-plates . . . use your speed, and stay out of Earth Fleet's range!"

Mihelson's answer filtered through, something about "Fight to the death. . . ."

The girl's eyes flashed, she became magnificent. Her voice took a tone of unmistakable authority.

"It is Praana speaking, the Princess Praana, daughter of Bedril! I order you not to fight, Dar Mihelson! You will not place my people in such peril!"

A thousand miles away on the *Valiant's* huge televiser, Praana's face must have been visible. She realized that instantly, and went on.

"I am in disguise, Dar Mihelson! It was Bedril's last order, and we planned this well. I must remain as a rallying point for my people in the time of their direst stress. The time is now! Mihelson . . . you know my voice, do you not?"

"But what are we to do, your Eminence? We cannot return to Mars . . . Wessell blocks our way to Earth. . . ."

AFTER a moment of indecision, Ric whispered, "You're sure he has speed? He could outrace the Earth Fleet?"

"Yes! You will see!"

"The moon, then. Earth's moon! The crater Tycho. . . ."

"Dar Mihelson," she spoke again. "You must get past Earth's fleet. You can do that, with the element of surprise; then head for Earth's moon! Swing around it once and enter Tycho! You will find airlocks there at the abandoned mines, and tunnels leading deep inside. You will be safe for a while! Await further word from me . . . I shall contact you again, I promise it!"

Already the wave-length was becoming tenuous, but Praana was sure her final words had reached him. Ric snapped off the disc.

A voice behind them brought them whirling around.

KUEELO stood in the doorway, heat-gun held ready as always. He laughed mockingly.

"So. A handy little gadget that is, Earthman. And you really managed to contact Dar Mihelson with it?" he shrugged. "That is all right—we shall have entertainment now. It will be interesting to see how he out-maneuvers the Earth Fleet! If you three will join me?"

They walked ahead of Kueelo, into a room where a visipanel had already centered the *Valiant* and was following its slow progress. Naric appeared in the doorway behind them, and remained watchful. Kueelo stepped to the screen and manipulated the magni-lens.

The space scene seemed to widen, draw away a little . . . then the Earth Fleet could be seen. Even at this distance it appeared formidable. In staggered horizontal tiers, perhaps fifty of Earth's cruisers had arrayed themselves under Wessell's command. Breathlessly they watched, from their own ship which was already speeding far out of range.

Ric noticed one thing. The Earth ships were all of the heavy type, built for concentrated power-blasts rather than speed. Mihelson might out-maneuver them, but, if he chose to fight . . .

The Fleet was almost in range of the *Valiant* now, and still the Mars ship continued its plodding course. It was unlikely that Wessell suspected anything. He was approaching slowly to make sure of doing a thorough job. It was sheer treachery; worse, it was murder! In that moment Ric felt almost ashamed of being an Earthman.

Suddenly, from the prow of the *Valiant* a beam of light probed forth to cut the gap of darkness like a slashing saber. Once, twice, three times it slashed. This was the accepted signal for a parley in space.

Tal Horan muttered and moved restlessly. Praana's golden face had gone pale. Surely Dar Mihelson was not going to parley! He must know what awaited him! Speed was the only salvation now.

From Earth's flagship the answering signal came. And then, although the *Valiant* still moved, the Earth Fleet applied forward rockets and began to slow appreciably. Mihelson's strategy was apparent now!

This would give him precious seconds needed for acceleration!

And then it came. Without warning the *Valiant* seemed to burst apart. To the watchers from afar it was startling; to Wessell it must have been unbelievable. Some thirty Units, each a spaceship in itself, moved outward in an ever widening circle . . . then all of space seemed aflame as the rockets burst into action. The Mars spacers sped straight at the Earth Fleet, but the circle was widening now and they passed safely *around* the Fleet, around and beyond it and were gaining acceleration even as the Earth cruisers tried to reverse their drift!

One of the Earth ships opened up with its rear-action ray blasts. Slicing, probing angrily, the livid blue rays tried to intercept the fleeting Martian Units. Two of the rays converged upon one of the Units and held there. The Martian ship grew fiery red, seemed to falter . . . then exploded into holocaust.

But the others were beyond range now and gaining acceleration with each second. Even the atomo-bombs, hurled recklessly, fell far short. By the time the Earth Fleet had reversed, the Martian ships were disappearing dots of light, heading for Earth.

"Mihelson did well!" Kueelo said, and whirled dials that dissolved the scene. "Only one Unit lost. But I have the most important Unit . . . do I not, Princess Praana!" His voice was mocking; it seemed to have secret meaning.

"Phobian half-breed!" Tal Horan's face was tight with hate. "Murderers and traitors, all of you . . . since time began! Ric, I had an encounter with this man back on Mars, at one of the Ionization Towers. He tried to get my identity card so he could come aboard the *Valiant*. How'd you manage it, Kueelo?"

"Never mind, Tal." It was Praana who spoke softly, but her slender body was taut, her golden face showed a pallor. "Where are you taking us, Kueelo?"

"Ah, so you are curious at last! Observe." Again the screen came to life. Ahead of them loomed the bright red disc of Mars! They had made a sweeping parabola and were heading back toward the planet.

Kueelo spoke again, and for once his voice lost its mockery. "Observe further,

The Towers have failed, the plague has conquered. Mars is a dead world now. I know that Emperor Bedril and his group of scientists remained there. He was a brave man, I admit—but foolish. This was inevitable."

Praana turned her head away. Tal Horan said bitterly, "I wish I had stayed to die with him! At least our work—"

"Yes! I am aware, Tal Horan, that you were working with Bedril on the atomic breakdown of the new Mercury metal, with which you hoped to combat the plague." Kueelo's eyes became bright. "I am sure you must have gone far. Well . . . *we* have worked on the same principle, and I'm sure your formula will be useful to us!"

"We?" Tal was puzzled.

Kueelo merely grinned, waved a hand at the televisé.

They were skirting Mars. Now a tiny world moved unerringly toward them. It was a dark, airless little world of crags and shadows, but it was unmistakable. Mars' smaller moon . . . Phobos!

IV

YOU may watch if you wish. I'm going to treat you to as masterful a piece of navigation as you've ever seen." Kueelo stood at the control board, hands ready, eyes fastened on the panorama spreading below them. "You especially should appreciate this, Earthman! Naric, keep them covered."

Phobos rushed up before them, a horribly barren world that seemed to encompass all of space. Closer it came, but Kueelo didn't check his drive. They could see vast plains dotted with craters, and huge serrated cliffs reaching up.

At last Kueelo applied his forward thrust, and they levelled out. Half around the planet they raced. A mountain range loomed. The spacer dipped sharply, driving straight at it! Ric was taut, sweat glistening on his brow. No ship could ever brake in time at that suicidal speed! He merely closed his eyes, awaiting the inevitable.

A sudden force sent him reeling. A profound nausea made him retch. Then Kueelo was at his side, touching his shoulder.

"How was that, Earthman?" Kueelo

laughed. "Don't worry, we're safe now!"

White-faced and shaken, Ric opened his eyes. They had entered a place of semi-darkness, but were still moving ahead.

"Where are we?"

"Inside the cliffs! We've entered a magnetic field that arrests speed and mass synchronously. We are being slowed in a graduating net of force."

In a few minutes they had come to a complete rest, but Kueelo told them, "Stay where you are! Our trip isn't over yet."

Ric peered into the forward screen. Darkness encompassed them. He turned questioningly. Kueelo grinned and gestured downward.

"You mean we're going inside this planet?"

"Yes. *Very* far inside. We're on the downward beams now. Patience, Earthman, you'll see many amazing things before we're through."

It took a long time, and there was no telling how far they'd gone or with what speed. They seemed not to be moving at all. But at last a faint blue radiance appeared, and Kueelo opened the lock.

They stepped out onto a ledge which extended perhaps a hundred yards, then dropped sheerly away. The walls curving up were of polished smoothness, and stretched away into unimaginable distances. The soft bluish light came from these walls and seemed to pervade the whole interior of this hollow world. The air was damp but comfortably warm. And the gravity . . .

Praana clutched at Tal Horan's arm. "This is almost Mars gravity! But . . . where do they get it?"

"Yes, we'll have to look into that later." Tal cautioned her to silence.

A three-wheeled car was waiting for them. Kueelo hurried them into it, and Naric took the controls. Soon they were speeding away, and they gasped as their ledge tapered off into nothingness! They were traversing the inside of the shell itself.

"It's eerie at first," Kueelo told them, "but you'll soon become accustomed to our gravity. Just imagine the space out there as being *up*. The only difference is that our light comes from the surface instead of overhead."

"What's the interior diameter?" Ric gestured outward.

"About three hundred miles. And you were wondering about our gravity, Tal Horan? It comes from out there!" Kueelo gestured vaguely at the gray-blue interior. "Our power plant is anchored in space at the exact center of Phobos. But it's reverse gravity—that is to say, its force extends *outward* toward the shell, instead of pulling inward."

Tal saw that the man was communicative. He nodded thoughtfully. "Quite an engineering feat! It must have taken a long time to set up all this!"

"Two generations! It was not done in my time."

"Where are we going now?"

"To the city of the Phobians."

Praana gasped. "Native Phobians? But there are no Phobians left! For three hundred years—"

"That's the popular supposition, and it suits our convenience. Yes, three hundred years ago the war between Mars and Phobos was supposed to have ended. But you shall see! Perhaps Gorak himself will have much to tell you."

"Gorak?"

"The present Phobian leader! There are only a few thousand Phobians remaining, as there are only a few thousand of your people. Ironic, is it not . . . Princess Praana?"

THE CITY came into view, a sheer grotesquerie of impossible buildings jutting crazily into space. However, as they came nearer, it was apparent that many of them were abandoned.

They passed through a long street and entered a building which Kueelo seemed to know well. He was familiar with everything here, Ric thought—too familiar! They came into a room where a man sat at a table, poring over charts and figures. He looked up, greeted Kueelo and Naric by name.

"This is Tal Horan, and the Princess Praana!" Kueelo said, the pride of accomplishment in his voice. "We have done better than we supposed! And this one is Ric Martin, who foolishly came into space to warn Dar Mihelson."

While Kueelo was telling his story, Ric watched this Phobian leader, Gorak, who was as ghastly a character as he had ever seen. Pallid, with a bluish tinge, the man

stood well over six feet tall, but his body seemed frail. His head was absurdly large, quite hairless and glistening. The colorless, lidless eyes were not nice to look into. He watched the others, especially Praana, with those cold eyes as Kueelo talked.

"So. The Princess Praana," Gorak said at last, and his thin gash of a mouth parted in a grin, revealing brownish teeth. "But are you quite sure, Kueelo? I seem to remember her differently, in the tele-magnum."

"I am quite sure, Gorak. It was Bedril's wish that she disguise herself."

Gorak nodded, never once taking those lidless orbs from Praana. "You have done well, Kueelo. She will serve as a most valuable pawn. And this other—Tal Horan. Is he not the metallurgist who worked with Bedril?"

"Yes, and I'm sure he must have their formula for the Counter-active! They were working in the right direction, just as we . . ."

Gorak held up a hand. He surveyed Tal Horan coldly from head to foot, and Tal returned the gaze unflinchingly. Then Gorak's gaze lingered on Tal's right hand. He spoke without emotion.

"Kueelo. You have not been very observant."

Tal Horan whirled for the door, but a dozen Phobians had entered silently to bar the way. Tal lashed out at them, and three went down before his pile-driver fists before the others brought him back, struggling, to stand before Gorak.

"It is useless, Tal Horan. You see, we need this formula." Gorak reached to Tal's right hand, removed a colorless, plastic ring from his finger. From the inside of the ring he stripped a tightly-rolled film, handed it to Kueelo.

"It is you who will need this, Kueelo. I am sure you can persuade Tal Horan to assist you in deciphering it."

"Think again!" Tal husked through clenched teeth.

Praana faced the Phobian leader squarely. "You beast! You'll never reclaim Mars from the red plague! And—my people are safe!" Triumph filtered into her voice.

Gorak grinned down at her. All of him grinned except those horrible eyes. He turned, touched the huge tele-magnum be-

hind him. "Let us say, rather, that your people have gained a temporary respite. They are safe on Earth's moon. I watched it." Sudden vicious hate erased the grin. "But my people remain too, Praana! For three hundred years the Phobians have hidden and burrowed and builded—and planned! The Martians thought they had wiped us out. They levelled our cities with atom-blasts, they slashed and blackened the surface of Phobos and hunted down my people mercilessly. Even when our Fleet had gone down to destruction and we were helpless, even when my people sued for a peace from the horrible war, *pleaded*, the Martian leaders would not listen!"

Praana was taut with emotion. "Yes! Yes, our history tells of it too! Three times the Phobians had initiated wars against Mars which ended in holocaust for both our peoples! And the last time, we determined it should never happen again. However," she gained control of herself, "this was long before your time or mine. Centuries ago."

"True. We are the fourth generation. It is personal, nevertheless! The Phobians as a race do not die easily . . . nor as individuals do they ever forget!" Gorak's lips writhed again. "It was for *me* to resume the war against Mars! I am destined to be our liberator, and I have done exceedingly well. Once more we are on equal terms, Praana!"

"*You* resumed the war!" Her face was puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"The spores, of course. The red plague that appeared so mysteriously on Mars. Where do you think it came from?"

Praana's face blanched. Tal Horan tired to leap forward, to smash Gorak's sneering face. But a dozen wiry Phobians held him back.

"Yes," Gorak went on. "The spores were launched from here! Almost single-handed, I have accomplished the destruction of Mars. The rest will be easy! We have far-reaching plans!" With a wave of the hand Gorak indicated that he was weary of this. "Take them away, Kueelo. See that Praana is made comfortable, but guard her well. If Tal Horan shows a disinclination to work with you on the Counter-active, refer him again to me, but I am sure you have persuasive methods equal to my own."

Gorak turned his cold orbs to Ric. "As

for the Earthman. . . watch him well! His lips have been very still, but not his brain!"

V

OUTSIDE again, Ric flashed a warning look at Tal Horan and said tentatively, to Kueelo:

"As a spaceman and engineer, all of this interests me! Just what is the nature of these spores? How did you manage to get them across to Mars? And"—he looked about the empty streets—"where are the Phobians?"

"You shall learn these things in due time. And, if you are entertaining thoughts of escaping from here," Kueelo said with calm assurance, "you may as well forget it. You will work, Earthman; you will work very hard, in order to stay alive. You'll soon learn why! Later. . . you may be of even more use to us."

They entered the car again and soon were speeding away from the city. The shimmering blue surface light began to fade away. They entered a twilight place where the walls were of dull gray stone.

"Where are you taking us now?" Praana asked.

"You shall see! I feel it is best that you understand fully what we have accomplished here, and it is only the beginning. Our plans are far-reaching!"

Far-reaching. Ric thought he knew what that meant, but he remained silent and watchful. A few miles further they entered a region of pallid, purplish vegetation. There were vast patches of it, acres wide, growing from the surface. And they saw the Phobians. Hundreds of these frail, pallid people were working listlessly into the growth, harvesting it, placing it in small fibroid carts to be hauled away.

"You asked about the nature of the spores," Kueelo said to Ric. "Touch it, then. I want you to see for yourself."

Ric examined it curiously. It grew in thick masses close to the stone, almost lichen-like. It was the strangest stuff he had ever seen. It seemed literally to crawl! Carefully he reached out a hand. A faint tingling, almost radioactive, went through his skin.

"Touch it with metal," Kueelo said.

Ric searched his pockets, found a small silver coin. Gingerly he extended it. When

the metal was yet a few inches from the fungoid growth, it seemed to be snatched from his fingers! The growth reached swiftly upward at it, and the metal dissolved away. For a three foot radius the growth turned from the pallid purple to blood red...seemed trying to tear itself from the stone. Ric could even feel a faint heat from it.

So this was Korak's weapon! This was the stuff he had launched, somehow, upon Mars. It was diabolic...and Ric could understand, now, how Mars had been devastated in a matter of weeks! Questions were pounding in his brain; but before he could speak, Kueelo was saying with supreme confidence:

"You wonder how we control it. We have only partially done that, by use of the new allotropic metal from Mercury. Under special processing in our atomic furnaces we have been able to strengthen the atomic structure of the Mercury metal, at least to the point where it will counter-act the spores temporarily. With that accomplished, it was a simple matter to propel them on robot-control across the short space to Mars."

"And upon landing there," Tal Horan's voice came fraught with hate, "the spores broke down the metal and were free to spread on Mars! It's diabolic!"

"Let us say, clever," Kueelo continued coldly. "And with the formula you have provided, I believe we can strengthen the atomic structure still more. We can increase our range. We shall have a weapon indeed!"

He dismissed the subject abruptly and turned to Ric. "Tal Horan will assist me tomorrow at the laboratories. *Your* work will be here. You are new, and can do the work of a hundred of these Phobians."

There was secret meaning, secret amusement in the words. Ric looked again at the Phobians moving slowly, automaton-like, listless and dull-eyed. He felt an awful foreboding as he wondered how long before he became like these shells of men...

THEY returned to the city where Kueelo assigned them to their quarters. They didn't lack for comfort, but Phobian guards, obviously not of the worker class, patrolled the corridors ceaselessly.

"Their plan is obvious!" Ric said when

they were alone. "Earth is to be next, unless it capitulates to their demands. And lord knows what those will be!"

"Yes." Praana was thoughtful. "I think Kueelo would have bargained with Mars, but Gorak wanted his revenge, the wholesale destruction of our people. And he probably figures it will be a good object lesson to Earth."

"They couldn't have picked a better time, with Earth divided on the question of the Mars refugees, and Wessell using the Fleet for his own political ambitions! Tal... you'll be working with Kueelo tomorrow. Pretend to co-operate, but slow them down if you can! Learn what their plans are. Find out how much time we have!"

Tal nodded. "We'll all have to keep our eyes and ears open. Our only chance is to get back to that spaceship."

"How? Even if we got past the guards, we could never find our way back to that airlock." Ric laughed bitterly. "Direction is meaningless in this crazy world!"

Then he was strangely silent, as his mind struggled on the threshold of an idea. There was something Kueelo had said, in his boastful mood, something Ric should have remembered. Something...

But Ric couldn't recall it now. Events had happened too swiftly. The more he tried to grasp the idea the more it eluded him. At last his weary mind gave it up, and he sank into a sleep of exhaustion.

He was awakened roughly and looked up to see Kueelo. Tal and Praana were already up, and some Phobian servants were bringing breakfast in to them.

"You won't find existence here too hard," Kueelo told them, "so long as you do as you're told. Eat your breakfast, then you, Tal Horan, will accompany me, and you, Ric Martin, will go with Naric to the spore-fields. As for Praana... Gorak wishes to confer further with her."

Tal Horan glanced at her anxiously, but Praana whispered, "It's all right, Tal, I can take care of myself; and I may be able to help!"

Ric accompanied Naric, and they reached the spore-fields where groups of Phobians were already beginning the day's work. Ric was given a leather hood that came over his head and around his neck, and soft leather gloves.

He went to work slowly, methodically,

following the example of the others. The roots of the growth, he found, were embedded deep. It clung tenaciously. And soon, even through his clothes, through the protecting gear, he could feel faint radiations at work on his skin.

Before an hour had passed, it began to take its toll of him. Sweat was in his eyes, but he did not mind that. Much worse, something seemed to be happening to his metabolism. His blood moved sluggishly in his veins, as a terrible impassivity gripped him. Almost it was as though essential salts within his body were being dissolved, to slow up cellular activity! Ric paused to stare around at the phosphorescent glow that clung about the place like a ghastly pall.

A GROUP of Phobians moved toward him, pushing one of the half-filled carts. Ric watched them dully, feeling only a desire to give up, to sink down into the lichen growth that came about his ankles. To move, even to think, was an effort. Then one of the Phobians came toward him.

"You are new," the man said without emotion. "To stand still is fatal. You must keep working, keep moving, if you want to last long."

"Thanks." With an effort Ric roused himself from his lethargy, and joined the group. He worked fast now. It was tiring work, and the sweat still poured from him, but he felt his brain gradually clearing, and the blood didn't pound so heavily at his temples. He knew well what Kueelo had meant when he said, "You will work very hard, Earthman...in order to stay alive."

"My name is Yarnith," said the Phobian who had first spoken, as he moved and worked beside Ric.

Ric didn't see what that mattered, and he made no reply.

"You are Earthian," the man went on. "I don't know how you came here, but you are strong, stronger than four of us. Stay with our group, Earthman!"

Ric looked at him, then, and at the others in the group. There were perhaps a dozen. They were frail and pallid, but somehow their eyes were not so vacant, there was not the gray look of death upon their faces.

"You've not been here so long as the others!" Ric ventured.

Yarnith's face twisted bitterly. "No. Once we worked in the city, at the laboratories, carrying on Gorak's great work. He has promised us much...expansion, and the respect of other worlds and the glory that once was ours. But I've seen our people sent here to the spore-fields in increasing numbers! It's a living death!"

Ric saw the others nod in agreement, as they listened to Yarnith. "How much longer will it be?" one of them grumbled. "I for one do not intend to stay here and become as these others!" He indicated the hundreds of Phobians moving listlessly about their work.

Ric's heart leaped. "You mean...you're planning an escape?"

But immediately he saw he was wrong. Yarnith looked at him in puzzlement. "Escape...how can that be? This is our world, and where could we go?"

Ric knew, then, that these people knew little of Gorak's plans. They were probably unaware of the secret airlock leading from their hollow world! Not for three generations had a Phobian set foot on the barren outer surface. Gorak was using them as pawns in his insatiable plan.

Again Ric looked about him. Their cart was half-filled now, and they were moving toward a group of rough stone buildings that apparently served as barracks. Yarnith whispered, "Be alert, Earthman!"

Ric was puzzled, but stayed with them. They rounded a corner of one of the buildings, out of sight of the other workers. Then Yarnith acted quickly. He burrowed deep into the cart, came up with a small leather pouch; then as the other Phobians gathered 'round, he portioned out the contents.

Ric thought he recognized the brownish stuff. The dread *eishm* stems, a powerful narcotic. He'd encountered it once on Venus.

"It helps," Yarnith explained. "It combats the fatigue, builds up a cellular resistance and re-activates the blood stream. But we don't have much of it here, and—"

One of the men gave a warning cry. Ric whirled, saw another group of Phobians appear around the corner of the building. Their dull eyes took on a glint as they saw the *eishm* stems. Some of the new-

comers carried crude knives. Then they were rushing forward, and Ric found himself battling beside Yarnith and the others, battling for his life.

He lashed out as two of the Phobians converged upon him. His fist caught one of them, the man's face lost contour and his frail body sailed backward. The other went down from a blow to the body. Then a dozen of them were upon him, hands tearing at his arms and throat, and Ric felt himself going down. He fought back, using fists and knees now. The dread lethargy of this place was gone from him. He was feeling the first joy of battle against odds.

Soon he was clear, using his Earth strength to advantage. He rolled aside as a knife flashed toward him, grazing his cheek. He gained his feet. Yarnith and the others were fighting against overwhelming odds. He saw Yarnith seize a fallen knife, and two Phobians went down with blood gushing from their throats.

The very silence lent an unreality. Ric was everywhere now, unleashing sledgehammer fists that cut a path through the attackers. He evaded the slashing knives, seized one of the Phobians and hurled him bodily.

Yarnith fought on by Ric's side, exulting, using the knife. The attacking group was falling back now. Panic seized them as they witnessed the Earthman's strength. Soon they were fleeing, leaving a half-dozen of their dead and dying on the ground.

Ric towered there, still feeling the fierce surge of blood that was a tonic to him. He heard Yarnith's exultant voice.

"That was a battle, Earthman! I'm glad you were with us. They'll kill to get a few of these *eishn* stems." It seemed not to matter to Yarnith that these were his own people. He extended the pouch, but Ric waved it away. Yarnith seemed puzzled, then shrugged, as the group went back to their work.

Disgust flooded Ric like a cold wave from the sea. These people were lost, struggling against a hopeless existence. They were little more than beasts, and the addiction to the *eishn* stems only hastened the inevitable. He could not even feel pity—and certainly he could expect no help from them.

HE returned to their quarters in the city, weary of body and mind. It was hours before the dread effect of the spores left him—but Ric was determined not to resort to the *eishn* stems. Praana and Tal Horan had returned, and they compared notes for the day.

"They've gone far," Tal said grimly, "much farther than I ever dreamed! They have an improved type of atomic furnace. They process and shape the new metal into bomb-casings for the spores; but they're using it for new rocket-tubes as well! According to Kueelo, it will give them tubes that are absolutely blast proof and triples efficiency in relation to fuel consumption. Already they've equipped two new spacers, and will have more of them ready in the event that Earth refuses the Phobian ultimatum."

Ric listened wearily, his mind trying to seize the problem. "What will the ultimatum be?"

"I learned that today," Praana said. "Gorak will demand full recognition of Phobos as a member of the Inner Planet Federation, with himself as supreme ruler of Mars once he reclaims it from the red plague."

"Earth Council will never agree!"

"I learned even more," Praana went on. "Dar Mihelson managed to reach Luna safely with all units! They are safe for the time being, deep within Tycho. And Ric... the balance of Earth's fleet has sided with your Earth Council, and against Wessell. Already a showdown battle is in the making!"

Ric groaned. "Just what Gorak wanted! It will give him the time he needs. Tal, how far have they gone?"

"Unfortunately, Kueelo's already deciphered our formula and it gives them the missing equation! You see, Bedril and I were working on a principle which meant stripping the outer sheathe of electrons from the new metal, without disrupting the atom itself—and the power generated would serve to counteract the spores. Here, in their new type of atomic furnace, they have the necessary heat and pressure to do that."

"What will it mean, then?" Ric's brows furrowed.

"Simply that, in a manner of speaking, they'll be able to control the spore action,

and they'll soon be able to launch the spore bombs all the way to Earth!"

Ric arose and paced the room angrily. He stepped to the outer door and peered along the corridor, but a group of guards hurried toward him with electros held in readiness. They had been instructed well. Ric turned and continued to pace the room.

"It will be at least a few days before they're ready," Tal said. "There's little I can do to slow them down, Ric—but my chance may come!"

Ric paused. Already an idea was growing apace within him. It was a desperate idea but they had to try something—anything! He said, "I think somewhere in this city there's a supply of *eishn* stems. I saw some of the workers using it today—maybe it's smuggled out to them occasionally. I want to get hold of some! All I can get! Praana, suppose you work on that. If you can, find out where the stuff's kept!"

VI

FOR RIC, the next few days were an anguish that surpassed the most refined torture. He worked long hours in the spore fields, doing the work of a hundred Phobians. One worked hard, in order to retain life and sanity; to remain long idle, out there was to die a slow death. As it was, the stuff was taking an insidious toll of him. At times he wondered why he bothered. But he drove himself on, hoping against hope.

Once he even partook of the *eishn* stems that Yarnith offered. The stuff was bitter, gum-like, and offered a soaring elation and a surcease from the terrible fatigue; but the after-effect was so depressive that he didn't try it again.

He stayed with Yarnith's little group, moving and working and fighting with them. The others became increasingly hostile, launching sporadic attacks—those who could rouse themselves from lethargy—in an effort to get some of the *eishn* stems. But soon even Yarnith's small supply was gone, divided among his group.

Still the fighting went on, for the sake of action and blood-lust. Each day men died. Each day Ric had to protect himself. He found himself taking a fierce joy in it, and he no longer looked upon these Phobi-

ans as men. They were mere beasts with the killer instinct.

Ric was becoming one of them.

Only one thing sustained him. After each day's work the Martian, Naric, came for him in the atomo-car and took him back to his quarters in the city. There at least he had the company of Praana and Tal Horan. He could bathe, and rest, and the meals weren't bad.

Tal Horan, in the meantime, was working hard with Kueelo and the others in the laboratories, at the atomic furnaces, at the forges. Kueelo seemed not to care how much Tal learned of their work. He was supremely confident.

And well he might be. Tal told Ric of it.

"I've seen the newly processed metal under test! It stands up indefinitely against the metal-devouring spores—and eventually it will be a complete counter-active against them. And the new rocket-tubes are frightening! I saw one of them in the testing block, subjected to internal blasts far greater than anything known. It seems almost resilient under stress!" Tal's face had gone pale as he talked. "Later they plan to equip an entire Fleet. If that time ever comes..."

Time began to lose all meaning for Ric. Days blended into a phantasmagoria of working and fighting... blood and madness. Already he was forgetting how he had come here. He cared even less. He was here to die, and he hoped it would be soon.

It was perhaps a week later that Kueelo came to them, after the days work. "Gorak wishes to see you. All of you!"

Tal and Praana were puzzled. In Ric, a spark struck home. He struggled to rouse himself. Gorak... what could he want with them now?

"TODAY," Gorak told them when they appeared in his quarters, "I spoke with the Earth Council. I gave them my ultimatum."

He paused, watching their amazement. Then he turned to the tele-magnum, a huge and magnificent instrument, as powerful as anything Earth had.

"I cut into the Earth beam while they were broadcasting to Venus and, by drowning out their channel, contacted them for a few minutes. Needless to say," he turned

his cold orbs upon Ric, "they refused my terms. They refuse to believe I destroyed Mars. Of course I realize it would be hard for them to capitulate even if they wanted to. Earth's Fleet is divided, and all has not gone well with Wessell. Already there have been skirmishes around Luna, and part of Wessell's fleet has gone down to destruction."

Ric's heart leaped. At least this was good news! But Gorak's cold voice went on.

"I cannot wait for them to destroy themselves, because in two more days Phobos comes into juxtaposition with Earth, and that will not happen again for months. Earth must have an object lesson! Come. I wish to show you what I mean."

Once again they entered the atomo-car and were speeding away from the city, traversing Phobos' inner shell. They passed the laboratories and shops, hearing the clangor of work still going on. They came to a place where huge, powerful-looking rockets were arranged in neat rows. There were literally hundreds of them.

"Those are the bombs!" Tal whispered to Ric. "They explode upon contact, releasing the spores!"

Their car had stopped, and Gorak ordered them out. Kueelo and Naric were there, and dozens of Phobians, fully armed. The place was well guarded. They saw vast mechanisms reaching endlessly across the wall. These were topped by huge metal discs, perhaps ten feet in diameter.

"The propulsion pits," Gorak explained. "Even vaster, of course, than those we used against Mars. I wanted you especially to see these—Ric Martin. Kueelo, show him."

Kueelo stepped to the operating board. Slowly, under his control, one of the huge discs slid back. A great, gleaming metal bore was revealed. It ejected toward them silently, as though on great compression coils.

"The bores extend entirely through Phobos' shell," Gorak went on. "It has been the work of years. They rest on huge pivots and can be adjusted to any desired angle." He waved a hand. "As you can see, we have twenty of them. Let us hope we will not need them all. Luna is airless, and the action of the spores will be faster there than on Mars."

"Luna!" Praana swayed and would have collapsed, but for Tal Horan's arms about her. "You're going to land the spores on Earth's moon? My people are there . . . bottled up in Tycho!"

"That is unfortunate. Your people may yet be saved, Princess Praana. It depends upon Ric Martin."

"What do you mean?" Ric's voice was tight.

Gorak looked at him calculatingly. "You may have wondered why we have revealed everything to you—all of our plans, all of our power. It's because I want you, as an Earthman, to realize what's in store for your planet unless they capitulate. I don't want Earth to go the way of Mars. I don't even want to destroy Earth's moon—unless it's necessary. It's up to you, Ric Martin, to convince your stubborn Earth Council!"

"How can I do that?"

"Tomorrow evening Earth's regular news broadcast will be beamed to Venus. I can cut into the channel again, as I did today. This time *you* will speak to them. You will tell your Council what you have seen here, and what faces them. It will be their last chance! If you don't convince them . . . Luna's destruction will! Earth was aloof when Mars was dying, but this will be much nearer home!"

THE hours passed. A deadly quiet had come over the city, not even broken now by the monotonous hum of the atomic furnaces. It was "night"; their wall lights had automatically dimmed, but outside the bluish light from Phobos' walls was all-pervading.

Ric, Praana and Tal Horan did not sleep. But the guards outside had been doubled, and they were alert, patrolling the corridors ceaselessly. Occasionally one of the guards stopped to look in upon them.

"Your people will not die, Praana," Ric told her. "I'll convince the Council to do as Gorak says. Later, perhaps, they can find the way to deal with him."

"No! His first move would be to order the surrender of their entire Fleet. Earth would be relegated to a minor power . . . and Venus would be next!"

Tal said thoughtfully, "Ric . . . when you get in front of that tele-magnum, tell your Council to send their entire Fleet out

here! They ought to be able to blast Phobos out of space!"

"Yes, if they could get within ten thousand miles of here—which they can't! Gorak's bombs are radio-controlled, and the entire Fleet wouldn't stand long against them."

They were suddenly silent, as a Phobian guard appeared in the doorway. For a moment the man stood hesitant. Praana rose, quickly crossed the room to him. The guard handed something to her, and moved quickly away.

"The *eishn* stems!" Praana handed Ric several tightly wrapped bundles. "For days I've been trying to persuade him to get some for us! I convinced him we needed it for ourselves."

Ric had almost forgotten about it. "My plan may not work, now. But it's a last chance. If only they send me back to the spore-fields tomorrow!" He hid the drug carefully away in his clothes.

And Ric did go back to the fields. For him it was the same routine day. Those deadly spores needed harvesting, to go into the bombs that were still being assembled. He worked as usual, but stayed near the man Yarnith, awaiting his chance.

At last it came. He managed to get Yarnith apart from the others.

"I have something for you!" Ric reached into his pocket, brought out one of the *eishn* stems. Just one.

Yarnith seized it, placed it in his mouth. His hands trembled in eagerness, his dulling eyes came to life. "Earthman! where did you—I thought—"

"Yes, you thought there were no more of them! Yarnith, you are no longer men, you are slaves, all of you are slaves! Do you suppose Gorak cares about you? He and the others live in luxury in the city, while the rest of you work out here and die and kill—"

Yarnith wasn't listening, he had become as the others. He no longer cared. Ric looked at the man in disgust, then fury swept over him. He seized Yarnith's arm, whirled him around roughly. Yarnith cowered, whimpering.

"Listen to me! Listen! There are more *eishn* stems, enough for all of you. All you have to do is take them! Do you understand that?"

Yarnith understood that. It was all he

understood, all he cared. He nodded eagerly. "More of them?"

"Yes, in the city! Gorak has them!"

Yarnith slumped in despair. "The city. We can never go there again. None of us have ever—"

Ric shoved him away disgustedly, went to join the others. Throughout the day he moved among them, portioning out the stems, giving them the same story. Each worker received one stem, no more. Some were beyond understanding him, and these he tried to avoid. Others watched him covetously, eyeing the supply of stems he was portioning out.

Once a knife slashed his shoulder, and he went to his knees from the blow. Ric whirled and killed the man with a single blow that snapped the frail neck. Ric went berserk then, dashing among them, flailing and lashing and throwing fists left and right as the blood-lust came upon him. They fled before him.

"You're going to understand one thing, damn you!" he shouted. "There are plenty of these stems in the city, but you'll get them for yourself! I'll bring you no more!"

That seemed to work better. It roused them from their lethargy, and Ric kept them that way. How many more he killed or maimed, he never knew. It became a sort of mad game. It was a day Ric was never to forget!

Nor would they forget him. At the end of that day he saw many of them in groups, muttering to themselves, watching him balefully. As if for the first time, they realized one thing: this Earthman always returned to the city . . . and he had *eishn* stems!

When Ric returned this time, there was a weariness upon him such as he had never known. But a fierce hope burned within him, a hope that these Phobians would remember . . . that they'd become men again for at least a while, and not fall again into their lethargy . . .

He'd done his best, and there would not be another chance.

VII

KUEELO came to them, as they were at the evening meal. "Be ready, Ric Martin. The Earth broadcast will be in a few hours. Gorak is getting the tele-mag-

num ready now." He handed Ric a closely-written paper. "These are the things you will tell your Earth Council, and be sure you follow it to the letter!"

Ric scarcely looked at the paper. They waited nervously, as the minutes lengthened into hours, and Ric's thoughts whirled in chaos. To refuse Gorak's dictates now would mean death to Praana's people on Luna. On the other hand Ric knew that Earth would never capitulate! At the very best, it would mean holocaust and a spatial war such as the System had not known in two hundred years.

At last it was time. They were taken under special guard to Gorak's quarters, where the tele-magnum was ready. The next few minutes would determine the fate of two worlds, perhaps even the entire System!

Everyone was tense. Even Gorak's pallid features were pulled into tight lines, as he said to Ric, "When we've gained control of the Earth beam, you will announce yourself. Then you will read what is on the paper, and no more! If you depart from it in the slightest, I shall order my guards to blast you down." He turned to Praana. "When Ric Martin is through, you may make a plea to the Earth Council on behalf of your people."

Gorak turned to the tele-magnum, an instrument that dwarfed everything in the room. The control panel was taller than the man himself, connected to huge coils and tubes. He manipulated the controls with swift surety. The tubes came aglow, danced with silvery radiance.

The coils hummed a smooth threnody, then shrieked as they absorbed the increasing power. Soon the sound rose above the audible. Then...from far away, a faint voice was heard droning monotonously. This was the Earth beam, the scheduled news-broadcast to Venus. Gorak moved the dials swiftly, and the voice filtered through.

"...at last report, has been determined that the Martians under command of Dar Mihelson have maintained their temporary haven within crater Tycho. The eight-day Battle of Luna, it is expected, will be terminated shortly. An unconfirmed report says that Felix Wessell has been captured, and is being returned to Earth where he will face court-martial for high treason.

Another amazing development concerning the plague on Mars, is thought to be a hoax. Thirty hours ago—"

Gorak twisted the dials viciously, cutting off the voice. "A hoax! So they think my demands are a hoax!" Fury mastered him for a moment, then he went to work over the controls. "I'll cut into their beam. Be ready, Ric Martin! They'd better listen now!"

The voice came again, then was drowned out as Gorak's increased potential flooded the channel. Tal Horan, standing beside Ric, was suddenly tense. He gripped his arm and whispered, "Listen!"

But Ric had heard it too, they all heard it. From the streets outside, from far away, came an angry murmur—a *crowd* murmur, wafted to them through the night stillness. And it was coming nearer.

THEY saw Kueelo motion to several of the guards, and the men hurried outside. Still the sounds came, louder now, a sort of angry chant. Now it seemed to enter this street, to be heading this way.

Alarmed, Kueelo himself seized an electro and hurried out. Gorak still worked over the tele-magnum. He looked up in annoyance. Then he straightened.

"Very well, Ric Martin. I've established contact!"

Ric hesitated, then moved slowly to stand before the tele-sender. He moistened his lips, glanced at the paper in his hand. At that moment a guard came bursting back into the room. Blood streamed from his face.

"The workers! I—I think they've revolted!"

Gorak leaped to another instrument, pressed a row of buttons—six of them, lightning-fast. Then he was across the room, hurrying out the door.

"Ric Martin speaking!" Ric was shouting into the tele-sender. "Be alert for spore-bombs aimed at Luna!" He could not be sure it got across, but that was all he had time for. The remaining guards stood hesitant, started to follow Gorak, and then turned back.

But Tal Horan was leaping into action now. He met two of the guards before they could draw their weapons...sent them crashing across the room. Ric leaped to help him. An electro-beam slashed across

his shoulder, so close he could feel the swirling heat of it. The melee was furious but brief. The remaining guards were no match for the two men and Praana, who had seized a small ornamental vase from a table and was battering one of the guards to pulp.

Tal grabbed one of the electros and came to his feet. "We'll have to make a break for it! I know the way back to that outer air-lock!"

Outside, the Phobian workers were coming in a surging resolute mob. There were hundreds of them. On the far side of the street were Gorak and Kueelo and a few of the guards. Gorak was harranguing the advancing mob, but it was useless. Then they saw him give an order...and the guards began opening up with the electros.

"To the right!" Tal said. "We've got to get past that mob. Stay on this side!"

With Tal leading the way, they sprinted toward the advancing Phobians, staying in the shadow of the walls. The electros were taking effect now. The odor of burning flesh arose.

But there was no stemming that tide. The mob raced forward, yelling, as those behind pressed on. Ric's work at the fields that day had roused them, all right—perhaps too well! They found themselves being carried forward in the mob.

A few crazed Phobians swerved from their path to leap at the little party. Tal and Praana had no choice but to bring their electros into play. Ric swung one foolhardy Phobian high over his head and dashed him back among his fellows.

"This way!" Tal hurried to a small building, blasted the lock with his electro. Inside were a score of the three-wheeled, atom powered cars. Minutes later they were speeding away from the city, heading for the outer air-lock of Phobos.

They reached the place, and Tal worked over the mechanism until huge metal doors rolled away. They saw the ship that had brought them here, the Unit Twenty-Six of the Martian *Valiant*. But they had no eyes for it now. Several of Gorak's own spacers were there, those with the new-type rocket tubes which Tal had mentioned.

"Tal!" An idea was building up in Ric's mind. "Remember what Kueelo said about their power plant, anchored in the center of

Phobos? He said it was reverse gravity, expanding *outward*! What would happen if we drove a spaceship straight into it?"

For a moment they looked at each other in delighted silence.

"About three hundred miles," Tal said, looking at the gray-blue distances of the hollow world. "And Unit Twenty-Six, here, has a supply of atomo-bombs! We'll have to ride it out there, and then get back before the explosion...it will take perfect timing...but it can be done!"

FEVERISHLY they went to work. First they maneuvered one of Gorak's smaller but speedier ships alongside the Mars spacer, anchored it there with magnetic plates which could be thrown on or off in a split second. But it pointed in a reverse direction, with its prow toward the larger ship's stern. Tal Horan looked to the fuel tanks, gave all the rockets experimental blasts to be sure the feed lines were working. At last all was in readiness.

Tal Horan faced Praana. "Wait here in one of the other ships. Don't be nervous. Watch for the explosion. You'll be able to see it. The moment you do, get these rockets warmed up and ready!"

She nodded, but her face had gone pale. Suddenly she choked up. "Tal, is—is it necessary?"

"It has to be done. This is the quickest and surest way! Don't worry," he took her hands in his. "We'll get back, I promise you!"

Quickly he turned away and entered the larger ship where Ric was waiting.

"You're a spaceman, Ric; I'm not. You take the controls."

Ric nodded grimly. Slowly he threw over the rocket-feed control. Yes, he was a spaceman. He'd handled all types of ships under all conditions, but he knew he'd have to call on every bit of his training now! The rockets throbbed to life. Gradually the ship dragged out of the lock, across the vast ledge toward the inner space. Ric increased the power...then they were free of the planet's shell and heading toward the center of Phobos!

The mass of the smaller ship anchored to them made the controls unwieldy, but Ric was ready for that. What bothered him was that they were fighting gravity all the way—a gravity that *spread outward* to-

ward them! The result was the same as a blast-off from a gravity equal to that of Mars! But there were other conditions that were not the same.

Tal Horan looked to the magni-plate controls that held the smaller ship to them. He tightened the power a little and then came to stand by Ric's side.

"About how long would you say?"

"We should be able to sight it in ten or fifteen minutes." Ric never took his eyes from the view-finder. "At least I don't want to accelerate until then. We'll need full power for the final drive."

The space around them now was tinged with the gray-blue light, but it was thick and murky, as though they were driving beneath the waters of a sea.

"Suppose we don't sight the gravity station. If we miss it altogether..."

"We're not heading blind," Ric nodded toward an indicator above his head. "That magni-finder will indicate the direction of any mass larger than ourselves, and then I can center our course. I'm just wondering if the atomo-bombs will be enough!"

"They will!" Tal assured him. "The principle of this gravity-station is electronic. It's been here at the center of Phobos for three hundred years without a breakdown...but once our bombs start the disruption, the explosion will be like nothing you've ever seen!"

Ric straightened suddenly. The magni-finder had come to life—was indicating a position a few degrees to starboard. He altered direction until the needle centered, and held the controls there. His eyes sought the proximity indicator.

"Heading at it now. Fifty miles! What do you think?"

"We can go closer," Tal said. Ric didn't question him; he was a spaceteer, but Tal was the electronic expert.

Tal Horan was peering intently ahead, now, and he exclaimed, "There it is! I can just make it out!"

Through the glaucous haze they could barely make out a spherical shape, hanging stationary, with a faint aura around it lending to the ghostly appearance. It must have encompassed miles, for even at this distance it was looming larger by the minute.

"Close enough," Tal announced at last. "We'd better get ready to trans-ship!"

THEY worked fast. Ric sighted the controls to pin-point precision, then locked them into place. Tal Horan was standing ready at the inter-lock by which they would trans-ship to the smaller spacer.

Ric gave a last look at the controls... then threw them over to full blast. He sprang through the lock, as the ship leaped ahead like a monster unleashed. With a sweep of the band Tal released the magni-plates, and was leaping after him. It was close! Their smaller ship was sent spinning free, end over end, "falling" back toward Phobos' shell.

Ric crashed against a wall, was dazed for a moment. He managed to drag himself forward to the controls. He groped blindly, was able to throw on the rocket power which served to stabilize them somewhat. He dragged himself upright, then, and realized that the worst was yet to come.

If that explosion reached them!... They must keep ahead of it at all costs. Ric opened the rockets wide, and gasped at the surge of power. These new rockets were blast-proof indeed!

Tal was at the stern ports now, watching the larger ship driving away from them. Soon it had vanished into the gray-blue distance. The explosion would be soon...

Minutes passed. Then it came. They saw it first, a blinding flash of light that seemed to encompass all of space within Phobos' shell! But it would be more minutes before they felt the actual concussion. They were speeding away recklessly, speeding *with* gravity now! And before Ric quite realized it, they were nearing the outer shell again and he had to break speed.

Then his heart sank within him. Due to that wild spin, he had lost direction! The huge air-lock, where Praana waited, was nowhere in sight.

Precious seconds passed, as Ric brought the spacer skimming the inside of the shell like a pebble inside a bottle! Panic gripped him. This would be the end, if they didn't find that air-lock! It was the only passage to outer space. When the full concussion reached this shell, it would flatten them!

He heard Tal shouting in his ear. "The city! There's the city!" He was gesturing frantically, far to the left. Ric headed for it recklessly and swept over the city at breakneck speed. The lock should be somewhere a few miles beyond...

Then they saw it. They glimpsed tiny pin-points of fire as Praana blasted the rockets of her ship as a signal to them. Ric braked with the forward tubes. As it was, he came into the wall with a crashing glide that sheared half of the under-hull away.

They climbed out, raced for the lock just as the first wave of onrushing air threatened to sweep them up. It became a hurricane. The full concussion would be right behind it!

Praana was waiting and ready. They piled into the ship and without a waste motion Ric was at the controls. They swept deeper into the lock...into darkness. Unbearable heat enveloped them. Already they were feeling the concussion! There came a moment of giddy acceleration, an unbearable pressure that sent the blood pounding in their ears.

Then a pattern of starlight swept across their vision. Sharp crags loomed suddenly ahead...they passed over them, a wild terrain dropped sheerly away, and their spacer became a fiery pinwheel of rocket blasts as they were hurled into free space!

RIC WAS fighting the controls, fighting the unbelievable pressure that threatened to black him out. He caught a glimpse of Phobos behind them, bursting apart in a blinding holocaust. Gradually, with alternate rocket thrusts, he managed to stop their wild spin. Then, dazedly, they turned to look.

The scene behind them now was like something on a slow-motion film. Almost lazily Phobos was expanding, as a ghastly bluish radiance enveloped the area. Then Ric came alert, as spinning, disintegrating fragments larger than their ship began hurling about them.

He blasted away, and minutes later they were looking back at the deadly area. Only a vast powdery haze occupied the former orbit of Phobos. Soon even this haze would disappear as the infinitesimal particles drew together. A few larger fragments were falling toward Mars now, where doubtless they would take up individual orbits about the planet.

Ric set his course, and on full rocket blast they headed for Earth. Tal was worried, as he scanned the visi-panel.

"Ric...just before Gorak rushed out of the room...when he touched that row of buttons..."

"Yes, I know. I'm sure that released the bombs. He already had the sights set for Luna!"

Hours later Earth came into view, became rapidly larger in their visi-panel. They could see Luna, far to the left. And a moment later, part of Earth's Fleet was seen blasting out to meet them. A voice stabbed through their radio.

"Hello, hello! Commander Graham of Patrol ship *Terra* speaking. "We've had you in our magniview for the past ten minutes. As you carry no insignia, you will go into a drift immediately and announce yourself!"

Ric did so gladly. Then, briefly, he explained what had happened. He chuckled as the Commander's amazed voice came back to him.

"We observed the disruption of Phobos! You came from there? What about those spore-bombs?"

"They're on the way! You've sighted none of them yet?"

"No. We've been watching..."

Praana spoke into the sender, anxiously. "What about my people? Dar Mihelson, and the others—"

"They're safe. The Battle of Luna is over, and already the Martians have transhipped to Earth. We're patrolling the dark side of Luna. If we sight the bombs, we can deflect them from their course, send them into a free orbit and destroy them at our leisure."

"No!" Ric said. "They may land on Earth if you try that. Send a flash to your patrol not to touch those bombs, but get away from there fast. Take my word, it's urgent!"

He received the Commander's assurance, and the televise blanked out.

"It's better to let Luna go," Ric said to Tal, "than to place Earth in danger. We can reclaim it later—Mars, too—now that you have the counter-active."

Tal nodded. There would be work, long and hard and dangerous. There would be problems. He and Praana stood arm in arm at the visi-panel, watching eagerly as the welcome panorama of Earth spread out below.