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COVER BY ROGERS

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THE MUTINEERS

By Kurt von Rachen

The Kilkenny Cats—even supplied with transport by Gailbraith's efforts—still wanted to destroy themselves!

Illustrated by Schneeman

STEVE GAILBRAITH lifted himself from his bed and listened intently, laggardly reacting to the sound of

breaking glass somewhere in the old royal battleship *Fury*.

He was not quite certain that he

had heard anything for he had been deep in a musing doze. Nothing else reached his ears. The obsolete bulk of the *Fury* was throbbing through the bottomless ink of Canis Major, just as she had for the past three days. Several minutes later an air lock sucked itself shut with a swoosh and a clang and Steve lay back. The watch had probably jettisoned the corpse of another "green fever" victim belatedly dead. Scurrying footsteps brought Steve upright again, for they seemed to be approaching his cabin. They did not stop but sped on up the companion-way at the end of the passage.

Steve got up and looked out. For several seconds he stood listening, but a draft was swirling about his bare legs and he again crawled into his bunk, ill at ease.

Minutes dragged by, but nothing further remarked the *Fury's* burrowing through space and Steve relapsed into his doze. Past events, he told himself, had made him unreasonably jumpy.

The series of sounds had interrupted his review of the past hours for their turbulence and end had left him doubtful as to any success in parleying with these fools.

The ingratitude of the lot of them and the swiftly worn away thanks for his deliverance of the expedition from slow slaughter, did not rankle upon Steve. Four years ago he might have brooded, but four years ago he had been a different being. Colonel Steve Gailbraith, politically radical deserter from the Royal Air Corps, had nearly broken under the short shrift given him by the men for whom he had victoriously fought. Once through with the need of him, Fagar, Dictator of All, had repaid him, not with medals but with trial and membership in the Sereon Expedition. The People's Government,

it seemed, had no want of men bright enough to overthrow the leaders who had overthrown the throne. Steve Gailbraith had gone into the revolt with hundreds of his brother officers because they, too, had sickened of the Royal tyranny and the sight of a world starving in plenty. But they had not really known Fagar. They had not known what Fagar might do to those he thought dangerous to him, no matter how much they had helped him.

THE Sereon Expedition might better have been called the Suicide Expedition, for Sereon of Sirius had wiped out one colony already. Fagar and his new ministers were not stupid. Oh, no. Their ally, the Sons of Science, led by Jean Mauchard, might bring their disagreement with the people's party into a second revolt, for Jean Mauchard did not like to see the streets turned into a feeding trough for blow flies, did not like to see ten thousand aristocrats herded into a coal mine and left to their agony, while a people's band played loud enough to keep the moans and weeping of children from disturbing the slumber of their commissioner.

Jean Mauchard, high member of the scientific caste, had a scientist's thirst for truth and accuracy, regardless of the consequences. Jean Mauchard discovered Fagar's soul when he walked into the palace, unfortunately to witness the brutal torture of the Emperor of All and what Fagar did. Jean Mauchard expressed his horror and attempted to plead for the empress in the name of humanity and the glory of man. Fagar, slimy with the shovel's scum in a sixth level mine, had never heard of the glory of man.

Jean Mauchard had poured his sulphuric acid on Dave Blacker

when loud, unrepressed Dave Blacker had attempted to prove that the scientists had not at all aided the longshoremen in the northwest war.

Jean Mauchard hated anything which savored of the officer's caste for, as a scientist, Mauchard saw in them nothing but a force trained to destruction. Hence, Mauchard hated ex-Colonel Gailbraith and was even now jealous of Steve's feat in getting them off Sereon, getting them a ship, trying to keep peace.

Vicky Stalton was not the sort of woman a man with red blood and a heart could hate. The torch of liberty girl, who had waved the millions of sorely oppressed on through blood to victory, was the daughter of a nobleman, but he had never given her name. She had fought up from the gutter to a position as propagandist and had developed her talent too well. Jean Mauchard thought her a tricky liar at best and failed to credit her with strength and courage enough to blast Fagar after she discovered that she had been writing and crying lies.

Steve moved restlessly in his bed. The fools were saved. If they held a solid front now, they could be free of Fagar upon some far planet. Fagar would try to find them, would send some scouts of the old royal fleet after them at the very least, for they had defied him, Emperor of All! They had stolen the ship sent to finish them if their mutual hatreds had not. And if, at any time, they relaxed, they might again meet Fagar—and instant death. Fagar had not dared finish them off. Oh, no. He had glorified them and a program to push out the limits of Earth control, knowing all the time, as the public cheered them, that they went to a doom manufactured out of their own animosities.

The conference ended a few hours before had left Steve exhausted. It had made him apathetic with the realization that he was trying to save men who did not want to be saved but only to exert their own wild wills. Several hundred longshoremen, women, children, captive crew members, Mauchard's men, Vicky Stalton and Steve were at stake unless some agreement were reached. From past performance, one would have thought they would listen to Steve. They had not. They had cried him down as a traitor to his own corps, as a shifty rascal intent on saving his own boots and had swept away every plan he had offered.

Dave Blacker, blatant and stubborn, disliked the military, disliked scientists, propagandists, dictators—

STEVE BURROWED wearily into his thermobag, as though by doing so he could get rid of this problem and these people. He felt particularly low, for in the row about the wardrobe table, he had unleashed his parade-ground voice, had hammered so that a pitcher of water had overturned. And unpredictable Vicky Stalton, dodging, had cried above his roar:

"What are we? A pack of Royalist soldiers? If you keep that up, you'll get bellow for bellow. Ye gods of Aramus! Is this a parley or a hog-calling contest?" And, flirting water from her ragged little uniform tunic, had stomped from the wardrobe.

Later, he had knocked at her door and had said to a segment of her face, "I'm sorry."

"For trying to drown me?"

"Yes. With words and water."

"That's better."

In her tone he had understood that she had been righteously wait-

ing there, knowing he would come, certain of his apology—

"Only one thing," he had said, his annoyance stirred, for he was weary and heartsick with the stupidity of them, "the next time I'm having difficulty in trying to get a point over, I wish you wouldn't throw your weight on the other side."

"I did no such thing. You can't call me an ally of Blacker or that mule Mauchard!"

"I didn't call you an ally," he retorted. "But it's your neck as much as it is mine. I've got enough to fight without a dumb blonde stepping in—"

She slammed the door of her cabin and left him there afume. He was tired. He was irritable. It took him an hour or more to see that he had browbeaten her without cause.

Well, to hell with the lot of them. Mauchard wanted to head for a place he called New Terre which swung about Procyon in Orion. Mauchard claimed that a friend of his, a Royalist Scientimajor named Gabrille, had stated his intention of heading for that place in case the Royalists lost. Mauchard claimed that New Terre already had a small Earth population and that uranium ore, stadiatite, from which inertion was made, duo-iron ore and many other valuable minerals were there in abundance.

Mauchard had said that they could help the colony, attract other refugees to them and soon enter into trade with unconquered peoples on other planets and, in short, make themselves strong enough to defy Fagar.

With a longshoreman's distrust of mines—bred from the propaganda atrocities of the supervisors in sub-levels—Dave Blacker had taken the stand that Mauchard's crowd was trying to delegate the longshoreman

faction to the laboring side of it and enslave them by scientific trickery.

Steve had attempted to cross-question Mauchard on the scientist's knowledge of the place and gathered that Mauchard relied upon his friend Gabrille. Mauchard was right about the size and position and climate of New Terre, for all that was written at length in "Space Directions" as Mauchard proved. When Steve had countered with the doubt that such a valuable colony would remain unattacked when robbed of the protection of Earth in flames, and had added his belief that they might find anything from Garcons to Mirionites in possession, Mauchard had forsaken argument for scathing personalities.

STEVE TOSSED restlessly. They had settled nothing. They were roaring through the empty dark without destination, liable to any attack, unable to man the *Fury's* best defenses through lack of trained crews, ripped by discord and suspicion.

Damn women.

What ailed Vicky? It did not occur to him that Vicky, too, was under as great a strain as he. Some of the Royalist disdain for the new order and its freedom for women was still with Steve. He might lose his ideals, his faith in man, his lust for honor, but he could not quite adjust himself to the idea that a woman had a right in council equal to a man's. Therefore, he could not see that she, too, took some of this burden.

The intership phone was at hand. Several times he had wanted to take it down and talk to her, but he knew that she would probably wind it up into another argument, or that he would blast at her again.

He resigned himself to troubled pondering upon his own fate. There

seemed to be but one point of ambition glowing in him and that was hardly one of which a former officer and gentleman might be proud. He wanted to see Fagar on his knees in the muck, digging his own grave with the shovel he had plied so long in the mines and then drop Fagar's beast-body into it with a blast from his own hand. There was so much raw, red satisfaction in envisioning that, that it almost frightened Steve.

Indeed, revolt did drag men down below the very animals which they reviled.

Steve sat up and reached for a cigarette out of the late Commisar Lars' own box. He watched it glow as it lighted itself, his mind on other things.

But there was something very strange about the way this cigarette glowed. Instead of a red coal at its tip it had a weird, green flame.



For Vicky, the mask had come too late. The gas had put her too deep for any hope of relief—

Steve stood up, staring. He hauled half a dozen in a row from the box and each one glowed in a similarly ghastly fashion.

Was it poison?

Did Mauchard or Blacker or a member of the beaten battleship crew want him out of the way that badly?

There was a nerve-tingle in the thought. Like a whirl of turned leaves from a military text, all available information raced through his mind.

He had to be sure of this. He pulled a flame cartridge from the scargun on the wall and bit off the end. He heaped a few grains on the edge of the washstand and touched a burning cigarette to it.

The thermilian flared greenly.

Green, when it should have been brilliant crimson!

Steve swung open a locker and swept down a rack of masks. His expert glance sorted the right one and practiced fingers suctioned its three-inch diameter to his nostrils and mouth. He took his first breath since the thermilian had flared.

He had not noticed how groggy he had been until now when the lethargy sloped off. He flicked on the master lights of the navigator's telltale board in this, the senior navigator's old room. The gas gauges were registering one hundred and three. The spectrum analysis band, when the switch was thrown from outer to inner atmosphere, glowed with unmistakable lines. The place definitely contained morphogene, known to the sailors of the old navy as "Mrs. Molly's Dream Darling," because it was also used in a Venusian dive, run by that lady to roll the unwary spaceman.

It was sometimes used in case of mutiny, having its main outlet in the crew's quarters and the armories.

There was no vent at all in the officer's superdeck, so that Steve had gotten the little which had crept into his cabin via the ventilating systems. If he had been asleep, it would have taken him as it had already taken, beyond doubt, the rest of the crew and anyone in the lower decks. Or, had he been asleep with it for hours, days, perhaps weeks?

MOTIVE-ANALYSIS was not a course in which Plebe Gailbraith had shone, probably because it had coincided with a period when Steve had been writhing through his first spasm of puppy love with the school commandant's charming daughter. But it did not strain his meager memory of that subject to deduce that Blacker would not use it, for Blacker probably did not know of it and would prefer force. That left the captive officers of Fagar and Mauchard. But the officers of Fagar were under bomb-locks in the double-belly. And Mauchard would favor a minimum of brutality—hence, morphogene and not instant-killing G-984, known as Statue Stuff.

Mutiny!

Jean Mauchard had found a way to enforce his will with a minimum of argument.

Poor old *Fury*! Her bulkheads were stained with the still-dark blood of her Royalist officers. Her bridge deck was chipped by the spaceboots of men not fit to feed her barrels. Rusty and stinking with unrepaired abuse, disgraced by a flag of corruption in the service of Fagar and now a pirate without a flag, commanded by sick renegades in mufti, disgraced again by mutiny.

He felt kinship for this vessel, for, as a middy, he had proudly stood his watches aboard her, had seen an emperor praise her, had helped her

single-handed battle with an entire enemy fleet. He had known the tradition into which they had both been born and knew tradition now was dead.

He, too, felt degraded and unclear. The last letter he had received from his father, shortly after Steve's desertion to a cause he felt glorious and just, had predicted such an end for him:

"You who have brought the name of Gailbraith into contact with the filthy scum of mankind's lowest dregs, may suppose righteous justice to be your destiny. But know that, no matter how bad may have been the treatment of the people, justice can never be brought about by the breaking of word, by brute force, by the obliteration of a class. The way of revolt is only the way to the destruction of all those things for which our civilization has stood. Revolt is the debaser of man, for there be no excuse for rape and ravage until calm counsel has failed. If you have definitely chosen the way of your going, then know that force breeds force and death breeds only death and that your finish, no matter your 'victories,' cannot be otherwise than as you chose to live—with dishonor, with degradation, without friend or flag, unmourned and with your clay merged with the filth to which you allied yourself in life."

He had thrown the letter aside, marking it off to a man's belief in an outmoded system, a father's disappointment in a son. But he could not cast aside the memory. For as the years of battle had rolled forward, so had it come true. He had broken his pledge to his service and now no pledge given him was valid. And he hurtled through the empty black without flag or friend or destination, unless it be that of the executioner's arc chamber, unless he

died through Mauchard's clumsiness.

Again he saw Fagar, digging his own grave and dying, strangled in its muck. Mauchard sought to rob him of that.

A CHILLY RAGE slowly took hold of Steve Gailbraith. He despised his own predilection for fatalism. He was fettered by a background belief that he could do nothing about the environment's grip upon himself. He was fettered by circumstance, yes. But not chained to the extent that his destiny could be spelled out by thirteen men and a bitter old man, more vengeful than competent.

He took down a seargun and looked into it. He put on an old Royal spacecape he had found forgotten in this cabin and swung it over his pajamas.

As he climbed the spiral ladder to the superdeck, the guard, a young scientist named Smithton, started at the apparition of what he at first took to be a Royalist officer. But Smithton was not one of Blacker's bullies, and superstition had no part in his make-up. He swung a blastick at Steve and pushed a buzzer for Mauchard.

Steve moved into the bluish light of the bridge lock. He was alarmed when he saw his own face reflected in the glass wall, for his cheeks were sunken and his eyes so far recessed as to be reflected not at all.

Mauchard stepped into the lock and looked through the glass at Steve. He slipped a mask over his nose and opened the lock door. Steve strode over the dyke and entered the eyes of the ship. Two Sons of Science jumped up from the resultographs and covered him with small blasticks. Steve took off his mask.

"Step up the gas content of the

air below," ordered Mauchard. A third Son of Science hurried into an adjoining cubicle. "Well?" he said sharply to Steve, "how is it that you are about?"

"Maybe I didn't get as big a whiff of it in my cabin," said Steve. "But that isn't the point. *What* are you about?"

"But one is tired of arguing with fools, he has to act as his superior knowledge directs," said Mauchard. "Now you can either take this tablet here or walk back through the lock without your mask. I will not tolerate interference from you."

"Are you heading for New Terre?"

"We are almost to New Terre. When you awaken you will be safely landed."

"Then the rest of the ship has been out for ten days or more."

"Twelve."

"You gave no heed to my warning that there might be people unfriendly to humans at your New Terre. In four years of civil war anything might take place this far into space. Have you given a thought to that?"

"I have and I seriously question it."

"Have you given a thought to your responsibility for the lives of these hundreds of people in case that small chance exists? You may, even now, be streaking forward to certain destruction for all of us, either at the hands of an Earth fleet or a strange population. You can't fight with thirteen men!"

"You cannot talk away my resolution," said the gaunt leader of the Sons of Science. "I suppose you would rather take Blacker's counsel and turn pirate. I, sir, am no mur-

derer and thief. I seek only peace and the enlightenment of mankind."

Steve gazed at Mauchard's cadaverous face for several seconds and read there the unswerving purpose. This man had a goal of quiet years of research so deeply planted in him that he would not turn aside for anything. There was no arguing here.

"I will not brook interference, sir," said Mauchard. "Either take this tablet or go back without your mask."

Steve threw his mask upon the floor and turned to the lock. He paused there a moment before he opened the inner door and looked at Mauchard as though seeking some way to convince this man of his risk to them all.

"I might be able to help if you ran into trouble," said Steve.

"I want none of your help," stated Mauchard.

THE THOUGHT of meeting the danger he had begun to sense and have no power to thwart it, was akin to illness. Steve went into the lock and closed the door. The outer door was opened for him by Smithton. Steve reeled as the morphogene engulfed him.

The young, masked scientist might have been grinning, though his mouth was hidden.

"If I were you," said Steve, "I would go back inside the bridge, regardless of orders."

Smithton's voice was muffled. "I want none of your advice."

"Nevertheless, only a fool would overlook any indicator to death. If I am awake and can stand here in this gas-soaked air, remember there might be others also immune." He said that with his temples going in and out like miniature accordions. He could not hold on very many seconds without showing the effect.

"There is no immunity. Go back to your cabin before you fall down

and I have to carry you back."

"I have been hit with morphogene thirty times," said Steve. "A man can develop a tolerance even to arsenic." The floor seemed to be swaying now, ready to strike him in the face. "I am going below now and I'll be back with reinforcements. Others are awake aboard this space can."

He stepped to the top of the spiral ladder, his back to Smithton. It was difficult for him to keep his mind on what he was to do, what he had figured Smithton would do.

Smithton did it. He snatched out and caught Steve by the shoulder, his blastick directed another way for the instant.

Steve whipped a hand behind him. As though impelled by some magic catapult, though only by his own helping shift of weight, Smithton somersaulted over Steve's head, sailed down to strike the rail and be turned by its curve while still in flight. Smithton struck heavily at the bottom and lay still.

That much activity almost cost Steve the last of his wits: He gripped the hand rail and fumbled and fell down the ladder. He felt Smithton under him but could not see, for the gas had taken toll of his sight. Steve felt weightless. His arms were jelly. His fingers that fumbled for Smithton's mask carried back but faint sense messages.

With the last of his consciousness, Steve clamped the mask upon his own mouth and nose and then sagged sleepily down, gulping in the purified air.

The knowledge that they might see them from above, brought Steve around more swiftly than his body liked. He crawled down the passageway to his cabin and summoned up enough strength to heave Smithton

to the bunk. He covered the young Son of Science with the Royalist cape.

MOMENT BY MOMENT, Steve was coming around. Anxiously he crouched down over the navigator's telltale board and threw on its lights. Touching a button which sent a billion cubes of light-years blurring under the glass, he saw the three-dimensional charts slow, go by, halt and then creep back. Two metal arms, worked by heavy calculating machines, slid rustily across the table and converged above the space chart. A third, which was a polarized shaft of light, stabbed up from below, through the chart. The first two arms quivered and warped so that they sagged into the cubicle chart. A brilliant spot of light gleamed in three space—their position at the moment according to the master calculators on the bridge. Another button depressed and the chart was blown up a hundred thousand times in size, its former limits pushing outward and vanishing in the frame.

Steve fluttered the leaves of "Space Pilot" and located the data relating to New Terre of Procyon. Taking its constant and feeding it into the space body plotter, he read it off and comparing it to the main chart, identified it as the sphere nearest to them dead ahead. It was plain then that not more than four hours were left of their journey.

What waited for them on New Terre? If it was as rich as Mauchard maintained, then certainly it would be held down by either Fagar or some horde of mysterious space. With the exhaustion of fuels throughout the Inner Empire, at least an armed geological scouting party would be encountered. Mauchard's friend Gabrille might have

been speaking idly when he thought of it as a future refuge. Of course, if *Gabrille was* on New Terre of Procyon, then all would be well—for Mauchard and his crowd. Blacker and his longshoremen, though this point had not much sympathy from Steve, would be reduced to something only slightly better than slavery and Vicky and Steve would find themselves complete outcasts, with no way to establish position and, hence, life. Whatever happened, everybody but Mauchard and his Sons of Science would lose.

Even now, her super decelerators were throbbing.

Speculating swiftly, Steve sought an out. Any out. But he alone could do so little and the rest of the ship was gripped in enforced slumber—

Blam!

The *Fury* shuddered from barrels to dust armor.

Blang!

She rolled like a strychnined dog.

From her upper turrets came a weak chatter of disintegrators. Their recoil accelerated the ship, lifting Steve back from the navigator's tell-tale. They had passed the area of bombardment and were turning.

An abrupt silence swept through the battleship, achingly unfamiliar after days and days of continuous barrel discharge either from bow or tail. A minute or more of this and a weak sputter of stern barrel igniters was heard, mounting into a shrill, useless whine. This was followed by a sharp, stabbing crackle of secondary arc ignition and the sob of emergency liquid gas pumps. And then, again, dull silence.

STEVE PUSHED through the passageway to Vicky's cabin. He kicked in the lock and sent the door

splintering back.

Vicky lay huddled in a thermobag, her small face pale as a dead man's, her straw-colored hair lying out over her pillow. So much did she look like death that Steve's heart lunged within him. He snatched down the rack of masks and found a right one which he fitted over her mouth and nose. He took a cloth and soaked it in water, placing it against her face. When she did not stir, he anxiously felt her pulse but could not discover any throb of blood. He shook her brutally.

"Wake up! Vicky. Wake up!"

He battered through the medicine cabinet and brought out an ancient remedy, ammonia. He broke the tube and held it close under her chin.

And still she did not move.

There was no lowering or rising of her breast, no flutter of eyelids, no beat of a heart to greet his anxiously listening ear.

"VICKY!"

Ashes were in his throat and acid in his eyes. His hands trembled as he shook her anew.

She was the color of a corpse.

Beautiful, jaunty Vicky. Vicky and her wisecracks, her disdainful smile.

"—your finish, no matter your 'victories,' cannot be otherwise than as you chose to live—with dishonor, with degradation, without friend or flag, unmourned and with your clay merged with the filth to which you allied yourself in life—"

Fredericky Stalton, the Torch of Liberty Girl—the very spirit of the revolt—

"Vicky—"

He let her down to her pillow and drew the cover across her face. He was too stunned to move, but stood touching her fingers which lay still

visible, bone-white upon the dark-blue bed.

BLANG!

BLANG! BLAM! BLANG!

Acid in his eyes and ashes in his throat. He picked himself from the scarred metal deck and steadied himself against the passageway wall.

BAM!

Again the *Fury* trembled and leaped sideways under the impact of bursting hell. Holding to the rail Steve crept down the ladder to the mid-deck. All but the ghastly blue emergency lights were off now and by their awesome gleam, he found Dave Blacker's cabin.

DAVE BLACKER was lying on the floor, tangled in his gigantically checkered topcoat, his round, hard hat tumbling back and forth as the *Fury* lurched, its tumbling speaking

of a new gravitational field. Blacker's knotty hands were still clenched to the chair by which he had attempted to pick himself up after the morphogene had taken him.

Steve kicked aside the G-231 mask Blacker had attempted to use and from the lockers of this, the first engineer's room, got out a morphogene disk. He clapped it on Blacker's face and then spilled a basin of water on the labor leader. The shock of it and the newly purified air made Blacker stir. Steve kicked him solidly in the shins and the pain brought Blacker into sitting posture, glaring about him as he gasped.

"Get up!" said Steve.

"What— Who the devil—"

"Get up!"

Blacker's glare intensified but he got up.

"The ship has been gassed. Mau-

chard is on the bridge. Something has attacked us. Get that into your skull and get it there fast before we're all done in."

"My men! Where are my men?"

"They're knocked out and have been for twelve days. We're somewhere near New Terre of Procyon and our tubes are out of commission."

Blacker staggered under this load of information. "What . . . what are we going to do?"

Steve had never thought to have Blacker say that to him, ever. "Come with me and break out some of your men—the husky ones." He stepped to the engineering telltale and pushed the spectrum analysis button. The lines tallied with that of a cylinder which spun and stopped, spun uncertainly and swung to morphogène. The meters read sixty-two.

"Mauchard has cut off the gas. Come along."

Blacker lumbered after him into the crew's quarters. Men were sprawled here over a card game, there across food. Some who had been off watch were sleeping. A pile lay where the Sons of Science had dumped them inside the double doors. Children were sprawled where they had been at play and women in various attitudes over sewing or reading. Here and there, as the gas thinned and fresh air came in, people stirred groggily.

Up from aft came three Sons of Science, one of them holding a blood-soaked bandage to his face. These had been standing a tube watch with two others now lost. They saw Steve blocking their way and halted, looking dazedly at him with the lethargy of those who have looked over the brink into the gaping blackness of forever.

"What has happened aft?" said Steve.

"Gone. Roasted to hell!" said the

one with the wounded face. "Byre and Frankson—dead."

A longshoreman was trying to sit up. Steve hauled him from the bunk and shook him into awareness. Another pried himself from a card table and tried to straighten a stiff neck. Steve sent him spinning into Blacker's arms and his leader cuffed him awake. Six men were quickly recruited.

Steve said to Blacker, "There are two gun turrets on either side forward of the tubes. If you two," he turned to the scientists, "figure out the firing mechanism, I want you to stand by with your crews at either gun."

"I'll help," said the boy with the bleeding head.

"Come with me," said Steve.

"What am I supposed to do?" growled Blacker, hating to have to ask for orders, but lost in the sudden efficiency of defense.

"Rouse out your men," said Steve. "Hold them here until I see how things look."

"Is that all?" growled Blacker.

"You'll find some of the men of the old crew know their guns. Find those and man all batteries."

"All right," said Blacker glumly.

STEVE WENT AFT through the airtight compartments until he came to one which refused to open. Beyond this, then, the ship was blown in.

He moved with swiftness, nervously as though if he stopped, some awful thing would catch up to him. Only his training made him act, for all that was capable of feeling in him seemed dead.

Later would come wrath. And Mauchard would pay for what he had done. But now came action.

Steve swarmed up the spidery ladders which led to the sixth observation post, an invisoglass turret

mounted on the battleship's back like a raindrop on an elephant. The vantage here was not as good as the meteor post above the barrels, but one glance around from it told Steve all he wanted to know.

The thick black engulfed the ship. But the *Fury's* hull was agleam with the rays of Procyon which appeared from here only slightly larger than faraway Sol himself, ten light-years and an almost invisible dot at Steve's back. The yellow-white brilliance of the gigantic Procyon made a hemisphere of softly hazed luminosity across the starboard sky. P-C.Mn.-313, otherwise and unimaginatively, New Terre, went from half to three-quarters, seeming to revolve slowly, as Steve watched it. He could see the seas upon it as burnished metal beneath the clouds; small seas they were, not connected but more like lakes. Shadows showed several low mountain ranges spreading apart to border the bodies of water. It was difficult to see color but one could imagine a dark greenness in the black splotches which were plains.

They were probably eight or nine thousand miles out from New Terre and its gravity was slowly sucking them down. Mauchard had obviously run in very close on his first approach, for try as he would, Steve could see no sign of hostile space cruisers.

Perhaps it had not been an attack at all. Perhaps the stern tubes, fed by inexpert men, had blown—

He picked up the phone and was reassured by its crackling. He looked into the control bridge through it and saw Mauchard staring anxiously at New Terre.

"What happened?" demanded Steve.

Mauchard whirled and faced the intership screen. "Leave me alone!

I want none of your kind of help, Gailbraith."

"You're in no shape to want or unwanted," said Steve. "I've an affair to settle with you later. What happened?"

Mauchard glared stubbornly and then said, "Batteries about the city. We'll swoop within range again when we get around to the dark side. Our orbit is elliptical and all the steering mechanism is smashed." His voice broke. "Bow and stern tubes. Smashed! If they have guns like that, they'll have a fleet as well, waiting for us!"

Steve faced the phone to the coaming so he would not have to look at Mauchard. He had enough to think about without remembering—

They would crash into New Terre or, if Steve brought them off, float helpless in space, for they had no spaceboats to accommodate so many nor trained crews to man them. And if they landed with Garcons or God knew what strange race awaiting them—

Steve threw the phone switches and looked at the crew's quarters where Blacker was still hauling long-shoremen on their feet.

"Blacker! Get gunners from the crew and man all guns to starboard."

Blacker looked at the flashing panel. He must have had a glimpse of the nearness of New Terre for he quickly sent two men to rouse out crew members.

STEVE WATCHED New Terre go away from them and revolve, or appear to revolve, into its full light. They continued outward from it until it was again a hemisphere and during the next half hour, they swung with it still astarboard and began their swoop back on its dark side.

The phone whirred and lighted. It was Blacker, looking haggard in this, a strange situation. "All the guns that'll work are manned. Whadda I do now?"

"Fire the starboard guns at Procyon," said Steve.

"Hell, we wasn't attacked from that way. I heard a—"

"Do as I tell you," said Steve. "Or die and be damned to the lot of you!"

Blacker caught that commanding note in the teeth. He went forward to pass the word.

The phone whirred and Mauchard's starved face appeared. Mauchard's thin hair was awry and his dark, sunken eyes ablaze! "You are issuing orders! I intend to signal that we surrender. I did not tell them who we were. They may be an Earth colony and the fire a mistake!"

"If you want to ride a spaceboat, you can surrender that," said Steve. "You hate anything that smacks of war. You hate me as an officer trained to war. I served on this ship and, as long as you are aboard it and she is in danger, you'll serve me."

Mauchard, master of natural law and emperor of test tubes, could not be bettered in his realm. He was not in his realm. Not his courage but his knowledge had reached its limit. With his honesty of purpose and willfulness of ideals, Mauchard saw in ex-Colonel Gailbraith nothing but menace and treachery, the will to slay and beguile. And he would not surrender now—to Steve. But an answer became impossible as the *Fury's* starboard flame guns belled into action, their searing shells swallowed by the brilliance of Procyon far behind them.

The *Fury* rolled with the broadsides and creaked in every plate

from their incessant hammering, for she was being driven sideways and forward from New Terre.

Quarter only in the light, the planet dwindled in size until Steve's practiced eye estimated her to be seventy thousand miles.

"Cease firing," he called into the phone.

Lessening her lurches, the *Fury* settled to the keel set of her gyros.

Steve slid down the long ladders from her observation turret and sought out the first gun manned. The young Son of Science there was dripping with the sweat of firing heat.

"What's your name?" said Steve.

"Baldrin."

"Baldrin, eh? Knew a good officer by that name once. Baldrin, consider us a vessel in distress. There are about thirty kinds of high explosive energy aboard this ship. I want to know how you would go about making a long streak of fire which will travel through the sky, bright enough to be plainly visible for a hundred thousand miles against a black field of space, which will burn for four hours."

"Distress? You mean you think they'll come out and rescue us instead of blasting us when we go near?"

"That's it," said Steve. "That's it exactly. The code of space. I want about fifty of these streaks and I want them within the next thirty minutes. You!"—he motioned to a petty officer of the old crew at the next gun gallery who had crossed flames on his dirty sleeve—"you know the magazines and what they contain. Show Baldrin what he wants and have some of your men pack it. I suppose, Baldrin, you'll want somebody in space-suits to dump it through the place the tubes used to be."

"Yes. Yes, but—"

"You'll think of something, I'm sure."

"But Professor Mauchard says that we must surrender because we can't maneuver to fight—"

"Well?"

"Oh. Certainly. I see. This is a surrender in a way."

"Now, let's get busy."

"I can mix—"

"Just mix it," said Steve.

BACK in the observation turret, Steve watched New Terre. Only a thin slice of its lighted side remained and that was slowly vanishing. Beyond it spun Procyon. The reflecting power of the *Fury's* hull was at a minimum for it had been set for yellow-white probably for months. Only a lucky detector could spot them at this distance.

In twenty-nine minutes by the observation turret clock the phone whirred. He saw Baldrin's grimy but eager face in the screen. "I mixed—"

"Good. Is it ready?"

"All ready."

"Fine. Knew you could. Now, can you put a delayed igniter in each sack? A small time cartridge out of a flame grenade is good enough. Set it for two hours and dump out the bags at one minute intervals."

Mystified, Baldrin started to question and then shrugged. He did not know the laws of space concerning distress.

"When I give you the word," said Steve, "begin to unload."

Steve switched to the main gun turrets. The face of a stolid range gunner appeared in profile. "You." When the gunner faced the panel, Steve said, "pass the word along to fire dark shells at a target dead ahead in our plane."

"Aye, aye, sir," said the range pointer with the air of one who cares not whom he serves, having confusedly served so many.

Through his phone, Steve heard

the word being passed. The dark shells had not much range or force but they were enough, for now the *Fury* was traveling at a slow speed. The first barrage, port and starboard, made the *Fury* jerk and buck. After that the ragged firing gave her no definite jolts.

"Cease firing," barked Steve into the phone.

He had gauged it nicely, for now the *Fury* was barely moving in relation to New Terre. At this rate it would take them a day or more to go around the planet at this distance.

"Can I start now?" said Baldrin, helmeted now for space and speaking by magnetic connection.

"Let them go," said Steve.

Looking aft and down the curved back of the *Fury*, Steve saw the first bag dumped. It expanded and spun away like a toy balloon which suddenly has its air released. After it went the other bags until, an hour later, all fifty of them had been unloaded.

Steve went below and met Baldrin coming through the ship, thanking him.

"Now, let's go forward and see Mauchard," said Steve. "Blacker, would you go along?"

THE THREE oddly assorted men worked their way toward the bridge. Baldrin, still in the wool under-jumper and pants of a spacesuit, too young to be easily wearied; Dave Blacker, stump of a cigar in his bulldog jowl, swathed by a tattered, loudly checked topcoat; Steve gaunt-eyed and strained, his slenderly aristocratic body engulfed in the Royalist spacecape, his pajama jacket girded about by a seargun belt, bar-footed, jaw-line hazy with the stubble of a blond beard.

Mauchard let them in through the air lock when he saw they were only

three and flourishing no weapons. Mauchard was defiant, standing back against the maze of calculators which covered the bulkhead with oblong number slits. He waited for the three to speak, the while gazing coldly at the suddenly disconcerted Baldrin.

Steve sank down in the navigator's scuffed chair. He saw a bottle sticking its neck out of Blacker's pocket and took it out, offering Blacker a drink, unaware of the humor of it in his weariness. Blacker glowered a refusal and Steve drank.

Mauchard reached a point of strain where he had to speak. He singled Baldrin. "So you've gone over to them, have you?"

"He's gone nowhere save where you took him," said Steve, "wherever that might be."

"And I suppose that you are going to take us away from here," said Mauchard.

"Not without rockets," said Steve.

"What do you propose to do?" said Mauchard.

"Kill you as soon as we have time to do it properly," said Steve. "Your morphogene trick—" he choked a little and his face was pale. "Get off the bridge, Mauchard. Get off the bridge!"

"Them's my orders, too," said Blacker. "And I got two hunnert tough guys to back it up. Blow, brother."

"Not until I understand what you mean to do!"

Steve looked at Mauchard and Mauchard took two paces backward coming up against the bulkhead. He stood there for a moment and then, signaling his men to follow him, went into the air lock.

STEVE GOT UP and pushed young Baldrin into the communications



With studied coldness, Gailbraith gave his demands to the giant, while fiery trails arched across the vault of sky above.

cubicle. "Do you know anything about contacting another ship?"

"Well—yes."

"Then start trying to make such a contact on that spacephone. Use a linguaresolver because those people or whatever on New Terre, don't speak our language."

Steve went out into the bridge. He threw the switches of the firing command board. "Stand by with dark shells. Guns one and two port fire on ninety degrees our plane."

The *Fury* slewed under the recoil and slowly swung her nose toward New Terre.

"One and two cease firing. Attention all batteries. Dark shells. Target dead astern. Fire at will."

The *Fury* picked up speed toward New Terre and the planet's gravity began to aid in pulling her down.

"Cease firing."

At a thousand miles a minute, the *Fury* plunged toward New Terre. The chronometer on Steve's right ticked off half an hour.

"Dark shells," said Steve. "Range minimum. Target dead ahead our plane. Fire at will."

Jolting unsteadily, the *Fury* began to slow down. Two spheres darted out of the low-lying atmosphere ahead and at wide distance on either side swooped up to parallel the battleship at a distance of three hundred miles.

"Contact," said Baldrin in the communications cubicle.

"Cease firing," said Steve into the master gun control phone. He went into the small room with Baldrin.

"We're commanded to halt by two ships."

"I saw them in the magnetograph," said Steve.

"Are . . . are we going to try to fight it out on the dark side of New Terre?" said Baldrin with the usual abhorrence of crashing in the blackness, blind.

"Have you their return wave?" said Steve.

Baldrin threw in the switch.

"Ahoy the cruisers," said Steve, speaking through the linguasolver which converted his words into universal electrospeech.

"Halt!" spoke the phone. "Approach nearer to Absolo and you will be engaged in battle!"

"We wish no battle," said Steve to the invisible commander. "Allow us to land, for we are disabled and we will explain our mission. We cannot maneuver to fight, as you should

be able to see. It is doubtful if we can handle our landing. Can you contact us and get us down."

There was a swift interchange between the two commanders of the space craft and a rapid contact with their base. In a short time the permission was granted.

TWENTY MINUTES later the *Fury*, which had been through so many strange experiences, was experiencing the end of another. Two spheroids had grappled her and now she was being eased down into a circular field in the blaze of landing lights. A swarm of beings surged out from the curved buildings and gazed open-mouthed at the battleship, pointing out huge tears in her bow and tail where their shells had done so much damage.

They were Mirionites, about four times the height of an Earthman. Steve had seen two of them in the triumphal parade of General Tars Golden after his return from the famous Orion campaign. He had been awed then by the furry, stilt-legged things, with their enormous ears and mouths and their tiny double eyes. They had had trouble walking on Earth because its gravity was greater than anything to which they were accustomed and they were having just that trouble on New Terre, or Absolo, as they called it, all of them carrying metal canes which were at once support and probably rapid-firing weapons.

A guard of soldiers, naked except for the metal cartridge bands worn on each bicep, assembled in brisk order as the landing ladder of the *Fury* dropped down.

Steve drew the cloak about him and stepped to the ground. The towering Mirionites looked wonderingly at him as a child might regard

an animated doll.

"Baldrin!" said Steve. "Hand down an instrument."

With the linguasolver he tried to make the officer in command understand him but the fellow shook his head, got down on his knees and hands and looked closely at Steve's face. Then he saw the linguasolver and called for one of his own. Crouched there he made signs that he was ready to listen through his instrument.

"Take me to your chief," said Steve.

"I cannot," said the Mirionite. "I have orders to arrest you. Why do you come down this way? We are at war with the Terrestrial Empire. We have destroyed its colony here. You are also to be destroyed."

"Destroy me and destroy yourselves," said Steve. "Take me swiftly to your chief."

"The governor is asleep."

"Then I shall awaken him," said Steve, and stalked down the ranks of knees in the direction where a glow showed against the clear sky.

"Wait," said the Mirionite. "I have orders for all Earthmen. I am—"

"I am an envoy. My person is inviolate. Touch me again and you will destroy Absolo."

"What is your business?"

"My business is with your governor, not with his lackey!"

"Envoy? From the Terrestrial Empire?"

"Certainly."

"If you lie to me, then you shall be killed with flourishes. Do not tamper with the law of the Mirionite. Earthmen are to be killed."

"Take me to the governor!" said Steve.

THE MIRIONITE pushed himself erect with his twelve-foot cane-gun and gave the order to lead off. For a little while Steve struggled to keep in the file, but the ground was rough and the soldiers marched swiftly. The captain at last shrugged and picked Steve up, holding him gingerly in the crook of his arm like one might carry a child who never has before.

The city was a series of smooth glass bubbles in the center of a ninety-foot glass wall. Solar storages gave off a glare of light. Neither shrub nor blade grew in this place, for the streets ran all about the homes and were soft as cloth with some dark fabric of chemical weave. Bars of light acted as fences, gates and doors, pulsating screens which dripped rolling sparks.

The business district was in silence, the marts labeled only by three-dimensional-color projections of goods on the areas before the entrances. A little farther along, female Mirionites and offspring peered frightenedly at the column which moved along the curving streets, until Steve was perceived and then a ripple of wondering and amused laughter followed.

Great sheets of scarlet flame crackled warningly before the compact group of hemispheres which marked the government place, zipping back and forth from either side of a circular series of posts which surrounded the place. The column paused on the heat-exuding edge of the live barrier, while the captain exchanged courtesies with the officer of the guard within. A space ceased to arc and the group moved through. The guard officer struck an invisibly suspended glass ball, which lighted and upon its lighting, caused a long series of such balls to bob and glow from the gateway on into the buildings. A sound of snapping within the hall of the first building ceased

and, by the jumping lights, soldiers stood up and craned to view whatever might be coming.

The captain who had carried Steve, had begun some distance back to show the effects of the effort, though he attempted to mask his heavy breathing. With the excuse of entering their destination, he set Steve down into the forest of stilt legs and flexed his aching arm. Steve was glad enough of it, for the captain smelled like a wolf's lair, uncleaned since the birth of the first wolf in evolution's chain. This palace smelled little better, but the acidity of brimstone took the sick sweet edge off the stench. Seeing the "tiny" being, some of the palace guards tittered.

The files halted and the captain glanced at the officer of the guard who had accompanied them. The latter went forward and a bright sheet of blue fire, which had been dancing before a circular door, ceased. The officer went in and a moment later petulant sounds came out. The argument was short and the guard officer stepped into the hallway to motion the files into the room.

It was very difficult for Steve to see anything, for the round furniture blocked his vision and the bed's base was too high for him to see anything of the governor but a pair of flattened ears.

Through the captain's linguare-solver and through his own, Steve heard the governor say, "Well? Well? Dromo, you know your duty. You know your regulations. You have heard my posted orders and the orders of the Multicouncil itself. And yet you wake me. You *wake me!* Before morning, too! If you cannot carry out orders, I shall have to put another in your rank! Now! Under the heading of Terrestrial Empire, what does the ordervoice

state? Quickly, now. What does it state?"

The unhappy captain screwed up his four glittery eyes, hunched his shoulders and let his ears droop. "The Terrestrial Empire Border must be maintained. Five scout cruisers—"

"No, no, no!" said the whiningly grieved governor. "Now you are trying my patience. What does it say with regard to Terrestrial People? Be explicit!"

"All People invading the domain of the Mirionite Multicouncil shall be drained of technical information and executed, to discourage exploration of the Multicouncil which does not desire war," parroted the miserable captain.

"There! There, you see? Was there any need of waking *me* just when I needed my sleep most? Give him to the Library Technicians and then to the Servant of Death. And go out of here and let me get my rest!"

"One moment," said Steve.

"What was that?" said the governor, lifting himself up and peering around.

"It was I, Emissary of the Mighty."

The governor took hold of the edge of the bed and put his face over the side to peer near-sightedly at Steve.

"Hmph," said the governor. "I had forgotten how insignificant People were."

Steve rummaged inside the military cape and found a sheet of paper he had scooped off the communications desk. It was a list of space-wave stations.

Shoving it up at the governor, Steve said, "I bring you a message. My space landing boat was shot up by your ignorant gunners when first

I tried to land. I am not a little angry with the impudence of your treatment of me. Please mend your manners and come to business."

The governor took the paper and squinted at it uncomfortably. As a learned Mirionite and as a governor, he felt that it should be in his power to read it, or at least that his officers and men would think it should be.

"Space lifeboat?" said the governor suddenly, registering Steve's remark. He reached up to the head of his bed and pushed a button which dropped a screen. He twirled a knob and the landing field came in focus. He stared at the *Fury*, looming above the Mirionite spheroids. "Space lifeboat?"

"I want no trouble with you," said Steve. "As you can see in that communication, I am an Emissary of . . . of The Comet, Spacemaster." He glanced impatiently at his watch. "His Mightiness, The Comet, will become impatient before long. He said that I should contact him concerning the acceptance of this mandate within three hours, and the time is nearly up. He does not trifle. If I do not report, he will know I have been killed and so set about the destruction of Absolo."

"Destruct— The Comet? I have never heard of this. What do you mean, destroy Absolo?"

"Just that. The Comet levies tribute on Absolo. The amount of that tribute is to be set by me. I am to stay here with my party until such time as he comes again. The Comet is the greatest space baron of all time and his fleet is of a size to engage and defeat the combined fleets of the Terrestrial Empire itself. If you want war, then you may have war."

IN STUNNED silence, the governor gripped the bed, the wave-length list

and stared at the "tiny" being who looked so ferociously at him. Then the governor relaxed. "I have seen nothing of such a fleet! You trifle with me!"

Steve did not look up. He pointed up.

The governor looked at the ceiling and a guard hastily threw a switch which removed the opacity of the dome. The strange constellations sparkled against the black night above. And more.

The governor gave a gurgling gasp.

Steve did not look up. He stood there, pointing confidently. And high against the zenith were the streaks of pale flame which would indicate a rocket fleet standing by.

"One, two, three—" counted the guard officer.

"I can count!" said the governor irritably. He pushed a button and a strained Mirionite face came into the screen. "Radso! Why did you not warn me—"

"The governor's sleep—" quavered the face.

"Sleep! You would allow me to sleep with death over my head? How far away are those ships?"

"Our ranges indicate seventy thousand miles. Are . . . are you going to order us to f-f-fire? We only reach two thousand and we have just five scout cruisers on all Absolo, and it is nineteen days to our nearest b-b-base. And there are only seven cruisers there—"

"Arc me dead," shuddered the governor, staring up through the dome from his bed. "Seventy thousand miles and they leave tails like that? Sir Emissary, you say you must report back and that it is nearly time?"

"Am I to report that you wish to be friends with The Comet, Master

of All Space, and that you guarantee the safety of his tribute commission?"

"Yes! Yes, certainly! S-seventy thousand miles and tails like that! A space lifeboat. Dromo, escort the Emissary back to his . . . his space lifeboat. Tell him and his friends he is welcome here. When"—and his eyes had a suddenly crafty gleam—"will he be back?"

"The day I do not send him a full report of our activities."

"Dromo! Dromo, give Sir Emissary a larger guard. Don't . . . don't let anybody step on him!"

"Thank you, governor," said Steve, taking back the message from the trembling hand. Dromo drew up stiffly and Steve walked nobly past the protruding knees.

SOME TIME later, aboard the *Fury*, when the Mirionites had finished squeezing through passages and the "space fleet" had "gone away," a haggard but grim Steve entered the cabin of Jean Mauchard.

"I suppose I owe you a deep debt for saving me from my folly," said Mauchard in a low voice.

"You owe me more than a debt," said Steve. "I have saved this ship, perhaps, but I have not saved you."

Mauchard started up from a chair. "You mean you hold the mutiny against me still? What else could I do—"

"To Ares with your mutiny, Mauchard. Down this corridor is the one who paid for your stupidity."

Steve's hands were shaking, but his face was calm. Nerve and hatred were carrying him to an impossible limit of strength. He took out his seargun and cocked in a new charge. "This is cold-blooded murder, Mauchard. I'm not above that now. I've sagged six runs below bottom

already. Not even your death can bring me any lower."

"What . . . what have I done? Who . . . who has paid?" For Mauchard could not have gone through the revolt without recognizing imminent death when he saw it in a man's eyes.

"Vicky Stalton died from the effects of your morphogene, Mauchard."

"Died? No! That's not possible! Colonel, listen to me. This is no bluff. It couldn't happen! Listen to me!"

"I've gone through the past many hours knowing what would happen to you, Mauchard. Squirm out of it if you can. I played this farce through, yes. But not to save you."

"Colonel, listen to me. You've got to let me look at her. That's all I ask. Just let me look at her and, if she died from the morphogene, then I know I must pay for it. But you can't condemn me until you let me see."

"All right," said Steve wearily. "Go look at her. Maybe it's more to the point to kill you there."

Mauchard went swiftly to a locker and pulled down a small flexoid case and then hurried on before Steve to Vicky's cabin.

She lay where Steve had left her, face covered, pale fingers showing. Steve stood in the doorway, seargun in hand, while Mauchard pulled back the cloth from her face.

But Mauchard did not seem to be interested in discovering life in her. Instead, he snapped open the case he had brought and took out a long needle to which he attached a tube. He nearly startled Steve into firing when he plunged that needle into Vicky's heart and depressed the plunger in the tube.

"Oldest scientific discovery in the book," grumbled Mauchard to himself. And then to Steve, "Morphogene is one of the gases used to

bring about suspended animation. Some people are allergic to it. She'll come around in a few moments."

Steve looked from Mauchard to Vicky and then stood staring at the girl like one who has just come out of a horrible nightmare to the security of an understood room.

Vicky stirred a little and rubbed sleepily at her eyes, yawning. She felt her fingers crushed and glanced up.

"Oh. Hullo, Steve." And then, seeing how pale he was, "What's the matter? Gosh, Steve, are you seeing a ghost or something?"

"No, Vicky," said Steve with a sob. The seargun clattered to the floor at his feet. "Thank God, Vicky. No!"

THE END.
