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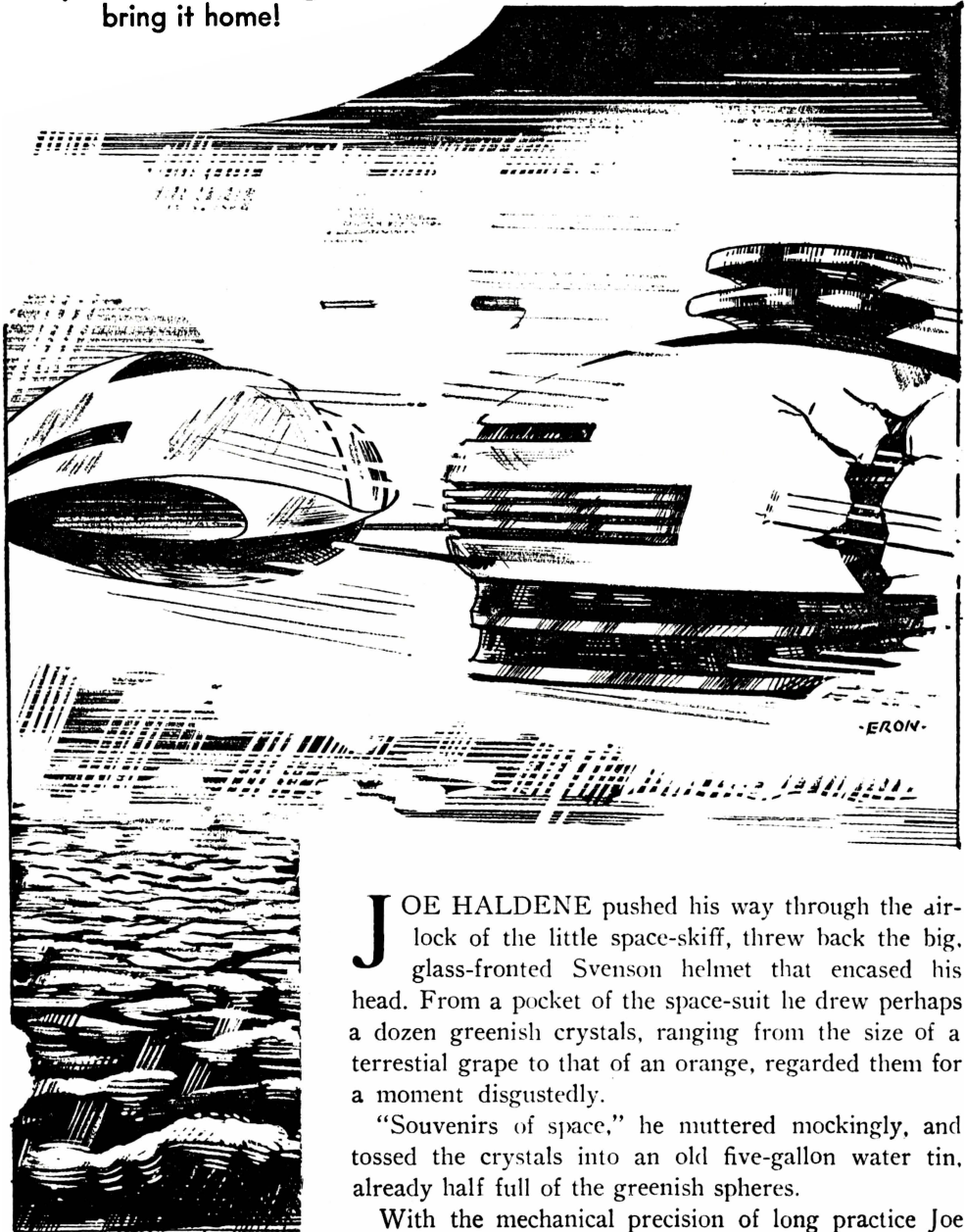
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SALVAGE OF SPACE

By **Frederic Arnold
Kummer, Jr.**

A space-derelict, like an abandoned ship, belongs to the first man to set foot on it—if he is man enough to bring it home!



JOE HALDENE pushed his way through the airlock of the little space-skiff, threw back the big, glass-fronted Svenson helmet that encased his head. From a pocket of the space-suit he drew perhaps a dozen greenish crystals, ranging from the size of a terrestrial grape to that of an orange, regarded them for a moment disgustedly.

"Souvenirs of space," he muttered mockingly, and tossed the crystals into an old five-gallon water tin, already half full of the greenish spheres.

With the mechanical precision of long practice Joe

unhooked the intricate air-tight flaps of the space-suit, allowed it to fall about his ankles. Stepping from the folds, he picked up the heavy asbestoid garment, glanced at the dials of its compressed air cylinder, then hung it upon a hook on the wall of the cabin. Still moody, he lit the tiny electric grill, set a pot of mud-colored *tala* on to boil.

Joe was just rubbing his hands with sand to clean them—for water was scanty on the little skiff—when he heard the outer door of the air-lock slam shut. A moment later another space-suited figure stepped from the lock, pushed back its helmet.

"What luck, Naal?" Joe said, without turning.

The brawny, bulge-eyed Martian scooped a handful of the green crystals from his pocket, dropped them into the tin.

"Fourteen, Joey, *matoul*," he said proudly. "We have good trip."

"Sure. Good trip." Joe was all irony, savagely bitter. "Nice green *xalt* crystals for Harrold's underpaid workmen to make into rings and beads—souvenirs for gaping terrestrial tourists. Maybe he'll give me fifty *thaels* for them, if I'm nice. Enough to pay for rocket-fuel, supplies, and your wages, Naal. Maybe a couple of *thaels* left over to buy flowers for Sally. Flowers, when Buck Harrold gives her fine earth-made gowns! Yes, and takes her out in his big space-yacht! Huh! I'd be ashamed to ask her aboard this little tub!"

"So, Joey, *matoul*." Naal stretched his powerful arms, until the muscles rippled under his red, rust-colored skin. "Woman-trouble. That is bad. And it is bad, my people say, for a man to hate himself." The Martian grinned, revealing teeth stained black from use of strong terrestrial tobacco. "Me, I do not think the *High-flier* is a tub. She good skiff. Old, small, but good. Someday when you have big

ship of your own, I buy her from you. Fifty *thaels* a trip from old man Harrold plenty for me! Ah, yes!"

Silently Joe poured the boiling *tala* into two cups, left his on the locker to cool. It was all right for Naal to think the *High-flier* a fine ship because it could come here to Deimos and back, perhaps twenty-five thousand miles in all. What the hell? Naal was a reddy, a Martian. Give him this old wreck, a chance to make fifty *thaels* twice a month, and he'd be happy. Buy himself a wife in the slave markets of Mercis and raise innumerable copper-colored kids. But he, Joe, was a terrestrial, even if born on Mars, with all of a terrestrial's fierce ambitious longings. . .

Joey stared disgustedly about the cramped, cheerless cabin, frowned at the grimy rocket-motors visible through the open door at its rear. Like a jail, he reflected, a jail from which there was no escape. Continue his regular trips to Deimos, and he'd go on as he had for the past year, breaking even. Quit the crystal-prospecting, and he'd starve. While old Harrold, Buck's father, was making thousands for his spoiled son to squander.

"Don't worry so, Joey." Naal, warmed by the stimulating *tala*, tried to be encouraging. "Woman-trouble is foolish. My old father he buy one, two, three wives at Mercis. And what you think? They all leave him and he only say . . ."

"Dry up, Naal!" Joey swung around to the observation port, stared at the barren, icy surface of tiny Deimos, rose-tinted in the light of Mars bulking like an enormous pomegranate against the blue-black sky. Somewhere on that great red disc, Joey reflected, was Sally Martin. He could shut his eyes and see her, all pink and white, her hair as yellow as sunlight, her simple fibroid dress clinging to her slender frame. Beautiful, too beautiful to be the wife of a sweaty, grubbing crystal-prospecter. If he only had a big

ship, one of those sleek, speedy twin-jet craft that plied the lucrative trade routes between Terra and Mars! The captain-owner of such a vessel wouldn't be ashamed to ask Sally to be his wife. Joe sighed. A mere matter of a hundred thousand thaels was all he needed to buy one of those clippers. He might just as well wish for Earth while he was at it. And Buck Harrold, with everything to offer a girl . . .

"Joey!" Naal crossed the cabin, his lead-soled gravity shoes clanging on the steel floor. "Joey, *matoul!* Look!"

JOE straightened up, awakened from his day dreaming. Naal's bony forefinger was pointing through the porthole at a bright splash of light brilliant against the dark sky. Joe frowned, his blue eyes narrowed. The point of light was growing larger, spreading like an exploded rocket into a thousand flashing sparks.

"Rings of Saturn!" Joey's lean brown face hardened. "A collision of asteroids or baby comets! Meteors, Naal! Thousands of 'em! And no atmosphere on this damned satellite to burn them up! We're in for it!"

"Run away from the storm maybe?" Naal muttered, eyeing the points of light apprehensively. "If we could make Mars . . ."

"No good." Joe shook his head. "This whole area will be blanketed for fifty thousand miles before we could reach home. We've got to take our chances! We'll sit down in that hollow between the two hummocks over in section 312. Remember? The one we worked trip before last. That'll be some protection. Hop to it!"

Naal nodded, vanished in the direction of the engine room. Less than two minutes later the rockets began to roar, lighting up the icy plain with their ruddy flare. Joe, at the controls, let them idle a moment to melt any ice that might have

formed about the exhausts, then opened the throttle full.

The little *Highflier* shuddered, leaped forward and upward. Joe glanced out at the tiny shower of sparks, like a thousand fireflies winging through space. Meteors, even big meteorites, a hail of rock and stone hurtling toward Deimos. Joe eased the ship to the right, staring down at the barren plain already pock-marked by countless meteor storms. Then he saw it, the cup-shaped depression between two jagged pinnacles of ice.

"All set!" he called over his shoulder. "Coming down!"

Very gently he eased the skiff toward the hollow, settled her down on the rocky ground without a bump. The rockets snapped off abruptly and Naal crawled through the companionway, his flat, ugly face wrinkled in a scared grin.

"How does it look?" he demanded anxiously.

"A humdinger," Joe muttered. "We better have our space-suits handy, case one of 'em knocks a hole in the hull. And if a big one lands on us . . ."

A rattling roar like a thousand riveters drowned out his voice. Naal's rust-red face paled; he clutched the grotesque little image suspended about his neck, muttering invocations in sibilant Martian.

Joe glanced up at the dark sky. Impossible to see the meteors now; they were moving too fast. The pale ice about the ship, however, was churned up as though by an ancient machine-gun. The roar increased, like hail on a tin roof. Joey gazed anxiously at the roof plating. If a rivet should give . . .

The rocky shower was growing more violent with each moment. The fragments were increasing in size. Dents began to show in the ceiling. Naal, hands trembling, was muttering furiously, swaying back and forth. Joe stuffed his pipe with black aromatic tobacco, puffed at it nervously. Huge chunks of stone were

landing about the ship, now. It was growing hot in the cabin with the friction of the pounding rain of rock. The din became deafening.

Face tense, Joe turned to the porthole. The ice was melting outside, a litter of jagged fragments covered the ground. Suddenly the little ship quivered, heeled over to one side.

"Gosh!" Joey's eyes snapped. One of the ice hummocks had disappeared in a cloud of steam and smoke!

"Big! Big one!" Naal muttered. "Never was such a storm! Aie! Feel the ship shake! Yetano protect us!"

Another sickening shock, near by. Again the little ship lurched. Joe, trying to look out of the observation port, lost his balance, crashed to the floor, lay there, panting. The porthole was blocked, now, buried by tons of shattered ice, powdered stone. More shocks, and still more. Like a twentieth-century battlefield, Joey reflected, clutching at a ring-bolt for support. It seemed a miracle that one of the huge meteorites had not landed on the space-skiff, reduced it to a bit of twisted, flattened metal. Naal, eyes on the battered roof-plates, was anxiously watching the wisps of smoke from Joe's pipe for a tell-tale swirling that would mark a leak.

THE plates, however, had held so far. The smaller fragments of meteoric stone had given way to huge boulders that spelled either instant death or nothing. These shocks also seemed to be growing less frequent.

"So far, so good," Joe announced. "I haven't felt one for the last couple of minutes. Can't tell though . . ."

Naal's courage was beginning to revive. His bulging frog-like eyes roved about the cabin, taking stock of the damage. Dishes smashed, a tin of flour upset, bottles of syrup and the imported terrestrial catsup of which Joey was so fond,

mingled in a sticky puddle on the floor.

"Not so bad," Joe said shortly. "Just enough to use up the dough I'd planned spending on Sally's flowers. Reckon the storm's about over. Any meteors that didn't land here on Deimos are sailing on into Mars' atmosphere to be burnt up by friction. No worry of ours. We'll head home at once, though. Can't tell when one of those strained plates may give way. Easy with the motors. They may back-blast if the rocket tubes're buried."

"Sure. I know." Naal squeezed through the little doorway, chuckling. "We too tough for meteor storms, eh, Joey? Smart, ah, yes, hiding between two hills. I start motors quick, you bet."

Joe leaned moodily against the control panel, raked shattered porcelain into a heap with the toe of his boot. Things didn't seem to matter much, somehow. Six months before he'd have been proud, exultant. But now . . .

He gazed about the dingy cabin, hating it. Woman-trouble, as Naal said. But without a decent ship how could a man hold up his head? A ship like the big silver yacht Buck Harrold put to such poor use. He, Joe, would have ripped out the bar, the luxurious cabins, the game-room, supplanted them with cargo-holds. And with a packet like that on the Terra run . . .

"All right, Joey, *matoul*," Naal called. "I've burnt away all the ice and stuff behind us. We go now, easy."

"Oke." Joe pulled back on the throttle. Shuddering, shaking, the *Highflier* emerged, chrysalis-like, from the heap of debris, leaped skyward. Joe set the controls and, swearing under his breath, began to swab up the pasty mess on the cabin floor.

The twelve thousand mile run between tiny Diemos and Mars would, for a first class ship, require only a few hours. For the *Highflier*, however, a day was necessary to make the trip. Joe, the cabin re-

stored to order, sat at the controls, staring idly at the huge red disc ahead. Behind him he could hear Naal humming softly as he tinkered with his beloved engines. Joe's eyes roved from side to side. Space above Mercis, capital of Mars, was usually filled with ships, sleek, flashing vessels that shot by the little *Highflier* like beams of light. Today the void was empty; all wise pilots had sought shelter from the meteor storms.

Joe glanced off to the right. Phobos, the larger of Mars' two satellites was in line with him. Which meant he was less than five thousand miles above the surface of Mars. In a couple more hours . . .

All at once Joe's heart leaped. Dead ahead was a long silvery object, very sleek, very graceful in the sunlight that struck it. No mistaking those trim lines; it was Buck Harrold's yacht, the *Kylos* . . . disabled! Slender rocket tubes battered, twisted by a meteor! Helpless!

"Naal!" Joe cried. "Come here! Look!"

The big Martian came running, peered over Joe's shoulder.

"*Kylos!*" he exclaimed. "Serve Harrold right, eh, *matoul?* To give so fine ship to his no-good, drunken son who knows not even one-ten' of what you've forgotten about navigation. Had he heeded storm warning . . ."

"Bring her about, Naal." Joe handed the controls to his companion, climbed hastily into his space-suit. "There may be people aboard . . ."

With consummate skill the Martian brought the little skiff alongside the disabled yacht. Joe snapped his heavy helmet into place, stepped into the air-lock. A moment later he had swung his light magnetic grapple onto the sleek, silvery hull, was hauling himself across the gap.

The *Kylos* was like an Archipenko sculpture; the sheer beauty of her flowing lines took Joe's breath away. Give him such a ship as this and she'd have

better treatment than Buck Harrold gave her! Clumsily he clambered along the polished hull. Except for the smashed rocket tubes, the yacht seemed intact. And tubes were easily replaced . . .

Joe, crawling onward, found the emergency ports open, the cradles for the lifeboats empty. Quickly he swung into an air-lock, entered the yacht's main saloon. There was air inside; he opened his helmet, glanced about. Bottles, half-emptied glasses, littered the tables, cigarette smoke still tainted the air, while traces of cloying perfume, red-daubed cigarette butts, spoke of women. A sacrilege, Joe reflected, to use such a ship for such purposes.

Naal's voice in the micro-wave set inside his helmet interrupted Joey's musing. Although the helmet had been snapped back, Joe could hear his companion clearly.

"Any people?" the Martian asked excitedly.

"Abandoned!" Joe exclaimed. "Left to fall, crash on Mars! A vessel like this . . . abandoned!"

"Old Harrold will buy Buck another," Naal chuckled. "Nothing we can do! Come back! The yacht's falling fast! Better we were clear of her pretty soon, eh, *matoul?*"

"Nope!" Joey's lean face hardened. "Listen, Naal, I don't care if this is Buck Harrold's ship; I can't stand by and let it crash! It . . . oh, hell, you wouldn't understand how a man can love a ship! Anyhow, we're going to try and save it! Get out the towing grapples!"

"But, Joey!" Naal's voice was shaky. "We haven't enough power!"

"Orders, Naal!" Joe said crisply, snapping the set off.

Returning to the outer hull of the crippled yacht once more, Joe saw the air-lock of the little *Highflier* open, saw Naal appear, lugging several lengths of stout cable.

WORKING with swift precision, the Martian fastened the heavy cables to ring-bolts sunk flush in the little skiff's hull, threw the ends of the tow ropes across the gap that separated the two ships. Hastily Joe made one fast to the wrecked, twisted tubes of the *Kylos*, the others to the cradles from which the little life-boats had been catapulted. Within half an hour the two vessels were securely fastened side by side.

Back in the cabin of the *Highflier*, Joe emerged, perspiring, from his space-suit.

"All set, Naal!" he said sharply. "Start those motors!"

Naal's greenish eyes flicked toward the control panel. The gravity-detector was spinning swiftly as the two vessels, bound together, plunged Marsward.

"Joey . . ." the Martian began.

"Hop to it!" Joe snapped. "Quick!"

Muttering dismally, Naal crawled through the entrance of the tiny engine room. A moment later the skiff's rockets commenced to roar.

Anxiously Joe glanced at the gravity detector. The ships' dive had been checked, but the rate of descent was still sickening.

"More power!" he called. "Give her all you've got!"

A grunt of assent came from the engine room, and the roar of the motors grew thunderous. Joey, his eyes glued to the control panel, frowned. Still falling fast!

"So!" Naal came into the cabin, shaking his rust-colored head. "Full power! And we keep on diving! Madness, *matoul*! Madness! Better to cut loose while we can! Why you do all this for no-good Buck Harrold?"

"For Buck Harrold?" Joe stared through a porthole at the sleek, graceful ship alongside. "D'you think I give a damn about that drunken bum? It's the yacht, Naal! She's too beautiful to let crash! I don't care who owns her! Don't

you see? I can't let her go any more'n I'd stand by while a beautiful girl was being killed!" His voice dropped to a far-off whisper. "The kind of ship I'd always hoped for . . ."

"But we go with her!" Naal glanced anxiously at Joey. "We be killed in crash! You—you sure, *matoul*, the meteor storm not jar your head, eh? Maybe you still dizzy. . . ."

"Dizzy?" Joe laughed harshly. "Sure I'm dizzy, Naal! So dizzy that I'm going to save Buck Harrold's yacht for him! And I don't expect you to understand!" He reached for his space-suit once more. "Leave the rockets as they are! We're going over to the *Kylos*, and lighten her!"

Dolefully Naal reached for his space-suit, followed Joe as he leaped across to the hull of the gleaming yacht. A moment later they were in its gilded, luxurious saloon.

"Open both doors of the air-lock!" Joe snapped into his micro-wave communications set. "We won't need air, wearing our space-suits!"

Naal obeyed, clutching at a stanchion for support as the air cooped up within the *Kylos* swept through the lock.

"Okay." Joey nodded within his helmet. "Let's go!" And seizing an armful of liquor bottles, he pitched them out into the dark void. The bottles, leaving the ship at an angle, disappeared instantly.

That was the beginning of a furious nightmare of toil. Working like madmen to lighten the yacht, they stripped it completely of Buck Harrold's prized furnishings. Piece by piece the bar vanished, then came the overstuffed armchairs, the roulette tables, the volumes of cheap, sensational books. Tin after tin of imported terrestrial caviar or terrapin, cases of champagne, armloads of linen, clothes, not all of them masculine. Rugs, lamps, pictures, cutlery . . . all the useless luxuries with which the *Kylos* was cluttered. The water tanks were jettisoned, but Joe

was afraid to empty the fuel bins, fearing that the semi-liquid trioxine might be ignited by the rockets of the little *Highflier*, chugging manfully alongside, and blast both vessels to bits in the explosion. Of the *Kylos'* engines, its navigating equipment, he was more considerate, determined to withhold it until the very last.

"Looks more like a ship already," he murmured, booting an elaborately-carved vase containing a fern through the lock. "Ferns!" Joe went on disgustedly. "I hope all this junk burns up in the atmosphere. Imagine being crowned by a potted plant!"

Naal, tossing an ornate mirror into the void, glanced at the red planet below. Its network of canals lay clear in every detail and Mercis was visible, a dark dot against the rusty plain.

"Close," he muttered. "We still fall, I think, Joey. If only the *Highflier* had big motors . . ."

"Suppose you run over and take a look at the gravity detector," Joe panted. "The controls on this packet are wrecked. And see how the skiff's rockets are running. . . ."

Nodding obediently, Naal stepped into the lock, swung himself upward to climb over the hull in the direction of the space-skiff. He had not been gone five minutes before he returned, dropping lightly onto the edge of the air-lock.

"Joey, *matoul!*" the Martian's voice was excited. "It work, you bet! You smart fella, yes indeed! We just barely settling down, now! Plenty slow enough for a landing! Maybe Buck Harrold give us a hundred thaels, a thousand, for saving his yacht! Think of it! Big money . . ."

"Huh!" Joe, lugging a heavy multi-phone toward the lock, grinned contemptuously. "Fat chance! He can keep his lousy cash! I'm saving this ship because I couldn't stand seeing her a heap

of twisted metal! Because she's as sweet and beautiful in her way as . . ." He was about to say "Sally Martin," but Naal interrupted him.

"*Matoul!*" The Martian pointed through the open air-lock. "A ship! Coming this way!"

Joe joined him, peered into the darkness. A ship, apparently from Mercis, was leaping spaceward toward them. As they watched, the vessel's forward rockets flared, braking its speed.

"One of Harrold's supply ships!" Naal exulted. "No more worries now! And maybe reward!"

Silently Joe Haldene watched the big supply ship come about, edge in toward the clear side of the yacht. Magnetic grapples shot from her bow and stern and a moment later the *Kylos* was sandwiched between the little *Highflier* and the rescue vessel.

Metal doors swung open in the side of the supply ship, a gangplank thrust out to the yacht's air-lock. Two bulky space-suited figures appeared, made their way across the runway.

THE first of the two men was Buck Harrold. Joey instantly recognized those pudgy features behind the glass front of the helmet. The other man, it appeared, was the captain of the rescue ship.

Harrold, catching sight of Joe and Naal, frowned.

"What d'you think you're doing here?" His voice rattled unpleasantly in Haldene's earphones. "On my ship . . .!"

Joe thrust his jaw forward firmly.

"Just saving it from a crash," he grated. "That's all! If I hadn't taken it in tow when I did . . ."

"Huh!" Harrold laughed bitingly. "That dirty little tub of yours couldn't keep a life-boat from crashing! And after scraping all the finish off my hull, I suppose you figure you'll hold me up for

reward money! Well, think again, Haldene!" He pushed his way through the air-lock into the cabin. "I . . ."

Harrold broke off at sight of the yacht's stripped, gutted interior.

"By all space!" he roared. "You dirty, lousy crook! Ten thousand thael's worth of furnishings . . . gone! What've you been up to, Haldene? What've you and this pop-eyed reddy done to my ship? Speak up, or . . ."

"Listen, you!" Joe leaned forward, his face a white angry mask. "You didn't think enough of this ship to stick by her after her rockets had been smashed! You and your men were only bothered about saving your precious skins! It would have been easy enough for me to let her crack up on Mars! But instead, I came aboard and worked like a dog throwing your damned junk out to lighten ship! I saved her from being wrecked! I don't expect any reward . . . not from you . . . but the least you can do is to keep a civil tongue in your head!"

Buck Harrold was making sputtering, incoherent sounds, interspersed with blasts of profanity.

"Threw my belongings out?" he gasped. "Out into space! Why, you damned spiteful wrecker! You'll pay for this! Pay for every bit of the damage you've done! By the Lord, I'll break you, see that you spend the next five years in the labor camps! McKain" . . . he turned to his companion . . . "take this man into custody until we get back to Mercis! We'll see what the courts have to say about boarding other people's ships to wreck them!"

Gripping the heat-gun at his waist, the captain of the rescue ship stepped forward. Joe stared at him with disbelieving eyes. No reward, no thanks even, for saving the *Kylos*! Not that he'd expected any. But to be accused of deliberate vandalism . . .! Harrold wasn't fit to be owner of a ship such as this. The *Kylos*,

like Sally Martin, was beautiful, clean, somehow . . . fine; perhaps that was why he'd worked so hard to save it. With such a ship he, Joe, could enter the terrestrial trade, and then maybe Sally. . . .

"Come along!" McKain touched his arm. "You'll have plenty of time for thinking . . . in jail!"

Joe straightened up, his gaze sweeping the empty saloon. The two big portholes opposite him seemed somehow like dark, pleading eyes . . . eyes that begged for release from a life of idle cruising, drunken revelry. It was almost as though the *Kylos*, like himself, yearned for long voyages in the void, reckless adventure, the mad exhilaration of racing past the great white silent stars, of bridging the dark gulfs of space. Joe glanced at Neal, standing bewildered by the air-lock, at Buck Harrold's red, coarse face. And then he shook off McKain's hand.

"Arrest me for cleaning out the *Kylos*?" Joe laughed. "Can't a man straighten up his own ship?"

"What!" Harrold roared. "You . . . of all the impudence! He's crazy, McKain! Crazy as a coot!"

"Yeah," Joe growled. "Well, think this over, Harrold! This ship was abandoned when I came aboard! And the laws of space, modelled after the old laws of the seas back on earth, state that an abandoned ship, a derelict, is the property of anyone who takes the trouble to salvage it! That's what the *Kylos* was when I came aboard, Harrold! A disabled derelict . . . salvage! And long's I took her in tow, she's mine!"

"Why . . . you dirty . . ." Buck Harrold plunged forward, his fists inside their asbestoid covering, doubled.

Joe, grinning, side-stepped; his own muscular arm shot out in a swinging round-house. Harrold's space-suit, ballooned by the air inside, cushioned the blow, but the impetus of it was sufficient to send him reeling to the floor.

"And now," Joe growled. "I'll trouble the pair of you to get off this ship at once! I'm particular about my company! As owner of the *Kylos*, I don't need you aboard;"

Harrold, swearing in lurid streaks, staggered to his feet.

"He's right!" McKain muttered. "Legally the ship's his, now! We can't do a thing, Mr. Harrold!"

"Except leave," Joey announced. "Right away!"

For a long minute Harrold stared at the wiry spaceman, his porcine eyes snapping with rage.

"All right!" he said at last. "Try to keep her from falling with that little tub of yours. She'll crash and I hope you crack up with her! You won't be laughing an hour from now, wise guy!"

Lips tight, he strode into the airlock, crossed to the rescue ship. A moment later it had cast off from the yacht, was edging clear with quick spurts of its exhausts.

"Joey! Joey, *matoul!*" Naal came running forward, a grin on his flat, ugly face. "Ah, how you tell that no-good Harrold where he gets off! And this big fine ship . . . all yours!"

Joe ran an affectionate hand over the polished mechanism of the air-lock. The sleek, gleaming *Kylos* . . . his! If he could bring it safely to Mercis, get enough from the sale of the little *Highflier* to make repairs, alterations. . . .

"Joey!" Naal gripped his arm, pointed. "Harrold's rescue ship! Swinging back toward us! Look!"

PEERING through the air-lock, Joe could see the other vessel come about in a long, sweeping circle, its flaring rocket exhaust red against the blackness of space. Straight toward the *Kylos* and the little skiff it came, leaping across the void like a gleaming silver comet.

"Good God!" Joe gasped. "If he's fool enough to ram us . . . ! But it would

wreck the rescue ship, kill everyone aboard! And he must see the light of the *Highflier's* rockets! Quick, Naal! Signal . . ."

As he spoke, the big supply ship swung about, missing the two smaller vessels by a scant hundred yards. For just an instant its rocket tubes were pointed like huge, spouting cannon at them, and the nose of the *Kylos* was enveloped in searing, lurid flames!

The yacht, the little skiff alongside, quivered under the shock as though struck by a giant fist. With jarring force the back-lash of the supply ship's rockets smote them, completely nullifying the *Highflier's* efforts to keep the *Kylos* aloft. Given a terrible impetus by that blast of flame, the two vessels plunged toward the great red planet hardly two thousand miles below!

Joe, hurled to the floor of the cabin by the shock, climbed dizzily to his feet. Naal, his reddish face dazed behind the glass of his helmet, lay crouched against a bulkhead. Joe glanced through the airlock; Harrold's ship was already only a pin-point of light in the dark void.

Suddenly realization swept over Joe. The *Kylos* was like a disabled auto, being held from sliding down a steep hill by a smaller car . . . the *Highflier*. And the back-blast of Harrold's rockets had been like a bump from a large truck, sending both vehicles downhill . . . to crash!

"The louse!" Joey muttered. "The dirty spiteful louse! Wreck this yacht before he'd let me have it!" He turned, eyes bleak. "You okay, Naal?"

The Martian dragged himself erect.

"Sure. All . . . all right, *matoul.*" He gasped, recovering his breath. "I . . ." Naal broke off, catching sight of Mars' red surface below. "Mighty Yetano! We fall! Fast!"

"They kicked us down," Joe said bitterly. "And we can't prove it was deliberate!" His eyes were like dead embers.

"But . . . *Highflier's* motors can't keep us up, now!" Naal's face was a sickly mud color. "Must cast off! Quick! This yacht drag the skiff down . . . to smash-up! Nothing left to throw out except big machinery too heavy to lift! The yacht must go, *matoul!* We cut cables, huh, Now?"

Joe's lips were a tight, harsh line. Naal was right. Less than two thousand miles drop to Mars and even with the *Highflier's* rockets still chugging steadily to check their fall, they'd crash in about four hours. And to attempt to land at five hundred miles per . . .

He glanced about the empty cabin. His ship . . . by law and by sweat! He had fought, struggled to save the yacht after Buck Harrold abandoned it. He succeeded, until Harrold's spiteful trick. And now . . .

"Eh, Joey?" Naal made no attempt to hide his fright. "We go cut cables? Now? Every minute we get closer . . ."

Joe stood like a run-down robot, eyes sweeping the cabin. To abandon this graceful, sleek *Kylos!* A glowing dream had come into his mind, during the past few hours. He had seen the slim silver ship at the head of the grain-fleet, leaving Mercis with empty holds, heading for Terra and its waiting wheat elevators. Had seen her outdistancing all others in the fleet, racing like a burnished bullet across the blue-black void. And the return to Mercis, holds full, to claim the high prices that went to the first home-coming grain ship! The man at the controls of the yacht hadn't been Joe Haldene, crystal-prospecter . . . but Captain Joseph Haldene, the proud master of a proud ship. That man wouldn't be ashamed to ask Sally Martin to marry him. Such a real dream until . . . Very abruptly Joey straightened up.

"Go ahead, Naal," he said brusquely.

All haste, the big Martian climbed through the air-lock, commenced groping

his way over the hull toward the *Highflier*. Joe remained a moment in the spotless cabin, glanced about.

"Goodbye, . . . *Kylos!*" he muttered. Then, as though ashamed of himself, he quickly swung up over the top of the lock, clambered over the sloping hull to join Naal.

The Martian, electric torch in hand, was standing in the skiff's small air-lock, ready to cut the heavy steel cables. Joe sprang across the narrow gap, landed beside him.

"Cut now?" Naal urged. "Mars get close!"

JOE glanced down. The red planet's intricate canal system was more clear than before, a net-work of dark lines. The two ships were gleaming in the flare of the skiff's exhausts, but beyond them there was only the star-speckled sable sky. Deimos and Phobos, one to the right, the other to the left, were like cold, unblinking eyes, staring from the darkness.

"All right," Joe whispered into his communications set. "Cut clear!"

"So." Naal swung out, electric torch in hand. "Too bad, Joey, to lose such fine ship. Truly, as my people say, it is day of bad luck, this day of the Wedding of the Moons! First meteor storm, then . . ."

"What!" Joey gripped the reddy's arm, his eyes blue flames. "You say this is the day of the Wedding of the Moons! Wait . . . Switch off that torch!" He slammed the air-lock's outer door, dragged the bewildered Naal into the cabin of the skiff.

"But, Joey," Naal muttered. "We fall! Fast! The yacht drags us down! Unless we cut cables . . ."

Joe, bent over his tattered copy of "Principles of Space Navigation," did not reply. Suddenly he straightened up, grinning.

"You're right!" he exclaimed. "The twelfth! At three-eighteen p. m., Martian!

Directly centered over Mercis! We're not cutting any cables today, Naal!"

"Not cutting cables!" The Martian's green eyes widened. "We die! In crash!" He shook his head stubbornly, picked up the electric torch. "Naal no die!"

"Wait!" Joe caught the big man's elbow. "I've never landed you in any trouble before, have I? You've got to trust me! Now go back in that engine room and get everything you can out of those motors! You hear, Naal? At once!"

Naal remained motionless a moment, his bulging muscles tensed. All at once he wilted before Joe's blazing eyes, dropped the torch.

"Yes . . . *matoul*," he said humbly, and crawled into the tiny engine room.

For the next hour there was no sound in the skiff's cabin other than the steady roar of the rockets, the clink of tools as Naal made continual adjustments of the motors . . . and the humming of the gravity-detector as it clicked off the rapidly shrinking number of miles between the two ships and the planet below.

Joe disregarded the rapidly-nearing plains below. Like a lay figure he stood before the main observation port, his gaze fixed on the two moons looming white and clear in the sky. Phobos, three thousand miles away, Deimos, eleven thousand. They were nearing each other now, about to pass in their orbits about Mars. Fascinated, Joe watched them slide slowly across the heavens. In another moment, the eclipse . . .

Suddenly footsteps sounded behind him.

"Joey," . . . Naal's voice was piteous . . . "Can get no more power from motors! We fall! Cut cables, *matoul*! Cut cables, please! Now, before we crash, die!"

"Wait, Naal!" Joe stared eagerly at the twin moons. Directly before the bow of the skiff they were meeting, the rim of Phobos overlapping that of the more

distant Deimos. "Look! The eclipse! What your people call the Wedding of the Moons!"

Naal gazed, bewildered. Suddenly he gasped. The ominous click-click of the gravity detector was slowing, becoming more deliberate with each instant! No longer was it a blurred humming. Each click, representing ten miles drop, was distinct, separate.

"Slowing!" Naal gasped. "Losing momentum the back-blast of Harrold's rocket gave us! How . . . how . . . !"

"Don't you see?" Joey laughed exultantly. "It's gravity! An eclipse . . . the Wedding of the Moons! Moons small, yet close enough to Mars to have a strong pull! One alone wouldn't have done it, but two, lined up by the eclipse, give a double gravitational attraction, are strong enough to check us! You understand? We're in a direct line—the two moons, then us, then Mars! Their drag is enough to slow us, nullify the momentum Harrold gave us! Easy now, for the old *High-flier* to take the lightened *Kylos* in! We're going home, Naal! Safely!"

AN HOUR later the two ships, still linked by the heavy cable, settled gently upon the space-port at Mercis. Naal, swinging down from the *High-flier's* air-lock, patted his bare feet delightfully upon the warm red sand of the planet.

"Home!" he laughed exultantly. "Joey, *matoul*, you best damn spaceman on all Mars! Yes, and Terra, too! Haie! What a trip! Me, I think I go get drunk!"

"Go to it." Joe climbed wearily from the skiff, stared with bright eyes at the graceful silver ship alongside. "And, Naal. Stop by Martin's on your way through town. Tell Sally that"—he squared his tired shoulders—"that Captain Joseph Haldene of the space cruiser *Kylos* would like to see her tonight!"

THE END