

PLANET STORIES



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► *Four Star-Flung Novels*

- HIGHWAY J** **Charles Eric Maine** 4
 He was Ingram of 1953, inventor of J-rotation . . . and along with his lightweight bicycle, directly responsible for the most gigantic nuisance of the 25th century.
- THE PRISON OF THE STARS** **Stanley Mullen** 30
 To head out beyond Pluto a venturer needs more than a super-spaceship . . . he needs men as super-desperate and freedom-mad as himself . . . people strange and daring. Wilding, the trespasser, found them on Alcatraz, the rogue asteroid . . . the prison of the stars.
- PURPLE FOREVER** **Jack Lewis** 62
 Three men on Venus . . . lolling about in their shirt sleeves and breathing an atmosphere of chlorine and ammonia that was certain to kill a man in thirty seconds. The pictures lied . . . they must lie. Trick photography? . . . Or the greatest hoax ever staged?
- BEYOND THE X ECLIPTIC** **Fox B. Holden** 86
 Earthman was dying slowly of boredom. Hope had become folly; work a means to avoid insanity; and death was the great reward . . . until Cragin, step-son of darkest space, dared the Barrier; dared to soar beyond the dread X Ecliptic where The Owners grimly governed all the fading galaxies.

► *Four Exciting Short Stories*

- THE GOLDEN APPLES OF THE SUN** **Ray Bradbury** 21
 Toward the sun . . . south toward the vorest of all burning hearths sped the refrigerated, ice-sheathed rocket . . . run by proud and vain men hoping to sting the lion and escape the maw.
- SLAY-RIDE** **Winston K. Marks** 25
 It was a great cosmic joke when the wholesale triggerman, the pirate of the spaceways, became the victim of a simple, webbed nylon garment known as spaceman's underwear.
- PASSWORD** **J. W. Groves** 55
 Professor Medcalfe had it. And he meant to keep it. For all men were fools . . . and only the Lanyiah deserved the Earthen jackpot.
- THE FATAL THIRD** **Theo. L. Thomas** 78
 Huge, violent Webster was moulded for war—but he lived in an age of peace. So he huffed, and he puffed, and he blew down Uranus . . . and smiled at his victory.
- THE VIZIGRAPH** **2 & 110**
 Of mice and men and affectionate fen.

T. T. SCOTT, *President* JACK O'SULLIVAN, *Editor* MALCOLM REISS, *Mgr. Editor*

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THE PRISON OF THE STARS

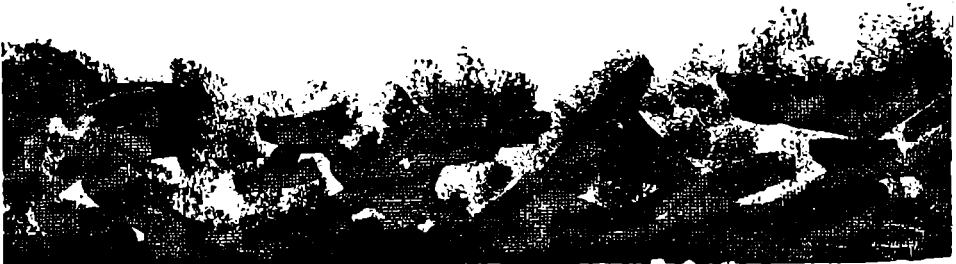
By STANLEY MULLEN

To head out beyond Pluto a venturer needs more than a super-spaceship; he needs people as super-desperate and freedom-hungry as himself; people strange and daring. Wilding, the trespasser, found them on Alcatraz—the rogue asteroid . . . the prison of the stars.

HE WATCHED rocket jets flame and change color as the supply ship put on power and drew relentlessly away from him. He saw the ship accelerate swiftly and its mirror-polished torpedo

shape diminish in distance until even its flares faded like dying stars.

Abandoned, utterly alone, a man in a spacesuit is on painfully real and intimate terms with infinity. Alone in space, a man



is more or less than a man. He could imagine himself the king of black space, but a king without lands, subjects or responsibilities is a poor monarch. He could pass the evil time ahead by reflecting upon his past life, although his present circumstances gave him little hope of profit from the knowledge of past mistakes and lost opportunities.

His name was Wilding, and legends about him on Venus and Mars indicate that the name suited him peculiarly. There is reason to believe that he was always more or less than a man. But when the supply ship had vanished completely, he was more alone than ever before in a lonely and anti-social life.

Around him whirled black, boundless vastness pinpointed with unfriendly stars. Even familiar constellations seemed alien and remote, luminous symbols detached from human values and emotions. Venus and Earth were invisible on the far side of the Sun, and Mars but the faintest of red lanterns hung upon the void. Great Saturn and Jupiter with their trains of inhabited moons must exist somewhere, but he took them on faith, not evidence.

Be patient, they had warned him contemptuously, dumping him from the supply ship like rubbish consigned to the human junk heap. Yes, be patient, and eventually someone might come out for him—but they had not told him how hard it would be to wait and watch the awful void of space and fire-flake star-patterns whirl about him. Patience, like his former life in the hive cities of the Solar system, had long ago ceased to exist. His senses reeled and he could only stare hypnotized at his immediate surroundings.

Wilding was as rich as Tantalus, and as tortured by the unattainable. Within sight, neatly packaged wealth circled with him about the giant radilume beacon. Many objects wrapped in reflector foil floated in and out of his ken as they found tiny orbits and worked out brief cycles of revolution about the giant atom flare which was the parent sun to the swarm of drifting particles. All the packages were rotating as rapidly as he, and light reflected from their metallic angularity made them resemble variable asteroids.

Loot like the splendors of a luxury space-

liner was in those packages. More food than had haunted the hunger-dreams of his youth on Venus. Other necessities like water, oxygen, clothing. Luxuries such as wines and liquors, entertainment tapes of canned music and visual diversions. Even supplies of drugs and medicines that could be perverted to forbidden joys. It was all his, for the moment, by right of existing in the middle of it, by the fact that no other claimant was on the spot. It dangled before his eyes—but beyond reach of anything but his imagination.

Wilding was circumscribed only by infinity. His sole problem was staying alive and sane.

Be patient, they had warned, with calloused indifference to his fate. But patience, if it still existed, was like the flickering witchlights of the supply packages, out of reach. Eventually, if it occurred to them, some convicts might come out from the prison asteroid and pick him up. They might come, if he lasted long enough and they had nothing better to do for entertainment.

For the first time in an otherwise grimly independent life, Wilding was completely dependent upon the whims of other people. He was helpless, unable to minister to his most elementary needs. His air might fail first, or he could starve to death in the midst of more food and drink than a man could debauch in a lifetime. His only hope was that the rich bait around him would attract other spoilers as desperate as himself.

He waited to be rescued.

BYOND a limited air supply, he could not breathe. He had no food, no water. To sustain him, besides the spacesuit and the remaining energy of his body, there was only his anger and his plan. He was an unusual man, brave and tough, even resourceful, but this time his fate was out of his hands. Even his plan was worthless unless he could live long enough to implement it.

Wilding swore grimly and silently, and waited. Even as men in ordinary circumstances measure such things, it was a long time. The initial velocity of his spin had begun to slow from occasional collision with one item or another of his useless wealth. One by one, the stars around him seemed

to flicker and go out. For even the eternal stars exist only in the mind of man.

He waited so long that the darkness of deep space seemed to seep into his space-suit. With that darkness, part of it, came fear, which is in itself the lesser death. He was weightless and nauseated, almost too weak to fight the fear. Hunger and thirst had weakened him. He wanted to scream, but brain and muscles did not respond in the oxygen thin atmosphere of the suit. Limply, he retched, lungs churning for air.

He swore again, faintly, dubiously. If this were the end, there seemed no point to anything that had gone before. His mind veered back to Mars, to the strange girl, Elshar, and what he had done for her. He wondered again why he had interfered. She was nothing to him, could never be anything. Love was not the emotion she roused in him.

Not love, not even desire. Not anything he could name unless it was fear. He pushed the thought of her from his mind.

He had felt fear before. He should know that sensation. He was feeling it now. But he had always dealt with fear by using it to put an edge on his soul. One could not deal with this situation so easily. A man should not die like this. A poor man in sight of wealth, a starving man in sight of food, a suffocating man in the midst of sealed tanks of oxygen. Anger roared in him. He called out to the dark gods of space to have done with their torture. . . .

Following numerous orbits between Jupiter and Mars are the uncounted asteroids. Some of these fragments of a long-vanished planet are named, and even most of the lesser fry are catalogued by numbers. One of them, since the earliest days of space travel and interplanetary survey, has three official numbers, two names, and at least a dozen colorful nicknames.

It is on the IPS spacemaps, named and numbered, but by interplanetary treaty it is marked in red letters: *Restricted! Warning, Do Not Land!*

This asteroid, commonly known as the Pelican, is the Alcatraz Island of space. It is a prison for the most hardened and hopeless of convicts. Outside of official circles,

few people have ever heard of it and fewer still dwell there. No spaceships ever set down, and none blast off from its scarred and pitted surface. The few inhabitants form a highly exclusive social group, their numbers limited by highly specialized requirements for membership.

The original Alcatraz was a small island in San Francisco Bay; on Earth, used as prison for only grade-A malefactors. In Spanish, the word means Pelican, and those curious birds formerly made the tiny bare rock their roosting ground. More curious birds roosted there since; but by now, with the very existence of the city of San Francisco a myth, the island has been returned to the pelicans and other fauna of the sea, sky and ground. Only some spiders and lowly insects inhabit the ruins of prison buildings, and birds and seals have the pinpoint of barren rock to themselves.

One knows by historical conjecture what happened to the prison and the nearby city. But even toward the close of the Twenty-First Century, the most optimistic would not claim that humankind has advanced beyond the need for prisons, and something drastic must still be done with the aristocrats of crime.

Expansion across space, with more worlds to conquer and loot, more races to exploit, and new frontiers of fabulous treasure to plunder, did nothing to improve the moral tone of humanity. A new and savage breed of criminals sprang into existence to meet these exciting conditions. It was raw, blind butchery at first, then racketeers of genius brought general looting into an organized and systematic bleeding of the body economic and generalized corruption of the body politic. After much bloodshed, the end result was the new Alcatraz, a prison preserve on Penguin Planetoid, familiarly known as The Rock.

The Rock is literally that. Bare rock, not even spherical, but large for an asteroid. It is a rogue asteroid, which means that its orbit is highly eccentric and comes nowhere near that of the other asteroids and rarely comes near that of any planet. It is a world to itself. It is not pushing licensed irony too far to state that its inhabitants are rogues whose orbits, from the standpoint of society, are also eccentric. Alcatraz Aster-

oid is a prison for the most incorrigible of lifers.

Only the rarest criminals qualify for such a sentence, but once sentenced, the trap closes on him for good. There is no reprieve, no parole, no pardon, and no escape. Few men ever enter the maze of caverns that honeycomb Alcatraz' forbidding interior, but those few stay. They live and die out of sight and out of touch with the worlds of reality. The Rock is the end of the line.

OUTRAGED authority forgets a man sent to Alcatraz. His record, and everything concerning him is destroyed. Both offense and existence are blotted out, which makes an unintentionally sporting offer, for if a convict should ever escape there is no previous count against him. Such a man could consider himself returned from the dead, or reborn. No escape from the Rock had been legally anticipated, and none had actually occurred. Such escape is a practical impossibility, even with no warden and no guards—for none are needed.

Newcomers arrive in the supply ship, which never lands. Like the packaged supplies, condemned prisoners are dumped overboard through a freight airlock and left twirling in space about a giant radilume flare moving in an orbit closely paralleling that of the prison asteroid. Man and supplies may twirl indefinitely, and the man may even die unless his fellow exiles are in a good mood, or are curious enough to put out in the space-lighter provided with a severely limited store of fuel and seine in the take to the prison caverns of Alcatraz.

Men have died like that, sometimes because the old hands were too disinterested to investigate in time, or again because the old inhabitants were too involved at the moment with minor feuding and treacheries to care.

Wilding was tough, and took a long time dying. There was time enough to die innumerable deaths, and even to reconstruct the patterns of a lifetime in his asphyxiating brain. . . .

He was born on Venus, in the most slippery part of Skid Road in Old Castarona. His father was a renegade Earthman who married a mutant swamp-girl from the edge of the Tihar Forest. Childhood in such

surroundings is a tonic to the adventurous spirit, and Wilding must have had spirit to survive at all. Of necessity, his mother taught him to steal. His father taught him to kill, by killing his mother in a drunken frenzy. From neighbors and rivals, he learned most of the anti-social trades, and he was an apt pupil.

His mind was uncluttered, free of the commonly accepted ideas of morality, without normal inhibitions. He killed and stole, but casually according to his needs and ambitions. Crime, except for profit, would have seemed immoral to him. Periodically he was caught and sentenced, which was according to the rules of the game; but no prison could ever hold him long. Even for frontier Venus, he acquired a potent reputation, both for crime-without violence, and as an escape artist. When he moved on to other planets and began piratical raids along the spaceways, he gave the security patrols some evil moments.

It was not inevitable that he be trapped and stopped dead by being sent to Alcatraz Asteroid. With luck, he might even have made his pot and retired to wealth and respectability. But his feet must have been slippery from Skid Road, for he slipped, stepped out of character and killed just once from a motive of, from his point of view, sheer stupidity. Protecting Elshar, a crippled slave-girl, from a cruel beating at the hands of a Martian slaver, he struck out in a passion against injustice. For this final murder, he was sentenced as an incorrigible. A man should hold to his pattern. . . .

WILDING waited, unconscious, slowly dying, and time passed. A lot of time. For the dwellers in The Rock did not share his impatience. It was off-season for the supply ship, and a far more interesting caper was in progress than the routine pick-up of a dying man in a spacesuit. A series of interesting brawls and murders was drawing to a suspenseful conclusion. Nobody wanted to miss anything or anybody, until the situation died out literally in a sprawl of charred and mutilated bodies.

So Wilding knew nothing about it when the lighter eventually came out. His body was blue, puffed and more dead than alive, the spark-blue eyes glazed and sightless. He

could not see the small craft circle and draw in the supplies with magnetic nets. He was unaware of the skyhooks that reached out to haul him through the airlock into the lighter, and was too far gone to care. For a man attempting death and rebirth, he had a good start on the first half of his project.

Pangs of returning sensation brought him sharply conscious and reminded him of his plan. If he were to be the first man ever to escape from Alcatraz Asteroid, he must start at once by establishing his place in a dangerous and hard-bitten society. He began his task by opening his eyes. Blistered and stiffened lids responded slowly.

The cubicle was dim and murky, air stale but cool. Grunting, he tried to sit up. Someone bent over him.

A woman's face blocked further view. The face was old and wise and ugly; the woman huge and muscular, a graying Amazon who might be a good foot taller than Wilding when she straightened up. Sound boomed from her as if from a cracked bell, and most of the cracks showed on her weathered skin. She was mildly drunk, her breath poisonous with mushroom beer.

"What's new in Venusport?" she asked.

"Who in Hell cares?" demanded Wilding.

Her laugh boomed again. "He knows where he is," she jeered. "So I win my bet."

"What bet?"

The big woman drew back and let Wilding have a look at her companions. Behind the woman stood a man and a girl. A spidery Mercurian straddled Wilding's legs and massaged numbed flesh with rough efficiency.

"My bet with Grouth," explained the Amazon, indicating the Mercurian. "Not decorative, is he? Mercurian twilight men never are. But he's what passes for my husband here."

Wilding stared at her, and past her at the others. "Now I know for sure where I am," he said. "I read in a book once that there's no marriage or giving in marriage in Heaven. Since I'm obviously dead, that leaves only—"

The Amazon slapped her ample thigh and vented some more loud rumbles of laughter.

"Proves my point," she bellowed.

"Grouth figured your first words would be 'Where am I?' or something else trite. You looked to me like a man who always knows where he is and how he got there, so I bet on it. Alcatraz or Hell—it's all one. Do I win?"

"Near enough," Grouth snorted unhappily. "I'll concede—"

"What stakes?" Wilding asked.

For his plan, he must have the respect and co-operation of the veteran convicts. Such an attitude must be earned, so he carefully disciplined himself to register neither shock nor surprise whatever he encountered. Even so, his hair nearly stood on end as the noisy Amazon explained.

"Our own version of Russian roulette. We load the blaster clip with alternating charges and blanks, then stick the muzzle in each other's mouth and pull the trigger to find out which load is first. Now Grouth owes me one. Not that I'll collect just yet. I like to be sure I'm through with a man before I blow his head off."

Wilding shrugged. "It should simplify divorce." With some effort, Wilding sat up and shoved the Mercurian violently from his perch. "Get off my legs. . . ."

Grouth glared and gave an unpleasant whickering sound. "I was only trying to work enough life back into you so you could give us some news. Mortality is high among newcomers. You won't last long."

"I may surprise you," Wilding said casually. Deliberately, his eyes fixed upon each of the four, impressing their features into his memory, evaluating personalities to determine potential usefulness to his plan. Savages, as he had expected. Degenerate and degenerate, all of them, but intelligent. Dangerous tools, but he had sometimes worked miracles with worse.

THE other man was a bald giant, of curious complexion, obviously not of Earth stock, very tall but so heavily built that he looked squat. Grinning, apelike, he thrust out something between a hand and a paw. Wilding took it and did not wince under the pressure.

"I'm Concor," said the bullet-head. "Martian, though origin is not important here. Welcome to our pesthole."

Wilding nodded, turning his attention to

the fourth of the odd group. She was a girl, young, sullen and striking. Lips writhed in scorn as she returned his frank stare, and the play of expression on her features was light flickering from a moving swordblade. She was not beautiful, nor even pretty in any ordinary sense. Everything about her suggested metal—her skin was snow on copper, her hair curling shreds of brass, her body posture suggested the temper and resilience of steel, even the eyes quivered like heated mercury and did something as poisonous to a man's bones.

Half-caste Callistan, he thought, and not quite human.

Her voice was coldly sibilant as a needle sliding in metallic groove. "Better enjoy us while you can, Halfling. If we seem so distasteful to you, brace yourself. We're the nice people here."

"My niece, Amyth," said the Amazon, touching the girl's shoulder fondly. "I should warn you about her. She's killed three men in a year for less than you're thinking."

Wilding gave a grim chuckle. "I'll remember that. If I ever start thinking about her, I'll break both her arms first."

"We're not too formal about such things here. You take whatever you're strong and clever enough to hold. The man who wants Amyth is likely to have his hands full. Even for me, there were some other suitors, but Grouth was man enough to hold me against all comers. So don't sell him short, for all his runt-size and odd complexion."

Wilding nodded, understanding. Women would be scarce, and men exiles would fight over them like male rats over scarce females. He had expected strange and difficult social organization in Alcatraz, even chaos, and the presence of women would be an additional cause of dissension. It might be used to his advantage.

"Who's the bull of this scrub herd?" he asked. "None of you?"

Amyth's laugh was a jangling of steel-shards. Taming her could be an interesting project, but held jagged possibilities.

"Most of us take orders from Tichron," the girl replied. "A few fellow Credus, an Earthman. If you have ideas about me, you'll have to fight Tichron for the privilege."

Wilding grunted. "Small privilege. But

I'd fight him anyhow. While I'm here, I rule. I lead, not follow."

"Big talk for a newcomer," she said. "When you're here a while—"

"I'm not staying. I'm Wilding. No prison can hold me."

"Alcatraz can," Concor said wearily. "We all feel like that at first. Nobody escapes. But if you want to try, count me in."

The Amazon belched beer fumes volcanically. "Me, too. And Grouth. It will be something to do. I'm Tiny. If I had another name it's down the drain years ago."

Amyth's wicked glance slashed at Wilding.

"I'll decide . . . after you've fought Tichron. If you have a plan, tell us. Maybe we can use it after Tichron wrings the blood from your body and throws the husk to the Pit Men for fodder. He'll be happy to learn there's a new challenger. His blood lust is growing—"

"There are those who fan his other lusts," Grouth broke in angrily. "It's unfair to taunt a newcomer into unequal combat. Give Wilding time to find his way around—"

Warm, unfamiliar emotion writhed in Wilding. It had been so long since the occasion for it that he could scarcely recognize gratitude. He could not remember anyone's championing his rights and interests. Also, he realized, if the sullen and monstrous Mercurian stood up for him, it was a sign he was accepted. Such as they were, he had allies.

"The girl is right, Grouth," he said quietly. "Now is the time. I must fight Tichron." His eyes lashed the girl. "I have a plan—but it is not for the ears of Tichron's sluts. When I have use for your obvious talents, I'll give orders."

Amyth's eyes blazed, her face whitened beyond its odd pallor.

From the doorway came a brazen bellow of delight, drowning what she might have said.

A burly shape glided into the room. A giant Venusian, broad face as savage as that of a swamp-slug, oily body glistening like the image of a squat godling. He looked like a professional wrestler.

"I heard that," he said. "I'm Tichron." The game had started.

II

ALCATRAZ ASTEROID was a separate world, an island of rock, wedge-shaped, eighteen miles long, and roughly the same in the circumference of its larger end. The interior was not hollow, but was honey-combed with habitable caverns like large bubbles, connected by a maze of passages. Outer levels had all been converted into a prison without guards and without bars. Life was easy, the social structure simple, idyllic or primitive depending upon the point of view.

Though not completely self-sufficient—since enlightened penology provided lavish supplies—the convict community would have gone on much the same if the rest of the Solar System had suddenly ceased to exist.

Elementary machinery for the basic trades had been provided; its use or neglect was left up to the prisoners. By artificial illumination, food could be grown in sub-surface hydroponic gardens, and limited animal husbandry was encouraged. But lack of usable fuels and raw materials limited manufacturing to safely low levels, which prevented even gifted technicians from getting ideas. Potentially fissionable ores were present in the deep interior, and under pressure someone might have found ingenuity to process it. Air and water were hermetically sealed-in, automatically purified and reclaimed at need.

Convicts were self-governed, which meant a rule of claw and fang since weapons were crude and hand-made. Dwelling in caves, the prisoners returned to an archaic way of life and became cave men. Life was brutal, direct, and usually brief. Cowards rarely got there, and the weak and unfit were quickly weeded out by living conditions intolerable to endure. Survivors were a tough, rangy breed who would survive anywhere. The few women were rank weeds, not delicate flowers; if they did not thrive, they persisted. Some children were born, and those who lived grew up as sinewy, strong and poisonous as desert snakes.

At the time the asteroid had been converted to a prison, it was assumed that it was uninhabited. But laired deep within the poisonously radioactive caverns was a small

colony of the legendary lost race of Pit Men.

Underworld legends told in whispers that these eery creatures sometimes came from their lairs and mingled with the human convicts of Alcatraz. Actually, prisoners rarely encountered them, for the Pit Men were shy, nervous beings, harmless unless provoked, and did not issue from their caverns except by stealth for provisions. The aboriginal dwellers were neither man nor bird, though they resembled both superficially. They were non-human, non-animal, being plants, mobile and intelligent, a variety of animated fungus so alien that contact on any but the simplest levels was impossible. Even so, they were the one fly in the ointment—

Outside of rumors, Wilding knew little of the Pit Men. But he had given them much thought, and wondered if he might find a use even for them in his escape plans. For the moment, though, he must confine himself to building up an organization. Breaking out of Alcatraz was no simple matter, and the escape he had in mind was definitely not a solo effort. He would need good technicians and a host of willing workers. For now—

There was Tichron and the challenge.

Word had gone out, and the convicts were assembling to enjoy the sport. A newcomer had challenged Tichron.

Wilding let his new-found friends lead him through an involved series of caverns. Accustomed as he was to varied atmospheres and gravities on many worlds, Wilding had difficulty in adjusting here. Air pressure was kept high, and artificial gravity set low, which made breathing and balance precarious. With a little additional effort, he felt that he could shove himself free of the rock floor and swim in the dense air. He must remember that in his encounter with Tichron, who would be accustomed to conditions in Alcatraz.

So interested was Wilding in his surroundings that the arena was reached almost before he realized it.

Dimensions of an immense hollow sphere lost themselves in murky light. Tiers of stone seats climbed the concave, curving walls, and a noisy crowd swarmed into the spectators' sections. Wilding's companions

led him down an arched ramp to the low-walled pit at the bottom center. Tichron had not yet arrived, and in the interval of waiting, Concor the Martian and Grouth the spidery Mercurian worked over Wilding feverishly to massage the stiffness from his limbs. Amyth retreated into sullen silence, but Tiny leaned close to Wilding's ear and whispered.

"I like your guts, young man. But why so soon? You should've waited to get back your strength, and choose a time when you have studied Tichron's style."

Wilding wished profanely that the woman would stop calling him "young man." She was old enough, though life on Alcatraz might have aged her prematurely, but no older, surely, than a Martian Pzintar idol, which by atomic timetable is something less than two million years. At times, Wilding felt older, less human, more fouled by life.

WILDING braced himself for Homeric struggle and turned to smile coolly at his strange cohorts.

"Waiting would be fatal," he told them grimly. "I need quick authority, and the unquestioned compliance of workers. In about two Earth-weeks the supply ship will be back. By that time I want the lighter ready for space. I want it supplied and powered for a longer run than picking up a miserable cargo of supplies."

Grouth sneered. "Without fuel?"

Wilding answered coldly. "Leave that problem to me."

Concor shrugged. "Since you are new here I should explain that there are no rules in the fight. If Tichron wins he can break your back with impunity. Probably he will. He has cruel whims. That is also your problem, and I leave it to you, willingly. However, just as advice, stay clear and do not grapple with him. Keep away and strike out hard with your fists. Some blows may get through all the blubber and muscles. If you give him a good enough fight, he may even respect you enough to let you live. Crippled, of course. . . ."

A ragged crowd-shout ordered the start of the fight. The hyenas were impatient for the carnivores.

Tichron was advancing, slowly and con-

fidently. Wilding stood up and moved slowly into the circle of combat. The cleared space was small, the ground surface uneven.

Wilding feigned nervous indecision. He appeared to hesitate, as if contemplating flight.

Laughter and jeers flicked him like whips.

Lowering his head, he moved with lightning swiftness. His move was totally unexpected. Rushing across the arena, he flung himself at Tichron like a living battering ram. His head connected solidly with Tichron's midriff. Breath gushed from the giant like air forced from a trodden balloon. Doubling up, Tichron reeled backward. His fists flying, Wilding hammered the exposed face. Tichron straightened long enough to receive a knee in the place most painful to him. The shock almost lost him the fight at once, but he recovered and hurled Wilding across the arena.

Wilding caught up a stone bench and flung it, but the light gravity betrayed his effort. It went wild. Nearly weightless, it still had mass, and part of the entranced onlookers avoided being brained only by undignified scramblings.

Now Wilding and Tichron circled each other warily. Tichron stopped circling and slid forward in liquid rhythm of movement. He caught Wilding flat-footed, jerked the lighter man off his feet and raised him high overhead. Wilding crashed to the floor with stunning force. Tichron leaped to come down on his prone opponent with both feet. But Wilding was already rolling. He caught one of Tichron's feet, twisted and jerked. The giant sat down violently.

As Tichron rose, Wilding launched himself in a suicidal dive at the giant's stomach. Again he connected like a battering ram. The sound of expelled breath was explosive. This time, as Tichron bent double, Wilding brought up his knee against the exposed jaw. There was a loud crack. Pawing frantically, Tichron went down in a heap. Wilding jumped, brought both feet down on the quivering hulk. It was like leaping on a rock. But Tichron was through fighting. He lay peacefully unconscious.

The fight was over before it had well started.

Jeers changed suddenly to cheers. As winner and new champion, Wilding was king

of Alcatraz. But not undisputed king—

A tall, cadaverous man stepped from the crowd.

"My name is Credus. I challenge you now?"

Wilding turned to Concor. "Is that in the rules—to fight one after another like this?"

"There are no rules," said the wily Martian.

"In that case—"

Wilding snatched a blaster pistol from the spring clip on Tiny's belt. He jammed the muzzle hard into Credus' side, but not before Credus had drawn his own gun and thrust it at Wilding.

Neither could miss, but it was deadlock.

"I'll bargain with you, Credus," suggested Wilding. "Unless you want to chance pulling that trigger."

"What bargain?" asked Credus sourly.

"Meet me here again in two Earth-weeks. I will fight you then without a gun, or turn the asteroid over to you."

Credus shrugged. "I am not a fool, halfling. But be here, or I will find you and kill you."

Credus stalked darkly from the arena, followed in silence by a full third of the assembled prisoners. With his departure, the cheers for Wilding were less enthusiastic, as if the throng disapproved of Wilding's trickery.

Tiny, the Amazon, was kneeling beside Tichron, who was conscious now, but breathing heavily.

"She was a nurse on Earth," explained Concor. "Before she got the habit of strangling her fretful patients."

The woman looked up and smiled brightly. "That gun of mine is loaded with alternating blanks," she observed. "I kept wondering if Credus would call your bluff."

Wilding met her glance. "So did I," he admitted. "And I remembered about those blanks. Can you do anything for Tichron?"

"Better kill him," advised Grouth impatiently. "It is your right."

"Let him live," said Wilding, frowning. "I may have some use for him."

The girl Amyth sneered unpleasantly. "The man has a mania for utility. Have you some use for me, halfling?"

"Halfling, yourself!" replied Wilding, with anger rising in him. "Perhaps, I have

—when I have less important things to manage. But I'll let you know. Don't rush your luck."

A slow flush crept into her cheek, but she swallowed a corrosive retort. After all, Wilding was boss, and her arms were brittle.

Wilding turned to Grouth. "Who are the technicians? I'll want all kinds to get that lighter in shape for space."

Grouth laughed bitterly. "Time enough. Concor can help you select the technicians. He's one of them, and a spaceship wrecker has to know many technical trades. But you'll need more than men, you'll need miracles."

Concor broke in. "He's right, Wilding. We have skilled labor to work with, but no materials. Metal is scarce here, but we can junk some machine tools for part of what we'll need. The real lack is fuel. You can't process metal without heat, and you can't power a space-lighter with non-existent chemicals. They leave only enough chemical fuel each time to power the lighter for the next pickup. I will back your play, but I'm no good at working miracles. I've even forgotten how to pray, and I doubt if any known or unknown gods would heed a prayer from me."

"I don't pray for miracles. I arrange them. Can't the lighter be converted to use atomic power?"

Concor waved empty hands. "Not easily. It could be, probably, but what is the use? Where would we get activated fuels?"

"No fuel," repeated Grouth, his voice like a dirge.

"There are radioactive elements in this asteroid," argued Wilding. "Can't they be used?"

Concor shook his head grimly. "They are here, true. But they are useless to power an atomic converter for the lighter. For two good reasons. We can't lay hands on them, literally. Without any shielding, we would be burned like moths in a flame, and the danger of the Pit Men is too great even if we dared invade their caverns. The Pit Men used to be harmless and friendly, but they aren't now. Some of the convicts found out they were good eating, organized hunts and stuffed themselves on Pit Men. Nowadays, we rarely see a Pit Man. They slink about in the caverns like shadows. And they wage

a relentless guerilla warfare. Any convict they catch alone is a dead convict. They rush him and overwhelm him. Probably they eat him or use him to fertilize their nursery beds."

"I could talk to them and make a deal," said Wilding.

EVERY convict in hearing laughed harshly.

"Try it," suggested Amyth acidly. "Their arms are less brittle than mine."

"And while you're at it," went on Concor, "ask them to mine and process it for us. They're immune to radiation burns. In fact, they seem to thrive on rays that are deadly to us. We've never dared invade the lower caverns because of the radiation, which makes their homes an impregnable fortress for the Pit Men."

Wilding nodded quickly, understanding. "Could I go there and talk with them?" he demanded.

Concor shrugged in futility. "You could if you were foolish enough. There would be some exposure, but not necessarily a fatal dose if you made your stay short. The Pit Men will kill you before the radiation does."

Tichron was stirring. He blinked painfully and sat up, nursing some cracked ribs. He stared at Wilding with frank admiration.

"It was a mistake to let me live," he said. "Someday I'll challenge you for another try. But not right away. You fought me fairly and defeated me. You give orders and I'll see that they're carried out. Also, a word of warning. Credus is next in line, he thinks. Watch him. A stealthy knife in the dark or a sudden shot from behind is his style. Sooner or later, if that doesn't work out for him, he'll challenge you. But never if you have a chance."

Wilding laughed sharply. "He already challenged, but we've postponed the occasion. I'm going to try to make a deal with the Pit Men. Have you any advice?"

Tichron's face worked curiously. He heaved his bulk erect and grimaced with pain.

"Yes, some advice. Don't go. Certainly, not alone. If you insist, I'll go along and show you the way."

"Thanks," said Wilding. "But you're in no shape for it. Rest up, and I'll find work for you. Who else will go along and show me the way to the Pits?"

He glanced round the circle of faces. Several of them paled and disappeared with suspicious haste.

"I'll go," offered Tiny. "But I won't want to come back alone. Will you come along, Amyth? The Pit Men have never offered to harm a woman. Probably not from chivalry, but none of us have ever had the stomach to try eating the filthy things."

"I'll come," agreed the girl quickly. "Perhaps we can watch while the Pit Men work over our hero. I wouldn't want to miss that."

Wilding smiled savagely. "Perhaps I will let one of them break your arms as part of the deal."

Before leaving with the women, Wilding gave orders to Grouth and Concor. All the machine tools were to be put in running order. All technicians assembled and ready to work on the space-lighter. Tichron was ordered to bed to rest and recover from his beating.

Authority seemed to come naturally to Wilding.

He enjoyed the curious sensation of responsibility and power. His previous life had given him no taste of organizing mass-effort. At first, he had been a lonely, hunted fugitive, then later a solitary beast of prey.

For a brief term, he had lived among the space plunderers, and he had headed a piratical crew. But the role then had been that of wolf-leader, one of the pack, with little authority and no great responsibility to his fellows.

Here, partly by accident, he had achieved perilous command. The people, such as they were, looked to him for decisions. They looked at him with respect. Grudgingly, they yielded leadership, but only to him as a better man. He felt a strange, new emotion.

He was contented, and oddly stimulated.

With Tiny and Amyth leading, he headed toward the deep caverns and his dangerous business with the Pit Men who dwelt there. . . .

III

THERE was darkness and furtive movement ahead. There was the nervous oppression one feels in deep caverns. There was silence and shadowy impressions of movements as soundless and nerve-wracking as the silence.

Tiny pressed a hand radilume into Wilding's fingers.

"From here on, nobody knows the way," she said, an odd gentleness in her voice. "I wish I dared go all the way with you. Shall I wait here?"

"No," Wilding answered uneasily. "Take the girl back safely. I will find my way, or perhaps the Pit Men will show me . . ."

Tiny's laugh was gruesome. It echoed among the silent rocks and came back magnified. While the sound still clattered back and forth from the confining rock walls, Wilding left the women and went on.

He went through darkness and more silence. Flickering ghosts of movement paced his progress. He knew the Pit Men were all around him, watching, curious, waiting to spring and overwhelm him. His handlight made a narrow rent in the solid curtain of blackness. He could see the path and the vague outlines of the passage for a few paces ahead. He went on for a long time.

Finally, he stood still and waited. Movement ceased around him. He shut off the radilume and shifted his position slightly. Again he waited. He stood still, scarcely breathing. Movement began again, and oddly, it seemed to move away from him. But one fragment of the movement drew closer. It edged toward him and stopped. It came on, slowly, softly, warily. Wilding could see nothing, scarcely hear the cautious breathing. But his instincts sensed the creature and placed it exactly. It was curious.

Suddenly Wilding leaped. There was quick, huddled violence in the darkness. The thing seemed all body. Wilding could find no arms or legs for leverage. But its strength was no match for his. Wilding overpowered the creature, felt it fall under him. In a flash, he was down on top of it, holding it against the rock floor, straddling a furry bulk, pinioning its struggles. The thing writhed feebly, then subsided and lay still. Wilding hoped he had not killed or serious-

ly injured the Pit Man. He eased the pressure, and felt the soft body stir slightly. Relieved, he eased the strain a little more, but held his advantage.

His fingers clicked the radilume switch. Light was momentarily blinding after the darkness. Wilding ventured a quick glance at the captured Pit Man and turned away in revulsion. How could people eat such things!

Wilding sat on the prostrate Pit Man and felt very unhappy about the capture. The Pit Man goggled out of excited eyes and geysered an insane gibberish of sound. There were no recognizable words, and not even an indication that the sounds were words. It was like the notes of a curious, chattering birdsong, chromatic, waveringly melodic and set to vague rhythms, but it resembled no speech Wilding had ever heard.

Easy enough to carry out his plan to speak to the Pit Men, but what language did one use? Wilding tried slum Venusian, two Earth languages, a smattering of canal Martian dialects. He got nowhere. The Pit Man stayed put and bird-sounds sprayed from him. Wilding straddled the creature and spoke words in every language he knew. That was all.

A similar difficulty had baffled trained semantics men. Even the cipher experts, though admitting that the birdsong sounds seemed to have a musical or mathematical basis, could go no further. No dictionaries or word-books exist, and the language, if it were even a language, seemed not phonetic. No actual words had ever been distinguished, let alone their meanings.

Nor was the language the only mystery about the Pit Men. No anthropologist ever studied the race, catalogued its social patterns, recorded its history. The Pit Men were non-human, their origins lost in darkness beyond the dawn of time. In the chronicles of the early (Martian) spacemen, there is mention of a fungus-people inhabiting some of the larger asteroids, particularly the rogue asteroids and those with a high content of radioactive ores. First explorations by solar survey ships from Earth found the fungus life-forms existing much as they still do, inhabiting deep caves in the honey-combed interiors of some asteroids.

Practically nothing definite was ever

learned about them. These mobile, intelligent fungus-growths clung to their impregnable isolation and lived among deposits of low grade radioactive ores, worthless to mine and difficult to transport. In murky, dim-lit caverns, they lived out their strange lives, eating if they eat, sleeping if they sleep, and worshipping gods as ancient and strange as themselves. At first contacts Pit Men proved friendly and harmless, if not molested—but deadly dangerous if aroused or mistreated.

But communication always stopped dead beyond a few meager words the more intelligent Pit Men deigned to learn and use.

Wilding got up, releasing the Pit Man. With a shudder, he helped the creature to the horny pads which passed for its feet. The thing retreated to the edge of the light cone and stood, half in shadows, trembling. Wilding took a long look at the goggling alien, then wished he had not.

IT WAS a stubby, waddling horror of gray-green and fishbelly white, oddly manlike, even birdlike as legend specified, but with no resemblance to any particular bird life of the known worlds. The head was huge in proportion, round and smooth as a polished plastic ball. A long slender trunk or tentacle extended from the almost featureless face. Limbs were not arms, but something between wings and flippers. Folded membranes, like the gliding surfaces of flying squirrels connected the flipper-wings to the plump, obscene body. In texture, the skin was not slick, furry or feathered, but dusty, like the wings of a moth-miller.

The Pit Man trembled and waited, while Wilding's nerves shrank from remembrance of its foul contact.

Impatiently, with a recognition of futility, Wilding gestured for it to go. Without language, communication was impossible, and there was no hope of making a deal with the Pit Men. Birdmen or animals, plants or parasites, the things were too alien.

He would have to manage his plan somehow without their help.

By signs, Wilding tried helplessly to convey a minimum of apology for the outrage of capture and attempted kidnapping. He

might as well have waved his hand against the wind.

The fungus-thing goggled and trembled and waited, making no move to leave, none toward Wilding. Treble sounds spilled from the orifice of its waving trunk, almost made words, hinted at resemblances, at possible meanings. Wilding thought he made out a corrupt and garbled enunciation of a red Martian word.

"Tza-tchagalok," which means either priest or temple, depending upon the tone in which it is spoken.

The Pit Man slid away. He came back. He retreated to the dark areas, returned again. His flippers gyrated excitedly. He reminded Wilding of a dog dumbly trying to lead a man to a discovery. The parallel was obvious. He wanted Wilding to follow.

Wilding shrugged and went along. There was nothing to lose. If it were a trap, he was already in it.

The darkness grew lighter, but oddly misty, as if some radiant vapor swirled and flowed in the caves. He could now see surroundings but as if through a veil of dancing dust motes. Light increased as they moved forward, ever deeper into the rock heart of the asteroid. Wilding felt his skin tingling as if he bathed in a thick liquid full of sparks. Fatalistically, he wondered how much exposure to this a man's body could stand.

The cavern opened out, became an immense chamber. Walls fell back and the floor sloped into an abyss swimming with blinding mist. The ceiling lifted and lost itself in vaulted brightness overhead. Pit Men swarmed in the great cavern like bees crowding a giant hive. They paid no attention to Wilding or his companion.

There was music, or at least unholy sound. It swelled and flowed in monstrous organ notes, lingering on chords, measured by an alien off-beat rhythm. The Pit Men wavered like shoals of fish caught in powerful undertows. Their bodies swayed and bobbed in response to the movements of sound. Even the light flared and faded like a visual echo of the music.

Wilding's late captive, now his guide, paused indecisively and made abortive motions with his flippers. Again the bird-sounds chimed and whickered. Again, Wil-

ding snatched at the Martian word for priest or temple.

"Tza-tchagalok, . . . Tza-tchagalok . . ."

The Pit Man pointed a flipper upward. Suspended in mid-air, without visible support except for the streaming pillars of light, was an elaborate structure. Wilding studied it. There were bars studded with prisms which shattered the streaming light to rainbow effects. It was like an immense jewelled cage.

Wilding sensed movement within the cage. He was curious how the creatures reached the staging, since there was no ladder, no ramp, no stairs.

He learned quickly. The Pit Man took flight, lurching clumsily into the air and floundering about on his flippers and the stretched membrane. It was a combination of swimming and gliding. The thing poised, as if waiting for the man to follow. Wilding did actually make the attempt. With the light gravity and the heavily pressured air, such swimming flight seemed almost possible. Wilding's attempt ended in ludicrous failure. He sprawled in flailing trajectory and fell awkwardly into web-like nets of glittering metal.

Pit Men gathered about and helped extricate him. Their birdlike vocals chattered in ear-splitting showers.

His guide and two others whisked him off his feet and soared upward through the mists. Once aloft, his low-gravity weight seemed no burden to them. In flight, their awkwardness vanished quickly, and they swam about with ease and grace. The approach to their temple may have been ritual; it was certainly not direct.

Wilding's senses spun. He felt nauseated and alarmed.

The Pit Man trio swooped down and deposited Wilding solidly on a platform built into the cage.

On the platform, paddling about mysterious ceremonies, was a very old, very gray, and very dusty Pit Man. He looked more like an owl than anything else. He goggled and waddled ponderously. He made a bobbing obeisance to a gigantic image, and to Wilding the ritual posturing was both solemn and impressive.

So was the idol. It was towering, of some burnished red metal, and represented a

being completely non-anthropomorphic, like those strange and morbid Pzintar images Wilding had seen on Mars. Ancient Mars had worshipped beings neither birds nor serpents, but blending qualities and appearances of both. This idol was like those, though not an exact duplication. It represented something utterly alien to man, infinitely wise, infinitely benevolent, infinitely sad. There was no suggestion of good or evil; there was only calm acceptance and understanding of things as they are, and a serene certainty in things as they should be. . . .

Wilding stared upward at the gigantic symbol, and felt a stir of religious awe.

The owl-like priest spoke then. He spoke in good, cultured Martian, though his vocal apparatus massacred word sounds.

"Even the gods die," he said in whistling accents. "Or they grow bored and tired and go away. The gods are beyond understanding, and sometimes we are beyond their understanding as well."

Wilding shivered as if a blast from icy eternities blew over him.

"My time is short," he said quickly. "I came to ask help from you, but a man's bones and flesh can stand only brief exposure to this radiation. If I stay here too long, I will die."

"Perhaps you will be reborn as a Pit Man," suggested the old priest philosophically.

The possibility was no consolation to Wilding.

He talked quickly, outlining his project, stating his needs, and the possible gain to the Pit Men in co-operating with him.

"I plan to escape with the bulk of the prisoners," he said. "If you will help, you can have your asteroid to yourselves again."

"How could we help you?"

"The Pit Folk are immune to radiation that is deadly to us. We have no shielding, so we cannot handle or process the radioactive ores. We can provide equipment, if you will supply the labor. All we want is enough to power heavy machines for two weeks, and sufficient purified atomic fuel to power the space-lighter on a short voyage. It will not require much knowledge or labor for that."

The gray priest was thoughtful. "If you

escape in that small lighter, not many of the prisoners can go with you."

"Not many," agreed Wilding. "Not in the lighter. I intend to seize the supply ship and take along all who wish to go."

"There will still not be space enough for all," said the priest gravely. "What of those who will remain behind?"

WILDING grunted. "That is not my problem. Perhaps the guards will send out and pick them up. Certainly there will be an investigation and no more prisoners will be sent here. I will leave you the means to dispose of the remaining prisoners. If they try to harm you, I leave the decision in your hands. You can destroy all of them."

"You are a more ruthless people than my race," commented the old Pit Man.

"Circumstances sometimes require me to be ruthless," Wilding replied, without apology. "It is like surgery, needed to remove cancerous tissue. Will you help?"

"I do not know," said the priest. He moved to the edge of the platform, and suddenly was surrounded by swarming hordes of the Pit Men. There was no audible consultation, no words, no waving of the flipper limbs. Music died away into silence.

Finally the gathering broke up and the Pit Men swooped away in all directions.

"What was that—a council talk?" asked Wilding.

The gray old priest goggled at him. "Not in words. Not talk in the sense you mean. My people are a symbiotic group, all parts of one personality. Each colony is group-brain, a group nervous system, the individuals are its limbs and organs. We have no speech, and communicate with each other by what you would call telepathy—though it is not that. We are not individuals at all, but parts of a great organism. Vocal sound with us is not communication, but an expression of mood-music."

Wilding looked upward at the gigantic image. "If you are still undecided, why not ask your gods?" he inquired cynically.

The priest whistled words in an eery tone. "One does not disturb the gods with questions unless he wants disturbing answers. We have already reached our decision. We will help you escape."

Wilding gave swift instructions and the priest agreed upon terms and methods of carrying them out.

Without visible or audible summons, Wilding's Pit Man guide reappeared suddenly, swooping down from the brilliance near the roof of the cavern. He settled with a flutter of membranes and a flurry of flippers.

"This one will return you to your own kind," said the priest. "You will not come here again, for this cavern is sacred to us. And there must be no more seizing and eating of Pit Men."

"There will be none," Wilding promised savagely. "Not after I warn the convicts that if any incidents occur, I will turn the human offenders over to you for punishment."

The priest shook his head. "No, we don't want that."

"I don't understand," protested Wilding.

"You must take responsibility for your own kind. That is our law. In your dealings with us, it must be yours."

Wilding shrugged, then agreed soberly. It seemed that his authority carried accumulating responsibility with it.

Return to the prison colonies of the outer caverns was without incident. Though surprised to see him alive, his fellow convicts received his news boisterously. Wilding cut short their enthusiasm and rapidly assigned tasks.

Time was short, and there was much to be done. For reasons concerned with the relative proximity to a new-type spaceship that he had previously cached in the asteroid belt, everything must be accomplished before the next scheduled arrival of the supply ship, or even sooner if an unscheduled prisoner delivery should occur. With atomic power, anything was possible. Prisoners turned to with a will as soon as radioactive ores, already processed, began to pour into the caverns, proving the Pit Men as good as their word. Growth and Wilding oversaw the tooling of weapons and stockpiling of vital supplies. Concor supervised technical jobs.

Work went on. In any subsurface world, time is arbitrary, an artificial thing of clockwork and labor expended. It passed rapidly

IV

A FULL day before the two weeks were up, Wilding was rushing conversion of the lighter to completion. Everything else was in readiness. Food, weapons and a store of ammunition were stacked on the landing stages for loading. Some would go into the lighter, the rest would be at hand awaiting the capture of the supply ship.

Aboard the lighter, technicians made final adjustments and tests. Among them, making herself both useful and ornamental, was Amyth.

Tiny had parked herself at Wilding's elbow. She reeked of poisonous mushroom beer. She was drunk and talking.

"Your eyes follow her," Tiny observed shrewdly.

"They do," Wilding admitted. "I'm curious about her. What could she have done to be sent here?"

"Amyth was born here. She's never had a chance to do anything. Can you imagine what such a life means to a girl like that?"

Wilding shuddered. "I don't have to imagine."

"She's tough," went on Tiny. "Only the tough ones survive. The authorities don't recognize their existence. They send men and women here, with all the fences down, then close their eyes. Maybe nobody told them about the birds and bees. Amyth is my sister's child. She grew up here, knows nothing but this prison life."

"She grew up all over," commented Wilding.

Tiny's eyes bubbled, like sunlight dancing in a glass of beer. "She's vicious as a blaster discharge, but as clean. Don't get any wrong ideas. I taught her to take care of herself. But she's still woman enough to think and feel. She likes you, made that dress specially for you to see her in it."

Wilding grunted unhappily. Even in Hell—complications.

"I can still see most of her in it. What's she trying to sell? I don't need a seamstress or dress designer, or a wife."

"You need something," rumbled Tiny. "Give her a break, man. Amyth's a flower growing in a trash heap. She deserves something better than this. Maybe you don't want her, and maybe you never will. But if

you break out of here, take her along."

Wilding nodded. "If she wants to go along, I'll take her. I can't promise any more than that. Can I trust you, Tiny?"

The Amazon smiled grimly. "You can—now. Some of us can't go, I know that. Even if your plans work out, there won't be room for all. For me it doesn't matter too much. Sure, I'd like to get drunk once more on good stuff. I'd like to walk crowded streets and push people off the sidewalks. But that doesn't count, really."

Wilding smiled, then sobered. "None of us are going back to that kind of life, Tiny. Sure, we could mix for a while and get away with it. Some might disappear for good. But we haven't changed. We're the same people, and under the same conditions, we'd just go wrong again and end in the same pot. I want something else. I want conditions so different that we can't go on being the same warped and misfit people. We're heading out, away from the solar system. I want a brand new, uninhabited planet to colonize. A world so new and different that we'll all have to change to survive. My plan is to give all of us a fresh start."

"You have more faith in people than I do. They won't change."

"They'll have to . . . or die."

Tiny whistled and swallowed hard. "It sounds wonderful and a little crazy, too. Where do you expect to find such a planet?"

Wilding answered slowly. "I don't know. It's a calculated risk. I was a successful criminal, Tiny. I made a lot of money in plunder, and most of it I used to buy and equip a spaceship. It's the biggest and best ever made, and it has a new kind of drive not released yet. That ship can reach the nearer stars in weeks, rather than years. The ship is hidden among the asteroids. That's the reason I'm in such a nightmare hurry. Right now, the asteroids are within cruising range; later on, the supply ship would never reach that orbit."

"Do you know that the nearer stars have such planets? Even if they have planets at all?"

"Nobody knows. But I'm gambling on it. I needed a tough crew, and women used to hardships for colonists. There's a big gamble to start, then the rest is savage battle for

survival—even if we're lucky. I knew I'd be caught and sent here eventually, so I gambled on that, too. Now I'll have my crew, and—"

"Counting me, there are twenty-nine women. All but Amyth and five others like her who were born here are pretty hard cases. I'm too old for childbearing, Wilding, so you can say twenty-eight. If you're restricting your colonists to useful citizens . . ."

"There'll be other needs, Tiny. You're a nurse. If you'll go, there'll be place for you."

"I'll go," growled Tiny. "And so will any of us. But you'd better not tell anyone else where we'll be headed. Not till you're on your way. They might get other ideas . . ."

"Would that be fair?"

"Fair or not—don't tell them. You took over the authority here. Don't start trying to squirm out of the responsibility now. Voting and fancy principles are fine for soft people in a safe and comfortably idyllic civilization. You're dealing with scared and desperate rats. They need help and strong leadership. You can give it to them, but if you show the least weakness or indecision, they'll tear you to pieces."

"You may be right, Tiny. But I still don't agree with you. This is too big a decision for one man. And I don't want any along who come unwillingly. I'll think about it, but I'm sure I'll give them a choice when the time comes."

"What kind of choice?"

"Come with me to the stars, or stay in some prison and rot. Hobson's choice."

"Think and be damned, then," said Tiny. The Amazon started to maneuver a drink to her mouth, then thoughtfully and deliberately broke the last flask of her mushroom beer on a rock.

The lighter was ready.

WILDING led his picked crew of twenty cut-throats aboard. He was not especially surprised to find the control cabin occupied.

Tichron sat easily in the pilot's chair, his blaster gun aimed steadily at Amyth who curled up like a sullen cat in the navigator's seat.

"I go, or the girl doesn't," said Tichron.

Wilding laughed at him. "You're a little previous. This is just a dry run. We're seizing the supply ship and coming back for the rest."

"So I've heard. Well, I'm going with you to make sure that you do come back."

"Amyth is not going this trip. None of the women. So you might hold your gun on me and let the girl get outside. We're wasting time, and I want to be sure of intercepting the supply ship long before it sights the beacon."

Tichron obliged by shifting his aim to Wilding. Amyth slipped silently through the airlock and dropped to the ground.

"Shall I take him now?" Grouth asked, edging toward Tichron who seemed unembarrassed by two possible targets instead of one.

"Don't move," ordered Wilding. To Tichron he said, "You can put the gun down now, or go on holding it. But your arm will be pretty numb by the time we hit the supply ship."

"Do I go with you?" demanded Tichron.

"You're wasting melodrama, big boy. I wouldn't think of leaving you behind. Ask Concor, we were wondering what had happened to you."

"Concor could lie, and so could you," growled Tichron. But he carefully reclipped the gun to his belt. "Perhaps you'll be killed trying to take the supply ship."

"Perhaps you will. . . ."

Wilding barked orders. The lighter was closed up and sealed. Atom-converters purred with steady vibrations. With a grunt and heave, the lighter moved into the airlock shaft. Lights dimmed and the jarring increased in tempo. Movement steadied into a smooth glide. Automatic door-flaps opened ahead and closed behind. Blast-off ritual began.

Suddenly the tiny ship shot from the surface like a cork from a bottle. Acceleration pangs became nagging nausea.

Wilding licked his lips. "Perhaps we'll all be killed. It will save a lot of trouble . . ."

From the shadow-cone of the planetoid, the lighter moved out to anticipate the orbit of the expected supply ship. . . .

In space, frontal attack is impossible. Ships approach and pass each other at terrific relative velocities. Limited human

senses cannot function rapidly enough, and even the automatic mechanisms which control a ship in spaceflight can react only according to the impulses built into them.

Surprise is almost equally impossible, since combat requires that both ships be moving at approximately equal speeds on courses nearly parallel.

Though Wilding had planned carefully, he knew that there is a vast difference between plans and execution. Anything, or any number of things, could go wrong. For one thing, if it came to an actual running fight, his craft was practically unarmed. Aboard the supply ship would be robot brains for mass detection, target-course computation, and the automatic aiming and firing of atomic warhead torpedoes. There had been neither time nor material to build such complicated machines. Even the control of the lighter was accomplished manually.

Moving out from the asteroid, the lighter described a wide curve. It came upon the supply ship from behind, striking a speed only slightly greater than that of its quarry. Rapidly overhauling the larger spacecraft, it sent no recognition signal and was prepared to answer none.

Already the supply ship had begun tedious deceleration preparatory to sighting the flare beacon and dumping the stores for the prisoners on Asteroid 297. It was a dull, routine maneuver. In the control cabin, pilot-captain and astrogator crouched over chart-screens and fed order tapes into the electronic devices which ran the ship. Men may be careless and overconfident. Machines are not—

ALARMS whined and clamored. Red lights blinked on the control panels, reporting intrusion. Instruments went into automatic action to determine the sector and nature of possible menace. Data tapes spewed from the battery of electronic brains. Electric typewriters clattered like machine-guns.

The strange object was man-made, too regular in form to be of meteoric origin. Metallic, but not a meteor. Its mirror-polished skin was analyzed spectroscopically and classified as an industrial alloy. Details of structure were noted and filed. By its

speed and the phantom glow in its wake, the stranger was obviously powered by some secondary use of atomics.

But the officers of the supply ship had scant time to digest this array of facts. With a burst of speed, the strange craft angled suddenly toward them. Distance closed rapidly, and collision seemed imminent.

Alarms screamed in mechanical panic. Robot piloting devices operated instantaneously, attempted ticklish maneuvering to avoid contact. It was too late.

The pilot-captain's brain was working almost as rapidly as the relays of his cybernetic helpers. But not as surely. For a desperate moment, he considered the possibility of piracy, but he rejected the thought at once. All known desperadoes had been hunted from the spaceways. And if communications were to be trusted, no other spaceship could be within many days run of his present position. Mentally, the officer reviewed Procedure Regulations, and wondered what space novelty he was encountering this time.

He had little time to wonder, and less for indecision. If he had acted at once, the ponderous meteor repeller tubes could have been shifted from the nose of the ship. Even the token armament of robot-aimed torpedo tubes could have been ordered into action.

In the confusion of the moment, he took no action at all.

There was shock. Although the strange ship had barely nudged the hull plates, brains writhed and circulatory systems labored to readjust to an abrupt change in direction of movement. Then the stranger was firmly alongside, secured by magnetic grapples, and the airlock doors were opening automatically as pressure on both sides equalized.

Men poured through the airlock. They were a desperate, savage crew from the prison lighter. Their weapons were crude but effective. The battle was brief, a momentary huddled violence, then officers and crew of the supply ship were overwhelmed. Oddly enough, casualties were few on either side.

It is easier to unleash wolves than to restrain them once they have tasted blood. Wilding hated senseless slaughter, and he

held back the vindictive impulses of his ugly horde with the hand of a master.

"Did any message get through?" he asked Concor.

The Martian shook his head unhappily. "Part of one. We tried to blanket their transmitter, but—"

"That shortens our time. Don't harm our prisoners. We may need them for hostages."

Convicts went through the ship and routed out everyone in hiding. The captives were lined up and Wilding went down the line inspecting his catch. The crewmen were both angry and frightened. The officers blustered.

One of the last captives, turned out of hiding in the crew's quarters, was a girl. She limped into the straggled line-up and faced the new masters of the ship.

Wilding stared at her in astonishment. "Elshar!" he gasped. "What are you doing here?"

The girl did not answer at once. She shrugged, smiling curiously. Racial strangeness was in the angles of her face-structure. Large, luminous eyes, of deep blue, rode high on tilted cheekbones. She looked very young, with her face still pale from shock. In her dark hair and fair skin were the curious blendings of mixed blood, which often produces rare beauty. But for the twisted leg, she was perfect as one of those incredibly delicate and minute figurines carved of Martian ivory, but more human. All too human.

"I brought my freedom with the money you left for me," she explained slowly. "There was enough left to bribe the guards of the supply ship."

Caught between confusion and anger, Wilding stormed at her.

"You must have lost your mind. What could you want—"

The girl stopped him with a gesture. "Perhaps. And perhaps more than my mind. I convinced them that all I wanted was to see the place you had been taken. I did not try to convince myself. All the time I hoped something would happen. Some miracle. I ask nothing from you. Just let me stay near you—"

Tichron's laugh was a knife-thrust in the heavy stillness of the ship.

"Friend," he said enviously. "You have

one woman too many."

"One is sometimes too many," Wilding said irritably. He told Elshar, "I'll decide later what to do with you. Now I'm too busy."

THE girl studied him gravely. "Don't think about me. I'll be no trouble to you."

Wilding nodded and turned his attention to Concor, who already bent over the calculators.

"With a little trimming, this present orbit will take us fairly close to the asteroid," was the Martian's verdict.

"That's your department. Get us there, and don't waste any time you can help. The patrols will be converging if any message at all went through. Our margin is small enough at best."

Tichron's broad face showed astonishment. "You mean you're actually going back for the others?"

"I never had any other intention. I'll need all who want to go with me . . . where I'm going."

Tichron's eyes narrowed. "Where *are* you going?"

"You'll find out when I tell the others. In time to make up your mind about going."

Alcatraz Asteroid showed suddenly against the dark backdrop of space, reflected sunlight waxing as the planes of its surface turned toward the Sun.

Airlock valves set into the savage exterior opened to let the lighter and captive supply ship into a tube leading downward to the inhabited caverns. Barely had the ship settled into cradles when Wilding went through the double doors and stared about the vaulted dockroom.

Something was wrong. By now, the convicts would know that the venture was well started, that the conquerors had returned with a prize. Curious and excited crowds should be milling about, swarming around the captured ship, greeting the venturers.

But no one was in sight.

Signalling the others to remain aboard, Wilding moved away from the ship to begin exploration. Cautiously, gun in hand, he poked through the main cavern with its stockpiled supplies, then on, investigating the nearer passages. Already out of sight of

his cohorts aboard the supply ship, he halted suddenly at a hint of furtive movement among the jagged rocks.

Three men sprang up and faced him. All three were armed and ready. It was not difficult to recognize Credus and his two chief supporters.

"I'm taking over," said Credus.

"Not so easily," Wilding warned. "It's still a deadlock. I have a gun on you."

Credus shook his head slowly. "You're too good a gambler to play against such odds. You wouldn't dare shoot."

Wilding was aware of a faint sound behind him. For a moment he hoped that Grouth or Concor had disobeyed his orders and followed him. He even risked a quick glance over his shoulder to see.

Two yards behind him stood Tichron, aimed blaster in hand. On Tichron's face was an expression of unholy glee, his lips curled up to expose wolfish fangs. Tichron held the balance, and knew it.

"Start bargaining," he suggested.

"I'll deal with you," said Credus quickly. "I have the girl, Amyth. She's yours . . . if . . ."

Tichron licked dry lips. His cold eyes questioned Wilding.

Wilding groaned. "I've nothing to offer but a fair deal—"

Tichron's trigger finger tightened. A thin beam flicked from the blaster. Sound and light jarred the caverns. . . .

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ECHOES of the blast died away in distance. For a fragment of time, the curious tableau held, then thought and perception began again. Wilding, his face bleak, was amazed that he still lived.

At such range, a miss was impossible. But where Credus had stood was an untidy heap of smoldering cloth and calcined rags of flesh.

Dazed by concussion, the survivors of Credus' party stared at the grinning Tichron.

"I'm playing along with Wilding," he told them. "The one thing nobody ever thought to offer me is a fair deal. I guess I'm just curious."

4—Planet—November

Still over aimed guns, the two groups faced each other as the strain mounted between them.

"Go on, shoot," urged Wilding. "The odds are even now. You can kill both of us, but we will take you with us. You have one second to drop your guns or start shooting."

Indecision tortured the pair briefly, but their nerve failed. Weapons clattered on the floor.

"What are you going to do with us?" one asked unhappily.

"Nothing, if you do as you're told. Where is everyone?"

The men talked willingly enough. As soon as the lighter had left, Credus took over. Weapons were confiscated, all the women were seized and taken to the lower caverns as hostages. Of the others, some had followed Credus willingly, the rest had been threatened into obedience. Except for his trusted cohorts, all convicts were ordered out of the way pending the return of the lighter. If Wilding's project succeeded, Credus wanted no one to interfere with his idea of snatching it away for his own use.

Wilding snapped commands. The women were to be brought to the main caverns at once. All others who wished to leave Alcatraz were to assemble there without delay. Alarm had gone out during the taking of the supply ship. Probably the patrol cruisers were already converging upon the asteroid, so time was short.

Half an hour later, Wilding stepped before the thronged convicts to address them. A hush fell as he looked grimly into the sea of faces, pale from their sunless quarters and from excitement.

"I can't promise you freedom," he warned. "What I have in mind may not be freedom at all to your way of thinking. All I offer is a hard, dangerous life, and possibly a short one. I'll need strong men and women for what I have in mind if we reach our destination. And competent technicians, first, to see that we get there. If we make it, you'll have a fighting chance at a new way of life. Life totally different from any you may have known before."

"How many can go?" Tiny asked soberly. Wilding shrugged. "All who will want to, probably . . . when they've heard my

plan. It may be crowded, but for a short distance the lighter and supply ship can carry all of you. And at the moment, the trip to the asteroid belt is only a ferry run. Shorter than it will be for a long time again."

He told them, then, of his plan. He told them of the fabulous treasure he had stumbled upon in a derelict spaceship, and how he had invested his treasure trove in a new type spaceship bought and assembled secretly, and hidden among the asteroids.

Like many others, Wilding had dreamed of leaving the Solar System and plunging beyond the space barrier to find a new home among the stars. Unlike some, he had tried to implement his dream, turning the loot of his crime career to that purpose. But to head out beyond Pluto, a venturer needs more than a spaceship. He needs other people as desperate and as venturesome as himself to join his attempt. He needs a hardy crew to get to the nearer stars, and once there, a people strong and daring enough to seize a strange new world and colonize it.

Originally, Wilding had planned a raid on Alcatraz to pick up a likely complement of tough souls, but the authorities had short-circuited his scheme by sending him there. An opportunist and a realist, he had adjusted his plan to the circumstances.

"Just breaking out of here to go back to the familiar worlds would be useless. We need not freedom to go back to our old lives, but a new kind of freedom. None of us can ever fit into the neatly standardized social structures in the planets and moons we call our homes. We need new settings where the adventurous man is not an anachronism. We must start fresh and make a world over to our specifications. It will not be a safe world, but it will never be as dull as those into which we cannot fit.

"Who will go with me?"

Dead silence fell as Wilding finished. Even the most hardened convicts exchanged dubious glances as if Wilding's words had given them new perspectives on themselves and each other. Discussion started as a murmurous trickle, increasing quickly to a flood of confused sound.

"What about those who don't go?" someone asked.

"I don't know," admitted Wilding. "Probably the authorities will abandon the asteroid as a prison. They may remove all who stay behind to some safer preserve. The stay-behinds are no concern of mine. Make up your minds. As soon as the stores are aboard, we are leaving. Any delay will be fatal, since the lighter and supply ship must get away before the patrol ships can mine the likely orbits and establish a spaceblock. There are no formalities, nothing to sign. Just be aboard if you are going along . . ."

TO THE casual eye, the asteroid belt seemed as empty as the rest of space. True, some suspiciously feeble stars altered the familiar patterns of constellations, and several larger asteroids were clearly visible by their own reflection of sunlight. But for the most part the debris of a long-ago shattered planet was so widely distributed in its orbital ring around the sun that only a trained astrologer could realize the near approach to it.

Nearing the end of their long deceleration, the two ships seemed to hang, unmoving, in blank space. Mass-detectors and proximity alarms warned frequently of meteoric fragments, but the pair of fugitive ships had so far encountered nothing of formidable or even interesting size. Matter in the asteroid belt is so scattered, and most units so small, that the odds are heavily against even accidental collision. Finding one particle in a shower of dust motes is a matter of instruments and mathematical calculators, not luck.

Pursuit was inevitable, but still invisible. Patrol ships were certainly converging to hunt down the fugitives, but they were still beyond range of the instruments. Wilding was satisfied by the progress of his venture, though still under strain. There had been trouble getting away from Alcatraz. Many convicts, though willing enough to attempt escape, objected to joining his further plans. A determined few had rioted and tried to seize the escape vessels for a mad dash back to the familiar moons and planets of men. The riots had been brief and bloody, though abortive.

Wilding avoided contact with his fellow fugitives. Growth and Concor had taken over technical management of the ships.

Tiny and Tichron were organizing the personnel. Amyth and Elshar, discovering a mutual curiosity, were inseparable, and Wilding had seen neither of them during the voyage. He felt, uneasily, that their long discussions might be concerned with settling something in regard to him. And now that the machinery of his great dream was actually in operation, he found himself oddly depressed. When there is no immediate occupation for hands or brain, the way of a leader is hard and lonely.

Brooding in his synthetic solitude, he wrestled with his greatest opponent—himself. Black doubts crept into his soul. He longed for crisis and the need for action.

It would come soon enough, he realized. Reaching the hidden spaceship with his cargoes of human raw material was only the first step in an endless obstacle course. Before personnel and materials could be transferred to the starship and the ship itself made ready for deep space, time would pass. Already the facts of the break-out from Alcatraz must be known. A network of fast patrol cruisers was slowly but surely closing in upon him. A getaway in the face of such opposition would be touch and go at best. At worst, it would mean a quick, inglorious end to his venture.

Troubled, he sought out Concor in the control room.

The Martian grinned at him, gestured toward the view-screen showing space ahead. "Any moment now. The charts of this part of the Belt are not too reliable. We're shaping our orbit now, and if the figures are right, we'll overhaul your asteroid—"

Mass-detector alarms set up a demonic clangor.

Growth came into the control room. "Right on the nose," he said.

A point of light swam into visibility on the view-screen. It grew swiftly, steadily, first in intensity, then in size, until it bulked large, filling up the field of the screen.

Weak with relief, Wilding ordered the ship set down.

Hours later, in a spacesuit, he was overseeing removal of the camouflaging which had turned the hidden ship into an irregular rock protuberance. Gangs of workmen swarmed over the savage surface of the

asteroid, clearing away staging, loading supplies, and putting the ship in readiness for take-off.

Doubts forgotten, Wilding threw himself into the work. He was in his glory. Everything was working smoothly. Too smoothly. The work of trans-shipping was approaching completion when disaster struck.

Tiny came out to him with word that Growth and Concor wanted him in the control room of the giant spacer christened *Starship 1*. Her face was very grave.

"It was a good try," she whispered as they entered the control room.

Wilding did not need to ask the trouble. Growth's and Concor's faces told him everything.

"The patrol cruisers?"

Growth nodded. "I've made contact with them."

Wilding whistled. "As close as that!"

"Closer. Evidently, they've been there some time. Waiting for more ships to tighten up their blockade. They've mined all major orbits and are just completing the network of ships. You couldn't sneak a mouse through."

"Any chance to run the blockade?"

Growth shook his head glumly. "Too late for that."

"Shall we tell the others?" asked Tiny. "No use of their wasting their labor now—"

"Not just yet," said Wilding. "Finish the loading. We may be able to bluff our way out."

"They'll be coming in after us soon," warned Concor. "Then it'll be a choice of surrender or being blasted out with atomic torpedoes."

Wilding sighed unhappily. We'll surrender . . . if it comes to that. But they won't try anything like that until they've tried to bargain with us for the hostages. Stall them along. When the ship is loaded, seal it up and take off. We'll meet them in space and try to run a bluff with the hostages . . ."

"It won't work," prophesied Growth gloomily. "You can't make a deal with the Security Patrol."

Privately Wilding agreed. But he said, "We can try."

The final processes of loading and stowing seemed to drag endlessly. At last it was

accomplished and word given to close up the ship.

IT WAS a grim and silent company in the control awaiting the blast-off. Grouth, Concor and Tiny were morose, already disheartened by the knowledge of defeat. Amyth and Elshar stood close to Wilding, both smiling enigmatically. He found their presence irritating, but said nothing. Only Tichron seemed untouched by the atmosphere of failure. He studied Wilding curiously, and even attempted to joke.

"Not that it matters now," he said. "But I've wondered why you were willing to include me on your expedition. Don't you know that I'm a chronic trouble-maker?"

Wilding smiled thinly. "Of course I knew that. But I wanted someone like you in my new world. Every healthy society needs some kind of trouble-maker. It stimulates growth."

Atomic motors roared into life, and the ship rose steadily up and out from the asteroid. As it moved toward the patrol cruisers, Wilding ordered the speed held to low levels, lest its seeming flight provoke action from trigger-nervous gunners aboard the patrol ships.

Tension grew as the range shortened.

A spreading, soundless flash of light flowered against the vaulted darkness of space. An atomic shell fired by the nearest cruiser. Just a warning, this time.

"Make contact," Wilding commanded. "We'll have to talk to them now."

The view-screen swirled with color as Grouth worked at the keyboard. Squirming colors cleared and a three dimensional image appeared. A man in the silver gray uniform of Security Police. It was like speaking with him face to face.

"The first shot was a warning," he said gravely. "Just hold your present course and do not attempt to change your speed."

"Warning of what?" Wilding demanded wryly. "Aren't you out of bounds? What right have you to interfere with our course or speed?"

The officer went white. "My orders are to stop you at all costs," he said. "If you surrender, and the hostages are unharmed, you will all be returned to prison without further punishment."

Wilding stared at the policemen insolently. "Not so fast," he protested. "Since when are people sent off to prison without even a trial? And for a trial, you must prefer some kind of charge. What is the charge against us?"

The officer's face went from white to red. "Jailbreak will do for the first charge," he stormed angrily. "After that, we'll see. You're all known criminals, or you'd never have been in Alcatraz."

Wilding laughed suddenly. "You're not making sense. You can charge us with jailbreak, even arrest us. But you can't make your charge stick in court. If we were in Alcatraz, you know there are no records in existence of criminal charges against us, so you have no right to say that we're known criminals. We can sue you for saying so publicly. As for the jailbreak charge, you may have a few witnesses among the convicts still on Alcatraz. But you know how unreliable such witnesses are in court. Any good lawyer can break down an eyewitness identification—"

The patrol officer licked his lips, his eyes took on a hard, metallic sheen. "We'll let the lawyers argue about it. Over your corpses if you try to evade arrest. I have my orders to stop you and take you back, alive if possible, dead if necessary. You have taken hostages, so a kidnapping charge will hold. If they are killed, the charge will be murder. Suit yourself about details."

One after another, armed patrol cruisers moved in to take up positions in the formation ringed about the doomed *Starship 1*. On every side, batteries of atomic cannon covered every possible route of escape.

"What are you going to do?" asked Tiny, her voice hopeless.

An expression of sour triumph crossed the face of the man on the screen.

"You have five minutes to decide," he told them. "By then, if you haven't surrendered and let a prize crew come aboard, we have orders to blow you out of space." He stopped talking and his image vanished back into the writhing colors.

"Show them the hostages," suggested Tichron viciously. "Then tell them to keep their distance or you'll blow up our atomic fuel. They're bluffing."

"I don't think so," Grouth contented.

"We could find out by threatening to kill the hostages, one by one."

Wilding glanced round the circle of faces. All were pale, set into lines of strain and bitterness.

"No," said Wilding. "The decision is mine, and I've made it. We won't have unnecessary killing. You can't found a new world on other people's corpses. If it were to cost even one innocent life, I wouldn't want that responsibility. We'll have to surrender and start planning all over again . . ."

"Shall I set the surrender signal?" Grouth asked.

Wilding nodded. For some reason, his eyes sought Elshar's face. She was smiling. It startled Wilding that her approval meant so much to him. He was not in love with her, and never had been. The sight of Amyth close beside Elshar was enough to prove that to him. Any world, new or old, without Amyth would have been dust and ashes to him. His feeling about Elshar was completely different, almost as if she were a child for whom and to whom he was responsible. But her face now was that of a judge, benign and sad and incredibly world-wise. And her smile was almost a benediction.

The girl moved forward suddenly. Her voice was clear and oddly confident.

"Don't signal anything," she ordered. "There is another way out. Wilding has won the right to it for all of you."

Elshar turned fondly to Wilding and put her hand on his arm.

"You don't understand, of course. Because of me you lost your freedom. You thought all along that you were my guardian angel. In your own way, you tried to be kind and good and understanding. The truth is that I am your guardian angel, one of them."

PUZZLEMENT in his face seemed to amuse her. She went on very quickly. "I know you have wondered about me, about my race. You always sensed some strangeness in me, but not even you dreamed how much there was of strangeness. I come of an alien race, not even of your Solar System. There are many such races inhabiting planets of various stars in your galaxy. Most of them have developed far beyond

your people in science, in culture, in social organization.

"For centuries these peoples have watched you and wondered. Many factors in your culture disturbed us, but these matters were unimportant as long as you were restricted to your own system. We dreaded the time when you would conquer the atom and attempt space travel. By the time that happened, we were prepared. A cordon of ships established a barrier just beyond your outermost planet, and it was deemed advisable to isolate you until your culture was found fit to expand to other stars.

"Certain ones among us were chosen to venture into your worlds as judges and observers. I was one of these, and mine was a special mission. As bait, I was to select one man to be a test case. That man must be one who typified all of the qualities most disturbing to us. I chose Wilding, or perhaps by interfering in my behalf, he chose me. Our problem was to see how one of the worst human products of your culture would respond to increasing responsibility. In the final analysis, Civilization is merely the response to expanding responsibilities.

"Wilding was a good choice. Environment and heredity made him a criminal, but he had a good mind and the primal virtue of courage. He was ambitious, a practical dreamer. Like your whole civilization, he attempted to reach worthy ends by evil means. From desperate need and because of a mystical anger, he is in revolt against his own kind, and against their culture. There was almost fatal weakness in his disregard of the precious gift of life, even of his own. He became an ideal test case.

"By his decision to give up his hopes and plans, and surrender rather than endanger a single life he has proved himself. He has won, for himself and for his race, another chance.

"There is a place where you can go. An Earth-type planet on which you can still play out your dream of building a world to your own needs and desires. It is in a parallel space-time continuum, not your familiar universe, and the way there is strange and terrible. There, you will be no menace to my people and the others, and by the time you have learned your way back, you will be civilized . . . or will have de-

stroyed yourself in the process."

Wilding fixed his eyes on Elshar as the girl finished speaking. Doubt had died out in him slowly, for her manner carried an eerie conviction.

"Is all this true?" he had to ask as his mind grappled with the strangeness of her. "Can you really get us away from the cruisers, and show us how to reach this . . . private world?"

"Quite true," she said softly. "I can't go with you, but I can make some . . . adjustments . . . in your course calculators. I can give your navigator instructions by post-hypnotic suggestion, which he will forget as soon as you reach your destination. Do you still wish to go?"

WILDING nodded quickly. He glanced upward at the view-screen where rioting colors had begun to flare and swirl. The timelimit of the patrol's ultimatum was up.

"Do whatever she tells you," he ordered Concor. Then to Growth, "Make the connection. I'll talk to him."

Colors steadied and faded on the screen, built up an image. It was the same officer. "You've made no surrender signals," the policeman stated.

"Hold your fire," Wilding told him savagely. "We're putting out spacecrafts with the hostages. They're alive and well. After that, I'll discuss terms."

Indecision struggled on the officer's face. But he shrugged and smiled coldly. If Wilding was willing to yield his only bargaining point, it was worth a brief concession of time. And there was nothing to lose by waiting, since the trap had already closed.

Growth broke the connection rudely.

They waited while hostages were released, hustled into spacearmor, and put aboard the spacecrafts. Air hissed in the escape tubes.

Wilding shot an anxious glance at Elshar. She was smiling again, sadly, fondly.

"Time enough. Don't worry about the patrol ships. Everything is ready. I almost wish I could go with you. Your experiment

should be . . . interesting."

Concor sat at the control console. He pressed buttons, and a view of space flashed on the screen. Electronic tapes fed swiftly into the calculators, and from them to the robot controls that actually operated the ship. Light faded in the cabin. In the dimness, Wilding's hand found Amyth's and drew strength from her nearness.

He heard Elshar's voice, clear and steady. "Try not to be afraid. It is terrible, but does not last long."

Something strange was happening on the view-screen. Space and the familiar stars shifted, changing relative positions, like images flowing around flaws in a mirror. There was a moment of kaleidoscopic horror as if all the senses slipped, then adjusted to new patterns.

"This is good-bye." The sound of Elshar's voice drew his eyes to her. The girl's form wavered in his vision. She was changing. For a fragment of perception, he glimpsed something that suggested the old priest of the Pit Men. Then, something as delicate, fearful and unhumanly wise as a Martian pzintar idol. But as his mind grasped at the reality, she faded and vanished like drifting smoke.

Long afterward, it seemed that the ship descended through dense, luminous vapor. Through rifts below could be seen a patchwork of brown and green, misted with blue. It was like an unrolling map in three dimensions. Richly verdant continents, studded with tumbled mountains. A broad ocean crimsoned by the setting of a double sun. Alien stars winked on one by one in the thickening twilight, and unknown constellations made fiery symbols against the dark vaults of another space.

Wilding stared down at the planet which was their new home.

Every man has his obstacle course, never to be completed. This was his next obstacle, and overcoming it was the joy of living. He was glad that it seemed a big one.

"Ready for landing," he said. He was smiling. . . .