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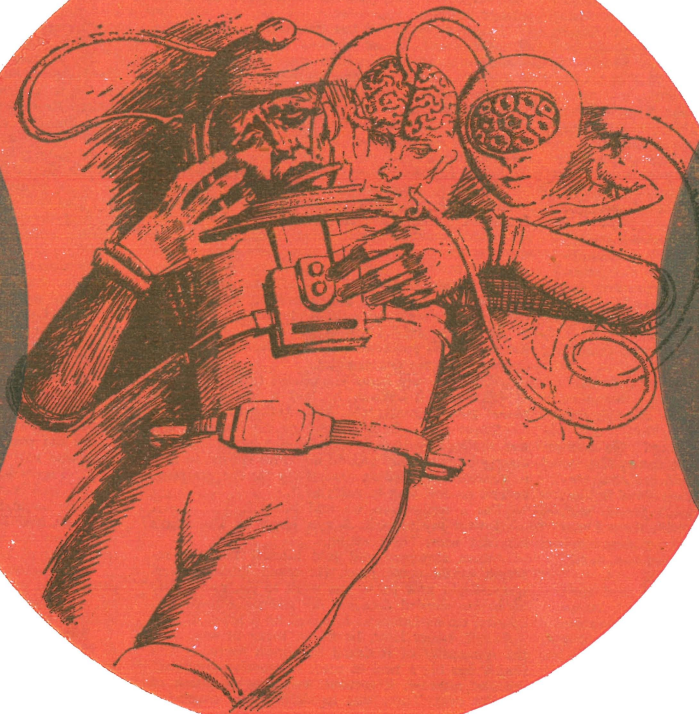
STAR WEEKLY NOVEL
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The Asteroid Stealers

■ The asteroid was just a rock, a big rock floating free in the long night of space. It had a purplish glitter to it, because John Storm was seeing it against the distant backdrop of cheerless Mars. Tiredly, Storm punched out landing co-ordinates. I'll go down and have a look, he thought. There was no point passing this one up. Even though he had been out here in the asteroid belt for a year and a half, seeking and not finding, he knew it was foolish to pass up any uncharted, unclaimed asteroid. Perhaps this one would be the ore source he wanted. Perhaps. . . . He jabbed at the keys of the ship's computer. It wasn't much of a computer, wasn't much of a ship, but he couldn't afford to be choosy. At the turn of the century the Hawthorn 113 had

been the finest thing in small spacecraft. But the century had turned 18 years ago, Hawthorn had its model 127 on the market now, and Storm knew he was lucky not to get blown to bits every time he coaxed some blast from the rattletrap rocket's elderly tubes. The asteroid glittered in his viewplate. Storm smiled grimly at it, and scratched his cheek where the stubble itched. Then he tapped the Function key, and relays clicked somewhere in the shiny nose of his ship, and impulses spurted back toward the reaction chamber, and the old Hawthorn shuddered and bucked and dipped asteroidward. As his little ship matched orbits with the floating hunk of rock, John Storm clambered into his spacesuit and readied himself for landing.

by **CALVIN M. KNOX**



Names went through his mind like a litany. Cesium, tantalum, lithium. Praseodymium and neodymium. Cesium, tantalum, lithium. Praseo—

Light metals. Reactive metals. Rare earths. An oddball bunch of ragtag elements. A few generations ago they'd been as useless as uranium was in 1875. But not any longer. They were the elements that kept the space industry going. The cesium ion-engine, powering 50 million spacecraft, for instance. How much cesium was there on Earth? Not enough to meet that hungry demand. Tantalum and niobium, for computer elements. Where do you get 500 pounds of niobium on a day's notice? You couldn't, that's all. Gallium for semiconductors? Rubidium? Lanthanum?

The whole vast complex of Earth's electronics industry was crying out for those obscure elements. Canada's great treasurehouse of reactive metals had been mined heavily since the middle of the 20th century. There was cesium in Africa, beryllium in South America, but who knew when those cock-eyed revolution would cut off the supply?

Earth needed those metals. A fortune waited for the man who found a new source.

But where? Under the Antarctic ice-shield, maybe, only Earth wasn't that desperate yet. The other place to look was space. The asteroid belt in particular.

And so a new band of '49ers went to space. They weren't looking for gold, of course. No one gave a damn about gold any more, except the jewellers and their customers. The big money was in metals.

Gallium and tantalum and cesium and lanthanum—

Hopeful prospectors went to space. John Storm was one of them.

Everybody had said he was crazy to go, of course.

He was 24, and he had a graduate degree from Appalachia Polytech, as a mining engineer. There were plenty of jobs waiting for him. Good jobs.

Donovan, the personnel man from Universal Mining, had interviewed Storm on the Appalachia campus in June of 1916, waving job offers around.

"Start in August," he told Storm. "We need engineers at our installation in Tierra del Fuego. It's \$16,000 base pay, plus maintenance allotments—"

"I'm going to go prospecting," Storm told him. "If I don't get anywhere in two years, I'll come back and go to work for you. But first I want to go."

"Don't be crazy," Donovan told him bluntly. "We've got this nice neat job all ready for you. Why throw away two years of advancement? Man with your talents, he can be making 20 grand in two years. Stock options and all the rest. Why—"

"If I find what I'm looking for, 20 grand will seem like pennies," Storm said doggedly.

Donovan's eyebrows fluttered like flags in the wind. His jaws shook in bewilderment. "You know how many guys are out there poking around the asteroids now? Hundreds! Half of them get killed out there, Storm. You don't want to get killed. You have a girl, haven't you? Marry her."

Storm laughed. "Settle down in Tierra del Fuego, huh? Why not on Mars?"

"You ought to see our installation down there," Donovan said. "We've got the whole place climatized. You wouldn't know you were in Patagonia. It's paradise down there. Outdoor swimming ten months a year. You'll love it down there."

It was all very poetic, Storm thought, and all very tempting. But not for him. Not yet.

"Will you hold the job for me for two years?" he asked.

"Storm's friends thought so too, though they were less blunt about it. They had been all through college and graduate school with him.

"I'm a lunatic," Storm said. "Okay?" He leaned forward, tensely curving his thick, strong fingers. He was a big, blond man, thick-shouldered and powerful. He liked to think he had Viking blood in him, and he was probably right. "Look," Storm said, "if I go with Universal and stick with them I can make lots of money, right? A senior mining engineer gets about 40 grand, and that's not bad, is it?"

"Damned right it isn't."
"Okay. Suppose I go to the asteroids and hook onto a million dollars' worth of cesium? Invest that million at four per cent and I've got the same 40 grand—and my freedom. I don't have to live in Patagonia, and I don't have to jump when UMC tells me to jump. I can do independent research, write books, just loaf if I like. It's a damned big gamble. But it's worth it."

Of course, it was two years of someone else's life, too. There was Liz to consider, and Storm had considered her. They had been over it a hundred times. She wanted him to go, and she would wait. Two years.

"I won't guarantee what I'll do after the two years," she told him gravely, and she could be very grave when she wanted to be, hazel eyes solemn as the tomb. "But I'll wait the two years."

"You're sure you want to?"

She smiled. "I want you," she said. "But I know I can't have you unless I let you go there first. Otherwise, every time you looked up at the stars—no. No. I wouldn't be able to spend the rest of my life knowing I had kept you back. Go. Only—Johnny—"

"Liz?"

"Find your treasure fast, will you? Find it right away and come home?"

"I'll see what I can do," he promised softly.

★ ★ ★
He hadn't been able to do very well. His time was nearly up, now.

Storm didn't like the idea of giving up. Somewhere out here, he knew, there was commercial-grade ore. Once there had been a planet between Mars and Jupiter, and some unimaginable catastrophe in the inconceivable past had blown that planet to flinders, and there was every reason to think that the fragments of that world—the asteroids—were rich in light metals.

Storm's luck hadn't been very good. On he went, from one forlorn drifting rock to another, burrowing here, scabbling there. Some asteroids were pure granite or basalt, chunks of mountains in orbit around each other, while others held traces of something worthwhile. Only traces. Then came the time he came across something remotely promising, a tiny asteroid that held swirls of lepidolite and pollucite and spodumene and half a dozen other interesting ores. Not enough to repay the cost of shipping to earth, but enough to give him hope.

Some rough computations told him the approximate part of the asteroid belt where he thought other asteroids of the same general makeup might be found. He headed there.

Now this one. Eight miles in diameter, glinting purplish in reflected light from Mars. Storm left his tiny ship in a parking orbit, 100 feet up, and descended by flexible titanium rope. The ship seemed to hover directly overhead, though actually it was still moving, following the asteroid's own orbital rotation exactly and so maintaining the same relative position.

Storm dropped the last five feet to the surface of the asteroid. On an asteroid so small, it wasn't a good idea actually to land your ship. The shock of blastoff would kick the asteroid a little way off its orbit, and lead to complications best avoided.

He looked around. The skyline, such as it was, was jagged and unfriendly. Low hills, but sharp-edged. The stars gleamed brightly beyond the horizon. With no atmosphere, there was no twinkle.

Storm began to roam, to gather his ore-samples. He nearly ran back to the ladder with his samples. Running, on as asteroid practically without gravity, might have been risky.

With controlled strides, he got to the ladder, and stamped his foot hard. The equal and opposite reaction sent him shooting up, feather-light, even lighter. When he was 20 feet off the ground, he reached out, grinning, and snared a loop of his ladder, and clambered quickly the rest of the way.

He pulled off his helmet, but didn't bother with the rest of his spacesuit just then. Into the analysis hopper went the ore samples.

There was ore here. Marketable ore. The way it looked, he had a whole damned planet full of marketable ore. Jackpot!

Storm was a little puzzled by the letdown, but not really surprised at all. Two years of steady disappointments had ground down his spirits, so that now, with unbelievable success his for the grasping, he had no real way to react to it.

I'm a millionaire, he told himself.

I won my gamble. I can laugh in Donovan's fat face now. No reaction.

Storm shrugged and told himself that the reaction would come later. He could jubilate afterward. Right now there was work to do, and plenty of it. He needed data on the asteroid's mass and density, on its chemical makeup, on a lot of things.

Eight hours later, he knew, more or less. And the immensity of it dazed him even more. It was simply too big a find to react to emotionally at all.

The asteroid, it seemed, was a solid chunk of reactive ores. There was lepidolite here, chock-full

of lithium and run through with gallium as well. There was beryllium. There was cesium-bearing pollucite. There was half a dozen other valuable ores, formed in who knew what cauldron untold billions of years before. Storm had been on field trips to Manitoba, of course, had seen the astonishing conglomeration of ores in places like Bernic Lake, the dazzling jumble of exotic metals stirred helter-skelter through the earth. Well, this was Bernic Lake all over again.

There was no point wasting time estimating the cash value of all this. Billions? Billions? Who could tell? He was rich, that was all he knew.

And that was the next order of business: filing the claim.

Mars was 90 million miles away. That was almost as great a distance as the gap between Earth and the Sun, but at the moment Mars was the closest heavenly body to John Storm. It was another 70 million miles on to Earth, at the moment, though the figures changed constantly as Mars, Earth, and this nameless asteroid continued to whirl.

Mars would be John Storm's first stop. He had the orbits on his side, since Mars and the asteroid would be approaching one another all the time he was en route, while Earth would be heading the other way. When he was ready to leave Mars for Earth, Earth would be coming round the other side of her orbit, which would save him some time there. Hopping from planet to planet is a little more complex than taking a jet from New York to San Francisco. New York and San Francisco, at least, stay put.

Storm checked out the location and orbit of the asteroid—"his" asteroid, now—and reeled in his ladder and punched out fresh co-ordinates for Mars.

Acceleration built up. Storm was in a hurry now, and he had the computer plot a maximum-velocity course. The gravity-drag bashed him back into his acceleration couch like a giant fist, but he didn't mind, because the faster a start he got, the quicker he would get to Mars.

He was tempted to relay a message to Liz now. All he had to do was beam it ahead to Mars, and the communication satellite there would catch it and flick it on to Earth.

These days it cost \$50 to beam a message from Mars to Earth.

He flicked on the beam.

"To Miss Elizabeth Chase, 11735 Coolidge Lane, Greater New York 113, Appalachia, Western Hemisphere. Earth:

"Bringing home the bacon, baby. Get ready for a celebration.

"Johnny.

"End of message."

He listened to the playback, nodded, touched the Transmit button. Off went the message toward the Mars communication satellite. It would take about four minutes to get there, Storm knew. Allow some time for a backlog of transmissions, and he could figure that within an hour the message would be on tape at one of the communication satellites orbiting Earth. Liz would have it tomorrow.

Mars gleamed reddish-brown in the very black sky. The little ship surged forward, and Storm waited, and slowly the importance of his find seeped into his mind.

★ ★ ★
"I want to register a mining claim," Storm said.

"Use the machine," the clerk told him.

Storm nodded and made his way to the end of the hall. On Mars, there was no room for dead weight. One clerical worker and a bunch of machines handled the work that 100 human beings would have done on Earth.

He confronted the machine. It wanted a filing fee, first of all. Storm put a two-dollar piece in the slot, and the machine hummed and a green light flashed and a lucite panel came sliding forward. Under the panel was a printed form. Glowing instructions told Storm to use the stylus to file his claim. Please print, he was advised.

He took more care than on any other document he could remember filling out, and in his 26 years he had filled out plenty. He put down his name, and his various identification numbers, and the nature of his claim.

He studied the filled-in form, nodded in approval, and punched a button. A yellow light flashed, with the panel retracted, and an instant later a stamped copy of his claim form came rattling out.

The asteroid wasn't his, yet. By the Space Act of 1997, it was possible for individuals to claim mining rights on natural orbiting bodies of less than planetary mass, with various provisos. The claiming individual had to begin mining operations within

six months, or lose his claim — that was to prevent people from running around randomly claiming everything in sight. There were limitations on the number of claims any one individual (or corporation) could make. And, since space was deemed to be the property of the human race in general, it was necessary to agree to pay a whopping royalty to the United Nations in return for a grant of mining privileges.

What he had just done was file a preliminary claim. By tight-beam relay, the claim would be forwarded to the master computer on Earth. If all went well, a formal mining grant would be forthcoming in a month or two.

It was listed on his charts as unclaimed, but the charts were never up to date. It wasn't anything Storm liked to think about.

Marsville still had a raw, unfinished look. Almost 50 years had passed since the first expedition of humans had set foot on Mars, and the colony itself was 20 years old. It sprawled haphazardly under a series of interlinked geodesic domes, and the air, while thin, tasted almost like Earth's to one who had not breathed Earth air for a while. Most of Marsville was built of corrugated tin shacks.

Storm's first call, after the all-important business of staking his claim, was Marsville Spaceport. "When's the next liner for Earth?" he asked.

"Three days."
"Got room for another passenger? I bought my ticket before I left Earth. Here."

He presented the wrinkled document. The colonist looked at him coldly but with respect.

"Smart one, eh? Not one out of ten buys himself a roundtrip ticket."

"I did," Storm said quietly.

"Prospector?"

"Yes."

"Lost your shirt, eh?"

Storm shrugged. "It wasn't so bad."

The colonist chuckled. "I see them come, and I see them go. Young ones and not so young. I guess you want to sell your ship, eh?"

"I guess I do."

"Follow over there, he'll give you the best deal."

Storm pocketed his validated ticket and crossed over to see the dealer in used ships. It didn't pay to try to pilot a one-man or two-man ship from Earth to Mars or back again. It was a whole lot cheaper to take a commercial space-liner out to Mars, buy an old heap of a used two-hammer, and sell it again after exploring the asteroid belt.

Half an hour of haggling and Storm had sold his ship. All in all, he was pleased with the deal. He had paid 20 thousand for it, and sold it for 15.

But now he was stuck in Marsville for three days — three Martian days, the colonist had told him with a kind of provincial arrogance. Each Martian hour was only a minute and a half longer than an Earth hour, but oh, how fussy they were about their extra 37 minutes a day!

He took a look around town. He saw the shacks, and the hopefully marked-out places where the civic buildings would rise, and the tool dumps and all the rest. It was only ten years since women had been allowed to settle here, making Marsville a true colony. The first Mars-baby was six years old —

There were no real native Martians. Nothing lived in the wind-swept red deserts except stunted, scrubby little plants and a few animals somewhat less impressive than mice. The "Martians" were the Earth-born colonists. Storm wondered what Mars would be like a couple of generations from now.

But right now Mars held no fascination for him at all. He was itching to get home. With a roar and a blaze, the ship broke free of Mars' feeble grasp, and carried John Storm and a 100 other passengers back to the mother world.

chapter 2

THE Hall of Records in Greater New York was a good deal more imposing than its counterpart on Mars. It was a towering skyscraper on the banks of the Hudson, the tallest building in the suburb of Nyack. John Storm had lost no time getting there, and had phoned Liz to let her know he was home. They had agreed to meet at the Hall of Records.

"Is it true?" she had kept asking. "Did you really find something out there?"

"I really did," he said. "Look, it's too big to tell you about this way. Come meet me, and I'll give you the whole story."

She hadn't arrived yet. Storm waited none too patiently in an endless line on the 30th floor of the

Hall of Records, moving up a painful notch at a time. His muscles were no longer adjusted to Earth gravity, and he felt his body sagging against the unaccustomed pull.

He reached the front of the line, finally. "Validation of mining claim," Storm said to the thin, harried-looking clerk. He slipped the copy of the form he had filled out on Mars through the wicket. "Would you check that, please?"

"Certainly, sir." Vague, gray noises. A pallid hand took the form, laid it face down on a glowing scanner plate. This was the moment he had been losing sleep over for days.

The clerk was frowning. A strip of tape came clicking out of the machine. Storm could not read the words on it.

"I'm sorry, sir," the clerk was saying. "There's no record of any such claim having been made on Mars."

The quiet, impersonal words hit Storm like a sledgehammer in the teeth.

"That's impossible!" Storm blurted. "Look, here's the duplicate? It's been stamped, hasn't it? That means the claim was recorded and transmitted."

"I'm sorry, sir. The computer says it hasn't been filed, sir. I'm very sorry. Next, please?"

"Hold it!" Storm bellowed, and heard people muttering angrily behind him in line. His hands trembled and his face grew red. He had been prepared for almost any eventuality, but not something like this. "You mean to tell me that the claim I filed got lost on the way to Earth?"

"No, sir. Claims never get lost. The transmittal process is automatic and failure-proof."

"But what about this copy I've got here? It's got a claim number on it! Can't you check and—"

"I have checked, sir." The wan figure behind the counter looked at Storm reproachfully, and tapped a bell. It tinkled gently. Storm turned, half expecting to be collared by guards and roughly shown the gate. Instead, a slick, supervisory-looking woman appeared, with a thorny glint in her eye.

"Yes?" she asked. "Is there any difficulty?"

"There sure is," Storm said. "I'm trying to check on this mining claim. The fellow here buzzed the computer, and got told no claim was ever filed. There's been some kind of error in the computer."

She glanced at Storm's document and flashed a smile as warm as a glacier's core. "Of course, Mr.—ah—Storm. If you'll come with me."

Feeling very much as though they were humoring him, as though they regarded him as some kind of crank. Storm followed her.

She waved him into a seat in front of her desk. She studied his claim, sheet for a moment. "It looks perfectly genuine," she said.

"It ought to. It is."

Behind her desk was a machine very much like the one the clerk had used. Motionless, hardly even breathing, Storm watched her place his claim sheet over the glowing scanner plate. A long moment ticked by, and then a ribbon of tape extruded itself from the machine. This time Storm was able to read what it said. It said 324.

"What does that mean?" Storm asked.

Miss Vyzinski looked at him sternly. "It means, I'm afraid, that no such claim has been recorded."

"One moment," she said. "I'll run some further checks. The first thing to do is see if your claim

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has somehow been misfiled. It's a one-in-a-billion possibility, but, even so—"

"It's worth checking," Storm said, dry-throated. She punched something out on a keyboard, and put the claim sheet on the scanner again. Another strip of tape emerged from the machine.

"No. Your claim's not in current, and it's not in dead storage, and it's not in pending. That means it's not anywhere, Mr. Storm."

"But—how—?"

"Let's attack it from another angle," she said crisply. "There's a claim number on this paper, right? Very well. Let's run a check and see what's entered for this claim number, shall we?"

"Go ahead," Storm said hollowly.

It took three or four minutes, this time. Storm wondered if Liz had arrived by now.

A yellow facsim sheet came popping out of the slot. Storm had to restrain himself from lunging across the desk and seizing it. Miss Vyzinski's

manicured fingers tugged it free.

"It's my claim, isn't it?" Storm said.

She was glancing from Storm's paper to the new one, and frowning furiously now. "No," she said in an odd voice. "No. It isn't."

She passed the two sheets over to him. Storm studied them in rising bewilderment. They were identical in every way, the same form even to the imprinted identifying number, six digits and four letters, in the upper left hand corner. Both had been filed from the office on Mars, on the same day.

The only thing wrong was that the claim on record wasn't his. The sheet had been filled out in a different handwriting, by someone named Richard F. McDermott, and he had filed a claim on an asteroid within Mars' orbit, nowhere near Storm's.

"I don't get it," Storm said. "Are you trying to tell me that two different people filed two different claims on the same machine at the same time?"

"I'm not trying to tell you anything, Mr. Storm. I'm simply showing you what the computer has on file. If you press me to interpret the evidence, I'd have to say that you're attempting some kind of game."

Storm stared at her in silence for a long moment. He felt as though he were strangling in red tape.

"All right," he said finally. "I don't understand any of this, but let's just skip it. I'll pretend that I never filed my claim at all, which is what you're trying to tell me. Okay?"

"Very well. But—"

He cut her off. "Now, let's start all over again. I've been prospecting out in space and I've found something I want to claim. Since the machinery got fouled up the first time, I'll file a brand new claim. Is that permissible?"

"Of course."

"I'll have a witness file his time in case the computer loses the record again," he said.

Her grin was frosty. "I assure you everything will go smoothly this time. If you'd really like to file a new claim, please come with me."

She led him to an adjoining office. There was a different sort of machine in there, the twin of the one he had used on Mars. She stood by while Storm laboriously copied on to a new form everything he had written on the first one.

When he had finished, she pressed the actuating button for him. "In just a moment," she said, "your claim will be recorded, and you'll get your duplicate copy. I'll countersign it, just to be certain. After that, it'll simply be a matter of time before your claim can be processed, and—"

She stopped. His claim sheet had come popping out of the machine, and stamped across it in big red characters were the numbers 217 and the letters XX.

"What now?" he asked.

She looked at him in an indescribably peculiar way. "Mr. Storm, when was the last time you were on Earth?"

"About two years ago. Why?"

"Are you sure you copied your identifying numbers properly on to the claim sheet?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"Would you let me see your identity cards?"

There was no refusing the schoolmarmish command. Numbly, Storm surrendered his documents. She compared them.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, the numbers are the same. But your claim was returned in Category 217-XX. Which means that there's no record of you in the computer."

"No record of me?" he repeated blankly.

"That's right," she said, watching him more closely than ever. "No one named John Storm who matches these particular identity numbers. Mr. Storm—if that's your name—I can't imagine what sort of prank you think you're pulling, but we don't have time for jokes here."

"Give me my papers!" Storm said in a strangled voice.

He grabbed them from her, and strode quickly toward the door. The choking sensation grew almost overpowering.

Storm emerged in the crowded main hall. Half dazed, he came to a halt, stared around like an elephant at bay.

"Johnny! Johnny, there you are at last!"

It was Liz. She saw him, and came running toward him, her shoes clattering on the stone floor, her face aglow, her eyes shining.

"Johnny!"

Storm didn't budge. She came running up, her arms wide as though to embrace him. But when she was still a few yards away she stopped and looked up at him.

"Johnny, what's the matter?" she said. "Your face—you look so strange—"

"I don't exist," he said in a hoarse, stupefied voice. "They just told me I don't exist!"

It took her a couple of minutes to get him calmed down, and a couple of minutes more before he could communicate to her the nature of the trouble. She looked at him blankly.

"But that's impossible, Johnny!"

"Try to tell her that," Storm said.

"Let's go in to see her."

Storm nodded. He smiled at Liz, touched her hand briefly. Her fingers were cold. She looked thinner than he remembered her, and older.

Miss Vyzinski was waiting.

"So you've come back," she said triumphantly.

Liz said, "I'll vouch for him. His name's John Storm, and I've known him for years. He—"

"The computer doesn't seem to have any record of him," Miss Vyzinski said. "At least, not under that name, not under those numbers."

"But it is my name," Storm said doggedly. "I know it. And those are my identity numbers. Look, the computer records can slip up once in a while. The scanners aren't infallible."

"We like to think they are," Miss Vyzinski said. "But we'll check. We'll see, Mr. Storm."

She closed her office door and made some calls, and the bureaucrats began to gather.

Storm watched tensely. He was as baffled as they were, but much more worried. A man without an official existence cannot fight to defend a mining claim. A man without an official existence is like a ghost.

With Earth crowded and getting more crowded every second, the only way to keep track of people was by computer. Everyone had a number, assigned at birth, and everyone acquired other numbers as he went along.

He was outside the system. Alone among Earth's swarming billions, he had no number. It made no sense, and small wonder the bureaucrats looked pale and worried.

A round-faced, melancholy-looking man in late middle age confronted Storm and said, "My name is Dawes. I'm that regional supervisor. May I see your documents, please?"

Storm handed them over. Another conference began.

Liz whispered, "Johnny, what did you find out there?"

"An asteroid full of goodies. Eight miles in diameter, and the whole blasted thing commercial-grade ore."

Dawes came over. "According to these papers," he said, "you were born on 6 May 1992. Is that right?"

"Right."

"We're running a check on births for the whole year 1992. We're also checking your other records. If nothing checks—"

"What if nothing checks?" Storm asked tightly. "I don't know," Dawes said. "I simply don't know, Mr. Storm. I don't know at all."

They had their answer in a dozen minutes.

Nothing checked.

So far as the computer banks knew, he had never been born, had never gone to school, had never occupied a residential unit, had never been tallied in a census, had never paid a cent in tax to any revenue agency. He had never been inside a hospital, never been vaccinated, never voted.

"You explain it," Storm said.

Dawes sputtered and fussed. "There are two possible explanations," he said limply. "One is improbable and the other is inconceivable. The improbable one is that the computer somehow dropped a stitch accidentally erased your entire record. The inconceivable one is that you never had a record—that you're some sort of being from another world, some creature of fantasy trying to bluff his way into official existence on Earth."

Storm laughed coldly. "You're overlooking the most likely explanation of all, Mr. Dawes—that my records have been tampered with. That someone managed to obliterate me entirely."

Dawes began to look greenish.

"Look," Storm said, "I went out to the asteroids and I made a valuable find. Now I come home to sew up my claim and I find the claim's been erased from the computer, and so have I. I'm entitled to suspect something fishy."

"And you think someone is trying to cut you out of this claim, Mr. Storm?"

"It's the only possible answer."

"Is it widely known that you were successful

in space?"

Storm shook his head. "I didn't tell a soul. But someone might have found out. Someone on Mars, where I filed my claim. I don't know. All I know is I'm a rich man if I can get my claim validated. I want to file that claim so that it sticks, Dawes. We can worry about my identity records later."

"I'm sorry. Only a person with official existence can file a claim, Mr. Storm. So far as the computer is concerned, you don't exist."

"But the asteroid—"

"I'm terribly sorry. It's getting late, don't you see? If you'll come back tomorrow, we'll try to get to the bottom of this. There's nothing I can do for you tonight, Mr. Storm. Absolutely nothing."

* * *

A ghost has a hard time of it in Greater New York. John Storm found out that night. He had only five dollars in actual currency on him, and the rest in travellers' cheques. But part of the cheque-cashing process is a split-second computer call to validate signature and number. Storm borrowed \$10 from Liz, and hoped it would see him through.

There was no place he could stay for the night, either. Not legally.

Two years had distributed his classmates all over the world, it seemed. Storm felt more forlorn than ever. It was a lucky thing Liz had still been around to greet him, he thought. He could cope with a couple of years of total solitude in the asteroid belt, but not in Greater New York.

Liz said, "I'll find a place for you to stay. There's this fellow my roommate Helene sees. He'll put you up. I know he will."

Two phone calls and it was arranged.

"Where can we go to eat?" Liz asked. "Someplace fancy. To celebrate your return."

"I don't feel much like celebrating."

"Cheer up! We'll get this stupid business cleared up in the morning. And then you'll claim your asteroid, and you'll be rich and famous, and all this trouble will seem like a lot of nonsense. Where's the asteroid? Show me!"

He looked up. City glow and city haze blotted out the stars. Squinting, Storm searched for the red dot of Mars, but failed to find it. "I don't know," he said wearily. He flung a hand at the stars. "Somewhere out there. Somewhere. It's just a little hunk of rock."

"Your hunk of rock, Johnny."

"I can't be sure of that, even."

She looked at him sharply. "Johnny, are you sure you didn't tell anyone what you found?"

"Sure I'm sure." He took her hand in his, squeezed it lightly, and managed a faint smile. They were after him, he thought, and he didn't even know who they were.

Storm shook his head and tried to brush the irrational thoughts away.

"Let's just walk," he said. "I haven't seen a city in two years. We'll walk, and then we'll eat somewhere, and then we'll take in a show."

It was good to be walking down a city street again, good to be seeing lights and activity and people, the overhead glow of a commuter-copter and the sour drone of a Europe-bound strato-rocket. It was good to feel the honest tug of Earth's gravity again, and the warmth of Liz at his side, and good to be able to breathe real air out under the open sky. The noise of the city, the filth, the crowdedness—all these were good to have again, after the silent emptiness up there.

But the bitterness and the tension kept returning to puncture his tranquility. He resented the element of irrationality that had entered his life. It was one thing to gamble on making a lucky spin of the dice; he had taken that gamble, the dice had fallen his way, and luck had been his in the asteroids. But then to come home and find that the rules of the game have surreptitiously been changed by an unseen hand, that the table is gone and the dice are now round, that his luck has arbitrarily been cancelled out—no, it made no sense, it was too much to accept.

Liz began to say something, halted, started again. "There's a restaurant," she said. "I'm starved!"

They ate. It was a so-called "Martian" restaurant, and Liz told him that this sort of place had become very popular in the last year. The decor was imitation Mars, with murals of the red deserts. There was a sketch of Marsville on the menu cover, but it was a Marsville of some ideal future.

Storm didn't tell Liz about the tin shacks of Marsville.

Liz dragged him off to a sully show next, a tri-dim that had opened only the week before. They

stood in line for 20 minutes to get into the theatre. Maybe they're right, he thought. Maybe I am some kind of creature from another world. I'm sure not part of this one right now.

He saw Liz home, near midnight. Helene was there, and Helene's friend, who turned out to be some sort of chemist for a large drug corporation. The three of them made a futile attempt to draw Storm into a conversation about his experiences in the asteroid belt, but he was sullen and uncommunicative, and they soon let the talk peter out.

"He's tired," Liz explained. "He just landed from Mars today."

They accepted that, and Storm left with Helene's friend.

Liz said, "Meet me here in the morning. I'll go up to Nyack with you. For moral support!" Storm smiled thinly. He knew he'd need whatever support he could get. He had to prove he was real.

The Grand Panjandrums of the Records Office had assembled in full force to deal with the perplexing case of John Storm. Storm squared his shoulders and stared them down and said, "Well? What's your verdict?" he asked. "We don't question your existence, Mr. Storm. Obviously you exist. What troubles us is the absence of your records."

"Unprecedented," someone thin and angular muttered. "Intolerably confusing," said someone chubby and pink-faced.

"I have my papers," Storm said. "Are you going to tell me they're all forgeries?"

Dawes said, "There is a prescribed procedure for entering in the records someone who has not previously been recorded. But to re-enter someone who is so positive he was once listed—?"

Pink-faced and chubby said, "We've given your documents laboratory tests. They're genuine, all right. Or else the cleverest fakes that ever were faked."

Storm drew a deep breath. "Give me the benefit of the doubt. Admit that they're real."

Thin and angular said, "But in that case, why don't they have correlatives in the computer files?"

"Such a thing is unheard-of!" Thin and angular protested.

"It seems to me we may be hearing of it now," Storm said. "It isn't impossible, is it? Clerks can be bribed. It isn't hard to delete something from a computer's files. Entries aren't etched with acid. Data can be released. It's just a matter of punching the erasure keys, and—"

The bureaucrats exchanged glances. Storm began to realize that these people were frightened. A great yawning hole had appeared in the airtight structure of their system, and they couldn't understand what had happened.

Somebody was saying, "We'll have to devise some new procedure for re-entering him."

"And the claim?" Storm said. "My mining claim? Suppose someone else has filed a claim on the same asteroid while all this haggling has been going on?"

"That'll have to be investigated," Dawes said. "So you're willing to believe I was telling the truth?" Storm asked, a little dazzled by the prospect of cutting through the tangle.

Dawes shrugged. "There's clearly been something irregular done here. In some cases other people have been shifted into your position, but not consistently. The job wasn't perfect. For example, the records of your university show a graduating class of 1132, but we could only find 1131 names, and yours was missing."

"You see?" Storm cried triumphantly. "That's what I was telling you! There was bribery involved!"

"Let's not say too much, Dawes," came a warning word from a pink-and-chubby. Storm got the impression that pink-and-chubby was a good deal less affable than he looked.

Something was worked out for Mr. Storm.

It took half the day. Storm cooled his heels in an ante-room, making fitful conversation with Liz. "We're issuing you a new identity card," Miss Vyzinski told him crisply. "You'll have the same numbers as before, but the asterisks will indicate a re-issue. We intend to do everything in our power to discover how such an error could have taken place."

"And my mining claim," Storm said. "What about that?"

"Well, I'm afraid you'll have to file it all over again, as soon as we've processed you re-entry. It shouldn't take more than another hour to complete the processing, and then you can enter your claim."

"But it's more than a month since I originally filed it," Storm said. "What if someone else has claimed it since my first filing? Who's got title?"

Miss Vyzinski looked disturbed. "That would be a matter for decision on a higher level, if—" She disappeared within. Storm turned to Liz, who smiled.

"How can you be so cheerful?" he asked. "Here I am, fighting for my very identity, and—"

"They're giving you your identity back, aren't they?"

"They're doing it grudgingly. They would have been much happier if I had dropped dead overnight."

"The nonsense will all be over soon," Liz said soothingly. "You'll have your numbers again, darling, and you'll have your claim."

Storm shrugged. He was vaguely aware that she was speaking to him as one might to a child, but he decided he deserved it. He was badly overwound, tight as a drum. Fatigue and strain and tension were doing this to him.

On the other hand, though, who had pulled this monkey business with his records? Someone was dead level interested in obliterating his identity, and that could very well have some connection with his mining claim. It wasn't a pleasant thought. At last Miss Vyzinski appeared with a sheaf of new-minted documents in her hand and a gleaming professional smile on her face.

"Congratulations," he said out loud to himself. "You're a person again, Johnny."

They sped back toward the heart of the city. How much simpler it would have been, he thought, to say yes to Donovan, to take the job and forget about pie in the sky. He and Liz would have been married now, perhaps there'd be a baby on the way, he'd have money in the bank. Instead, he was deep in debt, tired beyond all endurance.

But then he thought of his asteroid, and the freedom it promised. His own laboratory somewhere, and endless leisure, and complete independence from pressures, commercial and otherwise. Nobody would transfer him from continent to continent like a hapless pawn.

If. If. If—

He and Liz rode upward out of the tube, and emerged on street level. "I'll go over to Bud's and pick up my things," Storm said. "Then I'll rent a room, now that I'm official again." He laughed. "You know something? We couldn't even have been married without those papers! It's against the law to marry a non-person, I imagine."

Liz looked at him slyly. "Oh? Are we getting married?"

"It seemed like a good idea to me."

"It seemed like one to me, too," Liz said. "Three years ago. How do I know I still love you?"

"Pretend you do."

"That wouldn't be right, would it?" She began to giggle. "Oh, you big silly, I've been waiting so long! But we can apply for the license today."

"No," Storm said. "I've had enough bureaucracy for one day. I'd crack up completely if I had to fill out any more forms. We'll apply tomorrow. We can—hey!"

He whirled suddenly. A car had come rimming round the corner, a black, snubnosed limousine on manual drive. Some fuzzy intuition sent Storm into a frenzy of activity as the car angled toward them.

"Johnny, what—"

He grabbed Liz and hurled her against the door of the nearest building. The air-field broke and she went tumbling inside, sprawling down out of sight. A moment later Storm himself leaped through the doorway, felt the faint tingle of ozone in his nostrils as he broke the field of electrified air that comprised the door, and dropped to the floor.

The whole operation had taken no more than two and a half seconds. The occupants of the black limousine had been busy during those same two and a half seconds. A frosted window came rolling down, and the ugly snout of a high velocity automatic came thrusting forth.

Bullets splattered against the wall of the building, skewering the space where Liz and Storm had been standing only a fraction of a minute before. The stream of bullets raked the doorway of the building at midsection-level, and then passed on. Someone screamed. People were rushing to and fro, voicing their panic. Storm glanced around for Liz, and saw her, dazed but unharmed.

Uneasily, Storm got to his feet. There was the cold trickle of sweat running down his sides under his tunic, and he realized that he was starting to tremble. Shakily, Storm eyed the tow of chips the bullets had dislodged in the building wall. Police-

men were appearing, now. A crowd was gathering. "What's been going on?" an officer asked, speaking to no one in particular.

"They were shooting at us!"

Storm ignored the hubbub. He stared grimly off into the distance as though trying to see the retreating cars of his would-be killers.

He was aware of Liz at his side. She looked pale, wide-eyed with fear.

"Johnny — they weren't after you!"

"Yes," he said, and his voice sounded metallic in his own ears. "They were after me."

"Who?"

"God only knows. But they were trying to get me. They found out that just obliterating me from the records wouldn't work. So they tried some more permanent way to get me out of their hair."

He looked down at her. She was biting her lip, trying to hold back the tears.

"Why—why would anyone want to kill you, Johnny? What have you done?"

"I found an asteroid," he said. "It's worth a lot of money. But not that much. Not so much that anybody needs to go killing me about it. I don't understand, Liz."

The policemen were going through the crowd, interrogating everyone. Storm didn't bother to explain to the policemen that the car had probably been after him, that the gun had been aimed specifically at him. He didn't request police protection. He didn't do anything that would bring him back into the web of red tape once again.

He had reached his decision, and it didn't involve the local authorities.

"What are you going to do, Johnny?" Liz asked. "Go back to Mars."

"Mars? Why, Johnny?"

Storm shrugged. "I filed my claim on Mars. I've got to nail that claim down beyond doubt, and the place to do it is Mars. I'm going to get into the record office there and find out who sold what to whom, and why. Mars is the only place I can get answers to all my questions."

"Don't go, Johnny! It isn't worth it," Liz said. "It is, and I've got to go."

"Then take me with you!"

"Don't talk nonsense," he snapped at her, and instantly regretted his harsh tone. "Space is a lousy place for a woman. I wouldn't want the responsibility of your safety up there. It would only multiply our risks. No, Liz."

"So you'll just leave me again? Go off for another two years?"

"Liz, please—" He groped for words to get through to her, couldn't find any, and bit down savagely on his lip. Liz wanted him here on Earth. Liz wanted to marry him and settle down in that little split-level in Patagonia, and she wasn't going to smile benignly while he went haring off to space.

But he had to go. The answers lay on Mars.

Her tear-flecked eyes glared at his for a long moment. Then she said, "You're going, aren't you?"

"I don't have any choice."

"Okay," she said. "Go. Go to Mars and find out whatever it is you have to find out. Only this time I don't guarantee to be waiting for you when you get back. If you get back."

"Liz—"

But she was gone. He watched her neat, retreating figure for a few moments, and then she vanished round the corner.

chapter 3

A DAY later, he was aboard a liner bound for Mars.

It was the same ship he had come in on, the Martian Empress, making a quick turnaround.

Storm was in anything but a jolly frame of mind. He had had to take another loan to buy his tickets, and if something went wrong with his mining claim he'd be in debt for the rest of his life. Of course, if he could only be sure the asteroid was really his, he wouldn't need to worry about paltry five-figure debts. But he had no certainties.

He figured he was lucky simply to be alive and on board the ship. Life had suddenly become unimaginably complicated for him, and he was aware that he had become a pawn in some power grab that he did not comprehend at all. But he was aboard the liner, and on his way to Mars, and unless they planned to blow up the liner en route, he'd get to Mars intact.

It was too bad, he thought, that Liz hadn't seen him off. He hoped she'd calm down.

He peered moodily out the porthole. Mars glittered like a copper coin in the sky. Giant Jupiter was invisible, somewhere on the other side of the solar system just now, but there was Saturn, obligingly tilted axiswise to give him a fine tourist's view of the spectacular rings.

The clerk in the Hall of Records at Marsville blinked at him myopically and said, "You back so fast? You filed that asteroid claim a while back, huh?"

Tension formed a constricting band across Storm's chest. "That's why I'm back," he said. "I want to ask some questions about that claim."

The pale blue eyes were suddenly cold as space itself. "What kind of questions, mister?"

Storm leaned forward. There was nobody in the room but the clerk and Storm and the recording machines. Storm said, "When I got to Earth I looked up my claim. It wasn't in the records there. You mind running through the records and letting me see if my claim's recorded here?"

"Well, now, I can't do that, mister. Nobody gets to see the records without permission."

"Where do I find the registrar?"

"Well, you don't, really. You just sort of wait. He's out doing a little prospecting himself, round about Syrtis Major. He's the man can help you."

Storm scowled. "Nobody else?"

"Well, maybe the acting registrar might okay it." It was like pulling teeth. "Where do I find him?" Storm asked, struggling to control his temper.

"He's right here, mister. He's me."

The man smiled. There was mischief in the blue eyes now. "Sorry," he said. "Permission denied."

"What?"

Storm stared at the little man, and felt himself about to erupt. He had been getting the grand run-around from the high and mighty and the low and downtrodden, and he had had about enough.

Did the man want a bribe?

Storm said, "Listen, I've got 50 bucks here that's yours if—"

"Skip it. I can be bought, but not that cheap."

The bland words touched the spark. Storm's big hands shot out and wrapped themselves around the skinny neck. His fingers knotted tight. His arms trembled with rage, and he shook the little man violently. "We're all alone in here," Storm said. "I can shake your damned head off."

"Pl—please—"

Storm gave him one last shake for good measure, and let go. The little clerk backed away.

"Sheesh, mister," he whispered hoarsely. "You coulda choked me, you know that?"

Storm didn't reply. He was trembling.

The clerk said, "Come on. I'll show you the files. Just make it quick, though. Anybody asks you, did you see the files, you better not tell 'em I showed you."

Still fondling his throat, he turned to one of the machines and began punching out co-ordinates.

Storm told him the month and read off the claim number on his duplicate sheet.

The microreel continued to turn, and a claim after claim appeared on the screen.

"This one must be yours," the clerk said. "I'll stop the reel, okay?"

A magnified claim sheet appeared on the reel. Storm looked at it, and felt sickness in the pit of his stomach, felt reality dropping away.

The claim was the same one Miss Vyzinski had shown him in the Records Office on Earth. It bore the same number as his, the same time-stamp. But it had been made out by Richard F. McDermott for an entirely different asteroid.

"That's not the claim I filed, and you know it!"

Storm exploded. The little man was quivering, and his face was stippled with red splotches of shame or guilt or fear. "That claim's been substituted for mine! My name's John Storm, not McDermott. I've got a duplicate of that claim right here. You were in this office the day I filed it. After I left here, somebody yanked that claim and substituted a phony. I wonder who that somebody could be."

Storm had the clerk roll the files back a month before the date of his claim. Nothing turned up. Grumbling every minute, the little man reeled them forward again. Storm watched, his eyes narrow and frowning, his lips firm. There was a coppery taste in his mouth, the taste of rage. It was just as he had feared. They— whoever they were— had begun at the source, had eradicated his claim.

Storm watched the screen, not really knowing what he expected to find, and then something familiar whisked past his eyes, and he gasped, and snapped, "Hold it. Go back one notch, will you?"

"Listen, mistes—"

"Go 'back or I'll pull your head off, dammit!"

The little man was quaking like a leaf now. He pushed the stud and the screen flickered and the reel moved, and a magnified claim appeared on it.

Storm eyed it, and chills raced along his spine as he saw that the claim was for an asteroid with the same number as his, the same orbital co-ordinates, the same everything. The asteroid—his asteroid—had been claimed about six days after the filing of his own claim. One Clyde Ellins was down as the claimant.

So at last he knew. It was out in the open now. He had a rival for the asteroid, not a prior claim but a subsequent one, and his title was clouded by the absence of any record of his claim, and someone had been pulling strings behind his back, and he no longer had any reason to doubt that he was the victim of fraud, not simple innocent error.

The clerk was livid with fear. Storm glowered at him and said, "Who's this Ellins? Where is he from? Is he still on Mars?"

"I couldn't rightly tell you, mister."

Storm advanced toward the cowering little man, and let his huge hands dangle menacingly at his sides, the fingers clenching and unclenching. "You better rightly tell me," Storm said, "if you want to get out of here alive. How much did Ellins pay you to substitute his claim for mine?"

"Mister, I—"

Storm's massive hands reached for the slender throat. But the little man flung up his hands and said, "No! Don't! I'll tell you what you want!"

Thin lips worked incoherently for a moment. "He—he gave me \$1,000," the clerk said hoarsely. "To throw out your claim and slip the phony in."

"When?"

"About a week after you made the claim."

"And who is he, this Ellins?"

"You mean you don't know?"

"If I knew I wouldn't be wasting time asking you," Storm snapped. "Who is he?"

"Ellins? He's the local UMC man, that's who." The clerk risked a snickering laugh. "Let me tell you, you're up against the big boys."

Storm felt a moment of something close to panic. UMC was trying to beat him out of his claim? UMC was the Universal Mining Cartel, the same outfit that had offered him a job in Patagonia, two years ago. It was a hydra-headed, multi-continent organization, one of the new business units that had come into being after the repeal of antitrust legislation in the United States 30 years back.

The Cartel was vast and all-powerful. If anybody could get into the master computer files to obliterate somebody's records, UMC could do it.

But why, Storm wondered?

His asteroid, valuable though it was, was only a drop in the bucket of the cartel's overall wealth.

Storm said, "Where's Ellins now? Still on Mars?"

The clerk shrugged. "He was here a few days ago. Outfitting a new expedition, I think."

Storm paced round the record room for a moment, wondering what to do now. He couldn't prove he had ever had a claim on the asteroid. If he tried to trot the little clerk forward as proof that skulduggery had taken place, UMC would see to it that the man's throat was cut before he could testify. Storm realized dully that there was no legal way he could fight UMC's billions.

They had him.

No, Storm thought. I'll fight! I'll fight with all I have!

The office door opened. Storm whirled, half expecting to find UMC men bearing down on him. But the figure in the doorway was simply that of a prospector. He was a man a few years older than Storm.

He looked at the clerk and said, "Hi, Jimmy, who's your friend?"

"Prospector named Storm," the clerk said.

The newcomer turned to Storm and put out a calloused hand. "Name's Fletcher," he said easily. "Sam Fletcher. Been working the asteroids seven years now, and I finally got me some luck."

Storm said, "Whereabouts you hit it?"

"Belt Sub-seven," Fletcher said. "Found me an asteroid full of lithium. Just a little chunk, mind you. But it's real stuff. I'll clear maybe 100 thou on it."

"I was in Sub-seven a while back," Storm said tightly. "But there's some trouble on my claim, it seems. I'm trying to get it straightened out."

Fletcher looked up and laughed. "Trouble, huh? Well, I sure hope it wasn't your claim I saw them fooling around with yesterday."

"What do you mean?"

"On my way back from Sub-seven," he said. "I passed this asteroid, this little one. Eight, 10 miles across, maybe. And there was this big UMC ship there. They're hitching rocket tubes to the asteroid. I think they figure on moving it into another orbit."

"UMC? You're sure about that?"

"Well, I didn't stick around to have tea with 'em. But I saw the insignia on the ship, anyway. They're jumping somebody's claim, I guess."

Storm glanced across at the claims clerk. The little man shrugged and looked away. Clenching his fists, Storm turned and went out of the room.

* * *

On his way over to the spaceport, Storm tried to fit together the pieces of the story as he had learned it so far. What he knew added up to trouble, and the trouble kept getting bigger every minute. He had a rival for his asteroid.

The rival was the sprawling Universal Mining Cartel.

UMC wanted his asteroid badly. So badly that the whole business became suspicious, in fact. UMC didn't need to descend to petty theft, and to do a free-lance prospector out of an asteroid claim amounted to petty theft by UMC's financial standards. It couldn't possibly be worth it for them to go to all this complicated schemery just to steal a few hundred million dollars' worth of ore.

Item: they had bribed the claims keeper on Mars.

Item: they had somehow obliterated Storm's records from the master computer on Earth.

Item: they were even now, according to Fletcher, hitching up a rocket installation that would blast Storm's asteroid into a different orbit.

That was the worst blow of all, Storm thought. As matters stood now, he had at least some title to the asteroid, even though it was thoroughly clouded. There was his duplicate copy of the original claim, which would have to be argued away in court.

He wouldn't even have a fragment of a case if UMC moved his asteroid. Mining claims in space were dependent wholly on orbital location. The absolute position of asteroids—and of all other heavenly bodies, for that matter—keeps changing every instant. But the orbits, the paths of travel, remain constant.

So the only way of tagging an asteroid is by orbit. But orbits are not immutable. An orbit can be changed, simply by applying a deflecting force.

And as for a tiny asteroid only eight miles in diameter—

It didn't take much, really. One good swift kick from a bank of rockets would do it. Keep the thrust going for a while, and you could push the asteroid anywhere you wanted—clear out to Pluto.

Of course, it was expensive. Hitching that much thrust up to an asteroid wasn't done for dimes. You had to make sure you were putting your installation in a part of the asteroid strong enough to take the kick, or otherwise you might just smash your asteroid to pebbles. So there had to be some engineering work ahead of time, and probably some structural reinforcements. Then, too, the rockets cost money, and there was labor.

Even if the job cost 100 million, or 500 million, UMC could swing it, Storm knew.

But why?

The whole thing baffled him. Why go to such lengths to secure a single small asteroid? The cartel would be lucky to break even, after they finally had secured their claim. Unless, Storm realized, there was something else on the asteroid. He knew that he had to go out to the asteroid at once.

The dealer in used spaceships was doing business at his accustomed place at Marsville Spaceport.

He eyed Storm with a puzzled frown and said, "I've seen you before."

Storm nodded. "I sold you my ship last month. And I'm in the market for another ship."

"Got a McIntyre B-8 at 27, if you like. Needs a core job, but otherwise sound."

Storm said, "I've got three thousand cash?"

"You can't get a nose-cone for three thou, buddy."

"I've got something else for collateral," Storm went on. He produced his claim sheet. "I've got a claim on an asteroid in Sub-seven. Chock full of goodies. I'll give you the three thousand down and a mortgage on the rest of the ship."

The dealer eyed Storm speculatively. "You must think I'm crazy, friend. I sell you a ship, and

you go off to the asteroids and maybe crack it up, and I'm stuck with a lien on a claim that maybe isn't any good? No deal. Cash down or nothing. I got a family."

Storm began to sweat.

"Is there anyone on this lousy planet who's willing to take a risk?" Storm asked.

"Sure," the fat man said. "See Charlie Byrd, at Town Hall. He's the mayor. He's a gambling man."

Charlie Byrd was lean and hawk-faced, without an ounce of fat anywhere on him. Storm had to search half over Marsville for him, and finally found him, supervising a drain-building project at the extreme east end of the colony. He was about 66, Storm guessed.

Storm said, "Mr. Byrd, I've got a proposition for you."

"Always ready to listen, son."

With sweat rolling down his cheeks, Storm lined the deal out for the tall man. Byrd listened to him, without saying a word.

When he had finished, Byrd said simply, "Let's see that claim sheet of yours."

Storm handed it over.

"It looks okay," Byrd said. It seemed to Storm as though Byrd had put a wee stress on the verb: "It looks okay." All he had to do, Storm thought bleakly, was to call the Records Office and check on the claim, and discover that it was not officially recorded, and that would be the end of it.

A long moment passed, as perhaps Byrd considered whether or not to check on the claim, and it occurred to Storm that Byrd did suspect it, and was deciding whether or not to take the chance.

Finally Byrd said, "How do you feel about usury, son? Are you against it on philosophical grounds?"

"Right now I just want the money," Storm said.

"Well, all right. I'll loan you \$20,000. The rate of interest is 15 per cent per annum or fraction thereof. When you pay me back, you give me \$23,000, any time within the next year. Okay?"

"Anything you say," Storm agreed.

"Now, as to collateral. You'll sign over the ship, of course. That goes without saying. But there's also some extra risk in it for me. You'll sign a paper agreeing to pay me back out of future mining royalties on this or any other claim you may make. The first \$20,000 that comes out of your claim is mine, in case you default on the loan—plus interest."

"Agreed."

Byrd smiled for the first time. "You know something, son? We're both a couple of damned fools. You're an idiot for agreeing to be soaked like this. And I'm a worse idiot for lending you money on a claim that most likely won't pan out. But we got ourselves a deal. Give me half an hour and I'll get it all drawn up."

Storm nodded. "The quicker the better."

The ship he got was a Hawthorne 117—a one-man ship, even tinier than the one he had gone out in the first time. It was a compact little gleaming bullet, not much more than 20 feet long.

The mortgage was duly made out, and title to the ship was transferred to him. The thought occurred to Storm that it was more like philanthropy than usury, despite what looked like a high interest rate, and he quietly blessed Charlie Byrd.

Of course, Charlie Byrd didn't really know how dismal Storm's prospects were. Byrd thought there was a claim in existence. He wasn't aware that UMC workmen were busily jumping that claim.

Storm checked out the controls of his ship, running the tedious tests that were required by law. One after another, the green safety lights buzzed their responses.

Storm studied his charts. During all the weeks since he had made his big find, his asteroid had been moving across space toward Mars at a rapid clip, and the distance he would have to cover was very much less than it had been on the first trip. It was still something more than an overnight jaunt, but not much of a journey by space standards. A little 117 like this carried enough fuel to get it out to Jupiter and back, provided you made the trip in slow orbit and didn't have a very hefty appetite.

Storm activated his communication channels.

"Request blastoff clearance," he said crisply.

"There's a blowster AV-11 blasting downrange," came the tower voice. "Give him three minutes' clearance and you can go."

"Right."

The time ticked away. Storm stared through his narrow port. Red Martian sand, scarred by frequent jet-blasts, stretched out ahead of him. Behind him, invisible now, lay the gleaming geodesic dome of

Marsville. He wondered if he'd ever see Mars again, let alone Earth.

For an instant he wondered whether it might be smarter to give up, to forget his dreams of glory and go back to Earth. One man couldn't fight a cartel. He had 60 years of estimated life-span ahead of him, he had Liz waiting — maybe — and he had a good job for the asking. Why look for trouble?

"You have clearance, 117," came the brassy voice from the control tower. "Blast within 20 seconds."

Storm shrugged away all defeatist thoughts. He was on his way, and there was no turning back.

Mars became a dwindling red dot in the rear periscope.

chapter 4

SEEBING the asteroid again was almost like coming home.

They hadn't meddled with its orbit yet. Instead of matching orbits at first, he put himself in a moving orbit around the asteroid, and peered at it from a distance of 100 miles.

He didn't have to worry about being detected. Spaceships don't make any noise, not out in space where nothing carries sound waves. And his tiny ship was no more visible from the asteroid at 100 miles than a gnat would have been.

It wasn't hard to see the activity going on down on the asteroid. With his scanners on fine, he could plainly make out the work area. A crew was busy on the side of the asteroid facing Jupiter. They were putting in a rocket installation.

There was a big ship in parking orbit around the asteroid, and it was emblazoned boldly enough with the UMC monogram. On the surface of the asteroid itself, Storm saw what looked like ants, and knew that they were work-trucks and crawlers.

He circled the asteroid in his orbit a couple of dozen times, scanning the whole surface of the asteroid to make sure the intruders were gathered all in one place. Although he still had no strategy for coping with them, he knew he had to remain unnoticed as long as possible.

About the best he could hope for was to get a series of three-dee camera shots showing the men at work. It wouldn't be much, but the pictures would help bolster his contention that UMC had whisked the asteroid out of his possession by sheer craftiness. He didn't think he'd get far in court against UMC's battery of lawyers, but at least he'd make the giant cartel look silly as it tried to explain why they were building a rocket installation on an asteroid they had already claimed.

He knew what would happen. They would wiggle out of it somehow, and the asteroid would be theirs. Then, all smiles and blandness, they'd come around to him and say, "Would you like to work for us, Mr. Storm? That job offer is still open." And he'd disappear forever into the maw of the UMC organization, all dreams of fortune exploded.

Storm scowled. He studied his keyboard for a moment, and began to pick out the programming instructions for his computer. What he wanted was a landing orbit that would set him down, neatly and quietly, on the side of the asteroid opposite the UMC camp.

The ship descended. As before, Storm did not actually bring his ship down to the surface of the asteroid. A parking orbit was good enough.

It seemed to hover, motionless, 50 feet above the surface of the asteroid. Storm dropped his ladder.

He clambered down. It was good to be back, he thought. But it would be better if he knew that the asteroid was really his, as by rights it should be.

It was a fair distance, he knew, to the UMC camp — 10 or 12 miles, practically halfway around the 24-mile circumference of the asteroid. Under these low-gravity conditions, every step he took would be as though with seven-league boots, and he could cover the distance without any particular strain. Before he went, though he had to figure out some way of handling the situation.

He had landed near the edge of a miniature plain, bordered at the far side by the jagged mountains that ran around the equator of the asteroid, and bordered at this side by low rocky hills. The pale green light of the distant sun gave the hills a barren, forlorn appearance. Over on the other side of the asteroid, he knew, it was night, and the stars would be gleaming brilliantly, with Mars and perhaps even Earth lending color.

He nearly overlooked the mouth of the cave, when he first saw it. Storm had been roaming

the plain purposelessly for ten minutes, and when he saw the cave-mouth at first it seemed to be only a dark shadow against the side of the hills.

Storm went to have a closer look.

He strode across the plain, covering 10 and 15 feet at a bound. The cave mouth was about ten feet in diameter, an almost mathematically perfect circle carved into the side of the cliff.

Something about the cave puzzled him. It was too regular, too mathematical. Caves were usually carved by water, and there was no water on this asteroid. Of course, a stream could have run here once, hundreds of millions of years ago, in the days when this asteroid was still part of the planet that once had orbited between Mars and Jupiter. But you generally found caves in soft, water-soluble rocks like limestone. You didn't find them in tough igneous stuff like this cliff.

So the cave wasn't a natural formation. But in that case—

What was it?

Storm forgot, for the moment, the problem of the UMC rocket installation. There was a mystery here, and he needed the answer to it before he could go any further. Switching on his helmet-light, he stepped hesitantly into the utter blackness of the cave.

The floor was smooth beneath his feet. Storm was startled to see that the walls of the cavern, above and below him, were almost glassy, as though they had been carved out by the blast of a controlled thermonuclear explosion. Somehow, a tunnel of marble-smooth regularity had been slashed into this cliff.

Storm followed it inward, counting off his paces. When he was 12 paces into the cliff, the tunnel began to veer away at a right angle. It made a complete 90-degree turn, which took it along a parallel with the outside face of the cliff. Storm's frown deepened as he followed the tunnel another eight paces and saw it swinging around again, making a second 90-degree swerve.

Now it headed straight into the cliff again. Storm's helmet-light gave him only five yards' illumination, and beyond that the darkness quickly shaded in to conceal anything that lay beyond. He counted off 15, 18, 21 paces, and then saw the tunnel was making yet another turn.

He rounded the turn.

What he saw was so unexpected that he halted, dazzled and gasping, and for a long moment his mind failed to accept the sight.

The tunnel had widened abruptly into a spherical chamber about 15 feet in diameter. A kind of curtain covered what lay beyond — not a tangible, material curtain, of course, but something more like a thin fog, glowing a lambent greenish-yellow, giving off a bright radiance that made Storm's helmet-light completely superfluous.

And beyond the glowing curtain—

Machinery, first of all.

The walls of the chamber were lined with machinery. Bank upon bank of delicate shining metal rose to the right and to left, dizzily complex with tubing and pipes and dials and meters, a nightmare of mechanisms. The machinery rose perhaps ten feet high, two or three feet deep.

But there was something else in the chamber too.

It was floating (floating, Storm thought incredulously?) about ten feet above the floor of the chamber. It was an object perhaps three feet long, shrouded in a denser fog of the greenish-yellow stuff that made up the curtain of the chamber. Narrowing his eyes, Storm struggled to penetrate that inner fog.

He could not clearly see what lay within. It was a creature of some sort, he decided. He could make out, or thought he could, the shapes of limbs, like pipestems, and something that might have been a head, and other things that could have been ropy coiled tentacles.

It was, he realized dazedly, some sort of alien being, some creature from the depths of space. It had to be. There was no other explanation. None of the worlds mankind had explored had yielded any form of life of this complexity. Mercury was utterly barren; Venus had only insects; Mars had nothing higher than rodents. Jupiter, Saturn, and Neptune had been explored only by robot vehicles, because no human being could hope to land on those giant planets and withstand the crushing grip of their gravities, and the robot explorers of the big worlds had found no signs of life at all. As for the outer worlds, Uranus and Pluto, they were too cold to support any kind of comprehensible life.

And yet here, in a tunnel into a cliff of an asteroid eight miles in diameter—

Here, suspended in some kind of cocoon ten feet above the ground, wrapped in a bewildering nest that seemed to have neither substance nor form—

Here, surrounded by bedazzling machines and instruments that no Earthly mind had ever created—

Here, high above the floor, rested some kind of alien creature, some representative of what Storm guessed was an incredibly advanced creature. As Storm peered in awe and terror into the jewelled heart of the green cloud, it seemed to him that the fog was clearing, thinning.

Illusion, he wondered?

No. It was really happening. The inner cloud was not parting as rapidly as the outer, but it too was giving way slowly.

Storm half-saw the creature, now, as though through the waters of a stagnant lake. Yes, there were limbs, small ones, and tentacles too, dangling like limp snakes from the shoulders of the creature. And a skull, swollen and distorted, and—were those things, eyes? Those gleaming, multi-faceted diamonds glittering in the broad forehead?

Beyond doubt, it was a living creature suspended up here. And just as certainly it was a creature spawned on no world of the solar system.

The cloud ceased to grow thin. The alien had obviously revealed all that he was going to reveal. The outer curtain was faint as smoke now, but the inner cocoon surrounding the creature was still close and thick. Storm remained at the entrance to the chamber, not daring to approach further. The outer reaches of the curtain were a foot away.

His head throbbled with wonder and excitement. And then something new touched him, and he quivered convulsively, stepping back a stride in fright.

It had been like—like—he struggled for some way to explain it—like a hand reaching into his skull, slipping down behind the bone wall of his forehead to stroke the ridged gray furrows of his brain!

He thought he was going to be sick, and being sick inside a space-suit can be a harrowing experience. Storm fought for his self-control. Panic gripped him, and he wanted to turn and run, to flee from the chamber and the strange being it contained, to escape to the open plain before—

Again the invisible hand reached out to stroke his brain! Storm shuddered, trembled. Reaching out one gloved hand, he braced himself against the smooth glasswall to keep from falling.

Run, he told himself. Turn yourself around and get the hell out of here!

But he stayed where he was. His first wild fears were giving way to curiosity, now. Storm stood straight again, and peered into the swirling cloudy mists, staring up at the thing above him.

A third time there was the feeling of something trying to enter his brain. The contact had an almost physical tangibility to it. He felt as though something slimy were being dragged across his brain — something that felt like a wet fish. But yet it was not altogether unpleasant.

And he sensed something else, something emotional, an undercurrent of — what? Yearning? Pleading? A current of loneliness?

It's trying to communicate with me, he thought.

Yes, that was the only explanation. The thing was reaching out, sending waves of mental force to him, probing his brain, trying desperately to make contact with him. Storm wondered if it could.

Go ahead, he thought. Go on! Talk to me! I'm listening, whatever you are!

He had never believed in telepathy, psychic communion, extra-sensory perception, or anything else of the sort. But this was no question of theory, of belief or disbelief. This was something that was happening, unrolling from moment to moment, and Storm could only follow along the path of events from one instant to the next.

He had no idea of how to go about making himself receptive to the mind of a creature from another galaxy. All he could do was stand where he was, feeling the alien being probing at his mind.

The moments of probing were coming more rapidly, now. The first two had been nearly a minute apart. The third had followed, about half a minute after the second. But now they were coming every few seconds, quick, eager jabs. There was something almost panicky about them, Storm thought. As though the alien had a message of the greatest importance to communicate to him.

Go ahead! he thought. I'm listening!

Another probe came, more intense than any of the others, a hard thrust to the core of his mind. Storm felt ear-splitting agony, but he remained up-

right, and despite his fear he tried to remain sympathetic. He had the feeling that contact was only moments away, that one more jab would do it, would establish some kind of linkage.

The jab didn't come. Instead, the creature withdrew, and Storm stood there blinking, suddenly bereft of his uncertain contact with the alien being.

The next moment—before Storm had fully recovered from the shock of being abandoned by the being—gloved hands grasped his arms from behind, and a helmet was thrust against his, and a voice said roughly, "Don't move or you won't live."

Storm's first impulse was to turn and fight. But that, he saw immediately, was as good as committing suicide.

He switched his helmet radio on, and heard the voice saying, "I've got a gun in your back. Turn around slowly with your hands up or I'll blow a hole in your suit."

"I'm turning," Storm said.

He took a last look at the chamber ahead of him. The strange cloud-curtain had thickened again, growing even more impenetrable than when Storm had first stumbled around the bend in the tunnel.

Storm turned.

The man directly in front of him wore a copper-colored spacesuit bearing the UMC monogram. There were three other cartel men behind him, and all four were carrying guns.

"Let's go," the one in the lead said. "Walk past me and start walking down the tunnel. Walk at a steady pace, and slow down if I tell you to slow down. If you don't obey, I'll have to kill you."

Storm glanced back over his shoulder at the enigma behind the swirling greenish-yellow cloud. But no response came, no clearing of the cloud, no mental probe, no contact at all. Dark turquoise streaks slashed across the curtain, as though displaying the anger or frustration of the being within.

Outside on the plain, a glance told him what had happened. Two UMC crawlers were parked near his ship. Whether on a routine surveying tour, or in search of a detected intruder surveying tour, or across the asteroid's equator and had come upon his ship. As Storm looked, he saw a suited UMC man emerge from the cabin.

All the UMC men were out of the cave, now. The one who seemed to be in charge said, "You're coming with us. Just walk quietly."

Storm obeyed. His mind was half-paralyzed by the rapidity of events. To come across some inconceivable kind of creature in a cave on a dead asteroid—to have his mind probed by alien thought-waves—then to be captured without a fight by the very enemies he had come here to surprise—things were happening much too fast, all of a sudden.

They hustled Storm into the nearer of the two crawlers. One man sat on each side of him, with guns at the ready. He had left his weapon in the ship, and they had probably confiscated it.

The crawler was a versatile vehicle adapted for moving through any imaginable climatic circumstances. Torpedo-shaped, a dozen feet long, it rose on pivot-mounted legs, six in all. A transparent plastic shield formed a dome over the crawler. The vehicle lurched forward, skittering across the empty plain toward the mountain range that separated this hemisphere of the asteroid from the other.

Storm, unable to do anything but sit still, remained motionless. The fact that he had been captured by UMC hardly registered yet. His mind still glowed with the unearthly experience he had had at the end of the tunnel.

* * *

The UMC installation on the asteroid was more impressive than Storm had suspected when surveying it from 100 miles up. They had chosen a plateau about 300 yards square, nestling between two jagged hills, and had blown three big permafrost domes. One dome seemed to be serving as headquarters; the second looked like a tool dump. The third, at the far side of the plateau, appeared to house the rocket installation, whose launch-pads lay just alongside it.

The UMC men led Storm, none too gently, into the main dome.

"Here he is, Mr. Ellins," said one of Storm's captors. "The one who landed the ship. We found him in the cave."

"The cave, you idiots? Couldn't you have got to him faster?" Ellins snapped coldly.

Storm stared down at the man who had come to represent for him the personification of all the forces that were working against him. So this was Ellins? He looked tough, Storm thought. He wasn't a neat, slick, smooth-talking executive type at all.

Ellins glared at him and said, "What the hell are you doing here, anyway?"

"I was going to ask you the same thing," Storm said. "I've got a right to be here. You haven't. It's my claim. You know that as well as I do. Ellins. I was here a week ahead of you and got there first with a legitimate claim."

"What's your name?" Ellins asked.

"John Storm."

One corner of Ellins' mouth turned up in a bleak smile. He folded his arms, tapped his fingers against his elbows. "Storm," he repeated. "John Storm. Sorry, Storm. I never heard of you."

"Maybe not. But somebody in your outfit did. Somebody pulled my claim out of the records and replaced it with a UMC claim. Somebody named Clyde Ellins filed that second claim."

Ellins spat. "The claim's legal. There's a claim on file on Mars," he said, "and one recorded on Earth too. It shows that this was an unclaimed asteroid until a UMC prospecting party landed here. We've had the claim searched and the title's clear. The asteroid is ours, Storm, and you're a trespasser, and you ought to know what happens to claim-jumpers out here."

"Sure I know," Storm said evenly. "Do you? Maybe you've phoned up all the records, but I still have a duplicate of my original claim. I've got witnesses on Earth who know my computer file was deliberately erased. I've got someone on Mars who'll testify that he saw UMC workmen building a rocket installation here. Why build rockets on an asteroid, unless you want to shift its orbit to jump a claim?"

Ellins said smoothly, "The rockets will take the asteroid closer to Earth for more efficient mining." "Hogwash! You're just trying to run it into a different orbit to clear your claim!" Storm shook his head. "You won't get away with it, Ellins."

"Listen, if you—"

Storm cut him off. "I know how UMC worries about its public image. There are plenty of people on Earth who still aren't happy about the cartel system, and all UMC needs is to be caught pushing some free-lance prospector around. What will UMC do to a local representative who couldn't cover his tracks well enough to avoid some bad publicity?"

There was a long moment of silence. Storm saw that his thrust had reached a vulnerable spot in Ellins. The way to strike terror into a company man was to put him in a position where his actions could be construed as hurting the corporate image.

At length Ellins said, "What do you want, Storm?"

"My asteroid."

"Don't be an idiot. We've found the asteroid and we've claimed it. It's ours, and any claim you made would be just a nuisance claim. We'd squash you like a mosquito."

"Sometimes people get stung themselves while they're squashing mosquitoes," Storm pointed out.

"All right," Ellins said. "I asked you, and I'll ask you again. You can't have the asteroid. What will you settle for?"

"Does that mean you're trying to buy me off?" Storm asked in surprise.

"Call it that if you like."

"No sale," Storm said.

"Don't be a bigger lunatic than you have to be," Ellins said. A look of craftiness came into his eyes. He said in a soft voice, "I'm not admitting you have any valid claim to this asteroid whatsoever, Storm. But I'm interested in protecting the reputation of my company. Rather than get into a long legal hassle which we're sure to win but which will cost us a pile of dough, I'll offer you a fee to drop your claim right here and now."

"I said I wasn't interested."

"I'll offer you a million dollars," Ellins said crisply. "We can have the deal set up in an hour. I'll beam Mars for the authorization and UMC will deposit a certified cheque to your account in any bank you name, in return for your signature on a document that declares—"

"No sale," Storm repeated.

"You damned blockhead, why not? Isn't a million good enough for you? You can invest it and have an income for life. You can retire when you're still a kid."

"I'm not selling out. Why should I sell you a billion dollars' worth of commercial-grade ore for a million dollars, Ellins? Not two million either."

"Five?" Ellins said hoarsely.

"No, and not 50," Storm smiled. "I'll listen to you if you raise the bid a little more, though. Let's say, half a billion dollars. That's what I call real money. I'd be willing to turn the asteroid over to

you without prejudice, for that."

"Funny man," Ellins said bitterly. "My final offer is five million. You can take it or leave it."

"Suppose I leave it?" Storm asked.

Ellins glanced sharply up at him, his eyes no longer crafty at all, but simply mean and beady. "Then we'd have to play rough with you, Storm. We can't afford to let you go back to Earth and start howling about how UMC swindled you."

"How rough?"

"About as rough as it can get," Ellins said. "If you don't agree to sell out, you'll have an accident. We'll arrange it so your faceplate pops open. A little fluke with the servo controls, that's all. One of those one-in-a-million things. Then we put you in your ship and plot a nice orbit for you. Or maybe a straight line into the sun. Getting rid of bodies is easy, out here."

Storm had no doubt the UMC man meant it. For a long, crackling moment the two of them eyed each other in silence. Then Storm said, "That's not much of a choice, is it? Either I sell out for beans, or you murder me?"

"Five million isn't beans."

"Compared with the value of this asteroid, it is. The ore alone is worth two hundred times that. And then there's the thing in the cave—"

Sudden fury blazed in Ellins' eyes. "You forget what you saw in the cave, you hear? You just wipe that out of your mind! Any deal we make, it's going to include buying your silence about that cave."

"What is that thing in there, Ellins?"

"I don't want to talk about it. Just stay off the subject. The subject is your alleged mining claim. Will you sell us a waiver of your claim—or do we have to arrange an accident for you?"

"I need to think it over," Storm said. "Can you give me some time?"

"Sure," Ellins replied magnanimously. "Take all the time you like. A month, two months—just so long as you stay here where we can watch you. Think it out all the way, Storm. Don't jump to any rash decisions." Ellins shook his fist at him in anger, then turned away, his face knotted contemptuously. "Tie him up," Ellins muttered.

chapter 5

THE UMC men tied Storm up with silent efficiency. They used copper baling wire, thin and bright, and he was lucky that he was wearing a spacesuit, because the way they trussed him the wire would have cut to the bone.

They left him huddled against the wall of the dome, body doubled up. They left him helmetless, so that even if by some miracle he got free of his bonds he would be unable to leave the dome and return to his ship.

With Storm safely under wraps, the UMC men got back to their main business—building the rocket installation.

He pondered the choice Ellins had given him. On the surface, it didn't look like any sort of real choice. On the one hand, an offer of five million dollars. On the other, death.

But it was more complicated than that, Storm knew. He couldn't be certain that Ellins really meant to go through with his threat. Before any murder took place, there would be another war of nerves, of bluff and counterbluff, between him and Ellins. Would Ellins be so eager to kill him if Storm claimed that in a safe-deposit box on Earth there was a full account of the whole story, marked "To be opened if I do not return by January 1, 2019?"

Would Ellins believe him, though?

And, Storm asked himself in annoyance, why hadn't he taken that little precaution?

No matter. An imaginary safe-deposit box would be as good as a real one, if only he could get Ellins to believe it existed. Ellins was worried about UMC's reputation, because he was worried about his own status in the cartel. He wouldn't want to get the company denounced not only for claim-jumping but for murder as well. So maybe—

But if I sell out, Storm told himself, that's the end of it. I've got no further recourse. No, Storm thought, the thing to do was take a tight grip, hang on to the last moment, try to call Ellins' bluff. It was the slimmest of chances, but worth trying.

There was also the matter, Storm thought, of the alien being in the cave. Obviously Ellins and his cohorts knew that the creature was there. Suppose, Storm thought, UMC wanted the asteroid not for its mineral content but for the creature in the cave. The asteroid was rich in ores, but UMC had no real need to do all this undercover stuff simply to secure another ore source. But suppose

they had some special use for the alien—or for the weird machinery in the extra-terrestrial-being's cave—

Yes, Storm thought. That might explain UMC's strange eagerness to do him out of the asteroid.

He shrugged such speculations out of his mind, and turned his attention to his bonds. They had done a superb job of packaging him, he saw. He couldn't reach his wrists either with his feet or with his teeth, nor did straining against the wire do anything but tighten the bonds.

Storm lay still. He felt cramped, tense. It was only a few minutes since they had dumped him here, but already he could feel his muscles stiffening up in this unnatural position. In another couple of hours, he would probably be so gnarled he'd be unable to walk.

No one was paying the slightest attention to him. The UMC men were going about their chores.

Storm scowled at them. Just let me get hold of you, Ellins, he thought.

He recoiled in sudden surprise.

What was that?

A sensation in his brain, he realized. It was something like what he had felt before, only the texture was different now. In the cave, there had been a feeling of liminess when the alien's mental probes had tried to enter his mind. Now, it was more like a feather being brushed against his brain.

Storm waited tensely, and an endless moment passed, and he began to think it had only been an illusion, a phantom of his tired mind. But then—yes, there it was again!

Unmistakably.

There was a third probe, and it seemed more intense this time, but still feathery. His scalp began to itch fiercely. He wondered why the probes were different in texture now, and decided tentatively that it must be some function of the distance.

Other than the texture, it was the same as before, the same hopeful, yearning gesture, the same feeling that something was reaching eagerly toward him.

Go on, Storm thought. I'm listening!

He forced himself to relax. He let his aching body go as limp as the constricting wires would allow, and closed his eyes. He tried to lower all barriers of tension.

He waited.

It was a long time before the alien tried again. Two, three, four minutes went by. The thrust came.

Relaxed and unwary, Storm was taken off guard, and the assault penetrated to the deepest recesses of his brain. It felt exactly as though a powerful man standing directly above him had grasped a spike with both hands and had driven it through the top of Storm's skull.

A blaze of nerve-searing agony blasted through Storm's entire body. He let out a wild howl of pain, and his body twisted convulsively, half-rising from the ground, every joint straining as if jolted with electricity. Sweat bathed him, and he sank back, trembling, dazed and stunned by the onslaught.

A silent voice said hesitantly, somewhere within him, I . . . I am sorry . . . to have hurt you.

Storm blinked. "Where are you?" he asked, through the red haze of pain.

Still in my chamber, came the silent reply. But now . . . now . . . there is contact!

Storm said, "You mean our minds—"

"Are joined. Superficially. Yes, I apologize for the pain. It was not easy to make contact with a mind so different from my own."

Storm did not answer. The pain was ebbing, now. He could still feel the contact, but it was more like an adhesive plaster fastened to his forehead, now. There was an awareness of something not-him attached to him, but no pain. He had a sensation as of gentle fingers stroking his brain, soothing him.

Then he was aware of figures standing over him: Ellins, and one of his workmen. They had heard his howl of pain, evidently, and had come running over to see what was the matter.

"You call us?" Ellins rasped.

Storm shook his head. "No, No, I didn't say anything," he said huskily. "You must be imagining things, Ellins."

The UMC man knelt and peered at him. "Hey, are you sick or something? You look like hell."

Storm managed a grin. "Suddenly you're concerned for my welfare, are you?" Storm said. "Okay. You can get me an aspirin."

Ellins spun on his heel and walked away without a word.

Storm closed his eyes, tried to recover some of

his strength. He felt as though he had just run a five-mile race.

Quietly he said, "Are you still there?"

Yes, I was waiting for them to go away.

"Who are you?"

I will tell you everything. I need your help.

"That's pretty funny," Storm said. "My help. I can't even help myself. How can I help you?"

There is a way, came that calm, patient, voiceless voice, but not yet. It will take a while. I will explain, when the proper time comes.

"The proper time better not be far off," Storm murmured. "I don't think they're going to give me very much more time to decide."

We will find a way to delay them, was the telepathic answer. You are not yet strong enough to help me. The shock of first contact has weakened you. You will need time to recover.

"Whatever you say," Storm replied. There was something dreamlike and unreal about lying here bound in baling wire listening to a voice within his brain. If he had not seen the thing in the cave, if he did not know that Ellins had seen it too, he might have begun to suspect his own sanity.

The alien was silent for a long while. Storm lay still, watching the workmen beyond the dome.

Things began to happen within Storm.

They were odd things. First, the pain of his uncomfortable position lessened. His body seemed to be adjusting to the cramped, awkward posture.

Next, other symptoms of discomfort ebbed. He still had a lingering headache, but it vanished now, leaving only the most vestigial trace of the alien's forcible joining of their minds. He felt weak and hungry, but the lassitude that had gripped him in the past hour began to depart.

Storm felt new vigor, new vitality grow in him. The process was still going on when the alien said, calm as always, May I tell you who I am, and how I came to be here on this little world?

Storm assented, and a swirl of strange images came flooding into his mind.

It was chaos. However the alien saw his own story, he did not visualize it in a linear sequence. What came swarming into Storm's dazzled brain was a jumble of events, a random, senseless mixture of happenings, a group of floating incidents that lacked any casual relationship with each other. "I—don't understand—" Storm said.

Wait. I am trying to find a means of telling you—I must organize the events in a way that you will comprehend—

Storm closed his eyes. He wanted to roar, to bellow, to scream. It was not the alien's fault, certainly. But so totally different was the alien's way of looking at the time-sequence that Storm was driven panicky by the flood of images.

I am so sorry, came the humble mental voice. I am making a greater effort. It will be but another moment. I promise you, and then all will be well.

Storm fought the panic away. The flood of images subsided. Storm felt the alien assembling, reconstructing, arranging his tale.

Now we will begin again, the creature in the cavern declared, and began to transmit his story a second time.

It was more vivid than any solidifilm could possibly have been. The alien was actually reliving what had happened, and Storm, his mind joined in strange union to that of the creature from the stars, found himself participating.

Storm saw the broad sweep of the heavens, the glittering jewels of a million stars spread against the black velvet backdrop of space. But nothing looked familiar. The vision of space that blossomed in Storm's mind bore no relevance to any star-chart he had ever seen.

Storm knew, without benefit of any verbalized promptings from the alien, that what he was seeing was space as it had looked untold millennia ago, and space as it appeared in the far galaxies. Earth was nowhere to be seen. Somewhere high in the blackness was a small spiral nebula, a faint, indistinct, unimportant cluster of stars, and Storm was numbly aware that within this aggregation of stellar bodies was the sun known as Sol.

He was in a ship of some sort—or, rather, the alien was re-experiencing the thought of being in a ship, and Storm was sharing that relieved sensation. The ship was not extraordinarily different in form from the spacecraft Storm knew. It was roughly cylindrical, with an outer skin of some hard, gleaming, bluish metal. Storm found it perplexing and unsettling to be seeing the ship both from without and within at once, but he let the strangeness of the double vision go unremarked, and gradually he accepted it as a normal way of perceiving things.

The ship did not seem to be of any great size. Storm could judge that by comparing its dimensions with that of the figure he had seen in the cave. That figure had been about three feet long, and using it as a yardstick he could estimate that the ship was no more than 150 feet long, its corridors seven feet high and perhaps five feet in width.

In the cavern, the figure of the alien had been shrouded and hidden from his sight. In the vision he had a clear view of the alien, and others like him.

There were about 20 of them on board the ship. Storm found them bizarre, yet not repellent. They stood upright, all of them just about three feet tall. Two stubby legs, ending in round sucker-pads, supported them. They had four tiny arms, looking deformed and shrunken, and two opposing pairs of rosy, coiling tentacles with prehensile tips. Their heads were large in proportion to their bodies, and their eyes, many-faceted and gleaming, were the most strange aspect of them—solemn, immense eyes.

They wore no clothes. So far as Storm's unpractised eye could tell, there were no outward distinctions of sex among them—they all looked alike, in fact—yet he was subliminally aware that in reality the aliens fell into several sharply different groups. One group, numbering almost half the total on board, was male, or male-equivalent. The other group, seven or eight in all, were female-equivalent. The other few aliens were of neither sex, yet somehow important in the reproduction of the species. Storm accepted these distinctions without understanding them at all.

The ship was travelling. It had left its own home world an enormous span of years before. There was no way for the alien to communicate the actual length of that span, for, Storm sensed, the aliens did not perceive time in a linear way, and could not put the duration of the voyage into Storm's terms in any other way than "very long."

It was hard to tell why the journey was being made. For scientific research? Sightseeing, tourism, travel-for-its-own-sake? Military surveying? Storm did not know. He could not sort an intelligible motive out of the impressionistic welter of reasons the alien presented. The best Storm could conclude was that the motivating force behind the journey was beyond his comprehension, no more his to understand than the motivations behind the contours of a Beethoven symphony, a Picasso canvas.

The vessel was moving at incredible velocities. Storm was granted a view of the ship's power plant, but what he saw made no sense to him—gleaming machinery that did not seem to move or glow or function in any way—and he suspected that even if he were a propulsion engineer instead of a mining engineer he would not have understood a thing.

The alien gave Storm a capsule view of some of the ship's ports of call.

There was a planet of a bluish sun, a jungle world where worms of titanic size oozed through steaming mud, where towering creatures with shimmering scales thundered over the fallen hulks of trees 1,000 feet high. There was a world without land, a water-world whose cool seas abounded with life, where sleek brown mammals with fins and flippers streaked through the depths, debating points of abstract philosophy as they swam. There was a desert world, a world that made Mars look like Eden in contrast, a wind-swept, waterless world.

There was a world much like Earth, too, a quiet, beautiful world of green leaves and blue seas. The air was fresh as new wine, and the animals of this world were gentle as lambs, and winter never came, and the soft golden sunshine seemed reluctant to fade from the sky. But the world was not the Earth Storm knew, for its happy people were green-skinned and tailed.

There was a world that was no longer a world, for sizzling lava pits rose where cities once had been, and clicking clouds of radioactivity drifted in the hazy atmosphere. There was another world that looked like a nightmare of the Earth that was, a world without trees, without rivers and streams, a world of 50 or 100 billion people crammed into box-like cubicles that covered every inch of land area.

Miraculously, time was compressed for Storm. He came to know the people aboard the ship, and he thought of them now as people, not as "aliens" or as "creatures." He knew which one was his, the one who was telling him all this, and he knew some of the others too, saw them as contrasting personalities. He saw a little of their hopes and fears and dreams. And, though much of what he saw was utterly incomprehensible, there were certain re-

sponses that he understood as well as he understood his own. Certain things were universal. The response to beauty was a constant, though the idea of beauty itself was not. The need to love and be loved was a constant, if not the shape of desire. The feeling of brotherhood, of kinship, of shared endeavor—all these things came through to Storm.

In the telescoping of time, millions of years passed in a handful of seconds for Storm.

The star cluster that had looked so insignificant before now took on presence and majesty as the slim ship neared into its midst. The heavens were blazing with glory. Somewhere in that arc of radiance, Storm knew, was the Sun of Earth—a small sun, a yellow sun, a not very important sun in all this fiery splendor.

The ship moved through the new galaxy, stopping at this world and at that. The galaxy swarmed with planets and with life. Giant red stars and searing blue ones, shrunken white dwarfs and drab little yellow and green ones.

And still the journey continued.

Storm sensed the approach of familiar territory. Yes, there was Earth's sun now, looking like a pinpoint of yellow light as the aliens viewed it from the frozen wastelands of Pluto. Inward they came, dodging from one planet to the next, slicing across orbits as it pleased them. Barren Uranus, and vast Neptune, and vaster, triple-ringed Saturn, and mighty Jupiter—the expedition landed on each world. Storm wondered at the calm way the aliens came down on planets Earthmen did not dare to tread. The crushing gravity of the three giant planets did not seem to trouble them at all.

Storm saw Mars, red but green-dappled, looking younger and fresher and far more alive than he had ever seen it. Were there seas on Mars? Yes! And life—cities—intelligent creatures—

He knew that the journey he was experiencing had taken place millions of years before, and the knowledge chilled him. Yet he was able to set at least a hazy limit on the voyage's duration, because there was no planet between Mars and Jupiter. The explosion that had wrecked that world had already taken place. The asteroids pebbled the sky.

Storm longed for a view of Earth as it had been in the days when Mars had seas. He wondered what he would see there? Snorting dinosaurs locked in mortal combat? Flapping sea-creatures hesitantly crawling to land? Or scurrying mammals hiding timidly in the strange underbrush?

He never found out. He could see Earth, blue-green and inviting, hovering nearby in space. But the expedition did not reach it. The catastrophe struck while the ship was still crossing the orbit of the asteroid belt.

The alien told the tale without passion, without weeping. Something had gone wrong. The miraculous mechanisms that powered the ship rebelled. Not even the super-science of the beings from the far stars could halt the runaway destruction.

The ship exploded.

Storm quivered and shook as the image formed itself in his mind. He saw the hideous black gash developing along the gleaming blue hull of the ship, and it was as though his own body were splitting open. He cried out, tried to halt what was happening, but there was no halting it.

The ship split like a seed-pod that had ripened. Storm watched in horror as five small figures spurted from the interior of the wrecked ship, their bodies congealing instantly, their blood freezing in their veins. Like dolls they spun in orbit.

Another convulsion. Four more of the star-creatures tumbled into space. Two of them had tried to protect themselves, had donned the masks they wore when visiting strange worlds, but they had not had enough time, and they died too. The ship's atmosphere was gone, now. The chill of space penetrated everywhere, and even those who had remained on board died now.

All but one.

He had moved with instinctive reaction, donning his protective garb at the first quiver from the ship's engine, and he alone survived the moment of destruction. Dazed, stunned, he clung to a bulkhead while explosion after explosion rocked the ship, while the sweet atmosphere he knew vanished into the void.

The fury seemed to end. The ship was quiet. Sadly, the star-being explored the ruins of the ship aboard which he had voyaged so long. He saw his comrades dead, twisted and distorted, their bodies hideous to behold. He realized, finally, that he was alone.

He worked quickly, with the energy of complete despair. One of the lifeboats had escaped destruction.

Speedily, he stocked it with everything that remained undamaged aboard the ship. He loaded the little craft with instruments whose function Storm could not even begin to guess at, and prepared to take his leave, the long voyage at its unexpected end.

Before he could quit the ship, one final explosion racked it. He was within the lifeboat already, and when the explosion came it hurled him hard against the walls, and he lay there a long time, a trickle of blood seeping from his lips, his limbs broken. There was silence again.

Febly, he activated the controls. The mother ship, he realized, had been blown to fragments. There was nothing left of it, or of the corpses of his comrades. He had been lucky to survive.

Where to go?

While stocking the lifeboat, he had thought of heading for Mars, which looked inviting enough from a distance. But that was out of the question, now. The lifeboat, twisted and half-wrecked, could never make it across a gulf of more than 100 million miles.

Where, then?

Not far away, an asteroid orbited. It was nothing more than a chunk of rock, barren and forbidding, without atmosphere, without water. But it was the only landfall within reach. The star-being's decision had been made for it.

He forced his broken body to obey. Activating the lifeboat, he guided it down, brought it to a landing in a plain on the tiny asteroid. There he rested, for a staggeringly long while, letting his body knit once again before venturing from the ship.

A driving need to survive impelled him to feats that should have been impossible for him. Using tools from the lifeboat, he carved a dwelling for himself, blasting it out of the living rock—a tunnel, and a chamber. He hauled his salvaged equipment inside. He set up a force-field to screen himself from the savagery of his environment, and within the force-field generated an atmosphere for himself. Then he rested.

Recuperation was a slow process. He cast himself into a sleep beyond sleep, and for thousands of years he slept, while his body rebuilt its strength.

His body knit together. It would never be truly whole again, but at least he could move without too much pain. He was still too weak to leave the cave, and thousands of years passed before he ventured outside.

He was alone.

That was the hardest fact to accept. His was not a race that enjoyed solitude. There was always contact with others, always the comforting feeling of another mind nearby, and now there was a silence that held terrors. No member of his race was within a million light-years. Not even the super-minds of his species could span such a gulf.

He was alone, cut off from all contact with his own kind.

Of course, he had certain resources. His memory was perfect and permanent, and he could relive happier days with complete clarity and an illusion of reality. He spun away hundreds of millennia that way. But ultimately it became a hollow pastime.

He was alone—and no natural cause could kill him.

A prisoner for all eternity!

His only hope was to build a beacon that would reach his home world and bring a rescue party. But it was not an easy task, and he had to rack his mind, plumb his memories. He cannibalized his useless lifeboat for it.

The years passed. The seas of Mars grew dry, and bitter winds swept the red planet, driving all life away. On Earth, a two-legged mammal came to supremacy, invented civilization for itself, built pitiful little empires. And still the castaway of the stars toiled on in lonely exile.

He built the beacon, finally. He tested it, and it seemed to work, and he sent a message off to his home world. But he knew there was little hope of a quick rescue. His thoughts travelled at a speed that could not be measured, but his beacon wave was limited by the speed of light, and had half the heavens to cross before it reached a listening ear. Suspended in the force-field of his cave, snug in his nest, the castaway slept, and rested, and husbanded his strength.

Then came an intruder.

The alien sensed the presence of another being on the asteroid. Tentatively, timidly after so long an isolation, the star-creature sent out a faint probe, but drew back in uncertainty. It was, he knew, one of the creatures from the blue-green planet, one of the two-legged ones. The castaway hesitated and finally decided not to make contact at all.

Almost at once, the intruder went away. But a short time later, other intruders came. Their mental vibrations jarred the alien; these were harsh, crude, greedy people, whereas the first visitor had seemed to have a kind of honesty and integrity about him. The star-wanderer had no intention of making contact with these newcomers.

But they made contact with him.

They stumbled on his cave by accident, and explored it with trepidation, and came upon the glowing curtain, and saw the creature that lay beyond it, surrounded by the salvaged instruments from the ship that had perished millions of years before. They stared, and murmured in awe, and began to scheme to turn their discovery to their own use. And the alien, cringing with distaste, was helpless.

Here the vision ended. Here the dream shattered, and Storm, his eyes dazzled with the light of distant suns, blinked in confusion.

* * *

Storm said, "What do they plan to do with you?"

Kill me, I suppose.

"But why?"

I am a threat to them, they think. First they will torture me, to get from me the secrets of my instruments. And then they will kill me.

"What do they know about your instruments?" Storm asked.

Very little, really, the alien responded. But they are shrewd beings. They have guessed that there is power in them—the power to rule the solar system.

"Only if you show them how to use them!"

They have their ways of extracting knowledge, the alien said gently.

Storm stared at the distant figures of Ellins and his workers. His mind went back over the things the star-being had just said, and over the miraculous voyage that still glowed in his memory.

Yes, Storm thought. There was great power in those gleaming banks of machinery. He could only guess at the nature of the instruments. The power to carve tunnels out of solid rock? Yes, certainly. Anti-gravity machines? Probably. Atmosphere manufacturers? Food-manufacturers? Power sources that would draw energy from the structural bones of the universe itself?

It was a cave of miracles, no doubt of it.

Storm thought of such things falling into the hands of the UMC, and was sickened.

"It cannot be prevented, the alien said. Unless you help me defeat them.

"Won't you tell me how I can help?"

Later, the alien said. There was a note of sadness in the star-creature's voice. We must both find the strength to do it, you and I. Never in all our history has a member of my race knowingly taken an intelligent life. But there are certain emergencies that transcend even the most ancient of codes.

Storm did not answer. He was chilled by this new vision the alien had presented.

It was not a vision of evil. The Universal Mining Cartel was an impersonal entity, beyond evil and beyond good as well. Individual members of the cartel might be evil, as they chose, but not the cartel itself.

What Storm saw was a vision of concentrated power. Armed with the technology of an ancient super-race, UMC could put itself beyond the control of any political organization. It would become, even more than it was already, a super-state, a government in its own right. It would automatically become the richest, most invulnerable state that had ever existed.

Could UMC's technicians solve the secrets of the alien's cave?

Storm did not doubt that they could. Oh, it would take time, a generation or two of tinkering, but eventually the gleaming instruments would yield up their mysteries, and a billion years of evolution would be vaulted in a single leap.

And if UMC could make the alien co-operate, could torture him into revealing those secrets, it would happen so much the faster.

Would the alien be able to resist?

Storm doubted it. The star-being had great mental powers—obviously. But physically he was weak, weak as a baby. His was not a physically strong race to begin with, and this was a crippled, accident-broken individual, his strength sapped by a loneliness of millions of years. And these gentle creatures were not trained in self-defence. They were incapable of violence. The castaway might find himself helpless before UMC's greed.

"We've got to stop them," Storm muttered.

Yes. That is why I risked making contact with you. I sensed you were different. I gambled that

you would help me against them.

"I'll do whatever I can," Storm declared. "But I don't see how—"

Be patient. You will understand all, in time.

Storm wondered what they could do to keep the treasures of the cavern from falling into UMC's hands.

It looked hopeless.

It was abundantly clear, now, why the cartel had gone to such extraordinary lengths to get the asteroid away from him. Not for the cesium and lithium and gallium it contained, certainly. UMC did not play dirty for such small stakes. But the presence of the alien—and the things stored in the alien's cave — altered all the ground rules.

The asteroid now was worth billions to UMC, worth any sort of skulduggery to get. What did it matter if they compromised their corporate image in obtaining it — with such wonders as the prize? The alien said, We will defeat them.

"How? How?"

Patience. Build your strength. Our time will come.

The alien said no more. Storm was still aware of the contact in his mind, but he heard no further words from the star-rover. He knew the alien was there, though. He could feel the imperceptible changes taking place within him. He felt stronger, not physically but in some indefinable sense. For all his depression and pessimism, there was yet a sensation of tremendous well-being.

But still his wrists were trussed, still his ankles were bound. And, he knew, he was a great deal closer to death.

* * *

Some time afterward, Ellins and his work crew re-entered the dome, their labors finished for the time being. Several "days" and "nights" had passed on the asteroid, which spun on its axis every few hours, presenting now this face, now that to the distant, pale sun.

Ellins stripped off his space-suit and strode over to the corner of the dome where Storm lay. He glanced down, his eyes unfriendlier than ever.

"Still thinking it over?" Ellins asked. "You know, I'm getting tired of having you around."

"Just say the word and I'll get into my ship and clear off, Ellins."

"Funny man. There's only one way you'll get into that ship of yours, and that's as a corpse."

"You don't sound friendly."

Storm's calmness seemed to bother the UMC man. He hunkered down in an awkward squat, so that his face was on a level with Storm's, and said in a low, angry voice, "Come on, now! Stop fooling around. For the last time, will you take the five million and renounce your claim?"

"No."

"I said, for the last time. If you're a praying man, you better do some praying."

Storm managed a mirthless smile. "You ought to know one thing, Ellins. If I don't get back to Mars on schedule, there's a bank vault that's going to be opened. And in that vault is the whole story of what happened to my claim—including the name of the man who bribed the record-keeper. And that's you, Ellins."

A muscle flicked momentarily in Ellins' cheek. But he did not look at all demoralized by Storm's revelation. Storm had played his trump, and it did not seem to be taking any tricks.

Ellins said easily, "I figured you'd do a thing like that. Well, it's all right with me. What I found on this asteroid will make the UMC brass very warmly inclined toward me, Storm."

"You mean the alien?"

"I mean what I mean," Ellins said. "We'll ride out any fuss that your little bank vault document might stir up. We'll squash it the way we cut you out of the computer records. You aren't fooling around with small fry, Storm. Yes or no, Storm."

He had run out of bluffs. He couldn't stall any longer. Where was the alien now? Storm wasn't even sure he felt the contact any more. He hadn't heard a word from the star-being in a half hour.

If he signed that waiver, he was finished. Ellins would transmit it to Mars instantly, and no matter what the alien planned to do, it wouldn't affect the fact that Storm had conveyed title to the asteroid to UMC.

But if they threw him out of the airlock, he was finished in a much more permanent way. Taking the wealth, though, meant selling the asteroid, selling not only a billion dollars' worth of rare ores, but selling the alien too. Storm hesitated at that.

Where was the alien? Why was he silent?

"Speak up, Storm," Ellins prodded.

One final time, Storm weighed the alternatives. He couldn't sign the waiver. He couldn't. The instant it was done, his recourse was gone.

The only thing to do, he decided, was to choose the other alternative, and hope that the alien could work whatever miracle he promised.

In a wavering voice Storm said, "I'm not going to sell you anything, Ellins."

Ellins shrugged in relief. "Okay. That settles that. Get the wire off him, boys. When he walks the plank he'll do it on his own two feet."

They snipped the wire away.

Storm watched, his face rigid, as Ellins picked up Storm's space helmet and studied the face-plate for a moment. He found the servo controls, pondered them, made a tiny adjustment. The face-plate swung open and stayed there.

"How unfortunate," Ellins said with a cold smile. "The mechanism seems to have sprung. I understand that can be a real catastrophe, when your face-plate pops open and there's nothing but high vacuum around you." Ellins laughed.

Two of them held him open while a third kept a gun jammed into his kidneys. Ellins approached, holding the helmet. Storm didn't try to break free. At best, he could land a solid kick in Ellins' midsection, but a moment later there would be a hole eight inches wide running through his body.

Storm allowed Ellins to put the helmet back on.

The face-plate dangled open.

"Okay. Let go of him," Ellins said. "Just keep the gun in his back, Storm, you can start walking toward the airlock. If you decide you'd rather sign the waiver, all you have to do is say so. Some time in the next 60 seconds, that is. After that I'm afraid it won't do you much good to change your mind."

Stony-faced, wordless, Storm began to cross the dome toward the lock. It wasn't going to be a pleasant death, he knew, although it would be a fairly quick one. He could picture it clearly enough. The permoplast wall of the air lock would slide shut behind him, and the wall in front would open, and he would step from the protection of the dome into the nothingness of the asteroid outside.

Such air as there was in his spacesuit would go whooshing out into the void in an instant. The air in his body would try to escape too, pressing outward at 15 pounds per square inch, and there would be no countervailing suit-pressure to press inward.

He tried not to think of what would happen. He wondered how many seconds he would have to endure the pain before death came.

The lock was only a few steps away. Storm thought of Liz, back on Earth so many millions of miles away.

Then he thought of what the future of mankind would be like if UMC grabbed the alien's treasures.

"Where are you?" he asked softly, hoping the alien was listening.

No reply came.

The airlock's inner door slid open.

"Get inside," Ellins ordered.

Where are you? Storm thought frantically.

He started to enter the lock.

Suddenly the silence broke, and Storm felt the contact re-establishing itself, and heard the welcome silent voice saying, I am almost ready. Another few seconds—can you delay them?

chapter 6

STORM halted at the brink of the airlock and turned to look into Ellins' gleaming, expectant eyes.

"I've changed my mind," Storm told him. "I'll sign your paper. I'll take the money."

Ellins laughed harshly. "I knew you would. No man's fool enough to turn down a deal like that." Ellins barked orders over one shoulder. "Whitey, get me that paper! Gus, set up radio contact with Mars!"

Storm waited near the airlock panel.

Are you ready? he asked the alien.

Just one more moment, Storm heard the alien say. My people are conditioned against taking intelligent life. It violates our every precept. But you have no such qualms.

"Especially not in self defence," Storm said.

The alien went on. What we will try now is very dangerous. It may kill both of us. Are you willing to risk it?

"Yes," Storm whispered, thinking of the gleaming machines of the cave.

The alien said, We must join our minds. I will use you as a mental focus, and through you I will

attempt to strike down these men. I will use your strength. The death blow will come from your mind, and not from mine. Only in that way can I function.

Ellins said, "All right, Storm. Here. Sign this and I'll beam it to Mars to be recorded. We'll have a certified cheque for you right away. Signed, sealed, and delivered. Then you can get the hell out of here.

"Let's see what I'm supposed to sign," Storm said.

Storm scanned the paper.

The alien said, I am ready now. You must let me enter your mind to the deepest, now. It will be more painful than before, but it cannot be helped. I need your full co-operation. I cannot enter unless you throw your mind willingly open to me now.

"Does it read okay to you?" Ellins asked.

"Oh, Yeah. Yeah."

"Then sign it, and stop wasting time."

"All right," Storm said vaguely. "Just a minute, will you? I'm trying to think of something."

"He's stalling, chief," one of the other UMC men said. "Why don't he sign?"

"Just a second, will you?" Storm said. "Another second won't matter!"

He could feel the alien probing at his mind again — the same feathery touch as before. How did you go about opening your mind. Storm wondered?

The alien's probing grew more urgent.

What if he doesn't make contact? Storm asked himself.

Please, came the silent voice. You are not concentrating. Clear your mind. Make it a blank. Admit me!

Storm replied, I'm trying. You're part way in now anyway, aren't you? Can't you manage it?

The alien did not respond verbally. But Storm felt the pressure intensify. He was glad, now, for the extra strength that the star-creature had endowed him with. He knew he could not have withstood such a probe earlier.

Storm was dimly aware that Ellins was saying something to him, but he did not pay attention. His mind was riveted on the problem of attaining union with the alien. Another probe came, and another, and yet another, more intense than any that had gone before.

Yes, Storm thought! Yes! Yes! I'm open! I'm waiting!

He closed his eyes, blotting out the puzzled, uneasy faces of the UMC men, and threw back his head, and let all thought drain from his mind. He waited, receptive, open, offering no hindrance.

The alien thrust.

Storm tottered, nearly dropped to his knees as the impact hit him.

"Looks like he's having a stroke, chief," one of Ellins' men said. "What's going on?"

His face worked in agony. He could feel the alien's very being flooding into him, could feel the union of the star-creature's mind and his own. It rocked the Earthman to his core. There was pain, stunning pain, and he felt that his skull would burst.

But it was happening. The merging. The union. The joining. Storm could feel it happening, and despite the pain he welcomed the ancient being joyfully, throwing his mind wide, admitting the star-creature fully.

And then—

Oneness!

It lasted only the merest fraction of a moment. Storm never knew just how brief the union was. For him, it could have lasted a millisecond or a million years, there was no way of telling which.

He stood erect, swaying a little, his mind blurring under the impact of finding out what it was like to be hundreds of millions of years old. He knew.

He saw the alien's home world, through the alien's eye, and his heart cried out at the beauty of that far-off planet. A greenish-gold sun filled the sky, and through groves of strange trees and shrubs walked the alien's people, smiling, peaceful, their minds intertwined in delicate congress. It was a vision of harmony, a city beyond all human dreams, a greatness humanity could not hope to attain for millions of years.

Storm knew what it was like to have been born on that world, to be a member of its harmonious society.

Storm also knew what it meant to leave that world, and voyage on an eternal journey.

He had experienced that journey once, but it had seemed vividly real to him before, it was almost frighteningly so now. He was caught up in the cross-current of emotions aboard the ship,

Now he learned what it was like for immortals to die. He learned, too, what it was like for a member of this race to survive the death of his comrades.

For the first time, John Storm really understood what loneliness meant, what exile meant.

In that blinding fraction of a second he relived millennia of isolation in a cave on a barren chunk of rock. He felt the pain of the crippled alien. He shared the task of building the beacon that hopefully would bring a rescue team some time.

All this passed through Storm's mind in that single tiny fragment of an instant. No longer was the alien telling him things. He was the alien, and the alien was John Storm.

A sense of godlike strength swept through Storm. The universe was his for the taking.

He reached out.

Mars was first. Storm's enhanced mind embraced the 10,000 souls of Marsville. He felt the busy ambitions there, the envy and the covetousness, and also the hard work, the drive to build a city in barren desert.

But he could reach past Mars. He could reach all the way to Earth.

His mind recoiled, at first, as he brushed against those swarming seven billions. But the alien's strength buoyed him up, and he was able to fulfill his purpose. He descended into the crowded warrens of Earth, in search of a particular person.

Liz.

He touched her mind, and felt the warmth of it, and beamed his own love, and felt her response of love, sensed her eagerness for his return. Storm saw her frown, puzzled at the contact in her mind.

Come, said the voice in his mind, and there was no longer any way of telling whether the voice was the alien's or that of his own thoughts.

Yes, came the shared reply. We are ready.

It was so terribly, terribly easy.

The same that he had reached out to Earth for a moment's contact with Liz, Storm reached out for the minds of the UMC men.

He encountered Ellins' mind first, and probed it with his double strength. There was resistance, but not enough to matter.

It was like entering a pit of worms.

Storm did not linger long. He had no desire to remain and inspect Ellins' mind.

It was the equivalent of twisting a water tap. One moment the water flowed, and then the tap was turned, and the flow ceased. That was what Storm did. A little twist, a mental twist, and the dense, sickening flow of Ellins' thoughts ceased.

The others presented even less of a challenge. They lacked the fibre Ellins had, and offered no resistance. One by one, Storm entered them and—turned them off.

It was done.

I have killed, came the inner thought, and it was the alien's thought alone.

We have killed, Storm corrected.

Storm felt the linkage beginning to slip. With the task accomplished, the alien was withdrawing. And they were re-establishing separate identities.

Yes, the alien agreed. We have killed!

No, Storm cried in panic. No! Don't leave me! Stay!

I must, came the quiet reply.

In a moment more, the alien had withdrawn from Storm's mind.

He was alone again.

The shock of separation stunned him. He stood upright for a moment, shivering, sobbing in sudden isolation as contact with the alien broke. Then Storm's strength failed him, and he fell headlong, dropping like a tree.

★ ★ ★

The return to consciousness was almost unbearably agonizing.

Storm woke, and opened his eyes uncertainly. There was a hammering in his head. His eyes ached as though he had just been through a thirty-g acceleration.

He rose to his knees, and crouched there a moment.

He saw the UMC men.

They looked peaceful enough. Their passing had been quick and merciful. Ellins was sprawled only a few feet from Storm, and the others were strewn like dolls in a wide circle around them. Storm felt a qualm of pity.

Where was the alien's voice? Storm felt no contact at all. The solitude was crushing. In that single moment of union, he had shared his existence with the being from the stars as no two human

beings had ever shared it. It had been a kind of marriage. Storm reflected in wonder. A kind of marriage. And a swift divorce.

"Are you all right?" Storm asked, his voice sounding forced and hollow to himself.

No answer from the alien.

The effort, perhaps, of what they had just done, had strained the alien, Storm decided. Perhaps he—
—it?—was resting.

Storm got to his feet. He was still weak, but the strength was returning rapidly to him. He crossed to Ellins, looked down at him, saw that he and all the others were really dead. Storm picked up the document he had been asked to sign.

He looked around in satisfaction. The authorities were going to be mystified by this, he thought. He would report that he had gone out to the asteroid to investigate a story that UMC was trying to jump his claim. That he had found a UMC base already established there, but that everyone in it was mysteriously dead.

Storm didn't care. The asteroid was his again. UMC would not dare to fight his claim, after being caught redhanded installing orbit-changing rockets.

All that was fine. But now he had to see after the alien.

It took him a little while to find the alien's tunnel. It was night, on the other side of the asteroid, and the only illumination came from the stars, and from the faint beam of Storm's helmet.

There was no contact with the alien, none at all. Storm was frightened, now.

He came to the final bend in the tunnel, and rounded it, and gasped.

The greenish-yellow cloud-curtain that had screened the star-beings' chamber was all but gone. Nor was the alien floating high above the chamber floor any longer. He lay in a huddled heap.

And the machinery—the glittering, fantastic instruments from a distant world—

Ruins!

Storm gaped at the sight. Everything destroyed, all the wonderful treasures shattered.

"Are you all right?" Storm asked.

The alien's voice came, feebly, haltingly: I wish—to thank you—for your—help—

"What happened here?" Storm demanded.

"Why is everything in ruins?" Storm demanded. I destroyed it, came the answer.

"Why? Why?"

They must not be used by your race, the alien told him. You are not ready—far from ready. These things could have ruined your civilization. They are things no young race can have. They must be developed—not taken from others—

"But you could have seen to it that they didn't fall into the wrong hands," Storm said.

You do not—understand. Any hands would have been—the wrong hands—any human hands.

Storm saw what the alien was too tactful to tell him directly. Only a fool or a madman gives a loaded gun to a child, and this creature was neither.

"And you?" Storm said. "You sound so weak!"

I am dying, the alien responded. The effort of doing what we did—I knew it would kill one of us. I am happy it was not you.

"No!" Storm shouted. "Don't die! Maybe your people will rescue you soon!"

Not for many years. And I am not sad at dying. At last to rest—no longer to be alone.

Storm stared. For an instant, he felt a touch of the warmth of contact that he had known earlier, but it faded. The surge of mental energy needed to merge with Storm's mind and wipe out the threat Ellins posed had drained the alien's life-force, and he was dying.

Helplessly, Storm watched the being ebb away.

There was a sudden sensation of coldness, of air rushing down a corridor, and Storm knew that death had come. Storm turned away. He no longer could comprehend anything of this.

Slowly Storm turned, and made his way through the tunnel again. His ship was waiting, where he had left it. He clambered up the ladder, entered, explored his gear until he found what he wanted: a small explosive charge, the kind used in making mining surveys.

He returned to the cave, and set the charge, and ran into the clear again, and waited. There was no sound, of course. Storm counted off 60 seconds in his mind, and knew that the charge had erupted by now. He entered the cave once again, but this time he could penetrate only to the second bend. Beyond that, the roof of the tunnel had collapsed in the explosion.

Storm entered his ship. He sat at the controls for a long while, motionless, dazed, like a man emerging from a dream so vivid that it still captivated his waking mind. Then, shaking his head to clear it, he straightened up, and began to set the computer for blastoff.

The asteroid was his.

He needed only to return to Mars and claim it. No one need ever know of the creature in the cavern. That would be Storm's secret.

★ ★ ★

Liz said, "I've often wondered what it's like to be a multi-millionaire's wife."

Storm grinned. They stepped out on the terrace of their hotel, and looked out at the tropical glory below them. The sea was heartrendingly beautiful, the deepest blue they had ever seen, as it came rolling up against the crescent of the beach.

"Now you know," he said. "What's it like?"

"It's just like being the wife of a pauper," she said. "Except more comfortable. Otherwise it's exactly the same—provided the man is you."

"Provided," Storm said. He slipped his arm around her. They had been man and wife for three days. They would have two weeks together, and then he would have to leave her briefly—to return to his asteroid, and supervise the start of mining activities there. After that there would be no more separations.

Liz looked up at him. "There's one strange thing I've been meaning to tell you. Don't say it's silly, though."

"What is it?"

"One night, when you were away up there—I felt you were calling to me, Johnny. It was the weirdest thing. You seemed to be reaching out, to be touching me with your mind—and I knew it was you, and I told you I loved you, and I asked you to come home quick, and you said you would."

Storm chuckled and said, "It must have been a dream."

"But it was so real, Johnny!"

He smiled, but made no answer, and thought of a curious little creature huddling in a cave on a tiny worldlet. Sadness stole over him.

And another thought, a thought that had been recurring almost obsessively in the past few weeks. For thousands of years, the alien had broadcast a beacon beam. Those beamed impulses were streaking unstopably across space, and some day they would be picked up by monitoring stations of the alien race.

They would send out a rescue party, of course. They would cross the gulf of space, in search of their lost comrade. Perhaps it would be in the near future, or perhaps not for thousands of years. Storm wondered what would happen to Earth when those unimaginably advanced creatures came to visit.

Here we are, thinking we're kings of the universe, lords of creation. And then they come, gentle and friendly, but as far beyond us as we are beyond toads and snails—

He shrugged the thought away. It was not his problem to face. Time would supply the answers.

Meanwhile, the asteroid was his, and Liz was his, and the future was his. One other thing was his: the dazzling memory of that tremendous moment when he linked minds with the creature from the stars, and saw that gleaming city in all its splendor.

"Tell me about your daydream?" Liz said.

"I can't," he said softly. "It's—it's just a silly dream. It doesn't matter. How about a swim?"

"Love one," she said.

He smiled at her, and drove the dream from his mind, and they ran hand in hand down to the cool, swirling water, laughing as they ran.

—THE END—

COMING NEXT WEEK!

Donald Lam and Bertha Cool, as hard-headed as ever, are hired to bodyguard young Marilyn Cholan—Donald on the day shift, Bertha at night. But Bertha's chaperonage is evaded and Marilyn is involved in murder. Donald conducts his own investigation, uncovering a blackmail plot, but as usual gets himself involved, too! Read Part 1 of

FISH OR CUT BAIT

by A. A. Fair