

PLANET STORIES



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The Little Pets of Arkkhan

BY VASELEOS GARSON

Lovable little balls of fur, incongruous on this bleak asteroid, forlorn and lonely . . . who could be blamed for picking one up to take along—or for what happened thereafter?

AT FIRST, it was only a spider thread of sound. It was so soft, so caressing that it was like some healing unguent to the throbbing, burning boil that was Kent Knight's brain.

Tender and soothing as a wind-wafted melody in the first hush of evening, his grateful mind whispered. Then his mind was screaming as the spider thread grew jagged edges that clawed open the first pain wounds and tore them wider.

Knight lay on the hot rocky plain of the asteroid, sprawling convulsively where

he was thrown when the first sharp hurt slashed at his mind.

And it was such a lovely little beastie. All furry and round and soft. What awful power did it hold? I just touched it. Like an Earthly kitten, a little furry butterball. I should have known better, but it was like being on Earth again.

That faint wondering thought whispered through the pain. But it was flung from him as his pain-frantic brain raged at his nerves, knotted and twisted his muscles.

There was too much agony for his mind



"Look out!" Knight called. But the thing was quicker than Mallory.

to absorb. Knight sensed the waning of his mind's last resources with relief. The mental shocks ceased, his nerves and muscles quieted, and he drifted into a gentle darkness where there was no pain . . .

. . . *It's gone*, his mind observed gleefully. The thankful knowledge that wakefulness did not bring renewed pain smothered the *other thing*. But only for a moment.

Kent Knight. I am Kent Knight, I must remember that. I mustn't forget it. I mustn't let It make me forget. I am a man. My shipmates and I crashed on this asteroid in the Star Climber.

The *other thing* laughed at him—in him. The wee bit of Kent Knight which the *other thing* couldn't take or didn't want urged him to his feet. *It* didn't seem to mind his doing that much.

Knight drew his lean, rawboned frame erect. His muscles didn't hurt any more, he realized. He ran his strong fingers—which were shaking now—through his brown hair, ruffling the rock dust out of it. He looked toward the green oasis on the far side of the rocky plain where his friends were.

It's hard to remember that I am Kent Knight. It doesn't really matter anyway. No, Kent Knight, that's the other thing! I am six feet tall. I weigh one hundred and seventy pounds. I have brown hair. My eyes are hazel with funny blue flecks in them. Remember? Looks like somebody punched at them with a sharp blue pencil—that's what Mary Jo said.

I wonder if Sammy's drunk. That last time just before we crashed should have been a drunk to finish even Sammy, his big, broken nose, shiny, bald head and all.

Yes, I know you know my every thought, Thing! You've stolen my mind. But you cannot steal me. I am Kent Knight. I am a man. You, Thing, are my enemy and man's enemy.

It chuckled in Knight's mind.

"You are whistling in the dark, fool. Have you not wondered why you crashed on this wandering asteroid? We Arkkhans willed you here. There was nothing wrong with your ship—we willed you to crash because we wanted weak creatures like you.

"You are the first we found whose minds are strong enough to contain us without destroying the motor impulses."

The Thing filled Kent Knight's mind with a thousand scenes and chuckled as the horror spread like wildfire through the little that was left of Kent Knight.

"No!" Knight cried, the muscles in his lean throat convulsing.

SUDDENLY, Kent Knight began to run. He didn't want to, but his long sinewy legs drove him across the rocky plain at reckless speed, and his mind would not answer his frantic orders to stop. His lungs burned and screamed as they sucked in the asteroid's thin air, and his heart was a writhing, sobbing thing within his straining chest.

One ankle caught between two rough hands of rock and broke, but he did not stop running. Each time the weight of his body fell fully upon that fractured bone, it splintered a little more until the shards were sharp daggers biting into what mind still belonged to Kent Knight.

Then the other foot—the right one—stepped on a razor-edged rock that cut through flesh, bone and sinew, but still Kent Knight ran on. The Thing was chuckling at the stabbing pain signals.

Finally *It* said, "No, Kent Knight?" *It* released control, and Knight sprawled on the hurting rock, the blows and stabs of the rough plain against his body unfelt through the agony of his crippled feet.

"I hate you, Thing." Knight's deadly thought reached for the Thing within his mind. Then Kent Knight cradled his head in his arms and sobbed uncontrollably, his shoulders shaking convulsively, his whole body trembling with rage and agony.

"Why rebel, Earthling? You cannot prevail against us. So simple it was to hurt you. If you but accept your destiny as our hosts, it will be pleasant. Like this!"

The sense of peace which flooded through Kent Knight then was so deep and so full, he wanted to cry again—this time because he was happy and free of pain. For the agony in the broken ankle and the slashed foot was gone. The throb of the bruises, the aching loss of his individuality, of his will, the horror of his and mankind's destiny with the Arkkhans—all these were gone.

He stood up slowly and, for the first time since he picked up the strange furry little creature from its hiding place in a

rock crevice, he felt like Kent Knight.

He lifted his dirty face, streaked with tears, to where he knew Earth must be circling its familiar old sun. He whispered, "Thing, all my life I have feared pain. Ever since I was a kid back on Earth and my pup dug his needle teeth in my hand, I have hated and feared it.

"But peace at your price is not for me. If you don't mind," and Knight's full, almost sensual lips which loved pleasure so well twisted wryly as he spoke, "I'll take the pain."

He got it . . .

IT WAS Sammy's hoarse breath, saturated with liquor fumes, that was his first sensation when he finally crawled wearily back the molten road from his hell of pain.

His mind listened avidly, reaching out tenuous fingers, searching every nook and cranny of Kent Knight's brain, seeking out the Thing. The fingers grew surer, swifter as they worked through the brain, finding only pain. Then his desperate mind relaxed. Pain was something it understood; it could take care of that.

Knight opened his eyes. Sammy's blood-flecked black ones, popping as usual from his flushed face, stared into his eyes from only inches away.

"Cripes," muttered Knight. "Sammy, you're stinking drunk again!"

Sammy pulled his face back far enough so Knight could focus his eyes. He rubbed a huge blunt paw on his shiny pate, transferred the paw to his broken nose, tried unsuccessfully to straighten the sharp curve it made to the right before he answered, very slowly and very distinctly.

"You know, Kent, I do believe that you have made a highly astute and highly correct observation. I think, however, that you are guilty of an understatement when you say only stinking drunk. I have never in my binge-ridden life been as intoxicated as I am at this present moment."

He waved his paw at Knight.

"But, Kent, there is something very definitely wrong. Something is lousing up the usual beatific feeling I have after three quarts. Honest to gosh, Kent, I have been drinking for three days and three nights, but I can't go to sleep. I can't pass out. I can't get happy." He shook his bald

head, and the wall-light made it gleam like a highly polished egg.

"Hell, Kent," he exploded suddenly. "All I do is drink and, honest to gosh, it gets tiresome lifting and dropping a bottle all the time, day and night. But I can't stop. My mind keeps nagging at me to stay drunk. It's just like there was somebody in me with me." He was shaking his head like a puzzled child.

Kent Knight sat up slowly, looked first at his feet, then wiggled them. They were healed all right. At last he looked at Sammy. *So they'd got him, too. How many of the others have the parasites? And why has my Thing left me?*

Kent Knight stood up slowly, warily, fearing that the Thing would make his muscles flaccid, limp, uncontrollable by the wee bit of mind that still was his.

He looked around the sleeping cubicle he shared with Sammy. He looked at Sammy's bald pate, the harried black eyes, remembering.

"So I've been gone for three days and three nights, Sammy?" *I couldn't have been unconscious that long, his trammled mind thought, conscious of the unfelt shackles of the Thing. He walked slowly to the porthole. His eyes traveled out past the greensward to the rocky plain.*

"Asteroid time?" He asked. That wouldn't be so bad but . . .

"Chron time," Sammy muttered. Three Earth days and nights! *Where have I been?* His mind shuddered. *Its laughter was mocking.*

Kent Knight delved through his memory.

We were exploring, that was all, checking planets, planetoids and asteroids with an eye to colonization. We cracked up here. I went looking for lead to replace a burned-out rocket shield. I saw the pretty little beastie, a furry little ball. I touched it. And it had me. I wonder if it got Sammy the same way?

He started to put the question into words. But he didn't. The answer was there. A little butterball of fur came into view when Sammy shifted his seat on the floor. *Then where is mine?* He looked around the floor, then turned to where he'd lain on the floor. It was there, still begging to be touched. He bent toward it, but the memory of pain rose up sharp. He looked at it instead.

Sammy coughed. "You nervous, Kent? Want to participate in a little snort?" Sammy took a swig out of the bottle and offered it to Knight.

"No, Sammy. That's what put me on this hellish little ship, remember? Five years of exile from Earth." Sammy nodded owlishly, and said, in the cruel honesty of men who have been broken by the same thing, "It's man's great curse, but women are worse, and you had them both."

"Not women, Sammy, a woman—but she loved another guy so I just walked out."

"Correction, please," Sammy said. "You floated out." Sammy looked sad. "That was the trouble, Kent. You should have never stopped floating. Look at me. I'm happy and I stay that way because of liquor. But you stopped, and now look at you. In the three years I've been on this ship with you, you never have smiled once. Come on, have a drink."

Kent Knight shook his head. Sammy took an extra long snort. "Honest to gosh, Kent, there must be something wrong with this stuff. It's sobering me up."

Knight looked at Sammy, thinking, *Just wait until It starts talking to you.* He almost smiled at the thought. But his mind shuddered instead. Sammy was terror-stricken enough when the little D. T.imps talked to him. *It would drive him mad.*

As It is doing to me. Huh-uh, his mind whispered cautiously, *you don't trap me that easily.* Knight strode toward the cubicle door.

He followed the passageway to the outer lock and stepped out into the asteroid's thin but breathable air. *Hide our thoughts,* his mind urged, *and I will tell you something.* But *It* was listening. *Two times two is four, two times three is six—what do you want to tell me, mind?—is eight, two times five is—Sammy, careful, careful, careful!—fourteen, two times eight is sixteen—Sammy what? Sammy what, mind!—I don't understand—ty-two, two times twelve is—We can't hide from It, Mind—twenty-eight.* . . .

It was laughing! Knight's eyes flicked toward the spring where Captain Isaac Hansen was tasting the water.

"I know everything, Kent Knight," *It* chuckled. "I could tell you what your mind is trying to tell you but hide from me."

"Do you?" Knight's thought was list-

less. "Yes." The part that was still Kent Knight, though smothered by the Thing's presence, sighed, and Knight felt himself sigh almost in relief.

"No," Kent Knight said, and his lips were smiling. "You don't know what it's trying to tell me, Thing. We'll beat you. It will let me know and you won't know it."

"*I will know!*" The Thing's thought was sharp, almost angry, and it struck again with pain. But Kent Knight had hope again, and the pain didn't matter . . . too much . . .

WHEN it was gone, leaving only the echoes behind, Kent Knight raised himself to his feet, walked slowly toward the tiny spring where Captain Hansen was still tasting the water.

Captain Hansen, his seamed face beaming, looked up as Knight approached. His blue eyes were sparkling. "We can make millions on this water, Kent! It's the fountain of youth that Ponce de Leon sought! Why, look, I've sipped only about three ounces and look at my old hands. They're smooth and young as yours! And my face—see the fresh new skin!"

Kent Knight looked at the Captain's hands. They were age-gnarled, the knuckles big against the wizened fingers. Knight looked at the Captain's face. It was lined and rough and old. He thought, *Another manifestation of your powers, Thing? Make a man's dream come true? That is the Captain's dream. He wants never to grow old.*

But he said, and he actually put feeling into the words, "Why, you look like that picture of your son on your desk, Ike. But hadn't you better be careful? You don't know that water's strength. It might cause irreparable damage to you."

"That's right," Captain Hansen agreed. "I'm young enough now, don't you think?"

Knight twisted his lips into a smile he didn't feel, turned back toward the ship. Captain Hansen followed him, dancing.

Damn you, Thing!

It chuckled.

Knight leaned against the wall of the spacemen's mess, his eyes searching the crew members eating at the long table. *You can tell which ones still are fighting Them. They are the unhappy ones. But, God, so few of them!*

And we're hurtling toward Earth—to bring these parasitic thought-things to feed upon the minds of mankind. The ship is filled with them. Everywhere I go, my Thing whispers to those bodiless ones promising, promising, promising! Thought-conquerors . . . the power of thought had brought Man to the pinnacle of destiny. Now these—these Things—were stealing his birthright!..

"Do you see now how impossible it is, Earthman? We Arkkhans are so vastly superior to you, there is nothing you can do but bow to us? And you will be unutterably happy," his Thing thought.

Into Kent Knight's mind came the soft, sweet face of Mary Jo. *Mary Jo*. The thought was a caress—warm and tender as the touch of her hand. Mary Jo, whose warmth and brightness were life to him—even now when he had lost her forever.

He was remembering. . . .

He'd known it for a long time, ever since the night when the big, flame-thatched space captain had swerved gracefully over to their table and said,

"So this is your Faith, Kent. You're right, she's magnificent. No wonder you're the best damn spacer in the system. With a Faith like that, you couldn't help it." He knew it when she leaned almost unconsciously toward him, as if she feared Bob Mallory's mocking green eyes, his lean, almost hawk-like face.

And as the weeks wore on, the memory stayed with her for she would ask this and that about Mallory. And he would answer.

He knew for sure the second time the two met. They fought—not in just words, but with their eyes, with movements of their bodies. And he knew that he could not fight that lightning with the slow-burning flame that was his love.

So he said, and with the memory came the pain again, "You love him quite a bit, don't you." Her blue eyes had looked startled at first, then almost soft, then harried, "I guess I do, Kent. I'm sorry."

"No need to be sorry," he said. "This sort of thing happens all the time. I don't love you so much that life would stop without you. Besides, I like Bob, he's a good joe." I kissed her, he thought, and I knew I was a damn liar, or why did I go out and try to drink the distilleries dry? Sure,

it was a hurt pride—but I still kind of like Mary Jo.

The last words he said came back. "This is it, then, Mary Jo. Good-night, good luck, goodbye."

"I will give her to you, Kent Knight," the Thing said. "Your love will be the lightning. You can hold her in your arms, feel the warmth and excitement of her, knowing that she is yours. Nothing can take her from you."

For a moment, Kent Knight was tempted to let that little bit of mind that still was his be swallowed up by the Thing. But he remembered in time.

"Like Captain Hansen's fountain of youth?" his mind asked, and he laughed.

LIKE a magnified echo to his laugh came the excited clamor of the alarm bells. The signal board in the mess began to pulse redly. Approaching mass! Asteroid, wandering star, spaceship? Knight waited.

The look-out's voice came excitedly over the intercom. "SP ship! SP ship! And her nose is red!"

And her nose is red! Cut rockets or we'll blow you out of the universe. This was no routine SP check—that would have called for a yellow signal at the Space Patrol ship's bow.

It wanted to know what was the matter. Kent could feel its thought fingers searching hurriedly through his mind. And when it didn't find an answer it grew almost frantic in its headlong scrabbling. Kent Knight's mind was chuckling. He couldn't tell the Thing why, because he didn't know himself!

The muted thunder of the rockets to which his mind and ears had accustomed themselves suddenly cut out as Captain Hansen switched off the cys. Then there was a long moment of almost hurting silence, then the bow rockets began to fire and slow the ship.

The bow rockets ceased too, finally, and the silence came again. But all the while, Kent Knight's Thing was trying to find an answer.

Sammy came plowing into the mess, a sloshing bottle in one hand, his bald head glistening, his big nose twitching.

He said to Kent, "I knew it was too good to be true. I was just sitting in my

cubicle looking out and I saw the Moon. I conjectured that perhaps our exile had come to a premature end. But then that damn SP ship showed up."

Knight couldn't stop his mind quick enough. The Thing caught it in mid-flight, and stopped scrabbling. "So that is why. This is a prison ship and can come only so close to Earth. For a moment, I believed you Earthmen were stronger mentally than you are."

Hell, I should have known, Knight thought. This is the *Star Climber*. It's never been back to Earth since its maiden launching. It's not a prison ship exactly, just a place to live while you serve out your years of separation from Earth. And only an Earthman can know the poignant loneliness that comes when he is kept from seeing and smelling and hearing the loveliness of the planet that bore him. Five years of an indefinable torture—five years of loneliness and a sense of loss so deep that it brings you from sleep, screaming for Earth like a kid in the dark begs for his mother.

You go aboard the *Star Climber* or one of her sisters. They load you and supplies aboard. They salute you even in your punishment—you and the others who are serving the same sentences. Just before you step through the spacelock, you look up and see the beauty of Earth above you. You look down at the Moon's dusty plain.

And you set forth on your Odyssey of punishment. You can go anywhere you please. You can settle anywhere—on any planet. You can do anything you damn please so long as you stay half a million miles from Earth for the period of your sentence.

If you come closer than that, the SP ships will blow you into eternity if you do not heed them when their noses are red.

Like now.

Kent Knight strode to the viewplate and kicked it on.

Her nose was red all right. But it was fading, now that the SP's warning was heeded. But there were going to be explanations—the SP commander would come jetting across in his space suit, his regulation four-man guard behind him. "Explain why you have crossed the line," he would say. *Our story will have to be*

good, Thing, Kent Knight thought. Only an emergency will excuse the infraction. And it must be an honest-to-God emergency, or the *Star Climber* becomes a satellite of some lonely star for twice our original sentence. That should stymie you, Thing.

"Will they take our eyes, Kent?" Sammy asked anxiously, "and tow us to some god-forsaken spot and leave us?"

"I hope so, Sammy," Kent Knight breathed and the part of his mind that was his was chuckling at the Thing. *It* chuckled, too. "An SP ship can go to Earth," it said.

The bright flame of hope that had flared up in Kent Knight's heart was blown out by despair. Of course, what *would* stay the Things from taking over the minds of the SP crew?

"That is right," *It* agreed. "Nothing can stop us. Even now the commander is coming across."

KENT KNIGHT looked at the viewplate. A spacelock had opened, spewed forth five space-suited figures.

So many times I have done exactly what they are doing. Push the stud at your belt, feel the kick as the tiny cycs take hold and spit their energy from the jets at your back. Wonder why this exile-ship came across the line? You think: Are they waiting with guns, ready to blow us up when we step into the airlock? Or is there something terribly wrong? Has the loneliness made them mad so they risk coming back just to see Earth at closer range? Or are all of them dead?

I used to think all those things, Kent Knight. Remember? Then I walked away from Mary Jo, got sinking drunk, and tried to hide it when I took a ship out on patrol. So now a commander comes to find out why we have crossed the line.

Better help out Captain Hansen now. Don't want him to start talking about how young he looks.

Kent Knight strode out of the messhall, heading for the main airlock, Sammy and his bottle tagging along behind. All around him, Knight felt the excited whisper of the Things.

"I don't know what to tell them, Kent," Captain Hansen said anxiously. "I forgot all about the line. But something kept tell-

ing me, 'We're going home. We're going home . . .' and I just set the course. It seemed so natural, Kent."

"I know, Ike," Knight said softly. Then, as the turning levers on the inner lock moved, he added, "Here they come."

The five figures, bulky in their lead and rubberoid suits, their transparent helmets almost opaque as the lights within the ship reflected from them, closed the lock behind them. Four moved silently aside, two to stand on either side of the lock, while the commander strode toward Knight and Captain Hansen.

I must warn them, Kent Knight thought. They mustn't be taken by the Things. But I cannot move my lips. The Thing knows I want to speak. There is a way! he thought excitedly. The Thing became angry, began scrabbling through his mind, seeking the way, found it. "You will not forget to do it," It ordered. "Do it!"

With a sudden movement, Kent Knight's body grew taut. His left arm came up in a quick salute, and the SP commander suddenly stiffened, his four aides whipped atomic pistols out, held them at ready.

The left-handed salute! Knight's mind was laughing. *I fooled you, Thing! That's what I wanted to do, salute with my left hand. And you didn't catch the thought! We'll lick you now, Thing! Sure, you conquer by thought, but you can't conquer all of an Earthman's mind!*

The left-handed salute. To an SP man, that means danger, proceed with caution, destroy everything which you know or feel is inimical to you. So, Thing, just try to get them to pick up one of your fuzzy animals. The SP man's prime rule: When warned, distrust everything and everybody! You will live longer.

The SP commander left on his glassite helmet, turned on the little speaker.

"Damn my eyes," the rich vibrant voice which issued from the speaker exclaimed, "Kent Knight! Of all the exiles who should know better than to cross the line, it's you. But damn it, Kent, it's swell to see you." Gauntleted fingers reached to the SP commander's throat, twisted twice, and then pushed the glassite helmet back from a shock of flaming hair.

Even before the red hair was exposed, Knight had recognized the voice. Bob Mal-

lory, the lightning which had struck Mary Jo's love from him.

Please, God, the mind which still belonged to Kent Knight whispered, don't let the Things get him and his ship. He belongs to Mary Jo. She loves him, and he can't be her Bob Mallory with a Thing in his brain.

Ah, but what a sweet revenge! Here is the man who stole my girl. Let a Thing take his brain and let my Thing give me Mary Jo. If I cooperate I can be powerful among men. Just shake that gauntleted hand and he will have your Thing and you will have Mary Jo.

Mallory strode forward, his face smiling, one hand outstretched.

He is your enemy, Kent Knight. He brought you to this exile. He stole your Faith from you. No! The part that was still Kent Knight rebelled and the sharp stabbing memory of the pain he felt when he touched the furry little animal made him flinch. He stepped back instinctively from the outstretched hand.

It became angry. Through the tornado of pain which tore through his body, drowning out his will, Kent Knight heard his own voice saying, "Sorry, Bob, you startled me." Heard the words his lips voiced, the words which his pain-fighting mind couldn't silence. Saw his hand reach out, the hand he could not control, felt it clasp Mallory's firmly. Knew his lips smiled a smile of treachery masked in friendship.

The pain stopped. But it was too late for Mallory.

THE mocking green eyes slitted. The firm handclasp loosened. Then Bob was writhing on the deck, his handsome face grimacing, his body twisting and convulsing within the space suit.

I hope you're satisfied, Thing! Kent Knight's thought was bitter. You are giving him the pain that you gave me—pain that I wouldn't give to my worst enemy and he is a friend. Sure, he was a rival for Mary Jo, but he fought fair. I was hurt, too, sure, but it was the fortunes of love. But, see, even if I loved Mary Jo, I liked Bob. He's a grand guy. . .

Somehow, Thing, I will beat you. You have hurt a square guy. You have stolen his mind, just as you have stolen mine. You are destroying something fine and

beautiful. You have trampled on an Earthman's dream. For that and for Mary Jo, you will pay.

It said nothing.

His mind suddenly began to signal frantically. Knight's glance flashed to the four space guards at the portal, saw them recovering from their momentary paralysis at the sight of their commander writhing on the floor. The atomic pistols which had dropped unconsciously from the ready were coming up. The pinhole muzzles were centering on him.

"Wait!" Kent Knight's voice snapped authoritatively. "I warned him there was danger. Will you destroy me before I can explain?"

The four guardsmen hesitated. Knight said urgently, "Don't touch any living thing on this ship. Shoot anything down if it approaches you. Anything. We harbor terrible Thought Things which steal our minds. One has just seized your commander and—"

Knight's voice halted in mid-sentence.

I'm free, his mind was crying joyfully. It's gone. Act quickly, Kent Knight, act before it can come back. It is busy with Bob and he's strong enough to give it a battle so that It can't watch you, too.

Knight spun around swiftly, seeking Sammy. Sammy has the answer, his mind had said. Now to find it.

Sammy lay in one corner of the airlock entrance, one hand clutching his ever-present bottle. But for the first time in a week, Sammy had succumbed finally to the prodigious quantities of liquor he had consumed. He was sleeping like a child, the bottle held against his breast.

Kent strode over to him and reached down to shake Sammy awake. But before his hands touched the sleeping Sammy, his mind shrieked a warning. *Remember, Kent, you touched a furry beastie and you got the Thing. Careful Sammy doesn't give you his.*

Oh, Sammy, Kent Knight thought, you have the answer and then, damn you, Sammy, you pass out. Just when I'm free of my Thing—just when we need you and your answer most. Knight was angry for a moment, then his rage waned. He liked the guy, though he was always in an alcoholic fog. Unconsciously, he bent down and punched Sammy lightly in the jaw.

Instantly, he knew his mistake, and his mind cried out, *Fool! . . .*

He flinched in expectation. But nothing happened. There was no insidious fingering in his brain. A thought developed within him. *Do the Things sleep when their hosts sleep?*

Kent Knight looked thoughtfully at Sammy's bald head and at the crooked beak of a nose. *If they did, maybe Man could win after all.*

It chuckled.

The suddenness of it plunged Kent Knight back into despair. But then his mind rallied, and he was chuckling himself. *It wasn't inside him. Its presence wasn't strong enough.*

KENT turned slowly, and the heart died within him. Bob Mallory, green eyes haunted, stared at him over the bore of an atomic pistol.

"I don't know what awful power you have, Knight," his lips twisted painfully, "but it sure played hell with me. I was going to give you a break, but now . . ." Mallory pushed at the white stud, bringing the atomic gun to full power.

"Don't you feel *It*?" Knight asked desperately. "Don't you feel the Thing in your mind?"

"I feel nothing, Knight, except that you should be exterminated. Somewhere you have picked up the power to inflict agony by the touch of your hand. I can't let you take it to Earth as I know you're planning to do."

"Mary Jo," Knight said sharply. "Mary Jo." For a moment, the haunting look was gone from the green eyes, and Mallory's lips twisted in a smile. The tense fingers on the atomic gun relaxed.

In that instant, Knight acted. *Sorry, mind, he said under his breath, but we can take care of the Thing. It isn't talking to Bob.* He seized Mallory by the pistol arm, and thought desperately, *Bob, for the love of Mary Jo, remember the left-handed salute.*

He caught Mallory's thought, a frightened, anxious thing. *Something's wrong! Something's wrong. I feel it. What is it?*

Kent Knight felt *It* flow into him, saw Mallory's puzzled face, apologized to his mind and braced himself against the pain.

He kept his eyes fixed upon Mallory's

face, saw puzzlement spread over it, and laughed at the raging Thing. He would have thought that *It* could match the previous hurt, but the pain this time . . .

THE sound of his own sobs still was echoing in his ears when he awakened. His whole body ached, but his mind was numb and only partially felt the signals. He opened his eyes, and there was Sammy.

"Hello," Sammy said matter-of-factly. "I do hope you had a pleasant sleep while I battled over your body."

"It wasn't a pleasant sleep, Sammy. But what do you mean, battled over my body?"

"Exactly that, my good man," Sammy reported. "They moved us all to the SP ship, taking us to Earth for observation. Earth! Just imagine it, Kent. For the first time in three years, we'll be seeing home." He upended his bottle, his adam's apple bobbing.

"And I can obtain some honest-to-gosh Earth whiskey. No more of this stuff I've been distilling myself. Oh joy, oh rapture."

"Back up, Sammy," Knight said softly. "What's this about battling over your body?"

"Nothing too dramatic, really. They just seemed reluctant to let you go home, too. Seems as if you tried to skewer Mallory. You even beat up a couple of guards with atomic pistols. You went raving and screaming through the *Star Climber* trying to rip instruments out of the ship.

"In short, you went space crazy, Kent. You raved and babbled about some awful Thing that was running around in your mind."

"Yes?" Knight questioned quietly.

"And Mallory decided that you were better off in the *Star Climber*. He thinks you've picked up some terrible disease."

Sammy looked at Knight suddenly, searchingly.

"You're all right now, aren't you?" he asked.

It was quite a while before Knight answered. He was going over his mind with a mental fine-toothed comb. *Is It in me? I can't tell for sure. Once before I was sure It was gone, and It was here. Is It gone now?*

"Yes, Sammy," he answered finally. "I think I'm all right now. Why?"

"Well," said Sammy, taking another quick gulp out of the bottle, "You don't look all right."

His mind, which had been seeking out the Thing in Kent Knight's being, relaxed from its search and thought of other items.

"Sammy," Knight asked suddenly. "Do you feel queer?"

Sammy looked at Knight, his eyes suddenly harried.

"Honest-to-gosh, Kent, I wouldn't admit this to anybody else. But I wonder sometimes if *I* am all right. Everybody else seems just a little odd to me. I don't know what it is, I just feel it. But, then, maybe it's me. I'm scared all the time, Kent, and I don't know why. Sometimes, I believe something's trying to steal *me*." He looked up, waiting for Knight to laugh.

But Kent Knight's hazel eyes were very serious and very searching.

"Not the physical me," Sammy amended. "But the real me, the essence of me. So I try to drown that fear in my bottles. I never had that feeling until we landed on that asteroid. And now it won't go away."

You were supposed to have the answer, Sammy, Knight thought despairingly. But I guess you haven't. The Thought Conquerors have got to you, too. Because we are complex in our mental makeup, the reaction is different. You only feel there's something wrong with It in you; It didn't seem to affect Mallory much; It made Captain Hansen believe he's young; It made itself known to me and I wanted to fight It.

But how can you fight It when you have no measure of your opponent—when Its attack is so varied—when It comes and goes as It will?

He shrugged in answer. To Sammy, he put the question, "So we're going home?"

"It won't be much longer now," Sammy said. "The make ready signal buzzed just before you woke up."

The urgency struck at Knight. Only a hundred thousand miles from Earth! Rather, Earth was only a hundred thousand miles from slavery—abject submission to these Thought Conquerors, first seen by Earthmen as furry little butterballs.

Kent stood up. "You offered me a drink a couple of days ago, Sammy. I'll take that drink now." Sammy parted with the bottle, almost reluctantly.

Knight strode to the porthole and looked

out at the star-studded panorama. *We're near Earth, so very, very near. We're carrying her doom.*

He turned his back on the porthole, hoisted the bottle.

"A toast, Sammy," he said. "To might-have been. To Earth—which, but for this ship, might have reached the stars."

Knight put the mouth of the bottle to his lips and tilted it. The fiery liquor burned in his mouth, seared at his throat, sent warm fingers reaching through his belly.

He hurled the bottle to the floor. It smashed against the duralloy and the brown liquid spread. Smashed! Like Earth as the Thought Conquerors' conquests spread.

"Are you batty, Kent?"

Knight strode from the cubicle without answering.

BOB MALLORY jerked his red head around when Knight came striding into the pilot room.

It had sensed him, Knight thought. *It knows how I hate It. And—his heart was filled with a bright blaze of hope—It fears me!*

Mallory's atomic pistol was out, but Knight was reckless. He leapt forward. *Come into my mind, Thing! I know you. I can fight you now. I have no weapon, no answer to your strength, but you are afraid of me!*

Somehow, Knight dodged the flashing bolt, touched Mallory's arm. *It accepted the challenge and came to him.* But the pain was sufferable. He could stand the pain! His mind was exultant. It called orders to Kent Knight and Knight answered.

"Mallory," he cried, even as a part of his mind battled against *It*. "You must turn the ship, head it away from Earth. We're carrying a cargo of death!"

Mallory's handsome face was puzzled. A sort of apathy was mixed with it.

"Move, damn you!" Knight snapped. "Fire in the aft bow rockets, kick this ship around. Signal! Signal!"

The pain of *It* didn't seem to increase, and its control of his will wasn't growing stronger. *So much pain,* he thought happily, *has vaccinated me against It.*

Oh, please, let there be time! Mallory turned slowly toward the control board. He was shaking his head dazedly.

"Don't shout so," Mallory said finally, almost petulantly. "I have a terrific headache." He beat at his forehead with the back of a clenched fist.

The puzzled look was fading from his face. He turned suddenly to stare at Knight. "What's the matter with you, Kent? Are you going to throw another fit?"

"Damn you, Bob, can't you hear? Kick this ship around. We're loaded with death, I tell you."

"You crossed the line," Mallory said, accusingly.

It was going wild within Knight, but it wasn't hurting so very much. The pain wasn't so strong that it completely occupied Kent Knight's mind.

Great gods of space, Knight thought in exasperation. *This dumb Mallory can't understand that Earth's destiny lies in his hands. He's got to turn the ship. I can't. The Thing is just strong enough to stop me. Something had to be done to shock Mallory out of his lethargy.*

"Damn it, Mallory," Kent grated. "You stole my girl! The least you can do for me is to swing this ship around. By my Faith, it means everything."

Mallory jerked. His green eyes suddenly came alive. "I stole your girl, huh? By your Faith? *Your* Faith?" Mallory spun to the control board, snapped switches and barked alert orders.

The ship shuddered as the bow rockets kicked up a cross power that swung the bow, spinning the two Earthmen in the pilot room off their feet.

Mallory came to his feet, both fists swinging, his green eyes glinting, his red head bobbing. But Knight was quick on his feet, too, and he was dodging the light-moving Mallory.

"I'll keep *It*," he said, side-stepping Mallory. *It* was weakening within Kent Knight's mind. Knight knew that the minute he had ducked Mallory's first darting punch. *Just so long you can hold sway,* his mind jibed at the Thing, *then you succumb. This is just the start. We'll smash you one by one.*

"You haven't done it alone," *It* protested weakly. "You had a weapon, a terrible weapon, but you still don't know the weapon."

When *It* died, an intangible weight lifted

from Kent Knight's mind. The intoxication of that feeling of an untrammelled mind mingled with the fiery liquor that still burned in his belly.

"All right, Bob," he said, and he was grinning. "I'll fight you now."

Mallory grinned back. "It's all right, Kent. I'm just beginning to understand. It's hazy, but somehow I feel that I have just escaped some terrible fate. I've been in a daze ever since we challenged the *Star Climber*. But what happened to me to do that, Kent?"

Kent Knight, his mind exulting, told Mallory of the asteroid, the little fur-ball and the Arkkhans who were seeking to enslave Man.

"But our minds are too strong for them," he pointed out at last. "They can keep us in thrall just so long and then they weaken and die."

A shuffle of feet on the duralloy deck turned their heads. SP guardsmen were pushing their way into the pilot room, and they were laughing.

Their laughter brought a sudden drenching to Knight's high-flying spirits. The Things still lived within these men. The threat to Earth was still alive, so long as the Things held sway within the minds of the crewmen. *But we need only to wait, and soon their minds will kill the Thought Conquerors.*

Knight looked at Mallory. Mallory nodded and said, "It may take a long time." He reached to the control board and pushed the switch, turning the cys up to full power.

IT WAS THEN that the little butterball of fur rolled in from the passageway and scooted across the deck toward Mallory's legs.

"Look out, Bob!" Knight called. But the butterball was quicker than Mallory's pistol. He squirmed suddenly, his face stiffening with the pain of the Thing's entrance.

Knight caught a sudden thought within his mind. With an abrupt movement, he spun, dashed for the guardsmen by the door and plowed his way through them somehow, feeling the shock of a half-dozen Things darting into his body.

But he broke through, the Things within him screaming and snarling at his mind.

Sammy had the answer! He still has the answer. Sammy has the weapon. The words pounded into his mind, upholding it against the onslaughts of the Things.

They hate me! He gloried in the thought. Let them. I have the weapon now. Hating me won't hurt any more!

He fell, tripping; one leg had momentarily refused to function as the concentrated power of the thoughts of the half-dozen Things within him lashed at his mind. He staggered to his feet, his mind fighting, his lungs laboring.

He found the cubicle door at last, and with a tremendous effort of will stepped across the threshold. Sammy was there—good, wonderful, precious Sammy, with his bald head, his hook nose and his bottle. His bottle.

He half-staggered across the room. The Things within him screamed and tore at his very soul, but he managed to snatch the bottle from Sammy's hand and gulp it hurriedly. The Things tried to make him vomit, but he held the hot liquor down until he felt it warming him deep inside.

The shock of the liquor reached into his blood stream and he felt the Things' frantic struggles wane.

Yah, he thought exultingly, yah! One man's drink is another man's poison. And, Things, are you going to get poisoned!

The Things died. *I'm just a little drunk,* Kent Knight thought. He looked down around him. For a moment, he thought he saw a half-dozen shadows on the silvery deck. But then the shadows were gone and his mind was free again.

Sammy was staring at him with worried eyes. Knight bent down and kissed Sammy's bald spot with a loud smack.

"Bless you, you stinking drunk," Knight muttered, and staggered out, bottle in hand.

Sammy was still sitting there when Knight came back with four guardsmen. The bottle he had was removed from his hand and Knight and the guardsmen staggered out.

Sammy didn't mind the second or the third or the fourth time, but, when Knight came back with Mallory and snatched the fifth bottle, he rebelled.

He hung onto the bottle. "What in the name of space are you doing with my liquor? Are you trying to put me on the wagon?"

Knight and Mallory laughed and almost as a duet shook their fingers in Sammy's face.

"We're having a purge. We are cleaning minds of nasty thoughts." Sammy relinquished the bottle, and puzzledly followed Knight and Mallory.

He followed them all over the ship, but they didn't find any more minds to purge. Finally, Kent Knight said, "I think the Arkkhans are gone, Bob."

"Yeah," the red head replied. "But maybe we ought to give everybody another slug of it just to be sure they're not hiding out."

That bottle and several others went down the throats of the crew amid the wails and laments of Sammy.

SAMMY snored peacefully in a corner as Knight and Mallory talked. "It's funny when you think of it," Mallory commented. "They must have been more than just pure thought, or how could the liquor bother them?"

"Sammy had the clue. All the time I thought he had one of them in his mind, but he didn't. His subconscious mind somehow made him stay drunk. He knew something was trying to get at him.

"I feel sure, but somehow I'll never know, that they had a physical body of some sort, else they could have roamed at will across space. They wouldn't have needed any hosts."

Knight rubbed the nape of his neck where the hackles had risen at the memory of that furry little body he had touched which had brought *It* into his mind.

"Then it seemed like an actual weight,

a physical load, lifted from my mind when the Things died in me," he added, tapping a tumbler of the amber fluid on the table between them. "I'm sure I saw their bodies fading away that last time. There were a half-dozen shadows on the floor and then they disappeared."

Mallory nodded agreement. "I saw shadows, too, when we poured that liquor down a couple of my men. But what I can't figure is why your Thing jumped back and forth. First you had it. Then you gave it to me, and took it back again."

"I guess they just couldn't help it, Bob. Maybe it was instinctive, or perhaps they needed to change hosts lest they became rooted into one and died with it."

Knight stared at the glass, picked it up. He looked quietly at Mallory. "How's Mary Jo, Bob?"

Mallory grinned. "I wondered how long it would be before you asked that. So I suppose I'd better say it now."

He picked up his glass, clicked against Knight's. "Here's to Faith," he said. "Your Faith, Kent Knight."

"My Faith?"

"Mary Jo didn't know how much she loved you until you walked out so gallantly. But," he added ruefully, his green eyes flickering, "I found out what a smash climax you gave her. So, since then I've been looking for a Faith like yours."

"Honestly, I don't see what the hell she sees in you. You're about as romantic as an old shoe. But . . ." He drank in one swift gulp.

Kent Knight only stared out into space, seeing nothing for the joyous tears in his eyes.

