

★ PLANET ★

★ STORIES ★

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SPACE OASIS

By **RAYMOND Z. GALLUN**

Space-weary rocketmen dreamed of an asteroid Earth. But power-mad Norman Haynes had other plans — and he spread his control lines in a doom-net for that oasis in space.

Illustrated by Morey

I FOUND Nick Mavrocordatus scanning the bulletin board at the Haynes Shipping Office on Enterprize Asteroid, when I came back with a load of ore from the meteor swarms.

He looked at me with that funny curve on his lips, that might have been called a smile, and said, "Hi, Chet," as casually as though we'd seen each other within the last twenty-four hours. . . . "Queer laws they got in the Space Code, eh? The one that insists on the posting of casualty lists, for instance. You'd think the Haynes Company would like to keep such things dark,"

I didn't say anything for a moment, as my eyes went down those narrow, typed columns on the bulletin board: Joe Tiffany—dead—space armor defect. . . . Hermann Schmidt and Lan Harool—missing—vicinity of Pallas. . . . Irvin Davidson—hospitalized—space blindness. . . .

There was a score of names of men I didn't know, in that space-blindness column. And beneath, there was a much longer line of common Earth-born and Martian John-Henrys, with the laconic tag added at the top—*hospitalized—mental*. Ditto marks saved the trouble of retyping the tag itself, after each name.

One name caught my eye.

Ted Bradley was listed there. Ted Bradley from St. Louis, my and Nick Mavrocordatus' home town. It gave me a little jolt, and a momentary lump somewhere under my Adam's Apple. I knew the state Bradley would be in. Not a man any more—no longer keen and sure of himself. A year out here among the asteroids had changed all that forever.

Shoving from one drifting, meteoric lump to another, in a tiny space boat.

Chipping at those huge, grey masses with a test hammer that makes no sound in the voidal vacuum. Crawling over jagged surfaces, looking for ores of radium and tantalum and carium—stuff fabulously costly enough to be worth collecting, for shipment back to the industries of Earth, at fabulous freight rates, on rocket craft whose pay-load is so small, and where every gram of mass is at premium.

No, Ted Bradley would never be himself again. Like so many others. It was an old story. The almost complete lack of gravity, out here among the asteroids, had disturbed his nerve-centers, while cosmic rays seeped through his leaded helmet, slowly damaging his brain.

There was more to it than the airlessness, and absence of weight, and the cosmic rays. There was the utter silence, and the steady stars, and the blackness between them, and the blackness of the shadows, like the fangs of devils in the blazing sunshine. All of this was harder than the soul of any living being.

And on top of all this, there was usually defeat and shattered hope. Not many futures were made among the asteroids by those who dug for their living. Prices of things brought from Earth in fragile, costly space craft were too high. Moments of freedom and company were too rare, and so, hard-won wealth ran like water.

Ted Bradley was gone from us. Call him a corpse, really. In the hospital here on Enterprize, he was either a raving maniac, or else—almost worse—he was like a little child, crooning over the wonder of his fingers.

It got me for a second. But then I shrugged. I'd been out here two years.



"Cracking up, eh, Wallace?" Norman Haynes sneered.

An old timer. I knew how empires were built. I knew, better than most, how to get along out here. Be fatalistic and casual. Don't worry. Don't plan too much. That way I'd stayed right-side-up. I'd even had quite a lot of fun, being an adventurer, against that gigantic, awesome background of the void.

I didn't consider my thoughts about Ted Bradley worth mentioning to Nick Mavrocordatus. He was probably thinking

about Ted, too, and that was enough.

"Come on, Nick," I said. "They've got my ore weighed and analyzed for content in the hopper rooms. I'm going into the pay-office and get my dough. Then we might shove off to the Iridium Circle, or some other joint, and have us a time, huh?"

Nick laughed, then, good-naturedly, triumphantly. I gave him a sharp glance, noticing that under his faintly bitter

air, there seemed to be something big. Some idea that gripped him, confused him, thrilled him. His small, knotty body was taut with it; his dark eyes, under the curly black hair that straggled down his forehead, glowed with a far-away look.

Of course, he was still very young—only twenty-two, which to me, at twenty-five, with a six-months edge of asteroid-lore beyond his year and a half of experience, made me feel old and disillusioned and practical, by comparison.

"All right, Chet," he said at last. "Let's get your money. Celebrations are in order—on me, though. But I guess we'd better soft-pedal them some. I've got a lot to tell you, and more to do."

I didn't give his words proper attention, just then. I swaggered into the pay office, where a couple of stenogs clicked typewriters, and where Norman Haynes, acting head of the Haynes Shipping Company, sat at his desk, under the painted portrait of his uncle, that grizzled old veteran, Art Haynes, who had retired years ago, and who now lived on Earth.

I knew old Art only by reputation. But that was enough to arouse my deep respect. Between nephew and uncle there was a difference as great as between night and day. The one, the founder, unafraid to dirty his hands and face death, and build for the future. Tough, yes, but square, and willing to pay bonuses to miners even while he'd been struggling to expand his company, and open up vast, new space trails. The other, an arm-chair director, holding on tight, now, to an asteroid empire, legally free of his control, but whose full resources came eventually into his hands at the expense of others, because he controlled the fragile, difficult supply lines.

At sight of me, Norman Haynes arose from his chair. He was very tall, and he wore an immaculate business suit. He was smooth-shaven, with a neat haircut, in contrast to my shaggy locks and bristles. Across his face spread a smile of greeting as broad as it was false.

"Well—Chet Wallace?" he said. "You've done some marvelous meteor mining, this trip: Nineteen hundred dollars' worth of radium-actinium ore! Splendid! Maybe you'll do even better next time!"

YEAH! I'd seen and heard Norman Haynes act and talk like this before. He handed out the same line to all of the miners. To me it was forever irritating. Always I'd wanted to turn that long nose of his back against his right ear. He and his words were both phony. Always he used a condescending tone. And I felt that he was a bloodsucker. My anger was further increased, now, because of Ted Bradley.

I guess I sneered. "Don't worry about those nineteen hundred dollars, Mr. Haynes," I said. "When I buy grub, and a few things I need, and have a little blow, you'll have the money all back."

Beside the office railing there was a machine—a cigarette vendor. Into a roller system at its top, I inserted two five-dollar bills from my pay. There was a faint whir as the robot photographic apparatus checked the denominations of the notes, and proved their authenticity. Two packs of cigarettes slipped down into the receiver arrangement.

"Five bucks apiece, Haynes," I said. "At a fair shipping rate, cigarettes brought out from Earth aren't worth much more than three bucks. But you're just a dirty chiseller, not satisfied with a fair profit. Costs here in the asteroids are naturally plenty steep; but you make a bad situation worse by charging at least twenty-five per-cent more than's reasonable! A Venutian stink-louse is more of a gentleman than you are, Haynes!"

Oh, there was a Satanic satisfaction in feeling the snarl in my throat, and seeing Haynes' face go purplish red, and then white with surprise and fury. Some other space men had entered the pay office, and they hid their grins of pleasure behind calloused palms.

First I thought Norman Haynes would swing at me. But he didn't. He lacked that kind of nerve. He began to sputter and curse under his breath, and I thought of a snake hissing. I felt the danger of it, though—danger that broods and plans, and doesn't come out into the open, but waits its chance to strike. Knowing that it was there, sizzling in Haynes' mind, gave me a thrill.

Casually I tossed one of the packs of cigarettes to Nick Mavrocordatus, who had come with me into the pay office. He

gave me a nudge, which meant we'd better scam. When we were out of the building, he held me off from going to any of the few tawdry saloons there under the small, glassed-in airdome of Enterprise City, the one shabby scrap of civilization and excuse for comfort.

"No drinks now, Chet," Nick whispered. "Can't chance it. Got to keep on our toes. In one way I'm glad you talked down to that—whatever you want to call him. But you've made us the worst possible enemy we could have—now."

I shrugged. "What were you gonna tell me before, Nick?" I demanded. "I gathered you had something plenty big in view."

He answered me so abruptly that I didn't quite believe my ears at first. "Pa and Sis and Geedeh and I, have made good, Chet," he said. "We found—not just pickings—but a real fortune in ore, on planetoid 439. So rich is the deposit that we could buy our own smelting and purifying machinery, and hire ships under our own control, to take the refined metals back to Earth!"

"You're kidding, Nick," I said amazedly. "Not a bit of it," he returned.

THEN I was pumping his hand, congratulating him. Really good luck was a phenomenon among the asteroids. That friends of mine, among the thousands of hopeful ones that I didn't know, should grab the jack-pot, seemed almost impossible.

"I suppose you'll all be leaving us soon," I told him. "Going back to Earth, living the lives of millionaires. I'm glad for you all, kid. Your Pa can raise his flowers and grapes, instead of starting up in the truck-garden business again. Your sis, Irene, can study her painting and her music, like she wants to."

Anybody can see the way my thoughts were going just then. When you start out green for the Minor Planets, that's part of what's in your mind, first—get rich, come back to Earth.

Nick sighed heavily as we walked along. That funny smile was on his lips again. He glanced around, and the emerald light of the illuminators was on his young face.

Then he said, "I don't think it's quite

safe to talk here, Chet. Better come to our old space jalopy, the *Corfu*."

The *Corfu* was on the ways outside the dome. We put on space suits to reach it. Inside, the old crate smelled of cooking odors, some of them maybe accumulated over the eighteen months the Mavrocordatuses had been asteroid mining. Old ships are hard to ventilate, with their imperfect air-purifiers.

The instruments in the control room, were battered and patched; and from the living quarters to the rear, issued a duet of snores—one throaty and rattly, Pa Mavrocordatus' beyond doubt; and the other an intermittent hiss, originating unquestionably in the dust-filtering hairs in the larynx of Geedeh, the little Martian scientist, whom Nick had befriended.

"I can't figure you out, Nick," I said. "Rich, and not leaving this hell-hole of space. You're an idiot."

"So are you, Chet," he returned knowingly. "In my place, you wouldn't go either—at least not without regrets. In spite of all hell, there's something big here in space that gets you. You feel like nothing, yourself. But you feel that you're part of something terribly huge and terribly important. You'd be happy on Earth for a week; then you'd begin to smother inside. The Minor Planets have become our home. Chet. It's too late to break the ties."

Slowly it soaked into my mind that Nick was right.

"Not to say anything bad against old Mother Earth, Chet," he continued. "Far from it! That's just what's needed out here—a little touch of our native scene. Growing things. A piece of blue sky, maybe. Enough gravity to make a man believe in solid ground again.

Right then I began to smell Nick's plan, not only what it was, but all the impractical dreamer part of it.

I began to grin, but there was a kind of sadness in me, too. "Sure! Sure, Nick!" I chided. "The idea's as old as the hills! Rejuvenate some asteroid. Bring in soil and water and air from Earth. Install a big gravity-generating unit. Ha! Have you any idea how many ships it would take to bring those thousands and thousands of tons of stuff out here—even to get started?"

I WAS talking loud. My voice was booming through the rusty hull of the *Corfu*, making ringing echoes. So just about as I finished, they were all around me. Pa Mavrocordatus, in pajamas and ragged dressing gown, his handle-bar moustaches bristling. Geedeh, the tiny Martian, draped in a checkered Earthly blanket, his great eyes blinking, and his tiny fingers, with fleshy knobs at their ends instead of nails, twiddling nervously near the center of his barrel-chest. And Irene, too, standing straight and defiant and little, in her blue smock.

Irene hadn't been sleeping. Probably she'd been washing dishes, and straightening up the galley after supper. She still had a dish towel in her hands. Wealth hadn't altered the Mavrocordatus' mode of life, yet. Irene looked like a bold little kewpie, her dark head of tousled, curly hair, not up to my shoulder. She was exquisitely pretty; but now she was somewhat irritated.

She shook a finger up at me, angrily. "You think Nick has a dumb idea, eh, Chet Wallace?" she accused. "That's only because you don't know what you're talking about! We won't have to bring a drop of water, or a molecule of air or soil, out from Earth! You ask Geedeh!"

I turned toward the little Martian. The dark pupil-slits, and the yellow irises of his huge eyes, covered me. "Irene has spoke the truth, Chet," he told me in his slow, labored English. "The Asteroid Belt, the many hundreds of fragments that compose it, are the remains of a planet that exploded. So there is soil on many of the asteroids. Dried out—yes—after most of the water and air disappeared into space, following the catastrophe. But the soil can still be useful. And there is still water, not in free, liquid form, but combined in ancient rock strata; gypsum, especially. It is like on Mars, when the atmosphere began to get too thin for us to breathe, and the water very scarce on the dusty deserts.

I said nothing, wished I had kept silent.

"We roasted gypsum in atomic furnaces," Geedah finished, "driving the water out as steam, and reclaiming it for our underground cities. The same can be done here among the Minor Planets. And since water is hydrogen oxide, oxygen can be

obtained from it, too, by electrolysis. Nitrogen and carbon dioxide, necessary to complete the new atmosphere, which will be prevented from leaking into space by the force of the artificial gravity, can be obtained from native nitrates, and other compounds. Only vital parts of the machinery need be brought out from Earth and Mars by rocket. The rest can be made here, from native materials."

Geedeh's voice, as he spoke to me, was a soft, sibilant whisper, like the rustle of red dust in a cold, thin, Martian wind.

"You bet " Pa Mavrocordatus enthused.

"Nick's got a good idea. I'm gonna raise my flowers! I'm gonna raise tomatoes and cabbages and carrots, right here on one of them asteroids!"

It struck me as funny—asteroids—cabbages! Nothing I could think of, could seem quite that far apart. Black, airless vacuum, rough rocks, and raw, spacial sunshine! And things from a truck garden! It didn't match. But then, Pa Mavrocordatus didn't match the asteroids either! He'd had a truck garden once, outside of St. Louis. And yet he was out here in space, and had been for a year and a half!

Well, even if the idea *was* practical, I thought first that they were still just dreaming—kidding themselves that it would be a cinch to accomplish. And not being able to fight through.

Then I glanced back at Nick. That look on his face was there again. A strange mixture of confidence, worry, grimness, and vision. It came to me then that he was no kid at all.

"LET me in on the job?" I asked hopefully.

"Sure!" Nick returned. "We wouldn't be telling you all this, if we didn't want you. That's why we came back to Enterprise—hoping to find you around some place."

So I was in. Part of a wild scheme of progress—more thrilling and inspiring because it seemed so wild. An asteroid made into a tiny, artificial Earth! A boon to void-weary space men! A source of cheap food supplies, as well as a place to rest up. A new stage of colonization—empire building!

And then I thought I heard a sound—a faint clinking outside of the hull of the

Corfu. At once, I was alert—taut. Maybe half of my sudden worry was intuition, or a form of telepathy. When you've been out in deep space, a million miles away from any other living soul, you feel a vast, hollow loneliness, that perhaps is mostly the absence of human telepathy waves from other minds. But when you have people around you once more, your sixth sense seems keener for the period of lack. That was why I was sure of an eavesdropper, sensing his presence. With proper sub-microphonic equipment, a man outside a space ship can hear every word spoken inside.

Nick felt it too. "But we'd better look and see," he whispered. "Norman Haynes keeps spies around. And he may have heard rumors. You can't keep a project like ours secret very long. It's too big."

My pulses jumped with fear, as I piled into my space suit. But when Nick and I got through the airlock together, there was nobody in sight. Only some footprints in the faint rocket dust of the ways, covering our own footprints, where we'd passed before, coming to the *Corfu*. Our flashlights showed them plainly.

"Having a rejuvenated asteroid in these parts, producing fresh food and so forth, would take a lot of trade away from the Haynes Shipping Company, wouldn't it?" I said when we were back in the cabin once more. "Norman Haynes wouldn't be practically boss of the Minor Planets anymore, would he? He wouldn't like that. He'll fight us."

"We need you, Chet," Irene said, her eyes appealing. That was enough for me.

"We'd better blast off right away," Nick added. "We're going to asteroid 487, Chet. It's new name is Paradise. It's the one we've picked."

II

ASTEROID 487 was the usual thing. A torn, jagged, airless fragment. It was no paradise yet, unless it was a paradise of devils. Nick had a thousand men hired—space roustabouts, and a lot of mechanics and technicians, mostly fresh from Earth. Sure, it's hard handling a bunch like that, but there was nothing in this difficulty that we didn't know was part of the job. Some of our outfit gave us horse-

laughs, but they worked. The pay was good.

The ships came through with the packed loads of machinery. Atomic forges blazed, purifying native meteoric iron to complete the vast gravity-generating machine, sunk in a shaft at the center of the planetoid, ten miles down. Geedeh directed most of the work. Nick and I saw that orders were carried out, swearing, sweating, and making speeches intended to inspire.

And then the trouble started.

A rocket, bringing in food, and money to pay our crews, blew up in space, just as it was coming close. The light of the blast was blinding and awesome, making even the bright stars seem to vanish for a moment. Atomic rocket fuel going up. Gobs of molten metal dripped groundward, like real meteors heated in an atmosphere which still didn't exist.

It could have been an accident. You can't always control titanic atomic power, and space ships fly to pieces quite frequently. But then I had a suspicion that maybe this wasn't an accident.

Nick and I were in the open plain to see it happen. He'd just come from the air-tight barracks we'd built. His face didn't change much behind the quartz crystal of his oxygen helmet—it only sobered a trifle. While the fiery wreckage of the rocket was still falling in shreds and fragments, he spoke, his voice clicking in my receptor phones:

"Yeah, Chet. . . . And there's trouble on asteroid 439, too, where our mines are located. I just got the radio message, back at the office. Sabotage, and some men killed. It seems that some of the workmen are trying to break things up for us. Harley's in charge. I think he can handle matters—for a while."

"I hope so," I answered fervently. "If the work only turns out right at this end. With that ship smashed, we'll be on short rations for a week. And we've lost some important machinery. The pay money's insured, but the men won't like the delay."

I didn't expect much trouble from the crew—yet. It was Irene that really helped the most—mastered the situation. She'd taken over the management of the kitchens since the start of the work.

But now she had an additional job. She talked to that rough crew of ours. "We're

going to win, boys!" she told them. "We know what we've got to do: Our task is for the good of every one of us—and for many people yet to come!"

Simple, straightforward, inspiring talk. Funny what men will do for a pretty girl—against hell itself. But that wasn't all of it. The paintings of hers, that she'd hung in our recreation room, showed what asteroid 487 *could* be, when we were finished with it.

Space men are the toughest kind of adventurers that ever lived. But adventurers are always optimists, sentimentalists, romanticists, no matter how hard the exterior. And space men, by the very nature of the appalling region to which they belong, believe in miracles.

THEY cheered the thought—most of those tough men. I cheered, too. But the miracle hadn't happened yet, and in the back of my mind, there was always the fear that it wouldn't happen. Those crags were still bleak and star-washed. Deader than any tomb! It wasn't an impossible wonder—technically—to change all this. But perhaps it was impossible, anyway—because of Norman Haynes! He was the only person who had the power and the reason to stop all that we were attempting. The sabotage and killings must be incited by him—certain members of our crews must be in his hire. Quite probably the rocket that had blown up had been secretly mined with explosive, under his orders, too.

But there is nothing harder to fight than those subtle methods. We had no proof, and no easy means of getting it. We could only go on with our task. Geedeh and the rest of us worked hopefully. One segment of asteroid 487, had been part of the surface of that old world that had exploded. From here we spread the dry soil over the planetoid's jagged terrain, drawing it in atom trucks. More soil was brought in from other asteroids. The great rock-roasting furnaces were put up. Gypsum was heated in them, releasing its water in great clouds of steam, which the artificial gravity kept from drifting off into space. Some of the water, under electrolysis, yielded oxygen. Nitrogen came from nitrates.

Our gravity machine needed readjustments now and then. To a large extent,

the thousands of parts that composed it were electrical. Great coils converted magnetic force into gravitation.

One ship reached us all right, bringing seeds and food. Another didn't. It blew up in space, the second to go. Then somebody tried to get Geedeh, the Martian, with a heat ray. Another food ship failed to arrive.

Then Norman Haynes came to visit us. He landed before he had a chance to refuse to receive him. He had a body-guard of a dozen men. He was our enemy, but we couldn't prove it. He seemed to have forgotten the little brush between himself and me, at his office.

"Splendid layout you've got, Wallace and Mavrocordatus!" he said to Nick and me, pronouncing Nick's name perfectly. He sounded very much like his usual self. "Of course there's bound to be difficulties. Trouble with crews, and so on. It's hard to get people to believe in a project as fantastic as this. I didn't quite believe in it, either, at first. But the facts are proved, now that the groundwork is laid. You'll need help, fellows. I can give it to you."

He was smiling, but under the smile I could see a snaky smirk, which probably he didn't know showed. I felt fury rising inside me. He was trying to get control of our project, now that he saw for sure that it could amount to something. Competition he feared, but if he had control he could enforce his high prices, keep his empire, and expand his wealth by millions of dollars. His dirty work must have been partly an attempt to force the issue.

"Thanks," Nick told him quietly. "But we prefer to do everything alone."

Our visitor shrugged, standing there at the door of his space boat. "Okay," he breezed. "Get in touch with me, if you feel you need me!"

Some hours later, a radiogram came through from Earth. "*Congratulations!*" it read. "*Stick to your guns! I like people with imagination. Maybe I'll be back in harness soon myself.—Art Haynes.*"

HE'S probably just being sarcastic," I said bitterly.

"Old devil!" Pa Mavrocordatus growled.

Two men were killed just thirty minutes after the message was received. A little thin-faced fellow named Sparr did it, But

he got away in a space boat before we could catch him. A paid killer and trouble maker.

The incident put our crew more on edge than before. A half dozen of the newcomers—mechanics from Earth—quit abruptly. Our food was almost gone. We got another shipload in, but the growing unrest didn't abate, though we kept on for another month. There was similar trouble on 439, where the Mavrocordatus money came from. But maybe we'd make the grade, anyway.

We had a pretty dense atmosphere already, on Paradise Asteroid. The black sky had turned blue now. The ground was moist with water. Earthly buildings were going up. Pa Mavrocordatus had had seeds and small trees and things planted. It was that deceptive moment of success, before the real blow came.

After sunset one night, I heard shots. I raced out of the barracks, Geedeh, Irene, and Pa Mavrocordatus following me. We all carried blast tubes.

We found Nick in a gorge, his body half burned through, just above his right hip. But he was still alive. He had a blast tube in one hand. Two men lay on the rocks and earth in front of him, dead. Beside them, glinting in our flashlight beams, was an aluminum cylinder.

"It's a bacteria culture container, Chet," Nick whispered. "They had me caught, and they bragged a little before I did some fast moving, and got one of their blast tubes. Venutian Black-Rot germs. They were going to dump them in the drinking water supply. They mentioned—Haynes. . . ."

Nick couldn't say much more than that. But he'd saved our lives. He died there in my arms, a hero to progress, a little breeze in the new atmosphere he'd helped to create rumpling his curly hair. He'd died for his dream of beauty and betterment.

Poor little Irene couldn't even cry. Her face was white, and she was stricken mute. Her pa was shaken by great sobs, and he babbled threats. I told him to shut up. Geedeh cursed in his own language, his voice a soft, deadly hiss, his little fists clenching and unclenching.

"Too bad Nick had to kill these men!" I growled. "We could have made 'em talk.

We'd have evidence. The law would take care of Norman Haynes!"

"But we ain't got nothing!" Pa Mavrocordatus groaned. "Nothing!"

Geedeh's face was twisted into a Martian snarl of hate. Irene stared, as though she were somewhere far away. I tried putting my arm around her, to bring her back to us. It was a minute before she seemed to realize I was there.

"Irene," I said. "I love you. We all love you. Buck up, kid. We can't quit now—ever! We'd be letting Nick down."

She just nodded. She couldn't talk.

A COUPLE of hours later I was meeting our workers in our office. Most of them tried to be decent about it. "We'd like to stick, Wallace. But how can we? Nothing to eat. . . ." That was what most of them said, in one way or another.

And how could I answer them?

Some were not so regretful, of course. Some were downright ugly. A little crazy with space perhaps, or else hopped up with propaganda that secret agents in Haynes' hire had been spreading among them.

"Why should we work for you anyway?" they snarled. "Even for good money, most of which we haven't collected? You're probably like what we're used to. Just fixing up another place here, to clip us in the end, charging us prices sky high. Your 'Paradise' is just a little fancier, that's all."

So they turned away, and the exodus began. The freight ships blasted off, one by one, with loads of men. We couldn't stop them. And soon the silence closed in. We were left alone to bury Nick. The small sun was bright on the rough pinnacles, and their naked grey stone was bluely murky in the new air. There was a humid warmth of summer around us.

Just then, I didn't even feel exactly angry, in the blackness of failure, Norman Haynes had won, so far. What would be his next step in completing our final defeat?

I spent some time in the office, going over records. Presently Pa Mavrocordatus came rushing from the barracks. His whole fat body sagged, as he paused before me. His face was like paste. He didn't seem quite alive.

"Irene," he croaked. "She's gone . . . too. . . ."

I ran with him to her quarters. There was some disorder. A picture of her mother was tipped over on a little metal dressing table. A rug was rumpled, and there was some clothing scattered on the floor. That was all.

Geedeh had entered her quarters, too. "Kidnapped," he hissed.

What Haynes meant to accomplish by having his agents, carry off Irene, I couldn't imagine. The hate I felt blurred all but the thought of getting her back to safety. The urge was like a dagger-point, sharp and clear in the chaos of memories. I knew how much she meant to me now.

"I need a rocket," I said quietly. "The fastest we've got. I want to radio the Space Patrol, too."

"There are no ships left here," Geedeh returned. "The men took them all, except a little flier, which they meant us to have. But somebody has smashed it. Our big radio transmitter is smashed, also."

A minute later I was clawing in the wreckage of tubes and wires, there in the radio room. The apparatus was completely beyond repair. For the time being we were helpless, stranded on our asteroid. For a moment I felt little shouts of madness shrieking in my brain. But Geedeh's stabbing glance warned me that this was not the way. I fought back, out of that flash of mania.

"We'd better break out all of our weapons, Geedeh," I said. "Haynes has gone too deep to back out now. He's in danger of the Patrol if we talk, so he'll have to strike at us soon."

Thus we prepared ourselves as well as we could, for attack. Geedeh, Pa Mavrocordatus, and I. We equipped ourselves with our best armament—atomic rifles. Pa Mavrocordatus had gotten over most of his confusion. He was still sick with grief, but necessity seemed to have steadied him. He clutched his rifle grimly as we took up positions behind rock masses at the edge of the landing field.

III

WE waited silently. The asteroid turned on its axis. The brief night came. Then we saw the rockets approaching—flaming in on shreds of blue-white rocket fire. As the two ships slowed for a

landing, the three of us discharged a volley.

Our atomic bullets burst on impact, dazzling in the dark. The concussion was terrific.

"Got one!" I heard Pa Mavrocordatus shout after a moment, his voice thin through the ringing in my ears. My dazzled eyes saw one ship lying on its side on the landing field, its meteor armor unpunctured by our small missiles, but with its landing rockets damaged. The other ship had grounded itself perfectly.

We were ready to fire again, when the paralytic waves swept over us. I saw Geedeh half rise, doubling backward in a rigid spasm, his rifle flying wide.

Then I knew no more, until I heard Norman Haynes speaking to us. We were bound firmly, and it was daylight again, and our captor and his score of henchmen were smirking.

"I'm just trying to figure out how to make your deaths seem as accidental as possible," Haynes said, looking at me. "A couple of men of mine seem to have bungled a little business of bacteria. Maybe they blabbed before you fellows killed them. Now, of course, I can't take any chances. Too bad your reconditioned asteroid has to appear a failure for a while. But I can't let my taking over seem too obvious. Have to wait a while. I may be able to start up something here later, when people sort of forget."

"What have you done with Irene?" I stormed blackly.

Haynes' look was quizzical. "Why ask me?" he answered. "She probably ran off with one of your roustabouts. Or else they decided that she'd be nice company to have around, and made her go along."

He laughed cynically. Maybe he was telling the truth about not knowing where Irene was. But if this was true, it didn't make me feel much better. If some of his gang, who'd been working with us, had kidnapped her, there was no telling how badly she'd fare.

My fears showed on my face, and Norman Haynes seemed to enjoy them, though he was nervous, dangerously so. It was getting daylight again, now. He kept glancing at the sky, twiddling his soft hands. He didn't like physical danger.

"Your gravity generator seems to be the answer to my prayers, Wallace," he in-

formed me. "At full force it'll develop at least fifty Earth gravities, before breaking down and melting itself. We've inspected it. Power like that'll destroy all of you. It will look like an accident—a breakdown of the machinery."

Though Pa Mavrocordatus kept cursing Haynes continuously, and Geedeh kept calling him names that no Earthman could have translated into our less vitriolic English, our captor paid them no attention. He kept directing his threats at me. That was how I knew he was still thinking of the time in his office at Enterprize, when I'd called him by his true colors. He still held that grudge, and he meant to pay me back with fifty gravities. Which means that every pound of Earth-weight would be increased to fifty pounds! In a grip like that a man as big as me would weigh a good four tons!

That meant a heart stopped by the load of the blood it tried to pump, and tissues crushed by their own weight! Like being on the surface of some dead star of medium dimensions, where gravity is terrific!

AT Haynes' order, six of his twenty henchmen picked up Geedeh and Pa and me. The whole bunch was an ugly looking lot, the scum of the space ports. Some of these men were commanded to stay on the surface of the planetoid, while we were carried to the elevator shed. In the cage we descended at dizzying speed to that vault at the center of 487 where the gravity machinery was housed in its crystal shell. At that depth, under the load of the column of air above, the atmospheric pressure was very high. One could not breathe comfortably in that stuffy medium.

"Courage!" Geedah gasped to Pa Mavrocordatus and me, while his great eyes kept roving around, looking for some chance that wasn't there.

Haynes began to examine the machinery. He was smirking again. "Simple to do!" he said to his companions. Set the robot control for gradually increasing power, so that we'll have time to get away. Break the manual controls, so that no readjustments can be made. You can cut our friends loose now, Zinder, so there won't be any ropes to show this was a put-up job. But keep your blasters on these men—all of you!"

This was the end, all right. I was sure of it. I'd die without even knowing what had happened to Irene. Irene, whom I knew now that I loved. . . .

We'd been freed of our bonds when the surface phone rang. The lookout party, whom Haynes had left above, was calling. Our captor snapped on the switch of the speaker. A voice boomed in that busy cavern of metal giants, green light, and glinting crystal:

"Listen, Chief! There's a bunch of specks to the right of the sun. They're getting bigger fast. Must be a flock of space ships. Couldn't be any of yours. What'll we do?"

I saw Haynes' weak features go sallow. Briefly my spirits rose. I couldn't imagine whom those ships could belong to. But they must be rescuers of some kind. They were coming to stop Norman Haynes' madness.

But Haynes was clever, as he quickly proved. "Friends of Wallace here, I suppose. Maybe even Space Patrol boats," he said over his phone to the lookout party. "You'll all have to take a discomfort for a while. We'll use gravity on them, too! They'll never land successfully."

Pa Mavrocordatus looked at me and Geedeh. "What's he mean—use gravity?"

Geedeh was a bit quicker than I in giving the obvious answer. "Just as with us," he said. "Increase the output of the gravity generator here to a certain degree. From space, the increase will be practically unnoticeable. The rockets will try to land—but without taking into consideration the multiplied attractive force, they will crash!"

"Many birds with one stone!" Haynes chuckled gleefully. "You will have a short reprieve, friends, while I take care of these intruders, whoever they are. I can't use too great a gravity on them at first. It might warn them, if they notice that their ships are accelerating too rapidly. They might as well be part of my 'accident', even if they do happen to be police. The Space Patrol has accidents now and then, just like anybody else!"

Haynes started to work the manual controls of the generator. The area in which he and his several aides stood, was shielded against the greater attraction, having been thus arranged by us for test-

ing purposes. The shrill hum of the machines grew louder.

I felt the weight of my prone body increase suffocatingly. The heat increased too, as the great coils, gleaming in the glow of illuminators, gradually absorbed more power. And I knew that, out in space, those slender fingers of force were reaching and strengthening, invisible and treacherous. Our unknown friends were doomed.

Not only were they doomed, but our whole idea was destined to failure. The dream that Nick had died for. The vast progress that it meant. Worlds out here—worlds with largely a self-sufficient production—real colonization. Fair play. Norman Haynes would resist all that, because progress would weaken his power here. He was master of the asteroids, because he was master of their imports and exports. And unless he could control the rejuvenated asteroids himself, they would never be. With him directing, they would not represent a real improvement—only another means of robbing from the colonists. And colonists weren't rich.

I could see those same thoughts, that gouged savagely into my own brain, burning in Geedeh's cat eyes, where he sprawled near me. Being a Martian, born to a lesser gravity than the terrestrial, he was suffering more than I—physically. But perhaps my mental torture was worse. Geedeh was Irene's friend, but I loved her. She was gone—lost somewhere—maybe dead. That, for me, was the worst—much worse than that crushing weight.

I couldn't let things remain the way they were! My seething fury and need lashed me on, even in my helplessness. God—what could I do? I tried to figure something out. Could I break the gravity machinery some way? Impossible, now, certainly!

I tried to remember my high school physics. Principles that might be used to give warning signals, and so forth. And just what that awful gravity would do to things.

Close to me was the base of the domelike crystal shell that covered the gravity generator. It wasn't a vital part, certainly, just stout quartz. But it was the only thing I could reach. As I lay there on the floor, I drew my foot back, doubling my knee.

I stamped down against the quartz with all my strength. The first blow cracked it. The second drove my metal-shod boot-heel through with a crashing sound. A small hole, eighteen inches long, was made in the barrier. The sounds of the great machinery went on as before. The gravity kept slowly increasing. Geedeh, suffering more, now, looked at me puzzledly. Pa Mavrocordatus stared anxiously. And Norman Haynes at the surface phone laughed unpleasantly.

"Cracking up, eh, Wallace?" he sneered. "I know who your would-be helpers on those space ships are, now. I suppose I should be surprised at their identities. They're calling to you. Want to listen? My men above have looked this surface phone to our ship radio."

He turned up the volume of the reproducer.

Irene's voice was the first in the speaker. "Chet!" she was urging. "Chet Wallace! Pa! Geedeh! Do you hear me? I left 487 of my own free will. I couldn't waste time, going to the Space Patrol for help—they'd want proof, and that would take a while to present. So—there was only one person and I thought you'd mistrust him. . . . Why don't you answer? Or have you left 487 too? I'm turning the mike over to somebody else, now. I found him on Enterprize, just come from Earth, Mr. Arthur Haynes. . . ."

IV

I GASPED, listening to Irene. I didn't know what surprised and confused me most—her being alive and safe, or what she'd done about old Art Haynes. Could I trust old Art? I had no way of telling. Had Irene told him about his nephew, or had she kept silent? Did he know he was opposed to Norman Haynes, or did he think it was somebody else who had sabotaged the project? Where would his loyalties be, if he found out? It was a ticklish situation.

As soon as Irene's ragged, excited breathing died away in the speaker, Norman Haynes took it upon himself to clarify his own stand, and my uncertainties. He looked at Geedeh and Pa and me, tense and suffering in the grip of the gravity, and tortured with doubt.

"Uncle Art is an old fool," he said. "So he thinks he'll come back to the asteroids, and replace me in the business, does he? Well, he should have died long ago, and now is as good a time as any! He might as well be part of the accident, too, along with those space bums of yours. Nobody'll ever know!"

It was tragic that old Art couldn't have heard that. But his nephew wasn't broadcasting. He was just listening quietly. And now his uncle's voice was coming through:

"We're blasting in to land, Wallace, if you're listening. There won't be any more trouble, now. I'll see to that! We'll find out who's back of this sabotage. We'll put an end to it!"

For me it was bitter, black irony—old Art proving himself our friend, now! He didn't know his enemy. He was nearly ninety—a grim old fighter, with real vision. Irene too, who meant everything to me. She didn't know that with the intensified gravity those incoming ships would be smashed and blazing!

My mind was growing a bit dim in the strangling pressure of the artificial gravitation. Sweat was streaming from me in the smothering heat that added to the oppressiveness of the heavy air. Pa Mavrocordatus was groaning the name of his daughter. Geedeh's great eyes were fixed on me in helpless suffering.

Through the shrill sounds of the engines I listened for more words from Irene and old Art. But none came. They must know their doom by now. They must be fighting savagely and hopelessly to get away. Still some distance from 487, they were already caught, deep in the web of invisible force.

After some moments, I heard a distant crash, a roll of sound. What was it? A huge rocket, hitting the jagged crags above, at meteoric speed? Crumpling, destroying itself and those inside it? I thought my heart would burst with the added weight of my anxiety.

The first crash was only the beginning. Others followed in quick succession—inexorably. And there was a faint, far-off roar, coming down from ten miles above.

And that roar was the roar of titanic rain. Of floods of water coming down this shaft, where the gravity machine was! All

the countless tons of water that we'd baked from ancient rocks, and which had been mostly suspended as vapor in our synthetic atmosphere, was condensing now, coming down in torrents!

NORMAN HAYNES kept grinning satanically, while he and his aides attended to the gravity machine. Triumph showed in his eyes. But presently he began to look puzzled, as that souging roar that accompanied the crashing din, increased. It was a little early for the space ships to be smashing up, anyway.

I could feel a grim smile coming over my lips, against my will. Had my guesses and hopes, which had seemed so unsubstantial, been correct? Norman Haynes was glancing doubtfully at the reproducer. I could see that he was wondering why his surface watchers didn't communicate any more—and tell him what was happening up there on the crust of 487.

I knew the answers, now! Geedeh did, too. The excitement of knowledge was in his withered, pain-wracked face. Those distant crashes were not what I'd feared they might be, but part of what I'd hoped for. They were gigantic thunder-claps—the noise of terrific lightning bolts! Norman Haynes had made a simple oversight in his plan to destroy those incoming space craft. There was a fearsome electrical storm going on above—one of inconceivable proportions—utterly beyond the Earthly! Doubtless all of Norman Haynes' surface watchers, up above, had been killed by that sudden deluge of electricity! The multiplied gravitation up there, had pinned them down, so that they could neither escape, nor warn their chief!

Before Norman Haynes understood what was happening, foam-flecked muddy water was at the door of the machinery room, rushing and gurgling past the threshold! He and his helpers stared at it stupidly, and I laughed at them.

"You didn't realize it, did you, Haynes?" I grunted. "You didn't realize that increased gravity would increase the weight of the atmosphere, as well as of everything else! And increased weight of the air, means increased atmospheric pressure, too, pushing molecules together, creating greater density. And what happens? Go back to your high school physics, Haynes!

It's like when you store air in the tank of a compressor pump. The moisture in it liquifies. And in the case of an atmosphere as big as 487 has now, static electricity would be suddenly and violently condensed, besides."

Norman Haynes stared at me, stunned with consternation. But his recovery was fairly prompt. His sudden sneer had a rattish desperation. "Hell," he said. "Just a thunder storm. A lot of rain. What of it? The gravity machine still works. The ships will still be destroyed."

I knew that that was true—unless what I'd planned happened. Those rockets, manned by our old construction crew, and Irene, and old Art Haynes, had been too close to asteroid 487 for the last couple of minutes, to effect an escape, even if the sudden dark clouds had warned them that something dangerous was afoot.

"Watch this—Haynes," Geedeh panted, and it was hard for the acting head of the Haynes Shipping Company to guess what the little Martian meant, at first.

UNDER the pull of that terrific gravity, the water was coming into that room like an avalanche. Geedeh and Pa and I were floundering in it feebly, held to the floor by that awful weight. I was sure we'd drown. But as we coughed and sputtered, the flood found its way through the hole I'd kicked, low down in the side of the crystal dome that covered that gigantic machinery. There was a flash of electrical flame, as the water interfered with the functioning of the apparatus.

It was pandemonium, then. Every man for himself. Geedeh, the scientist, and I, who, under the force of grim need, had somehow contrived to plan this finale, had the advantage of knowledge. We'd figured out a little of what to do.

The gravity winked off suddenly—reaching the low of practically nothing, here at the center of this tiny world, whose normal attraction, even at the surface, was very small. We struggled to our feet, in a muddy swirl that was now a yard in depth. But before we could take advantage of our sudden lightness, and leap clear, the gravity machines gave a last gasp of power, and we were pulled down again, smothering. Then, with a grating roar, the apparatus stopped. The bedlam ceased, ex-

cept for a low whine of expanding atmosphere, and screams from Haynes and his men.

Presently, I felt all hell stabbing through me. My ears rang as with the after effects of some colossal explosion. My whole body ached. I clutched at Geedeh, who seemed on the point of collapse. Pa Mavrocordatus managed to help me. . . .

But strained by gravity vastly stronger than that of Mars, and now facing a circumstance even more dangerous, tough little Geedeh still had his wits, fortunately for us all. He pointed to an airtight crystal cage at one edge of the chamber. The cage was necessary in routine testing of the machinery here, which called for variations in the output of the gravity generators, and consequent great variations in air pressure.

"Inside the cage—all of us!" Geedeh squeaked. "Quickly! Bends! . . ."

Do you know what the air pressure is, at the bottom of a ten-mile shaft, even at normal Earth gravity? Yeah, something pretty high! Then you can imagine what it had just been like, here, at six or seven gravities! But when the generators had quit entirely, there had been that sudden loss of weight in the air, sudden expansion, thinning, loss of pressure!

The three of us got inside the cage, and sealed the door. I spun valves. There was a hiss of entering atmosphere, and the pressure rose again, far above the norm of sea-level, on Earth. I felt better at once, but I knew it had been a close call.

We looked out at Norman Haynes and his henchmen. They weren't drowning, now. Tottering, they stood with their heads well above the flood. It was something else that was killing them. Not suffocation, either. Their faces were bloated and congested in the glow of illuminators. Their bodies seemed to swell.

Norman Haynes raised his blast tube, as did several of the others, trying to fire at the crystal shelter where we had taken refuge. Norman Haynes must have known his failure, then. Why had it happened. How we had won. It may be that he even realized some justice in his hideous punishment. He had tried to obstruct progress and fair play.

The blast tube dropped from his fingers. He opened his mouth to shriek in his

agony. But dark blood gushed forth, and, with his henchmen, he toppled back into the water.

“**B**ENDS!” Geedeh said again. “Haynes had a worse case of bends than any deep-sea diver ever experienced.”

The flood had almost stopped, now, outside the cage. We waited. Vengeance was complete. And it wasn't quite as satisfying as I might once have thought.

Presently they were with us. Irene. And old Art—proving that the Haynes name was still great, even though one who bore it had soiled it some. We emerged from our sealed cage, after the pressure around us was gradually lowered to normal.

“I didn't think it was Norman who was guilty,” old Art breathed sadly when he spoke to us. “I knew he was high-handed, but I didn't realize it was as bad as it was. I guess Norman got what he deserved,” he finished, and there were tears in his heavy voice.

We went to the surface in the elevator. We needed space suits again, up there, with the air as expanded as it was. A lot of the atmosphere was leaking away from 487, being held down only by the tiny natural gravity. But there was nothing that couldn't be repaired and replaced.

“We must have pumps rigged to draw the water out of the vault, so that we can dry and repair the gravity machinery, and start it again,” Geedeh stated.

We started again, almost as we had done at the first, for quite a bit of the air and water had been whisked into space. We lived in space-suits for days, rebuilding and repairing the damaged machinery. Then with the aid of Art Haynes, and with extended credit now that our plans were made fully known and approved, we imported machinery to pump the water from the vault.

We hired specialists to come in, each of them with a trained crew of men to do the work that our old crews lacked the technical skill to do. Slowly, our planet of hope grew again, and there were bulletins sent through the asteroid belt that workers were wanted again on Paradise Asteroid.

The specialists left, replaced by the crews that had worked on the asteroid before. With unlimited credit, our great freighting

ships piled materials in regular formation, and the returning crews set their ships down on the landing fields, the men pouring eagerly forth, ready to set up the buildings that would be the nucleus of another Earth in space.

With our old crews returned, it took about a hundred hours to accomplish this. Asteroid 487 was almost the same as before the final trouble with Norman Haynes, now, except that the air was a little thinner. But that could be quickly taken care of. Pa Mavrocordatus was working with his vineyards and trees, and his tomato and cabbage patches, again. The big trouble was all finished, now. The dream was coming true. A little Earth, fresh and green, for tired miners of the Path of Minor Planets. Space madness could never be so common now. And cheap, fresh products would be theirs.

V

IRENE and I walked in the warm night. The crews were whooping it up in the lighted barracks. Somebody was playing a harmonica. The stars were brilliant, and there were a thousand things to think of. How we'd all struggled. How Nick Mavrocordatus, had dreamed and worked and died. How once the asteroids had been a planet, with almost human inhabitants, dreaming, planning, struggling, too. Their rock carvings were everywhere.

“It's the beginning, Chet,” Irene whispered. “Asteroid 487 is the first. But there'll be others—other small, beautiful, living planets. There's a lot of work to be done. And when it's all finished that will be almost unfortunate—too tame.”

I knew what she meant. She was pioneer stuff, just as all of us were. The greatness of life was in its battles. On and on, to vaster and vaster heights. That was what had driven us into the interplanetary void in the first place.

I kissed her. “Don't worry, Honey,” I said. “There's no end to it. No point of final stagnation. It goes on and on. There'll always be a frontier—something bigger to reach and conquer. . . .”

And we looked up in awe toward the infinite stars.