

PLANET STORIES



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Summer Issue, March-May, 1946
Volume III, No. 3



20c per copy



THIS IS A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE

PLANET STORIES: Published quarterly by Love Romances Pub. Co., Inc., 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y. The entire contents of this magazine are copyrighted, 1946, by Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc. Entered as second-class matter, October 2, 1944, at the Post Office, at New York 1, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. All rights reserved. While due care is always exercised, the publishers will not be responsible for the return of unsolicited manuscripts. Yearly subscription rate 80¢ in advance. For advertising rates address THE NEWSSTAND FICTION UNIT, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York City.

Printed in U. S. A.

Space-Lane of No-Return

By **GEORGE A. WHITTINGTON**

You were bored—keeping the endless, dull space-lanes clear. You wanted excitement, danger, to see the weird planets of the System. You wanted—And then it happened, all the swift, blazing danger of the void—and you found yourself being blasted out of existence.



“**A** STEROID FISHING” was no job for men who joined the Inter-Planetary Patrol with the lure of distant space frontiers in their heart,

Nord Holber told himself bitterly. Your two-man Patrol ship hung less than twenty degrees off the ecliptic, with sharp, hard starlight from the spangled

jet mantle of space glinting against the top and sides of its maroon plastic hull. Below, the asteroids rushed through their mad orbits like the vengeful ghosts of shattered planets and satellites.

Smaller fragments danced through weird paths above the main body. They were the hazard that forced space liners to arc far above the impassable Belt on the run between Jupiter's moons and the inner planets: and, since you were a fledgeling Patrol Officer, fresh from Federation University, you wasted the energy that boiled in your blood hunting these fragments, yanking them out of space!

"It's fun," Mike Doren admitted, as though reading his partner's thought. "Like shark fishing. But it's not what I joined the Patrol to do."

Nord Holber's answering smile softened the strength a firm chin and thin, straight nose gave to his long oval face. "More like mine sweeping in ancient times, Mike," he said quietly—as though the dispassionate menace of the inanimate chunks of matter they hunted could answer the call for high adventure! "One of those things could make a wreck of this ship—as easily as it could a liner."

Against that possibility, they wore space suits, and, under his transparent helmet, Nord's grey eyes swept the side view screens for any fragments they'd missed on the way down. Mike was at the drive controls, his gaze on the lower screen, watching their prey, an ugly, angular mass, hardly larger than a man's head, two hundred feet below.

"O.K.," Mike said, his big mouth curving in a wry smile. "Let go with the hook."

Nord pressed two control studs before him. Their ship was standard except for the little bay that now opened aft, the heavy electro-magnet that shot downward under tiny automatic jets, and the power-driven winch that paid out flexible, heavily insulated cable to hold the magnet captive and carry the current.

"Sunspot!" Nord said, as the magnet struck the little asteroid fragment squarely and clung.

"There's always enough para-magnetic stuff in them," his partner commented bitterly. "That's what makes this blasted assignment possible!" His blue eyes bright-

ened. "That's one more toward a full cargo—a trip back to Mar's Base, and some planet leave. Hope I don't dream about these dirty rocks!" The brightness hardened in his eyes, as they dropped to the Asteroid Belt below.

"I'll start hunting another one," Nord said wearily. "You haul this one in!" He took Mike's chair before the drive controls, and his long fingers made deft, swift adjustments. Their little ship nosed upward toward a safer cruising area.

The other jabbed the winch control studs. The winch began to turn again, drawing the cable taut. Their ship lurched momentarily, as the cable tugged against the orbital inertia of the little mass at the end of the magnet; but winch and ship were built for the struggle, and the asteroid fragment swung from its course, starting upward on the magnet.

NOW Mike stores it away in the outer hull with the rest, Nord thought glumly, and the whole weary routine starts over again. Three days it took to find this last one—three days of monotonous search just above the Belt!

He forced his slim, wiry body erect, and straightened his shoulders. "They're getting scarcer, Mike. Before long, the System Federation can lower the safe traffic lanes down to here—that's the closest to the Belt that'll ever be practical. Maybe the next batch of Patrol College grads will get a different initiation."

"Sure," grumbled Mike, watching the ascending magnet. "Maybe the Federation'll have the Patrol go all out after that pirate, Kadine. He's got the only ship in space that can navigate the Asteroid Belt! Get his secret—and liners can go right through the Belt without bothering about asteroids or fragments!

"If they'd tried that before, Nord, we wouldn't waste our Patrol career with this blasted 'asteroid fishing'."

"The secret's in the steel hull of his ship," Holber agreed, firm jaw tightening. Dhain Kadine, he remembered, had been a brilliant physicist before he turned to space piracy. Now his ship, the only steel-hulled vessel in an age of plastics, operated from a base deep within the Asteroid Belt itself—sailing untouched where other daring craft had been battered to wreckage!

"We can't go in after him," Nord added, and he picks his own time and place to come out. But—"

The visaphone on the instrument panel before him jangled a sudden warning. His grey eyes widened. A glowing disk indicated general communications wavelength, but the jangling meant a rider that stamped the communication; *urgent!*

He snapped the instrument on, and tuned in the length. The screen glowed, and blurred, vague images appeared. Broken, unintelligible words poured out.

Mike Doren glanced at the instrument savagely, and glanced quickly to the lower view screen. The asteroid fragment was still a few feet below. "Static from the cable," he growled. "Wait! We don't want to lose this thing."

"That's a Patrol Officer on the screen," Holber said doubtfully, and smiled. "But I can't make out enough to tell his rank, so it's not insubordination if we wait."

The current flowing through the cable to the magnet was the same high frequency used in the ship itself—there was no space in a compact Patrol vessel for unnecessary converters. But, inside, the current was screened against interference with visaphone reception; while outside, pulsing through the cable, it set up an interference field.

In a matter of seconds, the magnet and its captive were inside the hull, and the bay doors closed. Mike jabbed off the magnetizing current, and the two heard the heartening thump of the asteroid fragment against the outer hull.

They heard, too, the voice from the visaphone, suddenly clear and imperative against the still jangling alarm: ". . . Kadine. Repeating: . . ."

Mike's jaw dropped. "Ring of Saturn! Talk about the devil!"

On the visaphone screen was a Colonel of the Inter-Planetary Patrol. Behind him could be seen a spacious control room—the nerve center of a luxury space liner. The Colonel's square, rugged face was white with anger. His words were clipped.

"Repeating! All Patrol ships in vicinity of Space Lane 6, be on lookout for Dhain Kadine, who has halted and robbed Earth Liner, *Jovian Nymph!*"

The words swept the weariness from

Nord's face, and brought flame leaping from the depths of his grey eyes! Space Lane 6 was almost directly above their position. He saw Mike's features light with eagerness. Dhain Kadine had struck out from the wild Belt that was his impregnable stronghold; and now Nord Holber and Mike Doren, hugging the upper fringe of the Belt, were between the outlaw and safety!

"It's our chance!" Mike shouted. "Promotion—the end of this rookie fishing business—if we get him! We—"

IN the visaphone, the Colonel went on, his voice bitter with chagrin; "Valuable scientific documents have been taken under threat of destruction to an unarmed passenger ship.

"Kadine traveling in direction of the Eos Family. Imperative that the Patrol intercept and destroy Dhain Kadine!" He paused, and added grimly; "*Jovian Nymph* standing by."

Mike Doren whistled. "Must be some important papers! Why weren't they sent by Patrol ship then?"

Nord's eyes were speculative. "The Patrol's busy off Jupiter's moons. There's trouble brewing with the underground Jovian League trying to agitate the moons out of the System Federation. It's ticklish business, Mike—dynamite, in fact, with the System Congress expecting violence!

"Kadine's supposed to be in that business up to his ears, so somebody thought he'd be too busy to intercept a liner."

The other nodded. "So they send a Patrol Officer with the papers on a regular liner—and Jovian League spies tip off Kadine to come back from Jupiter and intercept them over the Belt, where he can jump to safety into the Asteroids!"

Nord was already searching the view screens. "Better get below and stow that fragment away, Mike," he ordered, quietly, asserting his nominal command for the first time since the two started their initial assignment. "And check pressure in your suit oxygen tank. The Eos Family is right below us in the Belt—and this is where Kadine's heading!"

His partner grinned. "Yes, sir!" He clambered through the inner airlock, and squirmed through the narrow space between the hulls. His voice came back over

the suit communication unit: "Aren't you going to acknowledge the orders?"

"That would warn Kadine," Holber told him.

His lips curved in a tight smile that did not soften the long oval of his face. "The Colonel knows we've begun fishing this section of the Belt—but Kadine may have been too busy over by Jupiter's moons to keep track of little details like that."

Doren came back into the cabin. "Doubt if the Jovian League spies keep track of routine assignments of rookie Patrol Officers," he agreed. "What's our move?"

"We wait." Nord's grey eyes flicked over the top and rear view screens. "Kadine should come from above and behind. We'll let him overtake us. That way we'll stay between him and the Belt, and make him fight!"

"He won't get by this heat ray!" Mike promised savagely.

His big hands went over the ray tube controls experimentally, and he grinned as he swung the sights across the rear sector. "I'm sick of playing with asteroid fragments!"

Holber didn't move his eyes from the rear screen. A faint, distant flicker of red splashed against the deep black of space behind them. The pin point of flame pulsed steadily among the cold stars—it was the rocket wash of a ship, a ship far below the space lanes, a ship too black to be visible against its sable backdrop!

"Here he comes!" Mike said tensely.

"He's seen us by now." Nord's long fingers brought retarding jets flaming into brief life.

Their speed slackened. In the rear screen, the wash of the other ship swelled suddenly, and the outline of its dark hull cut a silhouette across the dying radiance of exhaust gasses.

It was Kadine's ship! In it was the secret of safe passage through the Asteroid Belt—a secret that would open a space lane for System Federation ships, give Science access to the guarded secrets of the mysterious Asteroids!

In it, too, were the papers which had brought the outlaw back from Jupiter's moons—gambling possible success there to wrest from the Federation itself scientific knowledge that might assure a pirate coup against interplanetary civilization!

DHAIN KADINE, whose cunning and skill were legendary, had never hesitated in battle. He did not hesitate now! The black hull of his ship loomed in the view screen, and a slender, dazzling pencil of white darted forth—a heat ray stopped down to its most penetrating beam, concentrating the maximum fiery energy into a tiny area of searing destruction.

Nord whipped their vulnerable plastic hull aside, and the beam flared harmlessly in the view screens, as it lashed past, spending its fury against cold space. Nord threw the drive control lever forward to the last notch.

The Patrol ship surged ahead, matching the speed of Kadine's vessel—blocking the outlaw from the safety of the Asteroids below!

"That guy doesn't fool around!" Mike Doren said hoarsely. His big hands were busy as the ray tube's cross hairs shifted in the rear view screen. "Neither do I!" he added savagely.

"Sunspot!" Holber cried. "You hit him, Mike!"

The thin heat ray danced into the dark hull—drew a spreading circle of dark, sullen red! Kadine's side jets flared.

"Stay with him, Mike." Nord ordered calmly. "That steel hull will take a lot of heat before you do any damage!"

Doren sent his beam lashing after Kadine's dancing ship, against which the circle of red faded, then glowed once more as the merciless heat found the spot again.

Holber's grey eyes blazed, and his long fingers wove their swift movements into a smooth pattern on the drive levers—following, like a dance partner, the wild dartings of the outlaw ship.

For a few arrested seconds, Kadine's ray tube was cold, as he turned all his frenzied attention to the drive. Vainly, he spun and twisted. Mike Doren grinning savagely, traced every desperate motion with the fiery pencil of his heat ray.

"He can't get past—and he can't turn back! He's got to keep coming!"

As though in silent agreement, Kadine whipped his ship out of its gyrations, and drove a straight course toward the stern of the Patrol fighter. In the split second it took Nord to react, the pirate drew closer. His black hull blocked out the stars behind, filled the rear screen! In the steel nose,

the red spot flared brighter, rising toward the white heat that meant disaster—

And the view screen was suddenly an incandescent patch of unbearable brilliance that burned all vision from Nord Holber's brain—brought his eyelids down instinctively over throbbing eyes! He reeled in his seat, head spinning, stomach writhing, and realization more sickening than physical agony in his mind.

Kadine had blinded them with a blast of his retarding jets! It was an old trick—a veteran space-fighter's trick that took the cool nerve of blasting your ship's nose forward into your enemy's ray, shielding your own eyes from his aft jets, until you were so close your nose almost covered his view screen, then—Risky, but it gained several precious seconds!

Seconds in which to strike! Nord's jaw was a piece of sculptured white rock against which the sagging muscles of his face drew themselves taut. His eyes—they had to open! He had to see! Kadine would use the seconds.

Holber's eyelids came up slowly, and he lifted his head, suddenly several times its weight, toward the view screen. The cabin swam before him—a confusion of grey and black shadows. He had an impression of a distorted blotch beside him, and he heard Mike cursing madly.

"Can't see, Nord! Can't get my eyes open!"

"Hold on, Mike!"

The blacker shadow beside him lurched, and he heard his partner stumble back to a sitting position. This his eyes were focusing again, painfully, on a blurred patch of black, dotted with painful pinpoints of brilliant blue-white—on the screen. The black began to thicken, harden about the stars—it was torn to shreds by a fiery nova! Kadine's heat ray was eating into the stern of the Patrol Ship!

BEHIND the black nightmare that settled again over his tortured eyeballs, swift reactions prodded at Nord's muscles. His long fingers found the drive levers, and held tight as they sent the ship off in a dizzy, twisting tangent to her course.

In his helmet, the valve clicked shut as outside pressure fell. Air was rushing from out through a gaping hole in the hull, but the ship responded perfectly to the controls.

"He didn't do any real damage," Nord gritted. "Not yet," Again, he forced his eyelids up, and the screens swam before him in a red haze.

"Kadine's down below us," his partner cried angrily. "He's running for the Belt! Saving those papers is worth more to him than our hides."

Without a word, his eyes bloodshot and terrible, Nord hurled the Patrol Ship downward after the outlaw.

"We're pretty close to the Asteroids," Mike warned mechanically. "Fragments may be pretty thick." His big mouth spread into a sudden grin. "Blast the fragments! We're after them anyway—if a couple come through the hull, that's a couple we won't have to fish for." He moved his big hands over the heat ray controls eagerly.

"Kadine will have to slow down some before he cuts into that Belt," Holber reasoned aloud. "Get your beam on his stern jet tubes, just behind the nozzles—you'll have a better chance than trying to melt his hull again. The tubes are heat resistant, but they're plenty hot—and jet tubes have been rayed out before this!"

The other nodded. "It's an old trick—as old as the one he pulled on us. Look—he's leveling off!"

They were gaining rapidly, as the black craft below lost speed. It lurched suddenly, portraying the amazement of the pirate within, as the ray flashed in his screen.

"You found him again, Mike!" Nord exclaimed grimly. "Right across the tubes!"

"He can't run, for those tubes won't last seconds!"

Kadine's fighter dogged frantically, in a brief, vain effort to shake the beam which followed every twist. Abruptly, the dark ship swerved off course.

"There goes one tube!" Doren shouted jubilantly. "He'll have to cut down his drive now—to trim the jets!"

The outlaw ship swung slowly in a climbing turn, and Kadine was sweeping black space with his fiery beam as he came.

Like fencing foils, the two dazzling pencils of light crossed and recrossed—slashing and stabbing for the ships. But it was the duel of a slower, heavily armored adversary against a faster, unprotected opponent—for Kadine's metal hull would stand long seconds of heat, and a touch of

his own stopped-down beam could bore into the vitals of the plastic Patrol Ship at a touch.

"What's he up to?" growled Mike Doren. Once again, he had the other ship glowing dangerously red. Still Kadine came on.

Nord's throbbing eyes were slitted almost shut. The other wouldn't get away with the same trick twice! As the ship loomed almost upon them, Nord laughed harshly, touched his own retarding jets briefly. Let the outlaw— Only then, he realized, suddenly—too late! Desperately, he threw the drive lever—as the glowing nose of the other ship smashed into their lower hull!

The universe spun around him. He saw the stars streak across the view screens, and the floor beneath his feet bulge upward under the terrible impact—even as the last surge of her jets wrenched the Patrol Ship free, sent her staggering drunkenly upward.

He gripped the control panel with long fingers whose steel clutch almost lifted him from the seat, and the grey eyes in his white face were bloodshot and wild! Beside him, Mike's rasping breath deepened into a groan.

"Our heat ray's out! That devil—"

Nord laughed. Their ship swung smoothly enough under its drive, as his hands shot over the levers. Of all the intricate wiring beneath them, only the ray circuit had been broken! But the bottom of their fighter had been torn open under the nose.

In the lower screen, he saw the asteroid fragments they'd stowed away below, floating in space, bumping lightly against Kadine's steel hull as the black ship turned back. *Steel hull! Asteroid fragments!* In his brain, the words rushed together into sudden, strange meaning with the thought of the heat ray!

Nord laughed again, throwing his body far across the seat to press the two studs before the astounded Mike. "Mike, maybe we don't need a ray!"

"I don't get it," his partner gasped.

BEHIND and below them, the little bay opened in the still undamaged section of their hull, the electro-magnet shot downward under its tiny automatic jets, and the winch paid out the cable.

"Sunspot!" the dazed Mike whispered mechanically. The magnet had struck Kadine's ship, and clung, the cable falling slack below as the winch continued to turn. "But what good does it do us, Nord? He can't drag us into the Belt with him, our mass will throw off his trick drive correction."

"Right! Kadine will have to finish us first—he can't ray that cable off!"

His partner nodded glumly. "Here he comes! And we can't touch him."

Nord Holber laughed again. "That's what he thinks! Mike, there's high frequency current in that cable."

He shot their battered fighter aside—to port—as the fiery beam flashed upward. The slack cable passed under and over the pirate's ship. Nord sent the Patrol vessel down, then to starboard and up again, as Kadine's fiery pencil of destruction whipped toward them.

"He doesn't suspect a thing," Holber said tensely. "It looks like fancy dodging we're doing. But look at the cable, partner! A couple more times around—"

The plastic ship was weaving an intricate course, dodging, yet feinting downward, only to dance upward and away—and the insulated cable was wound loosely around the enemy craft.

"O.K., Mike," Nord said at last. "Reverse that winch, and pull the cable out."

Doren, understanding breaking at last into his flaming blue eyes, pressed the stud, and stared into the lower screen. "A high frequency current," he whispered, "flowing through a coil around a metal core—Kadine's steel hull!"

Within the metal hull of Dhain Kadine's spacer induced electrical current lashed a torrent of irresistible energy against sluggish electro-magnetic potentialities. Resistance of the steel produced heat—heat more intense than Mike Doren's beam could create. Despite the bulk of the outlaw ship within those few turns of cable, the induced current, surging through the steel drove the temperature higher—higher—toward the melting point itself! And, in the inner-hull, it was the same—rising temperature, heat radiating, warming the air within the cabin—

"An induction furnace," said Nord Holber quietly. "It must be pretty warm inside there now!"

Before him, the visaphone jangled suddenly. The screen glowed as he snapped it on. In it the dark, hawklike face of Dhain Kadine, was a blurred, flickering, terror-white, blob. His voice shouted hoarse unintelligible words—rose almost to a shriek. Sweat drenched his clothes—poured from every pore of his skin, flashed dancing highlights on the screen.

Nord Holber's fist and arm gestured in unmistakable pantomime—*jump!*

"Shut the current off quick, Mike," he ordered, as the space suited figure of Dhain Kadine leaped frantically through the port of the black ship below them. "The Patrol

will want everything that's in that ship!"

Mike Doren pressed the stud, and his big mouth spread in a contented smile as the other swung their fighter through space at top speed, uncoiling the cable.

"When it cools down," Nord said, "we'll go aboard. After we give Kadine and the papers to the *Jovian Nymph*, we'll go back to base in his ship. I don't want to make the trip all the way in this space suit."

His partner's eyes lit up. "O.K. But, when we get to Mars Base, we'll ride our ship and drag that steel monstrosity in on the cable. After all, it's the last catch of 'asteroid fishing,' and the biggest!"

