

PLANET STORIES



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One Against The Stars

By VASELEOS GARSON

Earth's last hope against the vicious radio-plague. A gleaming ship racing to bring salvation back from Venus. And hidden on the ship a thirteenth man—a plague carrier whose touch brought screaming death.

Illustration by DOOLIN

THIS was it. Its slim bright shape was Earth's last hope.

What matter the sweat, the blood and the tears that had gone into each rivet, every plate? What matter the eyes blurred and dulled with plans, blueprints? What matter the cost.

This was it.

It was done.

They stood there—the riveters, the welders; the draughtsmen, the engineers; the mathematicians, the technicians—and there glowed in their eyes a living flame.

This was the ship of hope.

Its rockets flickered into blue flames. Their soft purr of power deepened. Abruptly, the earth was trembling to the throaty roar of rockets.

In its long steel-rollered cradle, the ship trembled.

One of the workers, his denim trousers grease-stained, bending down, scooped up a handful of the dust at his feet, flung it at the shining ship.

"Just for luck," he said.

In the glass bulge atop the shining ship, John Bairn, the pilot, licked feverish lips. He brushed the black hair away from his gray eyes. His stubby fingers raced over the keys of the control panel before him.

His right hand touched—almost reverently—the scarlet handle of the firing lever.

He pushed the lever forward one notch . . . two . . . three . . .

He braced himself in the hydraulic-cushioned pilot's chair.

"Venus, here we come!"

The rockets roared faintly even in this sound-proofed cubicle. Then the pounding blood in his ears washed out all other sound. The pounding in his ears grew throatier, louder.

The 9G acceleration blacked him out.

That dive was a little too steep, he was thinking, first time I ever blacked out with

somebody on my tail. He jerked his head around to see where the butcher was. And then he remembered.

He looked ahead. The stars were steady white flames in the black pool of space. Ah, there it was! The pale green flame that was Venus.

Somewhere, there, lay Earth's salvation.

Arlington Arden, the metal expert, came into the cubicle then, his blond face pale.

"Some shove, huh?" he opined.

Bairn nodded, his gray eyes watched the orientation chart whose red and green and yellow lights were flickering in the rhythm that showed they were on the mathematically-charted course.

"Think the stuff is really there, Arlie?" Bairn questioned.

"We're staking our lives on it, John."

"Yeah, and the lives of a billion like us. What if it isn't?"

"Venus' spectrum shows its presence. It's not an emanation that is easily duplicated. If it isn't, it's too much of a grim joke—because the money in this ship could have paid for a thousand experiments. My Mary's got a touch of blue coloring in her skin—the first symptom, y'know."

"Sorry," Bairn said, and his voice was soft.

"Beautiful," Arden said. "I hope Mary can see it sometime." He was looking out at space, his arms clasped behind him. "It's not like I thought, though—this being the first humans to see the stars away from earth." He stopped.

"It's so damn' big and beautiful it hurts," he said at last.

"Yeah, I know," Bairn put in. "It makes guys like us feel cheap and small."

"No!" The word was explosive. Bairn jerked around in the pilot's cradle and stared. Arden had a frown on his forehead.



Hell burst in the engine room,

"And who in blue blazes are you?" Bairn snapped.

"Joe," the big blocky youngster said, as if that explained everything.

"Joe, huh?" Bairn grunted. "How did you get on this ship?"

JOE'S brown eyes stared steadily at Bairn, and his big shoulders shrugged. "I stowed away." And then as the two stared blankly at him, he hurried on:

"I had to. Really. There's a legend in our family that a man named Joe will be the first to reach the stars. It was promised way back when. So I had to come. I had to!"

Bairn grunted again. "Isn't much we can do about it now, I guess. But you'll have to earn your way. What can you do?"

Joe grinned—a big grin that made Bairn and Arden smile.

He shrugged and grinned again. "I don't know. But I'll be good for something. You'll see."

"All right. Arlie, will you take him down to the rocket room? Maybe the gang can find something for him to do."

"Come on, Joe," Arden said.

Joe shook his head. "Not just yet," he answered. "I'd like to tell you something first." He pointed out toward the stars. "A minute ago, you said"—he nodded at Bairn—"this makes us feel cheap and small.

"You're wrong. You're just afraid. All this is man's—yours, mine, ours. It's just so darn big, we don't realize it. But this is our destiny—that's what the prophet said a long time ago. It took a disease like that sweeping the Earth now to get us here. But we're here. The stars are our destiny. No sense in being otherwise. No sense in feeling cheap and small." He stopped, looked at Bairn and Arden.

"Don't you feel it?" Joe asked. "This first time the Earth shackles are loosed? Don't you feel the power and understanding and strength the stars give you out here?"

"This is where I belong," Joe said. "Out here where you can see what you're reaching for. That's why I had to come." He stopped and a slow embarrassed flush crept over his face.

"See what I mean?"

Surprisingly, it was Bairn who answered:

"Thanks, kid, you're good for something all right. I don't know what it is about you, but you give a guy a sense of—peace, I guess you'd say."

"Belonging?" Arden put in. "That it, Johnny?"

"Yeah, that's it," Bairn said, and turned back to his orientation board. "So run along, kid."

Arlie Arden, leading the way down the circular staircase that went to the power room, said abruptly:

"You're no city man, are you, Joe? I've never seen cloth like that made in the cities. That tunic you're wearing looks like it's made up for the north forests."

"No," Joe answered shortly, "I'm not a city man. I'm a wooder." They left the stairway, moved along a tube passage.

"Not a member of that crazy cult that wants a back-to-the-forests movement?"

Joe's denial was quick, and Arden looked at him sharply. The stowaway was looking down at his toes as he walked on. Arden shrugged.

"Here," Arden said at last, stopping before a huge oval door that jutted from the tube. He twisted a wheel on the door, pushed the heavy portal open.

Arden watched the stowaway as he stepped into the power room. Joe stopped and his brown eyes lifted first, then dropped down to rest on the huge generators that were making the air pulse with vibration. Then his eyes moved to the huge dull-metal bulk that occupied the whole far end of the power room. His gaze took in the feeder pipe that evenly cleaved the huge bulk of the machine in half; the long neat rows of switches and valves that broke the austere front of the power plant.

Joe breathed deep once then turned questioning to Arden who was watching him.

"THAT'S what drives the ship, Joe," Arden said. "Reduced to its simple terms it's an atom smasher. Hidden deep within that bulky outfit lies a block of uranium, constantly bombarded with electrons made a trifle heavier by running up against a magnetic current operating at right angles to them. The resultant dis-

turbance of the uranium is harnessed and fed into the rocket tubes."

Arden glanced at Joe whose eyes were fixed on the feeder pipe.

"That's a funny thing, Joe, that pipe you're looking at."

"Why?"

"Through that pipe comes water."

"Water?"

Arden nodded. "For some reason that not even the technicians who worked on that plant know, microscopic jets of water have to be hurled into the chamber with the bombarding particles to cause proper power."

"Water?" Joe asked. "You drive this ship with water?"

Arden smiled. "Yes, water and the help—not negligible either—of uranium. It'll take exactly two hundred and twelve gallons of water to drive to Venus, and the same amount back—at least that's what Black Tom figures." Arden nodded to the huge dark-skinned, black-haired man in white coveralls who stood by an instrument panel, checking figures off on a clipboard he held.

"Come on, Joe," Arden said, heading for a ladder that was bolted to the wall at one side of the huge power room. Joe followed up the ladder, was on the heels of Arden as the metal expert crawled through a cubby-hole at the top.

"See?" Arden said straightening up. "Water."

Joe looked at the row of horizontal metal cylinders that stretched before him. The tops of them were a foot taller than his head, and he moved to the side, and counted aloud to eleven before Arden said:

"We might starve and go naked, but we'll never run out of catalyst or get thirsty," Arden opined. "Each of those tanks holds six hundred gallons and there're twenty-four of them."

Joe moved to the nearest of the tanks, rubbed his hands on the moist surfacing and commented absently:

"It feels like velvet."

Arden laughed a little. "Come on, Joe, I'll turn you over to Black Tom and he'll put you to work doing something. He never likes to see anyone idle."

They crawled out of the wall cubby and down the ladder. A second white-garbed man had joined the power room head and

they were talking together as Arden and Joe approached.

"That's Whitey Burnet," Arden said, and started, for Joe had halted dead in his tracks.

Black Tom Morrissey and Burnet turned then. Morrissey said, "Hello, Arlie," briefly and turned back to his gauge panel. Burnet stood rigid for a moment at the sight of Joe.

Then with three quick strides Burnet was at Joe. He said softly.

"Damn you, Joe." And lashed out with a hard fist. The blow caught Joe on the cheek, cutting the skin, and staggering him momentarily.

Joe started to swing his browned fist up, then slowly he lowered it. He looked at Burnet with quiet brown eyes.

"I can't hit you, Paul. You know that."

Paul's face was white. "No," he said, and he was almost bitter. "I know that." Then he turned his back on Joe and walked away.

Arden's blue eyes watched the by-play, observed:

"Whitey doesn't like you very much, huh?"

Joe's brown eyes were dull looking as he pulled his gaze from Burnett's retreating back and looked at Arden.

"No," he said, and his voice was flat. "Paul doesn't like me much." With an effort he smiled, added: "Shall we find out what I can do?"

Arden nodded. . . .

Joe Wilding met the rest of the crew at the arbitrary meal that was termed supper.

JOE came in behind Arden, and unobtrusively slid to one side of the door, and watched the men around the table laughing and joking.

Arden said:

"Fellas, I'd like you to meet a new crew member."

The laughing and joking stopped, and the eyes of eleven men measured Joe Wilding. Black Tom winked at Joe and went back to his eating. Whitey Burnet, after a brief angry glance, turned back to his plate.

Arden added: "His name is Joe Wilding."

The others at the table smiled, nodded or spoke according to their habits—except

one, a nervous redhead, who stared at Joe.

Then he looked around at the others at the table. He was a little apologetic.

The redhead said: "I know this guy. I piloted the ship that took him to the Rock for sedition. I don't think we want him on the ship. He's one of those wild ones who tried to kidnap the president."

Arden grunted: "I thought so."

Burnet, his normally ruddy face white, reared to his feet:

"No!" he shouted. "You're wrong, Herd. He was pardoned. I know. They found he had nothing to do with the kidnapping."

"Maybe so," Charlie Herd, assistant pilot said, still apologetically. "But I know I took him to the Rock—and I didn't hear anything after that about him. But he's the same guy."

"He was a wild one," Herd said almost dreamily. "He knocked out two of the guards, grabbed one of the chutes and was almost out of the ship before I rolled the crate over and bashed him against the cabin wall."

Whitey Burnet's face was still white. "Look," he said. "I don't like Joe, but it's something personal. The tribunal found him innocent, so why not give him a chance?"

Arden turned to Joe who still stood by the side of the door, his handsome bronzed face stiff.

"Well?" Arden asked.

Joe smiled. He said, looking at the red-headed Herd:

"You're right as far as you went. I was taken to the Rock. I did try to break loose. The tribunal found me not guilty and apologized. I was released. And here I am."

Herd looked back at Joe, and then he smiled, half-apologetically:

"I'll take you at face value. You look all right."

"Thanks," Joe said.

Bob and Ronnie Guetschow, the bulky professor twins, broke the ensuing silence with:

"Come on and eat." The ice broke silently. Arden motioned Joe toward an empty chair at the table. Joe moved forward, then stopped as his eyes counted the men at the table.

"Sit down, Joe," Arden grunted, pick-

ing himself a convenient, padded chair.

Surprisingly, Joe shook his head. "No," he said, and for the first time he looked embarrassed. There was a slight flush under his tan.

The table talk stopped again. George Keating, the thin, wiry electrical engineer, said half-jokingly:

"Afraid you'll get contaminated?"

Joe's tan skin lost its red of embarrassment, twisted strangely.

"Sorry," put in Keating hastily. "Only joking."

Joe swallowed. Then: "I'm just superstitious, I guess." The words rushed out. "If I sit down, that'll make thirteen."

ED PARMAN, black-haired assistant to Black Tom, jumped hastily to his feet. "Good gravy, he's right. You sit down, Joe, I'll finish my pudding in the corner."

Joe said: "Sit down. I'm used to discomfort. I'm a wooder." He grinned. Parman grinned back, started in on his pudding.

Joe, the men were to notice in the coming days, seemed to make a point of never eating with the bunch after that. But he did it so smoothly, it wasn't offensive. . . .

Venus, in the days that followed, grew from a tiny yellow-green flame, that Bairn, the pilot, had noticed in the first hours of the flight, to a white globe, just hinting a tint of blue, that began to fill the heavens before him.

Joe, on an off hour from the power room, sat quietly in the co-pilot's chair, drinking in the planet. He and Bairn, usually so taciturn, had talked much in the days of the flight.

This day, when Joe came in, Bairn looked at him with a strange twist to his mouth. He said nothing for quite a while, the two just sitting there, Joe looking up and ahead, Bairn, apparently preoccupied with figures on his charts.

Finally Bairn said:

"Has Arden said anything to you?"

Joe shook his head. "No," he said. "Why?"

Bairn, apparently speaking absent-mindedly, said:

"Arlie's wife, Mary, has the radio disease. She's in the first stage. Has the blue coloring. It means everything to

Arlie that this ship gets to Venus and back. Venus has the only radio-active static compound that matches the stuff from the meteorite."

"Yes," Joe said. "I know. It was only luck that scientist, Struthers, had that meteorite in the room with him when he had the disease. It cured him. And then scientists and astronomers searched star spectrums to find a match for the color scheme that they found in the meteorite metal."

"This ship," Bairn put in, "cost billions; it meant the first real cooperative program the world's nations ever had. It would be ghastly if one man caused the destruction of Earth's last hope from doom. Wouldn't it, Joe?"

Joe's face was grim as he nodded.

"How would you feel if you were to blame for drowning out humanity, Joe?"

Joe stood up, and his body was shaking.

"Tell me, Joe," Bairn said quietly. "Why have you kept yourself from eating with the rest of the guys? Why is it when you come here you're always smelling of antiseptic?"

There were tears in Joe's brown eyes when he faced Bairn.

"Okay, John, What shall I do?"

"There's not much harm done yet? Arlie says that in the first stages, it's only communicable by contact. But once it gets past that first stage, it goes hog wild.

"Tell me, Joe, when did the nauseous attacks first come?"

Joe's brown eyes were dead. "Two days before the ship left."

"You were willing to sacrifice mankind just to see the stars yourself, Joe?"

It was Arlie Arden who came in quietly, then.

"No," said Joe, and then he looked at the two of them.

"Believe me," he said, and his voice was deep, vibrant. "I was drawn to the ship by a power greater than any of us. I knew the terrible gamble. For if this ship crashes before it gets back to Earth with that Venus ore, it means the end of man.

"I knew that. Everything my mind said pointed out the consequences. My mind said no in every possible way. But . . . my mind had no chance against the impulse that drove me aboard ship.

"Somehow I know that my presence on board this ship means the salvation of mankind. . . ." He shook his head at Arden whose lips were pursed to speak.

"It's not egotism or some crack-brained idea. I couldn't rest until I was aboard ship. I'm chosen to do something to preserve mankind, not destroy it. It's just as if something bigger than me or you or the universe had taken hold of me, placed me here."

Arden said: "Do you know what we're going to do to you, Joe?"

Joe looked at him steadily as Arden drew a gun from his pocket. "We're going to kill you and throw you out in space. It's the only way to keep you from contaminating the rest of us."

Joe said: "You can't." Simply, he said it.

Bairn said quietly. "We will, Joe."

Arden lipped: "Do you think we can value one life against Earth's billions? This is the ship of hope, Joe. This is Earth's last chance. If we fail, it's the end. For once the disease starts, there is no stopping it."

He leveled the automatic. "Good-bye, Joe."

JOE'S BODY slumped, almost in weakness. Then he galvanized into a human whirlwind. The gun cracked but Joe was not there. He'd spun quickly, diving for the cubicle door, flinging a chart as he fled. The flying chart disturbed Arden's aim. The gun blasted, and Joe felt the wind of the bullet fanning his cheek.

Then Joe was in the sloping passageway, sliding down the ramp. He heard the crack and the banshee wail as another bullet struck the duralloy wall and ricocheted.

He hurled his body toward the branch passage that led toward the power room, and then a communications speaker ahead of him cried out, bringing Arden's voice from the pilot's cubicle:

"Kill Joe Wilding—but for your life don't touch him!"

Joe stopped running abruptly then.

He was trapped, for that communications system had outlets all over the ship, and it wouldn't do to advertise his presence by running. Only the stealth he'd learned in his years of wooding could help him now.

But what good was all his wood training in this huge hulk of shining metal? No chance for camouflage, no chance to dive into a creek and swim away so that your spoor could be lost in the swirling water.

And then Joe smiled and began to run softly. He had a place to hide if he could make it. The quick pat of hurrying steps stopped him short and his quick mind hurled his body to the side of the passage and asprawl on the floor where the lights cast a shadow.

It was Paul Burnet hurrying up the passage, the light glinting on the butt of the automatic belted at his waist. Only for an instant did Burnet hesitate, then he ran on. His voice drifted back softly:

"I'm giving *you* another chance. We're even now, Joe."

Joe rose to his feet and hurried on to the power room. Joe halted, breathing deeply. Black Tom would be too interested in his charts to hear what little sound he might make.

At the huge oval door leading into the power room. Joe halted, breathing deeply. Then, quietly, easily, he swung open the heavy door, stepped inside, his eyes searching for Black Tom.

Softly, he pulled the portal closed, stood there breathing in long, quiet breaths. Then he moved across the huge power room, feet moving as cautiously as if he were stalking a deer in the autumn woods.

Black Tom's head was bent over a report sheet, his fingers were busy with a pencil. He shook his head, and Joe was motionless. Then a chuckle came from Black Tom's lips, and under cover of the sound, Joe made for the ladder leading to the water compartment.

Black Tom's head lifted as if startled; his head began to turn toward the exit door. Joe went up the ladder like a frightened monkey, fairly blasted himself through the cubbyhole at the top and then rolled quietly inside.

He lay there, his heart pounding with the quick exertion as he heard Black Tom's footsteps moving across the floor. He held his breath; Black Tom's grunt of puzzlement came muted to his ears. The footsteps returned to the chart table, and Joe risked a look to see Black Tom's head once more bent in study.

Joe lifted himself to his feet, went over

and touched the wet surface of the first of the water cylinders reverently. He walked on down the line, patting each of the huge tanks till he had reached the last.

His arms reached up, his hands gripped the top of the cylinder and the sinewy muscles in his back and arms lifted himself to the top of it. Then he slid down from the top into the wedge shaped space between the circumference of the tank and the bulwark of the wall.

This was sanctuary, Joe thought. Like a cave in the forest when the wolf-pack keened out their howls for your blood. Only different. For it was your friends who wanted to kill you.

In the darkness, Joe's teeth gleamed in a quick smile.

Then Joe fell asleep.

ARDEN was weary when he met John Bairn coming down from his time of duty in the pilot cubicle.

"He's gone," Arden said. "Just as if he had stepped out into space. Now we're worse off than ever."

Bairn nodded, said: "I get it. If he's on this ship, he'll have to come in for food; we won't know what he's touched. Maybe one of the more susceptible among us with a scratch may touch something he had and won't know. The infected one will pass like the touch of death among us."

Arden said: "Everything we know he might have touched has been destroyed or disinfected, but there may have been something we missed. Damn him!" Arden's voice was flat, hopeless.

"It's hard to imagine Joe as the destroyer he is. I talked to him by the hour. I liked him; and even now, when I know what a potential of death he is—that's what makes me so damn mad."

"Tomorrow," Arden said abruptly. "Tomorrow we'll know if this cruise is in vain."

Bairn amended it: "Tomorrow, we land on Venus; if the stuff's there, okay. If it isn't, we won't have to worry about Joe Wilding any more."

JOE didn't know what time it was when it happened. But he knew the first leg of the journey was over.

That steady thrumming of the motors that had worked its way into his body so

that it had become a part of him drew away gradually and left a sense of emptiness behind.

Joe climbed down from his hiding place, flexed his cramped muscles and stood erect. He faced the wall, the blank duralloy steel wall and stared as if his eyes could pierce the opaqueness and look out upon Venus.

He stood there a long time, his hands clenched into hard fists at his side, bright-eyed and staring.

"God!" he whispered.

How did it look out there on Venus—on that planet when this first earth ship landed? Was it like Earth—friendly, familiar? Or inimical, alien?

If he came out now, he could see it with his own wondering eyes—and die. If he stayed here, he might never see it. But his mission was not fulfilled. Somehow, quite clearly, he realized that.

So Joe crawled back into his metal cave, into the darkness.

The only sound in the quiet water compartment was a muffled sobbing.

ARDEN it was who closed the heavy door to the chamber.

"That's it," he said, and his voice was a caress. "There's enough of it in that lead-lined vault to rid the world. It's up to you, John, to take us safely home."

Some one of the men said: "How about Wilding?"

A hush came to the room, a silence tight and somehow menacing.

Arden's voice was harsh: "He can't hurt us now. We have the metal to cure us if he should contaminate us."

Whitey Burnet said: "Why not cure him?"

"No," said Arden. "I have the key to the vault. If one of us is infected, I'll open it and treat him. But Joe Wilding deserves to die. It wasn't his fault that we are still uninfected. He was willing to destroy the Earth in order to be here. That threat is gone now, but he must suffer."

"Arlie," Bairn said softly. "Would Mary want you to let Joe Wilding die?"

Arden spoke coldly: "Did Wilding care about Mary when he stowed away on this ship?"

Bairn had no answer.

JOE WILDING was restless. Even the fiery fever that racked him could not quiet him. He paced the long water compartment, legs weary but restless. He couldn't stand it here much longer; he had to get out into the light, out where he could move and see and feel something besides the dampness dripping upon him, the quick mutter of the pumps as they drove the catalyst to the firing chambers.

He walked to the cubbyhole, looked down into the power room.

Whitey Burnet was there, alone.

Impulsively, Joe Wilding climbed out of the cubby hole and down the ladder.

"Paul," he said softly. "I'm hungry."

Paul Burnet turned slowly.

"Hello, Joe."

They stood there, the two of them. Whitey Burnet, immaculate in his white work clothes; Joe Wilding, a heavy growth of beard on his face, his tunic dirtied, his hair mussed.

"I gave you your chance, Joe. Just as you gave me mine. We're even."

Burnet turned to the communications phone, then turned back suddenly.

"Now you know, Joe. Now you know how I felt. You know how it is to be hunted, to be afraid of your own shadow, to know what a despicable creature you are. To be followed by a fear that freezes your guts—"

"But I'm not afraid, Paul. I'm just hungry, and tired of being alone."

"I was alone, Joe."

"No, Paul, you weren't alone, ever. Carol's thoughts were ever of you. I hunted you the world over; but you always ran away. You never would give me a chance. And Carol's letters always came back marked: 'No such person at this address'."

Paul's voice was almost mocking: "Even now you act the gentleman, pretending. I hate your guts, Joe Wilding. But for you, Carol and I would have been married long ago. I liked you once, Joe Wilding, I even thought what a wonderful brother-in-law you'd make. Even now, I find myself liking you a little bit—but God knows I don't know why."

"You'd better call them, Whitey," Joe said.

"No, not yet. You saved my life when you dragged me away that day my kidnap

plan failed. You carried me, fractured skull and all, away from the greatest chance a man ever had to make this a real world. If we had got the president we could have forced the wildwood doctrine down the people's throats."

Joe shook his head. "The people won't take forced medicine. They must have sugar-coated pills to cure them and lead them right."

Whitey cut in: "Then you made me promise I'd quit. And you told Carol of my plot, and she wouldn't look me in the face when I came."

"She cried her eyes out when you left. She asked me to find you and bring you back. But you wouldn't listen." Then, softly, "She's still waiting, Paul. Waiting for you."

Paul stood tensely, his eyes searching Joe's bearded face. The atomic motor thrummed quietly.

"You'd better call them, Paul."

Whitey jumped unexpectedly, as the shrill keening of the danger siren suddenly keened into the power room. Bairn's voice cracked through the speaker:

"Grab something, guys. A meteor, and we can't dodge!"

Like an exclamation point to his words came the heeling crash.

JOE and Paul were flung to the floor as the ship rocked and heaved. The lights went out, the motors suddenly cut off. There was a shuddering scream as metal tore; the air turned hot and dry.

The ship kept rocking as if caught in a great stormy sea. Rolling on the floor, Joe heard a deep roar that was beginning to grow shrill.

A warning bell was ringing in his head; then he realized it was the bell signaling escaping air. Then he was on his feet, holding himself against the heeling motion of the ship, crying out:

"Paul, where are you? Paul, Paul, Paul. . . ."

"Here," Whitey's voice was weak, but Joe followed it. He found Paul, heaved him to his shoulders and staggered away toward a wall. It was the wall to the passageway he decided dully and felt along it until he found the door. It opened easily as if pushed by a giant hand. He struggled hard to get across the threshold

against the pushing air. He made it, dropped Paul to the passageway. Then he tugged desperately against the pull of the air against the door as he dragged it shut. Somehow, he got it closed, twisted the locking lever.

He sat down against the wall of the passage and breathed in long, shallow breaths.

In the darkness, he heard Paul's voice:

"Did you mean that about Carol," Paul asked, and his heart was in it.

"Yes," said Joe. "She's still waiting for you to come back to her."

It was quiet there for a moment, with only the muted ringing of the bell from the power room seeping through the wall.

Joe said: "Did I hurt you when I dropped you, Paul?"

"Not much," Burnet answered. "My head's a little dizzy, but it takes more than an easy jar like that to make it dangerous. Forget it."

"But how did you get through the physical for the trip? The metal plate in your skull should have barred you."

"I'm one of the few who know what the power plant here is like, remember? Besides, the physical wasn't too steep. And Joe, I'm sorry I was such a heel to sock you when you couldn't hit me back. You'd have killed with the blow."

"I know," said Joe. He heard Paul breathing in harsh gasps.

"Paul," he said anxiously.

"It's all right."

"But it isn't! Here, I'll carry you to the first aid room." Joe got up, lifted Paul to his shoulders.

Joe had carried Paul perhaps a hundred feet when lights flickering on the walls and the sound of footsteps signaled the advance of the others.

"So," came Arden's voice as the beam from a flashlight centered on Joe's face, "the rat came out of his hole."

After the blackness, the light hurt Joe's eyes and he lowered his head.

Arden came forward quickly, slapped Joe openhanded across the mouth. "I've waited a long time for this!" He slapped him again, and Joe felt the blood trickling from his lips.

Joe lowered Paul Burnet easily to the floor. He wiped his lips with the back of his hand, said:

"You don't understand. I'm bringing Paul, he's hurt. His skull was fractured a long time ago, and it's reacting." He knelt beside Burnet, took the hurt man's wrist. "How are you now, Paul?"

Burnet smiled weakly: "A little better."

Arden kicked Joe aside: "Keep your diseased hands off him, traitor."

Joe got wearily to his feet. "Arden," he said, "Bairn told me how upset you are about your wife. That's why I excused those slaps. But this—"

Joe's right arm drew back swiftly, drove his doubled fist to Arden's jaw. Arden dropped as if the floor had fallen from under him.

"That tears it, Joe," Bairn said. "I'm sorry, Joe. But we have no recourse but to lock you up. You're a walking plague, and socking Arden was the last straw."

From the floor, Burnet said weakly: "But Arden had it coming. . . ."

"We can't be the judge of that. Joe is worth no consideration now. Don, lock Joe up in one of the empty storage rooms, but don't get near him."

"Right," said Timnson, the mathematician. "Come on, Wilding."

Joe started to move away, stopped and said:

"See that one of the twins looks after Paul, will you?"

"Go on," said Bairn. Joe went ahead of Timnson.

THE HEAVY door clanged shut behind Joe, and he was alone in the darkness. The motors were still silent, and he wondered how much damage the meteorite had done to the ship. He felt his way to the communications phone, unhooked it. But the steady hum that signified that it was alive was absent. Even the call speaker gave no sound.

Wearied, Joe sat down against the wall, and despite the hunger feeling throbbing in his stomach fell asleep.

It was the overhead light shining into his eyes that awakened him. His ears sought for the sound of the motors, no familiar thrum. The wandering meteor must have done quite a bit of damage.

The communications phone buzzed. Joe answered.

"Hello, Joe," it was Burnet's voice.

"How are you, Paul? The dizziness gone?"

"Right, but I guess it doesn't do any good. We're not going anywhere." Burnet's voice was a little strained.

"Why?" put in Joe.

"That damn meteor knocked hell out of the rear blasting tubes, and some of the fellows are outside trying to replace the busted ones. But even if they get it fixed we're still derelict. That meteor took all of our water, and I guess you know what that means."

Joe was silent. Then: "No catalyst, no move, is that it, Paul?"

"Uh huh," Paul answered, "No H-2-O, no go."

"The cans," Joe said, abruptly.

"Cans?" Paul questioned over the wire. "Cans?"

"Sure," said Joe, and he was breathless as he hurried on. "Paul, all that canned food. There's water in them. And there must be some water left in the pipes to the kitchen and the lav? Have they thought of that?"

"Yes," said Paul. "The pipes, I mean, not the cans. Arden and Bairn are having the pipes pumped out now, Doc Guetschow tells me. But I'll pass along the can suggestion."

"Was it really bad?" Joe asked.

"Sure, they got the power room sealed again. But that water compartment was mashed to junk, and the water just went pfft! It's a good thing you got out there when you did, or you'd have been pfft! too. I'll ring you back with any later developments."

Joe pronged the receiver. He began to pace the room. He couldn't stay in here. There must be something he could do out there. But this room was better than any prison. His eyes searched the room.

Joe's eyes were sparkling all of a sudden. Bless the planners who laid out this ship!

He broke the heavy crowbar from the emergency wall chest. He twisted the heavy steel in the locking mechanism on the inner panel of the door. Bracing his feet against the door and drawing the heavy bar toward him, he strained desperately.

He knew from his meandering around

the ship that the locking device was only to insure the doors would not open accidentally. The muscles in his back and shoulders bulged so that the tunic he wore split down the back.

He tugged until his muscles quivered with the strain. He should break loose now so he could open the door from the inside.

But nothing happened,

JOE relaxed, stood back and wiped the sweat from his brow; the lack of food had weakened him. The locking mechanism should have given way.

Once more he inserted the bar in the device. Once more he called on his wood-trained muscles. He tried desperately this time, exerting all the strength he could summon. Blackness threatened to engulf.

Then as if in a dream, he heard the muffled cling! That meant the device had snapped. He fell to the floor, his breath coming in sobs. Then he quieted, lifted his body up, and twisted the wheel. It turned easily, and the door pulled open at his tug.

He came out into the passageway to face Arden, gun drawn.

Arden cursed softly: "Won't you stay put, Joe?"

Joe shrugged. "You need me," he said.

"Need you?" repeated Arden. "Need you to infect us so we can't get the ship going again."

Joe watched Arden, then he said: "Arden, why not cure me; then I won't be dangerous and I can help?"

"No." Arden's voice was flat. "I'm the only man on ship who knows how to give the treatment, and you're not getting any. Your life is forfeit for what you almost managed to do."

"You won't stop me, now, Arden," Joe said. "You can barely see me now, and you're trying so hard to keep from vomiting out your guts. You've got the radio disease; why don't you cure yourself?"

Joe moved back slowly; Arden's gun followed him hesitantly.

"You," Arden said. "You did it. You gave it to me." The gun steadied.

"No," Joe said. "You had it before I ever came aboard ship. But you didn't know it, did you, Arden? You're a car-

rier, and you came to the ship straight from your wife."

Arden shook his head weakly. "I took the usual tests; it showed me free of it."

"But you know the usual tests, Arden; you know you can't tell for sure until you get the nausea. And it acts at varying speeds with different people, doesn't it?"

Arden's fingers whitened on the gun; and Joe leapt aside suddenly. The shot blasted out. Then the gun dropped from Arden's fingers and he fell forward on his face, retching.

Joe lifted the fallen metal expert almost tenderly, and carried him toward the hospital room.

When he brought his burden in, Joe saw Burnet sitting on the edge of the bed, slipping on his sandals. Doc Guetschow, one of the professor twins, was remonstrating with him, trying to keep him in bed.

Burnet shook himself free and stood up. Then he saw Joe placing Arden's body on the bed.

"Well!"

Joe turned and smiled. Then he was serious: "Arden's got the radio disease."

"Your fault, Joe," Burnet said. "He was right."

"No," Joe said doggedly. "He had it when he came aboard, too. He's got it bad, too. See what you can do for him, Doc."

Then Joe trotted out of the hospital room, and headed for the kitchen storerooms. Wick Wilson, who doubled as cook and metallurgist, was opening cans and draining off the liquid into a tub.

"Help?" asked Joe.

Wick Wilson looked at Joe briefly, said: "I thought you were in the brig." Then, "Sure, lug the tub down to the power room. We're trying to get enough water out of the juice to make catalyst."

Joe hoisted the tub to one shoulder. "How about something to eat?"

Wick went into the kitchen, pulled a half chicken out of the refrigerator, brought back.

"Southern fried," he said. "It'll hold you together."

Joe bit off a chunk and carried the rest in one hand as he balanced the tub of fruit and vegetable juices on one shoulder and strode from the room.

BLACK TOM was putting the finishing touches on a metal cylinder he had salvaged from some of the shattered tanks.

As Joe came in the power room door, Black Tom asked: "How does it look? Been a long time since I did any welding, but it'll hold water."

Black Tom and Herd, the assistant pilot, had bolted the jury rigged tank to the floor, and had, through some amateur plumbing work, hooked up a pipe system to the atomic motor.

Joe jerked his chicken-filled hand at the tub on his shoulder.

"Where does this juice go?"

Morrissey apparently had just realized that Joe was a freem. He looked at him blankly for a moment.

"Dump it in the tank," he said, pointing to the metal ladder leaning against the tank. "But keep your distance," he added. "We don't want to catch the plague."

Joe grinned, stuffed the remainder of the chicken in his mouth, carried the tub up the ladder, and dumped the conglomerated juices into the circular opening at the top of the tank.

Joe came down the ladder.

"Got enough yet?" he questioned.

"Hell, no," exploded Black Tom. "Look at the gauge we rigged up. Here."

Joe looked at the gauge affixed to the side of the tank. It was about two inches below a chalk line Black Tom had drawn.

"The white line marks the absolute minimum of water we need to get the ship within gravitational pull of the Earth; from there in it's up to our extensor vanes."

"How much do you need yet?" Joe asked.

Black Tom grunted. "About twelve gallons—and if those juices run out, we'll have to do some wholesale lemon and orange squeezing."

Joe started to turn.

Black Tom said: "Thanks, Joe, for the can suggestion. It may pull us through."

Joe nodded, went up with his tub for another load of juice.

When he had dumped the second load in, he said:

"Wick's got Whitey, Ronnie Guetschow and Keating squeezing lemons. This is the last of the loose juice." He shook his head to clear his mind, said briefly, "Ex-

cuse me," and hurriedly left the power room.

When he came back, his face pale, his limbs shaking from the retching stomach, Bairn and Ed Parman were talking to Black Tom.

BAIRN looked serious. "Hell," he said. "It would boil down to that. The motor's okay, Ed says. But I don't know where in blue blazes we're going to get enough water. Timnson's got the hydraulic press from the workroom rigged up squeezing out the garbage we didn't dump."

He turned to Black Tom: "You're sure your sand filter will take all the solids out, so it won't plug up the water jets?"

Black Tom nodded. It was then Bairn noticed Joe."

Bairn said wearily: "Haven't you caused enough grief, Joe? Arden's sick with the disease because of you. You've been a jinx ever since the trip started. Why don't you crawl in a hole and die?"

"I'm trying to help," Joe said.

"Nuts," said Bairn tiredly. Then he turned to Black Tom. "We've got gasoline galore for operating the electrical units. Think gas'll work?"

"No," Tom said briefly. Joe's stomach was beginning to quiver again, and the figures of Tom, Bairn and Parman were weaving. He could feel his pulses pounding raggedly, as if a million drummers were anxious to keep out of tempo.

He forced himself to walk slowly from the room, but the dizziness caught him at the door and he had to hang on to the lever to keep from keeling over.

His thoughts were kaleidoscoping, but one finally broke through clearly. It was the answer.

He pulled himself erect, said through feverish lips:

"Bairn. . . ."

Bairn said, without turning his head:

"Beat it, Joe!"

"Please, John," Joe said, "I know where to get more water." He staggered toward the three men, the floor rocking under him. He felt his mind shouting the words, but his desperate mind couldn't make his lips move. His eyes wouldn't focus; his legs wouldn't work.

He only half-felt the hurt as his head struck the power room floor.

"Good," said Bairn, almost pleased. "That's taking care of him. Parman, shove him over in the corner. Better put these rubber gloves on."

It was a good three hours later when Bairn and Black Tom stood at the gauge measuring the height of the water in the tank.

"Not good enough," Black Tom said. "If we don't crash on the moon, we'll end up as a satellite. That's all the water we can squeeze out of it."

"Damn," breathed Bairn, "another gallon would take us home. But there isn't another lick of water on the ship." He checked off on his fingers: "The lav, the connecting pipes, the canned food, the garbage, the storage batteries, that does it, guys, I guess."

The others stood quietly. Bairn went on: "We might as well get going. Maybe, the fruit juice has got more umph to it than the water, and we might coast in. But Black Tom says we've got enough to reach the moon's orbit track, but not enough to reach the gravity pull of the Earth.

"We've done all we can," he said. "Now it's up to whatever providence watches over people like us." He licked dry lips and smiled.

THE MUTED thrumming of the atomic motor gradually worked its way into Joe's consciousness. He moved wearily, and then his mind, short-circuited by the ravages of the fever, cleared itself and he became aware of his surroundings.

How long he'd lain there, Joe couldn't tell as he staggered to his feet and toward the door. He had the answer, if he could make Bairn listen.

His glazed eyes stared around the power room. There was no one there. He weaved toward the water gauge, stared at it for a long time before it registered.

Why, his mind said dully, the tank's almost empty. Joe staggered for the door. The door was a ton weight that fought against him to open it. When it finally opened, he left it that way.

He got outside in the passageway, and his stomach rebelled. He was very sick for many moments. He crawled and staggered up the circular stairway toward the pilot's cubicle.

His body was bruised and hurting from the many times his weak legs had betrayed him before he reached the door to the cubicle. He couldn't move the lever to the door.

He tried to shout, but his voice was hoarse, weak. He pounded with both hands against the thick metal. But there was no answer. Once again, he was sick.

Then wearily he retraced his footsteps, pounded lengthily on each door with his weakened muscles. They couldn't hear him, a bitter voice nagged at him. He had the answer, and they wouldn't listen.

He didn't feel the pain as he rolled down the circular steps and lay at the bottom in a heap. Somehow he moved on, crawling.

If they couldn't listen, he'd have to do it. He reached the door to the power room, lifted his body across the threshold, and then weakness held him motionless.

Was this it, his heart questioned. This was what he had to do before the radio disease got him, wasn't it. He couldn't see, he couldn't hear, he couldn't feel. Oh, God, he couldn't even think.

Was this it? his heart asked again. Whatever the answer, it was somehow adequate . . . for Joe's body, weakened by the life-sucking plague moved slowly . . . so very slowly. . . .

"WE'VE nearly reached the last of the catalyst, if Black Tom's figures are right," Bairn said to the men crowded into the pilot's cubby.

"There's Earth," Parman said, and his voice was a caress.

The whole crew was there in the cubby, save for Arden and Burnet and the medical Guetschow twin. Doc Guetschow was down in sick bay with the other two, Burnet's head having started to act up again after three days without water.

"Tom, you're sure your figures are right?" the other Guetschow twin asked.

"Much as I hate to say it, yes. Only a few hundred miles and we're finished." Tom licked his puffed lips.

It was quiet there in the cubby as the atomic motor drove the ship at tremendous speed through the void.

"Can't we coast in?" Parman asked. "We've got tremendous acceleration."

"But not enough," Bairn said, "with the moon's gravitation field to reckon with."

All their hearts must have stopped then, when the steady thrum became a staccato beat. "This is it," Bairn said. The staccato turned to a broken rhythm, hesitated, and finally halted.

"God," said Herd, the co-pilot apologetically, "if the moon weren't around to hold us back."

But it was there, looming huge and ugly off the starboard side.

Parman said: "I can feel it pulling."

The strain made two or three of them giggle. Bairn said as if to a naughty child: "It isn't that strong, Ed."

Bairn's hand moved to click off the firing lever when the motors suddenly broke into thrumming life.

The inertia of new flight came to the ship again.

THEY made a frozen tableau, those men standing in the pilot's cubby.

Ed Parman was the first to break the tableau. He slumped to the floor, and lay there, his shoulders shaking convulsively.

"Herd," Bairn said suddenly, "Take over. Come on, Tom. Whatever did this is in the power room."

"Joe?" Herd asked.

"I don't know."

The two of them fled, leaving behind them, Parman on his knees staring at the void, the others half-crying, half-laughing.

Bairn and Black Tom Morrissey came into the power room. They stood awed at what they saw.

Joe was there.

Bairn said finally, voice as soft as the night wind over earth:

"Joe was right. He was good for something after all."

Tenderly, he and Black Tom lifted Joe's dead body down from the tank, laid him gently on the floor.

"The only thing we forgot, Tom," Bairn said. "*Blood.*"

Crimson still oozed slowly from Joe Wilding's cut wrists. There was a smile on his dead lips. For it was a man named Joe who was the first to reach the stars—and the roaring rockets had scattered his eternal life across the star trails.
