

# PLANET STORIES



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# Saboteur of Space

By **ROBERT ABERNATHY**

**Fresh power was coming to Earth, energy which would bring life to a dying planet. Only two men stood in its way, one a cowardly rat, the other a murderous martyr; both pawns in a cosmic game where death moved his chessmen of fate—and even the winner would lose.**

*Illustrated by Elias*



**R**YD RANDL stood, slouching a little, in the darkened footway, and watched the sky over Dynamopolis come alive with searchlights. The shuttered glow of Burshis' Stumble Inn was only a few yards off to his right, but even that lodestone failed before the novel interest of a ship about to ground in the one-time Port of Ten Thousand Ships.

Now he made out the flicker of the braking drive a mile or so overhead, and presently soft motor thunder came down to

blanket the almost lightless city with sound. A beam swayed through the throbbing darkness, caught the descending ship and held it, a small gleaming minnow slipping through the dark heavens. A faint glow rose from Pi Mesa, where the spaceport lay above the city, as a runway lighted up—draining the last reserves of the city's stored power, but draining them gladly now that, in those autumn days of the historic year 819, relief was in sight.

Ryd shrugged limply; the play was



meaningless to him. He turned to shuffle down the inviting ramp into the glowing interior of Burshis' dive.

The place was crowded with men and smoke. Perhaps half the former were asleep, on tables or on the floor; but for the few places like Burshis' which were still open under the power shortage, many would have frozen, these days, in the chilly nights at fourteen thousand feet. For Dynamopolis sprawled atop the world, now as in the old days when it had been built to be the power center of North America.

The rocket blasts crescendoed and died up on Pi Mesa as Ryd wedged himself with difficulty into the group along the bar. If anyone recognized him, they showed it only by looking fixedly at something else. Only Burshis Yuns kept his static smile and nodded with surprising friendliness at Ryd's pinched, old-young face.

Ryd was startled by the nod. Burshis finished serving another customer and maneuvered down the stained chrome-and-synthyl bar. Ryd was heartened.

"Say, Burshis," he started nervously, as the bulky man halted with his back to him. But Burshis turned, still smiling, shaking his head so that his jowls quivered.

"No loans," he said flatly. "But just one on the house, Ryd."

The drink almost spilled itself in Ryd's hand. Clutching it convulsively, he made his eyes narrow and said suspiciously, "What you setting 'em up for, Burshis? It's the first time since—"

Burshis' smile stayed put. He said affably, "Didn't you hear that ship that just came down on the Mesa? That was the ship from Mars—the escort they were sending with the power cylinder. The power's coming in again." He turned to greet a coin-tapping newcomer, added over his shoulder: "You know what that means, Ryd. Some life around here again. Jobs for all the bums in this town—even for you."

He left Ryd frowning, thinking fuzzily. A warming gulp seemed to clear his head. Jobs. So they thought they could put that over on him again, huh? Well, he'd show them. He was smart; he was a damn good helio man—no, that had been ten years ago. But now he was out of the habit of working, anyway. No job for Ryd Randl.

They gave him one once and then took it away. He drank still more deeply.

The man on Ryd's immediate right leaned toward him. He laid a hand on his arm, gripping it hard, and said quietly: "So you're Ryd Randl."

**R**YD HAD a bad moment before he saw that the face wasn't that of any plain-clothes man he knew. For that matter, it didn't belong to anybody he had ever known—an odd, big-boned face, strikingly ugly, with a beak-nose that was yet not too large for the hard jaw or too bleak for the thin mouth below it. An expensive transparent hat slanted over the face, and from its iridescent shadows gleamed eyes that were alert and almost frighteningly black. Ryd noted that the man wore a dark-gray cellotex of a sort rarely seen in joints like Burshis'.

"Suppose we step outside, Ryd. I'd like to talk to you."

"What's the idea?" demanded Ryd, his small store of natural courage floated to the top by alcohol.

The other seemed to realize that he was getting ahead of himself. He leaned back slightly, drew a deep breath, and said slowly and distinctly. "Would you care to make some money, my friend?"

"*Huh?* Why, yeh—I guess so—"

"Then come with me." The hand still on his arm was insistent. In his daze, Ryd let himself be drawn away from the bar into the sluggish crowd; then he suddenly remembered his unfinished drink, and made frantic gestures. Deliberately misunderstanding, the tall stranger fumbled briefly, tossed a coin on the counter-top, and hustled Ryd out, past the blue-and-gold-lit *melodge* that was softly pouring out its endlessly changing music, through the swinging doors into the dark.

Outside, between lightless buildings, the still cold closed in on them. They kept walking—so fast that Ryd began to lose his breath, long-accustomed though his lungs were to the high, thin air.

"So you're Ryd Randl," repeated the stranger after a moment's silence. "I might have known you. But I'd almost given up finding you tonight."

Ryd tried feebly to wrench free, stumbled. "Look," he gasped. "If you're a cop, say so!"

The other laughed shortly. "No. I'm just a man about to offer you a chance. For a come-back, Ryd—a chance to live again. . . . My name—you can call me Mury."

Ryd was voiceless. Something seemed increasingly ominous about the tall, spare man at his side. He wished himself back in Burshis' with his first free drink in a month. The thought of it brought tears to his eyes.

"How long have you been out of a job, Ryd?"

"Nine . . . ten years. Say, what's it to you?"

"And why, Ryd?"

"Why . . . ? Look, mister, I was a helio operator." He hunched his narrow shoulders and spread his hands in an habitual gesture of defeat. "Damn good one, too—I was a foreman ten years ago. But I don't have the physique for Mars—I might just have made it *then*, but I thought the plant was going to open again and—"

And that was it. The almost airless Martian sky, with its burning actinic rays, is so favorable for the use of the helio-dynamic engine. And after the middle of the eighth century, robot labor gave Mars its full economic independence—and domination. For power is—power; and there is the Restriction Act to keep men on Earth even if more than two in ten could live healthily on the outer world.

"Ten years ago," Mury nodded as if satisfied. "That must have been the Power Company of North America—the main plant by Dynamopolis itself, that shut down in December, 809. They were the last to close down outside the military bases in the Kun Lun."

Ryd was pacing beside him now. He felt a queer upsurge of confidence in this strange man; for too long he had met no sympathy and all too few men who talked his language. He burst out: "They wouldn't take me, damn them! Said my record wasn't good enough for them. That is, I didn't have a drag with any of the Poligerents."

"I know all about your record," said Mury softly.

Ryd's suspicions came back abruptly, and he reverted to his old kicked-dog manner. "How do you know? And what's it to you?"

ALL AT ONCE, Mury came to a stop, and swung around to face him squarely, hard eyes compelling. They were on an overpass, not far from where the vast, almost wholly deserted offices of the Triplanet Freighting Company sprawled over a square mile of city. A half-smile twisted Mury's thin lips.

"Don't misunderstand me, Ryd—you mean nothing at all to me as an individual. But you're one of a vast mass of men for whom I am working—the billions caught in the net of a corrupt government and sold as an economic prey to the ruthless masters of Mars. This, after they've borne all the hardships of a year of embargo, have offered their hands willingly to the rebuilding of decadent Earth, only to be refused by the weak leaders who can neither defy the enemy nor capitulate frankly to him."

Ryd was dazed. His mind had never been constructed to cope with such ideas and the past few years had not improved its capabilities. "Are you talking about the power cylinder?" he demanded blurrily.

Mury cast a glance toward the Milky Way as if to descry the Martian cargo projectile somewhere up among its countless lights. He said simply, "Yes."

"I don't get it," mumbled Ryd, frowning. He found words that he had heard somewhere a day or so before, in some bar or flophouse: "The power cylinder is going to be the salvation of Earth. It's a shot in the arm—no, right in the heart of Earth industry, here in Dynamopolis. It will turn the wheels and light the cities and—"

"To hell with that!" snapped Mury, suddenly savage. His hands came up slightly, the fingers flexing; then dropped back to his sides. "Don't you know you're repeating damnable lies?"

Ryd could only stare, cringing and bewildered. Mury went on with a passion shocking after his smooth calm:

"The power shell is aid, yes—but with what a price! It's the thirty pieces of silver for which the venal fools who rule our nations have sold the whole planet to Mars. Because they lack the courage and vision to retool Earth's plants and factories for the inescapable conflict, they're selling us out—making Earth, the first home of man,

a colony of the Red Planet. Do you know what Earth is to the great Martian land-owners? *Do you?*" He paused out of breath; then finished venomously, "Earth is a great pool of labor ready to be tapped, cheaper than robots—cheap as *slaves!*"

"What about it?" gulped Ryd, drawing away from the fanatic. "What you want me to do about it?"

Mury took a deep breath and straightened his shoulders. His face was once more bleakly impassive; only the mouth was an ugly line. "We're going to do something about it, you and I. Tonight. Now."

Ryd was nearly sober. And wholly terrified. He got out chokingly, "What's that mean?"

"The power shell—isn't coming in as planned."

"You can't do that."

"*We* can," said Mury with a heavy accent on the first word. "And there are fifty thousand credits in it for you, Ryd. Are you with us?"

Suspicion was chill reality now in Ryd's mind. And he knew one thing certainly—if he refused now to accompany Mury, he would be killed, by this man or another of his kind. For the secret power known only as *We* never took chances. Whispered-of, terrible, and world-embracing, desperate upshot of the times in its principles of dynamitism, war, and panclasm—that was *We*.

The question hung in the air for a long moment. Then Ryd, with an effort, said, "Sure." A moment later it struck him that the monosyllabic assent was suspicious; he added quickly, "I got nothing to lose, see?" It was, he realized, the cold truth.

"You won't lose," said Mury. He seemed to relax. But the menace with which he had clothed himself clung, as he turned back on the way they had come.

Ryd followed dog-like, his feet in their worn shoes moving without his volition. He was frightened. Out of his very fright came a longing to placate Mury, assure him that he, Ryd, was on the same side whatever happened. . . .

After some steps he stole a sidelong glance at his tall companion, and whined, "Where . . . where we going now?"

Mury paused in his long stride, removed a hand from a pocket of the gray topcoat

that wrapped him as in somber thoughts. Wordlessly, he pointed as Ryd had known he would—toward where a pale man-made dawn seemed breaking over Pi Mesa.

## II

"ONE BLOW for freedom!" said Mury with caught breath. His voice fell upon air scarcely stilled since the sodden thump of the blow that had killed the guard.

The body lay between them, face down on the graveled way in the inky moon-shadow. On one side Pi Mesa stretched away two hundred yards to drop sharply into the night; on the other was the unlighted mass of the long, continuous, low buildings that housed now unused fuel pumps and servicing equipment. Looking down at the dead huddle at his feet, a little stunned by the reality of this, Ryd knew that he was in it now. He was caught in the machinery.

Mury hefted the length of steel in his hand once more, as if testing the weight that had crushed a man's skull so easily. Then, with a short wrist-flip, he sent it flying into the dried weeds which had overgrown the aero field on the mesa's rim during the summer months after State order had grounded all fliers in America.

"All right, Ryd," he said coolly. "Trade clothes with this fellow. I've brought you this far—you're taking me the rest of the way."

The rest of the way.

Ryd was still panting, and his side was paining from the strenuous exertion of the long climb up the side of the mountain, far from the guarded highway. His fingers, numbed by the cold of the high, thin air, shook as he knelt and fumbled with the zippers of the dead guard's uniform. The belted gun, however, was heavy and oddly comforting as he clumsily buckled it about his hips. He knew enough of weapons to recognize this as, not the usual paralyzer, but a flame pistol, powerful and deadly. He let his hand linger on its butt; then strong fingers tightened on his bony wrist, and he looked up with a start into the sardonic black eyes of the Panclast.

"No use now for firearms," said Mury. "All the guns we could carry wouldn't help us if we were caught out there. That gun



is just a stage property for the little play we're going to give in about three minutes—when you'll act a guardsman escorting me, a Poligerent of Dynamopolis, aboard the towship *Shahrazad*."

For a moment Ryd felt relief—he had hazily imagined that Mury's hatred of Mars and all things Martian might have led him to try to sabotage the Martian warship which lay somewhere on the runways beyond the long, low buildings, and which would be closely guarded. But the towship would also be guarded . . . he shivered in the cold, dry night air.

Mury had melted into the shadow a few yards away. There was a light scraping, then a green flame sputtered, briefly lighting up his hands and face, and narrowing at once to a thin, singing needle of light. He had turned a pocket electron torch against the lock-mechanism of a small, disused metal door.

Ryd watched in painful suspense. There was no sound in his ears save for the hard, dry shrilling of the ray as it bit into the steel. It seemed to be crying: *run, run*—but he remembered the power that knew how to punish better than the law, and stood still, shivering.

The lock gave way and the door slipped aside. A light went on inside, and Ryd's heart stopped, backfired, and started again, raggedly. The same automatic mechanism that had turned the lights on had started the air-fresher, which picked up speed with a soft whine, sweeping out the long-stale atmosphere. Mury motioned to Ryd to follow him in.

**I**T WAS still musty in the narrow passage, between the closely-pressing walls, beneath the great tubes and cable sheathings that fluted the ceiling overhead. A stairway spiraled up on the right to the control cupola somewhere overhead; even in the airtight gallery a thin film of dust lay on every step. Up there were the meters and switches of the disused terminal facilities of the spaceport; beyond the metal door marked CAUTION, just beyond the stairwell, lay the long runway down which the ships of space had glided to be serviced, refueled, and launched into the sky once more by now dormant machines.

"Wait," said Mury succinctly; he van-

ished up the spiral stair, his long legs taking two steps at a time. After an aching minute's silence, he was back. All was clear as seen from the turret-windows overhead.

They emerged in shadow, hugging the wall. Almost a quarter of a mile to the right the megalith of the Communications Tower, crowned with many lights where the signal-men sat godlike in its summit. Its floodlights shed a vast oval of light out over the mesa, where the mile-long runways—no longer polished mirror-like as in the days of Dynamopolis' glory—stretched away into the darkness of the table land. A handful of odd ships—mere remnant of the hundreds that Pi Mesa port had berthed—huddled under the solenoid wickets, as if driven together by the chill of the thin, knife-like wind that blew across the mesa.

As the two paced slowly across the runways, Ryd had a sense of protective isolation in the vast impersonality of the spaceport. Surely, in this Titanic desolation of metal slabs and flat-roofed buildings, dominated by the one great tower, total insignificance must mean safety for them.

And indeed no guard challenged them. There were armed men watching for all intruders out on the desert beyond the runways, but once inside, Ryd's borrowed blue seemed to serve as passport enough. Nonetheless, the passport's knees were shaking when they stood at last, inconspicuous still, at the shadowed base of the Communications Tower.

Not far off, a half-dozen dignitaries, huddled close together in the midst of these Cyclopean man-made things that dwarfed their policies, their principles and ambitions, stood talking rather nervously with two officers, aristocratically gaudy in the scarlet of the Martian Fleet. Blue-clad guardsmen of Earth watched from a distance—watched boredly enough.

And out on the steel-stripped tarmac, under the solenoid of Number Two Runway, lay a towship, backed like a stegosaurus with its massive magnets—the *Shahrazad*, panting like a dragon amid rolling clouds of steam. She was plainly ready to go into space. The bottom dropped out of Ryd's stomach before he realized that a warning at least must be sounded before

the ship could lift. But that might come any moment now.

"Relax," said Mury in a low voice. "Nothing's gone wrong. We'll be aboard the *Shahrazad* when she lifts." For a moment his black eyes shifted, hardening, toward Runway Four. The Martian warship lay there beyond the solenoid, a spiteful hundred-foot swordfish of steel, with blind gunvalves, row on row, along its sleek sides and turret-blisters. It had not yet been tugged onto the turntable; it could not be leaving again very soon, though Earth weight was undoubtedly incommoding its crew. About it a few figures stood that were stiffly erect and immobile, as tall as tall men. From head to toe they were scarlet.

"Robots!" gasped Ryd, clutching his companion's arm convulsively. "Martian soldier robots!"

"They're unarmed, harmless. They aren't your police with built-in weapons. Only the humans are dangerous. But we've got to move. For God's sake, take it easy."

Ryd licked dry lips. "Are we going—out into space?"

"Where else?" said Mury.

**T**HE official-looking individual in the expensive topcoat and sport hat had reached the starboard airlock of the township before anyone thought to question his authorization, escorted as he was by a blue-uniformed guardsman. When another sentry, pacing between runways a hundred yards from the squat space vessel, paused to wonder, it was—as it came about—just a little too late.

The guard turned and swung briskly off to intercept the oddly-behaving pair, hand crowding the butt of his pistol, for he was growing uneasy. His alarm mounted rapidly, till he nearly sprained an ankle in sprinting across the last of the two intervening runways, between the solenoid wickets. Those metal arches, crowding one on the other in perspective, formed a tunnel that effectively shielded the *Shahrazad's* airlocks from more distant view; the gang of notables attracted by the occasion was already being shepherded back to safety by the Communications guards, whose attention was thus well taken up.

The slight man in guardsman's blue

glanced over his shoulder and vanished abruptly into the circular lock. His companion wheeled on the topmost step, looking down with some irritation on his unhandsome face, but with no apparent doubt of his command of the situation.

"Yes?" he inquired frostily.

"What goes on here?" snapped the guard, frowning at the tall figure silhouetted against the glow in the airlock. "The crew's signaled all aboard and the ship lifts in two minutes. You ought to be—"

"I am Semul Mury, Poligerent for the City of Dynamopolis," interrupted the tall man with asperity. "The City is naturally interested in the delivery of the power which will revivify our industries." He paused, sighed, shifting his weight to the next lower step of the gangway. "I suppose you'll want to re-check my credentials?"

The guard was somewhat confused; a Poligerent, in ninth-century bureaucracy, was a force to be reckoned with. But he contrived to nod with an appearance of brusqueness.

Fully expecting official papers, signed and garnished with all the pompous seals of a chartered metropolis, the guard was dazed to receive instead a terrific left-handed fowl to the pit of the stomach, and as he reeled dizzily, retching and clawing for his gun, to find that gun no longer holstered but in the hand of the self-styled Poligerent, pointing at its licensed owner.

"I think," Mury said quietly, flexing his left wrist with care the while his right held the gun steady, "that you'd better come aboard with us."

The guard was not more cowardly than the run of politically-appointed civic guardsmen. But a flame gun kills more frightfully than the ancient electric chair. He complied, grasping the railing with both hands as he stumbled before Mury up the gangway—for he was still very sick indeed, wholly apart from his bewilderment, which was enormous.

Above, Ryd Randl waited in the lock, flattened against the curved wall, white and jittering. The inner door was shut, an impenetrable countersunk mirror of metal.

"Cover him, Ryd," ordered Mury flatly. In obedience Ryd lunged out the heavy



flame pistol and pointed it; his finger was dangerously tremulous on the firing lever. He moistened his lips to voice his fears; but Mury, pocketing the other gun, threw the three-way switch on the side panel, the switch that should have controlled the inner lock.

Nothing happened.

"Oh, God. We're caught. We're trapped!" The outer gangway had slid up, the lock wheezed shut, forming an impenetrable crypt of niosteel.

MURY smiled with supernal calm. "We won't be here long," he said. Then, to quiet Ryd's fears, he went on: "The central control panel and the three local switches inside, between, and outside the locks are on the circuit in that order. Unless the locks were closed from the switch just beyond the inner lock, that lock will open when the central control panel is cut out in preparation for lifting."

Almost as he paused and drew breath, a light sprang out over the switch he had closed and the inner lock swung silently free of its gaskets. Ryd felt a trembling relief; but Mury's voice lashed out like a whip as he slipped cat-like into the passage.

"Keep him covered. Back out of the lock."

Ryd backed—the white, tense face of the prisoner holding his own nervous gaze—and, almost out of the lock, stumbled over the metal pressure rings. And the gun was out of his unsure grip, clattering somewhere near his slithering feet, as he started to fall.

He saw the guardsman hurl himself forward; then he was flung spinning, back against the engine-room door. In a flash, even as he struggled to keep on his feet, he saw the man in the airlock coming up from a crouch, shifting the pistol in his right hand to reach its firing lever; he saw Mury sidestep swiftly and throw the master control switch outside.

The inner lock whooshed shut, barely missing Ryd. At the same instant, the flame gun lighted locks and passage with one terrific flash, and a scorched, discolored spot appeared on the beveled metal of the opposite lock a foot from Mury's right shoulder.

"You damned clumsy little fool—" said Mury with soft intensity. Then, while the

air around the metal walls still buzzed and snapped with blue sparks, he whirled and went up the control-room gangway in two quick bounds. Even as he went the flame gun thundered again in the starboard airlock.

Mury was just in time, for the pilot had been about to flash "Ready" to the Communications Tower when the explosions had given him pause. But the latter and his two companions were neither ready nor armed; clamped in their seats at the controls, already marked, they were helpless in an instant before the leveled menace of the gun. And the imprisoned guardsman, having wasted most of his charges, was helpless, too, in his little cell of steel.

"It's been tried before," said one of the masked men. He had a blond, youthful thatch and a smooth healthy face below the mask, together with an astrogator's triangled stars which made him *ex officio* the brains of the vessel. "Stealing a ship—it can't be done any more."

"It's been done again," said Mury grimly. "And you don't know the half of it. But—you will. I'll need you. As for your friends—" The gun muzzle shifted slightly to indicate the pilot and the engineer. "Out of those clamps. You're going to ride this out in the portside airlock."

He had to repeat the command, in tones that snapped with menace, before they started with fumbling, rebellious hands to strip their armor from themselves. The burly engineer was muttering phrases of obscene fervor; the weedy young pilot was wild-eyed. The blond astrogator, sitting still masked and apparently unmoved, demanded:

"What do you think you're trying to do?"

"What do *you* think?" demanded Mury in return. "I'm taking the ship into space. On schedule and on course—to meet the power shell." The flame gun moved with a jerk. "And as for you—what's your name?"

"Yet Arliess."

"You want to make the trip alive, don't you, Yet Arliess?"

The young astrogator stared at him and at the gun through masking goggles; then he sank into his seat with a slow shudder. "Why, yes," he said as if in wonder, "I do."

## III

SHAHRAZAD drove steadily forward into deep space, vibrating slightly to the tremendous thrust of her powerful engines. The small, cramped cabin was stiflingly hot to the three armored men who sat before its banked dials, watching their steady needles.

Ryd had blacked out, darkness washing into his eyes and consciousness draining from his head, as the space ship had pitched out into emptiness over the end of the runway on Pi Mesa and Mury had cut in the maindrive. Pressure greater than anything he had ever felt had crushed him; his voice had been snatched from his lips by those terrible forces and lost beneath the opening thunder of the three-inch tubes. Up and up, while the acceleration climbed to seven gravities—and Ryd had lost every sensation, not to regain them until Earth was dropping away under the towship's keel.

A single gravity held them back and down in the tilted seats, and the control panels seemed to curve half above them, their banks of lights confused with the stars coldly through the great nose window. In the control room all sounds impinged on a background made up of the insect hum of air-purifiers, the almost supersonic whine of the fast-spinning gyroscopes somewhere behind them, the deep continuous growl of the engines.

Mury's voice broke through that steady murmur, coming from Ryd's right. "You can unfasten your anticlamps, Ryd," he said dryly. "That doesn't mean you," to the young navigator, on his other hand as he sat in the pilot's seat with his pressure-clamps thrown back and his gloved hands free to caress the multiplex controls before him. Clipped to the sloping dash at his left elbow was a loaded flame gun.

Ryd emerged, with much bungling, from his padded clamps, and shook his head groggily as he ran a hand through his slightly thinning hair. He ventured shakily, "Where are we?"

Mury smiled slightly. "Only our astro-gator," he indicated Arliess, still masked and fettered, "can tell you that with precision. I understand only enough of astro-gational practice to make sure that he is holding to the course outlined on the

log. For that matter . . . he is an intelligent young man and if he were not blinded by notions of duty to an outworn system . . . We are now somewhere near the orbit of the Moon. Isn't that right, Arliess?"

The other did not seem to hear; he sat staring blindly before him through his goggles at the slowly-changing chart, where cryptic lights burned, some moving like glowing paramécia along fine-traced luminous tracks.

Mury too sat silent and immobile for a minute or more. Then, abruptly, he inclined his universal chair far to the right, and his long frame seemed to tense oddly. His finger stabbed out one of the sparks of light.

"What's that, Arliess?"

The astro-gator broke his silence. "A ship."

"I know that well enough. What ship?"

"I supposed you had examined the log. It would have told you that that's the liner *Alborak*, out of Aeropolis with a diplomatic mission for Mars."

Mury shook his head regretfully. "That won't wash, Arliess. Even if you suppose her off course, no liner aspace ever carried a tenth of that drive."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Arliess. But his voice was raw and unsteady.

"I'm talking about this. That ship is a warship, and it's looking for us—will intercept us inside of twenty minutes at the most!"

ARLISS turned his head at last, slowly, as if the movement were painful. His dispassionate goggles regarded the telltale needles that had come quiveringly alive on the radiodetector box between them, bluntly giving the lie to the automatic chart. "You know more than I supposed," he said, and laughed unpleasantly. "But it won't do you any good now. We're to be inspected in space—a surprise of which we weren't informed until a few minutes before you came sneaking into the ship."

"That's too bad," said Mury. He sounded as if he thought it was too bad. As he spoke, he leaned sidewise, to the left this time, and closed a switch, lighting a darkened panel on the board; his long forefinger selected and pressed two studs. "Too

*bad,"* he repeated, and picked up the flame pistol. Young Arliess exploded in another furious surge against the binding clamps, clawing with clumsy gloved hands for the release; then he quieted, and stared at the small black bore trained on him.

He was trembling a little with fury. "You damned louse. Why don't you make it a clean job by giving it to me, now?"

"I'll need you, now if not before," said the Panclast softly. "Your friends would have stayed alive if that warship hadn't showed its nose. You must understand that. I was forced into counter-measures."

Then Ryd, squirming sidewise in his seat, understood. Those studs had controlled the outer airlocks. And now the men who had been in those locks, the young guardsman and the *Shahrazad's* pilot and engineer—were no longer there.

"You—need *me*?" Arliess was briefly incredulous. "Oh—I get it. There have to be three in the crew." Then he sprang like a tiger.

But the moment in which he had thumbed the release and wrenched free of the padded clamps had been too long. Ryd flinched away—but there was no roar, no flame stabbed blue. They grappled an instant, swaying on the tilted floor—and then the pistol, reversed in Mury's hand, chopped down on Arliess' temple, a glancing blow, but fiercely struck.

The astrogator let go, staggering; and the gun swung up again and felled him.

Mury let the pistol drop into his own crew-seat, and, lugging Arliess under the arms, got him into his seat with a grunting heave. He said breathlessly, regretfully, "It was the only way . . ." The mask came off at once; the shock-pale face that emerged was even more youthful than Ryd had thought. The red trickle across the forehead was startling against its pallor.

Ryd sat staring—unshaken by the thought of yet another murder, but with a knot of fear tightening in his stomach as he thought of the warship somewhere out of their vision, questing nearer with every racing second—while the motors throbbled, the airvalves sang softly, and the gyroscopes whinned somewhere.

And Mury's long, brown fingers explored rapidly through the stunned man's blond thatch; he nodded with satisfaction,

and then with sure motions secured Arliess in his place. Ryd, on peremptory gesture, did for himself the same, with fingers that were oddly numb and jointless.

Then Mury was back in the pilot's chair. For a moment he sat as if poised, staring into starry space with knitted brows; then he reached far over, in front of the sagging astrogator, and with a decisive flick of the wrist switched on the ship's magnets to their full power.

"What's that for?" stammered Ryd, bewildered and more than a little scared. "Why—"

Mury made no answer. Instead, he had fixed once more on the detector box, watching it intently as the minutes crawled. The movements by which he secured his own anticlamps were automatonlike.

**T**WICE the needles jumped briefly. Mury did not stir. But when they began to swing slowly over the scale, his hands leaped at the control studs; in the next instant *Shahrazad* leaped and shivered, and a powerful acceleration fought to lever them out of their seats. The noise was deafening; one thin layer of sound proofing was between the cabin and the one-inch tubes of the overdrive.

Ryd's eyes rolled up in his head and grew filmed; the control room for him a blur of dizzy flame. He almost blacked out again; he seemed to see the face of the white Moon, leprously diseased, float like a runaway balloon past the curved nose window and disappear below his topsy-turvy field of vision; but he couldn't be sure it wasn't his own head spiraling away from its moorings. And then it was over and the ship bored steadily along her new tangent through space.

But now she vibrated yet more deeply to the great thrust of the afterdrive, and the light blurred more and grew dim. *Shahrazad* raced into darkness, and the needles that told of a magnetic mass somewhere not far ahead, cutting swiftly through her far-flung field, swung steadily over.

Then *bang!* in one unreverberating explosion, and the ship bucked hard and the blurred lights came down in a rain of fiery pinwheels. The motor died with a snap. Silence rang and Ryd's stomach boiled with weightlessness; slowly his eyes could see again. *Shahrazad* held straight

on her course toward some unknown target star; the gyroscopes still whined.

"Seven thousand feet a second," came Mury's voice from nowhere. "That's the speed at which we overran the meteoroid. It wouldn't have been nice if it had come through here; the armor before the control panel would have stopped it if it didn't strike higher . . ."

Ryd fell to shuddering. He mouthed with difficulty, "My God, you don't hit meteors on purpose!"

"You damned well do," said Mury crisply, "if you have to." His manner brought a sort of frightened admiration into Ryd's dark, unsteady eyes. Mury added, with apparent lack of connectedness, "Astrogators' heads don't just crack themselves on switch handles." The underdrive, roaring alive as he pressed the bottom stud on the control circle, caught Ryd's breath against his diaphragm and left him none to answer with if he had wished to.

She leveled out on course with short jerky bursts from the various banks of tubes. Mury was doing all his own courseplotting now, and his teeth were sunk in his lower lip as he frowned at the charts and at the rows of figures that spun into view on the calculator. He was still correcting feverishly when the stars dimmed and space throbbed like a tympanum.

A voice clanged through the strobophones. "*Shahrazad! Algot* calling *Shahrazad!* Cut your drive to one vertical gravity. We will parallel and send a boat across. That is all."

Mury's right hand moved slightly on the sloping ledge and closed the throttle. The forward thrust again collapsed into weightlessness, and the *Shahrazad* seemed to hang motionless for a moment before the underdrive took up the load. And meanwhile the meters told their tale of the swift onrush of the great battle cruiser in whose forward sphere of exhaust gases they already flew. Across the starry sky ahead crept a vast belt of hazy light like a zodiacal glow.

"The *Algol*," said Mury musingly. A stellar dreadnaught. They aren't sparing precautions . . ." Abruptly he dropped his right hand from the dashboard, grasped a sheathed wire that curved away beneath the radiodetector box, and detached

it with a brisk jerk. The needles dropped instantly to a uniform zero. The chain of causation was complete.

SO THERE was no warning of the approach of the space-boat. It bumped alongside and grappled to the towship's starboard airlock a couple of minutes later; Ryd stiffened, drew a long breath, and held it as if he would hold it forever. Mury, hand steady, depressed the studs that opened the lock . . . for the second time since the ship had lifted.

The man who came aboard, from the warship hanging somewhere out there among the stars, was the very avatar of the Fleet in that second decade of the ninth century. Incarnate in space-blue and silver stars, with smoothly smiling face, shaven with a more than military meticulousness, that radiated power and the confidence of power. Power flanked and overshadowed his medium-tall figure, in the shape of two armed robot marines. The eyes of the Panclast masked their smoldering lights as they met those beneath the winged officer's cap; but the latter, aristocratically bored, noticed little or nothing.

"You appear to have had an accident, Captain Yaher," said the lieutenant with unblinking calm. "We noticed from a distance that your undershell was badly scored as if by collision with some solid body. Unfortunately . . . and remarkably. Is any of your equipment out of order?"

Mury shrugged without effort, jerked a gloved thumb at the dangling wire. The lieutenant raised narrow eyebrows.

"Damaged before you lifted?"

"We were inspected thoroughly on the runway. It must have happened during initial acceleration."

The other frowned, fine vertical lines creasing his smooth forehead. "Odd."

Mury smiled a thin, crooked smile. "You military men don't know what can happen aboard a run-down towship. Anything, literally. The merchant fleet isn't at its best since the embargo."

"I know," said the officer curtly. "Even in the Fleet—" He stopped short, and his eyes, shifting, found a new subject ready-made in the slumped figure of Arliess. "Was this man seriously injured, Captain?"

"Just stunned, I think. He's an astro-gator, and astrogators are tough."

THE OFFICER laughed perfunctorily. He moved forward and made a brief, distasteful examination of Arliess' tousled head, then stepped back, rubbing his fingers together.

"There's no fracture. But if he's concussed, he's in no shape to stand heavy acceleration."

Mury said smoothly, "We're not going to be using any. We're up to speed and our orders are to handle that power cylinder like a soap bubble."

The young lieutenant stroked his smooth chin, standing with feet braced against the tilt of the floor beneath which the rockets rumbled steadily, holding him erect as if under Earth gravity. The two men at the control board watched him with stares equilly unblinkingly but far different in sentiment. Mury's was inscrutable; it might have veiled anything. Ryd's was all sick fear and certainty that something would betray them before the nerve-racking scene was played out.

"I think," said the blue-clad officer, "that if it won't incommode you too much to hold this acceleration a bit longer—"

"Not at all," said Mury, and Ryd silently but no less hysterically cursed his facile confidence.

". . . I'll cross over again and send a ship's doctor to attend to your astrogator. A shot in the arm should bring him around."

Mury nodded placidly. The officer turned casually, spoke to the two blue-chromiumed robots, who faced about smartly; then, snapping his fingers, their master wheeled once more. "Just a moment. I almost forgot this. . . . Strangely enough, one of my men stumbled over it in your starboard lock." He fumbled inside his tunic a moment, displayed in his hand a heavy .20 service flame gun.

A flat and terrible silence lay in the control room. Then Mury broke it, as it had to be broken quickly:

"We weren't supposed to have any arms aboard. I can't say where that came from."

"Can't say, eh?" said the other musingly. Ryd, cold sweat on his forehead, stared in horrid fascination, first at the man and then at the fighter robots. He

tensed himself to fight back, now, at the last, like a cornered rat—he hardly knew how or why.

With a shrug, the officer dropped the weapon into his pocket. "Ah, well—so many of these little mysteries remain just that. We mustn't hold up Terra's power supply." He turned once more to go. "I'll have the medico here in a flicker."

The trio passed out through the wispering locks, out to the waiting spaceboat. Ryd found that his mouth was parched-dry; he stared at the apparently unshaken Mury, and drew a shuddering breath.

"I guess," he said jerkily, "we fooled them."

Mury smiled. "Yes," he agreed. "We fooled them this time."

Then a thought jolted Ryd; he gasped, "Listen! Did you think about— That battleship might have picked up those guys you dropped out of the locks! They've got us right here—we can't get away—maybe they're just—"

"Why would they?" Mury shrugged again. "But that chance had to be taken. Space is rather big, you know."

#### IV

IT WAS NOT more than three minutes later that young Arliess began to twitch and mutter under the neuromuscular impact of a cc. of arterially-injected *vitalin*. The Fleet doctor straightened and returned his small, bright needle to its velvet-lined case, snapping it shut hurriedly.

"He'll recover consciousness within a very few minutes. You'll be wanting to be on your way, no doubt. . . ."

When the doctor had escaped gratefully from the *Shahrazad's* topsy-turvy gravity, Mury gave power to the overdrive, sent the ship swinging back into a course for the point of intersection with the flight of the power projectile. The great curve that had taken them off the planet had placed them now almost directly in front of that hurtling objective; *Shahrazad*, still slowly gathering additional momentum, would be overtaken by the cargo shell at the moment that she reached a velocity practically equal with its own.

To ensure that, Mury's long, skillful

fingers twirled a vernier, finely adjusting the fuel flow into the disintegration chambers behind the after bulkhead, and with it the volume of steam which, smashed to atoms, was hurled at stupendous velocity from the driving jets to propel the rocket ship. An acceleration just a trifle under one gravity—the calculator clicked out its results down to six decimals. The gyroscopes locked the towship in its new groove in space.

Yet Arliess jerked ineffectually in his clamps, cried out thickly. His eyes came stickily open behind their square goggles. He sat stiff and still for a long minute.

Ryd underwent a considerable egoflation in his contempt for this other man's defeat. It had been long since he had known the savage joy of winning.

Arliess said weakly, raising both hands to press flat against his temples, "Where—are we?" The same words Ryd had whimpered not so long ago.

Mury turned slightly to look at the astrogator out of the corners of his eyes. He said deliberately, "We're past. Inspection's over, and—thanks largely to you, Yet Arliess, we're clear."

The young man sat for a moment with head buried in his hands. Then he looked up and out toward the motionless star fields that glittered ahead.

"So?" he said bitterly. "What next? Are you going to try to steal the power shell? And if so, where are you going to escape to? I suppose you realize that you'd have to scoot right out of the System to even get clear of the *Algol's* guns—and there are four other Earth dreadnaughts in planetary space alone?"

Arliess' words, coldly confident of a victory that would be death for him, chilled Ryd. But he took heart from Mury's jeering laughter.

"Do you think I'd have come this far if I had feared your dreadnaughts? *They'll* have enough to think of before the next twenty-four hours are past, when they are hurled in battle against all the power of Mars!"

Arliess stiffened. "Are you crazy? There's no war in the air. A year ago, yes, perhaps—but now, with the treaties signed and trade resuming—"

"And Earth," snapped Mury, "sold for that very trade into the hands of the Mar-

tian overlords. No, war is preferable—and we'll have war, now."

"You talk," said Arliess in a curiously flat voice, "as if the choice of courses rested in your hands."

"It does. Or rather, it will—so soon as I hold in these hands the weapon of the power projectile."

MURY'S voice became orotund. His hands rested lightly on the pilot's controls before him and he gazed into space-darkness as if toward an invisible dawn. "When a Terrestrial city goes skyward in one terrific blast of disintegration—When Pi Mesa and Dynamopolis vanish together from the face of Earth in a warningless holocaust—Then Earth will realize the truth, if only through deception."

Ryd's veins were trickling ice water instead of warm blood, and his nerve centers were paralyzed. It was too big for him, and his courage was gone again.

Mury talked on, and his voice was that of one sincerely and earnestly trying to convince:

"Earth's government has made peace with the Martians, but the instinct of the people infallibly distrusts the treacherous rival world. Why not—since Mars is indeed ready and avid to topple Earth from her old place as the mother-planet, mistress of the System? Mars, with twice Earth's area and five times the sunlight to drive his heliodynes—Mars with his robot millions and his human oligarchy athirst for power and glory, intoxicated with the strength of a new, raw, rich world. Only if we fight now can we escape domination. I am going to strike the blow that will wake Earth to battle, and bring her at last through pain and repentance to her age-old greatness!"

*Shahrazad* hurtled steadily on before the long hydrogen flares of her afterdrive, and three men sat behind her controls—and their triumph and fear and hate might have been strong enough to reach out beyond the metal shell and form an auro, not so bright but more fiercely potent, about the rushing ship.

Then young Arliess said through his teeth, "You know damn well it won't work."

"It will," said the Panclast, preternat-

urally calm, while his eyes were watchful on the slowly shifting dials. Somewhere behind them in bleak space sixty tons of concentrated hell was creeping up.

"You can't deceive a whole planet," exclaimed Arliess rapidly, desperately. "You can't plunge them into a war that will cost a hundred million lives, that will wreck the cities and the commerce of the whole System. There hasn't been war for seventy years . . . between Earth and Mars, never . . ." His voice trailed off and he gasped for breath as if the cabin had grown stifling.

"It is almost done," said Mury solemnly. With the words he cut off the afterdrive. Silence fell clublike, mind-numbing after the pounding of the rockets.

Arliess spoke again, with all the feeling washed out of his voice. "Where do you and your pal come out on this?" he demanded carefully. "You don't think you can get away with this, do you, even if you succeed in blowing up Dynamopolis?"

"There are some things I can't reveal even now, slight as are the chances of failure," said Mury smoothly. "We won't be caught, though; I can tell you that surely. And you'll accompany us to our destination. It would be best if you did so willingly." Ryd thought he knew what was implicit in the Panclast's words. There would be some hiding-place maintained by the secret power of We. In Antarctica, perhaps, as rumor whispered. Ryd clung hard to his new faith in Mury, and was warmed by it. He dreamed. . . . Perhaps, he, Ryd, in some new world to come from chaos . . .

**M**URY thumbed a stud; the sidethrust of the starboard drive made the counterpoised seats tilt far to the left. Then, as they drifted in free flight again: "Perhaps, since you have heard the truth, Arliess, you would like to join our cause. Secret now, it will soon be victorious over all Earth . . . a cause of glory which will have its heroes. . . ."

The astrogator gazed stonily ahead. "You may be right," he said stiffly, strangely. "But right on wrong, you're mad. Mad with power."

The other laughed softly. "That's very true. It is a little heady. The power that

will rock any planet—power indeed!"

All at once the stars were darkened. From overhead as the ship was oriented, a long black shape, picked out by patterned lights, drove past and dwindled into the flaming constellations. The power shell had arrived. Words were at an end.

Instead, there roared out the mighty voices of the after tubes. The sustained forward leap of the ship took breath from their bodies. But the colored lights came slipping back out of the starfields, their pattern expanding swiftly as seconds passed. As suddenly as he had accelerated, Mury closed the throttle, cut in the fore-drive, and started braking his speed. Then, with delicate spurts of power from all the rockets, he brought the *Shahrazad's* speed and course to parallel that of the great projectile which coasted effortlessly through space less than a mile away.

In the weightless pause, Mury said quietly to the astrogator: "The magnet controls are before you, Arliess. Would it be too much strain on your conscience to operate them now?"

The board had been built for efficiency; of the minor duties aboard the vessel, communications was assigned to the engineer, control of the powerful grapples to the astrogator, on the theory that while intership communication might be needed simultaneously with the use of the magnets, the plotting of the course would not so coincide. The strobophones and radio—the latter dead and lightless at the moment—fronted Ryd as he fidgeted in the engineer's place.

Arliess had delayed a moment. Now he answered harshly, "All right. What do you want?"

"I was sure you would see. . . . Your cooperation won't be difficult. The magnet rheostat is already stopped at the safety maximum for the fuel we're going to handle. Give them all full power, then." Ryd knew vaguely that too powerful magnetic fields upset delicate atomic balances, had in fact caused the great Tenebris disaster of 803 on Venus—a match-sputter, that, compared to what would soon hit North America—

Woodenly, Arliess gave the magnets power. Unseen, his hands curled themselves tensely inside his sweat-slip-



perly rubberized gloves; he was dangerously near hysteria. His keen, youthful imagination could see all too clearly into the near future. Over half of Earth, the skies would be red; there would be storm and earthquake, mountains splitting, rivers in flood, the fires of new volcanoes.

*Shahrazad* picked up speed again, swinging in to intercept the power cylinder in its constant flight. She forged forward on bright wings of flame, a small, squat ship of Fate, not a part but a target, rest on her broad plated back.

"Half magnets," said Mury shortly, firing another bank of tubes to correct his course. Still robot-like, Arliess obeyed. His right hand obeyed. But his left snaked very slowly off the dash, under the detector box at his elbow, captured a dangling wire. Then—bend this way, bend that way, bend this way—

The last power-thrust died. Inch by inch, *Shahrazad* and the fuel shell drifted together in their parallel courses. "Full magnets," ordered Mury, and the drift accelerated. For two long, waiting minutes it continued; then the towship lurched slightly, like a boat meeting a long swell, and the great masses met with a prolonged grinding of curving steel on stegosauric plates of iron. A moment while they settled solidly together and clung, locked; then the rockets roared once more to life and *Shahrazad* surged ahead evenly. To the greatly-overpowered towship, the mere sixty tons of the loaded cargo shell made little or no difference.

Mury sat bolt upright in his universal chair. His face was masked and serene, but the straight line of his head and neck was eloquent. His hand, resting lightly on the controls, was that of Zeus, gripping a thunderbolt.

Slowly, without speaking, he drove the ship's nose upward—upward as they were leveled off, but in reality downward, for gradually from overhead the great black curve of a planet's dark limb crept down, shutting out the stars. Then its sunlit side burst into sight and the pallid glare came flooding through the great nose window to make the glow-lamps needless.

It was Earth, and somewhere on that great globe, where the distorted shape of North America sprawled through half a dark hemisphere, was Pi Mesa. For this

ship of Fate, not a port but a grim target.

Then Yet Arliess' voice fell hard and deadly on that triumphant moment.

"Mury. Cut the drive!"

Mury's attention snapped to the astrogator. Even so with the back of his head to Ryd, the latter could see the slow tensing of his spare body, the sudden immobility that took him. Ryd froze.

"You'd better think twice, Arliess," said Mury in a low, brittle tone.

"Cut the drive," ordered Arliess again. "This is journey's end, Mury. If you don't cut it now, we'll all die."

**R**YD INCHED forward in his seat; his fingers, numbed as if the cold of sheer space had crept into the cabin, found the release. Then he was able to see Arliess, hunched forward close to his control board. One hand clenched over the magnet rheostat; but something had gone wrong. The astrogator had bent the synthyl handle out and away from its contacts; and now something gleamed half-hidden in his hand. Its ends were almost touching the inner contact of the switch handle and the minimum-resistance tap of the rheostat coil—a short piece of bared silver wire, whose placing between those contacts would send current leaping through the shortened circuit and pouring full into the magnet coils. It would envelop *Shahrazad* and power cylinder in a field of great intensity—but of brief duration, a fractional instant before the equilibrium of the stored atoms toppled and towship and cargo shell, together like one, vanished in one exploding flame, brighter than the Sun.

This was the end. Mury was beaten, and of course he, Ryd, was beaten too. For keeps, this time. With maudlin self-pity, he saw himself as one caught and singled out for destruction by the gods in the machine.

"Cut the drive," repeated Arliess for the third time.

Still the Panclast did not move, and his face betrayed none of what he must feel of the terrible irony by which a bit of wire, a short circuit, could wreck the plan that was to have shaken a planet. He said without stirring, "You can't use bluff on me, Arliess."

"I know that and I'm not bluffing," said young Arliess, pale to the lips, with

burning eyes. "I know your type, Mury. The monomaniac. You're not afraid of dying, but you are afraid when the success of your mission is threatened. But you can forget those plans now. We're going to stop, flash a distress signal."

"I never meant we should escape the final crash of the power shell," said Mury. "Escape was needless to the plan, and to die in such a cause . . . But I'll make you a bargain now, Arliess. I'll let you parachute to safety when we're in the atmosphere, if you'll swear to reveal nothing. Otherwise—perhaps you are aware of the power of—*We*."

Arliess' grin was savage. "Don't try to frighten me with children's boogie-men. I know that such an organization exists, and I knew one of their members once—a poor, starved gutter-rat without principles or courage or anything but a vicious wish to kick the world that had kicked him. No, Mury, *you're* something else again."

"I've explained my aims to you, Arliess. I have no private wrongs to avenge. I have acted because all history urges Earth and Mars to the death grapple; I have been an agent of history. You, not I, are the madman if you try to stand in the way."

Arliess laughed shortly. "I hold the final argument, though. . . . *Cut the drive!*"

V

FOR A moment their eyes met. Mury, all his weapons blunted, sat unmoving. Ryd, forehead beaded, gripping the arms of his chair, afraid to move or cry out lest he bring doom upon the ship, thought he saw Arliess' fingers start to tighten.

But in that instant a voice crashed into the death-still cabin. Harsh and vibrant, it rang through the open strobophones.

"*Shahrazad! Algol calling Shahrazad!* You are twenty-one degrees off course and failing to correct as per schedule. What is the matter?"

"All right," said Arliess, his voice husky. "Last chance, Mury, before I blow us to atoms. Call them back. Tell them to overhaul us and board. From the intensity of that signal, they can't be far away."

And indeed, even now the stars began to blur to the approach of the battle cruiser. Plainly, it had been trailing near; the

dead detectors had told them nothing. Perhaps, after all, suspicion had been born behind the official calm facade. At any rate, here upon them were *Algol* and its guns. . . . Again the voice came through the phones, querulously now.

Mury, without making any sudden motion, pressed his release. With equal care he came to his feet, standing without effort against a little more than one gravity.

"The message sent," he said coolly, "will be 'Temporarily electrical failure. All under control.'" With that he knelt down in the narrow space between the crew-chairs and the instrument board.

"If that fool tries to jump me, Ryd, use the gun." His hands started to grope at the under panels of the control board, purposefully but without haste. "I'm going to disconnect the central fuse."

"You'll never touch it," said Arliess with a gasp, "I'm shorting the coil—*now!*"

Ryd had, in a dazed automatism, lifted the gun. It was heavy and unsteady in his gloved right hand. He stared with eyes out of focus and with a sense of nightmare; death was coming and he wanted to live, had to stop it somehow, anyhow, *now*—

Then all at once the gun steadied in his hand, burned hot as it spat its crisping thunderbolt. The cabin shook to the blast.

And the weapon slipped from Ryd's hand. He drew in air, sharp with ozone, in short sobbing gasps, and cowered in his padded seat, shaking uncontrollably. But he was alive, still alive.

Arliess crouched half in and half out of his seat. He brought up the pistol which he had snatched almost as it fell, trained it across the motionless bundle between them on the floor. Mury was dead, as dead as many another dreamer whose human tools have turned in his hands.

The astrogator snapped, "Take the strobophone sender and call *Algol*. Tell them—tell them—"

"He'd have killed us all," gasped Ryd, cringing.

He choked off as the astrogator lashed out open-handed, knocking him to the floor. The young man stood for a moment gazing down on him, hands clenched at his sides; then—

"You rat!" he snarled. "You filthy little *rat!*"