

★ PLANET ★

★ STORIES ★

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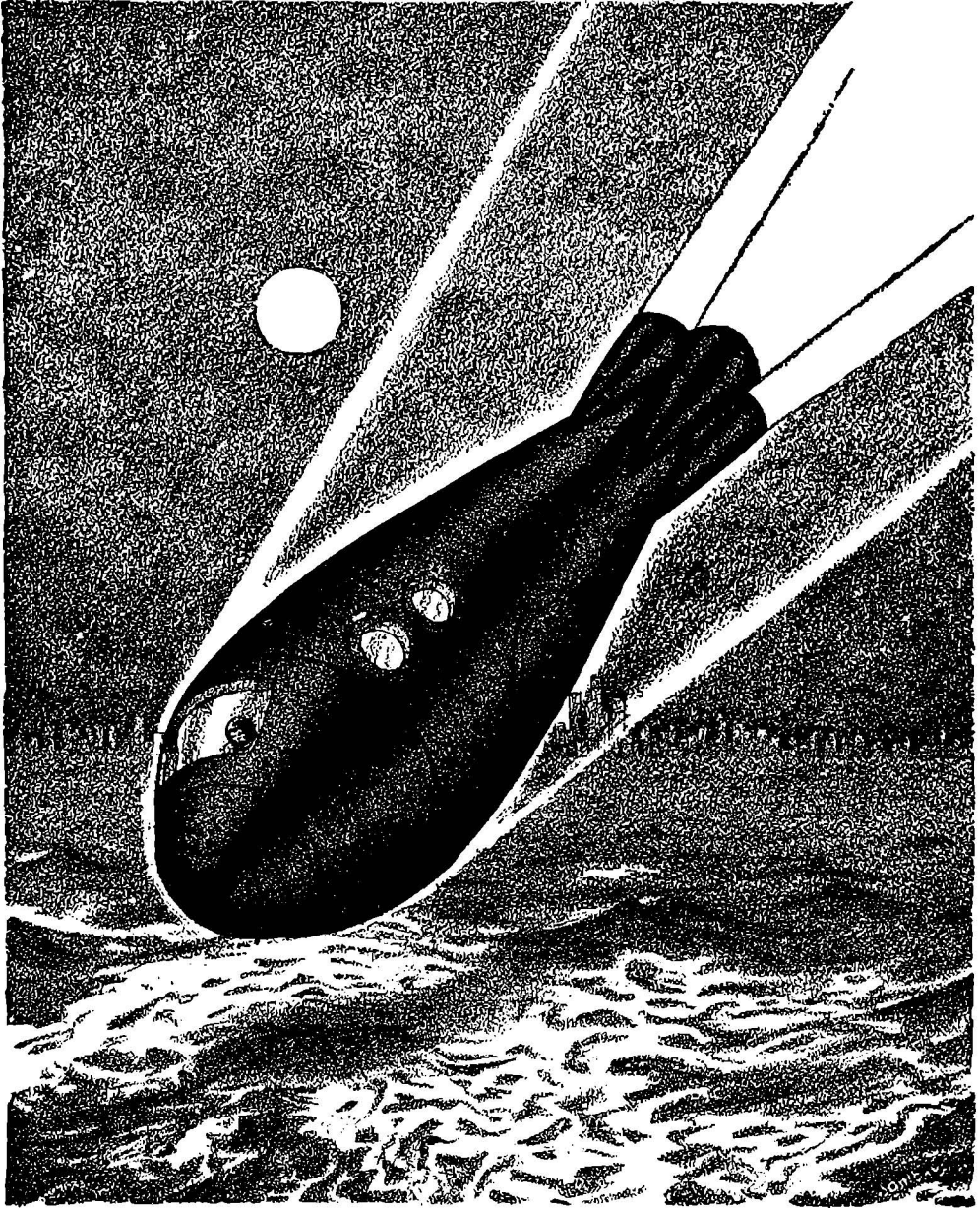
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PRISON PLANET

By **BOB TUCKER**

To remain on Mars meant death from agonizing space-sickness, but Earth-surgery lay days of flight away. And there was only a surface rocket in which to escape—with a traitorous Ganymedian for its pilot.

Illustrated by Knight



The ocean rushed up with incredible speed.

LISTEN, Rat!" Roberds said, "what *I* say goes around here. It doesn't happen to be any of your business. I'm still in possession of my wits, and I know Peterson can't handle that ship. Furthermore Gladney will be in it too, right along side of that sick girl in there! And Rat, get this: *I'm* going to

pilot that ship. Understand? Consulate or no Consulate, job or no job, I'm wheeling that crate to Earth because this is an emergency. And the emergency happens to be bigger than my position, to me at any rate." His tone dropped to a deadly softness. "Now will you kindly remove your stinking carcass from this office?"

Unheeding, Rat swung his eyes around in the gloom and discovered the woman, a nurse in uniform. He blinked at her and she returned the look, wavering. She bit her lip and determination flowed back. She met the stare of his boring, off-colored eyes. Rat grinned suddenly. Nurse Gray almost smiled back, stopped before the others could see it.

"Won't go!" The Centaurian resumed his fight. "You not go, lose job, black-listed. Never get another. Look at me. I know." He retreated a precious step to escape a rolled up fist. "Little ship carry four nice. Rip out lockers and bunks. Swing hammocks. Put fuel in water tanks. Live on concentrates. Earth hospital fix bellyache afterwards, allright. I pilot ship. Yes?"

"No!" Roberds screamed.

Almost in answer, a moan issued from a small side room. The men in the office froze as Nurse Gray ran across the room. She disappeared through the narrow door.

"Peterson," the field manager ordered, "come over here and help me throw this rat out . . ." He went for Rat. Peterson swung up out of his chair with balled fist. The outlander backed rapidly.

"No need, no need, no need!" he said quickly. "I go." Still backing, he blindly kicked at the door and stepped into the night.

WHEN the door slammed shut Roberds locked it. Peterson slumped in the chair.

"Do you mean that, Chief? About taking the ship yourself?"

"True enough." Roberds cast an anxious glance at the partly closed door, lowered his voice. "It'll cost me my job, but that girl in there has to be taken to a hospital quickly! And it's her luck to be landed on a planet that doesn't boast even one! So it's Earth . . . or she dies. I'd feel a lot better too if we could get Gladney to a hospital, I'm not too confi-

dent of that patching job." He pulled a pipe from a jacket pocket. "So, might as well kill two birds with one stone . . . and that wasn't meant to be funny!"

Peterson said nothing, sat watching the door.

"Rat has the right idea," Roberds continued, "but I had already thought of it. About the bunks and lockers. Greaseball has been out there all night tearing them out. We just *might* be able to hop by dawn . . . and hell of a long, grinding hop it will be!"

The nurse came out of the door.

"How is she?" Roberds asked.

"Sleeping," Gray whispered. "But sinking . . ."

"We can take off at dawn, I think." He filled the pipe and didn't look at her. "You'll have to spend most of the trip in a hammock."

"I can take it." Suddenly she smiled, wanly. "I was with the Fleet. How long will it take?"

"Eight days, in *that* ship."

Roberds lit his pipe, and carefully hid his emotions. He knew Peterson was harboring the same thoughts. Eight days in space, in a small ship meant for two, and built for planetary surface flights. Eight days in that untrustworthy crate, hurtling to save the lives of that girl and Gladney.

"Who was that . . . man? The one you put out?" Gray asked.

"We call him Rat," Roberds said.

She didn't ask why. She said: "Why couldn't he pilot the ship, I mean? What is his record?"

Peterson opened his mouth.

"Shut up, Peterson!" the Chief snapped. "We don't talk about his record around here, Miss Gray. It's not a pretty thing to tell."

"Stow it, Chief," said Peterson. "Miss Gray is no pantywaist." He turned to the nurse. "Ever hear of the Sansan massacre?"

Patti Gray paled. "Yes," she whispered. "Was Rat in that?"

Roberds shook his head. "He didn't take part in it. But Rat was attached to a very important office at the time, the outpost watch. And when Mad Barry Sansan and his gang of thugs swooped down on the Ganymedeian colony, there

was no warning. Our friend Rat was AWOL.

"As to who he is . . . well, just one of those freaks from up around Centauria somewhere. He's been hanging around all the fields and dumps on Mars a long time, finally landed up here."

"But," protested Miss Gray, "I don't understand? I always thought that leaving one's post under such circumstances meant execution."

The Chief Consul nodded. "It does, usually. But this was a freak case. It would take hours to explain. However, I'll just sum it up in one word: politics. Politics, with which Rat had no connection saved him."

The girl shook her head, more in sympathy than condemnation.

"Are you expecting the others in soon?" she asked. "It wouldn't be right to leave Peterson."

"They will be in, in a day or two. Peterson will beat it over to Base station for repairs, and to notify Earth we're coming. He'll be all right."

Abruptly she stood up. "Goodnight gentlemen. Call me if I'm needed."

Roberds nodded acknowledgement. The door to the side room closed behind her. Peterson hauled his chair over to the desk. He sniffed the air.

"Damned rat!" he whispered harshly. "They ought to make a law forcing him to wear dark glasses!"

Roberds smiled wearily. "His eyes do get a man, don't they?"

"I'd like to burn 'em out!" Peterson snarled.

RAT helped Greaseball fill the water tanks to capacity with fuel, checked the concentrated rations and grunted.

Greaseball looked over the interior and chuckled. "The boss said strip her, and strip her I did. All right, Rat, outside." He followed the Centaurian out, and pulled the ladder away from the lip of the lock. The two walked across the strip of sandy soil to the office building. On tiptoes, Greaseball poked his head through the door panel. "All set."

Roberds nodded at him. "Stick with it!" and jerked a thumb at Rat outside. Grease nodded understanding.

"Okay, Rat, you can go to bed now."

He dropped the ladder against the wall and sat on it. "Good night." He watched Rat walk slowly away.

Swinging down the path towards his own rambling shack, Rat caught a sibilant whisper. Pausing, undecided, he heard it again.

"Here . . . can you see me?" A white clad arm waved in the gloom. Rat regarded the arm in the window. Another impatient gesture, and he stepped to the sill.

"Yes?"—in the softest of whispers. The voices of the men in droning conversation drifted in. "What you want?"

Nothing but silence for a few hanging seconds, and then: "Can you pilot that ship?" Her voice was shaky.

He didn't answer, stared at her confused. He felt her fear as clearly as he detected it in her words.

"Well, *can* you?" she demanded.

"Damn yes!" he stated simply. "It now necessary?"

"Very! She is becoming worse. I'm afraid to wait until daylight. And . . . well, we want *you* to pilot it! She refuses to risk Mr. Roberds' job. She favors you."

Rat stepped back, astonished. "She?"

Nurse Gray moved from the window and Rat saw the second form in the room, a slight, quiet figure on a small cot. "My patient," Nurse Gray explained. "She overheard our conversation awhile ago. Quick, please, can you?"

Rat looked at her and then at the girl on the cot. He vanished from the window. Almost immediately, he was back again.

"When?" he whispered.

"As soon as possible. Yes. Do you know . . .?" but he had gone again. Nurse Gray found herself addressing blackness. On the point of turning, she saw him back again.

"Blankets," he instructed. "Wrap in blankets. Cold—hot too. Wrap good!" And he was gone again. Gray blinked away the illusion he disappeared upwards.

She ran over to the girl. "Judith, if you want to back down, now is the time. He'll be back in a moment."

"No!" Judith moaned. "No!" Gray smiled in the darkness and began wrap-

ping the blankets around her. A light tapping at the window announced the return of Rat. The nurse pushed open the window wide, saw him out there with arms upstretched.

"Grit your teeth and hold on! Here we go." She picked up the blanketed girl in both arms and walked to the window. Rat took the girl easily as she was swung out, the blackness hid them both. But he appeared again instantly.

"Better lock window," he cautioned. "Stall, if Boss call. Back soon . . ." and he was gone.

To Nurse Gray the fifteen minute wait seemed like hours, impatient agonizing hours of tight-lipped anxiety.

FET first, she swung through the window, clutching a small bag in her hands. She never touched ground. Rat whispered "Hold tight!" in her ear and the wind was abruptly yanked from her! The ground fell away in a dizzy rush, unseen but felt, in the night! Her feet scraped on some projection, and she felt herself being lifted still higher. Wind returned to her throat, and she breathed again.

"I'm sorry," she managed to get out, gaspingly. "I wasn't expecting that. I had forgotten you—"

"—had wings," he finished and chuckled. "So likewise Greaseball." The pale office lights dropped away as they sped over the field. On the far horizon, a tinge of dawn crept along the uneven terrain.

"Oh, the bag!" she gasped. "I've dropped it."

He chuckled again. "Have got. You scare, I catch."

She didn't see the ship because of the wind in her eyes, but without warning she plummeted down and her feet jarred on the lip of the lock. "Inside. No noise, no light. Easy." But in spite of his warning she tripped in the darkness. He helped her from the floor and guided her to the hammocks.

"Judith?" she asked.

"Here. Beside you, trussed up so tight I can hardly breathe."

"No talk!" Rat insisted. "Much hush-hush needed. Other girl shipshape. You make likewise." Forcibly he shoved her

into a hammock. "Wrap up tight. Straps tight. When we go, we go fast. Bang!" And he left her.

"Hey! Where are you going now?"

"To get Gladney. He sick too. Hush hush!" His voice floated back.

"Where has he gone?" Judith called.

"Back for another man. Remember the two miners who found us when we crashed? The burly one fell off a rock-bank as they were bringing us in. Stove in his ribs pretty badly. The other has a broken arm . . . happened once while you were out. They wouldn't let me say anything for fear of worrying you."

THE girl did not answer then and a hushed expectancy fell over the ship. Somewhere aft a small motor was running. Wind whistled past the open lock.

"I've caused plenty of trouble haven't I?" she asked aloud, finally. "This was certainly a fool stunt, and I'm guilty of a lot of fool stunts! I just didn't realize until now the *why* of that law."

"Don't talk so much," the nurse admonished. "A lot of people have found out the *why* of that law the hard way, just as you are doing, and lived to remember it. Until hospitals are built on this forlorn world, humans like you who haven't been properly conditioned will have to stay right at home."

"How about these men that live and work here?"

"They never get here until they've been through the mill first. Adenoids, appendix, all the extra parts they can get along without."

"Well," Judith said. "I've certainly learned my lesson!"

Gray didn't answer, but from out of the darkness surrounding her came a sound remarkably resembling a snort.

"Gray?" Judith asked fearfully.

"Yes?"

"Hasn't the pilot been gone an awfully long time?"

Rat himself provided the answer by alighting at the lip with a jar that shook the ship. He was breathing heavily and lugging something in his arms. The burden groaned.

"Gladney!" Nurse Gray exclaimed.

"I got." Rat confirmed. "Yes, Gladney. Damn heavy, Gladney."

"But how?" she demanded. "What of Roberds and Peterson?"

"Trick," he sniggered. "I burn down my shack. Boss run out. I run in. Very simple." He packed Gladney into the remaining hammock and snapped buckles.

"And Peterson?" she prompted.

"Oh yes. Peterson. So sorry about Peterson. Had to fan him."

"Fan him? I don't understand."

"Fan. With chair. Everything all right. I apologized." Rat finished up and was walking back to the lock. They heard a slight rustling of wings as he padded away.

He was back instantly, duplicating his feat of a short time ago. Cursing shouts were slung on the night air, and the deadly spang of bullets bounced on the hull! Some entered the lock. The Centaurian snapped it shut. Chunks of lead continued to pound the ship. Rat leaped for the pilot's chair, heavily, a wing drooping.

"You've been hurt!" Gray cried. A small panel light outlined his features. She tried to struggle up.

"Lie still! We go. Boss get wise." With lightning fingers he flicked several switches on the panel, turned to her. "Hold belly. Zoom!"

Gray folded her hands across her stomach and closed her eyes.

Rat unlocked the master level and shoved!

"WHEW!" Nurse Gray came back to throbbing awareness, the all too familiar feeling of a misplaced stomach attempting to force its crowded way into her boots plaguing her. Rockets roared in the rear. She loosened a few straps and twisted over. Judith was still out, her face tensed in pain. Gray bit her lip and twisted the other way. The Centaurian was grinning at her.

"Do you always leave in a hurry?" she demanded, and instantly wished she hadn't said it. He gave no outward sign.

"Long-time sleep," he announced. "Four, five hours maybe." The chest strap was lying loose at his side.

"That long!" she was incredulous. "I'm never out more than three hours!"

Unloosening more straps, she sat up, glanced at the control panel.

"Not taking time," he stated simply and pointed to a dial. Gray shook her head and looked at the others.

"That isn't doing either of them any good!"

Rat nodded unhappily. "What's her matter—?" pointing.

"Appendix. Something about this atmosphere sends it haywire. The thing itself isn't diseased, but it starts manufacturing poison. Patient dies in a week unless it is taken out."

"Don't know it," he said briefly.

"Do you mean to say you don't have an appendix?" she demanded.

Rat folded his arms and considered this. "Don't know. Maybe yes, maybe no. Where's it hurt?"

Gray pointed out the location. The Centaurian considered this further and drifted into long contemplation. Watching him, Gray remembered his eyes that night . . . only *last* night . . . in the office. Peterson had refused to meet them. After awhile Rat came out of it.

"No," he waved. "No appendix. Never nowhere appendix."

"Then Mother Nature has finally woke up!" she exclaimed. "But why do Centaurians rate it exclusively?"

Rat ignored this and asked one of her. "What you and her doing up there?" He pointed back and up, to where Mars obliterated the stars.

"You might call it a pleasure jaunt. She's only seventeen. We came over in a cruiser belonging to her father; it was rather large and easy to handle. But the cruise ended when she lost control of the ship because of an attack of space-appendicitis. The rest you know."

"So you?"

"So I'm a combination nurse, governess, guard and what have you. Or will be until we get back. After this, I'll probably be looking for work." She shivered.

"Cold?" he inquired concernedly.

"On the contrary, I'm too warm." She started to remove the blanket. Rat threw up a hand to stop her.

"Leave on! Hot out here."

"But I'm too hot now. I want to take it off!"

"No. Leave on. Wool blanket. Keep in body heat, yes. Keep out cold, yes. Keep in, keep out, likewise. See?"

Gray stared at him. "I never thought of it that way before. Why of course! If it protects from one temperature, it will protect from another. Isn't it silly of me not to know that?" Heat pressing on her face accented the fact.

"What is your name?" she asked. "Your real one I mean."

He grinned. "Big. You couldn't say it. Sound like Christmas and bottlenose together real fast. Just say Rat. Everybody does." His eyes swept the panel and flashed back to her. "Your name Gray. Have a front name?"

"Patti."

"Pretty, Patti."

"No, just Patti. Say, what's the matter with the cooling system?"

"Damn punk," he said. "This crate for surface work. No space. Cooling system groan, damn punk. Won't keep cool here."

"And . . ." she followed up, "it will get warmer as we go out?"

Rat turned back to his board in a brown study and carefully ignored her. Gray grasped an inkling of what the coming week could bring.

"But how about water?" she demanded next. "Is there enough?"

He faced about. "For her—" nodding to Judith, "and him—" to Gladney, "yes. Sparingly. Four hours every time, maybe." Back to Gray. "You, me . . . twice a day. Too bad." His eyes drifted aft to the tank of water. She followed. "One tank water. All the rest fuel. Too bad, too bad. We get thirsty I think."

THEY did get thirsty, soon. A damn-able hot thirst accented by the knowledge that water was precious, a thirst increased by a dried-up-in-the-mouth sensation. Their first drink was strangely bitter; tragically disappointing. Patti Gray suddenly swung upright in the hammock and kicked her legs. She massaged her throat with a nervous hand, wiped damp hair from about her face.

"I have to have a drink."

Rat stared at her without answer.

"I said, I have to have a drink!"

"Heard you."

"Well . . .?"

"Well, nothing. Stall. Keep water longer."

She swung a vicious boot and missed by inches. Rat grinned, and made his way aft, hand over hand. He treaded cautiously along the deck. "Do like this," he called over his shoulder. "Gravity punk too. Back and under, gravity." He waited until she joined him at the water tap.

They stood there glaring idiotically at each other.

She burst out laughing. "They even threw the drinking cups out!" Rat inched the handle grudgingly and she applied lips to the faucet.

"Faugh!" Gray sprang back, forgot herself and lost her balance, sat down on the deck and spat out the water. "It's hot! It tastes like hell and it's hot! It must be fuel!"

Rat applied his lips to the tap and sampled. Coming up with a mouthful he swished it around on his tongue like mouthwash. Abruptly he contrived a facial contortion between a grin and a grimace, and let some of the water trickle from the edges of his mouth. He swallowed and it cost him something.

"No. I mean yes, I think. Water, no doubt. Yes. Fuel out, water in. Swish-swush. Dammit, Greaseball forget to wash tank!"

"But what makes it so hot?" She worked her mouth to dry-rinse the taste of the fuel.

"Ship get hot. Water on sun side. H-m-m-m-m-m-m."

"H-m-m-m-m-m-m-m-m-m what?"

"Flip-flop." He could talk with his hands as well. "Hot side over like pancake." Rat hobbled over to the board and sat down. An experimental flick on a lever produced nothing. Another flick, this time followed by a quivering jar. He contemplated the panel board while fastening his belt.

"H-m-m-m-m-m-m," the lower lip protruded.

Gray protested. "Oh, stop humming and do something! That wa—" the word was queerly torn from her throat, and a scream magically filled the vacancy. Nurse Gray sat up and rubbed a painful spot that had suddenly appeared on her arm.

She found her nose bleeding and another new, swelling bruise on the side of her head. Around her the place was empty. Bare.

No, not quite. A wispy something was hanging just out of sight in the corner of the eye; the water tap was now moulded *upward*, beads glistening on its handle. The wispy thing caught her attention again and she looked up.

Two people, tightly wrapped and bound in hammocks, were staring down at her, amazed, swinging on their stomachs. Craning further, she saw Rat. He was hanging upside down in the chair, grinning at her in reverse.

"Flip-flop," he laconically explained.

"For cripes sakes, Jehosaphat!" Gladney groaned. "Turn me over on my back! Do something!" Gray stood on tiptoes and just could pivot the hammocks on their rope-axis.

"And now, please, just *how* do I get into mine?" she bit at Rat.

EXISTENCE dragged. Paradoxically, time dropped away like a cloak as the sense of individual hours and minutes vanished, and into its place crept a slow-torturing substitute. As the ship revolved, monotonously, first the ceiling and then the floor took on dullish, maddening aspects, eyes ached continuously from staring at them time and again without surcease. The steady, drumming rockets crashed into the mind and the walls shrieked malevolently on the eyeballs. Dull, throbbing sameness of the poorly filtered air, a growing taint in the nostrils. Damp warm skin, reeking blankets. The taste of fuel in the mouth for refreshment. Slowly mounting mental duress. And above all the drumming of the rockets.

Once, a sudden, frightening change of pitch in the rockets and a wild, sickening lurch. Meteor rain. Maddening, plunging swings to the far right and left, made without warning. A torn lip as a sudden lurch tears the faucet from her mouth. A shattered tooth.

"Sorry!" Rat whispered.

"Shut up and drive!" she cried.

"Patti . . ." Judith called out, in pain.

Peace of mind followed peace of body into a forgotten limbo of lost things, a

slily climbing madness directed at one another. Waspish words uttered in pain, fatigue and temper. Fractiousness. A hot, confined, stale hell. Sleep became a hollow mockery, as bad water and concentrated tablets brought on stomach pains to plague them. Conscientiousness punctured only by spasms of lethargy, shared to some extent by the invalids. Above all, crawling lassitude and incalcescent tempers.

Rat watched the white, drawn face swing in the hammock beside him. And his hands never faltered on the controls.

Never a slackening of the terrific pace; abnormal speed, gruelling drive . . . drive . . . drive. Fear. Tantalizing fear made worse because Rat couldn't understand. Smothered moaning that ate at his nerves. Grim-faced, sleep-wracked, belted to the chair, driving!

"How many days? How many days!" Gray begged of him thousands of times until the very repetition grated on her eardrums. "How many days?" His only answer was an inhuman snarl, and the cruel blazing of those inhuman eyes.

She fell face first to the floor. "I can't keep it up!" she cried. The sound of her voice rolled along the hot steel deck. "I cant! I cant!"

A double handful of tepid water was thrown in her face. "Get up!" Rat stood over her, face twisted, his body hunched. "Get up!" She stared at him, dazed. He kicked her. "Get up!" The tepid water ran off her face and far away she heard Judith calling . . . She forced herself up. Rat was back in the chair.

GLADNEY unexpectedly exploded. He had been awake for a long time, watching Rat at the board. Wrenching loose a chest strap he attempted to sit up. "Rat! Damn you Rat, listen to me! *When're you going to start braking, Rat?*"

"I hear you." He turned on Gladney with dulled eyes. "Lie down. You sick."

"I'll be damned if I'm going to lie here and let you drive us to Orion! We must be near the half-way line! When are you going to start braking?"

"Not brake," Rat answered sullenly. "No, not brake."

"*Not brake?*" Gladney screamed and sat bolt upright. Nurse Gray jumped for him. "Are you crazy, you skinny rat?"

Gray secured a hold on his shoulders and forced him down. "You gotta brake! Don't you understand that? You have to, you vacuum-skull!" Gray was pleading with him to shut-up like a good fellow. He appealed to her. "He's gotta brake! Make him!"

"He has a good point there, Rat," she spoke up. "What about this half-way line?"

He turned to her with a weary ghost of the old smile on his face. "We passed line. Three days ago, maybe." A shrug of shoulders.

"Passed!" Gray and Gladney exclaimed in unison.

"You catch on quick," Rat nodded. "This six day, don't you know?"

Gladney sank back, exhausted. The nurse crept over to the pilot. "Getting your figures mixed, aren't you?"

Rat shook his head and said nothing.

"But Roberds said eight days, and he—"

"—he on Mars. I here. Boss nuts, too sad. He drive, it be eight days. Now only six." He cast a glance at Judith and found her eyes closed. "Six days, no brake. No."

"I see your point, and appreciate it," Gray cut in. "But now what? This deceleration business . . . there is a whole lot I don't know, but some things I do!"

Rat refused the expected answer. "Land tonight, I think. Never been to Earth before. Somebody meet us, I think."

"You can bet your leather boots somebody will meet us!" Gladney cried. Gray turned to him. "The Chief'll have the whole planet waiting for *you!*" He laughed with real satisfaction. "Oh yes, Rat, they'll be somebody waiting for us all right." And then he added: "If we land."

"Oh, we land." Rat confided, glad to share a secret.

"Yeah," Gladney grated. "But in how many little pieces?"

"I've never been to Earth before. Nice, I think." Patti Gray caught something new in the tone and stared at him. Gladney must have noticed it, too.

The Centaurian moved sideways and pointed. Gray placed her eyes in the vacated position.

"Earth!" she shouted.

"Quite. Nice. Do me a favor?"

"Just name it!"

"Not drink long time. Some water?"

Gray nodded and went to the faucet. The drumming seemed remote, the tension vanished. She was an uncommonly long time in returning, at last she appeared beside him, outstretched hands dry.

"There isn't any left, Rat.

Rat batted his tired eyes expressively. "Tasted punk," he grinned at her.

She sat down on the floor suddenly and buried her face.

"Rat," she said presently, "I want to ask you something, rather personal? Your . . . name. 'Rat'? Roberds told me something about your record. But . . . please tell me, Rat. You didn't know the attack was coming, did you?"

He grinned again and wagged his head at her. "No. Who tell Rat?" Suddenly he was deadly serious as he spoke to her. "Rat a.w.o.l., go out to help sick man alone in desert. Rat leave post. Not time send call through. Come back with man, find horrible thing happen."

"But why didn't you explain?"

He grinned again. "Who believe? Sick man die soon after."

Gladney sat up. He had heard the conversation between the two. "You're right, Rat. No one would have believed you then, and no one will now. You've been safe enough on Mars, but the police will nab you as soon as you get out of the ship."

"They can't!" cried Patti Gray. "They can't hurt him after what he's done now."

The Centaurian grinned in a cynical way.

"Police not get me, Gladney. Gladney's memory damn punk, I think. Earth pretty nice place, maybe. But not for Rat."

Gladney stared at him for minutes. Then: "Say, I get it . . . you're—"

"Shut up!" Rat cut him off sharply. "You talk too much." He cast a glance at Nurse Gray and then threw a meaning look at Gladney.

GLADNEY subsided. Patti Gray noted with dawning wonder that his face had lost the loathing and anger he had previously held toward the outlaw pilot.

"Look. Sea!" Rat said a few moments later. Gray was in her hammock. She twisted over as he moved bony shoulders aside to let her see through the vision port. A startlingly brief glimpse of glistening waters shot past, reflecting a dancing moonpath. A continent whirled into place on the plate. The skies were clear of other craft.

"Travelling fast!" she warned. "I hope you know what you're doing." Another body of water shot past them beneath. "That must be the Pacific. Where are you going to set down?"

"The ocean." Rat didn't turn his attention away from the plate. "Gladney you got bad memory too much. That's why we passed half-way line full speed! Sea water good brake, stop us hundred miles!"

Gladney flopped back. "May I be kicked to death! Of course! I've heard of it being done by stunt pilots. But Rat, are you sure you can do it? I mean, can you land us without killing us all?"

"Oh yes," but Rat was grimly serious. "I can all right, but . . ."

". . . but what?"

"Ever see little boy skipping stones across water?" His hand shot out and described a series of violent ricocheting motions. "Like that? We land that way, I think. *Splat-splat!* First splat knock us all . . . all . . . what you say?"

"Knock us out?" Gladney supplied.

Rat shrugged. Gray caught his eyes.

"Goodnight, Rat," she smiled at him. "When I wake up, I want to see you again. You won't be in jail for awhile, not until the hospital releases you, and perhaps by that time . . ."

"All no bother, please. I liked you Patti Gray. But your memory pretty punk too. Forget your Fleet training, I think. Yes! But Patti . . ." he stopped, helpless.

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry about sometning. I kicked you."

"Rat, please forget it. I won't forgive you for there is nothing to forgive you for!" She smiled at him, winked once and closed her eyes. "Goodnight everyone."

They felt the nose dip as Rat dropped toward the moonlit sea. The ocean rushed up. The ship struck with titanic force, blasting through the white-caps, metal crumpling from the monstrous dive. And then all consciousness blacked out for those on board.

PATTI GRAY awoke, pressed the button under her pillow for a nurse, smiled about the clean hospital room.

Gladney was waiting to see her. He wheeled himself in and stopped the chair beside her bed.

"Hello. Feel human again?"

"Do I?" She laughed. "Gladney, I'm going to stay right here the rest of my life!"

"Yeah . . . that's what I said yesterday. But today I'm itching to get back up yonder." He dug a thumb at the sky.

"Is Judith all right?"

"Sure. She wants to see you. Frankly, Miss Gray," he lowered his voice, "I expected that first 'splat' of Rat's would kill her."

Gray shivered. "I have a hazy memory of that landing. How did we do it?"

"Easy. A coast-guard cutter saw us and picked us up about ten miles out."

"Gladney," she said quickly, "you've got to help me clear Rat. We've got to . . . why Gladney, you don't mean they got him . . .?"

"*They* didn't get him. *Earth* did. Don't you remember what he said about Earth being a nice place for us? Centaurians can't endure Earth's gravity and atmosphere; the Centaurian Embassy is very specially built, and all Centaurians come to Earth in what are virtually fish bowls.

"Rat was beginning to die even as we dove for the water."

Patti Gray stared at him a moment in frozen horror, then buried her face in the pillow.

"Some day, he will be remembered, Miss Gray," Gladney whispered. "Some day, after all the bitterness over Ganymede is forgotten, they'll remember *why* Rat left his post, and they'll remember how he drove."