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1942

VOLUME 16  
NUMBER 1

# AMAZING STORIES

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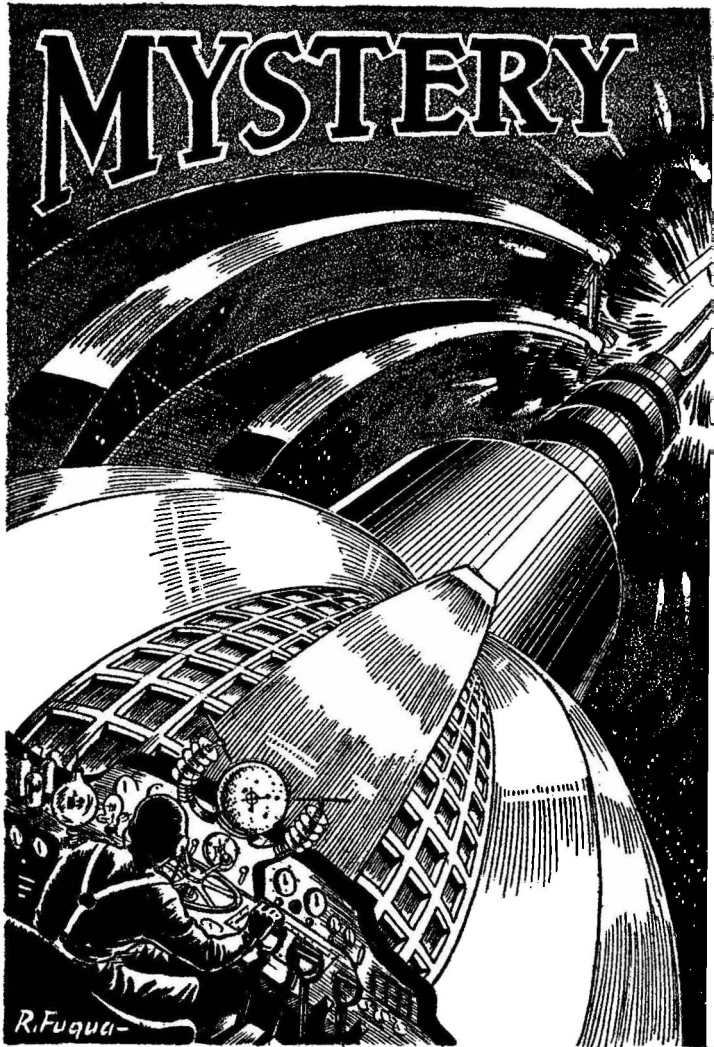
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STORIES  
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Volume 16  
Number 1

# MYSTERY




R. Fuqua-

The attendant pulled the lever and the ship blasted off into space

# ON BASE TEN

by William P. McGivern

**Veya Mallon knew her father wasn't a traitor, so she blasted spaceward to prove it—right into a hornet's nest of conspirators**



**T**HERE was a tense, painful silence in the chromium and duraglass office as Space Commander Wilson finally glanced up from the reports which littered his metal desk.

His eyes shifted from the tall, blonde, red-tuniced lieutenant who stood at attention before his desk, to the small lovely girl who was seated on the edge of a steel chair, hands clenched anxiously.

His kindly, deeply lined face softened in unspoken sympathy as he dropped his gaze back to the papers spread before him.

"I'm terribly sorry, Miss Mallon," he said quietly, "but there is nothing in the official report to substantiate your claim. Believe me, I'm as anxious as you are to clear your father's name. Unfortunately, the facts point conclusively to his guilt. It is impossible to

change the verdict on the strength of your suspicions."

Veya Mallon sprang to her feet angrily, every line of her slim, supple body expressing her emotion.

"Oh how can I make you see that you are being very unfair!" she cried. "You know—you *must* know, that he wasn't a traitor. He just couldn't be. And yet you don't raise a finger to try to find some evidence that will clear his name."

She paused a moment, bit her lip, then went on.

"My father was killed," she said bitterly, "because the information he possessed would have incriminated some Earth officer as a traitor. For that reason he was murdered. Papers were planted on him to make it look as if he were in the pay of the Martian Federation. On his last trip to Base Ten he discovered the information he had been tracking down for years. But

before he could get back to Earth, he was killed. The story about him running from a Martian ship and being killed in the battle is an out-and-out lie. You knew my father, Commander Wilson. He never ran from an enemy ship in his life."

Wilson passed a hand wearily over his tired eyes.

"Veya, my dear," he said huskily, "your father was my closest friend. I knew him as a courageous space fighter, without an ounce of fear in his makeup. But from all the evidence, it is dead certain that he *did* run from the Martian ship on his last flight. Undoubtedly he did so rather than risk a general battle that might attract other of our space fighters to the scene. Since he was carrying enemy instructions on his person at the time, he couldn't risk any chance of detection from our force.

"As much as I wished it were otherwise, the facts are definite. I have checked and rechecked them personally. There is no possibility of any mistake. Your father was in the pay of Mars, a traitor to Earth. Ironically enough, he was killed running from a Martian ship. I'm sorry, my dear, but that is the final verdict."

Veya Mallon turned appealing eyes to the tall lieutenant.

"Lieutenant Vickers," she said imploringly. "Couldn't you have made a mistake, somehow, somewhere? Couldn't it have been some other ship you saw running before the Martian cruiser?"

Lieutenant Vickers' boyish face twisted miserably.

"I wish I were mistaken, Vey—Miss Mallon," he said steadily. "But when the two ships flashed past my visi-screen I had a side-on view of your father's ship and the markings were unmistakable. I started after them, but it was twenty minutes before

I sighted either ship again. Then it was your father's, drifting out of control. I boarded his ship and found him lying dead. In his uniform pocket were the papers from the Martian Federation. It was my duty to turn them in, and I did."

VEYA MALLON'S pale features hardened. Her dark eyes flashed angrily at the two men.

"My father was not a coward or a traitor," she cried desperately. "I know that and so do both of you. But still you'll stand by and see his name dishonored because you're afraid to dig into the rotten mess that caused his death. Well, I'm not afraid. I'm going to shout his innocence so loud that someone will have to listen to me. And before I'm through I'll find out who framed him and killed him. I'll do that, even if it means my own life."

Trembling with anger Veya spun on her heel and started for the door.

Lieutenant Vickers moved to intercept her.

"Veya," he said pleadingly, "please listen—"

Veya Mallon jerked a small diamond ring from her finger and dropped it at his feet.

"Please don't speak to me again," she said.

Then she stepped through the door.

Lieutenant Tom Vickers stood still for a silent instant, the blood draining from his face. Then he stooped slowly and picked up the ring from the floor and stared at it dazedly.

"I'm sorry, son," Commander Wilson said kindly. "All of this has been a terrible strain on Veya and you must be patient with her. She's overwrought, nervous, emotionally shocked by her father's death. Time is the only thing that will help her."

Tom Vickers stared blindly at the

ring in his hands.

"Th-thanks, sir," he said brokenly. "But I'm afraid the only thing that will ever change Veya is the exoneration of her father's name. And that's impossible. I hated to testify as I did, but it was the only course open to me. I've wished a thousand times that I might have been looking the other way when his ship flashed across my screen, but I wasn't."

Commander Wilson nodded slowly.

"It's hard on you, boy," he said quietly, "but you must try and make her understand your position in the affair. And it might be a good idea if you'd attempt to convince her that her father actually was guilty. As hard as that will be for her to accept, it will be easier for her in the long run to realize that he *was* guilty. Then she can adjust herself to the facts and try and forget them. Her present resentful attitude will only make her more miserable, more sensitive and nervous."

"I'll do what I can," Vickers said shrugging, "but I'm afraid I'll get nowhere. For the past week I've tried to reason with her, but that only seems to make her more determined that he wasn't guilty."

Commander Wilson looked thoughtful.

"In that case," he said, "it might be best not to antagonize her by further efforts to prove her father's guilt. I think it would be best if we say nothing more to her on the subject. She has made up her mind. We can't change it. She'll have to do that herself."

"Yes, sir," Vickers said. "If you don't need me any more, Commander, I'd like a forty-eight hours' leave to sort of straighten myself out again."

"Certainly, my boy," Commander Wilson said heartily. "Take all the time you want. When you feel right,

come back. Not before."

Vickers thanked him and left the office.

OUTSIDE he stared unseeingly at the vast, sprawling space field, with its dozens of mooring towers and expulsion tubes, repair pits and checking offices. Freight, atomically condensed, was rolling into the holds of the mighty freight cruisers to be carried to the farthest limits of the solar system. Fighting and scout ships were hissing into the void from expulsion tubes every minute or so, blasting through the cold darkness of space to their allotted lanes and schedules. Everything was orderly confusion and efficient speed.

Vickers had grown up with scenes like this before him, almost a part of his own nature. Something he loved with an affection that was as vast as the void. But now it soured in his mouth. Everything, somehow, had lost its meaning, when Veya had dropped his ring contemptuously at his feet.

He realized that all he had worked for had been for her benefit. With her, everything and anything had been glorious. Without her, it was all pointless and futile.

And there was absolutely nothing he could do about it.

He turned and walked moodily along the ramp until he reached the small office that recorded the movement of ships in and out of the vast terminal. A small, fussy-looking man in the doorway saw him and waved.

"Want to see you," the little man said. "Veya Mallon just left from tube 22 in your single-seater. Said you said it was all right. Irregular as the very devil, but I let her go. Want you to sign a clearance form for your ship."

"Veya Mallon," Vickers said unbelievably. "You say she left in my

ship?"

"That's right," the little man snapped. "Anything wrong with that? I knowed you two was practically one. Didn't bother to check with you."

"It's okay," Vickers said, and signed the clearance form. "Did you say tube 22?"

"Yep. She arced out not more than a minute ago."

Worried, Vickers hurried along the ramp until he reached the conical base of expulsion tube 22. He couldn't imagine why Veya had taken his ship. Feeling as she did about him, it wasn't logical. But maybe it was the only way she *could* get a ship. He knew she didn't have one of her own. But what destination was so important to her, that she had to practically steal a ship to get there. That was what worried him.

He grabbed the first rocket man he bumped into.

"Were you here when Miss Mallon left?" he demanded.

"Yes, sir," the mechanic replied, stiffening to attention. "She just left, Lieutenant. She took a course twenty-two degrees off normal arc using full power. Destination Interplanetary Base Ten."

Base Ten! That was the base which had figured so prominently in the testimony against Veya's father. He had been reported leaving Base Ten when the Martian raider caught him. Veya had said repeatedly that it was on Base Ten that her father had discovered the plot against Earth. According to Veya the evidence proved that several Earth officers were involved in the conspiracy.

Base Ten was a dangerous hell-hole, rotten with intrigue and espionage, and no place at all for a hot-headed young girl. Interplanetary law kept it open as a free base between Mars and Earth and it had become a cauldron of trouble, harboring the suspicious characters

of both planets and offering a fertile field to free-lance agents from the other members of the solar system. If Veya was heading for Base Ten, she was heading for trouble.

"Anything wrong, Lieutenant?" the mechanic asked respectfully.

"I hope not," Vickers answered. "I'll be back in about ten minutes, and I'll need a ship ready to go. Set it for Base Ten and have it sparking when I return."

The mechanic jumped to his job, and Vickers wheeled and headed for Commander Wilson's office. He entered without knocking.

COMMANDER Wilson looked up, surprised, as Vickers barged in.

"What's up?" he demanded.

"Veya Mallon has just left for Base Ten," Vickers replied. "She took my ship, evidently with some idea of discovering proof of her father's innocence there. I'd like your permission, sir, to follow her and see that she isn't involved in any trouble. Base Ten is a dangerous spot for a young girl with ideas like Veya's in her head. I feel, somehow, responsible for her safety."

Commander Wilson stood up and ran a hand through his graying hair. He walked to the huge side window of his office and stared worriedly over the sprawling space field.

"Base Ten, eh?" he muttered irritably. "Silly girl should have had better sense than to head there."

"Then it's all right with you, sir, if I leave immediately?"

Commander Wilson turned from the window, tugging anxiously at his lower lip.

"Vickers," he said gravely, "I cannot grant you permission to follow Veya Mallon. We need you here, on hand for any emergency that might develop. While I think a great deal

of Veya myself, we can't let ourselves forget that our duty is here, not on Base Ten. If I could spare you, I'd stretch a point. But as it is, your request is impossible. If our space pilots were at liberty to chase about the void on personal matters, what kind of a fleet do you think we'd have? With Mars waiting to strike at any opening we leave, we can't take the chances of weakening any defensive line."

"But what about Veya?" Vickers exploded. "With the information she had about Earth defenses, she'd be a ripe plum to fall into the hands of Martian agents on Ten."

"We'll have to take that chance," Commander Wilson said quietly. "Earth cannot spare space pilots, Lieutenant Vickers."

Vickers felt a hot flood of anger rushing through him. Maybe it was illogical and inconsistent, but he knew, somehow, that Veya would need him on Base Ten. The thought of her in trouble, while he was twiddling his thumbs on Earth, was too much for him.

"Commander Wilson," he barked. "I'm going to Ten. Call it a hunch or something equally silly, but I feel my job is there."

Commander Wilson's features hardened into stern lines.

"I gave you an order, Lieutenant Vickers," he said, "and I intend that it be obeyed. If you leave this space field for Base Ten I will flash orders to our fighter ships to blast you out of the void on sight! You are dismissed."

A reckless fury was churning Vickers now, tipping the scales of caution and judgment in his mind.

"Send your order," he snapped. "But it will take more than a fleet of fighting ships to stop me from getting to Ten."

He turned and sprang to the door. "Stop!" Commander Wilson thundered. His hands dug for the service electron gun at his waist, but the door had banged shut behind Vickers before he could clear it from the holster. He stepped quickly to a tele-screen.

VICKERS reached expulsion tube 22 in a half-minute of furious running. The mechanic was waiting for him.

"Everything's ready, sir," he snapped. "All rockets firing at point two, course set dead for Base Ten."

"Fine," Vickers said breathlessly. "Shove the firing pin the minute I seal the hatch. I'm in a helluva hurry."

He clambered up the narrow iron steps to the square platform of the expulsion tube. Opening the hatch of the trim single-seater set in the chamber of the tube, he was halfway into the ship when he heard the sudden shout below and behind him.

Glancing back he saw a half-dozen land soldiers racing along the ramp toward him. One of them, a sergeant in the lead, was shouting at the top of his voice to the mechanic, who was standing before the control panel of the expulsion tube.

"Shove that pin!" Vickers yelled.

The mechanic paused indecisively, looking from the rapidly approaching soldiers up to Vickers.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant," he said worriedly, "but there seems to be something wrong. I'd better wait and—"

"Do as you're told!" Vickers roared. "Shove that pin!"

His voice acted as a stimulant to the hesitating mechanic.

"Right, sir," he snapped briskly. His hand slapped the firing pin into position at the same instant that Vickers ducked into the ship and banged the hatch shut.

With a rushing roar the slim single-seater flashed out of the tube and disappeared into the void, trailing sparks the indication of its swift cleavage of Earth's atmosphere.

Inside the bullet-like, rocketing ship, Vickers seated himself at the controls and breathed a sigh of relief. A tenth of a second delay then, and he would have been in the hands of Wilson's land soldiers. He checked the controls with a quick, practised eye, glanced at the wide visi-screen, and then settled down for the long trip to Base Ten. He realized with sharp clarity that his actions would break him forever with the Earth space fleet, but he forced this thought from his mind. The only thing he wanted to think of now was Veya. As long as she was safe, everything else was all right. If she wasn't— He hunched his big shoulders forward, and jammed the auxiliary rocket lever into place. Under this emergency power the flashing ship shot ahead with a spine-jarring spurt . . .

**T**WENTY-THREE hours later, Vickers moored at Base Ten. The red-and-gold insignia on the cowl of his ship gave him mooring preference over the pleasure and commercial ships which were waiting.

When he climbed out of his ship and descended the ladder, two officers of the Base were waiting for him.

For an instant a cold hand of fear closed over his stomach. If Commander Wilson had flashed a message to the base headquarters, it would be all over with him now.

"Welcome, Lieutenant," one of them said cordially. "Any special reason for the visit, or are you just gallivanting around for the fun of it?"

"Hardly," Vickers said easily. He was almost trembling with relief, but

he forced his voice to disguise his emotion. "Just a routine trip. You haven't heard from Commander Wilson lately, have you?" he asked, as casually as he could.

The senior officer, a red-faced, stocky, second lieutenant, shook his head.

"Not a word for the last two days. Suits us here. The quieter things are, the better we like it," he smiled.

Vickers smiled too. So far he still had a free hand.

"By the way," he asked, "has Miss Veya Mallon moored here today? I think she was expected up this way."

The second lieutenant nodded.

"She pulled in about six minutes ahead of you, Lieutenant. Too bad that a nice kid like that should have a father who'd sell out to the enemy."

"Which way did she go?" Vickers asked, trying to cloak his impatience.

The red-faced junior officer pondered.

"I was standing here," he said, scratching his head, "when she walked by me from the other mooring tower. I think a couple of guys met her, and she left with them."

"Did you know them?" Vickers asked quickly.

The officer shook his head.

"There's too many bums here on Ten for me to remember all of them. But I think I saw one of the fellows hanging around the Interplanetary Hotel a few nights ago, but I can't be sure. Every double-crossing saboteur and spy in the business hangs out there. It'll be a fine day when we clean that place out for good."

"The Interplanetary Hotel," Vickers murmured. "That's third layer, south, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. Why? You interested in somebody over there?"

"I might be," Vickers said grimly.



"I just might be."

He nodded to the two officers and started off. They saluted as he passed them and strode down the ramp to the exit gates of the space field.

WHEN he reached the Interplanetary Hotel an hour or so later, he ordered a drink of Saturn squeelah,\* and did a bit of serious thinking.

The officer had been sure that Veya had been met at the space field. No one could have known she was coming, but still, somehow, someone had managed to pick up the information and meet her as she arrived.

A worried frown cut a furrow across his brow.

There was no doubt in his mind that Veya had stumbled into something dangerous. The men who met her obviously would lull her suspicions with some plausible story until she was too deep to turn back. Why she had been picked up was a question he couldn't readily answer. Neither did he have any idea of *who* had ordered her met at the space field. But he was sure that they had met her for a reason, and it was a million to one that that reason would explain a lot of the peculiar questions which were bothering him.

He finished his drink and was turning from the automatic liquor dispensary when he saw a small, swarthy man hurrying past him, holding a handkerchief to his cheek. The man crossed the side foyer and disappeared through a small door that led, Vickers knew, to a first aid station.

Curious, Vickers waited until the man reappeared. There was a strange tingling sensation at the base of his

\* *Squeelah*—a potent drink fermented from the carnivorous plant forms that exist in great abundance on the dank planet of Saturn. It is green in color, bittersweet in taste and TNT if imbibed in quantity.—Ed.

spine as he saw the long, thin scratch that ran down the man's cheek.

For a brief second he hesitated as the somberly dressed, swarthy man hurried back across the foyer and made for the elatubes. Then he turned and ambled carelessly after him. But when he reached the elatube the door had already clicked and the car had rocketed upward on its mile flight.

Vickers waited impatiently for the car to return. Some sixth sense harried him, raised the hackles at the base of his neck. There seemed to be some vague pattern to everything that had happened, but the exact design of it eluded him. He felt as if he were in a labyrinth of strange motives and actions, and if he could find the right path to follow it would lead directly to the heart of the puzzle.

And it was a puzzle. He appreciated that with greater force as each instant slipped past. Looking back he could see the puzzle. But he knew he would have to look forward and move forward to find the key.

When the elatube car returned he called the operator to him.

"A friend of mine got into your car, but the door closed before I could hail him," he said easily. "I wonder if you remember what level he got off on? He was a small fellow with a sallow complexion and a fresh scar on his cheek. Remember him?"

The elatube operator scratched his head, then nodded.

"Got off on the sixth level, twentieth floor. Seemed kind of mad about something. I guess he's the one you mean."

Vickers thanked him and stepped into the elatube car.

"Sixth level," he said, "twentieth floor. I think I'll surprise my friend."

THE elatube operator set the controls and the car ascended swiftly.

It covered the trip in a half a minute. Vickers stepped out of the car and moved down the wide aluminum corridor, glancing at the doors on either side of him.

Within a dozen feet he stopped. He had no way of knowing what room the swarthy man occupied. It would have to be discovered by trial and error.

He selected a door and knocked sharply.

A middle-aged woman answered.

"I'm looking for my two friends," Vickers explained to her questioning look. "But I don't have their room number. I thought perhaps I could save myself a trip back down to the desk by inquiring for them. One of them is small and dark with short, black hair and narrow eyes. Do you remember anyone like that on this floor?"

The woman jerked a thumb to her right.

"Down two doors from me," she said ungraciously. "And tell 'em not to be making such a fuss. A hour or so ago you'd think they was staging a wrangling match in there."

Vickers hands clenched.

"Thanks," he snapped. There was a tight feeling across his shoulders as he strode down the corridor past one door and stopped at the next.

He knew there was no time for anything but direct action. He pounded on the door with the heavy palm of his hand.

There was a complete silence inside the room for almost a minute, then Vickers heard cautious footsteps approaching the door. A bolt clicked and the door opened a few inches.

Vickers stared through the crack and recognized the swarthy man he had followed from the foyer peering out at him.

"Whadda you want?" the swarthy

man growled. But Vickers noticed his beady eyes moving furtively over the red tunic of the Earth space fleet he was wearing.

"I want in," Vickers snapped. He placed his palm against the door and shoved hard. The door swung inward under his weight and the swarthy little man flew backward almost sprawling to the floor.

"What's the idea?" he panted fearfully.

Vickers shot a quick glance about the room. Another man was rising from a chair, a look of mingled surprise and fear stamped on his face. There was no one else in the luxuriously furnished room.

"I just have a few questions I want answered," he said softly. "First of all where did you get that scratch on your face?"

"What business is it of yours?" the swarthy man snarled.

"Maybe none," Vickers said, still quietly. "But it might be just my business. If you'd rather talk without your front teeth just keep stalling."

"I fell," the swarthy man said surlily. "My face got scraped on the edge of a chair. Anything else you want to know?"

"Yes," Vickers said. "Just one thing more. Where is Veya Mallon?"

THE words had hardly left his mouth before he knew they had scored. Both men started convulsively, then their hands dug frantically for their pockets.

Vickers sprang forward, his right fist smashing into the swarthy man's face with the force of a pile-driver. The man went flying backward, his face broken beyond recognition by the power of the sledge-hammer punch. He crashed to the floor, twitched once and was still.

Vickers wheeled and charged for the other man, whose electron gun was just clearing his pocket. The gun exploded with a vicious *hiss* as Vickers' heavy shoulder slammed into the man's stomach.

The force of his tackle hurled the man backward into the wall. His head snapped into its steel-hard surface with a sickening crunch. The gun slipped from nerveless fingers as the man doubled and dropped to the floor, a soggy red ooze plastering the back of his head.

Vickers scrambled to his feet and strode to the closet. The door was bolted, but he snapped the lock with a powerful drive of his shoulders. The door swung inward and Vickers heard an inarticulate moan from the darkness of the closet.

Dropping to his knees he found Veya's bound form doubled up in a corner. He lifted her in his arms and carried her carefully to the bed.

There was a nasty bruise on her pale forehead, but she was not unconscious. He ripped the gag from her mouth, with fingers that trembled with rage.

"I prayed you'd come," she gasped weakly. "It was a trap, but I didn't realize it soon enough."

"Don't talk," Vickers said soothingly.

He untied the bonds from her wrists and ankles and then chafed her arms until the circulation was restored.

"Tom," Veya said faintly. "I've discovered everything I needed. In the drawer of the desk here are the papers that my father was bringing back to Earth when he was killed. That was why he was killed. Because of what those papers and documents would mean when they were presented on Earth."

Vickers stepped to the desk and opened the drawer. A folio of papers

in a leather case was inside. He removed it and sat down again beside Veya.

For fifteen minutes he pored through the documents in the leather case, and when he finished there was an incredulous look on his face.

"It's positively incredible," he muttered. "Now I can see the whole scene. Your father discovered these and started back to Earth with them. The Martians discovered their absence and started after him. Your father decided to run for it, rather than fight, because he didn't want to take any chances with these documents in his possession. But they caught him, crippled his ship, boarded it and killed him. Then they recovered these papers and planted other ones on your father to make it look as if *he* were the traitor."

"It's all horribly clear," Veya said shuddering. "But why did they have to plant the other papers on him? He was dead and beyond hurting them then. They had these papers back in their possession. Why was it necessary to make him appear to be a traitor?"

"It was a devilishly clever move," Vickers said slowly, "to invalidate and discredit any of your father's papers which might subsequently have been brought to light. They didn't know but what he might have had other data and records of a damning nature hidden in his own files. If anything like that turned up they were prepared for it. Because a convicted traitor's records would have little or no weight in any military court. But these records in this leather case are absolutely conclusive. Your father's name will be cleared and the real traitor will face a firing squad."

"I don't think so!" a muffled voice said behind them.

VICKERS wheeled and saw a tall, masked figure standing in the doorway, an electron gun held unwaveringly in his hand. A black cloak completely concealed the masked man's body, down to the knees.

"Without those papers," the curiously muffled voice went on, "your case will be declared ridiculous. So I'll trouble you for the leather case."

"You can't get away with this," Vickers said bitterly.

"I'm the best judge of that," the muffled voice said mockingly.

Vickers stood up, the leather case in his hands. He stepped forward and extended the case to the masked figure, who reached for it avidly, his eyes glitteringly triumphantly behind the concealing mask.

His hand touched it, and at the same instant a spiteful *hiss* cracked through the room. The masked figure turned slowly and Vickers saw a round, black hole burned through the cloth of his cape, just below his heart. For an instant he staggered in the doorway and then he collapsed to the floor.

Vickers wheeled and saw Veya sitting up in bed, an electron gun clenched tightly in both her hands. Her face was white with horror.

"I did it," she whispered. "When he reached for the case he wasn't watching me. There was a gun lying on the floor. I picked it up and shot him."

"It's all right, honey," Vickers said

tenderly. He put his arm around her shoulder and held her close to him. "He deserved it if any man ever did. He had your father murdered and framed to appear a traitor, while all the while he was directly in the pay of Mars, as these papers here prove beyond a doubt."

Vickers stood up and stepped to the masked figure, lying sprawled in death on the floor. Reaching down he ripped off the mask, exposing the face of the dead man.

It was Commander Wilson.

"I should have been suspicious," Vickers said, "when he refused to let me follow you here to Ten. When I left anyway, he flashed his agents here to meet and get rid of you. Then he followed himself to make sure that nothing slipped up. But everyone slips sometimes, and he was no exception. His death will clear your father's name."

"It's terrible," Veya said softly, "that any man could betray his own planet like that."

"The reward of the traitor is always death," Vickers said grimly.

"Not always," Veya said shyly. "I was a traitor to our love when I lost faith in you, wasn't I? And I'm still alive."

Vickers grinned and took her in his arms and kissed her emphatically.

"You missed the death sentence," he said, "but you're convicted to life imprisonment in my arms."