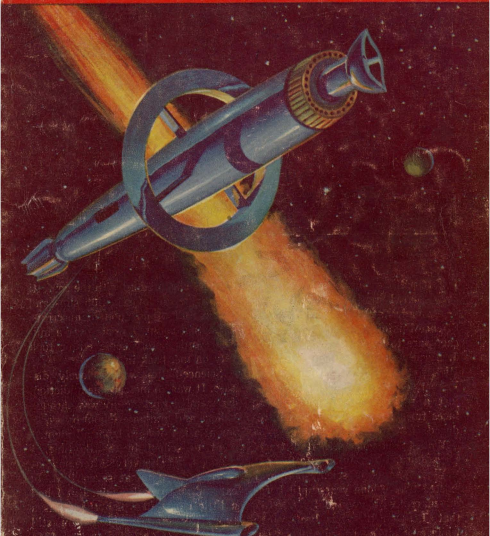


AMC

# OTHER WORLDS

MAY  
1953

35¢



**POWER  
METAL** S. J. Byrne

# The People Who Make **OTHER**

# **WORLDS**



No. 13

STUART J. BYRNE

**T**HERE seems to be some doubt that I was born—if remarks made at the Tenth World Science-Fiction Convention in Chicago are to be considered. Either S. J. Byrne was a house name, or I was Richard Shaver ghost writing for Ray Palmer, or Ray Palmer, himself, or just a plain ghost. Actually, some faces turned pale when I was introduced.

Well, to set you on the rick track I *was* born. But why go into that?

What counts is science-fiction. I existed twelve long years until I was inoculated with good old *stj*. After that, I lived. Life has been worth while ever since—in spite of several

decades cluttered up with the confetti I've made out of rejection slips and trunks full of no good manuscripts. By actual count, I wrote over a million words before some editor took pity on me, back in 1935.

Science-fiction was a lovely disease. It was an inescapable addiction. I remember working my way through college and graduate school by working at a job of hard labor all night. I went to school in the daytime. I dropped dead every afternoon at three and got up at seven P.M. to eat and go to work again. But I had a little closet in which there was a typewriter—and science-fiction still

*(Concluded on page 125)*

# OTHER WORLDS

## STORIES

- Power Metal, Pt. 1 of 3** ..... 6  
*S. J. Byrne (25,000 words)*
- Heritage** ..... 60  
*Boyd Ellanby (9,200 words)*
- Babes in the Woods** ..... 82  
*Gordon Dickson (6,500 words)*
- The Cold, Cold Grave** ..... 97  
*T. P. Caravan (2,000 words)*
- Lost Continents VII** ..... 102  
*I. Sprague deCamp (10,000 words)*
- The Seven Black Priests** ..... 126  
*Fritz Leiber (10,000 words)*

## FEATURES

- Editorial** ..... 4
- Letters** ..... 149
- Personals** ..... 155
- Other Worlds Book Shelf** ..... 160

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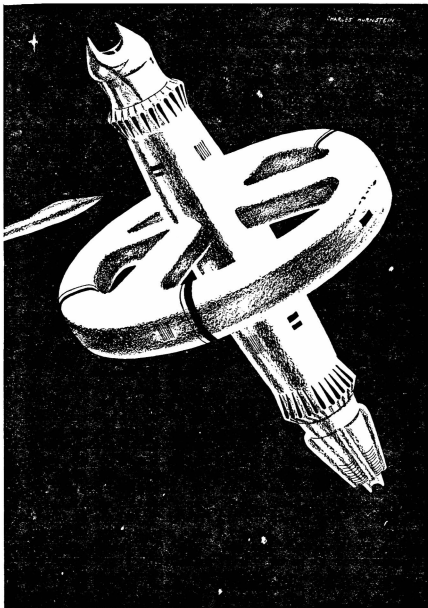
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# POWER METAL

by S. J. BYRNE



Like a voice from the Past, the old cry of "Taxation without representation" rang out. Teran resented the oppression of Mother Earth, and Cosmium—The Metal of Power—was the spark which flared their resentment into open rebellion. Across this background two men fought a duel that used planets, peoples, and the rebellion itself as weapons in their bitter struggle.



## Part I of III

## CHAPTER I

THE Governor's agent finally stamped the visa to Sol. Even after stamping it he sent Buchanan's monitor card through the cyberlector at his elbow and watched the shimmering indicators with a sudden deliberation. When it popped out in the acceptance chute he looked it over critically, as though his eye could detect a possible error punched in by the psychomonitor. He tapped it with a thumbnail, reflectively, just as though Buchanan had all the time in the world.

Earthworm!—thought Buchanan, watching the officer restrainedly. Not that he was as derisive as the word tended to imply. It was merely a popularized epithet for all Earthmen on Teran.

Aloud, he said, "You look disappointed I passed Process. What's the trouble? I'm only a member of Merchant Interstellar. Are we supposed to be spies?"

The officer was semi-bald, semi-gray, spreading toward middle age. He was a ten year veteran on Teran, which represented at least sixteen years of duty since leaving Earth. They usually got "star happy" by that time. Irritable, homesick, and ultra-bureaucratic. Buchanan could sympathize, but it was no problem of his.

"Would you mind clearing me?"

he said. "Captain Cardwell is still waiting outside—I hope!"

"You're cleared," replied the officer. Whereupon he handed him his trip clearance and his passport.

Buchanan stood there, seven feet tall, broad-shouldered, two hundred and seventy pounds—a healthy, average specimen of Teranian. He looked at the stamp on the visa while the six foot, one hundred and seventy-five pound average Earthman sat there brooding over a complex that was becoming racial. Terans were direct descendants of the first Earth colonists sent to Alpha Centauri, but two hundred years of adjustment to a planet that was half again as large as Earth had produced an undeniably superior race. They still numbered under twelve million, but a necessarily selective system of emigration to Teran had given the "colony" the cream of civilization. Terans were big, powerful, capable—and lucky! They lived in Paradise.

Larry Buchanan was in a hurry, but he could not resist gloating over that stamp on his visa. It told him that Central Government, on Earth, was giving him a chance to make his first interstellar trip, to travel more than four *light years* through the void and visit the solar system from which his ancestors had come. Perhaps that was why the Governor's agent was so sour, he thought. A common Teranian spaceman was going out on the long star road that led to Sol—which was home to the man at the desk.

"I hadn't thought of it until just

now," Buchanan said. "Maybe I could—deliver a message? Pick up something for you on Earth?"

The agent grimaced. "After sixteen years? I'd be a stranger there, myself. Besides, that visa says *Sol*, meaning the System. Your ship isn't going to Earth. Mars is your only port of call."

Buchanan's mouth dropped agape, and for a moment his solar plexus seemed to be full of hot lead. Not to Earth!—after a lifetime of waiting to see it?—after a six years' voyage that still lay ahead of him?

"What are you talking about? You don't mean—"

The other waved his hand, dismissing him. "Captain Cardwell can tell you. Go ask him. I'm busy!"

Buchanan thought it would be rather nice to wring this Earthworm's neck, but then his better nature exerted itself. He grinned. "I'll wake up in the morning and find out *you* were just a bad dream!"

Vincent Cardwell was so deeply engrossed in meditation that he was unaware of the time until Buchanan came striding toward him from the Process Office.

"I got it, Vincel! Let's go before Anne divorces both of us!"

Cardwell stood up, a broad-shouldered, seven foot Teranian, himself. He looked at his watch. "It's twenty-four hundred," he said. "We're going to have to eat at Center and tell Anne we can't make it out there. It's over four hundred kilometers to Lake Catherine and we'd be almost an hour getting there."

Buchanan stopped in his tracks.

"How come? You're going to be saying goodbye for more than a dozen years. Anne is fixing the eats herself. I mean—what have we got to do now that's so important? I thought we were all ship-shape!"

Cardwell only grasped his arm with a gentle but firm pressure, tugging him along toward the exit, and for the first time Buchanan sensed that his companion was under tension. "Let's get out of here!" he said.

What he did *not* say suddenly became ponderous with indefinable probabilities, in Buchanan's mind. He clamped his mouth shut and strode with Cardwell toward the automatic doors. Something was up!

When he thought of Cardwell's beautiful star ship, the *I.S.S. Carlona*, waiting out there in an orbit around Teran—waiting on this eve of adventure to start off into the deep, dark yonder—he prayed, not too rhetorically, that nothing would happen at this late stage to cancel the multi-million credit trip. Teran was a great, wide, wonderful world with plenty of horizons and opportunities, which was all very well for those who wanted to settle down and make a career at home. However, Buchanan's settling down days were gone forever. He had been in love half his life with Anne, but he had returned from a year's assignment on Teran's four moons to find that she had married his lifelong companion and rival, Vince Cardwell. After that, *interstellar* flight had become an obsession that was equivalent to "rebound."

CENTER was the functional name given to that cubical concentration of buildings which comprised the official and commercial part of the so-called "city" of Astra. Here there were no residential communities. The suburbs of Astra were scattered over a roughly circular area which was some two thousand kilometers in diameter. With the exception of remote controlled magnetic trains, ground travel was almost non-existent. However, whereas the suburbs were in effect loosely organized rural communities dedicated to the comfortable simplicities of living, *Center* represented all the compact efficiency that twenty-sixth century science could provide—as did Center Annex, ten kilometers away, where the industrial area was concentrated. The incorporated civic entity known as Astra was the only "city" on the planet, inhabited by close to seven million Teranians, descendants of colonists from Earth, and some twenty million *Alphids*, the semi-human indigenous inhabitants who had willingly accepted the role of servants and made of Teranian civilization a Hellenic type of society, of which gracious living was an ineradicable characteristic. The other five million Teranians lived and worked in various natural resource development centers located on twelve different continents.

"Now that I think of it, something *is* brewing," said Buchanan, as they sat eating their hurried supper. "I expected a third degree when they hooked me up to that monitor, but not to the thirteenth

power! I mean—that thing pretty nearly asked me the color of grandpa's whiskers! 'What is the maximum percentage of self-determination which may be indulged in by the majority without conflicting with the principle of Collective Authority?'—euphonious for Statism. Now that's a fine question to ask a man who is expected to know the answers to such problems as—'Compute the increase of a given mass when reaching the velocity of point nine times C'—or 'Delineate the universal ecliptic!' Honestly, when the monitor shot me that one about allegiance to Central Government I thought I was back in primary school—"

"Cut it out!" Cardwell exclaimed in a low tone, his eyes searching the twin terraces of the restaurant apprehensively. "Wait till we're in the air. Talk about something else!"

Buchanan had stopped in mid-sentence, mouth slightly agape. He raised his brows slightly and surveyed the room. All he could see was a solitary, blue-skinned Alpid riding his soundless bus-truck toward the kitchen.

"What the hell's the matter?" he said. "We're alone!"

"I don't give a damn! I said stow it!" Their eyes met, gloweringly, and an old sore was scraped open way down deep inside of Larry Buchanan.

In his objective world, Buchanan regarded Cardwell as a slightly awe-inspiring buddy—a buddy who had explored Teran's distant wildernesses with him when they were adolescents and who had adventured with





Vincent Cardwell

him on all six of Alpha Centauri's too young or too ancient worlds lying within or beyond the orbit of Teran. But in the private cellar of Buchanan's subjective mind, Cardwell was known, sarcastically, as "Vincent the Invincible"—the interstellar Midas who turned to gold all things he touched. Vincent Cardwell, the promoter, who owned controlling shares of the corporation that had built and now operated the *I.S.S. Carlona*. It was not enough to own a fifty-five per cent chunk of that traveling space island. Cardwell was her new skipper, too! Well, that was more understandable than the rest of the grudge items on his list, because one interstellar trip usually retired each captain, in rotation, and probably he, himself, would pilot the ship before he reached the age limit. But in the meantime Cardwell had his own considerable world by the tail. And who was Larry Buchanan? He worked for Cardwell—for Vincent the Invinci-

ble!—Vincent the Boss Man! Vincent—who was married to Anne. . .

"All right," he said, finally, "I'll talk about something else. What's this I hear about our only port of call being Mars?"

Again, Cardwell's face darkened. "That comes under the same heading," he answered. "I'll tell you later!"

Buchanan studied him. They had both suddenly lost their appetites. There was one other question he wanted to ask, but since it was personal he planned to save it for the six year voyage. However, this did not deter him from asking it, to himself: What were the emotional factors connected with Cardwell's decision to break the corporation ruling concerning the civil status of interstellar spacemen? He was married. Leaving a family behind you for twelve to thirteen years was tantamount to breaking up a home. There had to be a good reason behind Cardwell's determination to subject Anne to such loneliness and frustration. His one year old twins would be adolescents by the time he returned. There were two possible answers: Either he and Anne were incompatible and he didn't give a damn about the children—or there was a reason much more important than personal considerations connected with the imminent voyage of the Interstellar Ship *Carlona*!

Buchanan shoved back his chair and got to his feet. "Let's get going," he said, "to wherever we *are* going!"

Cardwell sat there for one brief mo-

ment before getting up. He glared at Buchanan under heavy brows. "All right," he answered. "I'll take you. We're going to start a course in history. . ."

"History! What do you mean? What kind of history?"

Cardwell got to his feet then. "The history of the immediate future," he replied, cryptically. "In fact, we're going to help *write it!*"

TWO moons were up, making the Channel Sea look like old platinum. To their right, the two Teranians could see it stretching away to a horizon that seemed to be the upper lip of a titanic saucer. To their left lay the mainland, rolling back into the Gilbert Mountains where Lake Catherine and Cardwell's home were located. Down below, on the shore, was the solitary glittering cube of *Center*, in the middle of a tenuous, straight-lined web of lights marking magnetic trainways to Astra's widely distributed "suburbs." Dead ahead on the peninsula was the other cube, *Center Annex*, and beyond it the fifty square kilometer space flight station with its endless barge sheds, its lifter cradles, administration, operations and maintenance buildings, and its interstellar communications towers. The half dozen parabolic antennas loomed like Brobdingnagian, shimmering toadstools over the moonlit area.

"Larry!" exclaimed Cardwell, suddenly. "Take the controls!" And in the same moment he slumped forward.

"Vince! What's the matter!" Buchanan steadied the skycar with one hand and held his companion off the control panel with the other.

In a few seconds, Cardwell straightened up and shook his head. "It's like a cardi-stim jag," he said. "I'll get over it. Maybe I shouldn't have eaten so soon."

"What the devil are you talking about? *What* is like a cardi-stim jag?"

"The anti-reaction shot I took before being monitored. All that thing is is a glorified lie detector. Anti-reaction serum minimizes involuntary response to psycho-stimulus."

It was darker, after all, than Buchanan had imagined. "The plot thickens," he remarked, laconically. "What you did was completely illegal. It is subject to fine and imprisonment, regardless of who you are. You must have plenty to hide. Why don't I?"

For the first time since going to *Process*, Cardwell smiled, though faintly. "You *will* have," he said. "You're assistant engineer on the *Carlona*, aren't you?"

"So?"

"Ever heard of the Message to Garcia?"

"No . . ."

"How about Paul Revere's Ride?"

"All right! All right, Vince! I've waited long enough! Let's have it!"

"I'll take those controls," Cardwell told him. "We're almost at the rendezvous now, and you'll find out all about it there. I'll just prepare you with this: Teran is getting ready for a declaration of independence. The

*Carlona* may have to play a strategic part in the whole conspiracy. We are going to be briefed right now by Howard Lydecker. Does that ring any bells?"

In Buchanan's mind, bells *were* ringing. Loud, jangling alarm bells. His pulse seemed to be pounding audibly.

Lydecker!—a recent immigrant from Earth, an Earthworm turned colonist!—the crazy little runt whom the official press had branded as a prime example of proof that Process could be erroneous at times. He had been before the Governor's court for months now as defendant in his deportation trial—because he had preached independence. A dynamic, irrepressible little devil, but popularly regarded as being nuttier than the proverbial fruitcake. Yet there must have been quite an organization of Teranian interests backing him because he had not been deported yet.

But revolution! Twelve million Teranians against six billion Earthmen! This was suicidal! Sheer insanity! Of course Teran hated bitterly to pay unjustifiably high colonial taxes when it took from ten to twenty years to get results from representative action on Earth, there were plenty of irritating trade regulations and restrictions on vital types of industrial and purely physical research, but—interstellar war, against ridiculous odds! Where would it get them? And what was the *Carlona's* role in all this? What was Cardwell's interest in it?

"Come off it, Vince!" he exclaimed, after a stunned moment of silence. "You're no bugle blower! You've practically told me that altruism and politics don't mix. What's the *real* story behind all this? You're a practical, hard-headed businessman. What's in this deal for Vince Cardwell?—and why are you dragging *me* into a powder house like that?"

The skycar was darting low behind the long line of barge sheds. "Don't you want your trip on the *Carlona*?"

"Hell yes, but—"

"Wait until after you have heard Lydecker. Then tell me about it. You see—we were supposed to go into all this after take-off tomorrow, but while you were in Process I received this message from the office."

He handed Buchanan an inter-office memorandum bearing no tell-tale heading, but both men knew that it had come from the offices of the *Carlona* Corporation. It read:

*Meet L., barge 10, at 2550. Governor Pomeroy requests passage Carlona.*

Buchanan's head jerked up. "Governor Pomeroy! Since when—"

"It's a surprise replacement. A new governor is arriving on the *Roosevelt* in six weeks, and as it will be held up several months for maintenance they evidently can't wait that long to get Pomeroy home. He's a twenty year veteran here. Probably Earth's greatest authority on current Teranian politics."

"I can see now why the emergency meeting. You couldn't very well con-

spire with 'the Emperor,' himself, on board. . ."

Inasmuch as they were landing, there was no time left for further discussion. However, something of a personal nature was bothering Buchanan now. The fact that Cardwell had "cut him in" was proof that the latter was either depending on him to join in the zany adventure like an old buddy, or he was cold-blooded enough to consider eliminating him if he tried to squeal. Or was it simply that "Vincent the Invincible" knew he could handle Larry Buchanan under any circumstance?

**I**NSIDE the shed were four other skycars, mere deeper shadows in the unlighted building. Cardwell parked alongside the others and he and Buchanan climbed out, looking up at the black bulk of space barge number ten, which, like all others of its kind, was zeppelin shaped and about five hundred feet long. Numbers one through twenty were *Carlona* Corporation property, of which twelve had already been loaded and lifted into the *Carlona's* orbit, preparatory to departure for Sol. Most of the others at the space port were Earth corporation barges waiting for Teranian cargoes or waiting to have their Earth cargoes unloaded.

A soft, blue spotlight swept down on them from the lock, halfway up the hull.

"Okay, Captain," came an unrecognizable voice, barely audible over the building's P.A. system. "Both of you, this way."

So I'm only the assistant engineer!—thought Buchanan, resentfully. "Who's here?" he asked Cardwell, as they found the ramp. "Lydecker, Bill Haufek—and the crew."

William Haufek! Teran's most brilliant young expert in nucleonics! "Brother!" Buchanan exclaimed. "This is adding up! But who's that with the spotlight?"

"George Winzer—First Mate. Now calm down! Wait and see!"

"Winzer! But what about Ott Keffler? I thought he was First Mate!"

"Sh-h-h-h!"

Buchanan was quite indisposed to enter into any crack-brained conspiracies when he stomped sullenly past Winzer into the open airlock.

**B**ARGE TEN was empty, its main hold converted into a sort of conference room. There was a long table, some chairs, ashtrays, and a single light—a glow-panel lowered down from the ceiling. At one end of the hold was a small instrument that glowed with a green light. Buchanan recognized it as a detector. Any unexpected intrusion into the shed would cause the green light to flicker red. He smiled derisively.

Where do we line up for lead pipes and propaganda literature?—he thought.

He also thought of Anne Cardwell, waiting alone at home on this eve of departure, and he thought of a lot of other things connected with his personal memories of Anne before she

was married, such as their college days, and summer trips, and one unforgettable little space jaunt alone together. Twelve years for Cardwell. Twelve years for him, until either one would see her again.

He suddenly hated this clandestine meeting and everybody present. They were a bunch of asses and he was a fool for being roped in! Teranian independence—ha! Maybe in three hundred years! To contemplate it now was to pour two hundred years of hard work down the drain. Teranian civilization would end up either blasted to cosmic dust or sick, weak, and *really* enslaved—forever! Now was certainly not the time for it. If these hot-bloods were wise instead of just smart, they'd prepare for a peaceful, legal separation when the planet was really ready for independent and sovereign government.

At this stage in his reasoning, Buchanan stopped in his tracks and stared at the other men even as Winzer was introducing them to Cardwell and himself. Not a single member of the originally chosen crew was represented here! Dobson, Keffler, Phil Sutton, Lee Salkin, Hank Goodhew, Alex Jardine, and good old swobbie Larry Pyle! Where were they? In their places stood a circle of strangers, glumly returning his stare. . .

*Dr. Albert Olmstead*—Chief Engineer and metallurgist. Interstellar spacemen had to qualify with a minimum of two applicable professions in order to reduce the size of the crews and thus the oxygen, water and food supplies. Olmstead came under

the wire, in a way—but why metallurgy? Buchanan was sure he was going to miss cantankerous old Keffler as his Chief.

*Raymond Hopper*—Communications, Electronics—instrument maker.

*Dr. Edward Jayne*—Medical, Surgery—assistant in Communications—assistant to Captain Vincent Cardwell in Navigation.

*Dr. Alfred Makowski*—Machinist—nuclear physicist.

*Peter Puckett*—swobbie and barge man. He would do most of the space suit dirty work.

*Dr. William Hausfek*—Passenger—nuclear physicist.

Another passenger was definitely conspicuous by his absence. Governor John Pomeroy!

All of these men were tall, native born Teranians, with the possible exception of Puckett, who was young and somewhat more stocky than tall. But at this moment their leader seemed to be an undersized, wiry little Earthworm, Howard Lydecker—physicist, writer, politician extraordinary. According to official records, he was a questionable Teranian. After only five years on Teran he had come to this—a revolutionist!

"Before we begin, Vincent," Lydecker said, "did you pass Process satisfactorily?"

"Yes," Cardwell answered. "Both of us."

*Vincent*, was it! Buchanan wondered how long his "old pal" had been associated with the conspirator.

"Good! If you will all be seated,

gentlemen, we can begin. .”

Buchanan wanted to remain standing, with his arms folded, towering over the Earthworm, glaring at him, but when Cardwell sat down he gave in and took a chair next to Peter Puckett.

“I regret that you were summoned to meet here in this manner on the eve of your long journey,” he began, with a confident, silver-tongued fluency, “but as you have been advised by now the Governor is going to be a passenger on board the *Carlona*. However, this alteration of plan has its advantages inasmuch as I have the opportunity to address you personally. Captain Cardwell and Doctor Makowski were going to give you a message on board the *Carlona*—a message which comes to you from the members of the Party for Independence, a secret organization of Teranian citizens numbering several million.”

He paused for effect, and Buchanan thought—Several million! Ye gods! Where have I been? Then he remembered that he had spent at least half of the past few years in local space, working on reactor plants and preparing in general for the “big jump.”

“Inasmuch as an affiliation with such an illegal organization is dangerous it may be assumed that these several millions of members represent many more Teranians who would like to be actively affiliated. Therefore, the message which must be brought to you may be considered as representing the planet of Teran,

itself. And inasmuch as I am the present leader of the Party for Independence I will deliver the message to you now, in person. . .”

So it began. The little man was as dynamic as word of mouth descriptions had depicted him to be. His dark, earnest eyes were arresting, his simplicity of words and eloquent manner of delivery, as well as his surprisingly practical arguments, caught at least half of Buchanan's attention after he had made a decision not to listen at all.

“Now why should we seek independence from Sol in the first place? Why bother?” Lydecker looked around, searching the faces of his listeners. “Why disturb the present system of things? Why risk the lives of our citizens in interstellar conflict against our distant *State Authority*—the Earth?” His brows lowered, his eyes became piercing, and he leaned forward, resting his fingertips on the table top. “All right! I'll tell you why! In the first place, the history of this colony is two hundred years old. The original colonies of the former United States of America were younger than that and very primitively equipped when they declared their independence! Owing to the carefully selective system applied to emigrations to Teran, the resultant civilization here automatically represents the cream of the crop! We are, in cross section, the physical and intellectual leaders of humanity—and I assure you that comparative statistics can and have proved this point conclusively! Let me make this prin-

ciple clear to you: If we are the very *cream* of the crop, by Earth's own selection over two centuries of time, then *we* represent civilization, the fountain source from which the future of Mankind will spring—and *they* are what is left behind! *They* are the old world, interring themselves already in one of the strata of history that is past!"

Thus Lydecker went on, swiftly, forcefully, sincerely, his expressive eyes now piercing, now appealing for response. He pointed out that Teran had originated as a mere mining camp dedicated to the sole purpose of obtaining Uranium, that for two hundred years Teran had supplied the system of Sol with eighty percent of its Uranium. But he said the Teranian mission was now accomplished at long last—because, as he was going to prove, Earth and its local colonies no longer needed Uranium. The Teranians had earned their just rewards. They should be free to carry on their own experiments in self-government. He listed grievances covering taxation without adequate representation, misuse of colonial tax money to the advantage of Sol and the disadvantage of Teran, unfair tariff, trade and import-export regulations, rank violations of Charter, and debilitating restrictions on scientific and industrial research and development.

Buchanan listened, and he made a decision. Whether he accepted Lydecker's arguments or not, he was going to take this trip to Sol—because what Larry Buchanan sought



Lydecker

in the adventure was purely his *own* affair. . . !

"Now!" exclaimed Lydecker. "We come to the chief bone of contention, friends—that vital argument without which the Teranian dream of independence might have slept for yet another hundred years!" He held out his right hand, fingers half closed, tensely, as though he held within it the most precious thing in the universe. "It is *Cosmium*, the Metal of Power!"

He let them all think about that for a while and Buchanan was able to join the others in plenty of thought. He had read quite a bit about *Cosmium*. The heaviest element known—atomic weight 100. It had never shown up in solar spectrums, because it could not be manufactured under such extreme conditions. It had been generally well concealed because it was manufactured in the dense cores of cooling planets and satellites, Earth's moon being the minimum size and mass required for its occurrence.

It was not unstable until taken out of the heavy gravitational field in which it was born and exposed to cosmic rays, whereupon any tangible mass of it would become critical and explode with a totally unprecedented violence. The moon had yielded a small amount of the element and two dome colonies had been wiped out by nuclear blasts before they learned to dampen the cosmic rays getting to it. Mars was the planet which had given the best yield so far. Robotic equipment in the twilight zone of Mercury was still not paying for itself. Planets like Earth and Venus and Teran were too big, heavy and hot to dig into, as yet. But Cosmium seemed to be opening up a new era of physical advancement. Its power yield was something short of fantastic when compared with Uranium. But it was the rarest and most expensive and dangerous and promising of all elements known to Man.

LYDECKER continued, this time with all stops open. He spoke swiftly and with a positive conviction that was irresistibly contagious. "Cosmium is already replacing Uranium on Earth. Star ships are being built around Cosmium reactor plants which will increase their velocity to point nine five C, which will definitely outmode our own shipping."

Point nine five C! Buchanan did some rapid mental gymnastics. Ninety-five percent of the speed of light! The mass curve at that velocity said that an ordinary ship would be burned out within a few million miles—but

to maintain it over twenty-five *trillion* miles! That represented an energy output that came within hailing distance of infinity! It was incredible! He actually broke out into a light sweat, and now he was giving Lydecker his full attention.

"With the export value of our own Uranium reduced and all other tariff barriers and import regulations remaining unchanged, an intolerable degree of economic degeneration and social *puppetism* must result. But this is only the beginning! Two of the moons of Teran—*Achilles* and *Chiron*—as well as the inner planet, *Kronos*, are of the proper mass and age and workable size to yield considerable Cosmium from their cores, enough to put us on a par with the whole system of Sol! But we are informed officially by Governor Pomeroy, himself, that if and when we set up boring operations at those locations the whole program will be under the strictest possible Central Government control—and *all* Cosmium produced in the Alpha System shall be shipped to Mars, which is the repository and experimental center for all Cosmium in the known inhabited universe! *Wait!*" He waved his hands for silence as audible comments began to fly. "If you think they aren't foreseeing what our reactions are going to be, then let me inform you that the colonial garrison of the Central Government here on Teran, numbering about fifty thousand troops, is going to be augmented. Don't be surprised if you hear later on that the *Roosevelt*



brought in a barge-load of additional troops, along with our new Governor, and that every Sol ship from now on will bring some more! Don't be deceived! *Cosmium* is the key to power—and they know it!"

The peculiar gesture he made with his hands and shoulders signified that his case rested, for the moment. It was time for reaction and rebuttal—if any. Cardwell, Olmstead, Jayne and Haufek had heard these arguments before, so they all looked at the newly indoctrinated—which were Raymond Hopper, Peter Puckett, and Larry Buchanan.

Puckett, deep chested, bull-necked and heavy in the arms, slammed a fist down on the table, almost causing it to crack. "So we're getting dealt off the bottom of the deck!" he said. "The question is—what do we do about it?" His light brown eyes swung from Lydecker to Buchanan, who merely met his gaze without expression.

"Aha!" cried Lydecker, beaming. "Now we're getting to the point for which we are here assembled! There are two points, to be exact. One point is: How can we establish this independence? How can we hope to resist our Gargantuan oppressor without armies or fighting space craft? Point number two is: What part must the *Carlona* play in this interstellar drama?"

He paused, looking at them, and they waited. Then he turned to Cardwell. "Captain Cardwell, would you kindly elaborate on the latter point?"

Cardwell responded with eager intentness. "Central Government definitely anticipates exploiting the Alpha System for *Cosmium*," he said, addressing himself chiefly to Hopper, Puckett and Buchanan. "Naturally, they also anticipate utilizing a good proportion of our own facilities, brains and manpower to accomplish this. The first concrete move in this direction was brought to the attention of the *Carlona* Corporation only three weeks ago. The Governor informed us that we were to change the crew of the *Carlona* so that it would include some of our best scientists, and Doctor Haufek was added as a special passenger in view of his outstanding accomplishments in the field of nuclear physics. The *Carlona* is to go directly to Mars, where these specialists will be trained in the new technical branch of nucleonics pertaining to the mining, handling, processing and general application of *Cosmium*. After this time they are to return to Teran and help supervise *Cosmium* mining in our system, under strict Central Government supervision."

"Then Mars," said Buchanan, abruptly, "will actually be our only port of call."

All eyes turned upon him, as though becoming fully aware of his presence only at this moment, and he sat there looking back at them in poker-faced defiance.

"Yes," replied Cardwell. "Our cargo barges will be picked up by interplanetary freighters and taken to Earth. The *Carlona* will receive a

new barge train at Mars for the return voyage."

Buchanan's hopes sank. Years of planning for a twelve year interstellar round trip—just for a whistle stop! By God, if necessary he'd jump ship on Mars before submitting to that! But wait! The *Carlona* was supposed to have a "special" mission now. . .

"What," he said, "is the *Carlona* really going to do?"

That broke the tension. Lydecker smiled at him, as did Makowski, Olmstead and Jayne. But Cardwell did not smile as he stared back at Buchanan.

"If we succeed in our plan," he replied, "we are going to trigger the Teranian Revolution and make Independence a reality. The crew of the *Carlona*, with the able assistance of Doctor Haufek, is going to *hi-jack* the Cosmium stores of Mars and make a run for it back to Teran. By the time we get back, secret equipment now in the making will be ready for the Cosmium, and there are also a number of other surprises in preparation which will make us ready for Sol's retaliation."

The total, grandiose mosaic was finally forming a tremendous picture in Buchanan's mind. But there was still a big hole left, of which Ray Hopper seemed to be aware.

"All right," said the latter, "so when we get the Cosmium how do we fight? Six billion Earthwo—" He looked at Lydecker, coloring suddenly. "Six billion Earthmen against twelve million Teranians. So far, the whole thing is just visionary. . ."

Now Makowski jumped into the argument. He was a heavy set, dark browed Slavic type, giving the impression of ponderous but infallible intelligence. "Teran has never fought a war," he said. "In the history of Mankind, there has never been an *interstellar* war. I can assure you there are some factors in it that are totally new to human experience. It is difficult for us to visualize the actual advantage offered us by the vast barrier of time and space which separates us from Sol. Please remember that point—space is *time*! Over four light years of it is, anyway. If we sent a ship to bomb Earth, more than ten years would elapse after its departure before we would expect a retaliatory bombing. Even interstellar communication, relayed though it is by the ships constantly en route, is limited to the speed of light. Eight and a half years for one message to go to Sol and have the answer returned! Under such conditions, many possibilities present themselves which are completely unprecedented. Another great factor is expense. The expense would be mostly on the shoulders of Central Government because for the most part they would have to come after *us*! Imagine the expense of equipping a hundred or so interstellar vessels and say two thousand military barges and sending them here into battle! Such an armada does not exist! With the Martian Cosmium in our hands and plenty of native Cosmium sources available, we could sit here and make ourselves impregnable—and *then*

send out a few special ships of our own design equipped with Cosmium bombs. Earth would soon give it up as a bad job—and from there our destiny would be completely in our own hands . . .”

“Time is growing short,” interrupted Lydecker. He depressed a stud on his belt buckle and a magnifying prism swung out to show him the chronometer concealed inside. “We’d better clear the premises before the Patrol comes around—at 2800. Now there are many questions, no doubt, which you would still like to ask. I can only say that you will be further informed, as occasion allows, while en route to Sol. Before we adjourn, however, I must take a vote of confidence on these plans of the Party for Independence. In short, what is your general reaction so far?” He smiled then, looking closely at all of them, but it was a pale, nervous sort of smile made only with the lips. In his dark, glittering little eyes there was—something else.

Haufek spoke up. He was almost as tall as any Teranian present, but he was slender of build, the idealistic intellectual type. In his pale blue eyes shone a simple sincerity. “I feel,” he said, “that the situation leaves no room for complacency. The issue of independence had to come to a head sooner or later. The advent of Cosmium represents a distinct historical crisis, so the time for action has arrived. The only way to achieve a higher goal is to make the attempt, to strive, to offer something of self for the good of the whole. I believe that

in the long run the independent development of Teran would be distinctly beneficial to all humanity. What Doctor Lydecker contends, that we have been actually selected for superiority—which in my mind connotes solely the responsibility of leadership—is quite true. In time our freedom would benefit the peoples of both solar systems. So I, for one, am heartily in agreement with the plan. Of course,” he smiled, “I am much more familiar with the practical details of what we hope to do, which contributes to my own confidence, but the basic fact remains—now is the time for action, or it may be too late, forever.”

Lydecker smiled a little more genuinely at Haufek, but Makowski and Jayne and Cardwell were busy studying Hopper, Puckett and Buchanan.

“All right,” sighed Hopper, with a wave of his hand. “I’m in.”

Buchanan looked at Puckett’s square, taut face, and Puckett looked back at him.

“Well?” said the latter. “What do you say, Buchanan?”

“I—”

Cardwell interrupted. “I can vouch for Buchanan,” he said quickly. “We have been over some of this before. He’s with us.”

Buchanan stared at Cardwell and felt that his eyes were growing round with astonishment. What a lie *that* was! But something vitally urgent in Cardwell’s gaze made him keep his mouth shut. He had been on the verge of raising a few objections because he was still not familiar with

the "practical details" to which Houfek had alluded, nor was he personally disposed to "offer something of self for the good of the whole," inasmuch as the "whole" had not yet demonstrated any proclivity toward offering anything to him as an individual. He merely wanted to make the interstellar trip and not be encumbered, body and soul, with this top-heavy and bottom-flimsy conspiracy.

"All right!" said Puckett, interpreting Buchanan's silence as corroboration of Cardwell's statement. "I'm not backing out!"

There was a hasty exchange of handshakes and looks all around. Lydecker said something about personal rewards for all of them after victory had been won, about the gratitude of future generations and the inevitability of their success. The meeting adjourned within twenty minutes of Patrol time. . .

LATER; en route to Lake Catherine, Buchanan asked, "What was the idea of the little white lie? You've never discussed this business with me before. How do you know I'm on board with this plan?"

"I just wanted you to be on board the *Carlona* tomorrow," Cardwell replied. "If you had expressed any unfriendly doubts you wouldn't be anywhere but at the bottom of the Channel Sea."

Buchanan tensed. "Says who?"

Cardwell shot him a quick glance. "Says the Law, Larry—the as yet unwritten Law of our people. Teran

wants no part of Sol's heavyhanded policies from here on out. You know too much to back out now."

Buchanan cursed. "Pretty clever, aren't you, Vincent? How you *must* trust me! So I'm hooked, am I? Okay, then. I'll make the trip. We'll see what develops."

Damn him!—he thought. What's his real purpose? He had a perfectly logical and official reason for bumping me from the new crew.

"Why in hell do you want me on this trip, Vince?"

Cardwell was looking ahead at the Gilbert Mountains. "We've been through a lot of adventures together, Larry. This is the biggest of them all. I took it for granted you'd want to be on deck."

The hell you did! Buchanan felt trapped and it made him fighting mad. Yet another part of him was already anticipating the take-off aboard the *Carlona*.

As the skycar sped through the night, he looked out at the two Teranian moons, Achilles and Chiron. He looked far beyond them at a first magnitude G-5 star known as Sol. It twinkled brightly in the sky between uncounted suns that lay beyond and beyond—an endless horizon for Man's endless ambition. . .

### CHAPTER 3

LAKE CATHERINE lay in the lap of the mountains like a shimmering sheet of mercury, capturing and reflecting the rays of all four of Teran's moons, two of which were

just rising. Beyond it loomed the glimmering snow caps of the mighty Henderson Divide, from which came the river that fed the large lake. Giant trees, thicker and taller than Sequoias—and perhaps as old—covered the rising slopes on every side. Far away in the silvery, moonlit mat of the forest a waterfall gleamed. Tenderleaf Falls they were called. Buchanan knew them well. He and Cardwell and Anne had enjoyed many a picnic there. In fact, there had been times—

“Anne must still be waiting up,” remarked Cardwell. “I see lights.”

“And why not? What’s sleep? She has twelve years to catch up on that!”

Cardwell did not reply. Both men contemplated the house in silence as they came in for a landing. Since plasti-sections were too cumbersome and expensive to transport from Earth and Teranian industry was as yet dedicated to more vital needs, the house was not prefabricated. It was a very old-fashioned villa made out of native timber—a long, rambling, rustic looking place with gables, and sloping roofs for the snow in winter-time. Its yellowwood logs had not been stripped of their brilliant, reddish bark, and the whole effect was one of pioneer ruggedness, except for the tiny, leadwalled power shed in back and the visiphone antenna perched on the very top of the roof.

It was 2900, one hour from Teranian midnight, when they stepped onto the long veranda, and Anne was there quietly waiting for both of

them. By Earth standards she would have been an Amazon, but by their own she was just the right height for men seven feet tall. She was lithe and graceful in the backless white evening gown she had put on for the occasion, and wilted yellow moonflowers still lay in her dark, dark hair.

Typically, she asked no questions in spite of the unusual disappointment she had suffered. She only took them both by the hand and said, “I’ve kept the *hashish* warm.” Which might have sounded comical to an uninitiated Earthman, but to the three Teranians it was the name their kind had fondly given to the local and very stimulating version of coffee.

Cardwell kissed her, apologized for the delay and offered no explanation. They were soon established in the “den,” drinking *hashish* and talking of trivial things—anything but the impending voyage. The “den” was long, with a polished hardwood floor that was decorated with the colorful furs of animals unknown to the entire system of Sol. One of them, a ten foot pelt of rich, deep orange, was spread before a great, stone fireplace where yellowwood burned cheerfully and squash-like seeds from the curleycew tree sent a woodsy aroma into the room. They all reclined on spongair formchairs with a *hashish* dispenser table between them.

Buchanan talked with as much apparent ease as the other two. He laughed and he smoked, but through the smoke he looked at her. Her soft,

jet black hair was done up in a coiffure called "midnight." The left side of her head was done in pompadour, but it swept back around to join the heavy cascade on the right side which looped low across her breasts and was drawn in by a jeweled teranium metal clasp on her left shoulder. She might have worn it in another style, but he had once asked her to keep it long and she always had.

He wished, however, that as a married woman she would not give him so much out of her deep, hazel eyes—and yet if she had excluded him from the world that lay within them he would have suffered far more. And she knew it. Perhaps Cardwell knew it. Well, who the hell cared now? This was good, good bye!

Inasmuch as they all knew they were trying to be trivial, the strain was greater than if they had faced reality. Anne broke down first. She raised herself on one elbow, and the formchair obediently changed its shape to give her the most comfortable support in that position. Her face had paled, her smile had faded, and she did not look at either of them now. The game of avoiding each other's eyes had begun in the midst of a brooding silence, but twelve long years of space and time stared them down wherever they looked.

"Let's stay up all night," she said. "We could take the launch out on the lake. The moons are up. . ."

Buchanan looked at Cardwell, who sat on the edge of his chair now, elbows on his knees, hands clasped

tightly together; studying the fire. His mouth was drawn in tight lines. "I ought to take the skycar back to the Port," Buchanan said. "I can pick you up in the morning, Vince. You ought to get some sleep. I mean —"

Cardwell sprang abruptly to his feet. "All right! All right!" he exclaimed, pacing the floor. "So this is the last night! You are very kind, Larry!"

"*Vincent!*" Anne sat up, her face coloring suddenly.

"Look! I—" Cardwell put his hands to his temples. "That shot I told you about, Larry—it's given me the shakes." He looked at his wife. "I'll feel better after a little sleep. I'll just go see the twins and then I'll take a timer. It'll give me a few hours of deep sleep and I'll be okay. So why don't you two—"

Both Buchanan and Anne spoke at once, interrupting each other.

Then Anne said, "Perhaps—we had all better go to bed." She looked from one to the other. "In the morning we'll have a nice—*farewell breakfast!*" The last two words quavered on the edge of a sob.

"Yes, let's get some sleep!" Buchanan put in quickly. "I know my room. See you in the morning!" Without looking back at her, or at Cardwell, he turned and left the room. Again he felt as he had in the Process office when the agent told him about the *Carlona's* only port of call. His solar plexus was a ball of molten lead.

Twelve years of space and time. . .

IT WAS 3000—midnight. Buchanan felt farther from sleep than he did from Earth. He had taken the short trail under the yellowwoods to the boat landing. It was a long dock, reaching a hundred feet out from the land, low on the glass calm surface of the lake, and T-shaped. To his left was the launch house, and to his right was a long bench, facing the lake. A native canoe, built by Alphids for Teranian use, was tied to the far end. He sat there surveying the unadulterated beauty of his native world. Achilles and Chiron had gone below the horizon, but the two smaller moons, Artemis and Hestia, raced each other across the sky.

He had visited all four of them. Funny, he mused, that he was so much at home not only on Teran but in the whole Alpha System, everything here was so much a part of him—and yet he had planned for years to leave it all in the swift wake of a star ship bound for distant Sol, which to him was totally foreign. What was in the nature of a man ever to seek the distant places?

Why not face it? He was running away from a personal situation that had become insupportable. But Cardwell was going, too! Why! What was *really* behind it all?

A board creaked on the dock. He turned to see a solitary blue-skinned Alphid standing at the end of the bench. It was one of twenty of the indigenous creatures Cardwell kept about the place. Like most of the adult species, it was four feet tall, frail in the shoulders and arms, and

ridiculously rounded out about the waist—in fact, heavily underslung owing to its short, stumpy legs and fat, three-toed feet. Its two chameleon-like eyes rolled in their sockets, observing first him and then the canoe, and back again.

“What’s the matter, fellow?” he said. “Want a canoe ride?” He knew it could not understand anything but certain whistles and sign language, but he talked just for the relief of talking to some living creature, as he might have to a dog.

There were no dogs on Teran, but there were five hundred million friendly Alphids. They had been the subjects of extensive psychological study. Some of them could accomplish quite intricate tasks in factories.

But could they handle a gun?

“Hell!” he said aloud. And he thought—Imagine us coming to that! Drafting Alphids to help us battle Earthworms!

Suddenly, he looked back along the dock, and there was a constricting pain in his chest when he saw the white, moonlit figure of Anne approaching him. He stood up, speechless, watching her.

“I sent Paddy ahead to bring the canoe around,” she said. “I saw you here—and I can’t sleep, Larry. Will you take me for a canoe ride?”

*Would* he—! “But, what about—”

“He’s dead to the world.” She was beside him, looking up at him, with moonlight and a world of their own in her eyes. She wore a clinging night-cloak around what must have been a negligee. “Oh Larry! Larry! Take me

out—please!”

He stared back at her for half a minute. Then he took her hand and led her around to where “Paddy” stood patiently beside the canoe, holding a paddle in his tiny hand.

Anne lay against the built-in padded back rest facing him, her head lolling back, looking at the stars. Buchanan paddled in silence, thankful for the chance to get out away from the land, out on the cool water in the night. He knew of an island over near the North shore. Once he and Anne had called it *their* island. He paddled silently in that direction, through a period of time that had that peculiar characteristic of being separated from the regular Continuum. You didn’t measure it.

When he was almost to the island, Anne began to talk. “Will you think of me, Larry?” she asked.

“I’d better not.”

“You mean—oh Larry, is that really why—”

“We’re almost to the island.”

She sat up and turned to look. “We used to call it *our* island.”

“We used to call a lot of things ours.” He dug the paddle viciously into the water. “I’m sorry,” he said. “But before I go, will you answer just one question?”

“Of course, Larry.”

“Why did you do it? Why did you marry Vince? I was only away a year. Do you love him?”

“I—I have that coming to me. I don’t know what he did to me, Larry. Constant association, attentiveness, kindnesses. I thought I—”

“I won’t accuse you of being blinded by the prospect of wealth and security. Maybe it was because he was so high in the Corporation you thought he’d be on the ground more than I. You knew I was a spacer aching for the stars.”

“Yes, Larry, that was his own talking point!”

“And now he’s going, too.”

The canoe scraped sandy bottom as they reached the island’s shore. It was there that Anne finally broke down.

“Why is he doing it!” she cried. “What does he think I am! Is he trying to punish me for not being able to love anyone but you?”

Buchanan rose slowly to his feet and stepped unheedingly into the shallow water. He dragged the canoe onto the shore. Then he leaned down and picked Anne up in his arms. She lay there in the double moonlight, still trembling slightly from her crying, looking up at his serious face, the burnished crown of his rusty red hair, the long, hard line of his neck.

“Anne,” he said, in a low tone.

“Yes?”

“It’s all a mess right now, between us, I mean. But it doesn’t have to be a wreck.”

“What are you trying to tell me, darling?”

“I mean—if you’ll wait, I’ll come back, and things will be right, then. I’ll see to it.”

Slowly, her arms went around his neck, but their lips met swiftly. And it was *their* island all over again. . .



At 300 that morning, Vincent Cardwell watched the canoe as it approached the dock in the waning moonlight. He closed his telescope with a snap. On his face was a tense, derisive smile. He went back to bed then and again pretended that he was "dead to the world." But his long, powerful body was bathed in sweat. . .

**B**Y MORNING, Buchanan had a new idea—one that he felt should have occurred to him much sooner. He waited until they were in the sky-car, headed for the Port, and he made sure that he was doing the piloting. Cardwell was willing enough to relinquish the controls to him. He had not slept all night—nor had Buchanan, for that matter. He had on his captain's uniform, a cream colored plastisuit that emphasized the powerful lines of his tall frame, but his dark eyes seemed sunken under his bushy, black brows, and his aquiline features sagged in a vague expression of dejection. Yet deep within his eyes was something that only Anne had noticed when she said goodbye. It was a distant gleam, as of hidden triumph.

"You're losing altitude," Cardwell remarked, at length. He was looking below at Panorama Mesa, a famous landmark in the Gilbert Mountains. It was a high peak topped by a small, rock-walled mesa, inaccessible from the ground.

"Something's wrong," replied Buchanan. "I'd rather land first and then investigate."

"But why land on top of Pano-

rama? That's a hell of a place to be stalled! We're due at the Port in an hour for the Governor's farewell parade!"

"Relax. There's always the phone."

True, he had forgotten the radio-  
phone. But the whole circumstance bothered his instinct. "I don't see anything wrong. What's the trouble?"

Buchanan merely busied himself with picking out a landing spot on the verdure clad mesa. After he had maneuvered the car safely to a stop in a clearing between stooped and crazily looping curleycew trees he turned off the thermatrons and sat back in his seat, looking at Cardwell.

"I wanted to talk to you," he said.

Cardwell looked around outside, then back at Buchanan. "You must think it's going to be a rough conversation, if that's why you landed first." His deep, dark eyes began to come alive.

"It *might* be rough," replied Buchanan, watching him closely.

"Well, let's have it, Larry! Damn it!"

"I want a good, logical reason—a concrete explanation. Why are you doing this to Anne?"

Cardwell's lips straightened into a thin line and his eyes blazed, but he controlled himself. "I could say that's none of your business, Larry, but maybe it is, after all! Well, you ought to know the reason I'm taking this trip—after what happened last night."

"What do you mean by that?"

"After that meeting with Lydecker."

"Oh. . ."

"What else *could* I mean, Larry?"

"What I'm getting at is that you're no starry eyed altruist. You're not going through with this conspiracy for the sake of dear old Teran. What's *really* behind it? What's in it for Vince Cardwell, personally? I want to see what it is that justifies leaving your wife and kids for twelve to thirteen years."

"It won't be too bad," replied Cardwell, evasively. "What's a dozen years out of a hundred? Life isn't as short as it used to be. Then there's her family she'll be with, and if something should happen to me there's my will. It'll take care of everything."

"Even under the conditions of an interstellar war? Don't be ridiculous, Vince. Now look! Brace yourself. I've got a proposition to make. You were authorized to change your crew. You've still got time to get hold of Phil Sutton and have him take my place. I'm staying here."

Cardwell's nostrils flared and his face reddened. "Are you insane!" he exploded. "What the devil's the matter with you!"

Buchanan's face was totally expressionless when he said, "I want you to sign a waiver and property settlement form before you leave so that Anne can get a divorce. I want to marry her."

"Listen, you—!" Cardwell's hand shot out and grasped the front of Buchanan's jacket. Almost as suddenly, however, he released his grip.

"Even if I agreed to such insanity," he said, "you couldn't do it."

"Why not?"

"You forget you're working for the Party now. If you stayed behind you wouldn't live thirty hours, with what you know. Even if you eluded them a few days or even weeks, the result would be the same, not to mention intermediate trouble with Merchant Interstellar for breach of contract with Carlona Corporation. But Lydecker would be on your neck, and any association with Anne under such circumstances would probably endanger her, as well. No, Larry, I'm afraid you're still Assistant Engineer of the *Carlona*. But now that you've brought this subject out into the open I'll tell you why I didn't bump you when I switched crews. Do you think I'm fool enough to leave you behind when I have to go?"

Buchanan colored with sudden anger. His crinkly, copper colored brows lowered and the muscles in his neck tensed. "Vincent the Invincible!" he sneered. "Got it all figured out, haven't you? You've got me well grappled and moored. Just like a master move in that game you play—what's it called? *Empire*—that's it! A good game for you, Vince. Power! That's what you're after! The Midas touch! Everything you touch turns to gold—everything except Anne. She's still a human being. She always loved me and there's nothing you can do that will ever change it! That's what makes you so damn frustrated and mad that you're willing to pull us all down in one flaming

wreck! Well, you're not going to do it!"

Cardwell turned in his seat, facing the other, his feet braced against the floorboards, ready to spring. "You," he retorted, "are coming with me, or in two hours you'll be dead! I'm talking for the Party now!"

"The hell you say! You're always talking for Vince Cardwell! Don't ever try to kid me, Vince! We grew up together. Remember?"

Cardwell reached for the controls. "We've talked enough. Let's get this thing off the ground!"

Buchanan stopped him. "Just one thing more. If I go on the *Carlona* I want you to play a little game—just between you and me."

Cardwell met his stare coldly. "What is it?"

"It's a long, long road out there, isn't it?"

"So what?"

"It's twelve long years, Vince, going and coming. Long and lonely years of very close association, when it's thousands of billions of miles to the nearest star. Things happen out there. Men go nuts and jump out of airlocks. They lose their mag paks and drift away into endless nothingness, and you can't stop a star train going at eighty-five C to look for one man!"

"If you're saying what I think. . ."

"I am. ." Buchanan smiled, but only with his mouth. "My proposition is—if I go on the *Carlona*, only one of us is coming back!"

Cardwell matched his intense stare. A light film of perspiration was on

his face. "All right," he said. "If that's the way you want it, Larry."

Buchanan's fists clenched. "Oh don't hand me that! It's the way you *planned* it all along! You didn't have the guts to shoot me in the back in local waters, did you?"

Cardwell reactivated the thermatrons and took the skycar into the air.

"It's your game, Larry. The rules seem to be simple enough. Only *one* of us comes back. . ."

**B**UCHANAN did not participate in the farewell ceremonies. As Assistant Engineer, rehearsed over the course of years relative to his duties on board a starship, he was fully occupied with his technical responsibilities. Dr. Olmstead, Dr. Jayne and a Port inspector had boarded the *Carlona* hours before and were now in communication with him over spacephone. Peter Puckett assisted him on the ground.

With the help and under the supervision of two Operations officers, they personally tabulated data transmitted by Jayne from Olmstead and the inspector. It was routine but it was the Law. The ship had to be licensed for each trip, always within five hours of departure. To acquire its license it had to satisfy the safety monitor. The electronic tester demanded answers to vital questions relative to air supply, food, water, the condition of the power pile, fuel for the navigation rockets, instrument readings pertaining to the thermatron charge ratings, humidity and temper-

ature in the gravitron cells, response of tractor and power beams, D.C. power banks, high frequency feedback absorption, radiation comparisons inside and outside the main shields, temperature and flow of molten lead around the boilers, proper functioning of condensation and return, turbine operation, generator output, *et cetera*.

Once the monitor was satisfied, it gave them a green light. One of the Operations officers, a friendly Teranian employed by Carlona Corporation, stamped and duplicated the trip license.

"Cheer up, men," he told them, with a wry grin. "They tell me those female Earthworms in the Martian colonies really go for Teranians. Just six short years and you may have a whole week or two to cash in!"

Buchanan and Puckett exchanged glances, aware of their dangerous political knowledge connected with the *Carlona's* secret mission. They could not know who was a Party member and who was not, or what innocent sounding banter of words might be a trap. Both men got to their feet and Buchanan signed a receipt for the license.

"You're a big help, Bryson," he said, noncommittally. "See you around sometime."

"All kidding aside, though, I wish I could go along," Bryson told them. "Never made a star trip. With only two to four trips out per year by Teranian vessels and with such small crews, how many of us will ever go before we're too old? You're

lucky!"

Buchanan raised an eyebrow at him. "I hope you're right," he answered.

"Come on!" Puckett exclaimed. "Let's ditch these landlubbers!"

When they were assigned to a lifter they discovered that it was grappling another barge for the *Carlona's* train.

"That makes thirteen barges," commented Buchanan. "You superstitious?"

"No," said Puckett, "but if I were I'd still be all right, because we're picking up number fourteen en route."

Buchanan stopped walking. "*En route!*" he exclaimed. "What are you—"

"Skip it! There's the Governor!"

Governor Pomeroy stood there at the bottom of the escalator gangway in the midst of a small group of officials. Several Alphids were busy transferring luggage from an electric cart to the escalator lift. Five hundred feet away, behind roller fences and an armed company of diminutive Earthworm M.P.s, a large crowd of Teranians and Central Government employees with their dependents alternately watched his departure in sullen silence or waved their hands and shouted, while a band somewhere in the background still played the martial *Salute to Sol*, which was the universal anthem.

Cardwell was there, with his eye on Buchanan's tall, striding figure, and there were Winzer, Hopper, Makowski and Haufek. Now it was Howard Lydecker who was conspic-

uous by his absence!

Governor Pomeroy was a rather impressive Earthworm. He was over six feet in height, and his two hundred and twenty Earth pounds of weight were still mostly brawn in spite of his years. He had a heavy jowled face, a ruddy complexion, a ponderous brow and a leonine mane of graying hair. His eyes were black and sharply penetrating. He had a reputation for stern, swift judgment and relentless execution of orders. For twenty years on Teran he had not been known as "The Emperor" without due cause.

"This is Mr. Buchanan, our Assistant Engineer," said Cardwell, introducing him to Pomeroy, "and this is Mr. Puckett, our barge man."

Pomeroy's grip was surprisingly strong for an Earthman as they shook hands. He had a way of looking into a person's eyes that meant he was actually interested in every personal-ity with whom he was confronted.

"So now our little party is complete," said the Governor. "Is there anything to detain us further, Captain?"

"No, sir. We have our trip license, I see. It looks like we're on our way." But Cardwell did not look at Pomeroy. He matched Buchanan's intent stare as he spoke.

*Only one of us will come back. . .*

ONCE they had all boarded the lifter, its gravitrons were activated and the workshop rose ponderously, pulling the loaded barge up with it. In spite of Buchanan's engi-

neering knowledge of how this was accomplished, the demonstration never failed to fill him with respect both for the surprising laws of Nature and the human ingenuity that had discovered and made use of them. In the gravitrons, a few tons of free iron atoms had been neutralized. Having almost negligible electrostatic fields, they were in the same state, due to their immobilization, which would have occurred had they been brought by physico-chemical means to a temperature close to one tenth of a degree above absolute zero. Astronomers had long ago determined that Nature abhorred neutralized matter as much as it did a vacuum, as was proved by studying the composition and characteristics of dark clouds, or "neutral striations," in interstellar space. Physicists had learned how to duplicate neutralization, and thus star ships had been born—not mere rocket propelled interplanetary orbiters, but ships like the *Carlona*, capable of maintaining an arbitrary course at speeds approaching that of light, itself.

"Buchanan."

"Hm-m-m?" He turned to find Peter Puckett standing beside him at the observation panels.

"How about giving me a space engineering course? There'll be plenty of time between hibernations. I want to know all about it."

It was a legitimate question. Everybody studied and trained during a star trip. Ship's officers usually bore the responsibility of imparting their technical knowledge to lesser crew

members.

"Okay, Pete," Buchanan said.

They did not mention it, but the fact was obvious that the two men were gravitating toward each other already. The pairing and matching of personalities under such circumstances was a well known psychological phenomenon. It was expected. Buchanan reasoned he could have done much worse in the way of space buddies. Peter Puckett was mentally alive, his personality surged between extremes of temper and enthusiasm—which made it more interesting than the phlegmatic kind, such as Makowski—and he would never stab you in the back. However, if he thought it necessary he might stab you in front, because he was the type that followed up convictions with action. Moreover, he was an exceptionally powerful man, physically, which gave promise of some good wrestling matches, at least. Exercise was an all important activity on star trips, and wrestling was a favorite sport with Buchanan.

The two men stood beside one another for a while, silently gazing down at Teran, the mighty planet of their birth. The Channel Sea had already shrunk to a mere neck of water connecting two great oceans, and the forested continent of Sylvania curved broadly toward the equator. This was goodbye to a world that they would not see in years—or perhaps ever again, if Fate so decided.

This was the real goodbye to Anne. Buchanan could feel the sharp reality of the parting now. Threads of mem-

ory and all their life's mutual attachments were unraveling through him and breaking off like paper serpentes, swirling and falling to the distant ground like Autumn leaves, leaving him alone in space.

He wondered if there would ever be another Spring . . .

"There she is!"

He looked up, startled. "What?"

"The *Carlona*, man! By God, that's what I'd call a beautiful sight!"

Buchanan looked upward, squinting slightly to accustom himself to the stars, which were shining unblinkingly now but pale and shorn of their deadly radiations by virtue of the polarizite view panels. Five miles above their lifter and barge he could make out the tiny satellite, looking exactly like a silver cigar clipped at both ends and thrust through a small buggy wheel. The "cigar" carried the fuel and air supplies, the Uranium pile, the thermatrons and gravitrons and boilers and generators and gyros and navigational rockets. That revolving "wheel" was to be their lonely abode for long, dark years to come.

"We're about in free fall already," he remarked.

"Yeah. We have to plant the barge first."

After the barge had been given an orbit, the lifter traversed the remaining distance by means of short spurts from its navigational rockets, and soon the silvery form of the *I.S.S. Carlona* emerged out of the stars to dominate all space—a vast, sleek denizen of the void, more than one

thousand feet long.

The lifter sought its "cradle" at one end of the main body of the ship, an airlock located in the center of a battery of navigational rocket engines. Once the airlocks had been keyed in and sealed fast, transference of passengers and luggage was as simple as it was on the ground—in fact easier, because passengers sailed along the circular corridor in free fall, pulling themselves forward by means of the netting that lined the walls. Baggage was kicked along like so many toy balloons, and the Governor's space pullman almost collided with the Port Inspector who was returning to the lifter.

Buchanan kept thinking of the fact that this was actually a *star* ship, not an ungainly looking interplanetary "blimp," as the local ships were called by spacemen. They were crawling under the rocket fuel tanks and the liquid oxygen tanks. Now they were under the pile, itself, beneath its double shields and the molten flow of lead that heated the boilers that ran the turbines. That intersection ahead came just before the giant thermatron banks and the gravitrons. To a large extent, this "cigar" portion of the tremendous ship was his professional territory. His engineering training brought him a mental vision of every section and each detail, down to the startling performance of electrons in neutralized atoms.

In thoughtful silence, the eight men drifted up through one of the "spokes" of the outer wheel until they felt its induced centrifugal gravity

begin to take hold. From there on their direction was "down." The sudden fall of the luggage demonstrated this fact.

Jayne and Olmstead greeted them at the foot of the chute, and each man seemed to meet the other for the first time. Down below in a busy, inhabited world, association had been on a wholly impersonal basis. Out here in this cramped little bubble of life, a man had to "measure up" in a hurry or he was whipped, psychologically, for the duration of the trip. Here, association would be necessarily on an extremely personal basis.

It was Ray Hopper, the Communications Officer, who first revealed his own Achilles' heel. He laughed, nervously, and said, "Well, here we are!"

Nine men turned to stare at him. Inasmuch as he had observed a ridiculously obvious fact, he blushed crimson and retired swiftly to his station. From such simple but personally bitter experiences, cancerous complexes had been known to develop. . .

**T**HEY were two hours under way when First Mate George Winzer approached Buchanan and began to engage him in secret conversation. Since Cardwell had taken Governor Pomeroy on some kind of tour of inspection, the "coast" was clear. In fact, they were momentarily alone in the Meter Room, where Olmstead and Buchanan were to do most of their routine checking and tabulating.

"We're fifteen thousand kilometers

out," Winzer announced. "How are your readings?"

Buchanan looked up. He liked Winzer, in spite of the fact that he had replaced an old space buddy, Ott Keffler. The man was in his early forties, a clear complected blond type with light blue eyes and an easy, pleasant smile—a cool, quick thinker and dependable ship's officer. Such men were an asset when the chips were down.

"Pretty fair," he said. "Guess I'll have to replace a few bleeder valves on the helices. Feedback's overheating the absorption banks. What's our velocity?"

"A long way from C-scale. We're still on altimeter—about 20 K.P.S."

"Guess you won't use the Doppler scope for a while."

"Larry. . ."

"Yeah?"

Winzer looked behind him at the open hatch of the Meter Room. Then he leaned on the back of Buchanan's chair. "Anything we do from now on that is connected with the Party or our special mission will be referred to as the 'Project.' "

Buchanan's eyes met his. "So?"

"We want you to do some Project work—now."

"What kind?"

Winzer looked at the small chronometer on the meter board. "At seventeen thirty you are to meet Puckett and Hopper at number two lock, Zero Deck. They've been briefed. You are to go along for orientation."

"Go along where? Orientation for what?"

"It's space work. You'll see."

Buchanan's brow wrinkled up. "Is this something connected with barge fourteen?"

Winzer's eyebrows went up. "How did you know?"

"Puckett said—"

"All right. That's it. We're telling Pomeroy the thermatron circuits on number thirteen are fouling the beams. That's the excuse. Any questions?"

"Yes. Where the hell is this extra barge?"

"You'll find out. No time now."

"But what about those bleeder valves? We're still in first band gravity and have to get all the push we can while it's available."

"I'll get Olmstead on it."

Buchanan shrugged and looked at the chronometer. In a half hour he would be starting his first job on the "Project."

**Z**ERO DECK was merely a tubular passageway lined with various types of equipment and supply lockers running through the axis of the "cigar." The thousand foot inner hull was divided into two principal decks on either side of Zero. These were A Deck and B Deck. The Zero Deck tube had an airlock at both ends. "Forward" on any starship indicated that half of the inner hull which contained the gravitrons. Number one airlock was "forward." Number two airlock was "aft," the one to which the lifter had attached itself when they had boarded the *Carlona*.

It was in the "aft" lock that Bu-





Peter Puckett

chanan met Ray Hopper and Peter Puckett. The latter two were already in space suits except for their polarizite helmets. Puckett had an air of urgency about him and worked with grim purpose, checking the suits and the mag paks and special equipment they were to take along. Hopper was pale, looking from one to the other of his companions for moral support.

"Come on, Hopper," Buchanan said, "this isn't your first space walk. You've been through Basic."

"I know, but this is a *long* walk—seven miles!"

Buchanan grinned at Puckett. "Clear out to the 'caboose,' eh? Is that where we'll find number fourteen, Pete?"

"Stow it till we get there. Now listen. Hopper has fixed our transmitters so we can switch to a long wave band and won't be received by the Bridge. This is the switch here. If you don't want 'the Emperor' to hear us, use that switch. Okay? Let's

get going!"

"What seems to be the big rush?"

"We're accelerating steadily, and our remo gear on thirteen only has a fifty thousand kilometer range. Come on!"

Remo. Remote control. So number fourteen was *not* a barge; it was a rocket ship! This was going to prove interesting, Project or no Project!

When they all had their helmets and mag paks on, Puckett signalled the Bridge for a power beam. Immediately the faint buzzing of the small thermatron chargers was heard by each man, and they knew their mag paks would function. Under Puckett's quick manipulation of the lock controls the inner hatch slid into place. They watched their tiny barometers sink to near zero pressure as pumps drew the air away and their suits rounded out like miniature blimps. Then the lock lights were extinguished and the outer hatch slid to one side.

Teran and her four moons lay below them, a mighty spectacle of heavenly splendor. All the rest of their field of vision was a sea of stars. Bright stars like great, shining diamonds caught in a titanic spider's web sprinkled with radioactive dust. Half a mile astern, looking like a lost silver fountain pen, was barge number one, apparently suspended in space without motion in spite of its tremendous velocity. Beyond it, like a tiny grain of wheat, was barge number two. It was difficult to see the others, but that was where the invisible power beam pointed, and that

was the direction in which their mag paks would take them.

They took the jump, and their small momentum sent them falling swiftly astern because of the ship's constant acceleration. Once they were fully within the power beam they activated their "paks," and small magnabeams rode the return flow of flux from the *Carlona* to barge number one. They went like rockets at first, but they were able to decelerate sharply by changing the polarity of their magnabeams. Within close range they could gain traction on any part of the barge's metal hull and pull themselves in.

Within half an hour they were standing on barge thirteen. When they turned to look for the *Carlona*, she was almost indiscernible against the ponderous star walls of the universe. They felt like castaways beyond Ultima Thule, yet by comparison with the distance they would cover during the next six years they still had one foot on the home shore. They were still deep inside the Alpha System.

Inside the barge, far aft, Hopper showed them a crate marked "J. Pomeroy—private." It was locked with a forged diplomatic seal.

"Just in case Customs wanted to inspect it," he explained. "Diplomatic immunity. You guys help me unpack it."

With their space suits off, they set to work, and in a short time they had uncovered a compact but very powerful remote control unit, all assembled and pre-tested. Hopper

plugged it in to the thermatron power supply and warmed it up. He also jacked in a concealed antenna lead.

"Where is this robo-ship?" asked Buchanan.

"Ever heard of Hermes-2?" said Puckett. "I hadn't until Makowski and Haufek briefed me."

Buchanan's brows went up. "Yes, but—what the devil! That's—"

"I know. Less than a mile in diameter, a wild, eccentric 'roid on a ten year orbit and the fastest little devil in the Alpha System. Well that's where the Party planted the robo-ship over a year ago."

"But where is it now?"

Puckett grinned at Hopper, who responded with a half-hearted smirk. "Looping right in on us from out of nowhere, at about a hundred K.P.S. Now you can see why we fired rockets at exactly fifteen hundred today. This has been worked out to an Al- phid's whisker—if they have any."

Buchanan tried to swallow but couldn't. "How—how close?" he asked.

"Relax! She'll pass us like a galactite within about five thousand kilometers. By Universal reckoning she'll emerge out of ecliptic at about plus twenty-eight dec."

"When?"

"About now. How you doing, Ray?"

Hopper was intent over his controls and a specially prepared table concerning Hermes-2. "I should have activated the robot signal by now, but I don't know. I have to fan the beam pretty much to make sure—"

He was interrupted by a high-pitched whistle that came to them from the set's loudspeaker in long, steady dashes.

"There she is!" exclaimed Puckett. "Long live Teran!—or something. This is one more step, men!"

"What happens now?" asked Buchanan, expressionlessly. A nameless, hidden factor connected with all these secret maneuverings was bothering him and he couldn't define it, but he had instinctively arrived at a state of vague apprehension.

"We bring the little ship in and hide her in good old barge thirteen!"

"And then what?"

"When we get into the Sol System we'll plant her on one of the asteroids between Mars and Jupiter, and there she'll wait again until we need her."

"Special equipment on board?"

Puckett's face lighted up and he grinned gleefully. "Teranians know a little science of their own, Larry. Ask Haufek about that sometime and he'll show you how we're going to take the whole colony of Martanium—that's where the Cosmium center is."

The whistle dashes changed to an undulating whine. "She's homing in," Hopper announced.

"What if the Governor starts playing around with the visiscope?" queried Buchanan. "Won't he be able to see it arrive?"

Puckett looked at his watch. "In about an hour from now," he said, "Officers' Mess will be served. Pome-

roy is a gourmet, and the first meal out is always special, you know. He'll be kept entertained for another hour after that. By that time our little pet should be bedded down for the duration."

THE roboship came in with extinguished motors, riding thirteen's stern magnabeams. It was a sleek little rocket auxiliary gravitron yacht of private design, about sixty feet in length.

Buchanan was not surprised when he was asked to help open the cargo hatch on the barge. This hatch was thirty feet wide and twenty feet high. It was only designed for opening in Port, because there was no airlock behind it. A considerable amount of valuable cargo that had been loaded into the main hold for a camouflage was thus ruined, and they dumped it. This would have been necessary, anyway, in order to make room for the *Surprise*; which was actually the name of the yacht. Under their light acceleration, the vessel had enough inertia drag to require the use of loading winches, but they got it in.

No sooner had they brought it to rest inside than all three men drifted with surprising abruptness against the aft bulkhead of the hold.

"What the devil!" Puckett muttered.

"What is it! What's happening!" exclaimed Hopper.

"Now it's my turn to tell you guys to relax," said Buchanan. "Olmstead must have replaced those bleeder

valves, which gets more thrust out of the gravitrons. We're accelerating better now."

"That's dumb timing," Puckett complained. "If the winches weren't still holding our playmate here, we'd have been smashed like an omelette!"

On the contrary—thought Buchanan. It was perfect timing. Now he knew what was bothering his instinct about this whole business. Everything was working *too* smoothly! The safety monitor at the Port had passed the feedback and absorption readings, which meant that the defective valves had been installed *after* take-off.

Suddenly, a new thought brought a prickly sensation to the back of his neck. On the surface of things, one might have concluded that the defective bleeders were used to time the *Carlona's* rendezvous with the *Surprise* a little better—but on the other hand, could it have been an excuse for creating that sudden increase in acceleration just in time to crush him under the weight of the space yacht? Or was his imagination working overtime? Winzer had said this was "orientation." Did he actually have to be out here with Puckett and Hopper to do this job, or was he a last minute addition?

The next day he found an opportunity to ask Olmstead about the bleeder valves. He put the questions to him as casually as possible.

"You must have been waiting for us to get our 'cargo' into barge thirteen yesterday before you threw in the good bleeder valves," he said.

"Of course!" replied Olmstead. "A sudden surge while you fellows were outside might have thrown you out of mag range and dumped you into space—or it might have lost us the *Surprise*."

"Mm-hm-m. Who was timing you—I mean, Pomeroy wasn't hanging around the visiscope, was he?"

"God no! Cardwell was handling it alone. He signalled me when it was safe to replace the bleeders."

*Very* safe! Buchanan suppressed a grim smile. Score one for himself! Cardwell had fired the first shot and missed, while callously endangering the lives of two other men. What a crafty and dangerous man his old space buddy had become! Perhaps it was something he had learned from playing the game of Empire.

But now it was Larry Buchanan's move!

VELOCITY was now being measured on C-scale, which meant in relation to C, the speed of light. It also meant that they were out of space altimeter range and must use the Dopplerscope, which was an automatic speed indicator based on the spectrum shift of Alpha Centauri.

Within one week the Dopplerscope indicated the figure, 03—three hundredths the speed of light, or nine thousand kilometers per second. In the second week they passed the Earthship, *Roosevelt*, within fifty thousand kilometers. Even at that distance of closest approach it was impossible to count her barges because their combined velocities car-

ried them 3.6 million kilometers apart on their respective courses within the single minute of closest visiscope observation. Nor was microwave communication possible until minutes after they had passed, in spite of frequency shift compensators. However, prior to its passage the *Roosevelt* had been in contact with the *Carlona*. Pomeroy and the new Governor of Teran had been exchanging coded messages for days.

After this event, life on board the *Carlona* began to settle down for the "long haul," as it would be three months before they came within hailing distance of another star ship. Hibernsleep schedules were posted. Each man was to submit to a sort of estivation for a week at a time, with a three day period of alternate wakefulness and catnapping in between. This system had been found to conserve over sixty percent of the air, water and food supply that would normally be consumed. It also gave each passenger an apparent trip time of less than two years instead of six, as far as conscious awareness was concerned.

The hibernsleep schedule kept three men on deck at all times. Inasmuch as there was very little in the way of duties to occupy their time, they dedicated their leisure hours of wakefulness to reading, studying, exercise, games and hobbies.

A day came when Buchanan and Puckett were examining the gravitrons together. They were six months out and traveling at 73-C. By this time they had lost track of who would

be the third man on deck with them, as the hibernsleep schedule rotated in staggered fashion, each time making a new combination of three man crew. Any dangerous trouble in the operation of the ship or its barges would activate a general alarm, so that outside of a few routine meter checks there was no need for anyone to be at any particular station at any given time.

The so-called gravitron "tank" was in actuality a cylindrical room just aft of the forward gyro that kept the "cigar" pointed on course. It was fifty feet long by thirty in diameter. Down its center was a hollow tube of polarizite that was eight feet in diameter. Inside the tube were three vacuum chambers, and in the center of each they could observe a large, dense cloud of neutralized matter. Encircling the outside of the tube were gigantic, ultra high frequency helices, and from their top and bottom axes bleeder resistors, or "valves," led to the hidden absorption banks behind the walls of the room, which in turn fed back into the thermatrons on B Deck, below.

Both men were wearing enclosed air helmets because the gravitron tank contained only helium gas at extremely low humidity. Communication was accomplished by telephone because radio transmission or reception would have been impossible in that place. Owing to the intense high frequency of alternating electrostatic fields produced by the helices, their hair was standing rigidly on end, but to this peculiarity was

added the phenomenon of visible wave motion as their hair responded to a lower harmonic of the sine-wave off-phasing of alternate double field polarities. It looked as though a wind were blowing inside their helmets.

"Those bleeder valves," Buchanan was saying, "keep the arcing at a minimum. The power that would ordinarily be expended in arcing is fed back through the valves and so you conserve quite a bit of it. If you get a weak valve like we had when we started out, you get a leak, which weakens the fields and overheats the absorption banks."

Puckett's vertical, slowly rippling hair-do gave him a ludicrous expression of extreme astonishment as he looked up at the widely spaced coils. "To think," he said, "that it takes all that to give us a lousy 85-C max on these tubs! Do you think somebody'll ever figure out a way of exceeding the speed of light? Boy, that would be something! We could really start exploring the galaxy then. The way it is, I doubt if anybody'll visit Sirius in our time. I know I wouldn't want to spend twenty-five years of my life just to take a close look at it!"

"Now you're talking about something that is the modern alchemist's dream—but who can say anything is impossible any more? We've been fooled too many times. Air flight was impossible at one time—even mechanical locomotion—not to mention visiphone, atomic power, interplanetary travel—and *interstellar* flight. Still, there's a big argument against

trans-C velocity or even reaching C, itself. As far as the mass factor is concerned, it goes to infinity at that point, and the required energy is also infinite. So how are you going to do it? Our mass right now is equivalent to a good sized planet!"

"Now you're getting into *my* territory!"

Buchanan and Puckett looked blankly at each other. Somebody else had thrown a phone jack into their system. They turned around to see a tall, slender figure in an air helmet, a man with an aquiline face, pale blue eyes and a friendly grin. His phone cable was jacked in to Buchanan's belt panel and he had not felt it.

"Haufek!!" they both exclaimed at once.

"So *you're* number three," remarked Buchanan, pleased to see the eminent young physicist.

"I feel awfully talkative today," said Haufek. "That's why I went looking for you fellows. How about us going up to the galley and putting some *hashish* on the coils? I'll sizzle your ears with a pet theory of mine."

"Man! Now's our chance!" enthused Puckett. "We've got him all to ourselves, Larry!"

It was a discussion to be recalled vividly by all three men at a much later date. It lasted for hours and left a deep impression on the minds of Haufek's listeners.

"So you see," he concluded, "inverse mass drive is theoretically possible, and that's why I'm so anxious to get my hands on some Cosmium."

"Say!" exclaimed Puckett. "If you could hop around through space like that, going to Sol would be like a trip to Center for any citizen of Alpha! Why, that would make *intergalactic* travel a reality!"

Haufek smiled politely at the other's enthusiasm and got up to heat some more *hashish*. "Take it easy, Pete," he said. "We're a long way from even setting up experimental facilities, if we ever do, and it would require an astronomical figure in credits. After that—time, patience, and luck! Maybe someday—"

Buchanan emptied his cup and looked at Haufek's lean and slightly stooped shoulders. "Bill, is this your own exclusive theory? I mean—does anyone else know about it?"

Haufek turned slowly to study his questioner. "I've never discussed it," he said.

"Then why tell *us*?"

An indefinable smile crept over the physicist's face. "I said I felt talkative today."

Buchanan wrinkled up his brow. "Maybe—"

"I know what you're going to say. Maybe we had better keep it between us."

"That's right!"

Both men looked at Puckett and his eyes widened.

"What are you getting at?" he said.

"I think Larry here is arriving at certain conclusions about our patriotic mission which are closely related to my own," replied Haufek.

"You mean," said Buchanan, "that

this whole show is going along too smoothly."

"Exactly. But don't misunderstand me. I believe in the principle of Teranian sovereignty. It's only that I want to see Party theories implemented rather than acting as a front for something so totally unexpressed that even Lydecker is unaware of it. I became cautious only after I witnessed the first physical functioning of our plans and began to put two and two together. After all, to plant the *Surprise* on *Hermes-2* a year ago must have taken considerable equipment—an interstellar ship. To develop the very advanced equipment the yacht is carrying required powerful influence and multi-million credit bribing of officials somewhere along the line. Moreover, the timing of that rendezvous with the roboship was just too perfect."

"Well," Puckett offered, "Howie Lydecker didn't make himself Party leader for nothing. He's a resourceful little dynamo, to say the least."

Buchanan leaned close to Puckett and asked him, in a low tone, "Ever hear of Adolf Hitler?"

"Sure! Just like I heard about Julius Caesar and Genghis Khan. But Lydecker's no Hitler!"

Haufek smiled at Buchanan but addressed himself to Puckett. "The two men have one thing in common, I'm afraid."

Puckett's face clouded and he became wary. "What do you mean? I think Lydecker is a good man!"

"Maybe too good," retorted Buchanan. "He's just the kind of mega-

lomanic idealist who makes the best possible type of stooge!" His eyes met Haufek's gaze and found confirmation.

Puckett's face reddened with perplexity and his mouth parted in incredulous amazement. "You mean —"

Both of his companions looked at him and shook their heads in solemn affirmation.

"But then—who is the Master Mind?"

"That," said Buchanan, "is a nice little question. We don't know. But as far as I'm concerned I'm taking all this very much with a grain of salt. My motto is: *Watch it!* And that's why I think we'd better keep Bill's inverse mass theory to ourselves. Wiser men than Lydecker might need it someday. With ships like that, Sol would be helpless—that is, if we *have* to get ourselves messed up in a war. . ."

"I was thinking of something else, too," said Haufek. "If things really went bad—I mean, if Central Government really brought Teran totally under the same dictatorial rule that the Sol System is suffering now, we might be able to find a distant world for some of us to build up the kind of society that men have always dreamed of. . ."

It was Buchanan's turn to stare, but Puckett joined him.

"Do you feel all right?" queried Puckett, as he stared at Haufek.

Buchanan got to his feet. "Come on, Pete," he said. "I'll let you beat me again at wrestling, you sawed-off

ape!"

Puckett's face brightened. "Let me beat!" he cried. "Why you overgrown Alphid's uncle, how would you like a sine-wave in your spine!"

Haufek grinned. "This ought to be good!"

**E**LEVEN months out. Velocity, 86-C. Distance from Alpha Centauri in millions of kilometers: 4.682 times 10 to the sixth.

Buchanan and Cardwell were playing the space game called Empire, and Governor Pomeroy was third man in the "crew." It was a space-man's game because it required about three times as long to play as the average game of chess, and time was a distinctly surplus commodity.

The players of Empire used one main board called the Master Plan and were supplied with magnetized, metallic playing pieces. On either side of the Master Plan, in slightly elevated positions, were two secondary boards for each contestant. One board was called Power and one was called Wealth. These latter boards were on spring tension scales which could be operated by gravity, when present or induced, or by magnetism. Certain strategic moves on the Master Plan enabled a player to make secondary moves on the board of Wealth, which could result in his winning or losing a chance to make small or large gain moves on the board of Power, and it often happened that all three boards had to be inter-related in the game to the point where triplicate combinations



of moves had to be visualized several steps ahead by each contestant. When any Power or Wealth board weighed enough, by virtue of pieces gained, it would close an electrical contact and cause a light to appear on a score panel. The first player to activate both the lights of Power and Wealth won the game of Empire.

Cardwell had been ship's champion since the beginning of the voyage and Buchanan was only playing him for lack of anything better to do. It was a means of avoiding conversation except for occasional impersonal references to the game, itself.

They were about in the middle of it and Cardwell had already activated his Wealth score light when Pomeroy stepped into the recreation room. He had lost most of his florid complexion by now as well as about ten pounds of his weight as a result of confinement and hibernation. But he was still "the Emperor," having lost none of his leonine bearing or dictatorial attitude.

"You men come to the Bridge a moment," he said. "I want to show you something in the visiscope."

"What is it, Governor?" asked Cardwell, from his chair. "Another lost comet?"

"No. Something weird. Come on!"

He glared at them impatiently and they got up, looking questioningly at each other. Interstellar space was a vast and bottomless sea, practically unexplored in a physical sense. In that great Unknown, incomprehensible things had been sighted before by spacemen.



*William Houlek*

They followed him rapidly to the Bridge.

The polarizite viewpanels on the Bridge were set at opaque, because to look at the heavens directly from the "Ring Deck" while it was revolving would have been futile. The observer would have seen merely a spinning whirlpool of stars. The visiscope, however, was connected through the "spokes" to several robotories, or remote controlled telescopes, situated on various parts of the gyro-stabilized inner hull. The visiscope screen on the Bridge enabled the observer to obtain a stable, magnified view of any desired portion of space.

Pomeroy, himself, manipulated the controls, and the other two noticed he was connected with the aft robotory.

"How fast," he asked, "is 86-C, in kilometers per second?"

Buchanan looked at Cardwell, and the latter replied, "Point eight six times three times ten to the fifth is—ah—two hundred fifty-eight thou-

sand kilometers per second."

"Something over nine hundred million kilometers per hour," put in Buchanan. He turned to Cardwell. "We've been hitting 86-C for over three days now, so it must be max. We might as well shut down the gravitrons."

"How fast do meteors travel?" asked Pomeroy, still searching with the visiscope.

"Anywhere from a few K.P.S. up to two or three hundred, depending on an infinite variety of factors," replied Cardwell, impatiently. "But what are you getting at? You won't be seeing any meteors, no matter how big, or even asteroids, at our speed. Even if they were traveling in our direction we'd pass them so fast that they might as well be invisible."

"Not only that," put in Buchanan. "Out here they're so sparsely distributed that the probability of colliding with one is almost zero."

"Then what I'm going to show you is something *else*," said Pomeroy, "because this thing is on our tail and overtaking us."

"*What!*"—from both Buchanan and Cardwell.

"There it is! Look!" Pomeroy pointed at the screen and they crowded close to see it.

Automatic filtering had adjusted the light of Alpha Centauri so that they saw it in the lower left portion of the screen as a clear, bright disc, very small and distant looking. But the star's brilliance served to minimize the light of the star fields beyond it and to bring out in sharp

relief the object under scrutiny. It was roughly circular in shape and appeared to be in about a one quarter crescent phase. Its apparent diameter exceeded that of Alpha Centauri. It seemed to hang in space somewhere astern of them, without motion, which meant that it was traveling with them.

"It's much bigger now than when I saw it last," said Pomeroy. "What is it?"

Again Buchanan looked at Cardwell, but this time with a tense, startled expression.

"We know what it *has* to be," answered Cardwell, "but it's such a rare coincidence to find one on our own course and traveling at close to our own velocity that—I think it will never happen again in human history. That's a galactite."

Pomeroy turned and glared at both of them. "I'm no astronomer," he said. "What the hell is a galactite?"

"You tell him, Larry. I want to scan it with the radialax and see how big and how close it is and plot its course. That baby may be a whole planet for all I know!"

They gathered around Cardwell as he went to work on the radialax oscilloscopes, and Buchanan elaborated. "A galactite is essentially a meteor," he told Pomeroy, "with one basic difference. It comes from outside the galaxy and from God knows where—very probably from some other island universe so far away that it would take this ship, at our present velocity, a couple of million years to reach it. During its travels, a galac-

tite keeps accelerating toward any particular galaxy to which it has been attracted. By the time it arrives it is going close to the speed of light and its mass is terrific. Some astronomers have theorized that larger galactites, striking normal stars, have been the cause of a few short-lived novae."

Pomeroy's stern face submitted to an expression of wonderment. "My God! They must be rare!"

"Very," put in Cardwell. "In fact they only existed in theory until now. This is the first one ever actually observed."

"We ought to get it on a visitape," said Buchanan. "Otherwise nobody'll believe us."

Cardwell turned around and stared directly into Buchanan's eyes. "I have a much better idea," he said. "Radalex gives it a twenty foot diameter. It's not more than a half kilometer astern. Although it's traveling faster than we are and on a course that will take it out of our reach in about an hour, I think we've got time to go out and haul it in."

"But—!" Pomeroy almost spluttered. "I understand a mag pak can only operate between magnabeams. How would you get out *there*?"

Again, Cardwell stared at Buchanan. "We have the space raft for use in salvage work. It has rocket engines and a sufficient range, I believe."

Pomeroy stared at both of them in amazement. "Do you mean to say you'd risk yourselves on an open space raft—way out here in no-

where?" A strange look of concern came into his eyes. "I don't want you taking unnecessary chances, Cardwell!" And then he covered up, hastily. "Nor you either, Buchanan!"

"It's worth the risk, I think," said Cardwell. "I don't believe any space captain would overlook such an opportunity. The thing is just too rare to pass up. Think of it, Larry! A piece of another galaxy, right in our laps!"

Buchanan's lips curled in a barely perceptible sneer as he returned Cardwell's meaningful gaze. "It is an unusual opportunity," he remarked. But his mouth was getting dry already with nervous tension.

Cardwell was not as much concerned about the galactite as he was about personal matters between them. The present situation was an excuse for *inviting* him to a duel in space. And only one of them would come back! It was funny, he mused, how you felt when the time arrived for life or death decisions. Sort of light headed, cutting tomorrow out of your mind—because there might not be any.

Pomeroy chuckled, suddenly, and shook his head. "That galactite must be rare, all right," he said. "This is the first time I've ever seen you abandon a game of Empire right in the middle of it!"

Cardwell was still glaring at Buchanan, a light mist of perspiration beginning to glisten on his face and arms. "We can continue it in due time," he said. "As I remember—*it was your move, Larry.*"

**R**AY HOPPER and Dr. Jayne were the next men due out of hibernation, so they were awakened in order to complete the required complement of three men on deck. When the plan to salvage the galactite was explained, Jayne not only agreed that they should bring it in; he volunteered to be one of the men to go for it.

Cardwell refused on the grounds that Jayne was the only medico on board. Hopper, on the other hand, made the excuse that his duties called him. He retired hastily to the Communications Office to check over the tapes and determine whether or not any inter-ship or trans-stellar messages had been relayed in.

Buchanan and Cardwell ascended one of the "spokes" in silence. When they reached Zero Deck, in the inner hull, they broke out the special salvage workers' suits. These were non-flexible, being constructed entirely of heavy metal and thick, reinforced polarizite to protect the wearer from possible collisions with drifting beams or wreckage. They were very much like deep sea diving bells, but were equipped with articulated hollow arms and legs. In place of gloves they were fitted with an assortment of small grappels, cable snippers and work tools, operated by levers from inside. The ponderous shoes contained variable strength electromagnets powered through cables by thermatron units on the backs.

Buchanan helped Cardwell into his equipment first, and then the latter

helped him into his. There was a moment when the sharp grappels and cable snippers on the balled ends of Cardwell's suit came close to his neck, before he was all the way into his shell. Both men paused to stare at each other. Those metal talons could tear him apart.

"You wouldn't do it this way, would you, Vince?" he said, knowing that the other could not hear him now. "Too obvious, isn't it? You want it the Cardwell way—in the dark, when my back is turned! It has to look like an accident. This would be messy, here in the tube. Not worthy of a champion player of *Empire!*"

Cardwell could not read lips, but he could read Buchanan's leering face. He shoved him down into the shell and reached for the helmet.

Buchanan had no formulated plan. In fact, he'd just as soon not go through with this. Not that he wasn't intending to play a game which he, himself, had proposed—but this wasn't *his* way. You fought an enemy when you were worked up to it.

But this! It was such a fiendishly phlegmatic way to indulge in murder. Out there in the deep, cold dark. To make a man get lost forever and live only long enough to experience a lingering death, to deliberately push him into this terrifying Charybdis that lay beyond the horizons of Heaven or Hell!

He hated such an act, but if that's what Cardwell was made of he'd meet him on his own ground. It could be that neither one of them would come

back.

When the outer lock opened and they saw the stars and distant Alpha Centauri, he thought of that night with Anne—on their island.

"If you wait," he had told her, "I'll come back, and things will be all right, then."

Activating their magnetic shoes, they walked slowly and awkwardly up the hull toward the outside hatch where the space raft was stored. It was an eerie experience for both of them, looking along that thousand foot, starlit hull with its strange protrusions, its magnabeam and buffer mounts, its power beam projectors and robotories all silhouetted against the star banks like the petrified monstrosities of a lost world. And above them—the Ring—with its friendly looking lights where the polarizites were not opaque. Little warm lights, infinitesimal sparks of humanity sailing brazenly through an Eternity that would never be aware of the brief span of Man's entire existence. Space—Makowski had said—was *Time*.

But enough of philosophy, thought Buchanan, ironically. There was murder ahead. . .

## CHAPTER 8

THE SPACE RAFT was a rocket-propelled platform measuring twenty meters on a side. Its metallic deck was lined and criss-crossed with inset rows of cargo rings and locker doors. In these lockers were all the working paraphernalia of the space

salvage workman—tie-down straps, cables from painter to bawser size, welding equipment, portable gas-pressure motors for short distance space suit travel, radiation detectors and a large variety of hand tools. Below deck, also, were fuel tanks for the navigating rocket engines located at both ends of the raft. There was an adjustable superstructure of light girders which acted as bumpers to protect the workers from collision with objects overhead.

Designed for use in a free orbit, the raft was adaptable to their needs now because the *Carlona* had attained maximum velocity, was no longer accelerating, and was in the condition of free fall. Under instructions from Cardwell, Dr. Jayne had shut off the gravitrons and was damping down the pile accordingly. The *Carlona* and the space raft appeared to float motionlessly in the center of Creation.

The galactite's superior velocity had already carried it beyond the *Carlona* at an apparent twenty degree angle from their course. It was far to starboard and receding at about a hundred kilometers per hour.

Without comment, Cardwell started two engines aft and the two men hung in their straps, looking for the galactite. Behind them, the *Carlona* began to shrink in apparent size until it was a large model of a star ship, then a toy, and finally a lost mote among the stars. Ahead of them, the galactite again acquired a disc, this time in full illumination, since Alpha Centauri was astern of

them. Cardwell skillfully decelerated to the point where their speed matched that of the ancient chunk of matter from beyond the stars. Or rather, they drifted toward it now with an almost imperceptible motion.

"Better watch our range," Buchanan warned, over his radiophone.

Both men knew that the *Carlona* could neither slow down nor change its course. To exceed the range of the space raft would be to stay out there forever.

"Break out the magnablocks, then," said Cardwell. "Let's get this over with."

The magnablocks were permanent magnets attached to the ends of slender, plastic cables. Buchanan was arranging a pair of them on deck when Hopper called them.

"Dust ahead!" he yelled. "Tie down and head in fast!"

Both men looked at each other in silence. *Dust!* Apparently harmless clouds of neutralized matter so attenuated that they were usually indiscernible to the eye, yet they were sometimes millions of kilometers thick, and at the present velocity of the raft the impact pressure would be equivalent to a hurricane. The *Carlona's* instruments could detect these clouds at astronomical distances, but the space they were traversing each second was also astronomical.

"Cardwell!" This was Dr. Jayne calling. "You can't make it back in time! Hitch on to that galactite for mass anchorage and start hauling toward the dust on an angle to inter-

cept our course. It's your only chance. You'll be in it within two minutes!"

"Roger," Cardwell replied. Then—"Well, heave those goddam blocks, Larry! What the hell are you waiting for?"

Buchanan heaved the first block. He watched it intently as it sailed away toward the galactite, dragging the plasti-cable through a lazy arc behind it. There was something very strange about that twenty foot piece of metal aside from the fact that it was a high speed intergalactic missile. Lumpy, bristling with splintered fragments of cosmic dust patina owing to extremes of heat and cold—yet damnably spherical.

The first magnablock made contact—and then everything happened at once.

At the point of contact, an explosion occurred. Buchanan saw a blinding, blue-white flame propagate almost instantly outward. In the same moment, he felt himself propelled upward from the deck, and when he looked downward he saw that it was Cardwell who had flung him upward after snipping the thermatron cables to his magnetic shoes.

Fortunately, he collided with one of the light buffer girders and held on.

"Vince!" he yelled. "You fool! Look at that galactite! It's *contraterrene*—"

He stopped, staring at the galactite, speechless. A hole had been opened up in its side. He caught a glimpse of metal decks and bulkheads



in miniature, and of tiny skeletons drifting away into the void.

But Cardwell was not looking. He did not notice that this far flung sphere was the manufactured product of an extra-galactic race of Lilliputians. He was attacking the uprights with a cutting torch—the particular uprights which held the girder to which Buchanan was clinging.

In the imminence of death, thought Buchanan, you don't think of anything but survival. Yet he was thinking of that alien space ship from another universe and what a loss it was to his kind not to be able to study it. But how could you study matter that was contra-terrene?—its electrons positive and its protons negative. This incident proved the existence of intelligent life elsewhere in Creation at a time when Mankind was beginning to become afflicted, subjectively, with monophobia.

And it proved more—that Haufek's inverse mass theory was no longer theory. In that single blast of terrene versus contra-terrene, an infinite horizon had opened up.

"Vince!" he almost screamed. "Don't do it! Wait!"

One upright had already come loose and Cardwell was clumping across the deck under him to attack the other one. Buchanan wondered if he could propel himself from one girder to another. If he missed he would continue unhindered into space, because Cardwell had also cut his lifeline. Yet if he continued to hang on to this one—

Blast struck them as they entered

the region of dust. Their tremendous velocity caused all resisting surfaces to accumulate the dust for hundreds of thousands of kilometers along their path in each second of time, thus creating a total impact effect that tore at them with irresistible force. Buchanan clung to his girder while space grew dim around him. The stars shone through as ghostly reflections on the surface of turbulent water. The "galactite" disappeared into the hurricane and was lost forever.

But he could see Cardwell. The first impact of the dust blast knocked him off his feet and he slid helplessly aft. In his flailing about, he switched on a rocket engine and the raft began to spin into the teeth of the storm. Simultaneously, Cardwell drifted off into space. There was still his plastic lifeline, but it crossed the exhaust stream of the rocket and melted. Cardwell was drifting swiftly away into the dim depths of the storm.

"Cardwell!" It was Dr. Jayne, calling from the *Carlona*. "Cardwell! Buchanan! Are you all right out there?"

Cardwell did not reply, and neither did Buchanan. The latter merely watched his companion fade out of sight.

Out of sight, in the life-consuming depths of the great Alone—never to be retrieved. Buchanan sweated.

This was what he had wanted to happen to Cardwell, back there on Teran. But it had been the conclusion of emotionalism. Out here in the



vast cold was logic. A man's life. . . The life of a man who had shared most of his adventures and half his dreams. . .

Abruptly, the dust cloud passed and the stars gleamed down with all their clean, sharp brilliance. He propelled himself to the deck and snagged a cargo hook with his grapnel. Working aft, he reached the controls and switched off the rocket motor. The raft continued to spin aimlessly through space.

"Buchanan to *Carlona*," he called. "Come in!"

There was no reply. His eyes searched space and found her. She was a tiny speck of silver against the stars, about five kilometers away. Evidently the dust storm had damaged the antenna in some way. She was out of communication with him and moving farther away all the time.

"Vince!" he called.

For answer, he heard Cardwell chuckle in amusement. "Couldn't hold out, could you?" he replied.

"Shut up, damn you!"

There was a long moment of silence. Then—"All right, Larry. I'll let you *think*." He chuckled again, from out of the emptiness. "There's a difference, isn't there, between your thinking and my thinking. Emotionally you are a big overgrown kid, Larry. You are incapable of the clean, clear stroke of decision. *You* can't let me die, can you? Anne or no Anne. I know you, Larry. I've known you all my—"

"*I said shut up!*"

"Why don't you turn off the re-

ceiver switch? That should help you—"

He did turn it off, but he heard himself panting slightly inside his helmet. He knew that if he waited too long, to go after Cardwell would take him out of range of the *Carlona*. That accidental firing of the rocket motor had consumed more fuel.

He waited . . .

He wanted to wait, to prove to Cardwell he could do it. Yet—what price proof?

He switched on the radiophone again. Silence. Deathly silence. Except for the faint hum which told him Cardwell's transmitter was working.

Why didn't he speak, damn him! Was he risking his life—even willing to die—to prove he had the stronger personality, always had been stronger? Even in the face of death, *must* he be "Vince the Invincible?"

"All right!" he yelled, at the top of his lungs. "You can die, Vince! Die!"

Silence. Only the faint hum from Cardwell's transmitter. It was a waiting game, and the thread of chance was growing taut.

Buchanan gritted his teeth. He could hear his labored breathing, even the throbbing of his pulse in his head. The difference between murder and repentance now was the difference between an old complex and freedom from it forever. But what other complexes would be substituted? Was a strong personality like Cardwell's capable of happiness? Hadn't he sacrificed something ir-

retrievably on the barren altar of materialism?

Damn you!—he said to himself. You're going to wait and then go back to the ship without him—because he was out of range!

And live the rest of your life under the suspicion of cowardice—a murderer!

But he waited. And it was too late.

"Larry!" came Cardwell's voice, worried now. "Damn you! What are you waiting for?"

"Too late!" cried Buchanan, brokenly.

And Cardwell, adrift in the bottomless abyss, heard Buchanan crying. Too late, also, Cardwell thought, for remorse. His own remorse. Larry Buchanan was his friend.

"Larry!" he called. "Maybe I brought this on, myself. I forced you into it. I—"

"You damned fool!" yelled Buchanan. "Do you think I broke down because you're going to die? It's because—it's too late for me to win! *You* have won, as you always have! But someday—"

"What do you mean?"

"You win, Vince! I'm going to come after you!"

"But you can't! You'll be unable to overtake the *Carlona*!"

Now there was silence from Buchanan as he started to manipulate the rocket controls.

"What's the use, Larry! Are you crazy? Two of us lost out here isn't going to help!"

"Shut up!"

"Larry, you crazy damned—"

Buchanan shut him off.

CARDWELL must have expected to see the raft emerge out of the sea of stars within minutes after Buchanan's suicidal declaration. But it never came. An hour passed, and he must have known his air supply was waning. He must have been convinced that he was lost, that he would actually die out there in the emptiness. If he broke down and screamed for help or confessed his sins or addressed his Maker, no one ever knew.

But Buchanan guessed what Cardwell's reactions must be when he saw the swift space yacht, *Surprise*, pull into view. Once the shock of relief had passed, his methodical mind would start working on a new series of grave probabilities.

For example, the appearance of the *Surprise* meant that the "cat" was out of the bag. It meant that others had had to help Buchanan out of his salvage gear and into a regular suit, that the whole crew had been awakened out of hibernation and made aware of Cardwell's situation—and that several of the others had accompanied Buchanan to barge thirteen to help him refuel and launch the roboship.

More important still, it must have meant to Cardwell that Governor Pomeroy was now aware of Teran's conspiracy.

Yet when Buchanan finally got Cardwell safely inside the *Surprise* and helped him to remove his gear, he was unable to discover a single

definable expression on the other's face.

"Got a stim?" he asked.

Buchanan handed him one and lighted it for him. His hand trembled with the lectrolite, but Cardwell's did not as he held the stim tube between his fingers and calmly blew smoke into the air. Buchanan tore his gaze from Cardwell's with an effort and returned to the controls.

During the trip back to barge thirteen, a distance of over a thousand kilometers, Cardwell did not speak a word—nor did Buchanan.

## CHAPTER 9

GOVERNOR POMEROY had been confined to his room. The others went into conference immediately after Cardwell's return.

They were all there. The dust storm had activated the general alarm and everybody was up. They all looked up at Cardwell and Buchanan as they came into the recreation room along with Puckett and Haufek. All except Raymond Hopper, who could not lift his gaze to meet the others' eyes.

"So it was Hopper who squealed," said Cardwell.

"We might have concealed our use of the *Surprise*," said Winzer, "but that transstellar message he picked up just before we hit the dust broke him down. He went to Pomeroy and confessed, trying to save his own skin."

Cardwell glared at Hopper's bowed head, then he turned to Dr. Jayne.

"Let me see it," he said.

Dr. Jayne handed him the sheet on which the deciphered codatape had been pasted. Cardwell read:

*T.S.28. .6.6.49S. .1527 .TSO 71...  
Central Government, Earth, to  
Governor Wainman, Teran . . .  
Teranian officials here confessed  
Lydecker heads revolutionary con-  
spiracy. . . Subject him submoni-  
tor and advise list of collaborators  
. . . Death penalty. . . Confirm. . .  
Signed 0-1 . . .*

Cardwell looked up, handing the message to Buchanan. "Well," he said, calmly, "let's calculate."

"We have," interrupted Makowski. "The message left Earth on June sixth, 2549. It has been under way three point eight years. It will reach Teran six months from now. They will submonitor Lydecker, and if his mind doesn't crack they'll dig out everything they need to know from his subconscious. Our names will be beamed out and the *Carlona* will be posted as a renegade ship."

"But assuming that the answer will be beamed back immediately," said Dr. Jayne, "a year will pass before it reaches our present position, and by that time we will be eighty six hundredths of a light year beyond this point."

"In other words," said Cardwell, "we've got to reach Mars before the return message does. Has anybody graphed this?"

"We didn't have to," said Olmstead. "At maximum delayed accel-

eration we'll still be a year behind it and the whole Sol System will be crawling with government ships looking for us."

"Of course," Makowski suggested, "we might sneak into the *Belt* and strike out with the *Surprise* from there."

"Yes?" said Haufek. "We'd have a poor chance of running back to Teran ahead of Cosmium powered ships with their 95-C velocity. We'd never make it."

"Just a minute," said Cardwell. "If the *Surprise* is equipped to take over a whole Martian colony it may be able to take over a government ship. We could transfer the stolen Cosmium to one of their own superfast ships and head for Teran."

"What about Pomeroy?" queried Buchanan.

"Hell!" ejaculated Olmstead. "If we're nothing but pirates, let him walk the plank!"

"Maybe," said Cardwell, "he might be of advantage to us if we converted him."

Even Hopper's head jerked up when he heard that statement.

"Why not?" Cardwell asked them. "We have years ahead of us yet before we get to Sol."

THOSE years went faster than anyone might have suspected. Hibernation was the main reason, as well as the time contraction effect experienced at "high C" velocity. There were events which marked this shortened period of conscious awareness—events which were related either

to Nature or to human affairs, as recorded in the *Carlona's* log:

10-17-53. . . One year under way. Velocity 85.5-C. Distance from Alpha Centauri,  $6.149 \times 10^6$  to the 6th million km. (.65 light year).

Communications Officer Raymond Hopper committed suicide by crawling behind the radiation shields and permitting direct exposure to the reactors. Ship's Doctor Jayne diagnosed case as *dementia praecox* augmented by interstellar agoraphobia. . .

4-22-54. . . . Velocity 85-C. Distance from Alpha Centauri,  $11.352 \times 10^6$  to the 6th million km. (1.2 light years). Traversing area of magnetic stress. Lost two barges, which were retrieved with space raft.

2-15-55. . . Velocity 83.7-C. Distance from Alpha Centauri,  $18.92 \times 10^6$  to the 6th m. km. (2 light years). Passed through meteoric cloud. Two meteors of critical size penetrated hull, damaging gravitron, electronic units of gravitron generators and port side absorption banks. Short circuiting developed insulation fire next to section 7 fuel tanks, but emergency reduced by automatic action of CO<sub>2</sub> system. Chief Engineer Olmstead hospitalized with critical burns. Assistant Engineer Buchanan estimates repairs will require one year, with hibernation.

Time had an inexorable way of passing. The years dwindled down. There were secret talks whenever Buchanan, Haufek and Puckett made up the three man crew.

By this time he had told his two intimates all about the "galactite." They had spent many hours discussing the possible origins of the Lilliputians. Haufek hypothesized that Nature had placed the greatest space insulation of all between island universes, because some of them might be contra-terrene. The proof of the existence of contra-terrene matter stirred him to refine his inverse mass theory.

"Suppose," he told them, "that a given object, such as a space ship, could be given such a strong acceleration that it would be equivalent to an irresistible force? For practical purposes we can refer to this as instantaneous acceleration. It is theoretically possible that the matter composing the ship would not have time to disintegrate and be dispersed in terms of heat because there again it would be limited by the infinite mass factor of C-velocity. There might be another alternative: mass inversion. In other words, the energy would be absorbed in the process of inverting matter, changing it to contra-terrene—just like turning it inside out. I also think that Nature would insist on spreading some of this energy out over space, and after inversion the ship would find itself halfway across the galaxy without having approached infinite mass. Another inversion would bring it

back to normal matter. Ergo, an inversion drive ship would be able to visit terrene or contra-terrene worlds."

Puckett wrinkled his forehead and looked askance at Haufek. "Out here," he said, "guys get space happy. Dr. Jayne was talking about dreams and delusions being mental defense mechanisms against insanity. Do you feel all right?"

"Don't let him kid you," put in Buchanan. "You keep after that math, Bill. You'll get your chance someday."

**I**N JANUARY of 2558, the *Carlona* reactivated its gravitrons at a distance of six trillion kilometers from Sol. The resultant repulsion of the Sol System's gravitational field began to act as a brake, and they began to lose velocity.

It was at this time that they intercepted the long awaited message from Teran relative to Lydecker. It read:

*T.S.12. 4.22.54A. 2730. TSO 3. . . Governor Wainman, Teran, to O-1, Central Government, Earth . . . Re ur T.S.28. 49S. Lydecker irrational due submonitor treatment . . . Subsequent submonitoring suspected members Independence Party reveals subversive plans on long term basis. . Ten death sentences issued. . Nucleus of resistance eliminated. Full report mailed I.S.S.Jupiter. 4.20.54A. Signed Wainman. .*

"Well," commented Cardwell,

"that relieves us from suspicion. We're clear to continue as planned."

Buchanan and Haufek were on deck with him at the time. Their furtive glances at each other proved that they were in agreement on one point which Buchanan expressed.

"You know, that's a very neat little message," he said, "but like all other elements of this conspiracy it looks like it's done up in too neat a bag."

Cardwell elevated his gaze without elevating his head. "What are you gibbering about?"

"I'm saying that Wainman's message is a lie! If you submonitored that many people one of them would *have* to break down and tell the truth. And if Wainman knows the truth what's he covering up for?"

"Did it ever occur to you," Cardwell replied, slowly, "that it wasn't necessarily Wainman who sent this message?"

Haufek's mouth dropped agape. "You mean—"

"I mean, the Revolution may have started, back on Teran. So naturally Lydecker would cover us."

Buchanan scowled, slamming a fist into his palm and pacing the Bridge. "Something still smells," he complained. "That message was sent only six months after our departure. The Party couldn't have made *that* much headway, not with all those new troops coming in on the *Roosevelt*."

"Time will tell," said Cardwell. There was an annoying gleam in his eyes as he stared both of them down.

By August of the same year (Earth time), the *Carlona* was ap-

proximately one billion kilometers from Mars, approaching the solar ecliptic at a minus sixty degree angle. Time tables on some two thousand known asteroids were studied, and it was finally decided to send the *Surprise* to a small, erratic body known as *Balder*. In five months it would be close enough to Mars for teletrometer control of the secret space yacht. Inasmuch as arrival time for the *Carlona* was November, this would give them two months on Mars to accomplish their purpose.

The problem of Governor Pomeroy was not quite settled. For several years he had appeared to be convinced that Teranian Independence was a justifiable cause, after sufficient indoctrination by Haufek and every member of the crew. Yet it was the general consensus of opinion that he was the weakest link. There were some, including Puckett, Haufek, Olmstead and Makowski, who advocated manufacturing an "accident" for Pomeroy. As time grew shorter, this issue gained proportion.

"Our plans have changed," Cardwell announced to Buchanan and Puckett one day, while the others were sleeping. "It's been decided that a crew will accompany the *Surprise* to the asteroid as we don't think we can smuggle in the remo gear."

"*Accompany it!*" exclaimed Puckett. "How?"

"Don't worry. She has magna-beams, and you can take barge thirteen with you—with sufficient air and provisions to keep you comfortable for months, until you get our signal.

We'll jimmy the log and say we lost a couple of men *and* the barge. That means the space raft will have to disappear, too, to make it look good."

Buchanan watched Cardwell closely. "Why the sudden change?" he asked.

"We can't take chances. Teranians on Earth squealed before. They can pull a 'Hopper' on us at the last minute. If you don't get a signal at the prescribed time it will mean the rest of us have been taken into custody. In that case the mission will rest with you alone."

"Who," said Puckett, "is 'you'?"

"Well, I think you, yourself, Pete, are a good choice, being the barge man—and maybe Haufek, as he's familiar with the equipment."

"You say this has been decided," said Buchanan. "Who made the decision?"

"The rest of the men, while you two were in hiber. I'm not taking the sleep any more from here on in, and I've gone over this with all of them."

"What was the decision on Pomeroy?" queried Puckett.

The three of them were on the Bridge, and Cardwell was reading the Dopplerscope. He turned around slowly.

"He's with us," he answered.

"As long as you're taking precautions against the unforeseen," suggested Buchanan, "why not send Pomeroy with the *Surprise*? If he's with us, as you say, he should be glad to have a chance to prove it."

"Now you're talking!" exclaimed Puckett. "I'd *like* to take care of the

Governor!"

Cardwell's brows lowered and he glared at the other two impatiently. "We can't do that for two obvious reasons. First, it would be difficult to explain his disappearance to the authorities and we'd all be submonitored to get the truth. Secondly, he'd be of no help on the *Surprise*. He'd be a detriment."

"Vince," said Buchanan, "you wouldn't be covering up for the Governor, would you?"

Cardwell tensed. "What the hell are you talking about?"

At that moment, a tinkling bell sounded on the "Ring Deck," and all the lighting on board dimmed and brightened in a slow but persistent rhythm.

"Ship call!" exclaimed Puckett.

The three men looked at each other in tense excitement. They were being hailed by some other ship!

Wordlessly, they started toward the Communications Office.

Codatape was spinning rapidly out of the receiver, already deciphered, and the three men stood next to each other, handing it along as they read:

*I.S.40. .8.20.58S. .1335. CO 1. . .  
CGPS 10 to I.S.S. Carlona . . . Pre-  
pare to be boarded and impound-  
ed for investigation. .Rendezvous  
twenty-one days Sol time, present  
course and deceleration. . Signed  
. .Captain Leahy, Solar Patrol. .*

"CGPS ten," muttered Cardwell. "Central Government Patrol Ship. That type of vessel is a young battle-



Governor Pomeroy

ship, probably Cosmium powered by now. You can understand now why it was a good idea to change our plans. Somebody has squealed."

"But why are you so goddam calm about it!" exploded Buchanan. "What are you going to do?"

Cardwell merely raised his brows and said, "I prefer to remain calm. In fact, we'd better send an answer."

"What can you say!" exclaimed Puckett.

"While I'm sending the message," said Cardwell, "I suggest you wake up Haufek and start planning to stock barge thirteen for its trip to *Balder*."

Puckett left in a hurry, while Buchanan waited to see the reply Cardwell was sending. As the copy tape reeled out, he read:

*I.S.22. .8.20.58S. .1420. .SC. . .  
I.S.S.Carlona to CGPS 10 . . . Con-  
firming ur I.S.40. . Will comply . .  
Aware nature of investigation and*

*have taken action. . Conspirators apprehended on board but killed resisting arrest. .as witnessed Governor Pomeroy. .Formal report available. .Rendezvous as your instructions. .Signed. .Captain Cardwell. .*

The transmitter clicked off and silence pervaded the room. Buchanan looked up from the tape to find Cardwell regarding him warily.

"Again I say, prett-y smooth, Vince! Too damned smooth!"

Cardwell rose slowly to his feet and faced him. "You've been hinting at something for a long time," he said. "Now get it off your chest! What's eating you!"

"All right!" exclaimed Buchanan. "You asked for it! Here it is! You're still no altruist, Vince. I'm positive there's something bigger behind all this than Teranian independence—for *you*, that is! You couldn't hitch your wagon to any star unless it was 24 karat gold! You're too smooth an operator!"

"You don't make sense. Make yourself clear or shut up!"

Buchanan tensed. "Don't tell *me* to shut up! I've got a stinking feeling that the rest of us are playing pieces on a board of Empire—*your* Empire!"

Cardwell reached out his hand to take hold of him, but Buchanan swung with his fists. The other recoiled, tripped over the chair behind him, and fell. Buchanan jumped on top of him.

For five minutes there was no time



for conversation. It was a fight that had been coming on for years. Tall, powerful Teranians, fighting with no holds barred.

Finally, Buchanan sat astride Cardwell, panting heavily. His lips were split and bleeding and one eye was beginning to swell shut. One side of Cardwell's face was gashed open from having collided with one of the control panels.

"Now talk, damn you!" shouted Buchanan. "Let's have it, once and for all! Who is the Master Mind behind all this?"

"I am."

Buchanan kept looking down at Cardwell's face, and the face, which had not spoken, began to grin upward at him in grim amusement.

Then Buchanan dared to turn around. In the doorway, gun in hand, stood Governor Pomeroy. But he wasn't grinning. He was scowling, and his trigger finger was tense. In the same instant, Cardwell threw a leg around Buchanan's neck and pushed him backward to the floor.

"That's a good position for you, Buchanan," said Pomeroy. "Now stay there! We're going to put you in hiber."

"And when you wake up," said Cardwell, with mock enthusiasm, "you will find yourself on board the

*Surprise."*

"So what!" exclaimed Buchanan. Pomeroy stood over him, still scowling darkly. "You will do exactly as we tell you," he said. "You'll have to, you see, because I can always place myself in 'safe custody' and pretend to tell all. You, Haufek and Puckett are our *chosen* conspirators. Your only ticket back from *Balder* will be obedience—and to the letter!"

Buchanan's face reddened with rage. "What's *your* cut in all this, Pomeroy!"

"For one thing—it is Cosmium, the Metal of Power," answered the Governor.

"But in the interests of a higher purpose," grinned Cardwell.

"Such as what?" Buchanan sneered.

Cardwell was quite calm and matter of fact when he raised his eyebrows and said, "Conquest, Larry. The conquest of Sol *and* Alpha. Don't you think that's a pretty good reason for leaving my dear *wife* for a few short years? Of course when I return to Teran I'll be in a position to make it up to her!"

Buchanan lunged upward to grab Cardwell's throat, but the butt of Pomeroy's gun descended on his skull.

*(To be continued)*



# OTHER WORLDS

## STORIES

- Power Metal (Part 2 of 3)*..... 6  
*S. J. Byrne (26,600 words)*
- In Hoko Signo Vincas* ..... 70  
*Paul Anderson & Gordon Dickson (7,800 words)*
- Yesterday's Paper* ..... 88  
*Boyd Ellanby (8,000 words)*
- Last Continents VIII (Article)*.....107  
*L. Sprague de Camp (9,700 words)*
- The Thinking Cap* ..... 130  
*Robert Bloch (11,000 words)*

## FEATURES

- Editorial* ..... 4
- Letters* ..... 154
- Personals* ..... 159

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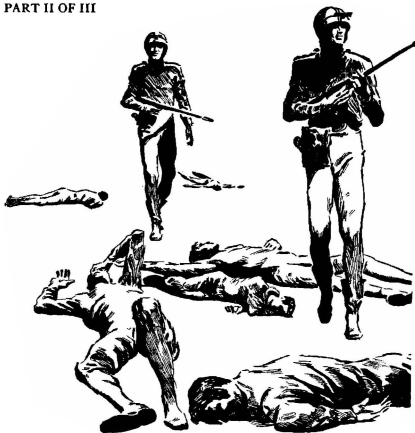
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## POWER METAL

*By S. J. Byrne*

Imprisoned and seemingly defeated, Larry Buchanan makes a valiant effort to strike back at Earth, only to find his path blocked by Lorena Forral and, indirectly, his personal nemesis—Vincent the Invincible.



*Illustrated by Charles Hornstein*

## SYNOPSIS OF PART I

**L**ARRY BUCHANAN is descended from a long line of pioneers who helped settle and develop a colony of Earth people on the large planet, Teran, belonging to the planetary system of Alpha Centauri. Inasmuch as Teran has half again the mass of Earth, the resultant descendants have made an adjustment to environment resulting in greater physical strength and a much greater stature than their contemporaries inhabiting the governing system of Sol. Moreover, a careful system of selective emigration to the colony of Teran has resulted in a superior race of men, in terms of intellect, training and personality, although they are in the minority in the ratio of twelve million Teranians to six billion Earthmen inhabitants of the Sol System.

Buchanan grows up as a spaceman in the Alpha System, never knowing the solar system of his ancestors' origin but always dreaming of taking the "big hop" to Sol, a six year journey, one way. His life long acquaintance, Vincent Cardwell, becomes more than a spaceman. In fact, he becomes just about anything he sets his mind to. Subjectively, Buchanan resents Cardwell's more powerful and decisive personality and calls him, in his own secret mental world, "Vincent the Invincible." When Cardwell rises to become controlling stockholder in the Carlona Corporation, an interstellar shipping concern, this deepens the subjective schism between the two, but when Buchanan returns from a

one year work assignment on the four moons of Teran to find that his fiancée, Anne, has married Cardwell, his bitterness is complete, although for Anne's happiness he attempts to maintain good appearances on the surface.

The Central Government on Earth has become completely dictatorial, especially in regard to Teran. There have been many abuses of the colony such as unfair tariff regulations, restrictions on trade and original, basic research and free enterprise, even to the point of actual Charter violations. The dream of Teranian independence is born, of which Buchanan is not particularly cognizant, at first; but Cardwell, in his own inimitable way, secretly plans to apply his Midas touch even to the brave dream of his people. The single interstellar ship belonging to his corporation, the I.S.S. Carlona, is to play one of the most strategic roles in the Teranian Revolution. Cardwell is her skipper and Buchanan is the Assistant Engineer.

A recent immigrant to Teran, Harold Lydecker, becomes the leader of the Party for Independence. On the night prior to the departure of the I.S.S. Carlona for Sol, Cardwell and Buchanan are summoned to a secret meeting headed by Lydecker, a diminutive "Earthworm" but a towering dynamo of leadership. The reason for the emergency meeting is that the local Colonial Governor, John Pomeroy, has requested passage to Earth on the Carlona, which circumstance will hinder the subversive activities of the crew unless they are adequately

*briefed beforehand.*

*At this meeting, Buchanan is surprised to note that the original crew of the Carlona has been changed, except for himself and Cardwell, and that a passenger has been added, who is present to hear Lydecker. This passenger is a famous young Teranian specialist in nuclear physics, William Hausjek. Some of the new crew members are also prominent scientists. This sudden change becomes clarified when Lydecker discusses the main bone of contention between Teran and Central Government.*

*This is the subject of cosmium, the metal of power.*

*Cosmium was never discovered in solar spectrographs because it is not produced in suns, but rather in the cooling cores of planets and larger satellites, such as the Earth's moon. In fact, it was first discovered on the Moon, in the course of exploratory borings into its core. Of an atomic weight, 100, cosmium becomes unstable when removed from its heavy gravitational field and exposed to cosmic ray bombardment. Several lunar stations were blasted out of existence before scientists knew what they had and learned how to shield it from cosmic rays. Its power yield was far superior in terms of nuclear energy to anything previously discovered, and gave promise of ushering in an entirely new age of progress and expansion. To those who controlled it exclusively, it was power in many a sense of the word. It was empire.*

*The Moon, Mars and the twilight zone of Mercury became sources of*

*cosmium in the Sol System, because larger planets such as Venus and Earth were too massive and hot to work—as was Teran. But there were satellites and smaller planets in the Alpha System which could be developed as even greater sources of cosmium than in the Sol System. John Pomeroy, the Governor of Teran, however, had informed the Teranians that cosmium would be developed in the Alpha System only under the strictest supervision of Central Government, and that all production would be transported to the Sol System for safe keeping.*

*Recognizing the glaring danger of falling into mere puppetism under such a plan, the millions of members of the Teranian Party for Independence planned to revolt. On the basis of certain carefully laid secret plans, I.S.S. Carlona and its specialized crew hope to steal all the Sol System's stored cosmium from Martanium and return with it to Teran, at which time they will make their formal Declaration of Independence.*

*After the meeting, Cardwell takes Buchanan with him to his home on Lake Catherine, far inland from the Teranian capital city, Astra. Here Cardwell's wife and Buchanan's former fiancee, Anne Cardwell, is waiting up for them. It is the eve of departure for both men. They are to be gone a minimum of twelve years. Cardwell will be leaving his wife and small twin boys for such a long period that it is tantamount to breaking up a home, and Buchanan suspects that there is more than altruism behind*

Cardwell's determination to pilot the strategic ship to Sol. He fears that "Vincent the Invincible" is out to make another Midas touch, for his own personal gain. The situation becomes tense because there is frustration and incompatibility between Anne and Cardwell, and because Buchanan and Anne are still in love with each other and unable to express it.

Cardwell pretends illness and retires. Buchanan takes Anne for a canoe ride on the lake and they go to an island that used to be their own private rendezvous. Here the two admit their love for each other and Buchanan promises to return from the twelve year voyage and make everything right between them. Cardwell sees them return, hours later, but says nothing.

The next morning on the way back to the space port, the two men have such an argument over Anne that they make a pact between them: Only one of them is going to return from the long voyage . . .

In the course of the six year journey to Sol, both the revolutionary plans and the strife between Buchanan and Cardwell develop. A secret space yacht, remote controlled, is brought in from an Alpha System asteroid and stowed in the last barge of the train that the Carlona is towing. This is the specially equipped vessel, Surprise, containing a key Teranian weapon designed to surprise the colony of Martanium on Mars.

Cardwell makes an attempt to kill Buchanan, but fails, and it becomes

Buchanan's turn to strike a blow—so that only one of them will return. As the months pass and the velocity of the Carlona increases steadily, Buchanan watches for a chance. In the meantime they are all aware of the fact that another interstellar ship, the Roosevelt, has arrived on Teran with a new governor named Wainman and new troops to bolster the garrison. Evidently Central Government is becoming wary.

Buchanan has acquired a new space buddy, Peter Puckett, swobbie and barge man. Owing to the system of hibernation scheduling which keeps most of the men in a state bordering on suspended animation seven days at a time, to conserve oxygen and supplies and make time go faster, there are only three men on deck at any given time. On one of the occasions when Puckett and Buchanan are on deck together, they have a long talk with William Haushek and lay the foundations for an enduring close friendship between the three of them. Haushek expresses the same doubts which haunt Buchanan—that there is a plot within a plot; that Lydecker and the crew of the Carlona are being used as pawns in some greater, Master Plan, of which Cardwell may or may not be cognizant.

In discussing the limitations of star ship velocity under the speed of light, owing to the increase of mass to Infinity at light's velocity, Haushek divulges his secret theory concerning the mass inversion drive, which might change the ship and its occupants to contraterrene, but which could jump

across whole galaxies. To experiment on such a drive, Hausfek needs caesium. The three make a pact to keep this theory to themselves.

Then Buchanan is presented with a challenge from Cardwell to have a duel in space. A galactite has been sighted, traveling along their own course, and it is apparently possible to haul it in on their space raft. Buchanan and Cardwell approach the galactite; when Buchanan throws a magnablock and line out to the galactite, he is surprised to witness a violent explosion. The "galactite" is contra-terrene, indicating that Hausfek's mass inversion equations may be correct. But this is not all. A hole is blown in the side of the twenty foot chunk of extra-galactic matter, and he sees tiny decks, bulkheads and miniature skeletons which drift out into the void—a sign of intelligent life in another universe!

But all this is not observed by Cardwell, as he is too busy pushing Buchanan off the raft. They are struck by a cloud of cosmic dust which, at their speed, has hurricane force. Instead of Buchanan, it is Cardwell who is hurled off the raft, and is drifting rapidly out of range. A psychological duel ensues, in which Buchanan appears to weaken by calling out to the other. Cardwell accuses him of weakness. "You are incapable of the clean, clear stroke of decision. You can't let me die, can you? Anne or No Anne . . ."

Buchanan rescues Cardwell in the secret space yacht, and the cat is out of the bag as far as Governor Pom-

eroy is concerned. This fact, coupled with an interstellar message from Earth to Teran, accusing Lydecker of conspiracy, is too much for Communications Officer Raymond Hopper, who confesses all to Pomeroy, whom they imprison for the time being. Cardwell expresses the hope that they may be able to indoctrinate Pomeroy before the voyage ends. The other men are dubious about this. They fear that the whole Sol System will be crawling with Patrol ships awaiting their arrival, if the information concerning the Carlona is forced from him.

Within one year of reaching Sol, they intercept a message from the new Teranian governor, Wainman, in reply to Earth's accusation of Lydecker. It is such a smooth cover up of their own enterprise that Hausfek, Buchanan and Puckett again become suspicious of the existence of a Master Plan. However, arrangements are made to plant the little ship, Surprise, on an asteroid, Balder, in the belt beyond Mars, to wait there until they need it on Mars.

Crisis develops when they are challenged by a Solar Patrol cruiser and told to rendezvous with it in twenty-one days on their present course. Cardwell immediately alters plans. He wants Hausfek and Puckett to man the Surprise and wait on Balder for them. Then he advises the Patrol Ship that they will comply, but that the conspirators were apprehended and killed, referring to Puckett and Hausfek. The whole thing again is so smooth that Buchanan comes out into



*the open with his accusations. A physical struggle between him and Cardwell ensues, with Buchanan winning. He demands to know who is behind everything.*

*Governor Pomeroy, who has long since been released from the brig as having been indoctrinated to support their side, appears on the scene with a machine pistol.*

*"I am," he says. He stands there covering Buchanan and informs him that he will also be one of the crew of the Surprise and do exactly what he is told. Buchanan is then surprised by Cardwell and held down.*

*Cardwell states that Pomeroy is planning to conquer both solar systems, the inference being that Cardwell will be his right hand man.*

*Buchanan lunges upward to grab Cardwell's throat, but the butt of Pomeroy's gun descends on his skull.*

Now go on with the story.

## CHAPTER 10

WHEN Olmstead, Makowski, Winzer and Jayne came out of hibernation, they discovered that Buchanan, Haufek and Puckett had vanished, but that Cardwell and the Governor were very much with them. Cardwell brought them together in the combination recreation and conference room to explain. Governor Pomeroy had deliberately assumed the role of accomplice by taking a seat beside Cardwell. As the towering Teranians filed in to take their places at the table they glared at him in suspicious resentment while

he gave them the old "Emperor" treatment, staring at each one with a penetrating intentness, as though they had come before the final tribunal that was to decide their fate.

"Plans have been changed owing to new developments," said Cardwell, cutting through the tension.

"What's this about Buchanan, Haufek and Puckett?" interrupted Winzer, as he sat down. "Where are they?"

"They have taken the *Surprise* to *Balder*," he answered. As the other four looked at each other in tense, questioning astonishment, he went on more rapidly. "Don't worry about the survival factors. They have a barge with them—plenty of oxygen, food, water and equipment. They can hold out for months, until we call them. You see—in view of this message we have little hope now of smuggling in the remote gear necessary for handling the *Surprise* remotely. It has to be manned."

He passed around the message from the Solar Patrol ship and watched their eyebrows go up.

"My God!" ejaculated Makowski. "That class of ship is heavy calibre and probably has cosmic power!"

Cardwell smiled confidently and passed around the second message. "By making our change of plans in a hurry and getting three men off the ship we were able to make up this answer . . ."

"'Killed resisting arrest . . . as witnessed Governor Pomeroy,'" quoted Olmstead, holding the codatape copy in his hands. His eyes narrowed as he

watched both Cardwell and Pomeroy. "That burns one bridge behind Buchanan, Haufek and Puckett. They are now definitely branded as conspirators."

"Don't forget," put in Pomeroy. "To Central Government, they are 'dead,' dumped into space. Nobody will look for them or suspect the presence of the *Surprise* in the asteroid belt, so the whole enterprise is still adequately camouflaged."

"Is it?" queried Dr. Jayne. "What about you? How do we know you are with us?"

"Yes," put in Makowski, sullenly. "It would be the simplest matter in the world for you to step over into their 'protective custody' when they boafd us and frame us all. In fact, maybe that's what you are waiting for."

"Just a minute—" Cardwell started to interrupt.

"Let me handle this," insisted Pomeroy. "Makowski has a damned good question, and I'll answer it. First of all, it would be impractical for me to merely give you my word—that I believe in Teranian independence and will do all I can to help, because I want to become a Teranian, myself. Instead, we'll give you the weapons. You can disarm me before the Patrol Ship comes alongside. If I turn you in, your game is up, so you can take me with you—shoot me down on the spot. But I won't. We'll all be questioned together, and my defense of the lot of you will place us all in a position to continue to Mars and progress with your original

plans."

"What kind of stims do you smoke?" bellowed Olmstead. "In the first place, we'd be disarmed before such questioning started, and in the second place we can't hope to keep you under our noses very long after we contact the Patrol ship."

Pomeroy made a slight gesture with his hands. "Then who has a better suggestion?"

"I have!" said Makowski, his face darkening. "I think we should dump you through a lock!"

Cardwell grinned. "And have *that* to explain to Central Government? If we got rid of the Governor here, we *would* be burning the bridges behind us!"

"Look!" said Winzer. "Practically speaking, this is a lousy mess. There's no way of rationalizing ourselves out of the fact that we'll just have to take our chances. It's too late to run for it now. We've got to go ahead. With Cardwell, we are five against Pomeroy if he makes a slip. Any one of us could still wring his neck. If none of us survives, there are still Buchanan, Puckett and Haufek. They have the *Surprise* and the *weapon*. And there is Lydecker back on Terah, backed by millions of Party members. Sooner or later, Pomeroy would get the axe if he betrayed us. You know that, don't you, Pomeroy?"

Governor Pomeroy smiled in grim appreciation as he stared at all four. "That's a fair proposition."

**A**LTHOUGH Winzer and Jayne suggested it, no attempt was

made to communicate with the *Surprise*, nor did the space yacht try to contact the *Carlona*—for obvious reasons. Central Government Patrol Ship No. 10 would have been only too happy to intercept such messages and learn of the existence of the deadly little ship. It was patently certain now that the social destiny of the whole Alpha System depended on the *Surprise* and her little crew of three. Alone and necessarily cut off from all communication, she towed her supply barge through the void, groping her way among the swift planetoids of the *Belt*, tracking down the orbit of a ten mile lump of matter known as *Balder*.

At the expiration of the prescribed twenty-one days, the Patrol Ship appeared astern of them, swiftly matching its velocity with theirs. The visiscope was constantly in use now, as none but the Governor had ever visited the Sol System before, and the other men were busy examining it visually. They were a month out from Mars now. With reference to their point of origin, the system lay "above" them. Mars and Jupiter both showed a disc, without magnification, and in the great gap between the two they could make out a few moving specks which marked the *Belt*. Earth was a super magnitude, blue-green star. Each conspirator magnified this body and studied it intently. Each surveyed this centuries-old headquarters of the dictatorial Central Government with private emotions of his own. And each surveyed the approaching Patrol Ship with a more adequately expressed

common denominator of emotion.

It was smaller than the *Carlona* by some two hundred feet and was devoid of a "ring deck," the assumption of the part of its designers being that servicemen did not require the luxury of centrifugal "gravity" but could content themselves with deceleration or acceleration. Born in the shipyards of the airless Moon and designed to spend most of its life in empty space, it was no more streamlined than any other interplanetary or interstellar vessel, but it was roughly cigar shaped. Its outer hull was studded with robotories, magnabeam and power beam projectors and heavy calibre torpedo racks. As it moved in close astern they could see the torpedoes—swift, automatic missiles of death, capable of homing in on any target within sixty degrees of their original trajectories.

The Patrol captain hailed them peremptorily over the radio and announced that a commuter was coming over. They were given the order to stand by for the boarding party.

If Cardwell, who received the phone message, noted something hauntingly familiar in the voice of the Patrol captain, he gave no outward sign of it, but he headed the reception committee at the base of the "spoke" as the Governor and the *Carlona's* diminished crew waited for their "Earthworm" captors.

In spite of his mounting suspicion, he staggered visibly when he saw Larry Buchanan climb down the netting and onto the "ring deck," followed by Peter Puckett. Both of them

were armed with machine pistols, and they were grinning in triumph.

"All right," said Buchanan. "Vince, you and Pomeroy over against the wall. Pete, frisk those two!"

"Larry!" exclaimed Winzer. "How in the hell—"

"Never mind, boys," Buchanan interrupted. "You four are still in our camp, so relax. It's all quite simple. We parked the barge on *Balder*, refueled, and doubled back. We used our weapon against the Patrol ship, and as they weren't expecting it we took them. The whole crew is temporarily paralyzed. Now we can haul our loot back to Teran with a first line interstellar fighting ship powered by cosmium."

"Well, hooray for our side," commented Jayne, with a congratulatory smile.

"Just a minute!" said Cardwell. "You wouldn't have had time to go to *Balder* and take that Patrol ship before the rendezvous."

"You mean Earthworms couldn't have done it," retorted Buchanan. "Teranians, it seems, can stand quite a few more G's of acceleration and deceleration than orthodox space medics are willing to admit. We're here, aren't we?"

"Where is Haufek?" asked Olmstead.

"In sick bay on board the Patrol ship. We were a little rough on him, I'm afraid. After all, fifteen G's—"

"And the *Surprise*?" queried Makowski.

"Trailing dutifully behind us, just out of visiscope range."

"But what's this with Cardwell and the Governor?" asked Winzer. "After all, Cardwell was—"

"*Was* is the word!" fumed Buchanan. "He *was* captain. This isn't mutiny—it's war. All of us, including Lydecker, were just so many stooges. Believe it or not, John Pomeroy here is the real Master Mind. You told me yourself, didn't you, Governor?"

"This may sound like a tired cliché," replied Pomeroy, "but I have to inform you that you'll never get away with it. You don't know how many years I've been working on my plans, or how many powerful people are involved. It's all too big for your comprehension, so I'd suggest you put in with me and Cardwell here and go along for your own good. You're clever men and you'll be recognized as such. I can use all of you."

"Talk about clichés!" exclaimed Buchanan. His face reddened and he glared at Pomeroy. "Listen, you tin-plated little—"

"Larry, wait a minute!" yelled Makowski. "I want to get this straight. If Lydecker's plan is just a front for a bigger one, what *is* the Master Plan? What's Pomeroy's cut and where does Cardwell come in?"

Puckett, still training his gun on his two prisoners, looked over at Buchanan and smiled sweetly. "Why don't you tell them, Larry?" he said. "Nothing like boosting one's faith in one's fellow men, you know."

Buchanan told them all he knew, while Cardwell quietly shared Governor Pomeroy's visible amusement.

"As I see it," he concluded, "a

strategic part of the Master Plan was to let the *Surprise* do its dirty work, and its crew was to be eliminated, along with the rest of you working at Martanium. The stolen cosmium was to be hidden away—maybe on *Balder*—and used as a bargaining point by Pomeroy and Cardwell when they pulled their prepared political *coup d'état* in the Sol System Government."

"But what about Lydecker and the Party?" asked Winzer. "What about Teranian Independence?"

Buchanan and Puckett both smiled grimly. "Lydecker and the Party are pawns, whatever their sincerity may be. It was all a catalytic agent for achieving other results which were to benefit Mr. Master Mind and his henchmen. After all, that's the only way they could have gotten hold of the Teranian secret weapon and found the excuse to get in to Martanium." He turned to stare at Cardwell and Pomeroy. "These two distinguished gentlemen you see before you were willing to achieve personal power over both solar systems at the expense of the courage and idealism of a race of fellow human beings—namely, our own."

"Oh good God!" shouted Cardwell. "You're breaking my heart!"

"Shut up!" barked Puckett. "Or I'll break your neck!"

"It might seem a little picturesque," remarked Makowski, "but I think a 'plank walk' would be in order . . . with suits and a short supply of air . . ."

Pomeroy's slight smile faded slowly

and his eyes became wary as he watched the others mull this over. Cardwell watched Buchanan, and their eyes met. And Buchanan heard again those filtered words of Cardwell's, inside his space suit, out there on the raft years and light years past: "You are incapable of the clean, clear stroke of decision. You can't let me die, can you? Anne or no Anne."

The old personal challenge was there again.

Buchanan still glared at Cardwell as he spoke. "Why waste good space suits?" he said, slowly. "I think I have a better idea."

When he had outlined his plan to the others he was so intent upon watching Cardwell's face that he failed to note a glitter of triumph in Pomeroy's eyes.

It required several hours to transfer the crew of the Patrol ship to the *Carlona*. Their paralysis would wear off in time for them to bring the merchant ship safely in to Earth. When they acquired the use of their faculties again, they were going to discover a note displayed prominently on the Bridge and addressed to the Patrol Captain. It read:

Captain, Patrol Ship No. 10—

We are trading you the *I.S.S. Carlona* for your ship, which is necessary to our escape back to Teran. If you are interested in laying your hands on the leaders of the whole conspiracy you might look in the brig. Don't take our word for it. Sub-monitor them and find out for yourself!

Buchanan saw to it that the two

prisoners had enough food and water to last them. He was the last to check up on them before all hands left the *Carlona*.

He and Cardwell again exchanged stares, and Buchanan finally sneered, "Vincent the Invincible!"

For answer, Cardwell only chuckled. But as an afterthought he added, "You're just a big overgrown kid, Larry."

And Larry, raging within, fled from the temptation to commit murder. . . .

## CHAPTER 11

WHEN they pulled CGPS 10 out of the *Carlona's* course and started back toward *Balder*, guiding the *Surprise* into their wake, they took with them one officer of the government ship. Dr. Jayne gave him an injection which acted upon the nervous system and minimized the effects of the induced paralysis, and in a few hours they were able to talk to him. He was approximately thirty-two years old, a dark haired, dark eyed perfect specimen of healthy, strong, indoctrinated "Earthworm."

Peter Puckett had discovered a well stocked galley and had busied himself preparing such a meal as they had not tasted in six long years. It was at mess that the captured officer was questioned. He came among them like a boy among giants. Evidently he had never really seen a Teranian at close range. But in spite of his amazement he did not forget the responsibilities

of his rank as CPO of a Solar Patrol ship. Nor would the mental regimentation of an Interplanetary State permit him to think for himself.

"You men must be insane," he told them, without accepting the seat Winzer offered him at the mess table. "You are revolutionists, conspirators, mutineers, pirates! You have resisted arrest, endangered the lives of Solar Government police officers and enlisted men and stolen a first line Patrol ship! Yet here you are enjoying a banquet in the home territory of your enemy!"

"You know," said Puckett, cutting a juicy steak, "in a way, we're like the freebooters of the old days back on Earth when the native races of the American continents were getting raped by Europe. Remember the old stories about the West Indies and the pirate hideouts? Well, the *Belt* is like that—hundreds of flying islands in the sky. And here we go with our prize, back to our little den to plan a real raid! Hey Chief, is there any rum on board? We might as well make this picture complete for you."

"Shut up, Pete!" grinned Buchanan, also enjoying his steak.

The CPO's eyes widened. "Do you mean to say you are contemplating a raid? Where?"

"Sit down," said Buchanan, "and we'll tell you about it."

When the CPO refused, Olmstead got up and pushed him into a seat. Although by Earth standards he might have been good material for a weight lifting team he was no match for these seven foot Teranians. After

experiencing a sample of Olmstead's seemingly titanic strength, he did not try to resist. He merely sat there and stared at Buchanan, waiting.

"We are not only contemplating a raid, but we've got to do it in a hurry, and you're going to help us," said Buchanan, pointing a fork at him. "As a Patrol officer, you should be familiar with some of the details concerning the layout at Martanium."

Under Makowski's guidance, the ship changed course slightly at that moment, and more acceleration was applied. The forward sections, inside the hull, swung slightly in their cradles to align themselves with the new center of "gravity," and the CPO almost fell out of his chair. It was appropriately timed to match the expression on his face.

"Martanium!" he exclaimed.

"Where else?" said Buchanan. "It's the cosmium center, isn't it?"

The CPO looked at Buchanan, then at all the others present, and in each grinning face he found confirmation. "You mean—you—"

"Yes, we mean exactly that," interrupted Buchanan. "We're here for one purpose only—to pick up the total cosmium stores at Martanium and take them back to Teran."

The CPO sprang to his feet, furious. "You'll never get away with it! Do you think that one Patrol ship like this can take an armed base like Martanium?"

"You seem to forget," replied Buchanan, sampling some fresh frozen vegetables, "that *something* we had took your ship. That same *something*

can take Martanium."

"You still can't get away with it!" exclaimed the CPO. "Why the whole Solar Fleet is maneuvering off of Earth's moon—" He stopped suddenly, eyes going wide, looking at them fearfully.

Knives and forks lowered. During the ensuing heavy silence, many a glance was exchanged. Finally, all those glances centered speculatively on the CPO. And he sat down, weakly.

Each man present knew that the largest government shipyards and refueling stations in the Solar System, outside of Earth, itself, were on the Moon. If the Solar Fleet was engaged in maneuvers in that area, it was temporarily based there.

And in everyone's mind, including the CPO's, rang two historical words: *Pearl Harbor!*

Haufek, who had recovered from the beating he had taken on board the *Surprise*, had the gleam of a bugle boy in his eyes. "Pete," he said, "did you see any wine on board? Perhaps we should drink a toast . . . to Teranian Independence!"

The CPO seemed to shrink within himself. He was unable to eat the food put before him. There was only one hope he could cling to. One piece of secret knowledge was his, and since there were no sub-monitoring devices on board they would never get it from him—until it was too late . . .

Dr. Jayne had been studying the CPO. "Tell me," he said to him. "Are you actually patriotic, under tyranny? Are you moved by sentiment in

contemplating the danger in which you have placed the Solar Fleet? That is, I assume you realize that one well placed cosmium bomb, which we can no doubt find at Martanium—”

The CPO yelled through his teeth. “You are assassins!”

Dr. Jayne raised his brows in mild surprise. “We are colonists seeking independence,” he corrected. “There is something that can be taken from a man which is more important than life, itself, and thus it involves a greater crime. That is self-determination, the right to think independently and originally, which is a process out of which all true civilization has evolved. But Central Government can't see it that way. When they are convinced we are seeking independence, that Solar Fleet you're so much concerned about will be sent against us—and hundreds of thousands of Teranians will die, not to mention an even greater number of harmless Alphids. Whenever human freedoms are endangered, war is the result. And this, my friend, is war. . . .”

In listening to Dr. Jayne, Buchanan suddenly knew why he had finally identified himself wholeheartedly with the original Lydecker Plan.

**S**UBSEQUENTLY, they attributed the CPO's new docility to Dr. Jayne's speech. He told them what he knew about Martanium, and much of what he told them coincided with some details which were already in Haufek's possession.

Haufek, Puckett, Winzer and Buchanan volunteered to man the *Sw-*

*prise*. The Patrol ship was to continue to *Balder* and wait for them there. After an intensive period of preparations and careful planning, the four man crew left CGPS 10 and boarded the history making little space yacht.

Again, traveling under forced acceleration and deceleration, but this time sparing Haufek the terrific load he had been subjected to the first time, they came within detector range of Mars within seven days. But detector range was also the range of their own weapon. Whoever might have detected them near Martanium did not have a chance to contact Solar Patrol.

The Teranian paralysis beam was in effect a carrier beam. It carried UHF waves whose upper harmonics were effective in relation to oxygen—oxygen under those conditions of pressure and temperature which were necessarily maintained wherever men breathed. Ultra-sonic vibrations in the atmosphere were the result. These were capable of paralyzing the human nervous system.

Long before their arrival at Martanium, they knew that the whole colony was incapacitated. Moreover, any ships approaching to investigate would get into trouble, because their crews would become paralyzed. There was a protection against the paralysis consisting of a certain type of interference generator, but only a few Teranians knew about that.

Including Vincent Cardwell.

The four men were incapable of resisting a natural curiosity in relation to this famous planet which none of



them had ever seen before. Although from their position it appeared to be in a one-quarter phase, they were able to see why it had always been called the "red" planet. On close approach it was the most colorful of all planets in both solar systems. The red of oxidized minerals dominated the pastel greens of hardy vegetation. Thin clouds drifted over the equatorial areas, and in the south polar region they caught the distant glint of shallow lakes produced by the melting snow cap there.

There were other, more significant reflections, closer in toward the equator. Visiscope magnification brought them close-up views of other Martian colonies. Dome construction had been abandoned early in the history of interplanetary colonization. Instead, ditches were dug with cabin-sealed equipment, and polarizite strips were laid across the top and sealed together. Nuclear energy heated the ground on either side, making the colonist independent of the sun for mere warmth, and since there were no projecting domes, no resistance was offered to sandstorms. From a "beach-head" ditch, whole canyons were developed and covered. The great polarizite strips at Tharsis made a design on the planet's surface that looked like a maze of giant airstrips. As they descended laterally over the night side of Mars, they discerned the lights of Xanthe, Cydonia, and far to the north—Hellas, the Solar Patrol base. Phobos and Deimos both rose as they observed, swinging toward them like pursuing dreadnaughts, and

they knew the stations there, at least, would be picking up signs of their presence. But all this had been foreseen long ago in the planning stages on Teran. There was still time to act.

And now below them in the dark plains of Elysium they made out the waiting lights of strategic Martanium—the end goal of a long, long journey.

AS expected, there was no resistance offered. Inasmuch as the Teranian weapon was the only one of its kind in existence, it was a complete surprise and no defense was possible. Those Teranians on Earth who had been broken down by sub-monitoring had had no knowledge of the paralysis beam, and so the crew of the *Surprise* found that this phase of the Plan was still airtight.

They landed boldly at the locks, manipulated the outer controls, applied docking hooks and had the *Surprise* pulled in to where it would be handy for loading. The main "channel" of Martanium was four hundred feet wide, fifty feet deep, and five miles long, connecting with lateral channels which led either to processing plants and laboratories or to the spectacular borings which penetrated the interior of the planet. Modern prefab buildings and living units lined every wall of every channel. Men, women and children lay across doorsteps and in the streets, temporarily paralyzed but otherwise unharmed. Under the condition of paralysis there was just enough involuntary breathing to oxygenate the bloodstream and

the cardiac nerve functioned sufficiently to keep the heart beating. It was a condition similar to hibernation, and the victims were not in danger of starving even after days of paralysis.

On the basis of information obtained from the CPO and knowledge possessed by Haufek, they headed straight for the cosmium stores near the processing plants. They appropriated an electrocar, powered by thermatron units, and drove as swiftly as possible among the fallen pedestrians and stalled cars in the direction of "Clarke Street," which was the second cross channel from the locks.

"So this is Mars," reflected Buchanan aloud, as they drove along the main channel.

"Yes, this is Mars all right," said Winzer, who sat at the controls. "But don't get dreamy at this stage. I'm thinking of the *Carlona* just now. That Patrol crew must have come out of the paralysis by now and I'll bet the ether between them and Mars and Earth is sizzling with exclamation points. The party, I think, has begun."

"There's some kind of a night club," put in Puckett, indicating a brightly lighted establishment at the corner of Clarke and Main. "We could go in and cop a short one to celebrate."

The others ignored him as they turned the corner and examined the length of Clarke Street. A mile ahead the channel was blocked by the massive walls of a building that indicated

electropulsion shielding from cosmic rays.

"There's our cosmium!" exclaimed Haufek. "By God, I think we're actually going to make it!"

"By now," said Winzer, "Patrol ships should be heading for both Martanium and *Balder*."

"Relax," said Puckett. "The *Surprise* is generating a beam over us. It may take them only a short time to start thinking of some other method of approach, but by that time we'll be out of here—with the goods!"

"We can beat them to *Balder*," added Buchanan, "because they can't take the G's that we can. However, after transferring our cargo to the Patrol Ship we'd better park it somewhere else to wait for us while we bomb Luna. *That* trip could be a kamikaze run. By the time we complete our mission and start a run for CGPS 10, it may have to leave us behind and light out for Teran."

The other three turned to stare at him.

"You sound like you're volunteering to be one of the bombardiers," said Winzer.

Buchanan shrugged. "Why not? It would mean a lot to the Revolution to cripple the Solar Fleet."

"There is a traditional method of drawing straws, I believe," remarked Haufek, quietly.

"How about getting hold of some cosmium before we go into all that," said Puckett.

The vaults they had to inspect were locked, but keys to the vault controls were available and they soon discov-

ered what they were seeking. The cosmium metal for experimental and production use was put up in small units inside of thermatron powered cases which generated a continuous triple field, shielding the dangerous element from cosmic rays. Each case, on Earth, would have weighed several hundred pounds, but on Mars an Earthman could handle them. To the Teranians they were like so many suitcases.

In one vault they also found a few cosmium loaded space torpedoes which were similarly protected by triple field electrostatic repulsion against cosmic rays.

While Puckett and Winzer were shuttling back and forth hauling this cargo to the *Surprise*, Haufek and Buchanan made a quick run to the mining center of Martanium. The main shaft openings were half a mile from the colony, but tunnels led to the center of operations. They availed themselves of a monorail magnatram and shot to their destination in less than one minute.

Again they discovered paralyzed men, some of them sprawled over machinery and controls. Some, in fact, had been killed as a result of the sudden loss of their faculties, but the Teranians were geared now to the unrelenting machine of war. They were not permitted the conscience-salving luxury of remorse. There was work to be done.

A few shielded cases of cosmium ore, ready for the processing plant, were picked up. In the mine laboratory they came upon a man who Hau-

fek recognized.

"I've seen his pictures in scientific journals," he said. "This is Doctor Fernandini, one of the pioneer authorities on cosmium."

"I've heard about him," said Buchanan. "He's a bachelor, too—no family ties. Let's shanghai him. He'll be better off on Teran, anyway. They can give him honorary Teranian citizenship as a reward—if he'll help develop cosmium resources in the Alpha System."

Haufek beamed with enthusiasm. "Larry, it looks like Fate's taking a hand. Everything's working out better than we imagined."

"You hope! Let's get going!"

The total cargo they finally stuffed into the *Surprise* represented the results of years of labor throughout the Sol System. It represented enough physical power to launch an empire—or to blow the planet, Mars, out of existence.

Protecting themselves with an interference field, they generated a paralysis carrier wave in all directions and headed for *Balder* at maximum sustainable acceleration. With them they carried the unconscious Dr. Fernandini, who was never to see Mars or Earth again.

## CHAPTER 12

EN route to *Balder*, they picked up a surprise message beamed to them from a Patrol ship. Puckett was watching it come out on the tape, and as he gathered its import and who it was from he slowly

rose up and finally yelled.

"Yeowl! Look at this!"

Fighting powerfully against the heavy acceleration, the others gathered around him. The message read:

*I.S.X. 9.18.58S. 630. JP. .CGPS 5 to renegade yacht Surprise .*

*By way of conversation until we get together, it might be advisable to tell you that our original rendezvous with CGPS 10 was also a part of the Master Plan. I don't suppose the officer you captured told you that. It was an ace in the hole, so to speak. So you see no time was lost when the crew of CGSP 10 came to life on the Carlona. Of course, by that time you had already reached Martanium, which is just fine—because I need that cosmium. Fine job, men! I told you the ramifications of the Master Plan were beyond your comprehension. Half the Solar Fleet was loyal to my faction before we ever reached the Sol System, thanks to the faithful labors of my half-brother, Luis Forral. Think this over. If you're smart, you'll play ball on my team. Last chance! Signed . . . Guess Who?*

"Pomeroy!!!" they all exclaimed at once. They looked at each other as though confronted with ultimate truth in the clarity of death.

"But — Luis Forral!" exclaimed Haufek. "He's number one butcher of the universe, the right hand man of the Dictator, himself! Now how the devil did he come to be related to Pomeroy?"

"Ye gods!" moaned Puckett.

"What a universe this would be with Pomeroy and Forral running it!"

"And Cardwell," added Winzer, bitterly.

Haufek turned to look behind him at Buchanan. "What's wrong, Larry? You sick?"

They all turned to look at him. The total lack of color in his face accentuated the coppery redness of his hair and crinkly brows, making of his whole physiognomy a clay mask — except for his brown eyes. He was not looking at any of them. He seemed to look through the walls of the ship into space and time. There was a barely perceptible rippling of muscles along his jaws but the cords in his long neck stood out in sharp relief.

"Hey, Larry!" exclaimed Puckett. "You got the G-G's or something?" The "G-G's" referred to violent cramps induced by prolonged acceleration or deceleration pressure. Only Haufek, so far, had experienced them.

"It's my fault," said Buchanan, in a low tone, still not looking at any of them.

"What's your fault, Larry?" asked Winzer.

Buchanan's eyes began to get watery, though whether this was owing to frustration or anger or pain or all three together none of them could tell. "Most of you," he said, in that same tone, "were for shoving Pomeroy and Cardwell out the airlock. That would have been the *clear, clean* stroke of decision, wouldn't it?"

The other three men stared at him curiously and at the same time considered what he had said. But as they

failed to answer his question, he suddenly yelled at them with his fists clenched.

"Wouldn't it!"

"Hey Larry, take it easy!" exclaimed Winzer. "You're talking through your head!"

In an instant, Buchanan was on top of Winzer, grasping the front of his leather jacket in his fists, tearing it, bearing the other back against the wall, yelling at him through his teeth. "What the hell do you know what I'm talking about? It's something I've—I—"

A hand with the seeming strength of a robot grasped his arm and pulled him back, gently but almost irresistibly. He began to relax, turned around to see Puckett.

"Relax, Larry. Take it from an old buddy—you, uh, don't feel well."

Buchanan read his face, anxiously, and saw that a friend was looking at him, subjectively. Puckett understood! Puckett alone! He suddenly gave Puckett a bear hug, which helped him regain his emotional balance.

How could he explain to the others that in spite of his pact of death with Cardwell he could never bring himself to kill him? Even a competent psychologist might never be able to explain all the delicate ramifications of the complex in Larry Buchanan, the complex of inferiority solely in relation to Cardwell's personality. Vincent the Invincible!—the man with the Midas touch—the man whose clever hands were getting hold of some of the marionette strings of empire at this moment, thanks to Buchanan's

complex. Buchanan cringed inwardly when he realized that this dark appendix attached to his own personality had already influenced the shaping of destiny for the known universe—adversely.

He staggered back through the cabin of the space yacht and sat down. Haufek, trying to understand, but failing to do so, walked back and gave him a lighted stim, which he took without looking up.

George Winzer, angry but trying not to be, straightened out his jacket and ran a hand back through his light blond hair, while he glared at Puckett. "What is this?" he asked. "A free-for-all or a Maypole dance? I don't get it!"

Puckett adjusted a dial and squinted at the sinewaves on the radalax monitors. "Larry's okay. He's just high strung." As Haufek came back, he reverted to the original subject. "As far as Pomeroy and Cardwell are concerned, I don't see where they think they have any reason to chortle with glee. We can beat them to *Balder* and have time to transfer our load and make a getaway again. And they don't know about our plans for Luna."

Haufek also watched the slowly shifting radalax sinewaves, as the *Surprise* automatically traced out the orbit of *Balder* on the basis of coordinates fed into its course computer. "Our cargo of cosmium," he said, "must reach Teran. And under this new set of circumstances that means just one thing."

They did not notice that Buchanan

suddenly raised his head to stare at Haufek intently.

"I think I know what you're getting at," said Puckett, looking up. He and Haufek stared at each other and knew they both had the same idea.

"Well I don't," Winzer complained. "Let's have it!"

Haufek turned to look at him. "Our captured Patrol ship won't be able to wait until the *Surprise* goes to Luna and returns. It's going to have to take off for Teran as soon as it's loaded." He turned back to Puckett, with a camouflage expression on his face. "That barge has enough provisions to stock them for the return trip, hasn't it?"

Puckett recognized the camouflage and played the game with him. "Yeah, at least they'll make it if they stay as much as possible in hiber, and that government tub can fly. They may chop a year off of the *Carlona's* time."

Winzer had been about ready to light up a stim, but he suddenly lowered his hands and glared at both of them. "Now wait a minute! Who is *they*? You sound like you weren't planning to go back to Teran."

Haufek shrugged. "The Solar Fleet base on Luna has to be bombed," he answered. "Somebody's got to man this little old torpedo boat."

Winzer paled. "You mean—kamikaze? Be left behind, captured or killed?"

"Look!" said Puckett. "Let's not pretend we're heroes. Frankly, it scares the hell out of me. But consider the logic of it. Pomeroy's Patrol ship isn't going to take out after

CGPS 10 right away because he isn't intending to go back to Teran—just now, anyway. In the meantime, the bombing of the Solar Fleet will not only materially help the Revolution along, but it will cause confusion and possibly delay the chase to retrieve the cosmium. CGPS 10 would have a much better start."

"But, I thought everybody was going to draw straws for the bombing job," Winzer argued.

Again, Puckett and Haufek exchanged glances.

"Well," Puckett drawled, "I guess that is the way it will have to be done."

Behind them, Buchanan had been studying both of them, with a new gleam in his eye. He got up, finally, and fought the acceleration pressure to come forward.

"Hiya, Larry," Puckett greeted him. "You feeling better now?"

Buchanan was studying the radalax screens, but he said, "Yes. A lot better . . ."

WHEN the *Surprise* settled toward the dark, rugged surface of *Balder* on a barely active gravitron "cushion," its crew could discern spacesuited figures standing outside CGPS 10. The two ships had not dared communicate with one another for fear of message interception, but all hands knew the current score. They were ready for a quick transference of cargo. The most valuable cargo in the universe.

"There's three of them out there," observed Winzer. "That's Jayne,

Olmstead and Makowski. Nobody's on board the Patrol ship."

Puckett flipped a switch on the short range transmitter and grabbed a phone. "Ahoj there!" he called. "Where's that government CPO?"

Olmstead answered over his suit transmitter. "He tried to be a hero for dear old C.G. and almost blew us up. Forget him. Did you pick up Pomeroy's message to you?"

"And how!"

"Then everything is self-explanatory. Let's get busy with that cosmium."

"Nuff said."

"And take it easy on that landing! If you crack one of those shield cases!"

"You wouldn't even know it. Here we come!"

Each man experienced an intense exhilaration that brought a nervous sweat to his skin. The first, all-important link had been forged in a chain of achievements opposed by almost impossible odds. This was the halfway mark in Teran's twelve year wait for the controlling share in cosmium—Metal of Power. So far, success was with them. And for the frosting they had brought along Dr. Ferdinandini.

No one discussed the fact that CGPS 10 had to leave immediately on the long road back to Teran or that the Solar Fleet base on Luna was far too far away to send the *Surprise* there under remote control. Yet everyone knew that the Luna base had to be bombed.

With the exception of terse remarks

relative to the loading job, they all kept their mouths grimly shut and worked fast.

Haufek and Puckett made an excursion to barge thirteen and came back with a mysterious looking load of metal, wires and space tools. When they dumped this paraphernalia into the dimly lighted cargo hold of the *Surprise*, they noted that it had been emptied of all the cases of cosmium. Only two shielded cosmium torpedoes lay there in their cargo straps, waiting significantly. When they looked into the cabin and the bunk room and the galley, they found no one on deck.

A few minutes later, Olmstead and Makowski came out of the Patrol ship's airlock to find that the *Surprise* had changed position. It sat on top of barge thirteen by the fuel bunkers and a spacesuited figure could be seen working rapidly among the lines and valves.

"Hey!" Olmstead yelled into his phone. "What's the idea!"

"A superfluous question," remarked Makowski.

"But—I figured we'd draw straws for it," complained Olmstead.

"And maybe they figured we haven't got any straws. Want to try to stop them?"

Puckett, driving the fuel pumps at full capacity, refused to answer their repeated calls. He watched the slow approach of the two men and worked fast.

Finally, he said to them, over the space phone, "You're losing time, chums. That star buggy is loaded, so

take off—and good luck!”

Instead of answering, the two below began to climb the hand bars on the outside of the barge hull. It was very easy to do in the light gravity of the asteroid. They almost floated up. When they reached the top, they came over to Puckett and tried to take hold of him. And he had been waiting for that.

He turned, having made sure that his magnetic shoes had a firm grip on the hull. Before Olmstead of Makowski knew what was happening he had shoved each one off the barge so violently that they followed a straight trajectory across to the Patrol ship and collided with it. They clung to its hull and looked back toward the *Surprise*, momentarily speechless. Even though they were aware of the almost negligible gravity on *Balder*, Puckett's unexpected feat had unnerved them.

“You haven't got time to walk back here again,” came Puckett's voice. “Now why don't you guys get going?”

Ten minutes after the *Surprise* took off, Puckett and Haufek turned on the visiscope and saw that the only man made object left on *Balder* was barge thirteen. They did not dare to use the regular transmitter, so they tried the space phone.

“Ahoy, anybody!” he called. “Anybody hear me?”

“Yes, Pete.” It was Olmstead. “We'll soon be out of range on the phones, so it looks like this is good-bye.”

Puckett looked at Haufek and

grinned. “Tell Jayne to revive Ferdandini,” he told Olmstead. “If you can bring him around to our way of thinking he'll be a good teacher during your return trip.”

“That's right. . . . We—ah—could say a lot of things about what you fellows are doing, but I guess there's no use going into that. You know what we mean.”

“Stow it! Reception's fading. Give our regards to Lydecker.”

“Well . . . so long Pete, and Bill . . . and Larry. We're—”

A blast of static interrupted, and when it passed, reception had faded entirely. Puckett turned around slowly to stare at Haufek.

“He said—”

“Yes. I know.”

They both started aft to search the ship, but they stopped short when they saw Buchanan standing in the open companionway that led down to the fuel tanks and the gravitron cell. There was a faint smile on his lips and a distant gleam in his eyes.

“You know,” he said, “I always told myself that if all I was going to get out of this star trip was Mars I would jump ship. And here I am!”

Haufek's mouth was agape. “But we thought you were—”

“So you did! But I think the three of us have been shipmates too long for anyone of us to put anything over on the other. Nice try, though.”

Puckett cleared his throat with an air of grave formality. “Glad to have you aboard, Buchanan!” Then he stepped forward with a grin and grasped Buchanan's hand, fiercely.



All three of them were shaking hands and grinning like boys playing hookey from school. They came out of the sudden flood of their emotions and suddenly sobered, staring at each other.

"What the hell are we so happy about!" exclaimed Puckett.

"Ah—we ought to get to work right away rigging up launching racks outside for those torpedoes," said Haufek.

"Yeah. Let's line this job up right," agreed Buchanan. The gleam in his eyes was not so distant now. "A good blast at that Lunar Base ought to spill the applecart for Pomeroy and Cardwell. At least we can do that!"

"And it's the one thing they don't know about," said Puckett. "You know, this boat is well named, at that!"

### CHAPTER 13

**T**WO weeks later, when Lunar Base detected the *Surprise*, it was too late. The little space yacht was cutting the ether in C-scale velocity and still holding to a G six acceleration. When the detectors on Luna picked out the two cosmium torpedoes, it was also too late, because they were way out ahead of the ship that had launched them. Within two minutes, the technicians who were aware of their danger knew that the Base would be lost. They activated the alarms and ran for the locks, as a matter of instinct, but intellectually they prepared themselves for death.

When the torpedoes struck, a twin nuclear blast created one of the largest craters on the Moon. If Earth's satellite had possessed an atmosphere, shock waves might have taken Central Government's greatest observatory fifty miles beyond the Fleet Base. At the time of the explosion, eighty percent of the Solar Fleet was on the ground. Seven first line warships and fifteen CGPS 10<sup>4</sup> class Patrol cruisers were atomized.

Fleet Headquarters on Earth was aware of the catastrophe within five minutes, in spite of the fact that the explosion had occurred on the opposite side of the Moon. Like a slow, ponderous tidal wave gaining crushing momentum, the news spread through the ether between ships and between planets. It was too big a story for even a dictatorship to keep from the people. Within an hour, billions of families were reading special news bulletins even as they peeled out of the wire-photo slots inside their homes. And what they read was confirmed immediately by visiphone broadcast.

Minutes before, Teran was a harmless little colony of overgrown technicians who supplied the Sol System with uranium, so incredibly distant that it might have been a myth. But now it loomed suddenly over the world and wielded an unsuspected club. In one fell swoop it had stolen away the total supply of cosmium and crippled the Solar Fleet. Teran was in revolt! Teran had made its declaration of independence!

An old, old cliché came to life

again, on Earth, Mars and Venus, and in every space observatory and relay and refueling station, from the twilight zone of Mercury to the frozen wastes of Pluto: *This is war!*

But there was no great uprising and clamor of demands that representatives of the people should force the government to take action. There were no representatives. Instead, the people waited for the Dictator to announce his intentions. The Dictator was an old man, and evidently he had been sleeping in his beard.

As a matter of fact, the Dictator was already dying from an overdose of sleeping powders—forcibly administered. And to the rostrum in Central Government's Council Chamber came Luis Forral, who was the half-brother of Pomeroy. His swarthy complexion had the appearance of light green clay under the battery of televisior lights, and the hollows in his thin cheeks and under his beady eyes had been accentuated by sleepless nights of frenzied preparation for this *coup d'état*. By his expression, it seemed that the unexpected blow at Luna had come to be considered already as a welcome political advantage, for he was uncontainably triumphant.

Luis Forral—the butcher, the man who had helped the Dictator quell rebellion by literally carving holes in the centers of resistance with bombs, bullets, deathrays and heat-sonics. The little man with the sleek, black hair and the sideburns who had earned a place for himself in history by using germ warfare against the ignorant and superstitious upper level

Venusians, in the name of Progress and Civilization. If he did not inspire admiration he commanded the sullen respect of those who feared him. And fear of Luis Forral was universal because his agents were everywhere, even among the members of one's own family. Inasmuch as a visiphone was a two-way affair, enabling agents to detect those who were not listening, he was necessarily seen and heard throughout the Sol System.

"I have in my hands a signed statement from your Leader, who is too ill to address you at this time," he said, in a tone of vast self-assurance. Swiftly, he read them the Dictator's last will and testimony, or that which achieved the same effect. The statement declared that their Leader had long been aware of his advancing years and slowing faculties, and that it had only been owing to the lack of a suitable successor that he had not relinquished his powers sooner. But now, at long last, he had been fortunate enough to find such a man. John Pomeroy, veteran statesman and long time successful Governor of Teran, was on his way home. In view of Pomeroy's unfailing sense of duty, *et cetera*, and his enviable faculty of getting things done and foreseeing events before they occurred; owing to his great organizational ability, his universal perspective and unparalleled understanding of the Teranian situation, *et cetera*, he was the man best suited for assuming the responsible position of Leader. The statement ended in the traditional flourish of hopeful clichés, plus the tremulous,

sinewave scrawl that everybody recognized as the old Dictator's signature—or a very clever facsimile thereof. But who was to dispute the latter point now, with Pomeroy and his half-brother, Forral, in power?

And now Forral embraced the microphones and the cameras before him, with his outspread, eloquent hands, with his suave manner, his silver-tongued voice and his brutal, penetrating little eyes. He spoke to them extemporaneously, emphatically, triumphantly.

"The newly instated Government will not corroborate the news releases of the old Government," he declared. "The startling announcements you have read and heard are not entirely supported by the facts, because—thanks to your new Leader, John Pomeroy—all subversive Teranian factions have been led into a trap of their own making. True, they have succeeded in bombing the Lunar Base. A universal day of mourning will be declared in memory of those patriotic men who died as a result of that treacherous deed, and we are certain that those responsible will be apprehended and be caused to suffer the full punishment prescribed by Law. But aside from that one tragedy there is nothing else to worry about.

"As far as the Solar Fleet is concerned, most of the vessels destroyed were obsolete and waiting to be converted to newer types. However, instead of throwing money away on conversions now we shall build a new and mightier fleet powered exclusively by cosmium.

"Where are we to get the cosmium?" Forral smiled sardonically. "You were told that the Teranians stole our cosmium. They only *think* they stole it, ladies and gentlemen. Actually—and thanks again to the unprecedented foresight of John Pomeroy—they are playing right into our hands.

"Moreover, we can definitely assure you that Teran is *not* in revolt—for the simple reason that it is not in a position to do so . . ."

He went on, in glib confidence, building for the astonished people a reassuring picture of unshakable governmental stability and offering them the firm promise of expansion and power and new interstellar horizons, predicated partially on the integrity and abilities of their new Leader and partially on the future development of cosmium—the Metal of Power!

That night the government owned bars enjoyed an unprecedented holiday business on three planets and several billion credits were earmarked for the Treasury of the new Central Government. Not that the people were celebrating anything, particularly in view of the catastrophe on Luna, but as long as they bought their liquor from the Government they were allowed to gather in public. And for the first time in years they really had something new to talk about.

Those big, lanky Teranians, living out there on the fat of the land. Who did they think they were, anyway? The new Fleet ought to go there and drop a couple of cosmium bombs. What the hell did *they* have to com-

plain about! Whatever happened to them now, they had it coming to them!

The later bulletins, after Forral's speech, declared that certain officers of high rank in the Solar Fleet had been relieved of their commands because of dereliction of duty in regard to security regulations and facilities. It had been due to their irresponsibility and that of high political figures that the Teranian suicide squad had been able to bomb Luna. Perhaps this Pomeroy was going to be what they needed, after all. A strong hand, yes—but backed by foresight and ability!

TEN days later, the *Surprise* was en route to nowhere, long since devoid of fuel. Depending now solely on her single gravitron tank, she curved mightily away from Earth's orbit, struggling against the straight line momentum established by her original dash toward Luna. Somewhere beyond Mars, *Balder* swung along its vast orbit, carrying barge thirteen, which was the only hope for Buchanan, Haufek and Puckett. It was too slim a hope to be cherished for long, even in delirium induced by the crushing weight of centrifugal force due to their desperate change of course. Their air was already foul, and even if they should reach the *Belt* by some miracle it was improbable that they would be able to match velocity and orbits with the asteroid without rocket fuel.

Moreover, they knew that a cosmium powered Patrol cruiser had been

on their trail for days, gradually building up speed to match and exceed their own in proportion to the acceleration sustainable by weaker "Earthworms." That they had not been blasted out of existence by a torpedo was an ominous substantiation of their conviction that they were wanted alive—for obvious reasons.

There was only one plan that seemed even partially practical. Since it was apparent they were wanted alive, it would be safe to allow the cruiser to come alongside. Once magnabeam traction had been established, they could take the Patrol ship, by means of the paralysis weapon, in the same manner in which they had taken CGPS 10.

It was the step after that that worried them. Where could they go in the captured ship? CGPS 10 had made good its escape because the enemy had still been handicapped by the element of surprise, but such was not the situation now. They knew that other ships had been deployed out into space between them and the borders of the interstellar gulfs. A break for freedom in a captured Patrol ship would undoubtedly attract a whole cloud of torpedoes.

In spite of all this, however, there was nothing else to do. It was the only possibility they could deduce from the circumstances. In fact, they had to capture the pursuing ship soon if they were not to die of asphyxiation. But there was something bothersomely sinister about the cruiser as it drew in toward them. It had not bailed

them during any stage of the chase. It maintained a dead silence and moved in swiftly and with a disconcerting confidence.

Just before the two vessels were within traction range, Buchanan realized the truth. He grabbed the controls and shot full power into the gravitron unit. Puckett hung on to a wall strap while Haufek passed out under the additional load of pressure. They were all baggard, bearded, exhausted. But Buchanan and Puckett remained conscious, staring at each other.

"What's—th'idea?" asked Puckett.

In Buchanan's bloodshot eyes was the look of a trapped animal. It wasn't fear. It was baffled rage. "Cardwell!" he gasped. "Knows—our weapon."

Now Puckett's eyes widened. "He's got an inter—ference generator!"

Buchanan nodded. "F we had fuel—we could ram him . . ."

"We're sunk, Larry. Maybe—as prisoners—we might come across—another chance."

"Are you kidding?" Buchanan switched off the gravitron and the sudden release from pressure threw them both into cramps.

They helped each other pull and massage the "Charlie horses" out of their arms and legs, and they worked on Haufek to revive him.

Puckett activated the controls of the paralysis generator, at the same time turning on the protective interference generator inside the cabin.

"Just for the hell of it," he said.

They watched the visiscope and the

magnabeam traction readings, and Haufek got painfully to his feet to watch with them. The paralysis weapon had no apparent effect. The Patrol cruiser loomed alongside and drew them sharply in on its beams. The capture of the *Surprise* was achieved with a chilling efficiency.

TWENTY minutes later, the three of them stood before Cardwell. He sat at a desk, clean shaven, well fed, beaming with new confidence and power, and wearing a Fleet Admiral's uniform. On his cap was a large, single gold star with a diamond in its center. They had heard of ordinary one star admirals, and multi-star admirals; but this was something new, probably another deal thought out long ago by him and Pomeroy. They stood in the large briefing room and were surrounded by a dozen uniformed guards.

After a long moment of silence in which Cardwell studied each man, and in particular Buchanan, he spoke to them. "It would be somewhat traditional of me to gloat," he said. "But the circumstances appear to eliminate personal considerations. You are saboteurs guilty of several major crimes, all of which are punishable by death. I speak now in the name of the newly instated Central Government. I need not inform you, I suppose, that John Pomeroy is the new Leader. I am merely confirming it officially."

Again, he studied each one of them, while the smaller Earthmen present watched the tall Teranians in wondering silence. The three prisoners mere-

ly stood there before their captor, offering nothing in their defense.

Cardwell relaxed suddenly into a less official attitude. Now he was solicitous, frank, intimate. "We have all been through quite an adventure together. In certain respects, our goals were the same. In others, they differed. I am sorry—*very* sorry—Bill, Pete, Larry—that you were not and can never be on my team. We could have gone far together."

After another considerable silence, Puckett said, "Shall we dance?" He smiled politely, through his teeth.

"Yes," put in Haufek. "What do you want? Tears? Or do we spit in your eye?"

Buchanan said nothing, but his bloodshot eyes never left Cardwell's face. His jaw muscles and the cords in his neck were prominent again.

Cardwell's only reaction to the remarks of the other two was a momentary narrowing of his eyes. He neither smiled nor frowned.

"About that cosmium," he said. "You might as well know what's really going to happen to it."

"It's on its way back to Teran," interrupted Buchanan, swiftly. "It's going directly into the hands of Lydecker and his Independence Party and it's going to be used effectively, because among other things Teran is going to enjoy the benefit of Dr. Fernandini's knowledge. Before you can build a new fleet, Earth is going to get blasted unless you accede to Teranian demands and withdraw your hooks from the whole Alpha System. You *are* gloating, Vince, and it's pretty

damned silly under the circumstances. We succeeded in every one of our goals and as a Benedict Arnold you've flopped flat on your face!"

Cardwell only raised his brows in mild surprise. "If you're so sure of that, why all the shouting?" Then he frowned and fixed Buchanan with an angry stare. "But the fact is, you're all wet, Larry. We know all about your kidnapping of Doctor Fernandini—a lucky stroke for *our* side, not for yours! You see, Pomeroy still has to combat strong political and military forces here who don't quite go along with his assumption of power, but he planned, long ago, to have just the ace in the hole at his disposal which would impress at least the Military to come over to his side. That ace in the hole is the cosmium you fellows were so kind to secure for us and ship to Teran. Teran is exactly where we *want* it—out of reach of the opposing factions!"

Puckett and Haufek gaped, involuntarily, and they looked at Buchanan, questioningly. He glared at Cardwell and waited, tensely.

"Who in the hell do you think Governor Wainman is?" continued Cardwell. "Didn't it ever occur to you that he was *our* plant on Teran, along with those extra troops that came in on the *Roosevelt* just after our departure? By now, he and his garrison have eliminated Lydecker and his star-gazing altruists, leaving only a hard nucleus of practical men who know which side their bread's buttered on. When Olmstead and Makowski and Jayne arrive with their precious

load of cosmium—and Doctor Fernandini—it will trigger the final plan for Wainman. He'll take over the planet completely and in accordance with the more efficient reasoning of our new Government. And as Mankind's first Admiral of an Interstellar Fleet, I am going to see to it, personally, that Teran does exactly what it is told to do!" His frown changed to an artificial, mocking smile. "I am going home—Larry . . . Too bad only one of us is going back . . ."

**B**UCHANAN'S long, powerful body shot forward as though from a catapult. Before the Earthmen could move, he and Cardwell were thrashing about violently on the floor behind the desk.

When the Patrol guards did start to move, they were met by Puckett and Haufek. Although Haufek was, among Teranians, the frail and intellectual type, he could still manhandle any Earthman in the room. But while he took care of them one at a time, Puckett waded in by the armful. Under the condition of their half G acceleration, the visible effect of Puckett's drive was disconcerting, in fact, awe-inspiring to these men who had never seen an unusually powerful Teranian in action.

One point was clear in the first minute. There was not enough manpower to handle the Teranians, physically, especially after five Earthmen had been knocked unconscious.

Puckett and Haufek both acquired machine pistols and stood in front of the desk, covering Buchanan, ready

to shoot it out with the remaining guards, two of whom were still armed. Evidently they had been given the strictest orders to avoid shooting the prisoners, but the principal reason for their hesitation was the fact that one of their number had escaped from the briefing room and run for help. The Earthmen stood where they were, tensely waiting for reinforcements, and watching in wonderment the beating that Cardwell and Buchanan were giving each other. To them it was a battle of Titans.

Cardwell's bleeding face swam before Buchanan's vision in a red sea of hate, and he knew that altruism, Teranian patriotism and the Revolution had nothing to do with it. He was only vaguely aware of pain as he received Cardwell's repeated blows or his head smashed against walls and metallic projections. The main thing was the pain he wished to inflict upon the total source of his life-long frustrations. This was Vincent the Invincible, the stronger of two personalities which had been so close in times past that they might have been one. Ying and Yang, a unity of opposites, struggling futilely in a circle that had no end.

Because he could not kill Cardwell. He could only hurt him, smash him, release the tangled springs of tension in one destructive unravelment, without other goal or purpose than release, itself.

And there was Anne, Anne, Annel In his arms on their island. The man with the Midas touch, going back to her with his gold and his power and

his achievement, taking her from him as he had before, sharing nothing, taking all of life and leaving him none of it—after the years and years and the trillions of miles and the desperate hope and struggle.

Buchanan was unaware of his environment other than the elixir of hate in which he swam. There was only Vince Cardwell—a bloated, bleeding, desperate face that emerged out of the haze and receded, again and again. He was unaware of the gas that was admitted into the room, or of the bullets that finally crashed into his back.

He glided into an ocean of darkness on the surge of a negative exhilaration, to dream in endlessness of a broad world under another sun—Teran, which was far away in space and time.

Space—somebody had told him—*was* time . . . So far, far away . . .

#### CHAPTER 14

**A**FTER convalescence in a prison hospital on Earth, there was a barred cell. Remanded to custody of Central Government for further investigation, conviction and final sentence—which never came. Death would have been understandable, but the waiting uncertainty through the years and the final realization that he was supposed to wait until he rotted—that, Buchanan told himself, was the master stroke.

There was only one relief valve for all of it. He hated. He hated Cardwell with an emotion that he could

feel, taste, smell, hear and see. It was a slow, smouldering bed of coals in which his spirit lay, like an old, battered sword which was becoming tempered to a hardness and resiliency it had never known before.

It was a two-edged sword. One blade was a heavy, super-hardened edge for the cruder battle of Self. The other—a delicate and subtly refined razor edge, fashioned for the battle of Man. News of the Interstellar Fleet's purge of Teran, of the disappearance of Lydecker and the betrayal of his people, the slowly integrating perspective of a universal civilization enslaved to the wielders of cosmium power, of Mankind tied inescapably to the strings of a Juggernaut machine that belonged to a handful of contemptuous Overlords—all these elements combined to produce a different kind of power metal, one that was not manufactured in the cores of planets and satellites, but deep within the core of a man.

Buchanan sat out the years in his cell, or paced them out, and even he was unaware of the fact that he had shed an old skin and became a different kind of human being. Older in suffering and emotion and perspective than he was in years. Larger and more powerful in the scope of his thoughts and purposes than he was in bone and brawn.

But in the midst of new light there was an old haven of darkness—a private little world that nothing would take from him. He hated Cardwell. He was going to find him. And he was going to kill him. It was a fetish,



a cyst that had to be removed before he could be whole. Beyond that, life could begin. There was no doubt in his mind that the time would come when he would escape, because he willed it. He willed it consciously and subconsciously, in wakefulness and in his tortured sleep. The years did not matter. There was his sustaining will and the absolute conviction that the time would come—the single circumstance he needed, the one alteration of monotonous routine that would offer a loophole of escape.

**I**N the beginning of it, he heard vague news from his guards concerning Haufek and Puckett. Later, there was no news. Whether they had been executed or transferred elsewhere, he could not determine, because so many years went by that the guards were new and were unfamiliar with the older history of the prison.

What was it Cardwell had told him once? It was on the morning of their departure from Teran, when they had had their argument on top of Panorama Mesa in the Gilbert Mountains. "What's a dozen years out of a hundred? Life isn't as short as it used to be." Buchanan had a habit of laughing about that, alone in his cell, laughing over the idea that Cardwell's words were a comfort to him, a thing to help sustain his mind and his will so that he could live to find the author of those words and destroy him.

"Sure, Vince!" he would say aloud to himself. "What's a dozen years—or twenty?—as long as I get out?"

If other prisoners heard him, they

would roll over on their cots and go to sleep again. Or if they were up they might remark, usually to themselves, "There's that crazy spacer again—star crazy!"

Buchanan did not realize it at first, but his apparent "break" came at a time that coincided peculiarly with the number of years necessary for Cardwell to build his Interstellar Fleet and go to Teran and return. Thirteen years. Or nineteen years since he had left Teran, himself. He had thought, on that long gone day, that all he was going to do in the Sol System was make a "whistle stop," but the years which still lay ahead of him were to prove otherwise.

"Venus!" he exclaimed to the examiner, when the latter told him where he was going. "But—why?"

The examiner was like that Governor's agent, back on Teran, who had first issued him his visa to Sol. Semi-bald, semi-gray, and spreading toward middle age. The man had a shifty eye and was obviously more concerned about a luncheon engagement than he was about the prisoner's thirteen years of incarceration or his future fate on another planet. He kept looking at his watch and filling out forms.

"You're a Teranian," the man told him, without looking up. "Their life expectancy is greater in the mines than it is for Sol System convicts. There's a shortage of manpower now, what with the Teranian Insurrection and all. You might as well be put to good use and earn your keep."

Mines! Buchanan tensed. The ura-

mium mines of Venus! He had heard about them. Deadly pits located in the borderland mists of the Venusian lower altitudes where the temperature and humidity were insufferable and men died as though stricken with plague. Earthmen, anyway. He had never heard of Teranians being sent there.

Uranium was evidently still used under those conditions where cosmium was too powerful to handle. Perhaps—in the Venusian wilderness—there would be a better chance for him to escape.

Suddenly, his head jerked up and his eyes widened. "Teranian Insurrection!" he exclaimed. "You mean—they've revolted?—against Central Government?"

The examiner looked up and observed him closely apparently for the first time. "Yes," he drawled, somewhat warily. "I guess you *have* been isolated from the news." Then he shrugged and went back to his forms. "Probably just as well."

In spite of the two prison guards beside him, Buchanan stepped forward and leaned over the examiner's desk, itching to pluck him out of his seat and shake him. "How did it happen?" he demanded. "Who's the leader of it? How are they fighting back?"

The examiner glared at him, trying to stare him down, but his face lost color when he really analyzed Buchanan's eyes. "Guards!" he exclaimed.

The guards took hold of Buchanan, but they might as well have taken

hold of so much wrought iron. The examiner got to his feet.

"Do you want to go out of here flat on your back?" he threatened, fearfully. "I can authorize a hypo!"

Buchanan relaxed and returned to his former position before the desk. "All right! All right!" he said. "It was just a normal reaction. I was *born* on Teran."

The examiner sat down as the color returned to his face. "We are only too well aware of that," he retorted. "You might as well know that there is a revolution in progress, but that it will only result in additional misery for the Teranians. There was an underground movement and Lydecker finally showed his hand."

"Lydecker!" Buchanan exclaimed. A surge of triumph shot through him and he grinned. "I thought that little devil was dead!"

"He will be. He gained a momentary advantage by bringing some new weapons to light, but he won't get away with destroying the Interstellar Fleet—"

Buchanan whooped for joy. He could not restrain himself, even though the guards prodded him meaningfully in the back with their guns.

"Shut up!" snapped the examiner. "It won't do them a bit of good. Admiral Cardwell has returned to build a new fleet equipped with new weapons, and when he goes back to the Alpha System it will be the end, not only of the revolution, but of Teran—as you knew it." He stared at Buchanan, deriving visible satisfaction out of the fact that the enthusiasm

was being wrung out of the prisoner's eyes. "Now. You wanted news. I gave it to you. Guards, here are his transference papers. Take him away." The examiner looked again at his watch and hastily closed and locked his desk. His work was done.

For Larry Buchanan, it had only just begun.

WHEN he had first come to Earth, he had been taken directly to a prison hospital where he had recovered his conscious faculties only after several days of treatment. Now, after thirteen years of imprisonment, he was brought out into the light of day and permitted to observe this planet which in his earliest studies had been the equivalent of Siam to a Hoosier schoolboy of the nineteenth century. It had been a place located beyond the horizons of his adventurous dreams, which he could never hope to live to see.

Yet here it was now spread out beneath him as a special sky coach transported him and some other prisoners to an unknown destination, and he was amazed at how little interest he took in it. New York with its thirty million inhabitants somehow failed to impress him. By comparison with his native city, Astra, this was an almost inconceivable metropolis. The much greater necessity here for centralization, and a basic difference in certain sociological concepts and practices, had combined to evolve a different architectural pattern than that of the Teranian capital. There were the concentrated cubes and spider

web network of outward radiating magnetic trainways, plus the distant suburbs, on a tremendously larger scale, which was to be expected, but there the similarities ended. Instead of one cube and one annex, as in Astra, Teran, there were literally hundreds of cubes, and the space between them was entirely covered over with polarizite—a vast *Center* sheltering tens of millions of people from the more deleterious rays of the sun and admitting only those radiations which were beneficial to life and growth, a hermetically sealed metropolis, completely air conditioned. Outside this area were countless miles of prefabricated structures housing the working classes. Some of these working armies pulsed in and out of the monstrous city like so much blood in the arteries of a living Colossus, and some of them pulsed outward to man the great hydroponic plants that seemed to fill all the interstices between the magnetic trainways. And beyond, in all directions, on every horizon, industrial cubes of endless variety and purpose added their own silhouettes to the general configuration of twenty-sixth century Earth. Above the central part of the great city, itself, were sky annexes—great, floating cities, in themselves, supported by gravitron tanks and steadied by gyroscopes. Long mooring cables tied them to the rooftops and prevented their rising into outer space.

Buchanan saw all this as in a hazy dream, as though it were insulated from the stark reality of his own existence, because he was more a Te-

ranian now than he had ever been and his mind and heart were with his native world. This, below him, was the harbor of the enemy, a world of enslaved people taught to believe what their Overlords told them. They were the instruments and the factory which supplied the "stockholders" in the Master Plan with the ammunition required to reduce Teran to the same status. Cardwell would be able to build a new and greater Interstellar Fleet, and when it was ready it would move on Teran with orders to subdue its inhabitants by the method of wanton destruction and racial debilitation. Out of the smouldering ruins a crippled race of human automatons would be created.

Across the long years and the great distances, Lydecker's words came to him now more vividly than they had on that night when he had first heard them: "If we are the very cream of the crop, by Earth's own selection over two centuries of time, then we represent civilization, the fountain source from which the future of Mankind will spring—and *they* are what is left behind! *They* are the old world, interring themselves already in one of the strata of history that is past!"

Then there was that old saw about self-determination and original thinking. Old though it might be, it was valid. Here below him, Man's materialism and his technology had passed from Spring to Summer. But in his mind and spirit the Autumn leaves had begun to fall. Man was no longer himself. He was a wooden-eyed marionette. There was a string at-

tached to his every step and thought. His life was a pre-planned rat maze, from breakfast to bedtime, in which he reacted automatically to stereotyped stimuli, and if he ever met himself face to face in a rare moment of leisure he would run away in superstitious dread as though from an enemy out of the Unknown, killing time along with the opportunity for original thought, paying the Government another couple of credits for drinks in a public bar, desperately bridging the precarious gap between one period of response to stereotyped stimuli to another. Man was a robot.

But out there across the interstellar gulfs was Teran and a man named Lydecker, with stars in his eyes, yes, but with something burning inside of him that went beyond the stars. In him and his kind was the real metal of power that would build the last citadel of true civilization.

Such were the results of Buchanan's metamorphosis in prison. He had had time to think. And he was a Teranian, the last of the free men.

He calculated. In a few years, the new Interstellar Fleet would be ready. Five years after that—Teran would get its wings clipped short, and that would be the end. Unless something could be done. But what?

Seven years of time in which to accomplish the impossible, a convict condemned to short-lived work in the uranium mines of Venus. If only Haufek were alive and he could find him—and Puckett. Perhaps, between the three of them—

"You fool!" he exclaimed, half

aloud.

"What was that?" said one of his guards.

"Nothing." He sat back in his seat and glared down at the Earth. Logic told him his dreams were futile. His new found willpower forced him inexorably along channels of resistance, as though he were starting to navigate an unknown sea without a compass. And blind hate told him that he would never submit to the machine that was run by Cardwell, Pomeroy and Forral.

"We'll be landing soon," said the guard.

Buchanan only grunted.

THE sign on the prefab roof said TRI-PLANET ENGINEERING CO. The space port was small and obviously private, but well financed. Buchanan's experienced eye took in all the signs of highly expensive spaceport equipment — a ten unit barge hangar, fueling docks, a stationary reactor plant for independent power source and thermatron recharging, a gravitron and electronics lab and maintenance building, private interstellar type transmitting station, lifters, space yachts, administration and operations buildings—a complete base. It was far north in the Wisconsin woods, located out of the line of regular inter-city sky traffic.

To Buchanan it seemed a strange place for convicts to be brought, but he said nothing. Nor did the other three prisoners, who were Earthmen. They waited in silence, with their eyes and their ears open.

As their craft settled to the ground on its gravitron repulsion cushion, a whole squad of guards in plain clothes came out to meet them. Conspicuously few words were exchanged. The new guards regarded Buchanan with considerable curiosity, as he towered a full head above the tallest of the Earthmen, but they lost none of their efficiency and self-assurance.

Inside the administration building the four prisoners were locked in a combination mess hall and waiting room. Here they were fed and told to wait. There were current news sheets and fotozines which constituted the real feast for the news starved men. As was to be expected, they talked together concerning their possible fate, but for the most part they preferred to read everything they could get their hands on.

Buchanan searched for news of Teran and found it. As the examiner had said, Lydecker had led an underground movement of scientists and old Party Members in a surprise attack on the Interstellar Fleet and sent its few surviving ships reeling back toward Earth, but not before the insurrectionists had been crippled badly by counter fire.

Certain articles on the subject revealed to him the fact that the Cardwell-Pomeroy faction had succeeded, through Governor Wainman, in retrieving the original shipment of stolen cosmium, but when the Interstellar Fleet attempted to interfere with private Teranian attempts to mine cosmium in the Alpha System Lydecker's revolt had flamed into full

scale defensive war. However, a captured Teranian vessel had enabled Central Government to determine the nature of the new weapons and devise a counter-defense against them for future attacks. It was now a matter of an armaments race between Teran and the entire Sol System. Obviously, the odds were heavily in the favor of the latter.

One item that caught his eye filled him with a vague wonderment and curiosity. It had been reported that in Lydecker's camp Alphids were playing an important role as industrial workers. There was a hint between the lines to the effect that Lydecker's group had discovered new faculties in the indigenous little people of Teran which had never been suspected before. They were evidently proving to be of even vital strategic importance. Although the whole story was obviously edited by wary censors, the suggestion emerged that the Alphids had something in their makeup which was a growing cause for alarm.

Buchanan could not suppress a smile when he thought of the little Alphids becoming a menace. If they could be guided and would learn new tasks, however, their large number could prove helpful, he thought. But what were twelve million Teranians and five hundred million Alphids against the Sol System's billions? The outcome of the war was a foregone conclusion.

Unless something very unusual could be added abruptly to the total picture.

Inadvertently, he found an advertisement which had been paid for by the Tri-Planet Engineering Company, and he read it through twice, the last time with slow deliberation:

**WANTED — PRODUCTION MANAGER:** Monitor code — 1-2-1-2-4-4-3-1-4-7-3-4. Tolerances: plus or minus 1, columns 4, 7, 9. Additional: Capable handle all types of men and accept heavy responsibility, adaptable to extreme environments, steady, reliable. Five years paid experience production management in mining, particularly radioactive materials. Willing to travel and sacrifice personal comforts in exchange for career with retirement benefits at end of ten years. Salary: *top*. Write L.F., Tri-Planet Engineering Co., P.A. 5, Route 2, Box 707.

Inasmuch as standard monitor code books were as common as dictionaries, he found one in the waiting room and began to decipher the listed code. First column: number 1 called for the masculine gender. Second column: number 2 referred to an age between thirty and forty. Third column: Number 1 called for a bachelor with no attachments, marital, family or otherwise. And so on. A degree in mining engineering was required, with some tolerances. Languages an asset. The I.Q. requirements were average, but the physical requirements were tops, again with no tolerances.

He looked up from the monitor code to see the other three prisoners staring at him. They were not the cut-throat type. As a matter of fact, if

they had been well dressed and cleanly shaven they would not have looked out of place in some high Government office or academy of learning.

"What is this place?" he asked them, abruptly.

One of the other three, who was the eldest, replied. "On the surface of it," he said, "it would be logical to assume that the Government had sub-contracted a private development company to exploit the uranium mines on Venus and that this company has been authorized to process convicts in connection with labor mobilization."

"All right. Then what's *under* the surface?"

The other smiled. "In view of your size and strength, you might be considered as a logical choice. But do we three look like the type they need in a uranium mine?"

"Not particularly, so what are you getting at?"

"We are political prisoners. The definition of a political prisoner is one who dared once to think originally. The State does not like that. So here we are. It's an unobtrusive and semi-utilitarian form of execution. We presume that you, too, are a political prisoner."

Buchanan thought for a moment, and he remembered the time he and Haufek and Puckett pulled a Pearl Harbor on the Lunar Fleet Base. He grinned wryly. "You may have a point there," he answered. "But I still think you're leaving something unsaid."

"You're right. There's one more thing. The Tri-Planet Engineering Company is merely a front for the sideline private enterprises of a former countryman of yours."

Again, the three watched him curiously. Suddenly, Buchanan's eyes widened.

"Cardwell!" he exclaimed.

"Exactly. Admiral Cardwell runs a successful little side business of 'recruiting' labor for the Venusian colonies. Many a Teranian has been brought directly from Teran to Venus through the facilities of the Tri-Planet Engineering Company."

"But why? I mean—what does Cardwell get out of it?"

"Money, among other things."

"You mean — we have been sold —?"

The elderly man nodded. "To the Colonial Government of Venus. It can't be done openly, but through Cardwell's powerful political drag with Pomeroy and Luis Forral he can 'arrange' such matters, or rather, his underlings can. He's pretty busy these days with the building of the new Interstellar Fleet."

The amazing story continued, with the other two filling in some of the details. Central Government was a game within a game. Rules were made to be obeyed on the surface and broken in secret. The tremendous profits of the Colonial Government of Venus would ordinarily be divided with Central Government in the form of taxes, but labor expenses were deductible, in certain categories. The theory was that Cardwell's enterprises

gave the Colonial Government of Venus a kick-back on prices paid for laborers, and thus the higher price paid the greater the kick-back and the greater proportion of profit becoming tax deductible. The Governor of Venus, it developed, was Luis Forral's brother, Enrique Forral, an unprincipled dictator living in the highest splendor and luxury known to human civilization.

Buchanan showed the other three the advertisement he had read, but they were only mildly surprised. The eldest of them explained.

"Another trick to trap technical help. You will notice the emphasis on no family ties. Obviously, such a person's disappearance must not be conspicuous. No one can actually be assigned to such work justifiably—pay or no pay. It is suicide. Naturally the company can offer top salary and retirement benefits at the end of ten years. Life expectancy for a production manager over the Venusian mines is far less than that. Ordinarily, people are not aware of these things, but our own presence here as political prisoners is one of the results of our having ascertained such facts previously."

Buchanan looked back at the ad, reflectively. "Who is L.F.?"

The other shrugged. "Who knows? The F may be for Forral, but I doubt if the L stands for Luis."

"Just who are you?" Buchanan asked.

The man smiled sadly. "I am—or was—an authority on the subject of sociology. These were my colleagues."

He indicated the other two. "It seems we were writing a book, and our diligence in the search for source materials and true facts got us into difficulties. Not only did we demonstrate ourselves to be original thinkers. We simply came to know too much. Or we were political nudists. The truth, wherever it appears, is necessarily naked, and the State, it seems, has a strictly Puritan attitude in regard to political deshabelle. One must clothe the truth in proper fiction. However, that's not important now. We want to avail ourselves of this particular opportunity to question you concerning your own world—Teran."

Before the conversation could develop further, the door of the waiting room was unlocked and their guards summoned them.

"All right," said the captain of the guard detail, "you'll be taken to the next station now."

Buchanan brought the advertisement with him. "I wonder," he said to the guard captain, "if I could speak to the man in charge around here for a moment. It's straight business and he might even be interested."

The man he had addressed turned to stare at him with an air of official disapprobation. "The man in charge of *what!*" he demanded.

Buchanan managed a smile. "Anyone who could tell me about this," he said, showing the other the advertisement. "I might have a chance of passing a monitor on that. Civilian or prisoner, it all ends up the same way. I'm a Teranian and my life expectancy might be a little longer than that



of the usual applicant. I hear it's a tough job no matter which way you slice it."

The guard captain recognized the ad without having to read it. He hesitated, looking at Buchanan speculatively. "You got the degree?" he asked.

"That's the only weak point, but I might scrape by on the tolerances."

"What the hell you trying to do—become a trusty so's you can plan a break?"

Buchanan laughed. "Who's kidding whom? Nobody's going to break from a Venusian uranium mine. I just don't give a damn whose side I'm on as long as I get a few extra privileges that might go with the job."

His three fellow prisoners, over-hearing him, looked at his face curiously and he met their gaze briefly. Somehow he felt they understood his motives and he liked them for their quick perception. It was the beginning of a possibly useful friendship.

"Come on," said the guard captain. "I think you'd better forget about that ad."

"Then tell me—who is L.F.?"

The other started, then controlled his facial expression. "Ask that question," he said, "when you get to your next station." There was just the trace of grim amusement in his eyes as he led his prisoners out to the spaceport.

In Buchanan's eyes there was the trace of another kind of amusement, which was perhaps grimmer still. So Vince Cardwell still had the Midas touch! He couldn't even stab him in

the back without making something out of the deal. But—was this the "clear, clean stroke of decision?"

His jaw was set hard when he boarded the lifter. Time would tell.

## CHAPTER 15

THE SPACE STATION was also a distinctly private affair.

Its orbit was at the outer Earth limit, somewhere near fifty thousand miles above the planet's surface. Actually, it was a reconvered interstellar ship with cigar shaped inner hull and a ring deck, very similar in size and shape to the *Carlona*, but its great reactor and thermatron banks and gravitrons had been removed to make room for another purpose. The "cigar" was a labor mobilization station, and the ring deck was reserved for the operations crew and administrative staff. It was equipped with a sufficient battery of rocket engines to take it into an interplanetary orbit when required.

The mobilization station was a large "hall" extending some five hundred feet forward, with four office doors in the front bulkhead. Out in front of the offices were several tables, metal topped, with magnetic paperweights. Everyone was issued magnet-soled slippers, or deck shoes, in the absence of gravity. And some chemical "sick pots" were available for the landlubbers.

To Buchanan, a space deck in free fall was home, sweet home, after thirteen years of imprisonment. He wanted to kick off his slippers and wallow

in the middle of the air, but he restrained himself.

In the hall there were approximately fifty "applicants," twenty guards and two company officers, the latter at the tables. Buchanan, again, was the only Teranian, and the curious stares on the part of the others were fully to be expected. Strangely, the stares of so-called "free citizens" of the Sol System had always been resentful, but the stares of victims of the State, such as these men, were merely curious, sometimes even tinged with admiration and respect. There was a principle operating here that Buchanan was determined to observe and study. He remembered that his three sociologist acquaintances had been ready to ask him questions concerning Teran. Come to think of it, these prisoners were all potential Teranians. Very few of them were the real criminal type, by appearances. On the contrary, they were the altruist type, mostly all strongly willed intellectuals or scientists who cared nothing for politics. In terms of psycho-monitor categories, if there were ten global perspectives here there were twenty cosmic perspectives. Very nice material.

Also in the same terms, there were a few regional perspectives, perhaps even one or two savages, or tribal perspectives. These were either actual criminals or the brawn variety of stooge who had been framed by those who had benefited by their criminal handiwork. About ten men in all were in these latter categories, and most of them looked like ex body-

guards, triggermen, or bouncers — large, brutish, quick to fight. These men, alone, were the only ones who greeted the appearance of Buchanan with some semblance of hostility, merely on a personal basis. He was the biggest of them all and therefore one to be watched.

The three sociologists were ahead of him in the line of newcomers being interrogated at the tables, and he overheard their names. They were brothers. Harold, Steven and Anthony St. John—famous authorities of whom he had heard even on Teran, academicians who studied the theory of government on a laboratory basis and who, unfortunately, had discovered certain basic equations for a successful civilization which included self-determination.

As soon as they were processed and told to join the other waiting prisoners, they headed straight for the suction tubes above the "sick pots," amidst the grins of a number of spacers present.

It appeared very much as though the examiner at table two had been waiting especially for Buchanan when he came up on the list. The man had an odd type of tan which seemed to be more a change of pigment than anything else. It was the peculiar olive complexion associated with a thorough adjustment to the climate of Venus. He was not much older than Buchanan, lean faced, straight backed, and as damnably contemptuous and impersonal as the worst foreign base personnel processor. To make it worse, he had a small, waxed mus-

tache and an archaic, clipped English accent. Buchanan might as well have been a lower class English infantryman being processed at a nineteenth century base in India. At least he was certainly heading for the "colonies."

"You are Lawrence Buchanan, a Teranian citizen," the examiner told him, looking up from his papers. "You are also that same Lawrence Buchanan who helped bomb the Fleet Base on Luna—"

A loud murmur went around the hall, and Buchanan heard some of the remarks.

"So *he's* the —!" "My brother was bumped off in that blast." "Yeah, I had a couple of buddies—" "The dirty—" "Hey, High Pockets! How's Hirohito!"

The examiner was about to go on when there was a general interruption. All present turned to witness the entrance, from the ring deck, of a very unusual executive. In fact, as it turned out, *she* was the Boss.

In her late twenties or early thirties, she was tall, lithe, and all woman. She wore a very sheer skirt that reached all the way to her artfully designed magnetic soled slippers, but it only served to enhance the visible lines of her long legs beneath it. There was nothing above her waistline but a sheer, deep bra. The fact that she seemed to be deliberately flaunting her distinctly feminine attributes before these woman starved prisoners revealed both a long-established self-assurance and an appetite for sadism. She, too, exhibited the Venusian "tan," on all visible portions of her

body, and it was easy to assume that this adjustment to environment was evenly distributed over the rest of her. Nestling against the slope of her breasts was a glistening medallion composed of expensive teranium metal and diamonds, but what actually caused Buchanan to catch his breath was the fact that she wore her dark hair in the same Midnight coiffure which he had liked so much on Anne. It swept in pompadore style from the right side of her head around to a full cascade on the left side, crossing her breasts just above the medallion and passing under a jeweled teranium clip on the right shoulder.

She surveyed the room insolently. Her heavy-lidded surveillance was insulting, amused, her red mouth a combination of sneer and general challenge.

A number of the men were heard to make pointed remarks about her and some of the guards started to move toward the offenders, but she waved them off with an easy gesture. The hall fell silent.

"I am glad you slobs identified yourselves," she announced, without changing her expression. Her voice was appropriately smoky. "You're the easiest type to handle. It's the 'gentlemen' in the crowd who bear watching—"

Her voice caught as she became aware of Buchanan and their eyes met. With a conspicuous deliberation, her gaze took him in slowly, from head to foot, and she moved over to him, with as comprehensive a walk and expression as she could manage.

There was the glimmering of a laconic smile at one corner of her mouth as she looked up at him and gave him a look that was built for two.

"Well, how did we find *you* on Earth, Red?" she asked.

The examiner came around the table and whispered rapidly in her ear, and her brows went up in some surprise. She appeared to take an even greater interest in him.

After another long look at him, she said, "Excuse me a minute." And she turned to table number one, addressing the other examiner. "You—ah—have an applicant for Production Manager?"

Buchanan's pulse leaped in his sudden excitement, but instantly slowed when he discovered that he was not the man to whom she referred. The latter stepped forward from the prisoner line as the examiner beckoned to him. He was a large, heavy set man with a bull neck, a wrestler's brow and little, glittering eyes—the bouncer type, but with some apparent intelligence, capable even of having a smattering of engineering knowledge. He came forward as rapidly as his deck shoes would permit and he began to talk first because he was mad.

"I applied for the job, all right, but I don't like the looks of the set up," he told the girl, at the same time wandering frankly with his gaze.

"That's beside the point," she snapped. "You're here now. You *might* have a chance of making your choice between being an ordinary prisoner in the mines or of being a

prisoner with a few extra privileges and a slightly greater life-expectancy, but you're going to decide right here and now. Do you want the job?"

His little eyes looked back at her and then shifted to the guards who closed in on him now, apprehensively, their machine pistols ready. He paled. "Well—if that's the way it is—"

Her eyes narrowed. "That's the way it is!"

He backed away slightly and shrugged. "Okay! Okay! You don't have to—"

"Your first job," she interrupted him, icily, "must be taken care of now." She turned to everybody else in the hall. "This is your Production Manager," she announced. "The duties of our Production Manager are plainly and simply to get production out of you men. We don't theorize on personnel psychology in our camp. There is just one rule: The Production Manager is boss; if the rulebook doesn't work his fists and a club will have to do. The inference is, the Production Manager is more a man than the rest of you and can handle any one or all of you. Is that clear enough?"

The new Production Manager raised his heavy brows in some bewilderment, but gamely hitched his trousers up and stood his ground.

The girl turned to the crudest types she could find in the crowd, who were also of the brawn trust. "You there, and you, and you," she said, hand picking them, "are in the clean-up squad." When she had ten of them, she turned to the Production Man-

ager. "Get these men to clean out the 'sick pots' — now! The place stinks!"

Immediately, she achieved the apparently desired effect among the men she had picked out. They were belligerent, especially when others present began to laugh derisively over the task that had been assigned them. Three of the largest men, who had formed some sort of pact between them, became vociferous about it.

"—— you guys! You don't see us doing it, do you?"

"Yeah, who the hell does she think ——"

"All right, you men," said the Production Manager, moving toward them purposefully. "You heard the lady. Let's get going!"

For answer, the biggest of the three toughs stepped up to him and tweaked his nose. The Production Manager promptly lost his temper and swung, but never landed. The other man struck him. He didn't exactly fall, even though he was out, in view of the fact that there was no gravity. He merely hung over, arms limp, shoes stuck to the floor.

Now it was the three toughs' turn to laugh. "How about one of us takin' that job, lady?" asked the big one.

Undisturbed, the girl turned to look at Buchanan, and he saw a small light of personal triumph in her eyes. He noticed for the first time that they were hazel.

"I understand *you* were interested?" she said.

A sudden silence pervaded the hall, except for a rapid flurry of whisper-

ings among the three toughs, who watched Buchanan sullenly. Buchanan looked quickly at his examiner and discerned that he had told the girl about his interest in the advertisement.

There was no egotism in his answer. He was thinking five moves ahead on the game board of *Empire*.

"It it's open," he said, quietly, "I'll take it."

For the first time, she really smiled at him, and a small cargo of personal electricity went with it. "You're hired," she answered, "but you've still got that job to do."

Without hesitation, Buchanan stepped out to face the clean-up squad. Before he spoke, he winked, almost imperceptibly, but he used a facial language that prisoners understood. It meant, "Let's put on a show for them now. Our chance will come later."

Aloud, he said, "All right, men. Clean the pots!"

Some of the men began to move toward the pots, but the three toughs stood their ground without moving, and two more joined them. The spokesman for the three toughs sneered at him.

"We ain't no —— honey dippers," he said. "And the last thing we're going to do is to work under a —— —— Teranian!"

Buchanan did not lose his temper. He smiled, almost jovially. "Would you like to tweak my nose, too?" he asked.

Unimpressed, the big fellow jerked his head. "Come here. We want to

talk to you, Red." \*

Obligingly, Buchanan approached them, and as he did so, all five men jumped him. He took a beating, but it lasted only a few seconds. Easily, he knocked a few heads together and left three of the men dangling outward in the air, held down only by their deck shoes. He took the big tough and his companion by their belts and plucked them from their shoes. In the next instant, he leaned way forward against the magnetic traction of his own shoes and threw the two against the nearest "sick pot."

The other prisoners roared. But they quieted down as the big tough braced himself against the pot and flung himself through the air at Buchanan. Incongruously, Buchanan waited for his approach and then swung his arm like a bat. It hit the tough on the head and he came to a stop in mid air. Buchanan leaned over him nonchalantly as though looking at a patient on an operating table.

"I'm going to put you back in your shoes, and you're going to work. Do I make myself clear?"

The other was red in the face with rage. "Aw — you!"

Buchanan's fist slammed down in the other's face and he shot to the deck, colliding with it hard enough to produce an audible "clunk!" He lay there unconscious, and the remaining members of the clean-up squad went to work changing the pots.

The girl waved her hand in Bu-

chanan's direction. "This is your *new* Production Manager," she announced, almost gaily.

He learned that she was L. F.— which stood for Lorena Forral. She was the daughter of Enrique Forral, Governor of Venus.

Later, she ordered him to the ring deck and told him, "of course your assignment is provisional. The advertisement meant what it said in regard to the monitor codings."

"I'll pass them," he said, "if I'm allowed a tolerance on the engineering degree."

She smiled at him. "That all depends," she answered.

Guards were outside the door of her office, but for the time being the two of them were alone, as the door was closed. He looked at her with a growing awareness of what she was getting at.

But he said, "What do you mean?"

She got up and came around her desk and without hesitation placed a smooth hand on his ponderous arm. "It depends on our mutual tolerance —" Her eyes extended the innuendo. "For each other, that is."

Buchanan did not return the smile she was giving him. "Look!" he said. "It may be a bum start, but maybe you like frankness. You don't have to go out of your way to give me the score. You're a spoiled brat and you think you can buy any toy in the shop."

She took no offense. Instead, she placed both hands and her face against his arm. "I think Teranians are the only *men* left in the universe,"

she said.

"You're a primitive without maturity," he told her.

She gave him a surprised, glad smile. "You mean I'm plain sexy?"

Buchanan's jaw clamped tight and his neck tensed as he looked at her. He turned to walk out on her, but she stopped him with her nails in his arm. When he looked at her again he saw her teeth.

"Listen, Buchanan," she said, swiftly, "I don't have to be anything but what I want to be. Where I come from, I'm the Law!"

He smiled at her. "Yes, my Queen. May I go now?"

Her face relaxed. She reached for a stim and lit it. Through its smoke she studied him.

"Yes," she said, finally. "You'll be monitored when we get to Venus."

Silently, Buchanan made his exit.

## CHAPTER 16

**A**FTER a six year interstellar voyage and thirteen years of imprisonment on Earth, the pace of events on Venus was in some respects bewildering to Buchanan. There was too much to absorb and get adjusted to all at once. Not only was there an overwhelming influx of new faces, personalities and conditions, as well as intricate intrigue and politics to be understood, but adaptation to the world of Venus, itself, was a complex and challenging experience.

Volcanic action on Venus was the cause of confusion relative to earlier astronomical theories regarding the

so-called "mystery planet." Some of the mountains were still very young, geologically, and a particular group of violently volcanic peaks in the northern hemisphere towered in some places above fifty thousand feet. The tremendous volume of smoke and volcanic ash these cones pumped into the upper atmosphere, combined with the prevalence of violent winds at that level, served to blanket the sphere in a shroud that had deceived the spectroscopes. The winds tossed these clouds so high that they obscured and sometimes obliterated a natural ionosphere. But what harmful short solar radiations the ionosphere failed to block were usually dampened by the heavy atmosphere beneath.

With some rare exceptions, even the upper plateaus were only semi-inhabitable by Earthmen, and for the most part the administrative centers of the Colony were established in moored sky islands. Another reason for this was the hostility of the *Braburnii*, otherwise known as the "upper level" Venusians. These were tall, powerful people ranging between the size of Earthmen and Teranians. They were primitive, superstitious, very numerous, and devilishly ingenious in the arts of guerrilla warfare. In the lower levels were vast seas of carbon dioxide and sulfuric gases into which not even the *Braburnii* could venture without breathing and cooling equipment; yet in these depths lived another species, the product of a different offshoot of evolutionary development—the *Gagandii*, or Peo-

ple of Darkness.

A world of extremely variegated environments, of high winds and volcanic clouds, of sweltering heat, deep and dangerous jungles, of mists and sudden storms and often catastrophic earthquakes, possessing ten continents, eleven oceans and about twenty-seven lesser seas, in addition to uncounted inland freshwater seas, lakes and tremendous rivers, Venus was difficult to explore and subdue. In fact, after centuries of development the task had only begun. The main objective was not real colonization, but exploitation of natural resources, which appeared to be inexhaustible.

Enrique Forral, Buchanan discovered, was as old and ailing as Central Government's deposed Leader, a glorified remittance and confidence man, the type of old school politician whom successful executives reward by planting them in the financially or politically lush hinterlands where their practices of old are continued with less hindrance than ever, under the high sounding name of Consul, or Ambassador, or Colonial Governor.

Buchanan never saw Forral, but the "grapevine" was ripe with information that seemed to be fairly reliable. The Old Man, as he was known in the vernacular, preferred to dictate policy from his sky castle and accept the services of his daughter, Lorena, as chief implementer. The latter was so involved with her affairs when they arrived on Venus that he was monitored without her supervision. He passed and was sent to the mines officially as the new Production Man-

ager.

It was at the mines that he received his greatest shock of surprise. The main uranium development was on the small continent of Hahddra. For the most part, its land mass was lower level terrain, obscured by the carbon dioxide atmosphere which was breathable only by the seldom observed and seldom contacted *Gagandii*, but its central portion rose spectacularly in a Venusian version of Fujiyama, minus the snow, twenty thousand feet above sea level. The crater on top was extinct, a ten square mile walled-in area that was only semi-tropical, one of those rare places on the planet that was inhabitable by Earthmen. Here Lorena maintained a private retreat and hunting villa, which she visited on rare occasions when she was not busy with the affairs connected with colonial administration. It was here, also, that a few of the more privileged prisoners, such as the Production Manager, were allowed to stay.

The mines, themselves, were a surprise to Buchanan, but nothing compared to that which lay in store for him when he met some of the other prisoners. The miners lived in an air-conditioned series of barracks which were located just above the carbon dioxide line, in a hot and humid atmosphere which was almost deadly to breathe. The openings to the shafts were below the CO<sub>2</sub> line and were reached by cabin-sealed magnatrams. Entrance was gained to the shafts through airlocks, but inside the temperature and the humidity tried to



keep pace with each other. Geiger counters located throughout the mines indicated that radiation was also at the upper borderline of safety.

Buchanan had not been inside the locks five minutes before he lost his temper.

"What the hell does the Government think it's doing?" he asked the mine foreman who had accompanied him down from the crater. "Are they *trying* to kill the workers?"

The foreman, a short-necked, thick-shouldered Earthman, merely shrugged. "If you live too long you work too long," he replied. "What's the use?"

Buchanan stopped short to stare at his companion. "Listen. Have you ever tried complaining about these conditions?"

The other gave him a gold-toothed grin. "Ha!"

"Now wait a minute! There has to be somebody you can go to!"

"Yeah. Haven't you met her yet?"

Buchanan's eyes widened, then narrowed. "You mean—Lorena Forral?"

The foreman chuckled. "That's the dame. If she ever comes to Hahddra, try complaining—just once!"

Buchanan said nothing more about the subject. To better conditions in the uranium mines of Venus was not his primary goal, but he planned to speak to Lorena about it when the opportunity arose. Come to think of it, his concern for the mines would be a good camouflage for his real intentions.

"Well," he said, after they had

walked some distance toward the main center of activities, "if we've got to answer to that shrew we'd better concentrate on production."

"Yeah. Here's the men."

THE men had been called to the "meeting hall" by sub-foremen and they were waiting in anticipation of making trouble for the new Production Manager, which was a traditional sport among them. It was one form of sabotage and resistance they seemed to be able to get away with. Unsuspecting, he came out on a low balcony above them—and stopped short, staring.

A tense silence gripped the men as Buchanan stood there. He suddenly turned to the metal stairs to his right and ran down them. At the bottom he was met by at least a dozen grinning Teranians, and he found himself in the bearhug of a man stronger than himself.

"Pete!—you old swobbie! How come you're still alive?"

Peter Puckett was too happy to grin. He only squeezed both of Buchanan's arms in his iron grip as though to assure himself that he was real. "Shut up!" he said. "This is my first miracle."

Buchanan reached out behind Puckett and grasped a taller man's hand. "Bill!" he shouted. "Bill Haufek! Am I dreaming?"

Haufek was lean and pale but still very much alive. He smiled faintly and his lips trembled, but he remained speechless.

"Hey Larry, you old moon loon!

How the hell did you get here?"

"By God, old spacemen never die! Larry! Remember me?"

They were all there—all his old space buddies from Teran—the ones who should have formed the crew of the *Carlota*. Herb Dobson, Ott Keffler, Phil Sutton, Lee Salkin, Hank Goodhew, Alex Jardine, Larry Pyle, and three other Teranians who were strangers but enthusiastic members of the welcoming committee. The Earthmen behind them looked on with some show of sympathy and understanding. For the most part, their belligerence had subsided. In fact, they soon crowded around the Teranians, vicariously enjoying their experience and trying to get in on the conversation.

The mine foreman on the balcony scratched one ear and looked at the clock on the wall. He shrugged and finally leaned on the railing to watch developments.

After a while, he shouted, "Hey, Buchanan! Let's get ahead with it! This outfit's got to produce or we all catch hell!"

Buchanan looked up at him from a ring of happy faces. "How long before the end of this shift?" he asked.

"One hour."

Buchanan wrinkled his brow. "And Lorena Forral is the only one I have to answer to around here?"

The foreman nodded. "That's enough!"

"Then I have only one more question to ask," said Buchanan. "Is there any liquor in Hahddra?"

The men roared enthusiastically.

Again, the foreman scratched his ear. "As long as you're willing to believe in fairytales, yes," he said. "But it's Forral's private stock, up at the villa."

"One more question," said Buchanan, his eyes narrowed.

"Yeah?"

"If I give you a couple of good men, how long will it take you to get it down to the barracks—enough for the second shift, too?"

The men fell silent. They watched Buchanan and their foreman, tense with wonderment and hope. The suggestion was tantamount to a revolution. And there were greater probabilities of painful repercussions than their new Production Manager realized—but they were willing to back him up.

The foreman was not averse to risking the newcomer's neck, and he was too smart to offend the men at this stage. It was a novel form of politics, an excellent beginning with the men if he could get away with it, which, again, was improbable.

"All right," he said, straightening up. "Better give me four Teranians. I might run into Drukh."

Buchanan turned slowly to face the others. "Who the hell is Drukh?"

For answer, the foreman said, "Ha!" and turned away.

It was the beginning of reunion—and it was the beginning of trouble for all of them. But the break in the monotony was worth it regardless of the cost. Puckett and Pyle and two of the strange Teranians came back with the foreman and the liquor—plus a

story. They had run across Druk, a huge, brutish *Braburni*, larger than any local Teranian, a freak Venusian giant who was Lorena's personal bodyguard on Hahddra. A considerable battle might have ensued had not the Colonial Patrol responded to the telemeter indications of the robomonitor devices placed everywhere on the mountain. When they learned that the new Production Manager had ordered drinks all around for both shifts of miners, they had thought it so suicidal an infraction of the rules that it became funny. The liquor detail had been allowed to proceed. In fact, the Patrol Guards politely helped them.

"Of course, what they're getting at," Puckett told Buchanan, "is that the robomonitors are all hooked in to every standard activity here. If we don't produce the required amount of uranium, or if we eat too much of the stores or too little, or take too much blasting juice from the tanks, all these items tickle a Master Monitor at Colonial Headquarters, and abnormalities simply ring an alarm. That's probably happened already, and Her Majesty, the Passionate Witch, will soon be here to chop us down."

They were in an eight man bunk room in the barracks, surrounded by all the other Teranians and a few Earthmen, including the St. John brothers. Beyond the closed door, the sounds of revelry could be heard as both shifts of miners tried to get plastered on the modest ration of liquor given to each.

"In other words," Buchanan grinned, "the Patrol Guards decided to help us to the feast that precedes the execution."

"Something like that. But the way they handled it it seems they're trying to emphasize the fact that this whole party is totally *your* act and responsibility."

"Maybe that's exactly the way I want it. Tell me. Any of you handsome brutes been raped by the Witch yet?"

Puckett looked up and found a few faces that were turning red. "A few," he said, "and they were Production Managers until they made one mistake."

"And that was?"

Puckett glared at him. "That Foral dame is the same thing as a witch, as far as love-life goes. Don't fall in love with her—she doesn't like it!"

Buchanan imitated the eloquence of his mine foreman and said, "Ha!"

The conversation drifted to other topics, and especially to Teran. Most of the Teranians present, including Puckett and Haufek, had languished in prisons on Earth or worked in Martian labor camps or elsewhere, having come to Venus only within the past several years, but there was one Teranian named Daniel Eckert who had just arrived via the Cardwell "Tri-Planet Co. Ferry," and it was his story that concerned them most.

Again, it concerned the Alphids, but this was the uncensored version and more up to date. Any news of Teran within six years of the present

was considered as extremely current.

"At first," he told them, "Lydecker's outfit appeared to be merely developing latent abilities in the Alphids to the point where they could be put to work in the underground, but after the big clash with the Interstellar Fleet the real truth began to come out."

He went on to explain in some detail the theories behind the amazing Alphid phenomenon. It seemed that the Alphids had never been threatened before, as a race. The original colonization of Teram had been gradual and peaceful; but the attack of the Interstellar Fleet was a different story. Tens of thousands of Alphids had been killed outright, which constituted an ethnic threat. The conditions necessary for a psychological mutation had been latent within them, and the attack had triggered the beginnings of the change. It was an abrupt adjustment to a changed environment—a racial defense mechanism.

"Okay," interrupted Buchanan, finally, "but what *was* the change in them?"

"Well, individually, they look and act the same. In their conscious minds they are individuals. But when danger threatens, subconsciously, they become so much *en rapport* with each other that they act as *one entity*. This entity has come to be called *The Alphid*."

"Interesting if true, but so what?"

Daniel Eckert eyed Buchanan patiently. "It isn't funny," he answered. "Imagine five hundred million minds

suddenly blended into one. Imagine the magnitude of a combined racial will like that, the effects of singularity of purpose, the infinite variety of information that could be absorbed and made immediately available. Imagine a race with a single subconsciousness that works day and night, learning on a planet-wide scale, capable of exerting its will through any single member at any place or in a hundred members in a hundred places at once. *The Alphid* is growing, mentally, and already the Party in the underground was beginning to wonder, when I left, whether the Alphids were working for them or they were working for *The Alphid*. He's subtle, powerful, elusive, and so far incomprehensible."

Buchanan's brow furrowed. "Assuming all this is valid, whose side is *The Alphid* on—ours or exclusively his own?"

"That's the big question. Naturally he would tend to identify us with resistance against Sol and therefore the defense of Teran. But whether or not we are going to be considered as intruders, also, is hard to tell. Lord knows what's happening right now."

"Well what's this Alphid done so far that's so alarming? Can he invent, express himself, communicate, operate weapons?"

"He can communicate—and has—through codatape. Mostly, he asked Lydecker questions concerning the Sol System, Central Government, and the origin of Teranians, meaning ourselves."

"Hmm — leading questions, all

right. What else?"

"Eidetic memory. Through various Alphids he has read everything on the planet. He may be inventing by proxy, through us. Some of the Party scientists came up with the damndest conclusions in the secret labs and built things they couldn't quite explain. The question arose, if *The Alphid* is influencing *our* subconsciousness, what is the end purpose? The biggest question of all is: If *The Alphid* continues at the rate of development witnessed so far, is *homo sapiens* going to continue as the dominant species in the universe?"

Buchanan poured another cup full of liquor. "What you need," he said, "is a drink! A lot of what you say may be true, but let's not be impractical. Speaking of practical things, Haufek, have you done any more thinking along the lines of your pet theory?"

Haufek and Puckett both gave him a quick signal of caution with their eyes, and Haufek said, "No." Hesitantly. "There's been no opportunity for that kind of meditation. It was just a dumb hypothesis, anyway."

Buchanan was immediately aware that if he read the opposite meaning into Haufek's words he would come up with a strong promise that something *could* be done about the mass inversion drive theory. In fact, from the attitude of both of his friends he gathered that they had stumbled on something but were asking him to skip the subject in front of the others. Many years had flowed over the dam since he had last seen the two of them.

And Haufek was a very unusual scientist.

"Well," Buchanan said, abruptly getting up from the table, "let's break this up. I've got to get that night shift back to work or we'll have more than the Passionate Witch on our necks."

"*Your* neck, chum," remarked Daniel Eckert.

"Hal"

## CHAPTER 17

**B**UCHANAN stood on the outer slope of the crater, a machine rifle in his hand. It was another infraction of the rules, but since both the giant Venusian, Drukh, and the Patrol Guards, considered him a doomed man, they let him have his way. His contention was that the men were entitled to fresh meat once in a while, if he had to hunt it down, himself. A week had passed since his arrival and the liquor party, but so far no repercussions had been suffered, which was taken by most of the men to be an ominous sign of grim preparations elsewhere. Retaliation was bound to come. In the meantime, he did as he pleased, and one of the results of his attitude was that the miners not only liked him, but had taken new courage and their production rate was up instead of down. Buchanan figured Lorena could put *that* in her pipe and smoke it.

He surveyed the panorama below him not without specific interests in mind. There had been plenty of talk of strategy at least among the Teranians. There was a faint possibility

of escape, there was apparently a specific place to go, and there was a definite goal they had in mind. But it was still hypothetical. A lot of groundwork had to be laid and there were vital risks to be taken.

Far below him was a vast sea of clouds, not ordinary clouds, but the sulfurous CO<sub>2</sub> bank that separated the upper levels of life from the world of the mysterious *Gagandii*. Below those deadly clouds were dense, treacherous jungles composed of flora which were independent of solar radiation because they generated chemical energy for the purposes of reducing carbon dioxide and obtaining the necessary carbon for life processes and synthesis of the carbon chain molecules which made fat, proteins and carbohydrates. What oxygen they liberated was absorbed by the gills of the *Gagandii* and other, lesser orders of oviparous animals, and thus a complete biological cycle was obtained in spite of the weird environment. It was a world unto itself.

A necessity for migration from one continent to another had made of the upper level *Braburnii* a race of primitive chemists. Although their methods were crude, they had mastered the rudiments of science necessary to the production of oxygen by chemical means. With very crude but reasonably effective gear, the *Braburnii* could penetrate the lower levels and launch small war canoes on the hidden seas. With these and a secret means of chemical propulsion they had learned to travel. These facts were closely related to Buchanan's

growing plans for escape.

Not far below him a much more enticing landscape was observable. Volcanic action still prevailed in the mountain at least to the extent that a few spasmodic geysers could be found. One of these spouted once every few weeks in the middle of a small, warm water lake that he had visited once before in the past week. From this lake a turbulent stream descended over clean rocks into several smaller lakes, which were merely large natural swimming holes connected by smooth, rock chutes down which the tepid water cascaded. Beyond the last pool a swift river gathered and spilled at last over a thousand foot cliff. This entire water chain was surrounded by semi-tropical forests in which both game and predatory animals were abundant. After so many years in space and in prison, this place was a welcome reminder of his early days on Teran.

He started down toward the string of natural swimming holes, intent upon taking a swim, as he had on his previous visit, and as he went he kept his eyes and ears open for game or danger, of which there was plenty of both. At the same time he was busy mulling over in his mind the implications of his last, startling meeting with Hausfek and Puckett.

They had brought him a Venusian, a medium sized *Braburni*, who had a smattering of basic English. He was six feet three inches tall, broad shouldered and muscular, with the somber, olive complexion of his kind, a minor chieftain of a small, local tribe. Sul-

len and wary, he had been typically reticent and difficult to drag information out of. He had given them the traditional warning that Venus was the exclusive property of his own people and that they would countenance no further encroachments—a remark directed in particular at proposed Colonial plans for opening up new mines further around the mountain. He had come to tell them that this would mean war with many tribes.

He did admit that his people admired the Teranians for their great strength and stature and that they were somewhat inclined to learn more about them because they believed they were potential allies, being victimized as they were by Earthmen. Curiosity, therefore, had also brought him to the little conference, to learn more facts about the world of their origin.

The end result was that he told them two things of great value. One was that the greatest Venusian chieftain, commanding tens of thousands of huge *Braburnii*, was named Ahahdd the Great, and that if they could ever make an alliance with him they might find a haven in which to prepare further strategy. He and his people lived in a hidden place on an adjacent continent, and the Colonial Authority had never been able to track him down and subdue him. The other fact the Venusian divulged was of infinitely greater value. It was this information which Haufek and Puckett wished to keep secret from the rest until they could make use of it. The

chieftain told them certain facts concerning the People of Darkness below the CO<sub>2</sub> belt. These humanoid creatures were capable of withstanding great extremes of atmospheric pressure and heat. They were able to descend into and explore deep caverns below sea level and follow ancient volcanic fissures almost to the source of active lava. Story and legend had it that these people were the masters of a strange element which, when brought up to certain levels, would explode with a terrible violence.

Buchanan, Haufek and Puckett permitted themselves to believe that this could be nothing else than cosmium. With cosmium and a safe haven, and numerous native allies to assist them, Haufek might have a chance of developing his mass inversion theory. A slim, almost invisible thread of chance led through danger and hung precariously on the pegs of legend—yet it was the only really *big* hope they had.

As Buchanan divested himself of his clothing and slid into one of the warm pools, he compared this knowledge with the certainty that Cardwell was well on his way toward completing a new Interstellar Fleet, a fleet that would move ruthlessly upon Teran and blast it to ruins, particularly now that *The Alpid* seemed to be cause for alarm.

His head ached from the intricacies of his problem. He shook it off and abandoned himself to relaxation and the pleasures of the moment. He stretched his great limbs and swam about, enjoying the slightly gaseous water. The pool fed directly into

a stone chute that curved around a cliff and ended in another pool which he had visited a few days before. He was contemplating shooting the "chutes" when a great flood of warmer water enveloped him from the lake above. Unknown to him, the geyser had erupted. He was swept down the chute before he could start to swim to the shore. Beyond the pool below

was the swift river and the thousand foot waterfall.

At the bottom of the chute, as he shot into the lower pool, he collided with something large, soft and warm—a naked human body. He struck the other's head hard with his shoulder, and immediately the two of them were entangled and borne by





the flood into the river. In the next instant he was aware of two more startling facts. The other swimmer had been knocked unconscious—and she was a young woman with long, auburn hair and a native complexion. He held on to her and tried to swim for the shore. In another moment she revived, spluttered, struggled in his arms, and screamed in English, "The falls!"

"I know it!" he shouted. "Swim with me!"

Together, they swam. She swam expertly, but it was his longer limbs and strength that finally saved them. They came out of the river just above the falls and she collapsed, near to fainting, on a great rock.

As he crouched over her, panting from his exertions, he had an opportunity to examine her more closely. Her face was not beautiful. In fact, it had *Braburnii* features—slightly puffed eyelids, a very small bridge to her nose, an upper lip that was equally as full as the lower one, and a deep olive complexion. Yet she had the features and the more lithe form of an Earthwoman. The whole combination spelled half-breed.

But she was tall, taller than an Earthwoman—almost as tall as Anne! She lay there naked before him, her deep breasts rising and falling with her rapid breathing. As he looked at her, her eyes opened again and met his gaze. They were quick, intelligent and frank. Slowly, she took in his naked figure and then studied his face.

"You—Teranian," she said, with

the *Braburnii* accent. "Save my life."

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I am—Aarri."

Suddenly, she sat up, threw her arms about him and hugged him. Before he could do anything at all to either resist or accept her, she broke away from him and ran into the woods. He sprang to his feet, ready to give chase, but suddenly realized how foolish it would be under the circumstances. It had been many a long year since he had experienced the sensation of holding a woman in his arms like that, and yet at the moment he was actually more concerned about finding out who she was. In the end, he chuckled and said aloud, to himself, "These jungles are dangerous! I guess anything can happen!"

He saw Aarri again the next day. He had been called to the mines in the middle of the night because of a minor cave-in that had killed two men and because of a fight between several of the others. There had been three more radiation deaths, and the men were getting panicky. Those original trouble makers he had first been forced to subdue on the space island had started it all over again. Buchanan and some of his Teranian companions had taken over, but he had had to work shoulder to shoulder with the men to extricate one miner who had been trapped in the cave-in. It had been a very rough night and he was worn, dirty and tired. Moreover, he was blazing mad and was contemplating summoning Lorena to Hahdra when he came upon Aarri.

It was at the villa, itself. He was

on his way to his small quarters behind the villa, passing between the main building and the barns, where some domesticated animals were kept. At one end of the row of low-roofed barns was a large, titanium beamed water tower. Below the tower was an open air wash room for the lesser help around the place. There were rinsing troughs and pounding boards, inasmuch as washing machines had been too much of a luxury to transport to this area, except in the case of Lorena, herself, who had a personal laundry of her own.

As Buchanan passed this outdoor laundry he suddenly stopped and stared at the girl bending over the rinsing troughs. A tall, lithe half-breed with long, auburn hair. As her blouse was loose he was again able to admire the depth and beauty of her rather exotic breasts, and in the same instant her quick eyes raised to meet his stare.

She paused, looking at him fixedly, as though stunned. She saw a tall, heroically proportioned man, a man with a lofty, red-thatched head and a square jaw, with crinkly, coppery colored brows and a commanding pair of eyes from which the inner self could not hide. He was bare to the waist, carrying his light work jacket in his hand. His long, powerful muscles glowed with fatigue and sweat, even through the streaks of dirt. But how tall he was!—taller than she, as tall as Ahahdd the Great, even almost as tall and broad as Drukh! A strange, wise looking young-old man from the stars.

As he stepped toward her she straightened up and tossed her hair back. She was frightened, not of him, but of their meeting—here, in this place.

"You told me your name," he said, without preamble. "Now tell me what you are doing here? What is your connection with the villa?" His eyes took in her torn garment, which was someone's petticoat, handed down—perhaps Lorena's. It was a faded yellow. In it she looked wild, a Venusian Gypsy—or better, she was the Venusian version of the Burma girl who waited for a certain British soldier by an old Moulmein pagoda. Again, Buchanan might as well have been that soldier in 19th century India. He was a part of colonial history repeating itself on an interstellar scale.

"I work here," said Aarri, with her *Braburnii* accent. Her eyes went to his hair and she seemed to want to reach up and touch it. "You—La-ree Bookan-an—straw boss."

He studied her for some time without speaking, then broke into a friendly grin. "Nice meeting you," he said, "again, that is."

Instead of lowering her lashes and blushing, she did the opposite. Her chin came up, her shoulders went back, as though she were proud to remind him of their first meeting. There was no indignation, only a proud eagerness to be admired by this kind of a man. But suddenly she looked about her, apprehensively, and turned again to her work.

"You must go," she said.

"I was going. But why *must* I go?"

"Drukh."

"Oh to hell with Drukh. Everywhere I turn it's 'look out for Drukh!' What's that circus freak got to do with you?"

With head bowed over her work, she answered. "I refuse to marry him, and so he says that he will guard me forever to see that no other man do so—for he will kill him."

"Oh for—" Buchanan started to say, then merely laughed. "Tell Drukh not to worry. I'm not going to marry you."

She whirled toward him, eyes narrowed but blazing. "Then go!" she exclaimed. "Why you torture Aarri?"

He started to laugh, but paused when he saw tears in her eyes. "I'm not torturing you. Aarri. Forget it! Just tell me one thing."

She wiped her eyes and straightened up, again tossing her hair back. "Yes?"

"You have an Earthman's blood in you. Who was your father?"

For answer, she spat upon the ground. "That is for my Earthman's blood!" she exclaimed. "I am of the tribe of Ahahdd, who is my brother!"

Buchanan's brows went up. "You mean—Ahahdd the Great—is your brother?"

"By the same mother, who died at the hands of an Earthman." Tears of hate were in her eyes now.

"Do you remember him—your father, I mean?"

"Who would not remember a demon? His name is Enrique Forral."

Very lights burst upon Buchanan's

consciousness and he staggered, visibly. "Then you—are the half sister—of Lorena!"

"Yes. It is my curse. You better go now, La-ree. I see Drukh."

Buchanan turned to see the giant Venusian standing on the back veranda of the villa, watching them. "So long, water nymph! I wanted to see Drukh, anyway."

Aarri busied herself with the wash, but out of the corner of her eye she watched him.

**D** RUKH was an inch taller than Buchanan, but much broader and heavier. His dark, glistening forehead slanted back from heavy brows. His great, ponderous face was somehow too large for his little, black eyes. He had that slight looseness of joint and awkwardness of stance that was characteristic of giantism.

"Hey Drukh!" said Buchanan, as he came alongside the veranda. "I want to talk to you!"

Drukh only glared hatefully at him through his puffy lids, in pure Oriental fashion.

"When is Lorena Forral coming here? I've got some problems to talk about."

Slowly, Drukh's thick lips parted to reveal a broken row of half rotted teeth. It was a malady caused by an addiction to chewing a Venusian plant leaf known as *djangan*, a mild narcotic that developed chronic mental lethargy. "You talk too much," he said.

"And you didn't answer my question."

Drukh's enormous, lumpy hands extended into the air and tensed, with thick fingers curled inward. "Some-day Drukh crush your skull like an egg."

Buchanan squinted up at him. "To think they used to use people like you in motion pictures!"

"What?"

"I said—how's your table tennis?" With this, he walked off.

But Drukh bellowed after him. "Miss Lorena come soon. You die, Teranian!"

Buchanan was singing an ancient tune to himself:

*"Come you back to Mandalay,  
"Where the old Flotilla lay."*

Then he thought of Teran and a tall, stately woman with a Midnight coiffure. And the years and the light years.

He went silently into his room.

## CHAPTER 18

**B**UCHANAN went down to work early the next morning. He arrived at the barracks an hour before the dayshift was supposed to go into the mines. The men were up and showering prior to going into the messhall, with the exception of a few veterans who were satisfied with a dash of what passed on Venus for coffee. Some of these were still in their bunks.

Puckett, Haufek, Keffler and some of the other Teranians, in the company of the three St. John brothers and two other Earthmen corraled him and started talking fast. They were

already having a quick breakfast.

"You're just in time," Puckett told him. "We're going into a council of war."

"Where?"

"You'll find out. It's in the jungle near here. Three tribal chiefs have asked for a secret powwow."

One by one, they drifted out of the barracks toward the magnatram station and then disappeared into the jungle, to meet further along the mountain on a narrow trail. The rendezvous was only half a mile distant, on a large ledge in front of a shallow cave.

Here were the three *Braburnii* chiefs and about twenty warriors, waiting with weapons, ceremonial paint and war hides. The weapons consisted of long, poison-tipped spearguns powered by native made plastic bands. Also, they carried tooth-edged short swords and blood-blackened bludgeons made of something akin to iron wood. The ceremonial paint was not on their bodies, but on the ground. In accordance with their incomprehensible customs, religion and superstitions often bordering on black magic, they sat or stood in proper positions within an intricate design they had painted in vivid blue colors with vegetable powders. The war hides, representing various short-haired killers of the jungle, they wore over their heads and draped across their broad shoulders and down their sweating backs. Native jewelry made of precious metals and painted bone completed the savage picture that met their eyes as they came upon the

place. There was not one *Braburni* present who was under six feet three inches or weighed less than two hundred and twenty pounds. One man, the strongest chieftain, who turned out to be the spokesman, was taller than Puckett. They came to a stop before a line drawn on the rock ledge, beyond which they were told not to pass.

The spokesman knew no English but spoke through a *Braburni* interpreter. "Who," he asked, "is chief among you?"

The general reaction of the Earthmen and the Teranians soon brought the man's eyes to rest on Buchanan. "Ah yes, the Son of Fire. It is fitting," he remarked.

There ensued a discussion which was remarkable for its brevity and its comprehensiveness. The *Braburnii* recognized all prisoners of the uranium mines of Hahddra, and especially the Teranians, as political allies in their perpetual fight against the usurpation of the Earthman's so-called Central Government. They had heard, especially, of the lean, fair-haired wizard named "Haoo-fehk" and wanted to know how much he had mastered of the whiteman's magic that could make the death light flow in wires and make day of night and run machines to carve out the bowels of the world, and who could lift whole cities of men into the skies and make his houses fly beyond the sky to other worlds. The *Braburnii* realized that they had to fight fire with fire and acquire this witchcraft. If "Haoo-fehk" could teach some of it to them,

they would help them escape to the country of Ahahdd the Great.

In fact, it was word from Ahahdd, himself, which had motivated this meeting. He was sending a fleet of war canoes through the Seas of Darkneś below the death mists, already offering them asylum—on one condition.

"You must bring with you one woman, Aarri, who carries the ancestral blood of Ahahdd, because she is his sister."

Haufek and Puckett looked at Buchanan, puzzled.

"I—ah—met her," said Buchanan. "I don't see why that should be so hard to do."

"It is a warrior's test," said the chieftain, meaning that it was perhaps almost suicidal. "She has tried many times to escape from Hahddra, but always she is caught and punished. Many times has she felt the whiplash of Drukh because of this."

Buchanan's brow furrowed. "I understood Drukh was in love with her."

"He is a madman with love for the half-breed."

"Then—how come he—"

The chieftain smiled. "The Son of Fire does not know the custom of our people."

"How about it, Larry?" queried Puckett. "Can you get hold of her?"

"I don't see why not, but—say, chief, do you mind if we talk this over for a minute among ourselves?"

With due ceremony, they retreated some twenty yards.

"What are we getting into?" Buchanan asked his companions in a

low voice. "Remember back in history when the whitemen sold rifles to the American Indians? All it accomplished was to get more Indians killed. In this case, that's not such a good idea. We need these Venusians. And if we get over to this other continent, then what? Without modern laboratory facilities what can we do?"

"Build them," said Haufek. "Through the *Braburnii* underground we can get a lot of things."

"Nuts!" retorted Buchanan. "That's years, gambling precious time on wishful thinking."

"Any better ideas?" asked Puckett.

"Just another drawback. How do we get across the intervening water with the Colonial Patrol looking right down our necks with radalax? They'd spot us in five minutes and blow us out of the mist."

"There's a way to confuse them," said Haufek. "Very simple strategy coupled with a simple piece of apparatus which I have already built. Leave that detail to me for now. We can get across."

"Come on, Buchanan," urged another Teranian, "let's make a decision."

"If I got this girl, Aarri, when would we make the break?"

"Let's ask the chief over there."

In a body, they moved back to the parley line and started conversation again, through the stony faced interpreter.

"The extra boats will be here tonight," replied the chieftain. "It is wise to use them quickly before they are discovered by the magic eye of

skyboat."

"At the end of the second shift," suggested Puckett.

Buchanan shrugged. "All right. I'll bring her."

The pact was sealed officially with a little silent war jig on the part of the *Braburnii*. There was something they said about the new Dawn of Vengeance, but the Teranians and the Earthmen were already too much occupied with their own plans to pay much attention.

"Tonight, then," said Puckett, for the others, as they reached the magnetram station. "At the end of second shift. For God's sake don't slip, because we'll all be off our posts, the tribes will be gathering with their breathing equipment, and the monitors will be screaming to Headquarters. We can't back out then."

"I'll be there," said Buchanan, "with Aarri."

AT the end of the first shift, Buchanan double-checked all the miners, including the foreman, and found that they were all well briefed on the plan. All the oxygen equipment they had on the premises had been collected in readiness, as well as Haufek's special gear for jamming up the Patrol's radalax. Small, inconspicuous details of men from the first shift were already carrying this to the meeting place with the *Braburnii*, and the latter were taking it all down into the CO<sub>2</sub> belt and the boats. Having helped organize and set all this in motion, Buchanan headed up mountain for the villa.

But when he got there, he ran into the last person he had hoped to see. Lorena Forral had arrived and a platoon of Patrol Guards stood around on the veranda in grinning expectation of an immediate execution.

"Well, Red," she addressed him, abruptly, "I understand your education has not yet been completed."

She stood on the steps of the villa in a two-piece lounging pajama of sheer, red plastiglas, and he had to admit she was as beautiful as Hell could have made her. In her hand was a long whip. She fixed him with a gaze, under long lashes, that he could not quite fathom.

"I won't waste your time or mine," replied Buchanan, his mind working rapidly in the emergency which faced him. "I took your liquor and gave it to the men, which was retaliation on my part for the hell hole you have allowed them to work in. You're not God, and I'll be damned if I'll submit to your assumed power of life and death. You said a Production Manager's first job was production. Look at your monitor readings and you'll see no cause for complaining. I'm busy." He hadn't intended quite the hot tone he used, but he could not resist telling her off, in spite of the precarious situation. Yet on the other hand he sensed that a certain amount of justifiable boldness would find favor in her eyes.

The guards tensed, and some of them placed their hands on their machine pistols, watching Lorena, but she remained calm, never taking her

eyes from him. The whip flicked once or twice in her hand, making little ripples.

"I have no quarrel," she said, "with the production rate. But insubordination is an ugly crack in the wall of Authority and must always be quickly repaired." Her eyes widened in a flash of command. "Buchanan, you will go to your quarters!"

Like a bad little boy. Still, that wouldn't be so bad if it would give him time—time to sneak out and find Aarri before the fireworks began. He shrugged and went on his way, impervious to the derisive laughter of the Patrol Guards.

Pretending that he understood he was to retire without his supper, he took a shower and got into his sleeping shorts. He lay on his cot staring at the ceiling, thinking fast. Executions usually occurred at dawn. It was a historical tradition, at least in a military sense. If he were to get it tonight he wouldn't have been sent to his quarters. Therefore, he might still have time, even though he'd be under close watch. Later, when the place quieted down—

The door opened. It was night. In the black frame stood Lorena, as before, with the whip in her hand. The light from the glo-panels on the walls almost rendered her two piece pajamas transparent. It was as though she were naked, bathed in ruby flame. Hell, he thought, is a woman. He sat up, bringing his feet to the floor.

"I told you once," she fired at him, "that I am the Law! I wish to inform you that I have dismissed the Patrol

Guard and sent them aloft again. We are alone."

Except for Drukh, thought Buchanan, but that didn't matter now. His pulse leapt with sudden hope. Only a woman and a dumb ape between him and success!

"Well, that makes it cozy—" he began. But he leaped straight into the air and yelled as the whip flashed heavily across his face and drew blood. He stood there wiping the blood away and glaring at her with the threat of murder in his eyes. "Why you dirty little b—"

"Crack!" The whip bit into his neck and shoulders. "Crack!" It bit into his bare back. "Crack!" It drew blood from the calves of his legs.

Furiously, uncontrollably, she flicked the whip, as though she were intent upon killing him with it. Her teeth flashed, her lips drawn back tight, her eyes blazing.

Half blinded with pain and rage, and fearing that the whip would strike his eyes, he reached out for it. Finally, it wound around his right wrist and with one titanic heave he jerked it out of her grasp. But he didn't let go of it. He flipped it in toward him and caught its handle.

Before she could escape through the door he leaped forward and blocked her, closing the door and locking it. He ducked and swung just in time to block her thrust with a dagger that she pulled out of a hidden sheath in her bra. The dagger clattered into one corner and she was flung into another. She glared up at him, still furious. He stood there, bleeding



Lorena Forral



from the long gashes she had cut on his face and neck and stomach and legs. As he glared at her he weighed the whip in his hand, speculatively.

"You wouldn't!" she cried out, more in the tone of a command than in fear.

"Now aren't you the foolish little virgin from Hell!" he retorted. At the same time he swung the whip with all his strength and cut her shoulder open.

She screamed and almost swooned. He dashed forward and slapped her mouth hard with the back of his hand.

"Shut up!" he told her.

She looked up at him, startled, frightened. Then she was mad again. She reached for the whip, but he threw it away. She struggled with him, scratched, bit—and he beat her repeatedly with the back of his hand.

Finally she stood there breathlessly, her lips swollen, her shoulder a mass of blood. He looked down at her face, then lower, at her half-demolished bra.

"You asked for this," he said. "The hard way!" And he suddenly crushed her to him and kissed her on the mouth hard enough to bruise her again.

She tensed, then her arms started to go around his neck. At which moment he threw her onto the cot and stood there laughing at her.

"You bitch! That's all you came for!"

She stared at him tensely, like an animal, her face white with strain. Suddenly, she was on her feet again, her arms around his neck, pressing

her lips — and her warm body — against him. Fiercely.

"You're the first one who ever knew how to handle me," she gasped. "It's true! This is what I came for!"

"You'd better get that shoulder taken care of. And never try using a whip on me again, understand?" He shook her, mauling her shoulders with deliberate roughness.

Her lips trembled. "If you disappoint me now, I'll kill you!" she warned. Then she kissed him several times, rapidly. "Wait here. I'll be back."

Buchanan thought — "Ha!" Fat chance.

THE moment she left, he cursed himself. He should have tied her up and gotten her out of the way. So now he would have to wait until she came back. He was certain she would return. In her condition—

He washed up and applied medication to his wounds. Then he turned out the lights and lay on his cot, resting and waiting.

What a woman! A pity she was a shrew like that.

So many long years it had been, since— But tonight was vital for other reasons. Down the mountain the stage was being set for the exodus. A hundred men depending on him, and the tribes were preparing the boats. Soon all would be in readiness. He had to get Lorena out of the way.

The door to his quarters opened once more and he discerned the dark outline of a woman entering before the door closed behind her. Before

he could wonder if she had another dagger, she was in his arms, sobbing.

"She whipped you! She's a living demon! I hate her!"

He sat up, startled, reaching for the light switch.

"Don't turn on light. It is Aarri."

"Aarri! What are you doing here? Don't answer that! It's a good thing you are. I want you to hide in my closet until I take care of her. She's coming back."

"Don't trust her. You must go now, with me. Take me away with you, La-ree. I love you. I help you!"

"Omigawd!"

"What you say, La-ree?"

"I say maybe you're right. We'd better get out of here. It might be a trap."

"You will take me?"

"I came here to get you."

Before he could prevent it, she had her arms around him. He suddenly felt lips on his such as he had never known. A soft, strong chain suddenly bound him there, holding her to him, in spite of the urgency of the situation down the mountain. His arms went about her for a moment, and he drank the tenderness she gave him.

Suddenly, the door to his quarters burst open and a giant shadow loomed in it. A lesser shadow was beside it, holding a powerful flashlight. Its beam caught Buchanan and Aarri in each others' arms.

Buchanan lurched for the light switch and flicked it on just as Drukh shouldered his huge bulk through the entrance, his ponderous face trembling with murderous rage.

Behind him, Lorena screamed, "Kill him!"

*(To be concluded)*



**POWER METAL** S. J. Byrne

# OTHER WORLDS

## STORIES

- The Game of White** ..... 6  
*James McConnell (17,000 words)*
- Power Metal (Part 3—Conclusion)**..... 44  
*S. J. Byrne (26,400 words)*
- Lost Continents IX (Article)**.....109  
*L. Sprague de Camp (12,500 words)*
- Punishment Fit The Crime** .....130  
*Lyn Venable (2,100 words)*

## FEATURES

- Editorial** ..... 4
- The Man From Tomorrow** .....140
- Letters** .....143
- Personals** .....156

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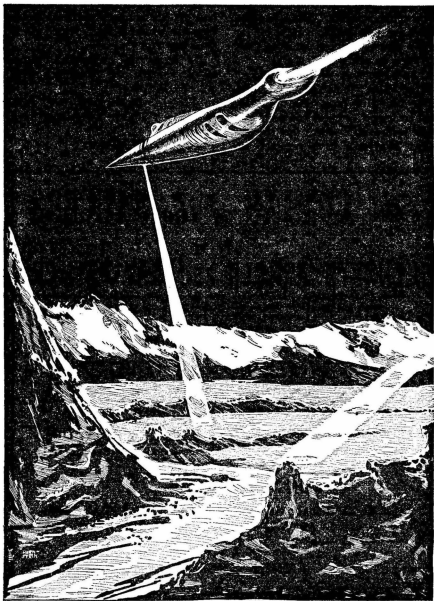
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*Illustrations by Charles Hornstein*

After a quarter of a century, Larry Buchanan and Vincent Cardwell meet again. Vincent the Invincible—the man Larry has battled on three planets; the man who has haunted him across five galaxies; the man he must kill in order to be free.

## **POWER METAL**

*By S. J. Byrne*

## SYNOPSIS OF PARTS I AND II

**L**ARRY BUCHANAN is descended from a long line of pioneers who helped settle and develop a colony of Earth people on the large planet, Teran, belonging to the planetary system of Alpha Centauri. Inasmuch as Teran has half again the mass of Earth, the resultant descendants have made an adjustment to environment resulting in greater physical strength and a much greater stature than their contemporaries inhabiting the governing system of Sol. Moreover, a careful system of selective emigration to the colony of Teran has resulted in a superior race of men in terms of intellect, training and personality, although they are in the minority in the ratio of twelve million Teranians to six billion Earthmen inhabitants of the Sol System.

Buchanan, a spaceman in the Alpha System, has always dreamed of taking the "big hop" to Sol, a six year journey, one way. His life long acquaintance, Vincent Cardwell, becomes more than a spaceman. In fact, Buchanan's view is that Cardwell has the "Midas touch," that everything he touches turns to gold. Subjectively, Buchanan resents Cardwell's more powerful and decisive personality and calls him "Vincent the Invincible." When Cardwell rises to become controlling stockholder in the Carlona Corporation, an interstellar shipping concern, this deepens the subjective schism between the two, but when Buchanan returns from a work assignment on the four moons of Teran

to find that Cardwell has married Anne, his bitterness is complete.

The Central Government on Earth has become completely dictatorial, especially in regard to Teran. The chief bone of contention suddenly appears in regard to a new element, cosmium, which promises a whole new era of advancement because of its tremendous yield of nuclear energy—far superior to anything previously discovered. Central Government is exploiting the Sol System's cosmium resources and plans to exploit the Alpha System under strictest supervision, all cosmium production to be returned to the Sol System for safe keeping and controlled distribution. A recent immigrant from Earth, Howard Lydecker, becomes leader of an underground Independence Party and plots revolution. Cardwell secretly plans to apply his Midas touch even to this brave dream of his people, unknown to Buchanan. The single interstellar ship belonging to his corporation, the I.S.S. Carlona, is to play one of the most strategic roles in the unfolding history of the Teranian Revolution. Cardwell is her skipper and Buchanan is the Assistant Engineer.

On the eve of departure for Sol, Buchanan stays at Cardwell's home, tension develops over the fact that Anne is still in love with Buchanan, and the two have a secret meeting during which Buchanan promises to return from Sol and help her get a divorce from Cardwell and marry him. Cardwell is aware of the clandestine affair and is frustrated prin-

cipally because Anne is one object his Midas touch cannot affect. On their way to the spaceport next morning, he and Buchanan have a hot argument over the total situation. Buchanan accuses him of having personal stakes in the revolution; he says that Cardwell's willingness to leave Anne and her infant twins for twelve years points to a greater personal goal attached to the voyage of the *Carlona*. The result of the argument is that they make a grudge pact to the effect that only one of them is going to return to Teran.

The part the *Carlona* is to play in the revolutionary plot is to hi-jack the cosmium and return to Teran, thus placing the revolutionists in a position to bargain for freedom. At the last moment a complication arises when the Colonial Governor, John Pomeroy, requests passage on board the *Carlona*. It becomes obvious that during the six year voyage to Sol they either have to get rid of him or convert him.

En route, they learn that a new Teranian governor replaced Pomeroy, a Governor Wainman, backed by additional troops for the colonial garrison. The voyage of the star ship, *Carlona*, continues, and in the meantime there is the matter of the secret grudge pact between Buchanan and Cardwell. When an opportunity presents itself for Buchanan to let Cardwell die, on one occasion when they are out in space in suits and Cardwell drifts away from their work raft, Buchanan finds he can't kill Cardwell. He has a built-in complex that recog-

nizes Cardwell as the superior personality. Cardwell laughs at him for his failure and tells him he is incapable of the clear, clean stroke of decision.

One result of their strange duel is that Buchanan had to use a small, secret ship to rescue Cardwell, a ship which had been stowed away without the Governor's knowledge, and which carried a secret weapon necessary to the success of the planned raid on Martanium. Once the "cat" is out of the bag, they have to imprison Pomeroy, but Cardwell thinks he can be converted to their cause.

During the voyage, Buchanan acquires two close friends: Peter Puckett, and William Hausck, a celebrated authority on nuclear energy. The three of them agree that something about the voyage of the *Carlona* does not ring true. They suspect that they are being used as pawns, along with Lydecker, the leader of the Independence Party, in a much bigger game, some hidden Master Plan that smells of Empire. Buchanan suspects Cardwell of duplicity but is not sure he is the Master Mind. The three men secretly discuss the scientific problem of interstellar flight, lamenting the limitations of matter when approaching the speed of light, owing to the sudden increase of mass when approaching C-velocity. Hausck lets them in on a secret theory of his, involving the possibility of a revolutionary type of space drive that might lead even to intergalactic travel. But for his experiments he needs cosmium—the Metal of Power. Realizing that



such a space drive would place Teranians in a distinct position of advantage over the Sol System's ships, they agree to keep the whole thing secret.

When they get within hailing distance of the Sol System they receive a message from a Solar Patrol cruiser instructing them to make a rendezvous with it in twenty-one days along their present course and to prepare to be impounded for investigation in connection with alleged subversive activities. All too smoothly, Cardwell revamps their plans and replies to the Patrol cruiser that they will follow instructions. He tells the cruiser, however, that he is aware of the nature of the investigation, that the guilty parties were apprehended and killed resisting arrest, as witnessed by "Governor Pomeroy." To make it look good, Puckett and Hausck are to disappear before the rendezvous with the Patrol ship. At first it was planned to plant their little secret ship, the Surprise, on one of the asteroids of the "Belt" beyond Mars and keep it there until they needed it for their raid on the cosmium mining colony of Martanium, at which time it was to be brought in by remote control. But now Puckett and Hausck are to man the little ship personally. This will serve the double purpose of hiding the strategic little ship and getting the supposedly dead conspirators out of sight when they meet the Patrol ship.

Buchanan accuses Cardwell of being too smooth about the whole thing, and of being connected with some

Master Plan. They have a physical struggle which is interrupted by Governor Pomeroy, himself. Pomeroy is the Master Mind. His goal is cosmium—Metal of Power—and dictatorship over both solar systems, with Cardwell as one of his right hand men. He says Buchanan, too, must accompany Puckett and Hausck on the Surprise, and assures him he will do exactly what he is told to do or end up being executed by Central Government as a rebel.

The Surprise departs for an asteroid, with Puckett, Hausck and Buchanan aboard. The Carlona meets the Patrol Ship at the appointed time, but Pomeroy and Cardwell and Buchanan's buddies on board the star ship are surprised to learn that the Surprise has doubled back and captured the Patrol cruiser with its secret paralysis weapon. Pomeroy and Cardwell are taken prisoner by Buchanan, Hausck and Puckett, and the rest of the Carlona's crew are informed of the Master Plan that was using them as pawns. The crew favors doing away with Pomeroy and Cardwell, but Buchanan, again, can't kill Cardwell. He offers an alternative plan. The crew of the Patrol ship are put aboard the Carlona in a paralyzed state which will wear off shortly. The Patrol ship captain is given a note to be read when he comes to, to the effect that the real conspirators are Cardwell and Pomeroy, as may be proved by the method of sub-psych-monitoring. Cardwell and Pomeroy are left on board the Carlona, in the ship's brig, and the rest leave on

board the Patrol ship, towing the little Surprise behind them on magna-beams.

The rebels park the Patrol ship on an asteroid to be used in making their getaway to Teran. But first there is the matter of the cosmium haul from Martanium. They go to Mars in the Surprise and succeed in taking the colony over with their paralysis weapon. They also shanghai a renowned specialist on the subject of cosmium, a Dr. Fernandini, and start back toward the asteroid where their companions are waiting to transfer the cosmium to the Patrol ship. They have learned, however, that the Solar Fleet is based at present on the Earth's Moon, for maneuvers, and they conceive of a "Pearl Harbor" maneuver with the Surprise, using cosmium torpedoes taken from Martanium. To blast Luna will be a kamikaze run, because the stolen Patrol ship must leave for Teran to avoid pursuit. Volunteers will be chosen by lot to take the Surprise to Luna.

En route back to the asteroid they receive a message from Pomeroy in which he announces that half the Solar Patrol was on his side in the first place and that he is quite in control of the situation which they thought was going to be a trap for him. He sarcastically thanks them for stealing the cosmium from Martanium, as that is also a part of his Master Plan to overthrow Central Government and take over. Buchanan is terribly affected by the realization that it was his complex which prevented the crew from doing away with

Cardwell and Pomeroy. He is determined to make the kamikaze run to Luna in the Surprise.

After the cosmium is loaded onto the Patrol ship, Puckett, Hausfek and Buchanan take the Surprise and two cosmium torpedoes and head for Luna at top speed. They succeed in blasting the Lunar Fleet Base and crippling the Solar Fleet badly. However, under the heading of incompetence the loss of the Lunar Base merely becomes another political brick for Pomeroy to throw at the present government, and he pulls his great coup d'etat, installing himself as dictator of both solar systems. Cardwell is appointed Admiral of the first Interstellar Fleet, to be built at once. He captures the Surprise, using the interference generator against the Teranian paralysis weapon. He outlines to his three captives the further phases of Pomeroy's Master Plan. The hi-jacking of the cosmium from Mars and taking it to Teran is just what they want. Governor Wainman, on Teran, is in on the Plan. He will overcome Lydecker and take the Patrol ship over when it arrives, holding the cosmium there as a bargaining point for Pomeroy to use with the Central Government's military factions. Thus the heroic efforts of the rebels have been expended merely to place the Metal of Power in the hands of their greatest enemy.

Remanded into the custody of Central Government, Buchanan loses contact with Hausfek and Puckett. In the meantime, Cardwell takes the Interstellar Fleet to Teran to back up Wainman and collect the cosmium,

and to smash Lydecker and the Independence Party. What appears at first to be a minor item of news is Lydecker's increasing use of the indigenous people of Teran in his struggle—the harmless little humanoid Alphids.

Buchanan spends thirteen years in prison on Earth, nursing his hate for Cardwell. His personality changes subtly as he hates and thinks. He swears he will never be free of the prison of his own self until he can overcome his inferiority complex in relation to Cardwell by killing him.

Finally he is sold into slavery in a Venusian colony, where he is to work in a uranium mine, with a short life expectancy. By attracting the attention of the Venusian Governor's daughter, Lorena Forral, he becomes production manager, though still a prisoner. In the mines he meets his old friends Hausjek and Puckett and other Teranians he knew back home, and he makes many friends among the Earthman prisoners. He violates every rule, throws a party for the men on Lorena's liquor, and they plan to escape. The upper level Venusians, the tall, sturdy Braburnii, want to work with them to effect the escape, especially that of Hausjek, whom they consider to be a great medicine man. Ahahdd the Great, the highest chief among them, living with his tribes in a hidden land adjacent to the continent of Hahddra, where the mines are, offers a means of escape to his country—boats and crude oxygen equipment, with which they can hope to penetrate the lower levels, char-

acterized by a CO<sub>2</sub> atmosphere, and cross the ocean channel. There is one condition. They must bring to him his sister, Aarri, who is the half-sister of Lorena Forral. She has been held on Hahddra by her half-sister because of certain information she has in connection with the legends of the non-human lower level Venusians who live in the CO<sub>2</sub> belt—the mysterious Gandii. Aarri is guarded by a gigantic upper level Venusian named Drukk. He is jealous of any man who goes near her, and particularly of Buchanan. As circumstances develop, Aarri falls in love with Buchanan, but he never forgets Anne, back on Teran, to whom he promised to return.

All is set one night for the exodus of the prisoners, and native Braburnii are helping the prisoners to assemble the necessary equipment for the escape down through the CO<sub>2</sub> belt and the lower levels. Latest news from Earth and Teran is that Cardwell was repulsed on Teran by Lydecker and The Alphid. It seems that the racial instinct of self-preservation among the Teranian Alphids has brought out a psychological mutation in them. Consciously they are individuals, but subconsciously they are a single entity, a super mentality that brings to Mankind grave forebodings concerning the future status of homo sapiens in the universe. Cardwell is building a vengeance fleet with brand new weapons. This time Teran is to be wiped out. Hausjek and his friends only have a few years to build Hausjek's new type ship if there is to be any hope of helping Terdn to descend

itself. The prisoners hope that in the hidden land of Ahahdd the Great they may be able to achieve this goal.

Buchanan goes up the mountain to get Aarri, but runs into Lorena Forral. She reprimands him for his infractions and sends him to his quarters, where she starts to horsewhip him. He takes the whip from her and returns the punishment, then kisses her. She tells him to wait for her and she will return to him when she takes care of her wounds inflicted by the whip.

While he waits for her to return, he plans to get her out of the way. Aarri comes to him, professing her love for him and telling him not to trust Lorena. He must take her, Aarri, away with him.

Lorena returns abruptly with Drukh, and Buchanan and Aarri are discovered in each others' arms. Drukh comes lunging into the room bellowing with rage, and Lorena orders him to kill Buchanan.

Now go on with the story.

## CHAPTER 19

AS Buchanan lunged to his feet to meet Drukh's bellowing charge he saw Aarri dart toward the whip, which still lay on the floor of his room. Lorena ran to intercept her, but he was suddenly too much occupied with the freak Venusian giant to watch the struggle between the two half-sisters.

As Drukh loomed upon him ponderously, his gigantic hands reaching out to crush him, he planted a blow in

the other's solar plexus with all his might. Although Drukh weighed more than three hundred pounds, Buchanan's two hundred and seventy-five pounds, backed by muscles hardened by a greater gravitation than that of Venus, had an effect which no "Earthworm" could have produced. The Venusian grunted and doubled over, hitting the bed and breaking two of its legs. Only vaguely aware of a furious battle going on between the two women, Buchanan leaped through the air, landing with his knees in the middle of Drukh's spine and striking his thick neck with a rabbit punch.

The giant bellowed in sudden pain and rage, shook his head and rolled over, sweeping Buchanan with him, bringing his superior weight to bear against him. The Teranian squirmed loose from his thick arm and got to his feet. As Drukh surged upward, Buchanan struck him square in the face. Drukh staggered, shook it off, and came at him, squaring his chest and spreading out his sweating arms like a wrestler.

"You going to pop like a beetle!" threatened Drukh.

"Now who's talking too much!" yelled Buchanan, and he gave him two straight bodied uppercuts to the chin.

He followed this with more swift blows, to his nose and his eyes. Drukh bled, deliberately taking the blows, but moving in all the time like a slow avalanche. Suddenly, Buchanan found himself against the wall and the Venusian embraced him about

his waist in a titanic bearhug, his bleeding face leering in triumph as he strained to break his opponent's back.

A great iron wheel seemed to be rolling slowly across Buchanan's back, gradually applying pressure that would soon crack his spine. Blood shot to his head bringing pain and dizziness. His hands found Drukh's throat and a contest of sheer strength and endurance developed. Sweat, heat, blood and hate. Drukh was full of dumb, brutish hate, but Buchanan hated this stupid obstacle in the way of vital success involving his companions, who were waiting down the mountain for him. And he was desperately wary of his life. He choked that great neck with all his Teran born strength, while waves of blackness swept over him intermittently and Drukh's big, battered face loomed in discolored suffering before him.

Then he kned Drukh and the giant released his grip with a howl. He punched blindly at the Venusian's mid-section. But it was then that Drukh landed a double-fisted blow on his chin and the world exploded in his face. His head struck the wall and he sank to the floor. Drukh picked him up and struck him again. Each blow was like a battering ram, mangling his face. The room raced around him in circles and he tasted blood in his mouth.

With his legs, he managed to trip the giant, and he fell, shaking the room. Buchanan made the mistake of getting on top of him, of trying to batter his face into a pulp. Massive

hands grasped him and rolled him over onto the floor. He tried for a wristlock but sweat was a handicap. The grip slipped and Drukh struck him on the back of his head. He sprawled out onto the floor and it seemed a black pit was trying to open up and engulf him. He wished it would, because the fight was out of him even though the will to resist was still there.

Suddenly, he was aware of Drukh's screaming. It was weird to hear that massive giant scream. He shook his head and looked up. As his vision slowly cleared he saw Aarri using the whip on the Venusian. She whipped him as furiously as Lorena had whipped him, drawing blood. It seemed that Drukh was instinctively afraid of whips. He cringed by the bed, on his knees, holding his hands up before his battered face. Lorena lay near the door, unconscious.

Buchanan was surprised to read the hate that was in Aarri's *Braburni eyes* as she swung her whip. She was probably repaying Drukh for a dozen whippings he had given her and at the same time releasing all the venom that her enforced imprisonment and life-long mistreatment at Lorena's hands had generated. But he knew that when Drukh conquered his instinctive fears and realized that it was only a woman who attacked him he would rise and take the whip from her. So he got to his feet and stopped her. As Drukh straightened up, still on his knees, and started to evaluate the situation, Buchanan came close to him and stared down at him, waiting

for him to make a move. Drukh started to reach for him, but in a single flash of swift motion he clasped his hands over the back of the giant's head and brought his knee up under his chin with all his might. As the other slumped, falling on his face, Buchanan took the whip from Aarri. Its base was of thick, heavy leather, heavier than a blackjack. Gritting his teeth against the inner cry of conscience, he brought the improvised weapon down with all his strength. Drukh lay very still in his own blood.

"The poor, dumb—brute!" Buchanan gasped.

"La-rwee!" cried Aarri. "Your face—it is broken!" She stared at him, crying with her eyes wide open and her mouth agape, lips trembling.

Buchanan raised a hand to search for his nose in a face that had lost its feeling. Quickly, he brought his hand away and looked at bloodied fingers. As he swayed, dizzily, Aarri came to him swiftly and gave him support, leading him to the bed. He lay there gasping for breath, fighting a sudden surge of nausea and knowing that he was bleeding too rapidly.

"Is there—first aid—equipment?" he asked. "Get—bandages." After that he passed out.

When he came to he found Aarri bathing his swollen face in some kind of medicated water. He knew it was supposed to hurt but he was only aware of a dull, far away ache in the middle of his face. His nose was badly broken.

"Where is Lorena?" he asked, finally.

"She is locked in your closet."

"Then—you didn't kill her?"

Aarri searched his lacerated face warily. "You want me to kill her?"

"No. That is, I—"

Aarri's eyes narrowed. "You love Lorena, La-ree?"

"Hell no! I just don't believe in killing." Except one man, he thought, with a twinge of real hate, as he remembered Cardwell. "Drukh is dead. That's enough. But I wonder what we're going to do with her. If we merely tie her up—"

"If we go to my brother, Ahahdd the Great, we hold her there, prisoner."

"You mean—as a hostage?"

"Yes. Make Enrique Forral give us what we need—white man's magic."

Buchanan sat up weakly to receive the bandage she had prepared for his nose. "That is not our plan, exactly," he told her, as she applied the bandage. "We hope to fool the Patrol and make them think they destroyed all of us in the Sea of Darkness. If they thought Lorena was with us—"

Aarri's eyes lighted with hope. "Then, you are ready to go to Ahahdd?"

"Yes. Everything is ready. We have to go now. But what about Lorena?"

Buchanan got up and opened the closet. Lorena stood there staring at him. She wore another two piece pajama, this time of light blue plastiglas that was equally revealing, particularly in view of the fact that it was half torn as a result of her struggle with Aarri. Her long, dark hair hung down

her side to her waist. In her hazel eyes he read genuine concern for him.

"Oh Larry your face!" she cried out coming into his arms. "It's all my fault. I'm so sorry. I'll do anything--"

"You get away from La-ree!" exclaimed Aarri furiously pushing her back into the closet. As Buchanan stared at the half-breed girl, wonderingly she added. "Don't trust her La-ree. She is evil!"

"Larry take me with you," said Lorena. "I'll help you!"

Buchanan tried to sneer with his swollen lips. "Like hell you would! But I'll take you."

"No. La-ree! Why you take her now?"

Buchanan turned again to Aarri. "That was your idea, wasn't it? We can't leave her here, and we can't kill her."

Aarri ran to one corner of the room and snatched up Lorena's dagger. Raising it she charged Lorena. "I can!" she cried, glaring hate at her half-sister. But Buchanan caught her arm and held her. Lorena refused to even give a sign that she was aware of her presence. She kept her eyes on Buchanan. "You cannot fool him!" screamed Aarri, still trying to get at her. "You with your Earthwoman face and demon body and heart of poison, with the full blood of our father in you! You not have this man like all the others! What you know of love—*daslahahdd'ha!*" The latter was some epithet that was without meaning to Buchanan, but it evidently had plenty of meaning for Lorena.

"You little—" Lorena lunged for Aarri with her nails, her teeth flashing in rage.

Blood would have been spilled again if Buchanan had not pushed them apart. "Cut it out, you two!" he exclaimed. They paused, staring at him. "We've got to get moving! That damned Patrol ship will be here any minute if the monitors are still working."

As they left the room, Lorena met Aarri's fiery stare and laughed with her eyes, behind Buchanan's back.

PUCKETT and Larry Pyle met them at the lower magnatram station, as all the rest were gathered with the tribesmen at the upper level point of departure, around the mountain. The second shift had not ended; the men had simply left their posts when Buchanan signalled from the crater that he was on his way down.

When Puckett saw Lorena and the bandage across Buchanan's battered and lacerated face, there was little left to tell of the story that he could not surmise.

"Cripes!" he exclaimed. "You must have run into Drukh."

"Yeah. He's off our list—but the Patrol Guards aren't. Let's move!"

"But—what's with the Witch? Why bring her?"

"She'll be less trouble with us than stirring up trouble behind us. Let's go!"

Buchanan led the two women onto the jungle trail, followed by Pyle. Puckett paused for one brief moment to watch his red-headed friend, won-

deringly. His eyes narrowed in thought for one moment. Then he followed them.

The point of departure presented a shadowy scene of preparation that none of the participants would ever forget. Although it was night and they dared not reveal lights to the danger laden sky, there were a few shielded points of illumination consisting of native oil lamps under thatched canopies and their eyes soon adjusted themselves to their environment. Earthmen, tall Venusian warriors, and taller Teranians moved back and forth to their appointed tasks, collecting and arranging equipment for the carrying parties. Several *Braburni* medicine men danced silently in ceremonial designs they had painted on the ground and burned strange incense before the images of their various gods, while four tall chieftains in their war hides stood watching or giving instructions to their warrior aides.

Buchanan turned Lorena over to a detachment of Earthman miners for safe keeping and went to find Haufek, accompanied by Puckett. The scientist was busy making final adjustments on his "gimmick," which was to fool the Patrol ships. It was a thermatron powered magnabeam absorption field generator, capable of absorbing the electromagnetic radalax waves in such a manner that they would reflect back to their source with a minimum of distortion.

"We'll tow a few dummy rafts way behind us," he explained, "and when the Patrol detects them they'll blast

them out of the water and, we hope, report that we were all killed."

"There's just one fly in the ointment," put in Puckett. "We've got Lorena Forral with us. If the Patrol knows that they won't fire."

"In that case we'll release the rafts farther out and perhaps put a propulsion unit on one of them and have it tow the rest in another direction. They'll follow, but when they find out the rafts were decoys we'll be out of harm's way."

It was only then that Haufek noticed Buchanan's bandaged face. He stopped and stared, but before he could say anything Herb Dobson and Lee Salkin interrupted.

"Hey Larry!" Dobson exclaimed. "We're about ready to go and Chief Didjandu wants to see you."

Aarri was already there, talking to the chieftain in *Braburni*. She acted as an able interpreter and seemed to be very proud about the whole thing. Now that she was close to her "other blood," her more savage personality had begun to reveal itself. She stood beside Buchanan as though he were her mate.

Chief Didjandu and his three colleagues silently observed Buchanan's face, at first, with a stoic lack of expression. Then Didjandu spoke, in solemn tones.

"Son of Fire, Slayer of Drukh. Now you are a warrior," Aarri translated. Evidently the killing of the ogre of the mountain was equivalent to the slaying of Goliath. His fame had gone before him. Aarri had not tarnished the tale of heroism with a



recital of her own contribution to Drukh's demise, and thus a warrior's legend was launched. Buchanan grinned back at the chief through swollen lips.

"You have brought Aarri, blood sister of Ahahdd the Great, and your journey begins," continued Didjandu. "In the Land of Ahahdd, you make blood brother with *Braburnii*. Haoofehk great medicine man, teach white man magic. Other white men *Braburnii* kill and drive out. So speaks Garlanath, God of Wind and Sky." Thus Didjandu went on, ceremoniously, while Buchanan itched to be on his way; yet he hesitated to insult the tribesmen by disrupting tradition.

"But one thing evil omen," said Didjandu, finally. "You bring Witch Woman. While she live, evil live and follow you."

Buchanan knew Aarri was watching him closely now. So he said, "Aarri, sister of Ahahdd, is wise. Lorena is daughter of Enrique Forral. Aarri says we hold Lorena as our protection."

Aarri translated this with some hesitation. Didjandu studied Buchanan closely.

"Witch Woman have demon fire in her body," the chief replied. "This magic twist the eye of man and he see not what trail he follow. Aarri is woman. She wise but not warrior. What warrior say?"

It was good repartee for a Venusian jungle inhabitant. Buchanan sharpened his wits with a mental exclamation of "Touché!" He entered their own ceremonial pattern by straight-

ening up in a stern attitude of lofty pride. "I am not a warrior," he said. "I am a chieftain! Ahahdd the Great requests a warrior's test be passed to rescue his sister, Aarri. This I have done, but it is not enough. Ahahdd should know whom he brings to his camp. Son of Fire is not only the Slayer of Drukh. He bring great white chief's daughter to throw at Ahahdd's feet!"

Aarri was roughly torn this time between civilized suspicion and savage pride as she translated. The eyes of all four Venusian chieftains lighted up with enthusiasm and understanding. Buchanan enjoyed a mental chuckle. Ever since monkeys were born, the jungle loved a braggart. To these savages, his bold statement was incontrovertible.

"A warrior chief has spoken," replied Didjandu. "It is good. And now you go, with power of the gods."

Aarri followed him possessively as he turned and made his way toward the others.

## CHAPTER 20

THEY wore hip boots made of woven fibre by the tribesmen, to protect them from unpronounceable and often unnamed crawling horrors of the lower world darkness. They marched in single file and in groups of five, which was a strong symbolical number among the *Braburnii*. But there was a more practical reason for the grouping. Each group of five carried an oxygen "sleeve" that enveloped them, as though they were bear-

ers of a Chinese paper dragon. The sleeve was also of a woven material and gummed over on the outside with some vegetable substance similar to unvulcanized rubber. Each bearer carried on his back a cluster of hollow gourds capped with the equivalent of a wooden whistle, which was a crudely adjustable valve, held on by tough plant fibres. Chemicals placed inside the gourds generated oxygen and built up pressures which relieved themselves through the "whistles" whenever they reached a critical point. When the whistles ceased their faint wailing, like an archaic popcorn wagon, the bearers would wiggle their shoulders and shake the chemicals a little more, and soon the elfin whistling returned. Thus had the Venusian savage proved his adaptability to environment. Earthmen and Teranians, ten thousand years advanced beyond the *Braburnii*, were the beneficiaries of this primitive technology. With it, they entered a world not made for man, a dense, cloying, humid world of carbon dioxide and sulfuric gases. Somewhere below, boats awaited them on the Sea of Darkness.

Buchanan was leading one group of five, which meant that he was also the eyes of the group. Behind him were four Teranians—Puckett, Haufek, Eckert and Kessler—inasmuch as the mixing of Earthmen and Teranians in one sleeve would have given rise to some problems of height distribution. Ahead of him was the only group of tribesmen accompanying them. These were their guides. On

the back of their sleeve they had painted a phosphorescent substance which glowed sufficiently through the murky atmosphere of CO<sub>2</sub> for him to see it. No torches would have burned here.

Through a small slit of mica set in the rubbery goo that covered the oxygen sleeve, he watched the ghostly glow of the guide's sleeve and tried to take up any slack in the guide line tying them together, so that no one would trip. How the guides, themselves, found their way he left to their gods to figure out. He only hoped they would reach the boats before somebody's oxygen supply gave out. The trail was steep, which was a consolation as well as a disadvantage, because the faster they descended the sooner they would reach the sea.

Inasmuch as their arms protruded from the sleeve, they could handle spears. They held these in readiness, though they could not understand of what use they might be in this deadly gloom where nothing could be seen. Once in a while they heard animal noises, coughing sounds and low, rumbling trumpeting. Once a web of roots came alive and sought to ensnare them, but they followed previous instructions. Clay jugs hung at the sides of the sleeves. These they opened and poured on the roots. The native manufactured acid soon made the root webs curl back into the soggy brush. On another occasion, Buchanan heard the native guides yell, and he was forced to come to a stop while the Chinese dragon ahead of him thrashed madly about. Another

jug was spilled, and a phosphorescent liquid splashed against some obscene crawling thing the size of a bushel basket, making it a clear target. Buchanan knew that of the ten men in the two sleeves only he and the lead-man could see, so he came in with his spear and helped kill the thing.

"Stay clear!" he heard the lead-man say, in a muffled tone. "Poison!"

Buchanan's stomach quivered in strange revulsion as he fought the writhing mess near his boots. It was a rolling, quivering mass of slimy mouths among which crawled detachable tendrils, like so many worms. A myriad of spiked tongues darted incessantly from the mouths, which he surmised were poison bearing barbs. When they had mauled it enough so that it lay still and the worm-like tendrils seemed to be shriveling and dying, Buchanan shouted at the lead-man and asked what the thing was called.

"Daslahahdd'ha!" replied the other.

As they moved on down the trail, Buchanan remembered that this was what Aarri had called Lorena and he suppressed a grin in the darkness to spare his swollen lips the pain. What more despicable and lowly form of life could be referred to when searching for an approbrious epithet?

"Man!" ejaculated Puckett behind him, after Buchanan described the creature. "You talk about Dante's Inferno. Hell never heard of this place!"

When they reached the calm and tideless sea they found ten boats and

four rafts. The boats were of light construction for carrying up out of the CO<sub>2</sub> belt, but they were surprisingly roomy. Woven matting caulked with the same rubbery substance as was used on their oxygen sleeves was stretched across a clever framework of warped wood, forming long hulls with a beam that compromised neatly between seaworthiness and speed. To the gunwales were fastened long sleeves of matting which were stuffed with hollow gourds, a wise provision against capsizing. Each boat was equipped with wooden hoops like a covered wagon, over which more caulked matting was stretched. Once the passengers were inside this matting could be closed tightly and a battery of oxygen gourds could be set in operation. Propulsion was provided by a chemical gas generator which possessed jet-like exhausts below the water line. The pilot of each craft was provided with sacks of a chemical which, when dropped down the tube of the generator, caused gases to form which emerged under considerable pressure from the exhausts and pushed vigorously against the dense, chemical laden water. Steering was accomplished by means of a cumbersome double rudder. One great blessing was a coating of phosphorescent paint on the inside of each boat's oxygen cover, so that illumination was available without the necessity of burning up valuable oxygen and filling each boat with oil smoke.

There was very little opportunity for conversation under the difficult circumstances produced by their en-

vironment. Two five man sleeve groups went into each boat, the *Braburni* guides accompanying Buchanan and his four companions. Buchanan had no chance to walk around and inspect each boat like a proper chieftain. There was no provision for solo operation in the dismal country of the as yet unseen *Gagandii*. He could only assume that the two women had been put aboard. He knew that they had gone together in one sleeve accompanied by three of the Earthmen, and that Aarri, at least, would certainly manage to get aboard. If she had not succeeded in drowning her half-sister in CO<sub>2</sub>, then Lorena, too, was still with the expedition.

The lead boat, which was his, shoved off, dragging towline with it that would soon be pulling a raft decoy at a safe distance. Haufek was busy tuning up his "gimmick," but he paused to hand Buchanan a compass.

"Our leadman speaks some English," he said. "Maybe you can argue with him. Half their seagoing expeditions disappear because they rely on reading the currents and praying to their gods. Tell him this is some of the gre-e-a-t Haoo-fehk's whiteman's magic."

"But—what would be our course?" asked Buchanan.

"If we can believe their primitive painting on the ground that they call maps, I'd say the Land of Ahahdd is due South of here and about seventy kilometers away. This sea is merely a large channel between two continents."

"What about current drift?"

"That's probably where they get lost. Enough lateral drift and poor speed, and they're heading into the lost horizons."

"We'll have to rig up some kind of speedometer and watch the angle of our towline on the rafts. Maybe we can figure an equation that can guide our course."

"One thing for sure," said Puckett. "You're sure as hell not going to navigate by the stars down in this soup!"

Stars . . . Five Teranian spacemen looked at each other in the ghostly phosphorescent light of the hooded boat. An inexpressible longing for the great, clean, fiery gulfs of interstellar space assailed them all. The thin wail of the oxygen whistles began to give them claustrophobia. Danny Eckert cursed, which seemed to express the sentiments of all five of them.

"Haufek, do you honestly think we've got a goddam chance in hell of building your space ship?" Keffer asked, suddenly.

Haufek was busy over his "gimmick." Finally he answered without looking up. "Given *enough* hell, we might make it."

HELL came from all sides, as if in answer to Haufek's pessimistic remark. The guide lines tying the boats together became fouled. Inexperienced Earthman or Teranian pilots either steered into other boats or applied too much or too little of the gas generating powder to the propulsion tubes. With no satisfactory

means of communication available. the traffic evolved into something resembling a Gordian knot. Some of the boats actually climbed up onto the rafts which were supposed to trail far behind.

The *Braburni* guides in Buchanan's craft came to the rescue here by skillfully bringing their vessel out into the lead and, by a process of accelerating in tugging spurts, they indicated to others which direction to take. When they finally became sufficiently untangled to proceed at a normal rate, there was no way of telling whether or not all boats were accounted for. Some might have broken their lines or sprung leaks. Others, having been rammed in the sides, may have sprung leaks in their oxygen hoods. In fact, once they heard a muffled sound of violent coughing and wheezing, and at another time they heard a distant scream of agony. There was nothing to do but go on. And through it all they sweated in their confines, feeling clammy and panting slightly for air, fighting against their encroaching claustrophobia and wanting to yell, fight or die—anything to escape the intolerable monotony of that silent gliding through the unbreathable night over an uncharted sea in that dark world that belonged to another phylum of life.

By the time Buchanan and his companions had rigged up a means of judging speed and drift and finally established a course, some distant volcanic disturbance brought an ocean tremor in their direction in the form of half spent tidal waves. They came

rolling out of the opaque mists without warning, cresting against the pressure of currents, and suddenly all boats were borne along in a hopeless entanglement. The gourd filled pads along the gunwales saved Buchanan's boat from capsizing, but they passed one close by that was upended and sinking in the violent flood. When the waves finally passed them, they were totally disorganized, half the guidelines were severed, and they were far off course in a region of currents so swift that the heavy waters rippled about them with an audible sound.

As has happened several times long years before, on Teran, Buchanan now felt that his solar plexus had turned into molten lead. He took over a mica observation window and watched the churning waters in his immediate vicinity, which had suddenly acquired a phosphorescence of their own. Once, when they circled aimlessly in an eddy, he discerned a raft nearby. Sprawled out on its surface was the inert form of a woman.

"What the hell are you doing, Larry?" asked Puckett.

Buchanan made a dash for the sleeve in which they had traversed the jungle. He appropriated one cluster of oxygen gourds from the battery up front and, picking up the sleeve, started aft.

"Hand me a knife, quick!" he exclaimed.

"What the devil's up, Larry?" asked Haufek, who was still at the controls of his "gimmick."

"I'm going to cut our raft loose and tie on another. When I get on the sec-

ond raft, pull me in. There's a woman on it."

Eckert leapt to his feet. "You can't go out there!" he exclaimed. "Forget the woman. She's dead! You can't open our hood out here. We've got enough trouble!"

Buchanan eyed one of the native tribesmen and pointed to his knife, commandingly. Impressed by the magnitude of the deed that was contemplated, the *Braburni* handed over the weapon.

Eckert yelled and lunged to intercept him, but Buchanan gave him a swift uppercut and he sank to the damp deck of slats above the caulked matting of the hull. Before anyone else could move to stop him, he unfastened the back end of the hood and went out, together with the sleeve and the gourds. Puckett hastily closed the flap of the hood, coughing in the sulfuric fumes. The *Braburni* leadman released more oxygen from the gourds and the tiny whistles competed loudly with the coughing and swearing of the men.

**B**UCHANAN, holding his breath, swam easily in the dense water, and the currents in the eddy bore him swiftly to the raft. With him he carried the severed end of the tow line that had been attached to the lead boat's raft. As he reached his destination he threw a slip-knot around his ankle, thus tying himself to the boat. Throwing himself onto the raft, he threw the sleeve over himself and the girl and pulled one of the whistle valves clear out of a gourd.

With a "whoosh!" that died quickly in a sigh, the oxygen inside escaped and he filled his lungs with it. It was necessary for him to sacrifice another gourd in this manner before he obtained relief. In the meantime, the three remaining gourds were whistling merrily and the sleeve began to un-wrinkle as oxygen filled it. He replaced and refastened the other two whistle valves and juggled the gourds. One remained inactive, but the other began to whistle feebly as more oxygen began to be generated inside.

He groped for the girl and lifted her head in his arms. In the darkness inside the sleeve it was impossible to tell whether this was Lorena or Aarri. He forced an active gourd valve into her mouth and waited. He felt for her pulse but could detect no sign of life.

He felt a tug at his ankle as the towline became taut. They were dragging him in toward the boat.

In that moment he was aware of a great light suffusing the darkness. It was followed by a blast as a bomb exploded some distance away. The ocean rose up like a water spout and he felt himself being dragged off the raft by the towline. Without thinking of the consequences, he reached down with his knife and severed the line.

He could hear other explosions in the distance. The Patrol had detected some of the rafts and was bombing the whole area. Evidently Lorena was considered to be expendable under the circumstances, or they did not know she was here.

The raft swirled away on the crest of the new turbulences created in the

water. Buchanan knew that he was lost, with a very limited air supply. The bombings became more infrequent and more distant and finally ceased altogether. He hoped that Haufek and Puckett and the rest would make it to the Land of Ahahdd, but he doubted it.

The girl in his arms sighed, then coughed, trying to shove the gourd away. Finally, he heard her voice, murmuring incoherently. It was Aarri.

"Aarri!" he called. "Can you hear me?"

"La-ree!" she sighed. "Son of Fire!"

"Forget that baloney! Wake up! What happened to the others?"

"Two boats crash. Some fall out. I swim to raft."

Very enlightening. He cursed under his breath. It might have been better for all of them to die in the uranium mines than out here.

"You worry. La-ree? If any man take me to my brother, it will be you."

"Don't be a fool!" he almost yelled. "Lost out here on a raft without power and not enough oxygen to last us another hour? You're crazy!"

"Whiteman think what you call—logic. *Braburn* think other way—on outside, with wind and sky."

"Well, there's no damned wind or sky either, down here—so dump your crystal ball overboard and relax. This is the end of the road!"

"La-ree never believe in something impossible because he know it is going to happen?"

He started to speak, then caught

himself. Yes, he believed, in prison, that he was going to get out and find Cardwell. He believed it because he willed it. When he recalled that old fire of hate, something strengthened him, momentarily. Cardwell — out there in the star-spangled universe, preparing death for Teran.

"What is it, La-ree?"

"Nothing!"

He felt her actually snuggle against him and relax comfortably, exactly as if they were enjoying a canoe ride on some moonlit bay.

"Don't say I'm crazy. La-ree. If I was to die, why did I not do it when I fall out of boat? Why am I here now in your arms?"

"Just to prolong the agony."

"No. The gods are with us."

"Then they must breathe CO<sub>2</sub>. They're *Gagandii*."

She tensed and sat up. "La-ree! Maybe that is it!"

"What is it?"

"The *Gagandii*! Maybe they find us!"

"And have us for supper. No thanks!"

"But they cross Sea of Darkness in boats—never get lost."

"Now you tell me! Why didn't we contact them in the first place? Make a deal with them to get across."

"They — are half enemy, half friend. Hard to find."

"Have you ever seen one?"

"Dead one—like river lizard, with air flaps."

"With what? Oh, you mean gills. Can they talk?"

"No, but there is writing language

—many signs they paint on stones on edge of upper level, for *Braburnii* read. Medicine men make messages with *Gagandi* signs." After a considerable silence she added, "Medicine men teach Aarri sign language once. Some signs tell strange stories, what you call—legends of *Gagandii*."

"Such as?"

"One is Aarri secret. Lorena always try to get. That is why she want to come with us. That is why I tell you not trust Lorena. She know I love you, La-ree, and give *Gagandi* secret to help you make star ship."

"What are you getting at? Most of that medicine man stuff is bird seed."

"Long ago, *Gagandii* say, white-men come make big secret place under mountains—try live forever. They die from demon sickness but leave great whiteman magic place. Little whitemen always try search for it but *Gagandii* kill."

Now Buchanan tensed and straightened up. She had struck a chord of memory in him that reverberated like thunder. The old legend of the Last Jesuits! In the twenty-third century, just prior to the founding of the colony on Teran, the Last Jesuits had financed a secret expedition of their own and come to Venus in the early days of its development. Legend had it that they foresaw complete dictatorship and social degeneration, that they were endowed with great scientific knowledge, even that they had discovered longevity. Their plan was supposed to be of the Messiah type. They wanted to hide out with their knowledge for several cen-

turies, develop it, and then return to human society and establish their own kind of civilization. Jealous scientific interests had influenced the government of Earth to pursue them, but they disappeared and were heard from no more.

Over two centuries later, here he was with a half-breed *Braburni* girl in his arms, irrevocably lost on a raft and about to die of suffocation—hearing fresh news concerning the legend! Logically, the *Gagandii* would know about it, if the Last Jesuits actually did penetrate their world and leave behind some tremendous technological monument to their passing.

"Aarri."

"Yes, La-ree?"

"You speak as though you know where this place is. Do you?"

"Only partly. I know which land."

"All right. Which land is it located on?"

She remained silent.

"Well?"

"Aarri not smart, but this knowledge big treasure, like heart. Not give away in one minute, La-ree."

"Hell, I was just making conversation! What difference does it make—now?"

Aarri pressed close to him. "If we live—maybe I tell, La-ree."

"Yeah. That's great!"

Thus he drifted on the raft with Aarri in his arms and waiting for the last whistle valve to sputter into deathly silence. Gradually, as the awareness of death approached, he began to savor the moments of life that were left to him with growing



desperation, not in fear of death but with a soaring evaluation of the state of living, which was a shining miracle he had never really examined before.

He was suddenly very much aware of Aarri. His arms went around her tightly, and hers responded with a perfect understanding. To him there was little to say, but she thought differently.

"La-ree, if we live—"

"Shut up!"

After a while, he knew she was crying.

"I'm sorry."

She found his bruised lips and kissed him again with a tenderness that was amazingly rare, a thing that was difficult to define—unless one believed in the fairytale of complete self-effacement and devotion.

There were worse ways of dying . . .

**I**NSIDE the sleeve, the oxygen gourds had become silent. Neither figure on the raft moved when it bumped gently against the luminescent buoy. The current made it swing around the buoy until it caught on a line that stretched outward in the dark sea toward other glow-buoys that were invisible in the thick mists.

Nor did either human on the raft notice the approach of the strange boat along the buoy line. Great hooks emerged out of it and caught large knots in the line, pulling the vessel forward. Over the gunwales, eyes stared, like the chameleon eyes of Teranian Alphids, and behind salamander faces great gill sacks rose and fell in even cadence.

Slimy, webbed feet came over the gunwales and stepped onto the raft. Webbed hands lifted up the oxygen sleeve and chameleon eyes examined the two underneath. The creatures chirped unintelligibly among themselves and lifted the inert humans into their boat. Several others came forward with apparatus that their race had never built. They were bonafide, factory made oxygen helmets with freshly filled tanks to fit on the back. The gauges were too ancient to work, but the helmets filled immediately with oxygen at the touch of a valve. The boat stopped its painful progress along the buoyline and the *Gagandii* stood there patiently on the deck and waited for the humans to revive. Two more boatloads of them approached from the rear, and more of the slow-moving, chirping People of Darkness joined the watchers.

## CHAPTER 21

**T**HE LAND OF AHAHDD was in actuality a great continent in the southern hemisphere of Venus. By comparison with this vast, savage territory, Hahddra was England, lying off the coasts of Europe. Unfortunately, however, over sixty percent of it lay below the ubiquitous ocean of CO<sub>2</sub>, leaving only wild mountain ranges exposed to the Venusian troposphere. This "upper level" area comprised some nine hundred thousand square miles of terrain which was largely wooded, containing high altitude fresh water lakes and turbulent rivers. Active volcanoes in

some regions laid a perpetual smoke screen along the tops of the ranges, whereas in most of the other areas where valleys, great, extinct craters or spectacular gorges and canyons would ordinarily have presented themselves to view, rain clouds drifted in and out between the shoulders of the land, making it extremely difficult for any aerial survey group from Colonial Headquarters to obtain a clear picture of the topography, except by sonarsounding and radalax bearings.

For more than three centuries, Earthmen had attempted to exploit this continent, but station after station had been wiped out completely without a trace. Punitive expeditions had always managed to scrape up a few of the tall, proud *Braburnii*, but the real hiding place of the great tribes of this land had never been ferreted out. Inasmuch as the cost of exploitation always exceeded the returns, financial pressures at home had finally caused Central Government to leave the continent alone. There was enough uranium, copper, vanadium and tungsten in other parts of Venus to satisfy the needs of Sol, especially considering the uranium shipments from Teran.

One month after the Colonial Patrol had reported the runaway expedition of prisoners from Hahddra destroyed, a tall, broad-shouldered, red-bearded Teranian with a broken nose was observed by a *Braburni* scout in the Land of Ahahdd. As the scout, himself, was almost equally as tall and powerful, and inasmuch as he was

a renowned warrior among his own people, he made the mistake of trying to add to his laurels by capturing the intruder single-handed. That he escaped with his life was perhaps intentional on the part of the red-bearded giant, and the story the scout brought to Ahahdd the Great prepared the way for him.

La-ree, the Son of Fire, had arrived at last, after some of his surviving companions had announced his death. Shortly on the heels of the first scout came others, saying that he had been observed in the company of a half-breed *Braburni* woman. Aarri, sister of Ahahdd, was coming home to her people at last.

Thus it was that Ahahdd moved forward to meet the warrior chief from the stars, who was the Slayer of Drukh. He was borne on a throne, carried by twenty warriors, leading a ceremonial regiment of painted guards wearing colorful war hides, while behind him, in the hidden land of his people, an amalgamation of tribes numbering into the hundreds of thousands prepared a holiday feast of welcome.

**E**ARLY in the afternoon of the third day of Buchanan's and Aarri's march through the upper levels, a *Braburni* warrior stepped boldly into their path and held up his hands in the universal sign of peace. Buchanan was carrying an ominous looking weapon, which was a combination machine rifle and multiple projector of thermo- and neuro-sonics. In the instant of the native's appear-



ance, he aimed the weapon at him, but Aarri pressed his arm.

"It is our guide from Hahddra," she said.

Buchanan lowered the weapon, wondering.

"Peace, Son of Fire," the leadman

greeted him. "Ahahdd the Great comes to receive you."

The situation was fully relieved of tension when Peter Puckett came into view on the trail. He emitted a whoop of joy when he saw Buchanan, but his joy was tinged with concern as he



saw the other's unbandaged face for the first time in the silver-gray light of the Venusian day. In addition to a badly broken nose and scarred lips, a great scar beneath his right eye pulled it slightly downward in a fixed expression of stoic suffering. A stranger looking from his broken face into the depths of his brown eyes would have realized that life had scarred him on the inside, as well, and added something to his will that somehow increased the impression of his height.

"Hey Larry!" Puckett exclaimed. "Where the hell have you been? What's the idea of making me lose my appetite for a month?"

Buchanan smiled, holding out his hand to his old buddy, but he said nothing at first.

"Hi, Aarri!" Puckett greeted the girl. "Your brother is sure preparing a party for your home coming." He started to look back at Buchanan, then did a double take at Aarri. It was his first good look at her in daylight. She was not beautiful but her features were good, somehow reminding him of ancient, so-called classical art. Except for the slightly oriental aspects of her eyes and nose, she might pass for a Grecian goddess, with her full, classical lips and her heroically proportioned body.

She smiled at him, suddenly happy. "You friend of La-ree. How many others here?"

"Three boatloads got in. Or rather, three and a half. One was half wrecked. The one you got tossed out of, in fact."

Aarri's eyes widened, then narrowed. "My half-sister, Lorena? She alive?"

Puckett glanced quickly at Buchanan before answering. "Yeah. She's very much alive, I'm afraid."

"Who survived?" asked Buchanan, without expression.

"Thirty-one of us. Mostly Earth guys."

Buchanan tensed. "What about Bill?"

"Oh he's here. He'll be along with Ahahdd's parade any minute. Me and our leadman came ahead to simmer you down because we heard you were armed—" He stopped, looking at Buchanan's weapon in amazement. "Say! Where the hell *have* you been? Where did you get *that*?"

"Skip it for now," replied Buchanan. "What about the others—Herb Dobson, Ott Keffler—"

"They made it, but some didn't."

"Who!"

"Well, Phil Sutton, Hank Goodhew, Larry Pyle—"

Buchanan's lips tightened. Puckett paused for a moment. He tried to change the subject slightly.

"Some good Earth guys made it. Remember those St. John brothers?"

"Good! Who knows? Someday they might be very useful."

"What do you mean?"

Buchanan and Aarri suddenly looked up trail. Ahahdd and his retinue were coming into view.

**A**LTHOUGH Buchanan was aware of some of his old friends in the vanguard—Bill Haufek, Herb Dob-

son, Ott Keffler, Lee Salkin, Alex Jardine and Daniel Eckert—he refrained from greeting them because his eyes were caught by the eyes of Ahahdd the Great, staring down at him from the raised throne.

He saw a tall, broad-shouldered *Braburni* of his own age and size, a beardless warrior king who satisfied all the requisites for a powerful and successful ruler. He held his head erect, his heavy-lidded eyes were narrow and penetrating, his features inscrutable. A great, yellow war hide was draped over the back of his throne, but he, himself, was bare to the waist except for a multiple necklace of jewels and painted teeth and the heavy, gold rings in his ears. Also, by some weird form of native surgery, a large emerald had actually been set in the flesh of his forehead between his brows—the *Braburni* sign, he was to learn, of an emperor.

Evidently tribal etiquette required that Ahahdd should speak first, because the other Teranians present contented themselves with grinning at Buchanan. They stood there watching him and Aarri as they looked up at Ahahdd. The procession had come to a halt. Finally, the carriers lowered the throne to the ground and Ahahdd spoke, in *Braburni*, while Aarri translated.

“Greetings to Star Chief La-ree, Son of Fire, Slayer of Drukh,” he said, in even, deep-voiced tones, but without facial expression. “Welcome to the Hidden Land. On your face are written the battle deeds of a warrior. In your eyes shines the wisdom of

many worlds. You have brought me my sister, Aarri. What is your wish?”

As long as he was being brief and to the point, Buchanan followed his cue. “My wish,” he answered, also without facial expression, “is that you join your forces with mine to do battle against those who falsely rule your world and my own.”

“This was my wish in the beginning,” replied Ahahdd, “when I first heard you had come to this world. But what are your own forces, and what is your plan?”

Buchanan studied the young emperor chieftain carefully and chose his words well. “There are many parts to my plan,” he said, “among which your part is a great one. The war you wage against the Earthmen who attempt to rule this world is only a part of the greatest war ever fought, because it reaches from star to star. The war is here. The war is on Earth and Mars. It is on Teran, my native world, which belongs to another sun than yours. There, on my world, are millions of my own kind engaged in the same kind of battle you know here, against the same false rulers. In addition, there is another race there, just as you have the *Gagandii* here, and they number into the hundreds of millions. They, too, are a part of my forces.” To himself, he only hoped that The Alphid would be an ally, but he continued boldly, while Aarri solemnly translated and his Teranian friends began to stare at him in growing amazement. “But this is not all. The *Gagandii* are also on our side with their magic bomb that they used

for you against your enemies in times past, and with a great secret which only now makes possible the Great Plan which will bring victory to all of us."

"Hey, wait a minute!" exclaimed Keffler, unable to contain himself. "Not so fast, Larry! What is this—"

"*Ciryā!*" shouted Ahahdd, glaring at the offender.

"Silence!" translated Aarri, and Keffler shut his mouth.

"The *Gagandii*," said Ahahdd, "are mystery people of the Darkness. They know many great things but hard to make friends. If they with you, too, then you speak truth. Victory will be ours. But speak. What is your story and what is your plan?"

Buchanan told his story. The *Gagandii* had considered them as prisoners at first. When they learned that Aarri could understand their written language, however, they were taken to the Land of Ahahdd, under the CO<sub>2</sub> belt, to be questioned by higher authorities. They were sealed in a small room that was filled with oxygen for them. At floor level there were flap covered slots, through which the slate tablets and painting materials were passed to them.

What the *Gagandii* wanted to know, first of all, was what all the excitement was about. They had been aware of the movement of Ahahdd's small fleet of boats and later the passage of the prisoners. When the bombing occurred, they were determined to capture someone from the boats and question them. In anticipation of meeting upper level inhabitants, or

oxygen breathers, they had brought along special breathing equipment which turned out to be one of the main points of discussion.

The *Gagandii* actually knew where the lost laboratories of the Last Jesuits were located. They often visited the place and used some of the apparatus they found there, although for the most part it was incomprehensible to them.

At this point, Haufek and some of the others began to show at the seams, but Ahahdd warned them to silence with an imperious gesture, insisting that Buchanan continue without interruption.

Although the *Gagandii* had not been troubled as greatly by the colonization of Venus by Earthmen as the *Braburnii* had been, they were worried, nevertheless, about the possibilities of the future. Moreover, their main interest, strangely, was in the existence of other worlds beyond the sky. When Buchanan gave their chieftains a crude description of suns and planets and solar systems and delineated the possibilities of various types of worlds and environments in the galaxy, they became actually excited. They wanted to know how the whitemen traveled to such worlds. Buchanan tried to tell them that there were difficulties, but that Haufek's new type of ship might open up whole new horizons among the stars. He emphasized that if they could procure cosmium for Haufek and allow him to make use of the lost Jesuit laboratories it might not only be possible to discover new worlds,

but to smash the dictatorship of the Earthmen.

"They then asked me concerning the nature of my plans against the false rulers of the universe," Buchanan continued, "and when I told them they said that they would give me and you, Ahahdd; every assistance possible, on two conditions."

Ahahdd's narrowed eyes did not even blink, nor did his face move a muscle. Finally, he spoke. "The conditions?" he asked.

"One condition is that you meet with them at the borderland of mist and sky to have a great council of war and come to warriors' agreement. We must all meet there and decide on all our plans. The *Gagandii* desire that you, Ahahdd, bring to that meeting all the lesser chieftains over whom you rule and any others with whom you may be allied. They give three parts of one year for you to communicate with far lands and bring all the *Braburni* forces in your world together, because they are going to do the same."

Ahahdd still did not blink an eye. "What is other condition?" he asked.

Buchanan looked at his Teranian companions and took a big breath. "That is one which concerns my own forces. We must agree to give them something if they furnish us with the Power Metal called cosmium and lead us to the Jesuit laboratories. It does not concern the *Braburnii* because it lies beyond this world."

"What," said Ahahdd, "is your plan, Son of Fire?"

"My forces must work in the lab-

oratories on whiteman magic and prepare new weapons as well as the great ship. It will mean years of work and it will require the help of many thousands of your people. But the years are numbered. Within six Earth years a great force of ships from the Sol System will reach my own world and seek to destroy it. By that time, this new ship we wish to build must be ready. In the meantime, we must furnish you with certain weapons and you and the *Gagandii* will have to war against the Colonial Headquarters here. It will be a bloody war, Ahahdd, and perhaps a long one, but with our weapons you may be able to drive them out. Also, such a war is necessary to keep the Earthmen too occupied to discover what we are really preparing. An outbreak of full scale war on Venus might even recall the fleet of vengeance that would be sent against my own world, which must survive if yours is to be eternally free."

"Holy smoke!" ejaculated Puckett. "You're talking about a Second Front!"

The others remained silent, watching Ahahdd's implacable features. Aarri took hold of Buchanan's hand and squeezed it, tensely watching her brother. He sat there on his throne and studied them both.

At last he spoke. "Son of Fire speak heavy words. What other proof have *Gagandii* they know place of *Jeshutii*?" He used the *Braburnii* word for Jesuits.

For answer, Buchanan held forth his strange weapon. "Haufek great



whiteman wizard," he answered. "Ask him if this gun made by any whiteman magic we have today? They gave it to me as a sign of their good will, as proof that they spoke the truth."

Ahahdd motioned to one of his guards and the man brought the gun to him. He looked it over slowly and then handed it to Haufek without a word.

Haufek took the gun and examined it carefully. Finally he looked up and said to Ahahdd, "It is an old weapon, made long years ago, but by a great magic. It is good. I think the Last Jesuits made it."

Ahahdd gazed at him expressionlessly. "What it do?" he asked.

Buchanan said, "It's both thermo and neuro-sonic, Bill. Try the thermo on some underbrush."

Haufek skillfully located the correct controls and aimed at a small tree. He depressed a stud and the tree went up in smoke. "It can do more," he told Ahahdd. Whereupon he aimed at another tree and activated the machine rifle part of the weapon. The warriors present staggered back in surprise, but Ahahdd revealed no emotion of any kind.

"It will cause death to all present," said Haufek, "if I press this." He indicated the neuro-sonic activator.

Ahahdd finally spoke again. "The *Gagandii* not make this. It is great magic. I now believe they speak truth. But Son of Fire bring great question to *Braburnii*. We must return to house of Ahahdd and talk to elders. Come!"

Whereupon the warriors lifted the throne to their shoulders and the procession began to retrace its steps. Buchanan was surrounded by his friends instantly.

"Ye gods, Larry!" exclaimed Dobson. "Do you realize what this may lead up to?"

Buchanan looked at him and said, "Do you?"

Haufek pounced upon him. "Larry, don't tell me those labs of the Jesuits actually exist! What's the real story?"

"I'm not kidding you," he said, because the *Gagandii* are not playing games. They mean business all right. Those labs exist and they can take us to them."

Haufek's pale blue eyes shone with a new light. "Let's see," he said. "With the whole native side of the planet giving Teran a Second Front, with hundreds of thousands of *Braburnii* and *Gagandii* available to get a lot of raw materials we need, with a reasonable supply of cosmium and a half useable lab with real thermatron power banks or maybe a reactor, and at least five years of time—" He turned to Buchanan and slapped him on the back. "Hey! We've got a chance! I didn't tell you before, but another addition to our ship may be certain weapons the Sol System never heard of. I've even experimented on some of those and they're potent!"

"Yeah, but we're still dealing in long shots," complained Eckert. "We'll have to work with our guts!"

"He's right," said Buchanan.

"Larry, what was it you had to

promise the *Gagandii*?" queried Dobson.

"Oh—that."

"Yeah, what is it?" asked Puckett.

Buchanan said, "Ha!" and walked on. Later he remarked, "After we build a ship that works, ask me that question again. It's silly to think about it now."

## CHAPTER 22

ONE NIGHT long after his arrival in the hidden land, Buchanan lay on his sleeping furs staring at the dimly lighted ceiling of his quarters. Ahahdd had given him the Council Chamber of the Elders out of respect for his recognized status as the greatest chief among them. He wondered if he was a chief or a fake. His whole universe was a daisy chain of "ifs," even though the Great Plan was definitely taking shape. Important chieftains from other continents were arriving every week now, guided through the seas of darkness by the *Gagandii*, themselves, along their networks of lines supported by glow-buoys. The day of the great meeting between the upper and the lower levels was close at hand.

But there were more problems than plans. One, in particular, he was worried about. The *Gagandii* had mentioned an obstacle to reaching the Jesuit layout. It was far down in the depths of their own world, below sea level. The pressures were great and the sulfur content of the atmosphere was high. Ordinary oxygen helmets were not usable because they had no

cooling units, and the journey was long and even dangerous. The problem was how to get there, but they had left that up to the whiteman's magic. What was indicated was a space suit of the type used on the work rafts or on airless moons and planets near the sun. They were like deep sea diving suits and were equipped with self-contained cooling systems, as well as food, water and air supplies. In fact, he needed a couple dozen suits like that. It was a nice problem. It had been discussed among Teranians and Earthmen alike, without any tangible solution being reached.

Vague plans drifted through his mind concerning the possibilities of leading a small raiding party to Hahddra and lying in wait for a Patrol ship. With a vessel like that in their hands, they might be able to go further and—

Just then, the light went out. A single oil lamp had been burning in a niche near the entrance to the cavern. There was no wind. But the lamp had gone out. Tensing slightly, he raised himself on his elbows, listening.

As he became aware of the faint sound of naked feet approaching him, he reached for the Jesuit weapon which lay on the floor beside him. But before he could get a good grip on it, he felt the soft form of a woman lie down beside him, and her arms went around his neck. Her lips were against his before he could speak. They were not the lips of Aarri, which he well knew by now. Instead of tenderness there was feverish desire. Instead of

adding to him they took away.

Against an assassin he would have used violence. Against this more subtle danger there were other defenses, if one really cared to use them.

He waited for her to end the kiss, but it lingered, and her body pressed tightly against his, burning him. And then he was seeing the endless years behind him with his body instead of his mind. Loneliness and a man's hunger . . . His arms wrapped around a slender back. She was wearing one of the spiraling mid-riff sarong type of costumes worn by the *Braburnii* women, and beneath it he felt a female body of fire.

His mind brought him the words of Didjandu, the *Braburnii* chieftain he had left behind on Hahddra: "Witch Woman have demon fire in her body. This magic twist the eye of man and he see not what trail he follow."

And he heard Aarri saying, "Don't trust her, La-ree. She is evil!"

The lips pressed against his had found the pent up spring of his longing. The parched meadows of the lost world inside him were bending already to the winds of a promised cloudburst, and he wanted those wastelands drenched. He thirsted in his roots and clutched at her, with a thunder in his ears, and his veins were a web of lightning.

But through it all he saw the narrowed eyes of Ahahdd and heard him say, "Son of Fire, welcome . . . On your face . . . the battle deeds of a warrior. In your eyes shines the wisdom of worlds . . . Son of Fire speak heavy words."

Hundreds of thousands of tribesmen motivated in the lower and upper levels by the plans of the Star Chief—Lydecker and his underground, trillions of miles away—and Cardwell

To himself he said, "Hell!"

He tore himself loose and said aloud, "Lorena, what do you want?"

"I want you—only you, Larry. You are the only man who ever—"

"Shut up! You want something else!" He shook her.

She relaxed and he shivered as the fire of her cooled. He shivered with the struggle to overcome the desperation of his body, and he fell back upon an old, old friend, which gave him strength at last. It was hate. Hate for Cardwell. Hate for treachery and the ugliness of deception. Hate for the mistrust of her, doubly so because she was a flaming, beautiful, desirable woman. Hate because she could not give the real tenderness and devotion that came from Aarri, who loved him deeply. Aarri, who was not beautiful but who was real. Lorena was not real. She was a witch, or any way you cared to spell it.

Her arms were still around his neck and she kissed him on his ear. He could feel the warmth of her breath as she whispered to him, "I should get mad, Larry, because you just dumped ice on our first fire. I should yell and scream. But I won't. I want to prove I love you. I can help you."

"Okay, so you're a big help. Now get the hell out of here!"

"Larry, you need equipment to get to the Jesuit labs. Maybe I can get it for you."

Buchanan's mind came swiftly back into the saddle. "How?" he asked. After all, she was an important personality in the enemy camp.

"The *Gagandii* have buoy lines to Hahddra," she said. "If you or Ahahdd could arrange it, I could go back and—"

"Oh yeah? You could go back and send over a fleet of Patrol ships. Now do you want to walk out of here or get thrown out?"

Quietly, she got to her feet. "I'm not mad, Larry. Someday I'll prove I love you." Whereupon she left him.

"Well I'll be kicked to death by little Alphids!" he exclaimed, after she had gone. And again he stared at the ceiling, even though it was dark and he couldn't see it.

His long, powerful body was bathed in sweat. The storm cloud had passed and withheld its rain. He thought of Anne, but the memory of her was attenuated by great gulfs of space and time. He finally fell asleep to dream of Aarri—a tender dew for the parched meadows . . .

**T**HE great conference between the upper and lower level tribes lasted a week. They met in the borderlands of mist and sky, and a crew of *Braburni* messengers working in oxygen sleeves went back and forth over the border with armloads of painted slates, historical slates that now belonged to the great webs of destiny that were being spun around Man's known universe. Unknown to the officials of Central Government, over five million Venusians were planning

an effective Second Front in the Teranian War. Three facts looming out of that conference would have changed the entire complexion of the Sol System's strategy of war. Just three items: The laboratories of the Last Jesuits; cosmium; and William Haufek, one of human civilization's greatest nuclear physicists.

But they thought he was dead, and the Jesuit story was a lost legend, and Venus was too big and hot for cosmium exploitation. And in the meantime a huge new Interstellar Fleet was forming, equipped with weapons that were supposed to blast even The Alphid out of existence.

Unanimous alliance was the greatest product of the conferences, but the greatest immediate problem was the means of getting to the hidden Jesuit facilities. To save face as a great wizard, Haufek had had to promise that he would rig up something, and as a matter of fact he had some ideas on the subject but the task was close to insurmountable considering the primitive materials at hand. Haufek needed equipment from Earthman civilization.

In the silver-gray twilight of the evenings, Buchanan had become accustomed to walk alone or with Aarri along the barren ridges above the hidden crater where the tribes of Ahahdd lived. Up there was a slight wind and a coolness of dispell the humidity from the air, and the fog from his mind.

One evening he was with Aarri. They walked, hand in hand, along the high flung ridges, aware of the purpling

coloration in the dimming bowl of the impenetrable sky. To their left they saw the perennial clouds that were trapped in the crater. To their right the long, rugged lines of the jungle clothed mountains and the red-earthed heathen foothills fell away a mile below into the endless mist of Gagandiland. They were mists without horizons, melting and blending into the sky, making a giant boat of the mountains that sailed into nowhere. Almost a hundred kilometers away they could see another ship—the soaring volcanic cone of Hahddra sailing slowly into the night.

They were alone, but Buchanan was aware of the ponderous weight of the universe—Man's universe, with which he was dabbling. Was the dream of freedom degenerate self-indulgence in the face of overwhelming odds, when millions and millions had to die for it? Certainly his personal share in that dream was self-indulgent—his hate for Cardwell and all he stood for. Behind it all was a deep-seated complex tied up with him and Cardwell and Anne. Long ago there had once lived a philosophical psychologist named Freud. Freud's philosophy said that Buchanan's glands were compromising the universe.

Well, to hell with it! His vengeance hunger was a great, dark, gurgling, gushing thunderflood of glory. Let history take care of itself.

But the music of the spheres was jangling discordantly as titanic effect responded to the new foundations of cause that he was building.

"La-ree."

The strained Nirvanah of a bitter cosmic perspective broke like a bubble, and there was Aarri walking beside him on a mountaintop.

"Yes?"

"You never told me—about her."

"About whom?"

"The woman you love—far away."

"How did you know there was a woman like that?"

"She stands between La-ree and Aarri. It is plain."

"Aarri, I really think you love me."

Her hand squeezed his. "La-ree! La-ree! You know it! You *are* my love!"

He looked at her and smiled, placing his arm around her waist. "Yes," he said, "I know it." He knew she wanted to stop walking and come into his arms, to be loved, but she was restraining herself, holding back because she was not the woman he wanted. He smiled inwardly, to himself, sadly. He looked down the long channel of twenty years and there was Aarri, a Venusian half-breed, with a pleasant face, a beautiful body and a shining devotion. Fate was a kaleidoscope.

"Maybe," he said, "the laws of man should be limited to the atmosphere of the worlds he lives in. Maybe the great spaces between worlds should be a divider between one set of things and another."

"What you mean, La-ree?"

"I mean—while I am here—this is my life. When I go, that life will be left behind. There'll be heartbreak then, but if we're both willing to pay the price—"

She stopped and stared up at him, wide eyed. "You mean—" He was not sure she was breathing.

He looked kindly into her eyes and smiled, then slowly nodded his head, taking her into his arms. Her head was suddenly against his chest, but she was not quite responding yet, wanting to make sure she had understood him correctly.

"I need love, Aarri. God knows I need it. And you do, too."

He felt a hot teardrop on his arm. He looked down at it, wonderingly.

Suddenly, they heard someone running toward them. They disengaged themselves and saw Peter Puckett. He began to shout.

"Hey Larry! Lorena took a powder, and guess who with?"

Buchanan tensed and he felt Aarri do so also, for his hands were still on her arms. She looked up at him, drying her eyes, the transition of emotion from tenderness to hate and alarm straining her face.

"What happened?" he said, when Puckett came up to them, puffing hard.

"Well, you know she's been playing around with Dan Eckert."

Come to think of it, he had seen Eckert talking to her on several occasions, but he hadn't given it much thought.

"Eckert must have fallen for her, the b— Sorry, Aarri." Puckett took another breath and went on. "The two of them have just disappeared. We think she's talked him into going back to Hahddra."

Buchanan's eyes narrowed, then

widened. "My God, if she touches off an alarm at this stage of the game, all our plans—" He gripped Aarri's hand. "Come on! Let's contact the *Gagandii* and try to intercept them!"

The three of them ran back toward the camp of Aahhdd the Great.

ONE day later the news came to them out of the mistlands that *Gagandii* patrol boats had been unable to intercept the fleeing pair, but a boat had definitely been stolen. There was a possibility of their actually reaching Hahddra. A council of war had to be called, over which Aahhdd and Buchanan presided.

Buchanan pointed out the dangers of the situation. "If Lorena reveals to the Colonial Government what we are doing and they get wind of our possibility of acquiring cosmium and the use of the lost Jesuit facilities, and if they know we are alive here working with you Venusians and that Haufek is with us, they will stop at nothing to destroy us, even if first line battleships have to be called from Earth. They'll blow this hidden land into mist. If that is Lorena's plan, then the attack can come anytime. This place has to be evacuated. We've got to find some other place to hide, until we can find a way of getting to the Jesuit labs."

"They will not destroy," said Aahhdd. "They will come to find out what they can—about *Jeshutii* hidden place and magic metal of death you call cosmium. We fool them, like in past times. Number of warriors stay and be captured but tell lies to take

up time while we go hide in new places. They not know we so many. Think if they capture few they capture all. Captured warriors can tell they get mad at Earthmen and Teranian friends because of big trouble they cause and that they killed them. Maybe they believe and go away."

"Not if Lorena has anything to say about it," said Buchanan.

"We can try it," put in Haufek.

"Yeah," said Puckett, "but who's going to volunteer to be captured?"

### CHAPTER 23

**T**HERE were *Braburnii* volunteers, but before the camp could be evacuated, all their theories were suddenly dissolved in a totally unexpected development. Lorena and Daniel Eckert returned alone, in a stolen Patrol ship. On board was a single, heavy duty type space suit that Lorena had managed to have brought from Headquarters under the ruse that she was on the trail of something important that military interference would obliterate. Eckert had successfully posed as a turn-coat stooge who was trying to earn his freedom by framing his pals.

"That one suit," said Haufek to Buchanan, "opens the door to the Jesuit lab. We can fly this ship to the lowest possible point, meet our *Gagandi* guides, and one of us can go on down and look the place over. There may be equipment there that can be converted for use and brought back, and then several can go down."

"Sort of like the cannibals and the

missionaries," put in Puckett. "Hey Eckert, I guess we'll have to use some heavy hawsers to haul back all we said about you."

"Yes, Dan," said Buchanan, "but why didn't you let us in on it?"

Eckert almost sneered. "You wouldn't have trusted Lorena. Without her I couldn't have swung it. I figured I could handle her if you couldn't."

Buchanan raised his brows and looked from him to Lorena, who was smiling at him cozily with tongue very much in her cheek.

He said, "Ha!"

"But I got hold of some news, through the Patrol Guards—or rather Lorena did," Eckert added. "The Interstellar Fleet is just about ready to go. They've speeded up operations because The Alphid is on a rampage."

Buchanan squinted at him. "The Alphid?"

"Yeah. He's actually sent Earth an ultimatum! I don't know what the message said, but the effect of it is that Sol should keep its nose out of the Alpha System or take the consequences, whatever they are. Of course Earth propoganda is pooh poohing the whole thing and they're advertising how tremendous the Interstellar Fleet is. Now they're out to smear Teran, though. They must be really scared because they're out to blast it out of existence."

"That's a hard one to believe," said Buchanan. "Forral, Pomeroy and Cardwell are realists. They're probably emphasizing the danger in order to get full support for the fleet build-

ing and make the war popular—a noble necessity, for survival. *Et cetera.*"

"Speaking of realism," said Haufek, "let's evacuate this camp anyway. If Lorena doesn't go back soon to Hahddra or Headquarters they'll come looking for her. They might even be on her trail anyway, in spite of her warnings to stay out."

"You're right. We'll move this suit over to your little shop and you can check it over."

"Larry." Lorena had stepped close to his side.

"Yes?"

"Have I proved something?" she asked. "I didn't have to come back here, you know."

He hesitated, watching the crew of Teranians and Earthmen go to work getting the space suit out of the ship. It was weightless in space, but here it weighed a quarter of a ton. Only a Teranian could hope to maneuver it on the surface of a planet.

"You owe me a minute of your time," she said.

"All right," he answered. "I guess I had you wrong."

He took a walk with her.

LATE that night he was awakened by a *Braburni* guard. The warrior motioned for him to get up and follow him quickly.

The man led him down into the mat-covered trenches that formed the labyrinthine world in which the *Braburni* hid, beneath the floor of the crater. He pushed his way through a small crowd of natives who were

standing around a lighted doorway. They opened a path when they saw Buchanan, but they said nothing.

When Buchanan stepped into the room he stopped breathing for a moment, while his blood thumped into his head. Aarri stood there looking at him dazedly, with a bloody knife in her hand. On the sleeping furs at her feet Lorena lay in a dark pool of blood which was coming from her left breast.

Without a word, Buchanan knelt by her side and lifted up her eyelids. He bent down and placed an ear to her breast and heard nothing. She was dead. He remained at her side, kneeling, and looking at her perfect face. Finally, slowly, he looked up at Aarri. He got to his feet.

He stood there looking at her, and finally his lip curled. He slapped her across the face. "Jungle law!" he exclaimed. "Savage! Half-breed! And I thought you were the tender kind! You're as hard as she was!"

Aarri stood there looking back at him, on her face a red welt from his back handed slap. Tears began to flood her eyes. She ducked her head and ran away.

Something twisted, hard and sharp, inside of him, as he saw her go like that. But—good God! This was cold-blooded murder! For savage jealousy. All he had done was take a walk with Lorena.

Before he could do or think much about Lorena's death, Haufek looked him up. His face was deathly pale.

"Follow me," he said. "You've got to see something before I destroy it."



Buchanan followed silently. This was one of those nights, he told himself. Anything could happen. He kept thinking about how he had slapped Aarri. And of Lorena's beautiful body, lying there on the floor in its own blood. She had meant well, after all, and been paid by getting stabbed. Maybe she really had loved him.

Haufek led him to the Patrol ship. Inside, he took him to the small bridge and reached under the instrument panel. He fumbled with a bolt, disconnected something, and then took it out. In his hand was a tiny micro-transmitter.

"I tested it," said Haufek, "and it was transmitting a steady howl, on a beam aimed straight at Hahddra."

Buchanan's face reddened, then paled, and the muscles along his jaw rippled his short red beard. "Think the Patrol put it there without Lorena knowing it?"

"Hell, I don't care who put it there. The point is, the Patrol knows where we are. We'd better scatter!"

"Let me have that." Buchanan looked carefully and found a flat, smooth, plastic surface. On it he saw Haufek's fingerprints. Mixed in with them he saw the smaller, slender fingerprints of a woman. Lorena!

He had to make sure. "You take care of the details," he said. "I'll be back soon. Question Eckert."

"I doubt if he knew about this."

"So do I—the dumb stooge!"

He went back to Lorena's room and again pushed through the crowds. Lugubrious as it was, he forced himself to take her dead hand and press her

index finger against the transmitter's base, alongside the other small fingerprint. In the light of the oil lamp he examined the two and found them perfectly identical. Lorena had installed the tell-tale transmitter, herself. Now there was no doubt.

He took a walk. So she was a witch all along! Aarri had never trusted her. Aarri knew that Lorena could twist a man's eye and make him miss the trail. She knew that her half-sister was a stinking, foul, self-seeking traitor! She knew she was up to no good and felt that killing her was the only way of avoiding catastrophe for all of them. All right! So she was jealous, too! But that wasn't the main reason she killed Lorena. She was smarter than all of them put together.

Suddenly, he came to a dead stop. Wait a minute! She put that transmitter in the ship merely as a locator. But the enemy didn't necessarily want the location of the camp. They wanted the location of the country where the secret Jesuit outfit was. They were waiting for the supposedly stolen Patrol ship to be taken there, and then they had planned to close in.

But now that the transmitter had been disconnected the Patrol would know its trick had been discovered and that Lorena was probably a prisoner, though they could not know, of course, that she had just been killed. Attack was a foregone conclusion.

Buchanan began to run. As he did so, he heard others running also, and he heard shouts of warning. From the sky searchlights were stabbing downward. As he looked upward at the

source of the lights he saw three first class Patrol cruisers descending through the cloudbanks. They were descending leisurely, as though they had nothing to fear.

He ran into Daniel Eckert and grabbed him. "So you're the boy who could handle Lorena!" he yelled at him. "Well this is what you've brought along with her, you dumb stooge! Maybe next time you'll follow orders!"

Eckert showed resentment in his eyes only. He was too occupied with the emergency to take the matter up on a personal basis. "We gotta get out of here," he said. "Where is Lorena?"

"She's dead, so run for yourself."

"Dead!"

"Yeah. A transmitter was found in the ship. Fingerprints showed she planted it. Do you think the natives would go for such treachery? They let her have it." For some reason he had begun automatically to defend Aarri. Suddenly, he knew why he had begun to run in the first place. He wanted to find her and make sure that she would be safe. And he did owe her an apology.

He left Eckert and ran on. Assuming that she had followed practiced emergency procedures along with the rest, he headed for the nearest secret exit, which happened to be at the back of his own quarters. There were Puckett, Haufek, Keffler and several Earthmen lugging the big space suit through the opening into the natural passages that honeycombed the crater as a result of previous volcanic

activity. He helped them with it and they swung the camouflaged door of rock back into place on its pivots.

"We're the last ones through here," said Haufek, "so we'd better seal the exit." As he said this, he pulled on a long lever made out of a log and a trap above the rock door fell open disgorging tons of sand and boulders. Even if the enemy found the camouflaged door of rock, they would not be able to open it now.

Buchanan knew there were more than a dozen such exits in the crater, all of which led downward through the old flues and fissures into larger chambers far below, and that from these tunnels led outward into the humid jungles of the foothills and the borderland mists. Somewhere down there he would find Aarri.

But as the night wore on and he came upon thousands of the *Braburnii* in the torchlit caverns below, he found no trace of Aarri. Finally, however, he located Ahahdd.

"Ahahdd, have you seen your sister?" There was no interpreter present, and at first Ahahdd did not understand him. "Aarri!" Buchanan exclaimed, desperately.

Ahahdd's face still refused to reveal any expression, but his eyebrows raised slightly. His dark eyes were particularly penetrating, and he seemed in a tragic mood. He turned from Buchanan only long enough to call an interpreter to him, an eager, slender *Braburni* youth who was visibly honored to serve two such lofty chiefs at the same time.

"Tell him," Ahahdd said to the

youth, "that he does not know the way of the *Braburnii*. To promise the heart is to be born again. To be rejected is the end of new life."

The youth's mouth dropped agape. "But—sire! Is it that your sister and the Son of Fire—"

Ahahdd only nodded affirmatively. Then he added, "You know our set plan in times of attack. Volunteers remain behind us to be taken prisoner in order to confuse the enemy with misleading stories. Aarri remained as a volunteer."

The young interpreter stared, speechless.

"Tell him that," said Ahahdd, and then he walked slowly away, as though he had more important duties to attend to.

But from the shadows of the great cavern they were in he watched the tall, red-bearded Teranian's battle-scarred face as the *Braburni* interpreter delivered the message. Buchanan's face remained expressionless, but the slow lifting of his head, the tensing of the muscles in his neck and the clenching of his big fists did not go unnoticed. Ahahdd's narrow eyes narrowed more and a bitter smile of satisfaction tugged at the corners of his large lips. Then he really walked away . . .

**B**UCHANAN walked alone up the mountain. The lower jungles were humid and the insects were murderous. No one could sleep. But he walked up the trail toward the crater in order to be alone and think. If the Patrol cruisers had gone, he wanted

to see the crater floor and make sure that they had not merely killed the volunteers and gone away. This was a distinct possibility because Lorena's body had been left lying where he had last seen it. They had no doubt found her, and now there would be hell to pay.

Lorena had probably told Headquarters about everything—the *Gagandii's* ability to handle cosmium, the Jesuit labs, the existence of Haufek, the huge alliance of upper and lower level Venusians—and that he, Larry Buchanan, was now heading the Second Front effort. If Cardwell got wind of that, he might really divert the new Interstellar Fleet and give Venus such a working over that the planet would go up in volcanic smoke. Damn it! If they only had Haufek's inversion drive ship ready! Or if they could only reach the Jesuit labs and fabricate a few of Haufek's special weapons they could at least get Plan A ready and surprise Colonial Headquarters. Once that place was taken over and Haufek was given a little time, defenses could be set up, powered by cosmium, which might even surprise the Interstellar Fleet. Soon Haufek intended to make a try for the hidden Jesuit layout in the stolen space suit, but soon was not soon enough.

In the dark early hours of the morning he reached the floor of the crater and found everyone and everything gone—including the Patrol ship that Lorena and Eckert had brought from Hahddra. Above all—Aarri was gone.

He walked up on the ridges and stayed there until the shrouded skies began to grow silvery gray with the dawn light. He found a flat rock and sprawled out on it, waiting for the sudden increase in the degree of light that would mean the sun had risen. But he fell asleep, out of sheer exhaustion.

He awoke two hours later. He opened his eyes abruptly and got to his feet, staring down at the foothills where his companions had spent the night. Having fallen asleep with a specific problem on his mind, he was surprised to wake up with the solution to that problem clearly delineated.

Why hadn't any of them thought of it before!

*Gagandii* slate writings were ambiguous at best, and during the conferences this one question had not been asked because it had not entered anyone's mind. Moreover, the *Gagandii* who had visited the Jesuit labs might not have been thorough in their observations or been able to recognize everything they saw. Or they might be the exasperatingly logical kind who felt it was impractical to waste words describing something which could not be used until those who knew how to use it arrived at the place where it was located.

He turned and trotted toward the trail that led down the mountainside.

"IF what you say is true," said Ahahdd, after Buchanan had outlined his plan to him and Haufek and Puckett and various visiting

chieftains, "then our first plan of attack would have great chance to succeed. We will make arrangements at once."

"Now how in the devil did we ever miss thinking of something so obvious?" asked Haufek, scratching his head.

"I could still be wrong," warned Buchanan.

"But man—if you're right!" ejaculated Puckett, enthusiastically.

"Still, you know I was supposed to try first to make it to those labs," complained Haufek.

"No offense, chum," said Buchanan, "but that suit's going to be heavy. It'll be just about all I can do to move the legs of it."

"You just explained why I should be the one to go," said Puckett. "Remember all the times I smeared you in wrestling matches?"

"That was out in lovely space, Pete, and we weren't wrestling in all metal space suits."

Puckett produced a sly smirk. "Your main reason for being the hero wouldn't be that torch you're carrying for Aarri now, would it?"

Buchanan answered almost too quickly. "Any objections?"

Puckett and Haufek raised eyebrows at each other. An interpreter whispered in Ahahdd's ear and the latter's enigmatical eyes narrowed again more than usual.

"You travel once more dark trails of warrior," he said to Buchanan. "May the gods go with you."

"I don't think they'd enjoy the scenery," retorted Buchanan, and he

grinned at his Teranian companions.

#### CHAPTER 24

THE SCENERY to which he had referred was not even enjoyable to the *Gagandii* who were his guides. *Braburni* oxygen equipment had taken him to the hidden continent from which real operations were to begin. Jesuit oxygen equipment was usable from there on, while *Gagandii* squads carried his metal space suit on a litter behind him. But when they entered the volcanic flues and penetrated cavernous worlds below the level of the Seas of Darkness and the temperature rose, he finally had to get into the big suit and turn on its cooling system. Also, he needed the liquid food and stimulants it contained.

Two days to get that far, and the suit held a thirty-six hour air supply. He could not waste that time on sleep. He had to push forward on the stimulants. He had a feeling that the sloth-slow *Gagandii* were amazed by his strength and endurance, because they were continually meeting prepared relays of their own kind to spell them off and lead the already legendary Son of Fire deeper into the Never Never Lands of their own dark world.

Now he, too, was a sloth, or a metal salamander, weighing more than a quarter of a ton, an animated diving bell with tools for hands and a searchlight for an eye. It was all he could do to lift one ponderous leg up and plant a heavy foot ahead of the other.

' Many times he would slip on the steep inclines and go clanking and rolling to the bottom of a passageway, and they would have to come and pick him up. That was one reason why each relay squad numbered no less than a dozen of the weird, gilled, chameleon eyed *Gagandii*.

But thank God for that spacesuit! In the piercing shaft of his searchlight, the white CO<sub>2</sub> mists took on a yellowish hue, revealing the increase of the sulfur gases as the temperature and the pressure rose. Outside temperature: 140 degrees Fahrenheit. Outside pressure: twenty pounds per square inch. The *Gagandii* relay squad that now relieved him was wearing breathing equipment of its own concoction—to give them CO<sub>2</sub> and some oxygen. A greenish slime covered their bodies. Either they had smeared it on as a protection against the heat, or it was the *Gagandii* equivalent of sweat.

Question: How in bubbling hell had the Last Jesuits ever found this place? The answer, emerging subtly out of a logical pattern of his subconsciousness, supported his theory concerning what he hoped to find when he got to his destination.

Thirty hours later, he was staring out through the polarizite into the mustard yellowness, feeling the heat as the cooling system failed to counteract fully an outside temperature of 170 degrees, and he knew he was blind with fatigue. He tried to lift a leg, then fell over with a "clunk!" Everything went black.

HE had blacked out from fatigue, and he slept. He still had air. But he awoke, finally, gagging on the stale dregs of it. He was suffocating.

He looked up through the polarizite viewpanel of his helmet to meet the large eyes of a *Gagandi*, who was down on his hands and knees, working to open the head panel. The latter was wearing his own breathing apparatus.

Something was distinctly new and different. He saw the ceiling of a cavern, but in that ceiling he saw the persistent marks of machinery. There was light, all over the place, and no murky yellow of sulfur gas or milky white of CO<sub>2</sub>. A glance to his right revealed a ponderous metal door containing inset gages, and valves—the door of a large airlock!

He had arrived! They had carried him the rest of the way!

Hastily, he looked at the outside pressure and temperature, on his helmet gages. Fifteen pounds pressure; ninety degrees of temperature; normal humidity. And the lighted glow-gas chamber signalled an oxygen atmosphere!

He pushed the webbed hands of the *Gagandi* away and unfastened the panel for himself. When a musty smelling but breathable current of air flooded in on him he almost fainted again.

"Thanks!" he said, and he smiled up at the weird face above him.

Other *Gagandii* slothed into view. They helped him out of his suit. Their breathing apparatus consisted of chemical chambers hollowed out of stone, ostensibly quite heavy to carry.



Tubes looking like the intestines of some animal led upward off their backs into damp, spongy sacks covering their gills, and exhausted CO<sub>2</sub> swirled around their necks and faces like smoke. They looked like creatures out of some other world's hell. They all stared at him, waiting in silence. It was up to him now. This was a territory that he was supposed to know more about than they. Whiteman's magic.

He was fascinated by them for a moment as he realized the magnitude of their own effort in bringing him here. They believed he would actually fulfill his desperate promise to them.

"That all depends," he said aloud, "on what this place—and the future—has to offer."

It was then that he saw the dead *Gagandi* lying on the floor over against one wall of the corridor he was in. Just as he stepped over to examine him, he caught a motion out

of the corner of his eye and turned. Another of the creatures fell down and lay there, dying. He looked at the rest of them, wide-eyed with astonishment.

They were all dying, at the end of their breathing supply. Futilely, he made a start toward the airlock door, not knowing quite what he was looking for, but the *Gagandi* leadman who had helped, or tried to help, open his faceplate, waved him off, even as he sank to the floor. Within another minute, all of them lay there, gasping their last.

Buchanan stood there helplessly, looking down at them, and as they died he caught a message from their eyes: *Remember your promise!*

In spite of the importance of the place they had led him to, he stood there thinking of them. Any race whose individual members would sacrifice their lives for the good of the whole was civilized. They deserved a break. But could he really give them what they wanted? It was an opiate dream, but he was going to try, if it were possible.

Suddenly he came to the realization that he was terribly alone, carried to a tomb of ancient scientists under the continent of another world. He was Aladdin in the magician's cave—or he was a blood brother to the horrified victim of Montresor.

He ran down the corridor and discovered a world of wonder, a place that must have housed at least a hundred men at one time. There were natural grottos and great rooms that had been carved out of the rock

There were upper and lower levels and old flues that had been taken advantage of which led onward to other grottos and caverns, but always at their extremities he would find an airlock. There were living quarters, the furnishings of which had fallen into dust and rags, and here and there he found a gaping, hollow-eyed skeleton with a crucifix half buried inside the rib case, amidst the rags of garments the men had once worn.

There were machine shops and furnaces for use in metallurgy, and there were labs, glorious labs—dilapidated, but labs, with equipment that could be reactivated, delicate tools and measuring devices, instruments. If they no longer worked, they could be repaired, because there were supply rooms containing wire, insulators, resistors, transformer plates, glass blowing equipment for making vacuum tubes, vacuum pumps, chemicals. He found an early type of theratron bank intact and still half charged. He also found two reactor power units, turned off. They could be reactivated.

There were small arsenals of weapons, also weapons which could be used at once. But he could not locate that for which he was mainly searching—upon which everything now depended.

It had to be here, or it didn't make sense.

Finally, he found a yellowed chart of the place, and immediately, from one corner of the fine lined drawing, the thing he sought stared him in the face. He ran to a certain airlock and

opened it. There was another cavern and a large door like that of a hangar. Between him and that door was the thing he sought—all of two hundred feet long.

It was the ship in which the Jesuits had arrived.

Evidently, beyond that hangar door, was a great hole in the continent which had once been the channel for active lava. The Jesuits, fleeing from their oppressors, had been forced to penetrate it, and thus they found this sanctuary, two centuries ago.

Their, Messianic dream was about to be realized, vicariously, because at long last their hoarded technology was going to be used against the same forces which had motivated them in the first place.

**F**OURTEEN days after the Patrol's raid on Ahahdd's camp, the Venusian allies put Plan A into action, with a surprise twist at the beginning rather than at the end of the plot.

Under cover of the CO<sub>2</sub> belt, *Braburnii* and *Gagandii* boats brought Jesuit weapons and some special gear devised by Haufek in under the shadow of Hahddra's cone, and there on the borderlands between mists and sky they set up the base of a "bridge-head." The featured weapon, however, was neither of Haufek's devising nor of Jesuit origin. It was *Gagandi*, and it contained cosmium. The lower level Venusians had conceived of a much simpler method of handling cosmium than the whiteman's system of shielding. They kept it in solution, in

which state its mass was not yet critical. By means of the application of chemical heat they caused the solution to boil off. As the cosmium solvent boiled off, the remaining solution would finally reach the point of precipitation. When the cosmium precipitated, it acquired critical mass and detonated. Hence the nick-name, "boilers," originated among the whitemen participating in the Venusian Second Front offensive. In times past, the *Gagandii* had loaned Ahahdd's people a few "boilers" to obliterate Earthman stations. Now the deadly "boilers" were going to have a more formal unveiling.

A much larger contingent of men and equipment had moved in toward Colonial Headquarters, which were located on the southern continent of Novaterra—so named by the earliest Earthman explorers of Venus. Here were the mooring points of the sky islands, and here were the space station facilities, the Colonial Patrol Garrison, the uranium storage sheds, ammunition magazines, the arsenals, repair shops, interplanetary communication towers and the nuclear energy plants.

On "A-Night," when the grand offensive was to be launched, the monitors at Colonial Headquarters detected the presence of a space ship above Novaterra. The ship was two hundred feet long, which represented the length of a common class of local Patrol ships. Inasmuch as the monitors were always indicating the locations of Patrol ships, no alarm was given. To the unthinking robot senses



of the monitors, nothing was abnormal. They had never had a stimulus-response circuit built into them for detecting enemy ships, inasmuch as there were no enemy ships—nor had they ever heard of the Jesuit legend. So it was a case of nothing being as well hidden as the obvious.

When the ship came within phone range, human operators hailed it in routine fashion. However, when there was no reply it was too late to do anything about it. Haufek had rigged up a replica of the paralysis weapon used on the *Surprise*. All ground facilities were incapacitated. Simultaneously, Peter Puckett and other Teranians and Earthmen led *Braburni* war parties up out of the borderlands to the magnatram stations, where they boarded cars for the ground center of the Colony. At the same time, Patrol ships in the vicinity of Hahddra were alerted by a blinding explosion that shook the sky as well as the earth. The whole top of the extinct volcano was blasted into dust. When they drew in toward the scene of the blast, paralysis struck them as the result of another Haufek set-up on the borderlands of Hahddra. As other Patrol ships centered in on Headquarters, their crews also blanked out.

The sky islands, of which there were three, were totally unprotected. It was a simple matter for the invaders on the ground to haul them down, until the operators on one island fought the action by opening up their gravitron tanks to full power, which ripped up the mooring machinery below. As they started skyward, how-

ever, they were faced with the worse dilemma of plunging into outer space. Since they could not possibly hope to navigate out there, they sank back to the ground and surrendered.

ENRIQUE FORRAL sat behind the ostentatious desk of his palatial office, a machine pistol quivering in his pudgy, blue-veined hand, his wide, blood-shot eyes watching the door. It was a tungstitanium door, light to handle but difficult to demolish. When it began to glow with heat and he saw rivulets of metal running down its surface like so much molasses, he screamed and dropped his gun.

"I surrender!" he screamed. "Don't kill me!"

"Then stand back and no funny business!" came a voice from beyond the door.

It was too late to open the door for the invaders. It was too hot. Forral could only stand there and watch it melt. Thermosonics, he thought swiftly. Strictly a war weapon not included in Colonial Garrison ordinance. Then Lorena had told the truth, after all! The Hahddra prisoners had made a deal with the *Gagandii* and found the Jesuit citadel.

He cursed himself for a fool. He had not wanted to admit to Central Government that he was facing trouble he could not handle. He had not called for help, and now it was too late.

A gaping hole opened in the door, and a red-bearded giant with a scarred face and broken nose leaped

through carrying a strange, multi-purpose weapon in his hands. He was seven feet tall, broad shouldered, and expressionless, except for a cold gleam of deadly hatred in his brown eyes. Although he had never seen this man before, he knew he was Larry Buchanan, Cardwell's arch enemy, the prisoner who was supposed to have been "taken care of," sold into slavery that was to have ended in death in a uranium mine.

Behind him were Earthmen, no more friendly than their leader, and behind them he saw the war hides of the *Braburnii*. Forral's flabby chin trembled. With mouth agape and eyes staring, he backed against his desk, watching Buchanan, speechless.

"Before you die," said Buchanan, "I want the latest news. What's the status of the Interstellar Fleet?"

Remembering the Interstellar Fleet, Forral took courage, momentarily, and he was strengthened by a sudden flood of righteous indignation. His thin lips tightened and he straightened up. "You're only digging your own grave," he said, imperiously. "You'll never get away with this!"

"I asked you a question," said Buchanan, icily.

"The Fleet? Ha! Perhaps you thought you could sacrifice a few thousand *Braburni* tribesmen on a Second Front that would divert Cardwell's forces from your own planet. Well, you're wrong, because the new Interstellar Fleet left for Teran over a week ago. But as far as your own local forces are concerned, Solar Patrol will handle you. You'll all be fer-

reted out and obliterated. What's this going to gain you?"

"That's our business. Where are the prisoners your Patrol captured when it raided the camp of Ahabdd two weeks ago?"

Forral's eyes narrowed. Aarri, his half-breed daughter, had been among those prisoners. "What do you think? They're all dead."

Buchanan's face strained taut with the effort to control his emotions. "You lie!" he shouted.

"Can you prove it?" sneered Forral.

Buchanan's teeth showed between his lips as he stepped forward and grasped Forral by the front of his lounging jacket and almost pulled him off the floor. "You little, rotten, putrid lump of garbage!" he yelled. "You're going to meet your Maker! It won't do you any good to lie! Where are those prisoners?"

Behind the overwhelming anger of the man, Forral detected a strange note of desperation, of frantic pleading. Evidently the secret knowledge of the fate of the prisoners was a last ace in the hole, so he clutched at it.

"Then if I tell you," he retorted, "it will be on my own terms."

"He gets nothing!" yelled one of the Earthmen.

Just then, there was a commotion, and into the room stepped a huge *Braburni* warrior, almost as large as Buchanan. He came in like an angry emperor, and his own men and the Earthmen respectfully made way for him. Forral stared at first uncomprehendingly, not knowing who he was,

until he noticed the emerald between his brows. Then he lost his momentary decorum and seemed to wither in horror.

Ahahdd said nothing. He merely stood there glowering at him, drinking in the vision of him as though to add to the fires of his hate. It gave Buchanan an idea. He beckoned to an interpreter.

"Tell Ahahdd," he said, "that he must make Forral tell where the prisoners are. After that, we will rely on his judgment as to what he does with the Governor."

As the interpreter gave this message to Ahahdd, Forral fell on his knees. "No!" he cried, pleading with Buchanan. "You can't leave me with *him!*"

"I wonder," said Buchanan, "if anyone ever pleaded with you for their lives or for their honor. Now you take Ahahdd's mother, for instance—"

"No!" shrieked Forral. "Don't do this to me, for the love of God!"

Buchanan met Ahahdd's narrowed eyes, and the latter nodded to him almost imperceptibly. The Earthmen joined their *Braburni* colleagues in a grim, satisfying smile. Buchanan went out with them to attend to other business.

FIFTEEN minutes later, a *Braburni* warrior asked Buchanan to follow him. They left the sky island, which had been grounded, and trotted through the busy streets of the invaded colony. Finally, at the end of one street, they had to shoulder their

way through a crowd of *Braburni* warriors. The prisoners were there, already being briefed on Plan A and given weapons.

Buchanan threw pride to the winds and asked for Aarri. She stood there in their midst, attempting to be aloof, but he took her by the hand and led her away from the others.

When he had her alone to himself, he turned to her swiftly. "There isn't time for talk," he said. "I was wrong about you. I hurt you and I'm sorry."

She stood there looking up at him, searching his eyes. "If Haufek make star ship," she said, "how soon you go?"

"Four or five Earth years."

Tears filled her eyes. "Oh La-ree, I wish your heart not be so far away beyond the sky!"

He drew her to him and kissed her.

A *Braburni* warrior found them and began speaking to Aarri in his own language.

"Ahahdd calls me," she said to Buchanan.

"What does he want?"

Her manner was changing subtly into something savage. Her eyes looked through him rather than at him, and he read hatred there mixed with triumph.

"It is a brief ceremony, with his medicine men, concerning the gods. They are sacrificing something to the spirit of my dead mother."

"Sacrificing! What are they sacrificing?"

"The heart of Enrique Forral."

## CHAPTER 25

PLAN A was completed with the obliteration of all installations on Novaterra. Before the "boilers" were planted, however, the colonial employees and the garrison were herded into two sky islands. These were activated to the point of level bouyancy and were towed through the sky to the remains of Hahddra, where their gravitrons were destroyed and they were anchored. Here they were abandoned, but their human occupants were permitted to hope for rescue by forces from Earth.

Vital scientific supplies, weapons, ammunition, whole thermatron installations and a complete new reactor were transported to the secret continent in captured Patrol ships, and Ferral's own sky island was appropriated as a living abode for the remaining Earthman and Teranian rebels on Venus. The island was not moored in the sky, however. On the contrary, it was submerged in the mists of the lower levels and camouflaged with one of Haufek's anti-radalax "gimmicks."

Project Astra was well on its way by the time retaliation struck from Earth. The Solar Patrol ships never knew what hit them. Central Government could only guess at the truth, since Ferral had never warned them. The devastation wrought by the *Gagandi* boilers was their first clue, after small spy ships succeeded in reconnoitering Novaterra and Hahddra. Later, when another Solar Patrol offensive was launched, the castaways

on Hahddra were rescued, and the whole story came out.

Cosmium, a total Venusian alliance, Jesuit science coupled with the brain of William Haufek—all this called for a great council of war. And so the long siege of Venus began. Each time the attacks were launched by Central Government they took their toll of the *Braburni* defenders, who were led by trained Earthmen, operating under a wartime governing commission headed by the St. John brothers. But each succeeding time they came they found an ever growing strength in equipment and technology. And in the meantime thousands of *Braburnii* and *Gagandii* toiled in mines of their own, bringing to Project Astra the materials required by Haufek.

Earth was busy preparing an auxiliary fleet to back Cardwell up in case of setbacks in the Alpha System. An all out war against Venus was too expensive. They adopted a plan of waiting and spying. Sooner or later, Haufek would show his hand. Then they would strike with special weapons held in reserve.

THE years passed in universal waiting tension. Venus had reverted to its ancient role of impenetrable mystery planet, but was constantly watched for signs of the danger that was brewing beneath the shroud of its clouded skies. Cardwell's mighty fleet of a hundred new super battleships hurtled across the great gulf, month after month and year after year, at a 95-C velocity—an irresistible force. But there in the skies of the South-

ern Hemisphere of Earth was a malignant eye, the baleful, waiting eye of Alpha Centauri—the living, monstrosly intelligent eye of The Alpid, who seemed to wait like a giant cat with its suckling brood of Teranians—Lydecker's Independence Party, which was waiting to see the whites of Cardwell's eyes.

The six billion inhabitants of the Sol System took more than a vicarious interest in the circumstances involved. A question had arisen in the mind of Man: if Cardwell failed, would it mark the end of superiority for *homo sapiens*?

Who or what was this *thing* that had been born on Teran as the direct result of violence? Was its bizarre danger reality or hysterical imagining? Time would tell, and time was growing short . . .

ONE night on Venus a simple event occurred that was unknown to the waiting worlds outside. A tall, gaunt Teranian with blond hair and pale blue eyes laid down a screwdriver on the control board of a converted space ship. He tested a simple instrument and then looked up at his three companions, Buchanan, Puckett and Aarri.

"It is finished," he said. "There's nothing left but the tests."

Buchanan looked at Puckett and then at Haufek and finally he broke out into a sad grin. "How many years ago was it that we plotted this, back on board the *Carlona*? It was only a theory then."

"Too long ago," mused Puckett.

"What is it—twenty years—twenty-two?"

Haufek's brow wrinkled up as he reached for a stim. "Now wait a minute. I said we're ready for *tests*. If the tests should go wrong, we might be blown into something far more intangible than a theory."

Buchanan said, "Well anyway, congratulations, men!" He shook Haufek's hand.

They shook hands all around. When Buchanan turned to Aarri, he found her staring at him, dry-eyed and forlorn. He took her into his arms and kissed her. Her arms went about his neck and she returned his kiss fervently, grasping desperately at the memories that a few brief years had given her.

She said nothing, but when Buchanan again turned his attention to the ship's control board, she silently left the room.

"I've got an idea," said Puckett. "Instead of telling the others we're ready, why not make the tests first? All we're going to do is drop out a ways into space and launch your remote control models. If they work, we know the ship will work. Then we can come back and say goodbye. We're loaded with supplies already."

Haufek looked up at Buchanan. "What do you say, Larry? Why not give the folks a complete report?"

Vague apprehension assailed Buchanan, but since he could not pin it down to a logical reason he shrugged. "Okay with me," he answered, finally.

Puckett gripped his arm, unable to contain his enthusiasm. "Do you

realize what it means if we succeed? We can hop across space in a flash—play leapfrog with the stars! We can get to Teran ahead of Cardwell, join Lydecker with our new weapons, even hop back to the Interstellar Fleet and give 'em hell out of nowhere!”

“Yeah? By my reckoning, Cardwell's about a month from being in striking range of Teran. Maybe we'd better get busy instead of yapping.”

They went around checking the ship. No one was on board. The hangar was empty. They closed the airlocks and started the gravitrons.

The sky island was beneath the CO<sub>2</sub> belt, so no one saw the ship rise silently toward outer space. In its belly was the most powerful cosmium energy plant that Man had ever dared to build.

Unknown to the three experimenters, ten first line battleships from Earth had established orbits around Venus, maintaining eternal vigilance against this moment. When the experimental ship emerged into space, the nearest battleship detected it and alerted all the others. They began to converge rapidly in its direction.

Once Haufek had placed his ship in an orbit, he turned his attention to the two models. Each one contained a miniature replica of his inversion drive acceleratron, which, when activated, would give the model such a terrible, near instantaneous acceleration that all matter contained in its field would tend to acquire infinite mass. Haufek's equations told him that Nature would take a course of least resistance under these condi-

tions, and invert the matter thus affected to contraterrene, spreading the titanic expenditure of energy out over a long, straight line through space, not violating the C-velocity speed limit, but causing the model to arrive at another point through what must be the equivalent of so-called “hyper space.”

Or, failing this, the force released would tear the model into atomic shreds.

The men were so intent upon their preparations for the experiment that they failed to notice the signal lights on the control panel for some time. Finally, however, Buchanan gripped Haufek's arm. He pointed to the flickering lights.

Wordlessly, the three of them went to their posts—Haufek to the navigating controls, Buchanan to the visiscope and the radalax, Puckett to the weapons board.

“Big ones!” Buchanan exclaimed. “Battleships—half a dozen of them. No, there's another one, and another! They must have been waiting for us!”

“Let's scuttle for home,” said Haufek, flipping switches.

“Too late!” exclaimed Buchanan. “They're here!”

Just then, all three men sensed an inaudible vibration and began to go numb. The enemy was using their own weapon of paralysis. Puckett and Buchanan stared at Haufek. They watched him, fascinated, as he flipped switches on the control panel which activated the acceleratron.

The answer was obvious. It was too late to withdraw from the battle.

Their interference generator, which could have counteracted the paralysis, was not even connected yet—a tragic oversight about which it was too late to cry. The enemy had the distinct advantage of surprise and power, even against their advanced weapons. And more important than anything else—Haufek's new drive could not fall into their hands.

Puckett and Buchanan sweated cold sweat in the imminence of possible violent death if the experiment failed, but they nodded silent agreement as Haufek reached out and pressed the final button.

Consciousness went out of them almost with an audible "swoosh!"

**H**OMUNCULUS in a bottle . . . Adrift in a sunless, starless sea—the seventh sea of a lost world beyond Beyond. Eternities? Time was a word without ideation. There was simultaneous forever, an endlessness contained in a dot. A dot that imploded into nothingness and left—galactic gulfs that were swallowed up like so many microscopic bacilli in the gaping maw of emptiness never visited by Creation. Endlessness beyond the end of all things—waiting for Beginning that approached from a distance measured by forever, which was meaningless yet the totality of reason.

Buchanan was unaware of how long he lay there in the control room, conscious, without realizing he could open his eyes and look around him. The common, ordinary stimulus of hunger finally stirred him to physical

action. He sat up, shook his head, and blinked.

He sat there for a while, trying to get a grip on what it was he was supposed to remember. Something had happened, of titanic proportions, something that had cast a new die for all things that comprised his world. He saw Haufek lying on his face near the pilot's seat in front of the control board. Puckett slumped in his padded chair before the weapons board.

Weapons!

Buchanan got to his feet, remembering the battleships. The signal lights on the panel were quiescent. He tried the visiscope.

An endless wall of stars met his eyes. He looked at the radalax oscilloscopes, all of which held a fixed monitor sinewave pattern, indicating that the detectors were on but were encountering no foreign bodies. The battleships were gone. He did a double take at one oscilloscope which should have shown a full lacework of waves indicating Venus.

Venus was gone.

For a full minute, Buchanan used the visiscope, rotating the scopes in the forward and aft robotories through every possible arc. There was not a planet in sight. They were in interstellar space.

Buchanan turned to his two companions and worked on them, slapping their faces, shaking them. Puckett was the first to revive.

"Wha— Where are they?" he muttered.

"Petel Wake up! We made it!"

Puckett stared at him, then sud-

denly acquired the full use of his faculties. He jumped up and looked at the instruments. Then he went to the visiscope. Buchanan continued working on Haufek.

"Holy jumping Jehosephat!" yelled Puckett, his eyes glued to the binocular eyepieces. "This is interstellar space!" Then he paused to look at the chronometer, which was working normally. "Unless it's a coincidence, we've jumped a couple of light years in about a minute!"

"It was probably near instantaneous," said Buchanan. "We've just been out for a short time, but it seemed like forever."

"You can say that again! I thought I was pinch-hitting for Father Time!"

Haufek stirred and opened his eyes. The two men helped him to his feet. By the time they guided him to the visiscope, he was fully conscious.

"Did we do it?" he queried.

"See for yourself, Billikins," said Puckett. "We didn't do it. *You* did!"

"We're out there, all right."

"And I'm hungry," said Puckett.

"Just a minute," Haufek interrupted.

The other two looked at him, then at each other, and waited. Finally, Haufek straightened up.

"You look funny," remarked Buchanan. "Why so pale?"

"I—hardly know how to express it," replied Haufek, "but—there are no familiar stars out there . . ."

Buchanan and Puckett almost collided, trying to use the scope simultaneously. Three minutes later, they

both faced Haufek in grim silence. .

"I don't even know if we're in our own galaxy," he said.

"Oh for God's sake, we can't have jumped that far!" exclaimed Puckett.

"I threw in maximum power," replied Haufek. "Maybe we can try some shorter hops and look around."

Buchanan remained silent. He was thinking of two things. He had left Aarri without really saying goodbye. When he would see her again, if ever, was now conjecturable. Then, too, if they could not locate themselves and get to Teran soon they would be too late. Too late for everything . . .

The three of them forgot about their hunger during the next hour, while Haufek manipulated the ship through space. They had no way of telling how far they went, but they did keep score on the number of jumps.

"On every uneven jump, we're contra-terrene," Haufek told them. "We'll have to remember that. On every even numbered jump we're terrene."

Nebulae, star clusters, double suns—the flaming heart of a galaxy was penetrated, but no familiar celestial object or group of objects came into view.

Haufek finally turned to them. "Shall I say it?" he asked.

"I'll say it for you," replied Buchanan. "We're lost."

"In some other universe," put in Puckett.

Haufek shrugged, but he was far from nonchalant.

"You know what?" said Puckett, at length. "I'm going to have something



to eat."

"Might as well," said Haufek.

Buchanan said, "I'm not hungry."

He looked back into the visiscope and scanned the unfamiliar starfields again. Far out in the black places were little, distant blobs of light—other island universes. Somewhere in the bottomless well of Creation—

It was like searching for a specific grain of sand in a desert, with an endless number of deserts to choose from. He was unable to make a comparative test of his various motivations. Anne, the woman he said he'd come back to. Cardwell, the man he had to kill. Teran, the world he sought to save. And Aarri, to whom he had not even said goodbye.

"Aarri," he whispered.

But the infinite depths of space could not even send back an echo . . .

**I**T took them two months to work out a semi-reliable system. By use of photography and charting of new constellations, they orientated themselves in the midst of the unknown, established points of reference, calibrated the acceleration controls for distance, learned how to control direction, established experimental courses in various directions, followed them, and returned to their starting point to try new courses.

They learned how to emerge from the galaxy they were in. They carefully checked on the distances of all visible island universes and marked down ten of the nearest ones for investigation. They had a secondary list of twenty-eight other galaxies

slightly more distant. There was nothing else to do but try.

In the course of their wanderings, they recorded their various courses, taking the first galaxy they had landed in as a point of reference. They discovered a number of promising solar systems and some not so promising, but nowhere did they discover the signs of a thriving interplanetary civilization. They landed on certain worlds, some of which were no larger than Mars and some of which were larger than Teran. Some had frozen atmospheres, some none at all, or they possessed atmospheres consisting of poisonous gases only. But there were worlds which they referred to as "carbon-chained advanced." Here were the signs of advanced biological evolution based on carbon, hydrogen, oxygen and nitrogen, with basic energy production based on common photosynthesis—chlorophyll, green plants absorbing normal, healthy, solar energy and converting it, breathing in CO<sub>2</sub> and exhaling oxygen, building a breathable atmosphere and a protective ionosphere. Worlds that were fertile and virgin, waiting for Man.

There was one planet, slightly larger than Earth, which contained an almost breathable atmosphere but which was too heavily laden with carbon dioxide. It was a compromise between normality and the CO<sub>2</sub> belt of Venus. When Buchanan observed this he began to laugh, bitterly.

"That's all right," Puckett told him. "Go ahead and let it out, boy, this is getting me, too."

"You don't know what I'm laughing about, and I shouldn't be laughing at all."

Haufek looked up from his instruments. "Well, let's have it," he said.

"I'm recalling the promise I had to make to the *Gagandii*."

"Hey! How about that? You never did tell us," put in Puckett.

Buchanan produced a wry grin. "Look at me. I'm a planet merchant. They asked me to find them another world. For a number of generations they've been trying to mutate into oxygen breathers, but the correct adjustment is a long way off yet. You've heard of the African lungfish. Well, they have rudimentary lungs, but when some of their best mutations have tried to crawl up out of the CO<sub>2</sub> belt they have run afoul of too much oxygen. Burned them up. So they had a choice of waiting thousands of years more for the correct mutation or—which was more hopeless than that—of finding a compromise in the way of environments, an in-between sort of atmosphere that would enable them to take advantage of their lungs right away and live where they could see the stars and become astronomers. The crawly devils have a strong racial instinct for expansion. When I told them about the possibilities of this ship and when they knew its success depended on two things they could give us—namely, cosmium and the Jesuit labs—they made me promise to search for a world that would suit their immediate needs. And there it is!" He waved his hand at the visiscope. "All what the doctor ordered,

waiting to be inhabited."

"Well?" queried Haufek. "Why the demoniac laughter? Later on we might be able to get some help and build a few extra ships. When we get time, it's conceivable that we might be able to transport some of them here and let them get started."

"Oh yeah? That's why I'm laughing. I used to think their request was impossible, but now that we've actually stumbled on what they want, the impossible part of it all seems to be in finding the *Gagandii*. Where in hell are they?"

## CHAPTER 26

THE FIFTH galaxy they visited was the one they wanted. After four months of traveling farther than any man had ever dreamed of, they discovered themselves to be in home territory. They were hundreds of light years from their own section of the known galaxy, but to them it was similar to being in one's old home town and merely looking for the right street and the right cottage with the white picket fence around it. At the end of one short hop, when they found themselves within gravitron traveling distance from the vast nebula in Orion, they were practically knocking on the old homestead's front door. Visible in the depths before them shone the steady eye of Sirius and, at last, the two little suns, Sol and Alpha Centauri, seemingly so close together that one might have thrown a stone between the two.

Yet Buchanan remembered a long,

six year voyage he had taken to get from one to the other, traveling at about eighty-five percent of the speed of light.

Haufek hopped the ship once more, an even numbered hop, making them terrene. Some of the worlds they had landed on were contra-terrene, and they had been able to land there because they, themselves, were contra-terrene. But now they were back to normal again, and the last inversion hop had been made. They could make it now to Teran by sheer fall boosted by rockets—within a month. The disc of Teran was visible in the scope.

Buchanan counted the years. Six years to Earth. Thirteen years in prison. Close to seven years on Venus.

After twenty-six years, he was coming home. His "whistle stop" on Mars had expanded into the biggest adventure of his life and the greatest voyage ever taken by his species. Mars, Earth, Venus—and five new galaxies.

But what had happened on Teran during his long absence? Especially during the past few months. The Interstellar Fleet had had time to strike, after all. The answer lay before him—not far away . . .

**T**HEY came in over Sylvania, the channel and the peninsula where the Center and Annex of Astra City had been. Center Annex was a mouldering heap of rubble. Center, itself, was non-existent, a blasted hole filled with seawater. Beyond lay the Gilbert Mountains and the snow-capped ridge of the Henderson Divide. These greater monuments to Nature always

remained behind in time to look back upon the folly of Man.

The outstanding feature of Teran as they saw it now was its stillness. There was no air traffic, no sign of life on the ground, and no radio traffic. Their signals elicited no response. Some of the rural areas where small residential communities had once been located were again mere heaps of rubble. They saw whole mountainsides which had been denuded and blackened by fire.

But when they came in sight of Lake Catherine, Buchanan tensed visibly. The rambling house was still there. Cardwell would not have blasted that. His pulse began to race when he discerned a skycar parked in the landing area below the house. Their first sign of life!

"Suppose you guys leave me off here and continue scouting around," he said.

"Need some help?" suggested Puckett, watching him closely.

Buchanan looked at him. "Why?"

Puckett shrugged. "There's no trace of the fleet around, but Cardwell might be home."

"So?"

Puckett and Haufek both stared at Buchanan. They looked at his thick, red beard and his battle-scarred face. He was slightly heavier than in the old days, somehow a bigger man all over. It was mostly in his eyes where you could tell. The vastness of years, the tempered hardness of suffering, hatred and longing in *crescendo* at the end of a long, long trail.

"I know the score, Larry," said

Puckett, "but let's be reasonable . . ."

"This is where I get off," said Buchanan. There was something in his voice and manner that was like a cold wind.

The ship lowered on its gravitrons, crushing trees at either end of the small landing area, and Buchanan jumped out of the lock to the ground. In his hand was a common variety of machine pistol.

He paused for a moment, trying to realize that he was standing on Teran, the planet of his birth. Slowly, he looked up and watched the ship rise into the still air. It hovered up there, waiting. The traces of an appreciative grin appeared about the corners of his mouth, but when he looked up at the house again, his face lost all expression and his eyes flamed alive.

Up there on the veranda, the tall figure of a man. Broad shoulders, black hair—the exact size and shape of Vincent Cardwell. He had a machine rifle in his hands and he was watching both the ship above and the figure on the landing field below.

Buchanan's fingers tensed around his machine pistol. He started toward the house. As he did so, the man on the veranda started toward him.

Why do I have to kill him?—Buchanan was thinking. The answer came calmly into his mind. Because you can't live with the complex that says you can't. You are a prisoner of yourself until you can kill Vincent the Invincible. His death is your only freedom.

It never entered his mind that Cardwell was Public Enemy Number

One, in all Man's known universe. Cardwell, the Teranian Benedict Arnold who had sold his people down the river and helped build an interstellar system of slavery—Cardwell, admiral of the fleet which had destroyed his own native world. The man with the Midas touch, who had sold him into an assignment of death. Vincent the Invincible.

Buchanan's steps hurried up the path. As his opponent came suddenly into close view, he raised his weapon to fire, then stopped.

The tall Teranian stood there, also ready to fire, staring at him. It was Cardwell, all right, but a much younger Cardwell. His image. Even as Buchanan looked, an exact replica of the first man stepped to his brother's side.

The twins! Twenty-six years had brought them from infancy to manhood. Buchanan trembled, lowering his gun, and for the first time became fully aware of the fact that he was over fifty years old. Though in these days such an age was still on the borderline of one's prime, he felt old—old as the stars.

"Who are you?" asked the first twin, in a full, masculine voice. "Are you from—the Base?"

Buchanan stood there taking them in, and his eyes misted. Had Fate rounded one more corner, these boys might have been his own sons. The murder lust went out of him momentarily, when he realized he had come near to shooting one of them.

"I am looking for—" He was about to say, "your father," but instead he

said, "your mother—Anne Cardwell."

The twins did not budge. "That still doesn't answer my question," said the first twin. "Who are you, and where did you come from? What's that ship doing up there? Who's it?"

"My name is Lawrence Buchanan—"

The second twin placed a hand on his brother's arm. "Buchanan!" he exclaimed, as though the name held a lifetime of meaning. On Teran, the name was part of history.

"That ship up there," continued Buchanan. "involves a long story. It is seeking contact with Howard Lydecker."

The first twin's grip on the machine rifle relaxed. "Come up to the house," he said. "We want to talk to you. There's a transmitter there. We didn't answer your previous calls because we did not want to reveal our position until we knew who you were. You can tell your ship that Lydecker's headquarters, what's left of it, is located on Mount Grant in the Hundred Islands."

Buchanan suppressed a surge of elation over the fact that Lydecker still lived. "And your father?" he asked, as gently as possible. "Where is he?"

"We never knew our father. Every vessel of the Interstellar Fleet has been destroyed. We think—he is dead."

Buchanan was silent for a moment. He was painfully aware of having been cheated. Cardwell was neither dead nor alive. He was a mystery—

which he would have to investigate later.

"But what about your mother? Is she here?"

"Yes. She is here, but—"

Buchanan lunged up the path. "Then what are we waiting for?" he asked.

He was ahead of the twins before they could detain him. The first one started to overtake him, but the second one held him back.

"Maybe it's the best thing to let him walk right in," he suggested.

"You're wrong," said the other. "She must never know. Come on!"

ANNE CARDWELL looked up slowly when the man came into the den and stood before her. She saw a tall, powerful man in the late years of his prime, an ugly, red-bearded man with a broken nose and a bad scar under one eye that pulled it down slightly. He might have been a pirate out of the pages of ancient story books, except for his eyes. She had known a pair of eyes like that once, but these were slightly different. These could be kind, like those other eyes she had known, but they had seen too much of death and violence, and they could hate. Just now they were ludicrously bewildered.

As her two sons, Ralph and Andrew, came into the den behind the stranger, she laughed. "Who is this man, boys?"

As they did not answer, the stranger said: "Who are you?"

He saw before him an old woman seated in the kind of old and com-

fortable chair that is reserved for the aged. Her hair was white. Her face was wrinkled. He had no desire to meet someone's grandmother. Where was the tall, stately woman with the black, midnight coiffure and the blue eyes that held the only world he had ever wanted?

The old woman smiled. "I am Anne Cardwell," she said.

Buchanan swayed like a tall tree in a storm. The two young men grabbed him and led him outside. They led him down the trail to a shaded platform where there were a number of rustic seats made out of the yellow-wood tree. Here they sat him down and he stared into space like a victim of shock. His hands hung limply between his knees.

Finally, he brought his hands to his face, pressing them tightly against his flesh, as though to stifle a cry of anguish.

"Don't ever let mother know what she really looks like," said Ralph, sitting down in front of Buchanan. "Psychologists have explained it to us. You gave her a dream to live for once. You said you would come back to her. When the years passed and you did not and people kept telling her you were dead, she refused to believe either that you were dead, or that you would not return. Without the dream she would have lost her mind. So a mental defense mechanism took over—self-delusion. She began to believe she was the girl you had said good-bye to, and that nothing would change until you got back. But each year of waiting was like a life-



*Anne Cardwell*

time, too, and her twisted delusions brought on an acceleration of senility. She doesn't know it because when she looks in a mirror I guess she still sees herself as she was when you knew her."

"If you go to her and insist on identifying yourself," put in Andrew, "it may be the end of her magic mirror. The shock of reality would kill her."

Buchanan's hands dropped away from his face. His eyes were dry. "Too many years have passed," he said, in a strange monotone. "My dream is gone. It died today. But hers is worth far more than its own realization, even if that were possible. Let her keep it. Don't tell her I was here."

"You wish—to return to your ship and find Lydecker?" asked Ralph.

Buchanan looked fondly at both of them. "You boys said you wanted to talk to me," he said.

"We do! Ever since you and Puckett and Haufek bombed Earth's moon, we thought you were dead, but now that you have returned—"

"I want to talk to you boys also, but—can it wait? Say until tomorrow?"

"Yes. We have waited all our lives."

"Then tell the ship to go on. That's Puckett and Haufek up there. Tell them where Lydecker is. They can contact me later."

"What do you want to do?"

"I want to borrow that boat I saw down by the dock."

Buchanan spent the rest of the day out on the island that had once been his and Anne's. There, whatever he did, was private. If he cried, prayed or slept, no one ever knew. And up at the villa above the lake an old woman sat in an old chair and chuckled to herself, wondering about the strange, ugly man with the hauntingly familiar eyes. When it was time for her afternoon broth she had forgotten the man—but a golden dream of youth and a pleasant faith in its fulfillment remained with her.

**T**WO days later, the twins flew Buchanan toward the Hundred Islands and a prearranged meeting with Lydecker. En route, however, they took him to the southern tip of Sylvania where he began to see hundreds of thousands of Alphids at work. Here were strangely designed buildings of gleaming metal, or plastic, he could not tell which—a sprawling young metropolis inhabited

solely by Alphids. And beyond the buildings was the vast skeleton of a ship that was fully a mile long.

"My God!" Buchanan exclaimed. "What and whose is *that!*"

"It is some kind of super space ship is all we can say," said Ralph. "The Alphid is building it."

They had briefed him on The Alphid. He was definitely not a myth. The sight of those formerly harmless little Alphids working below with such calm purpose, exhibiting a technology that appeared to compete with that of Man, suddenly filled him with instinctive dread.

"Can you go close?" he asked.

"No. The Alphid's laws are quite simple to understand. We can go thus far and no farther. Those who have tried ceased to exist."

Buchanan felt the hair at the base of his neck try to stand up. "But—can you talk to this—this Alphid?"

"Lydecker has—maybe a few others. But that's all over with. Communications have ceased."

"Well, what's the score? What's he really after?"

"We're not sure, but it's mostly bad. The long, peaceful association experienced by Alphids in relation to ourselves here on Teran seems to be to our advantage, for the time being, but the attack of the Interstellar Fleet has identified the Sol System with violence and danger. That's what touched off this ship project. In spite of the fact that Lydecker's forces *and* The Alphid completely demolished the attacking fleet after its first strike at Teran, we gather

that The Alphid wants to beat some ears down in the Sol System so that there will be no recurrence of violence in the future. Maybe his plans reach farther than that."

"What do you mean?"

"Ask Lydecker."

Buchanan studied both of them and wondered what they were really afraid of, or what they were trying to conceal from him, or what they were afraid to admit. That they were on the right side of the fence now was evidenced by the fact that they were active officers in the Army of Independence. They had joined the revolt against the forces represented by their father long ago—partially as a result of having absorbed from their mother a hatred for him with which they had been nurtured. They had spent all of their formative years with their mother, and when their father made his first appearance it was one that shook their world and sent their people into hiding. They had sought out Lydecker voluntarily and had served him ever since.

**A**T the great headquarters base on Mount Grant, Buchanan ran into a few of his old friends, in the company of Haufek and Puckett and the Cardwell twins. There were Albert Olmstead, Alfred Makowski, George Winzer, Dr. Ed Jayne, and later he even discovered that same Dr. Fernandini whom they had shanghaied out of Martanium so long ago. He was Lydecker's right hand consultant—a full-fledged Teranian citizen. But he sensed that

everyone was working under a great internal tension. The Alphid was casting too dark a shadow across the immediate future.

All his old acquaintances had changed with the years, except Lydecker, himself. He was the same dynamic leader of old. In his eyes was a deathless quality of leadership and conviction, but they filled with tears when they saw Buchanan. Puckett and Haufek had already told his story.

"I have you to thank for a Second Front we didn't even know we had," he said, shaking Buchanan's hand vigorously. "Without your efforts, Haufek might never have built this wonderful ship for us, which will perhaps prove to be the salvation of our race!"

There were tables and chairs on the veranda and a well stocked bar. Haufek, having recognized the fact that his responsibilities had come to an end momentarily after years of conscientious effort and worries he had not expressed, had become plastered, possibly for the first time in his life. Buchanan wondered if Lydecker was drunk or delirious.

"Isn't that an overstatement?" he asked.

"No!" cried Haufek, staggering over to his chair with a tall glass in his hand. "Yer shavyer of Mankind, ol' boy! La Ree, Shun of Fire—hup! —Shlayer of Drookh—Shtar Chief. Yer th' shtar of nexsh shapter of hishtory—hup!"

Buchanan glared at him. "What are you giving me, Bill?"



"I mean it! You been through th' mill, boy! I made with the shlipshstick and the figures, sure! But who was the boy—hup!—who did the pushin' all along? Y'came through, Larry! Y'delivered th' goods! F'I hadn't believed in yer leadership—hup!—I'd never 'v done what I did!"

Buchanan looked over at Puckett, finally, and winked. "Now he tells me! All the time I was believing in *him!* There's just one complaint to make. I think it's all spread even—except the drinks. Bill, how about mixing two Teranian Terrors for me and Pete here?"

Lydecker went on after the brief interruption. "This is the strangest war ever fought," he said. "The two contenders suddenly found themselves separated by an unexpected third party of astounding proportions—The Alphid, himself. He helped me smash the opposition, true—but has he left us the hope of fulfillment of all our original dreams? We have come to wonder if our life is our own. Yet we can't actually name The Alphid as an enemy. If you want the truth, I see it this way. His forced mutation—thanks to Cardwell and Company—has precipitated a development that will end, inevitably, in his superiority over our own species, whether we fight—or wait. In this universe, Man has reached the end of his superiority."

"So you all soak your heads in a bucket and give up without a struggle," Buchanan accused. Haufek had brought him his drink and he gulped half of it down. "You wouldn't be

the victims of a subtle job of hypnosis, would you? If The Alphid's so smart, he could get you to thinking in terms of defeatism."

"He hates violence," retorted Lydecker. "He has only one answer for it. That is ultimate violence—annihilation. We have a slight advantage of time. We do not have to wait any longer. Puckett and Haufek have told me of those other worlds you found. We have facilities here. We can build a few more ships based on Haufek's inversion drive and start transplanting civilization."

Buchanan frowned. "There's something wrong about running away with our tails between our legs."

"We don't necessarily have to do that. We just can't take chances. The Alphid is too much of an unknown quantity. After we have thoroughly established ourselves and have had more time to develop some real weapons, we can come back here and perhaps re-establish communication with him."

"Wha'dya shay, Larry? How about it?" asked Haufek.

Buchanan looked at his drunken friend. One time Haufek had dreamed of another world of their own where they could plant a new Eden free of the old seeds of violence.

"I'm going fishing," he said, "for the first time in about thirty years."

## CHAPTER 27

**T**WO NIGHTS later, Buchanan sat alone on a rock on top of Mount Grant, smoking a stim

and looking down at Lydecker's rambling villa and the bay, under the bright light of the two Teranian moons, Achilles and Chiron. Here and there below the villa he saw lights burning in various shops and buildings, where the remaining Teranians still lived and worked for their salvation. Haufek was down there in one of the labs. working with Dr. Fernandini and Olmstead and Jayne and Makowski and others, already drawing up plans for three great intergalactic ships.

The fishing had helped him to organize his own thoughts. But he had had an unexpected little adventure that bothered him.

He had used one of the launches that the local Teranians utilized for the purpose of obtaining fresh fish. He had insisted on going out alone, beyond the reefs, where the waves were broad and deep and the spray was a refreshing challenge. There were other boats out there, but in the late afternoon of that day he had found himself alone on a relatively calm sea. Finally, he had noticed another fishing boat cruising unobtrusively along within a quarter kilometer of his. He noticed that it, too, contained a single occupant.

Idly, he had examined the other through a pair of binoculars. He had seen a tall, black bearded man wearing dark sunglasses. The latter was examining him, as well, with a pair of binoculars.

After a while, the other boat had increased its speed and departed in the direction of a neighboring island.

He had later checked that island on a map and asked some questions about it. It was supposed to be uninhabited.

Therefore, he had been asking himself ever since: Who would be hiding out on an uninhabited island within gunshot of Lydecker's base of operations? Why should the man have to investigate him from a distance with a pair of binoculars? Then why should he take off toward his hiding place in great haste, as though he had recognized Buchanan and decided on a sudden course of action.

**S**UDDENLY Buchanan was aware of the most peculiar sensation of his life. It was equivalent to the often described experience of Nirvanah. He knew he was sitting on the mountaintop, yet he had no sense of location. Because he was everywhere—on the mountain and in the sky—like an entity brooding over the totality of Creation.

But peace was not a characteristic of his sensation. Instead, he felt the weight of worlds on his shoulders. And the tension mounted until it seemed he would be strangled by it.

At last he received a message—a meaning without words. A flash of realization burst upon him, and he began to run down the trail toward the villa.

Long years later he was to ask himself if The Alphid had spoken to him that night, reaching out to him with its multiple intelligence, like a friend, warning him of a danger that threatened Man's precarious destiny

—but it was easy to reduce the unknown to the egotistical level of one's understanding and explain it away as instinct—or the result of pure logic.

He stopped at the villa only long enough to pick up his machine pistol. Then he headed for the hangars and the ship that had brought him back to Teran.

In the control room he saw a tall, black-bearded man examining the acceleratron instruments. The latter turned around to face him as he came in.

"Vince Cardwell!" Buchanan exclaimed. He did not ask him to get his hands up because he did not intend to capture him.

Cardwell knew this. He could see it in his eyes. The two men stood there glaring at each other, with the bitter memory of the years swirling around inside of them.

Each had the positive presentiment that this was their last meeting. But meanwhile there seemed to be an infinite time at their disposal in which to stare at each other and review their lives, each in his own manner.

"Not that it matters," said Buchanan, at length, "but how did you survive?"

"You're right. It doesn't matter. The fact is, I survived. Just before my fleet attacked Teran I received a message from Earth concerning you and Haufek and the Venusian revolution. I have been waiting ever since for you to show up."

"Yes? Well, here I am. What are you going to do about it?"

Cardwell studied the muzzle of

Buchanan's machine pistol. He wanted to sneer at him as in times past. Buchanan had never been able to kill him. But now when he looked into his eyes he was not so sure.

Suddenly, his hand went back and grasped the activating lever of the acceleratron. He grinned when he saw the expression of alarm on Buchanan's face.

"I thought this was the lever," he said. "This is a new kind of ship, isn't it? What will happen, Larry, if I pull this down?"

Buchanan's knuckles whitened around the gun, but he did not fire. Cardwell laughed.

"So I haven't got it set right. You don't dare shoot, because I can still pull the lever."

"You would be blown to cosmic dust—along with the whole mountain. Where would it get you outside of hell where you were born?"

"It gets me a chance to talk some sense into you. I want to go back to Earth, Larry. I want you to drop that gun and show me how to work these controls."

"There would be only one reason for your going back there," said Buchanan, still aiming the gun at him. "You think you can make another try against The Alpid."

Cardwell's face paled with the seriousness of his thought. "I've got to you fool! Don't you know what's happening? Are you and Lydecker still star-gazing? The human race is in danger of—of—"

"Thanks to you, yes! We're all in danger of being subjugated to the au-

thority of a superhuman intelligence. And Lydecker and Haufek and I and others are doing just what you said. We're doing a hell of a lot of stargazing, Vince. This ship is not interstellar. It's intergalactic. It'll take us out of here and we're building more.

Cardwell's mouth dropped agape. He turned briefly to stare at the lever in his hand. He let go of it—then suddenly grasped it in self-defense and turned back to Buchanan, tensely.

"You lie!"

Buchanan grinned. "No I'm not, Vince. I've been there. I've seen five other galaxies. There are inhabitable worlds out there—whole solar systems just waiting for us. And that's where we're going. But you're going to stay here. You're going to enjoy being master of a universe where Man plays second fiddle—all because of you! You made your worlds, Vince, you with your Midas touch! Where has it gotten you now? I'll make you a proposition, Vince. You always boasted about being able to make the clear, clean stroke of decision. If you pull that lever, that's what you'll be doing. You'll blow up the master pattern, and you'll kill all the men here who could build another ark of space in which to transport a representative body of humans to a new universe. Think back over your life now. What have you done to me, and to Anne, and to your sons who hate your name? What have you done to the whole damned universe? If you can pull that lever and deny your race the right to continue

the master of its own destiny—go ahead! Pull it! But if you don't pull it, I'll kill you! Take your choice!"

Cardwell saw behind Buchanan's speech. It was the final clash of their two personalities—the final test of strength between them. In the cold light of logic, it was gambling with stakes that were not the property of either. But from a perspective which lay beyond the ideation of words it was understandable—terrifyingly apparent.

This was the final shape their duel would take. The gun was there, pointing at his heart. The lever was in his sweating hand. One swift movement and there would be oblivion. If he did not destroy Man's hope of Tomorrow, he, himself, would die. Thus Buchanan placed Cardwell on a gigantic balance scale, against humanity.

Cardwell looked into Buchanan's eyes and knew he was telling the truth. Both men stood there—waiting. Buchanan's finger tightened on the trigger. Cardwell's hand clutched the lever tighter. The muscles of his arm tensed.

Neither ever knew how much time passed, locked in a silent, motionless duel, as in some surrealist night-mare. They lived through the obliterating blast that their minds could imagine. They both saw themselves teetering on the brink of extinction. They suffered and died and came alive again to realize that they were still there facing each other, waiting for one or the other to break.

Cardwell broke. He made a swift

dive for Buchanan and Buchanan fired. He missed.

Cardwell was striking Buchanan with his fists, but Buchanan stood there and gazed at him in sudden wonderment. His mouth was bleeding from Cardwell's blows, but he began to laugh. He looked at the gun on the floor and laughed. Cardwell made a dash for the gun, but Buchanan caught him, turned him around, and struck him in the face, causing him to stagger back against the wall. Cardwell supported himself against the wall, wondering why Buchanan did not pick up the gun—why he was still laughing.

"Are you insane!" he almost shrieked.

"No!" Buchanan exulted. "I just found out something very funny!"

"Nothing's funny, damn you!"

"Oh yes it is! For twenty-six years I have been a prisoner of my own complex, the complex that made it impossible for me to kill you, Vince. I thought I had to kill you before I could be free. But that isn't it! I just shot at you now. I missed but that isn't important. The fact is, I shot with intent to kill. I am actually able to kill you. I could pick up that gun now and do it. But here's the ~~joke~~! It wasn't killing you I wanted. It was to be able to kill you. I'm free at last, Vince! I've got you where I always wanted you!"

Cardwell lunged forward again, his fists flying, but Buchanan caught his head and pushed it down. He brought his knee up sharply, giving him what

he gave Drukh. But not as hard. He only wanted to stun him.

Cardwell was on his knees, bleeding through the nose. He lifted up his face, and suddenly he was pleading.

"Look! I didn't do it, Larry! I earned my keep. I chose a bullet rather than that other way out. Take me with you when you go—"

Buchanan picked up the gun and weighed it pleasantly in his hand. He admired it happily.

"No," he smiled. "That's not for you, Vince. As the old saying goes—you've made your bed. Now lie in it! *You're going back to Earth!*"

**A**FTER they built the three arks and departed for new worlds beyond the stars, Buchanan borrowed the old ship. Back on Venus he had to fulfill an old obligation. He had to tell the *Gagandii* that he had kept his promise. The arks would be coming for them one day before it was too late. Perhaps even the *Braburnii* could have a new home of their own. And as many deserving Earthmen as they could take. He had an idea The Alphid had planned it that way all along, but of course that was something he was ashamed to mention to anybody. They might laugh at him. Or then again, they might not.

Then, too, there was a very personal reason for hopping back to Venus. There was a girl there, a half-breed *Braburni*, to be sure, but the only one who could give him now the kind of love that belonged in a new world. . . .

**POWER METAL** S. J. Byrne

