

THE WINGED PERIL By Robert Moore Williams

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AMAZING STORIES



**RETURN OF
MICHAEL FLANNIGAN**

By **JOHN BLOODSTONE**

Walter Poff

AMAZING STORIES

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If Mni'r'a were not stopped, there would be no way back

THE RETURN OF MICHAEL FLANNIGAN

By John Bloodstone

Flannigan, the man, had been lost on Luna. Now, Flannigan, the robot, came crashing back through the lens to find a body of living flesh in which to build a new life



WHEN IT first made its appearance it was somewhere between Earth's orbit and Mars, traveling outward, away from the sun. Thirty seconds later it had passed the orbit of Mars. In ten minutes it was somewhere near Jupiter. No telescope could have picked it up because its velocity surpassed that of light.

A portless, metallic ball streaking toward the edge of the solar system, emerged out of nothingness.

Earth had no such ships as this. Earth had built a few experimental moon rockets, but nothing more.

There had been only one semi-successful rocket expedition to the Moon. Three men had died, one had survived.

One man out of four. Michael Flannigan, a madman who was dying of radioactive poisoning as a result of exposure to the lunar surface—exposure especially among the craters. There had been one crater in particular. Rheingold, near the ageless shore of the Mare Imbrium. Flannigan had fought to return to Rheingold in the face of inevitable death.

There had been some delirious mention of a Lens—a *Land* of the Lens, and Mnir'sr Nikinra, queen of the Serin Ni. So they had let Flannigan go, in the battered rocket of the ill-fated first expedition. The cost of repairs and refueling had been worth it, because he radioed back further priceless readings concerning the unknown radiations of outer space.

And then he had disappeared. Two weeks had passed and no one had heard from Flannigan. Nor were they planning to send out another rocket until they could solve the problem of radioactive contamination on the Moon and sterility caused by hard radiation in outer space.

The world had wondered about poor, mad Flannigan, but the enigmatic Moon had not deigned to answer the riddle.

THE GOLDEN robot turned to its twin which sat motionless beside it before the viewplate and the control banks.

"You see?" it said. "Yours is not the only world. And the four suns of Gra'ghr are not the only stars. Before you are suns and worlds without end. Gra'ghr was surrounded by some sort of nebula, and now we have emerged from it. An unknown universe lies at our disposal, and all eternity."

"Flan'ri," said the other, "let us

hope it will not be eternity until we find—"

"Don't say it. It may take us twice ten thousand years, and to dwell upon our need without fulfillment within the span of a human lifetime or two could lead to serious frustration—even in robots such as ourselves."

The other's photo-electric eyes, perfectly human in appearance, sought those of the first robot. "But I am afraid," it insisted. "What we seek is what we wanted when we were still human. Our love and the happiness we seek depends on emotions, which we lack. We cling to past desire and future hope only on the basis of our present *memory*. And memory can fade—even in robots. Flan'ri, pray Gur we can acquire human bodies soon!"

The first robot looked its mate over for one brief moment. Bald, naked, sexless, gold-plated. Yet it must be regarded as a female, as Mnir'sr Nikinra of Serin Gor. As for itself, the first robot remembered that it was a "he". On Gra'ghr, within the Lens, "he" had been Gurund Ritroon, Son of Gur the Avenger, alias Gon'ri the Warrior, alias Flanin'gan Kinri the Silent. Out here on the unknown starroads of eternity, "he" reverted in his mind to his old identity. His original identity. Michael Flannigan, of Earth.

But Earth he would never see again. Earth was lost forever beyond the mysterious barrier of the Lens. This was a lost universe, inside the Lens. Somewhere in this fathomless abyss he must find a world, or worlds, where perchance a human type of civilization flourished. And there, somehow, they would have to be patient and wait for the right opportunity to find two suitable bodies. He had no murderous intentions. Nor did he hope to use cadavers. In fact, it was impossible even to guess at the unimaginable

circumstance which would satisfy all the necessary conditions.

But with a swift space ship that drew its energy from the stars, with imperishable robot bodies and endless years of time—

Swiftly, he rose to his feet, staring at the viewplate. Simultaneously, he threw the ship into deceleration that would have crushed a human to pulp.

"What is it, Flan'ri?" asked Mnir'ra.

Flannigan did not reply. If a robot could have emotions he had them now. It was as though his articulatory circuits had been shorted out. He could only stare ahead and decelerate.

"Is it that bright object out there?" she asked. "That globe with the rings around it?"

Mnir'ra, never having known the solar system, could not recognize an unmistakable signpost. She was looking at the ringed planet, Saturn. . . .

IF FLANNIGAN had been in possession of his human emotions, he might have sworn aloud or perhaps called out to his Maker. He might have staggered, broken out in a cold sweat. Or his hair might have wanted to stand on end.

But he had neither emotions, hair, nor sweat. He could not emote, but he had his mind—and therefore his memory. Mentally he could be surprised and astounded. And he was all of that now as he looked at Saturn and held the controls at full deceleration.

"Mnir'ra," he said evenly, "something has happened. That wasn't a nebula we went through. Being robots built of tough, imperishable metal, we were unaware of our terrific inertia and velocity. We—our speed *did* something. Maybe when you get to the speed of light, or beyond it—"

"Flan'ri! Will you tell me what this is all about? What's happened?"

He looked at her, put one perfect

hand on her gold-plated shoulder. "Beloved," he said, "*we have passed through the Lens!*"

Mnir'ra's robot form seemed to get even more rigid than it was normally. "You mean—"

"Yes. This is *my* universe, my own solar system! Mnir'ra, I've brought you back with me!"

Mnir'ra remained silent for a moment. Then she said, "And your own world? Where is that?"

For answer, Flannigan fingered controls on a smaller panel to his left: The viewplate spun, or appeared to. In another moment the scene outside came into focus, revealing at first the distant, glaring ball of the sun behind them. The viewplate shifted slightly, and several other bright bodies came into focus.

There was a bright, blue-green one that appeared to race upward at them as Flannigan applied electronic magnification. Soon Mnir'ra beheld a great globe that glowed in a silvery crescent halo of light. Most of it was in the shadow of night, but the sunlit crescent portion revealed, under the envelope of its atmosphere, the outlines of continents and magnificent seas.

"That is my home," said Flannigan. "This is Earth, the world that bore my original body of flesh and blood. It is teeming with billions of inhabitants. If our search is ever to be rewarded, it will be there."

Earth—Flannigan thought to himself. Earth, and things he had never hoped to see or know again. Things that he had sought to forget forever when he stood for the first time on the high rim of Rheingold, on the Moon—when was it?—a month ago, a lifetime, or eons past? He remembered those things now—white gulls gliding on the tangy air over the small blue bay of Maatlan, colored sails in the sunset off Waikiki, the blinding

whiteness of eternal snow mantling the Andean horizon across Lake Titicaca, the multilaned automobile traffic on the Hollywood Freeway, the misty panorama of San Fernando Valley in the early morning seen from Mulholland Drive, the smell of fresh coffee, the warm breath and the soft lips of a blonde, blue-eyed girl. . . . He stopped his train of reminiscence. There were some things that a robot—

“Your whole life was really there, wasn’t it?” said Mnir’ra, sounding remarkably feminine. “There must be many memories. Flann’ri, you never told me before, because to me you were the godly emissary of Gur. You were Gurund Ritroon the Avenger. But here you were a normal human being. Was there a girl, a sweetheart—or a wife?”

There was a girl, yes. His fiancee, Louise Daren. But all his life the ancient thing that was in his blood had responded to the secret call of the Lens. And he had succeeded at last in getting to the Moon and finding the Lens, which had received him and transported him into that hidden world where his destiny, fashioned eons before, could be fulfilled. Then, on his return to Earth, he had been near death, and sterile as well. He and Louise were hopelessly separated even before he made the plunge across the abyss a second time.

And *now* how was he returning? As a robot. But that did not matter—nor did Louise. If he was returning to Earth in the time that he had known it and Louise still lived, her entire lifespan would be as the single tick of a clock compared to his. He had himself and Mnir’ra to think about. They had a mission, to find each other in life again, to find the happiness that fate had denied them in spite of a love that had leaped the chasm of incalculable ages from one incarnation to another.

“You—love someone else?” asked Mnir’ra. “A girl on your own world?”

“Mnir’ra,” he said to her, “as an ordinary Earth mortal I knew and loved a woman, and there are memories, of course. But how can they compare with that other memory—that night under the golden light of Lan Ba’na on the shore of the Barrier Sea below the ancient Temple of Gur when you came to me singing, wearing white flowers in your long, blue hair; our battles for Serin Gor under the four suns of Gra’ghr, the skies filled with flaming death, ships blasting into pieces of wood and men, sails rising in flames from the fire brand and the rocket bombs, and you facing death beside me; my battles shoulder to shoulder with Djikn Kinri, your brother, like the time when we came to rescue you from Xlar’nr Marnari at Wur’tzoon—and my search in the Hills of the Sky for the lost temple of the Secret Gods. I could go on forever. Memories such as those are not mere recollections. They are a part of us, and they transcend all else. They will never die, Mnir’ra.”

DURING the reverse trek back toward Earth, Mnir’ra had a nightmare. Which was the more harrowing an experience inasmuch as robots do not sleep or dream.

She had need for neither food nor sleep because she ran on atomic energy built into her frame, which did not have to be replenished but once in a century or two. Her total mental-spiritual socius had been scanned, reduced to an equivalent pattern of electrical charges and transferred as such into the cells of her robot brain. Nightmares had to be the result of subconscious association with animal stimuli, since Mnir’ra now was of metal.

But she did have a nightmare, with her eyes wide open. She had it as she sat beside Flannigan’s robot body,

before the control boards—and she was powerless to interrupt the dream, as though for a moment her conscious volition had faded out.

She seemed to be herself, yet someone else at the same time. There was a bewildering awareness of double identity, as though a second personality within her were seeking supremacy over her will.

She was an ancient intelligence. She was a Master, one of those “secret gods” who had built the robots ages ago. She was the ancient brain that had died and turned to dust. Or at least she was possessed by a residual memory of that brain—for orce long ago it had transferred itself into the electronic brain to which her identity now clung like a shadowy spirit, fluttering between entity and extinction. Flannigan had borrowed these two robot bodies, but he had forgotten or failed to realize that residual charges of the original occupants might still remain, deep-seated, within the cells of the robot brains. Those residual charges still maintained a pattern of identity beneath the superimposed pattern of her own mentality. And now they seemed to be capable of sapping the energy of her own charges to amplify themselves.

She knew some of the thoughts of that ancient entity that lurked in the sub-cellars of her mind. It was arrogant, derisive, proud, and filled with a lust for revenge, power and conquest. It saw in Earth a ripe plum to be picked, and it recognized Flannigan as its biggest obstacle. It recognized the fact that Flannigan must be destroyed. He must not even be allowed to reach the Earth.

In addition to this, the added nightmare for Mnir'ra was the knowledge that to succumb to this entity hidden within her was to lose her own identity forever. She had already lost her body. Now her mind was being

pushed toward the precipice of extinction.

She made a supreme effort to emerge, and the shadowy presence retreated. “Flan’ri!” she exclaimed at last. “Flan’ri!”

He turned to look at her out of his expressionless metal face. “Yes? What’s the matter?”

“Flan’ri, there is danger! I—”

She could not go on. How could she explain in the primitive tongue of Gra’ghr? There were no words. Moreover, when she sought to reveal the truth the inner shadow seemed to rise swiftly in attack, and her mind reeled in the struggle.

“Danger? From what?” he asked. The space ship was so close to Earth now that he was compelled to maneuver it into a decelerating orbit around the planet. “You mean—danger from Earth?”

Quickly Mnir’ra answered, but she heard herself express thoughts that were not her own. “Yes,” she lied involuntarily. “*Your world is advanced, is it not? We will be detected and recognized as aliens. Won’t they send out interception?*”

Flannigan could not laugh or smile, but he wanted to. “Compared to the science this ship represents, Earth is still in its infancy. They may detect us as we drop deep within the atmosphere, but they are incapable of intercepting a ship like this.

“However, there is something we’ll have to figure out. How to announce ourselves. I can radio and procure permission to land under guard.”

“No,” Mnir’ra heard herself reply. “*You know our real purpose. If they knew we were after two human bodies—*”

“Don’t be melodramatic,” Flannigan interrupted. “We have years of time. We don’t have to rush things. There may be quite legal ways. There is capital punishment on Earth. Many

young people are condemned to death. Perhaps—”

Then Mnir'ra expressed herself, momentarily. "Flan'ri, haste is necessary—” This, followed by unintended words: "*And we must land secretly. We must disguise ourselves somehow as humans and remain incognito.*"

Flannigan stared at Mnir'ra, vaguely troubled. "Why?" he asked.

"*You know we have a greater mission than a return to the flesh.*"

"Now you are contradicting yourself. What's the greater mission?"

Mnir'ra read the alien thought welling up in her: *To conquer—stupid!* But she was aware of a sudden inhibition, of caution. She said nothing. Instead, she got up and made an exit from the control room.

"Women!" said Flannigan. "Now she's hurt about something. You'd think I'd forgotten our anniversary!"

Mentally he laughed as he watched his altimeter. Anniversary. That was a thought. When had they gotten married, if at all? Actually, he figured their mateship as robots had been initiated on the day he transferred her total personality from her cruelly lacerated and dying body to the second robot. He remembered how he had hurried to make the transfer because of her moribund condition. He had required a half hour for his own transference from the hideously scarred body of Gon'ri the Warrior. For her it had been a matter of five minutes.

Come to think of it, maybe it would be a good idea to use the transference machine on her some more and amplify her charges with a feed-back treatment. After all, he could not be sure of the stability of the charges—

An appalling thought struck him. She had begun to mystify him with her curious double talk. Could it be that she was unstable already?

Flannigan rose to his feet and

turned slowly to look at the opened door of the control room. A vague presentiment of danger bothered him. Now where had she gone?

"Mnir'ra!" he called out.

He checked on a faint buzzing sound inside his head. It was a detector. As long as the robots were near each other the buzz continued. By its loudness or faintness he could gauge how far away Mnir'ra was.

What startled him was the fact that the present buzz was fainter than he had ever known it. Either she had gone crazy and stepped through the airlock, or—

Again the presentiment of danger. He started swiftly toward the exit to the control room. There was only one other place: the Inner Sanctum, as he had dubbed it, where he had first discovered his own robot body and the dust heap that had once been the brain of a Master. That room was thick-walled, shielded. Once it had even been shielded from Time.

The transference machine was there. With it lay their only hope of ever being retransferred into human bodies again.

"Mnir'ra!" He activated his built-in degravitor and floated down the corridor faster than he could have run.

A wave, like a shock, engulfed him when he saw that the ponderous door to the transference chamber stood ajar, and that the light was on inside. Another shock followed as he heard a tinkling crash.

Swiftly he pulled the door open and stood in the entrance looking down the inclined floor to the bowl-like bottom twenty feet away. The transference machine lay splintered and torn, with hundreds of silvery wires still flailing about in the air as though it had been a sentient thing that was now in its last death throes.

Mnir'ra stood there looking up at

him, in her metallic fingers shreds and fragments of the delicate, irreplaceable instrument. Their hopes for life in the flesh were now completely blasted.

FLANNIGAN wondered what he would have done as a human being. There were so many outlets for the emotions. But as a robot—

"About that other mission of ours," he heard Mnrir'ra say. *"It is now the only mission!"* She straightened up from the transference machine, her work of destruction accomplished.

"And that is?" Flannigan's brain seemed to him to be encased in ice.

"To conquer your Earth! How could you have overlooked such an obvious opportunity? We are again the Masters—"

"What do you mean, again? Mnrir'ra, you're sick. Now you listen to me—"

For answer, Mnrir'ra started purposefully for the door in which he stood. As she came to pass through, he blocked her way.

"Let me through!" she said.

"Not until you've listened to me," he answered.

"With whom do you think you are dealing?" she said. *"A puny woman of flabby flesh and watery blood? Remember, I am your equal—an atomic-powered engine of destruction. Now, get out of my way!"*

Still, Flannigan held his ground. "Why did you destroy the transference machine?" he asked. "That was our only hope of fulfillment. It was built by a science which my world cannot come near to duplicating."

Suddenly, Mnrir'ra pushed him. It was a titanic thrust that could have moved a house from its foundations. Flannigan fell backward into the outer corridor. Before he could get up, Mnrir'ra had activated her degravitor and was darting toward the control room.

In another moment Flannigan was after her. When he overtook her she was manipulating the controls. To his surprise he noted that she knew what she was doing—yet he had taught her nothing. He, himself, had been a Doctor of Science, but she was from a primitive race to whom he had introduced gunpowder and rocket bombs. What could *she* know about the controls of a space ship that was advanced millenia beyond the science of his own age?

"Get away from there!" he warned her.

But as she persisted he threw himself upon her, only to get knocked off his feet again. She got up and charged him. He realized that he had been laboring under a handicap, remembering her as Mnrir'ra, queen of the Serin Ni. Now he faced her on an even footing. She was a robot like himself. He remembered some of the training of the Irishman he had once been. As Mnrir'ra lunged at him, he tripped her. But he feared to damage her seriously—if that were possible.

The ensuing struggle lasted ten minutes. Both robots received rough enough treatment to kill two rhinoceros, but they found themselves to be almost indestructible. Mnrir'ra had made one jab with her metallic fingers into some recess under his dorsal plates, and he had heard something break. It worried him, but it did not seem to deter him.

What stopped them was the ship itself. In the course of their banging around the control room they had battered and dented the control banks into dangling wreckage. The ship was falling swiftly into Earth's atmosphere. It was the rising whine of the resisting air that brought them out of their struggle.

"We'll crash!" shouted Flannigan. "The controls are ruined!"

"Then we'll have to jump," said Mnir'ra.

"Jump?"

"Yes. Have you forgotten our degravitators? We can float down."

"But—you've destroyed the transference machine and now the ship! Why, Mnir'ra? You can't be *that* insane! There must be a reason. What is it?"

Mnir'ra looked at the altimeter and saw that it was not functioning. But the viewplate was. They were hurtling laterally across an endless vista of mountains and plains and winding rivers punctuated by villages, towns and cities.

"We'd better jump," she said.

THEY BOTH stood in the open airlock with the wind whipping past so fast that, had they been human, it would have torn the flesh from them. Rugged terrain swept by only five thousand feet below. Flannigan saw low mountains and pine forests. Then clouds surrounded them.

In the clouds the mist was rammed thickly into the airlock and Flannigan failed to notice Mnir'ra's swift movement. She tripped him and he fell headlong into space.

He sought to activate his degravitator, but suddenly he realized that it was dead. He was falling free!

In the same moment he heard a distant cry: "Help! Flan'ri! I can't get free!"

Then he was beneath the clouds and hurtling toward a mountain top that suddenly seemed to reach up to catch him. In his gyrations he caught a glimpse of the distant ship. Its trajectory still held it higher than his. He figured it would crash about five miles further on.

Although the soaring mountain top had shortened his fall, he hit the Earth hard. There was no pain. Neither was there unconsciousness. He

was vividly aware of ricocheting down a mountain slope among trees and rocks, rolling over and over until at last he came to rest in an impossible thicket in a ravine.

Distantly, he heard the roar of an explosion, and he was aware of the ground shaking for a brief moment. The detector buzz in his head had stopped.

He wondered if it meant his detector was broken as a result of his fall, or if Mnir'ra had been destroyed by the crash of the space ship. Then he remembered that distant cry he had heard at the last moment: "Help! Flan'ri! I can't get free!"

In some unaccountable way she had gotten caught in the airlock. Obviously, she had crashed with the ship.

Flannigan did not know if he could move his robot limbs. He hadn't the volition to try. Instead, he lay there on his face in the thicket and had the illusion of crying. It was a trick of his human memory.

Because the old song was haunting him again, the song that had disturbed his earthly life before and taken him to the Land of the Lens:

Whither has my lost love gone?—

Altinra, she of laughter,

She whose eyes were like the dawn

Where night embraces day;

She who sings no more of me,

Who walks into Eternity,

Taking only memory

Of love, like blossoms, withered...

Altinra or Mnir'sr Nikinra—they were the same, the woman he had loved in two different ages of time. But where or when would he ever love her again? Nowhere... Nevermore...

The age-old story was done.

Neither he nor she would ever share

again even the memory of that which they had loved. He heard the bards of Serin Gor sing the old lament:

*No more the myriad children
Of Life and Love and Laughter
we shall behold
On Mag'dur's peak or Kild'rn,
On flowered plain of Raj'dur
—they're dead and cold!*

Human-like, he buried his metal head in his arms, tried desperately to shut the ancient songs out of his mind:

*O ancient Queen of Beauty,
Thy love-path in the woodland
was left too soon!
No more your sandaled footsteps
Tread light the hills of Rurz'tlid,
where r'ur birds cried.
You sleep where Yun'dlir slept
In caves of dread, where Jin'r hid
and our hearts died!*

WITHOUT realizing what he was doing, he got up and limped through the thicket, tearing up bushes and trees as they blocked his path. He had to get going. Had to be on the move.

Maybe Mnir'ra *wasn't* destroyed in the crash! Maybe she had gotten free at the last moment! He had to find out.

He had lain there in the ravine longer than he realized, and now it was night. He limped. His co-ordination was slow. Things clicked and groaned inside as he walked. But he was struck with a dumb wonderment at the perfection and durability of his metal body to have survived a direct fall of over a thousand feet.

Perhaps Mnir'ra— He cut it off. Why hope? She had been caught in the airlock. She had not jumped. She had gone down with the ship, and its power pile had jarred into critical mass. The explosion had been atomic. She was only vapor by now.

On top of another rise he caught sight of the distant forest fire. He saw a few moving lights in the distance and heard the barking of dogs. Once he detected the neighing of a horse.

Suddenly there was a roar at his elbow and a giant bear loomed over him in the night. He cringed, forgetting he was a robot. It closed in on him but he felt nothing, except that it knocked him over. He caught its giant head between his metal hands and the dumb brute snarled in its frustration.

Why kill it? It was the servant of blind instinct. He gave the bear a shove and it left him on the run.

Flannigan stood up and looked again at the fire where the ship had exploded. Why go on? Mnir'ra had ceased to exist.

And what destiny was left for him to fulfill? A robot, and a battered one at that. The first people he met would no doubt consider him a Frankenstein's monster. Somewhere he'd probably end up with a bazooka shell in his belly. Maybe that was all he needed. . . .

SUDDENLY, Flannigan became aware of two things that took his mind momentarily off his own personal affairs. First, he heard a distant shouting that came from the direction of the fire. It was the type of shouting that a military officer might do in order to transmit verbal commands to his troops. They were sharp orders barked in quick succession. He recognized the language as Russian. Secondly, he heard a low thundering in the distance, and soon he discerned a vast formation of swift bombers soaring upward into the stratosphere. They were obviously starting out on a long-distance flight. Some of the ships he saw silhouetted against the clouds as searchlights fol-

lowed them upward. He recognized the ships and the markings. They were Russian, and they were the latest in global atom bomb transportation.

"Oh no!" he exclaimed, suddenly recalling some recent world history.

He knew that time on Earth and time in the Land of the Lens were different. While he had spent months in the latter place, perhaps only a few weeks had passed here. His reason for believing in that possibility was that while Daren, Deegan and Gilbert, on the first expedition, waited only seventy hours for him, he lived for what seemed to be months as Gurund Ritroon, Son of Gur, beyond the Lens. If that were true, then it might well be that the atomic explosion of his ship somewhere in Russia could have precipitated—

"Pray God I'm wrong!" he cried out. But as he watched the incessantly growing formations of the tremendous armada, he was forced to review his knowledge of current events up to the point of his last flight to the Moon as an Earthman of flesh and blood....

THE YEAR, he reflected was 1960.

By that time international diplomacy and the general status of world affairs had progressed from possible to impossible. In fact, that first four-man rocket flight had been equally as important to world politics as it was to science, because for years the Western Power nations had been racing with Russia to be the first to reach Earth's satellite.

While Flannigan had climbed Rheingold in response to the irresistible call of the Lens, his companions were claiming the Moon in the name of the United Nations. Although this gave Russia, as a U. N. member, an interest in the Moon, it lessened the probability of a Russian attempt to grab that which it had been given a chance to help control.

Still, things had been at a high tension, and many an anxious scientific and political eye had ogled the Moon, wondering if Russia would think it worth turning pirate. True, it had been established by Flannigan's first flight that the pilots of any Moon rockets would more than likely pay for the trip with their lives, if they made it at all. If meteors did not get them, the radiation effects of outer space would at least make them sterile. And any work accomplished on the Moon itself—such as would be necessary to build a push-button remote-controlled launching station for atomic rocket bombs—would definitely result in death due to radioactive poisoning.

However, *kamikaze* warfare was a long-established art. It would be relatively easy to propagandize sufficient volunteers to give their lives to any cause. Suicide crews could do it. Upon his first brief return to Earth after his first flight, Flannigan had learned that as a precaution the United Nations had been forced to authorize its member nations, including Russia and her satellites, to begin the construction of atomic space rocket batteries to be trained on the Moon. So that if it were even suspected that a pirate launching station was being erected there in the near or distant future, the entire visible lunar surface could have its face literally "lifted".

But he remembered that the Moon was far from being the only issue. During the "Fifties", the world's political bulls had had a lugubrious holiday clod-hopping about in the booby-trap china closet of international affairs. Korea had finally been left with a dividing line between North and South, largely because of mounting dangers in Europe. As taxes had soared, so had the national blood-pressure in the United States. Econ-

omies had to be made on a drastic scale. One of the effects of this had been the removal of the U. S. Army of Occupation from Japan. The U. S. had lost prestige in Korea because the presence of its forces there had not resulted in a T. K. O. in favor of the U. N., and the lesser nations were out for blood when they saw what could happen to England after Iran, Iraq and Egypt. So the first thing that happened in disoccupied Japan was a revolution resulting in a Communist victory and alliance with New China, while the Russian bear smiled beatifically out over the Pacific.

In the long run, this had cost the U. S. taxpayer more than ever because the States had to back the U. N. to keep the "yellow" reds from inundating India.

Atomic warfare was held in abeyance because now that the U. S. had graciously given the enemy sufficient time to prime his rifle both contenders were ready, and it occurred even to the politicians that it would be silly for two opponents to aim weapons of equal calibre at each other and fire point blank.

Flannigan reflected at this point that where politicians were concerned this method of approach to their own differences would have resulted in something generally beneficial. But where the world was concerned there was no percentage if no nation could be the victor.

So it was that while tensions were at the breaking point and cold-war weary populaces clamored for a hot war to end it all—come what may—nobody dared knock the chips off the shoulders. Rumors and facts gleaned by both Intelligence and plain old dirty spying had brought the Eastern and Western Powers to such a wary state that full-fledged armadas of atom bombers stood ready on a thousand airfields with all crews on red

alert for a single atomic explosion. Once the first enemy bomb arrived, there would be no time for a diplomatic exchange of gauntlets. The bomb itself would be the signal for all-out atomic war.

SUCH WERE Flannigan's reflections as he watched the Russian bombers. What had happened was not hard to deduce. His ship had exploded somewhere near a strategic Russian industrial target. In the minds of the Russians, an unscheduled atomic explosion like that could only mean one thing: that the Western Powers had grown tired of playing around.

Flannigan wished he were made of flesh and blood and glands and nerve cells, so that he could take pleasure in beating himself into a pulp. He had gone wrong from the beginning. First he had ditched his Earth fiancée, Louise Daren, to follow the wild goose to the Moon. He neglected to give himself credit for saving an entire nation of people in the Land of the Lens. Then he and Mnir'ra had lost their bodies of flesh and blood. Further, he had let Mnir'ra, as a robot, go unstable and destroy the transference machine. Mnir'ra was gone—vaporized—and now the explosion of the space ship had precipitated a war on Earth capable of bringing an end to human civilization.

Why? he asked himself. His whole life had not been his own. He had been thrust into the rut of predestination and had had to go where fate decreed. True, he had found Mnir'ra, but without fulfillment. And now she was gone forever from him, while he was left unutterably alone before the spectacle of impending devastation triggered by his own arrival.

Earth—to which he had not hoped to return. Fair Earth with its fresh green fields, its striving peoples and cities and sciences and churches and

homes and schools and corner drug-stores. Earth, now intact; tomorrow a shambles. In three or four hours the bombs would start dropping—Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Diego, and then the Twin Cities, Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, New York. Maybe it would happen sooner if they used transoceanic guided missiles. Also, Eastern Siberian armadas could reach Seattle in jig time. Then, too, there were the spies already instituted in the enemy countries. What the bombs did not demolish, they would finish—destruction of bridges and government buildings, and murder.

For lack of anything else to do, he started to walk. Too bad his degravitator was not functioning, he thought. If it were he might be able to get somewhere in a hurry and perhaps convince someone with authority that the explosion was all a mistake.

But that would probably be futile. This unleashing of the great potentials of opposed powers on Earth had been waited for by both sides. The carbuncle of festering hatred and suspicion had felt the first thrust of the knife. Now the operation would have to be carried to its conclusion. World War III was under way and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

But there was another thought that bothered him, something he could not quite bring into mental focus, something that was connected with hidden peril which somehow overshadowed the catastrophe of atomic warfare.

His degravitator. The bothersome idea was connected with that. He worked mentally, groping back. About his degravitator being broken. That was it. He recalled that Mnir'ra had reached under a plate on his back and he had felt something break during their struggle.

Had she deliberately broken his degravitator? But how could she possi-

bly know where it was when he did not know himself? No, it was impossible.

But she had handled the ship so expertly before he interfered. How had she done that? And if she had not deliberately broken his degravitator, why had she deliberately tripped him in the airlock? There would have been no point in tripping him unless she had known that he would fall and be destroyed!

But Mnir'ra was his eternal loved one! She wouldn't do a thing like that and also destroy the transference machine.

Flannigan stopped dead in his tracks. He remembered she had spoken of a "greater mission" than a return to the flesh: "*To conquer your Earth! How could you have overlooked such an obvious opportunity? We are again the Masters—*"

Swiftly in the wake of this recollection came another. Mnir'ra's last words to him as he fell from the ship: "Help! Flan'ri! I can't get free!"

Could it have meant that she was not stuck in the airlock?

WITH A suddenness swifter than comprehension, Flannigan's physical environment was starkly outlined in a blast of blue-white illumination that would have blinded him had he been human. It was a light that rivaled the direct glare of the sun ten times over. As it quickly subsided into a normal daylight glow, he saw a false dawn beyond the burning mountain ahead of him—a false dawn that darkened poisonously into an orange glow.

When he saw the mushrooming cloud above the glow he fell flat, just in time. The shock wave hit his own hillside like a titanic hand, though he was miles away from the center of the explosion. Trees and

bushes either took to the air or were flattened out as though by a steam-roller. Then came sound, a buffeting, ricocheting echo of thunders that constituted a hurricane in itself.

Far beyond, Flannigan counted three other orange points and rising mushrooms. He heard other distant thunders, while white flashes beyond the horizons in many directions looked like an epidemic of summer heat lightning.

The Allies had answered the Russians. The last destruction, predicted by all the prophecies of Man, had begun. Ahead of him, somewhere beyond the mountain, a city had existed. Now it lay gasping, mortally wounded, with a hundred thousand dead. This night would bring death to twice a hundred more populaces, both here and in France, England, America, a world of countries.

Damn it! His space ship had started all this!

And yet, could he really hold himself responsible? This war would have come sooner or later. Still, perhaps there was something he could do. He was still a Doctor of Science. If he could only get back to the States.

But how could a golden robot get by in this topsy-turvy world, especially now? Anyone discovering him would immediately associate him with the enemy. The world was trigger-happy. No one would give him a chance to talk.

His mind went back to Mnir'ra. If she had been possessed somehow, if the ancient Master had asserted himself in her, then perhaps the other robot did not crash with the ship. Perhaps it was here, at large, intent upon disguising itself and contacting humans to put them to work for its own purposes. Here, in Russia, where reserves of weapons, materials and manpower were equal to the desperation

which must have gripped the Soviet Republic by now. If that ancient mind lived, it could offer superior science at a time when it was desperately needed. It could bargain and acquire power. It could conquer the Earth!

Flannigan's first impulse was to start looking for the other robot, but he soon perceived two good reasons for following such a course. First, Mnir'ra's personality must still exist somewhere in the other robot. So it would have to be captured, not destroyed. That would take preparation. Secondly, if he let his own presence be known, the other robot would promptly make him objective number one.

The obvious answer was—time, and a disguise—as well as friends to help him. Speaking of friends, he had Louise Daren, his former fiancée, provided San Fernando Valley had not been obliterated by Russian bombs. He had already told her part of his incredible story. Perhaps she alone would believe the rest of it. In regard to disguises. Louise's cousin, Frank Daren, would provide what was necessary. Frank was an eccentric character, but he was precisely the man he needed now.

Problem: How does a robot, especially in the midst of universal atomic warfare, transport itself from the heart of Russia to Van Nuys, California?

Flannigan simply started walking. Perhaps Mnir'ra was not irretrievably lost. If she was not destroyed in the ship's crash, perhaps there might yet be a way!

Then he thought of Louise, the girl who had loved him all his life, who had waited patiently for him to settle down. Well, that problem was simple. He was only a robot now.

But what was his and Mnir'ra's prime goal? The flesh. If he and she

ever acquired bodies again, there would still be Louise. As an ordinary human being, he had loved Louise. As an ancient entity, reborn into this era out of eons past, he loved Altinra, who in this era was Mnir'ra. And if she survived, he would love her for other eons to come.

Flannigan looked at the poisonously illuminated sky. To hell with it! he thought. First there was the world. Something had to be done about that and the threat of the ancient Master he had inadvertently brought with him out of the Lens, before he would indulge in any personal considerations.

A ROBOT does not require sleep or rest. A robot is not subject to periods of incapacitation due to fatigue. A robot is tireless and efficient. Also, its metallic exo-skeleton can deflect stray bullets in the night, especially when it is made of tough metal of a kind that Earth had never known.

Flannigan very quickly became aware of these advantages in his *Drang nach Westen*. Borrowed clothing, a hat, dark glasses, a muffler and high-collared overcoat, plus gloves, furnished a temporary disguise which enabled him to work quite effectively under cover of darkness. Soon he acquired a gun and ammunition. And somewhere in Eastern Germany there was a ten-year-old captured C-74, freshly fueled for a long haul of personnel to Vladivostok. He managed to conceal himself in the forward baggage compartment. A human being would have smothered, or been crushed by the load of luggage, or frozen to death on the long flight. But he waited patiently until they landed at Vladivostok and refueled for the return trip. The flight crew and returning personnel were grounded by weather.

He took the ship. Pursuit came belatedly, as the advantage of surprise and zero visibility had been with him. He flew very low over rough water. Radar tracking was difficult, and the pursuit planes were not long-range enough to keep up the search. He got away.

Having plenty of fuel and good deicers, he flew north across the Sea of Okhotsk and the Eastern Siberian peninsula, out over the Arctic Ocean north of Point Barrow. He was challenged twice, in code, by Alaskan defense posts, so he kept very low.

Somewhere near the Mackenzie River his fuel ran out. He bellyflopped on a plain of snow. Disguising himself well with cold-weather gear, wearing snowshoes he had found in the equipment on board, and carrying a new rifle and ammunition, he started south along the Mackenzie, wondering how long it would take an atomic war to reach the point of diminishing returns.

SAN FERNANDO Valley had been hit, but not as badly as Los Angeles' industrial section. Burbank and Glendale had received the worst of the single great blast that had wiped out the aircraft factories in that region. Blast and fire had partially demolished North Hollywood and Studio City, but the cities of San Fernando and Sherman Oaks and Van Nuys were reasonably intact. Northridge, Encino and Reseda remained untouched.

However, there was martial law and the whole Western Seaboard had been alerted for an invasion. Ever since both sides of the world had expended their atomic stockpiles and settled down to an old-fashioned war of navies, air forces and armies, Washington, Oregon and California had been filling up with armored divisions and air-defense groups. A hundred war-

ships patrolled the coast and reconnaissance bombers filled the skies from the Golden Gate to Diamond Head. From Honolulu to Guam, and from Guam almost to the Asiatic mainland, allied forces watched. But more than half of the allied forces were engaged in Spain where the last European stand was being made. England was already occupied. And now the seething hordes of Eastern Siberia, Red China, Red Japan and Red Korea glared balefully at Alaska, Canada, and the U. S. West Coast. Every day of waiting tension brought news of at least three sinkings of allied warships by the ubiquitous Red Undersea Fleet. Ordinary nonatomic tactical bombing of cities from Nome to Seattle had already begun, and Western Hemisphere forces were retaliating with Operation Top—hurdlng the North Pole to strike at Murmansk, Leningrad, Moscow and points south.

In Van Nuys, like everywhere else, the Red Cross, hospitalization and First Aid had become words as common in usage as survival corps, radiation casualty, Geiger Patrol, fire, water supply, bomb shelter and "cup-a-cawfee". The majority of the populace was in uniform, one kind or another. Routine had become as rare as bitching about politics and taxes. The U. S. mainland had never been hit before in living memory, and now that it had been hit a surprising number of people had turned politicians into statesmen overnight. The chalk cliffs of Dover were a thing of the past. Now it was Coast Highway 101. That was the new line which "they" must never cross.

LOUISE DAREN, after a seventeen-hour shift at the hospital, had slept six precious hours when her doorbell rang—at four A. M.

She slipped a negligee around her,

put on her slippers and got up to look in a mirror. Hastily, she made a few dabs with a comb and brush at her voluminous blonde hair, rubbed a powder puff over her nose, and went resignedly to the front door.

"Who is it?" she asked, before opening it.

"Special messenger. Open up please. This is an emergency." The voice was peculiarly even and devoid of a tone of urgency.

Louise turned on the porch light and looked through the peephole in her front door. She saw the shadowy figure of a tall, broad-shouldered man in hat and overcoat. The coat collar was up, the hat brim was down, and a black muffler was up to his nose. He wore dark glasses—and gloves. It was warm for overcoats, gloves and mufflers. And one wore dark glasses in the broad light of day. If he were a blind man, on the other hand, would he be a special messenger?

"Put the message in the mailbox," she said suspiciously. "This is a bad time of night—"

The stranger stepped up very close to the peephole. "Louise," he said. "I have come back. Please turn off the porch light—and let me in!"

A wave of gooseflesh crept over her. "Who are you?" she asked.

"This is Michael! Let me in!"

Vertigo caused her to stagger. Michael Flannigan, dying of radioactive poisoning, had left her two weeks ago to return to his mad dream—to the Land of the Lens. She had last seen his battered rocket in a telescope, lost and out of control, close within the grip of lunar gravity. He could not possibly have survived!

And yet . . . She turned off the porch light. "Your voice is different," she said. "This is all so—incredible. Oh Michael, if it's you, prove it!"

"All right!" he said through the

peephole. "There was Tiajuana, October the twenty-ninth. The Twenty-One Club. Do you remember?"

Louise trembled as with ague. "What—" She steadied herself by leaning against the door, to keep from fainting. "What did we—have—for dinner?"

"Filot mignon, medium rare, with mushrooms. You had a dry Martini. They gave us a surprise first course of lobster. The orchestra played Brazil and I gave them five dollars to play an encore."

"Michael!" she exclaimed, opening the door. When he stepped in she threw herself into his arms, sought his lips—

Then she screamed, and he placed a gloved hand over her mouth as he closed the door behind them.

"It is I," he insisted. "Don't be alarmed. There is much to tell."

There was a small end table lamp burning in the living room. In its illumination she could see the golden, metallic glint of his robot's face. She backed away from him, trembling.

That same illumination outlined the soft curves of her body through the flimsy negligee, and Flannigan the robot remembered Flannigan the man. But the eternal element in him remembered Mnir'sr Nikinra, Queen of the Serin Ni.

"I—I'll fix some coffee," Louise stammered. Then her hand went suddenly to her mouth. "I mean—"

They stood there motionless, looking at each other for thirty seconds.

"Oh Michael!" she exclaimed abruptly. He stepped toward her and she was in his arms again. "Michael! Michael! What has happened to you?"

"I'd give half my life," he said in her ear, "if I could drink a cup of coffee—or if I could just bawl. . . ."

BY 8:00 A. M. Flannigan had told his story. He had removed his coat, hat, muffler, glasses, gloves and shirt. She had to believe him. He was the walking and talking proof of everything he claimed.

Regarding Mnir'ra, he concluded, "I should have figured that there could be a residual charge in that robot mind, one that held all the patterns of the ancient master mind that had once been its occupant. The way I see it now, I hurried up her transference, and her charges were not as heavy as mine. The latent intelligence within her was somehow able to borrow energy from her own charges to augment its own patterns. It became dominant, and I can only pray to God that at least a residual pattern of Mnir'ra's mind still remains."

Louise could drink coffee if Flannigan could not. She was on her fourth cup. "Then you really think the other robot exists—that it was not destroyed?"

"It is more than possible. Its degravitator was in working condition. It could have drifted around all night and landed anywhere. Dominated as it is now by the original entity that occupied it ages ago, it is an evil instrument endowed with a superman science and bent on world domination. I can't take the chance of believing it no longer exists. I must find it."

Louise raised her brows quizzically. "And destroy it?"

"I can't do that either. Mnir'ra might still be—"

"I understand." Louise looked away, out the breakfast room window, at her fruit trees in the back yard. Brown and yellow leaves lay on the ground, in the green grass. Withered leaves, gone forever—like her former relationship with Michael Flannigan. "Well, what do you want of me?" she asked, coming to the point.

Flannigan slowly drew the shirt back on over his golden shoulders, while she watched, fascinated by the mechanical perfection of this product of another world. "I need a perfect disguise," he said. "And I thought of your cousin Frank."

She started, almost spilling her coffee. "You mean—prosthetics?"

"Something like that. He has all the materials, rubber plastics and that sort of thing—plus the expert know-how. I'm quite sure he could cover my body and face with the semblance of living flesh, complete with hair and a 'five o'clock shadow'. Where is Frank now?"

"He's working at the hospital—for the government. Rehabilitation courses, prosthetic cases. He doesn't actually do the work anymore. His factory does that."

"But he's still the expert. Don't you think—"

"I'll have him over tonight," she said. "In the meantime you'd better stay hidden. I've got to go to work."

"I'll join the vacuum cleaner in the closet," he said. "I'm just another machine."

She left him hurriedly to hide the tears that she could no longer restrain. He sat there looking at the half empty coffee cup and at the dead leaves lying in the grass underneath the fruit trees. . . .

FRANK DAREN was fortyish, slightly stooped, partially gray, with a precocious middle-age spread and a ridiculous, perfectly round little paunch. His face was large, long, heavy-jowled, his eyebrows blond and fuzzy. He wore a pessimistic scowl on his thick lips, and his small, watery blue eyes were shifty and suspicious behind large, horn-rimmed glasses. His hand-shake was so feeble that Flannigan was not sure he was

holding on to his hand at all when they were introduced that night before supper.

In spite of the irrefutable evidence, Daren continued to maintain a doubtful, brooding expression as the evening wore on. The kind of job Flannigan wanted would cost money, perhaps several thousand dollars, he explained.

There was something about his reticence and shifty, sidelong appraisal that pricked up the Irish in Flannigan. "Louise," he said, when the other two had finished eating, "I am sorry to have to mention this, but—"

"I know," she smiled. "Your will named me as beneficiary. You are perfectly within your rights to bring the subject up. Your property and funds are still intact. I intend to turn them over to you."

"Don't be silly," he answered. "All I want is enough to pay Frank here. You forget that I need neither food, rest nor shelter."

"But Michael!"

Flannigan looked at her intently. "The Michael Flannigan you knew is legally deceased. His body lies dead, riddled by radioactivity, lost forever in a cave on the moon. It's been there for weeks. What you see before you is a mere shell—for the memory of him. I have memories that transcend this age and this world. I am capable of outliving you by ten thousand generations. Life and the material securities requisite to it are fleeting. You need them now, so keep them. I only want two thousand dollars."

Frank Daren had been studying him speculatively. Suddenly he said, "I'll do the job. What's more, since you fell from your ship you must have been shaken up internally. I notice you have a limp. I'd be glad to see what I can do about repairs. Being an expert on artificial limbs, I might catch on to your inner workings. At

least I might be able to straighten out a few bent parts, if any. You'll have to come to the lab at the factory—after closing time. We haven't yet started swingshifts."

Just then the visamatic came to life, a television receiver equipped to be activated by the transmitting station whenever a government announcement was being made. An excited, bald-headed announcer, backed by a map of the Pacific Coast, broke in on their conversation.

"—from Supreme Allied Headquarters late this afternoon. The invasion has begun! This is official, ladies and gentlemen! *The invasion has begun!*"

Louise tensed, looking at Flannigan and Daren. The latter paled, staring in fascination at the visamatic's screen.

"God help us!" she muttered, while Daren shushed her to silence again.

A U. S. Army officer, young but already tense and grave with the strain of his responsibilities, was introduced. "I am authorized to corroborate all civilian announcements made in this area," he said, "to the effect that the Communist invasion of Alaska, Western Canada and the West Coast of the United States has begun. At the same time I am commissioned to assure you that defensive action is also being taken. This is war, but you are being called upon to remember that it is not yet defeat. We have only begun."

He went on to state the enemy's magnitude and positions. The forces involved were those of Eastern Siberia, Red China, Japan, Northern Korea and other Red volunteer groups conscripted from all Eurasia. Southern Korea and Formosa had already surrendered. The Philippines were collapsing, with the help of a powerful Communist underground. Guam, Kwajalein, Wake, Midway and the Hawaiian Islands were out of communication,

as were half the major defense posts in Alaska and Western Canada, which was indicative of new atom bombings. Numerous naval battles were in progress off the coasts of Washington and Oregon. One Red beachhead had been established in the Puget Sound area.

"Listen!" exclaimed Louise. A deep-throated moaning sound began to rattle the window panes. "Air-raid sirens! Quick! There's a bomb shelter on this block!"

Surprisingly, Frank Daren still appeared to be interested in Flannigan. In fact, a sudden anxiety appeared now in his little, watery eyes.

"Come to the factory with me," he said quickly. "It isn't far from here. We may be able to get through the traffic controls with my hospital license. It is very important that you have that disguise!" -

"Why?" queried Flannigan abruptly.

Daren raised his eyebrows. "Need you ask that?" he said. "You are an atom-powered superman. We could use somebody like you! Come on! You too, Louise! That Major's uniform is just what we need. My car is outside."

There was an incongruity to this new attitude of Daren's that Flannigan did not like, but he had little time to dwell on it. He was thinking about sunny Serin Gor, in the Land of the Lens. He had helped its beautiful people to ward off a dreaded enemy by giving them the gifts of a superior science. Now the threat of destruction moved toward California through the flaming night sky. What could he offer to this—his own world? Super science? No. But somewhere behind the enemy's lines another robot was no doubt at work. And *that one* possessed what he lacked—the ancient science of a superior technology. Flannigan

nigan's gift to the world could be the other robot's destruction. Yet, even if he could find it and destroy it, what about Mnir'ra?

He left the solution of that in the hands of Fate, as he rode along in Frank Daren's car. He could not see the traffic. He could only hear it—and the air raid sirens. He had insisted on concealing himself in the rear baggage compartment, for obvious reasons. . . .

THAT NIGHT the enemy only got through as far as Ventura, but Santa Barbara received a severe pounding by nonnuclear bombing. The emergency subsided toward midnight and Louise, exhausted from too little sleep, retired to a factory office that was provided with a daybed. She slept while Daren worked on Flannigan.

Flannigan lay on the equivalent of an operating table under a bank of fluorescent lights while Daren, with sleeves rolled up and bifocals adjusted, carefully examined the unclothed robot body.

"This is not only an interesting case," he told Flannigan. "It is a vital one. Tomorrow is Sunday, which is a lucky circumstance. We can work right through."

Flannigan eyed him critically. "At first you didn't seem to be interested, Daren. Now you are actually excited. What's going on? I'm just asking for a rubber plastic disguise."

Daren ducked his head closer in to his work and made a very small file cut. "Maybe part of it is wishful thinking," he said. "But I think the government would be interested in you. Remember the old comic book versions of supermen? You're practically that, in reality. Incidentally, this isn't merely gold plating. It's a clever lamination process. Your 'skin' alone is worth a fortune. Underneath that is a

metal my file won't touch, and it won't take a Rockwell at all. That metal is priceless, from an industrial point of view."

Flannigan began to talk less and watch and listen more. Whatever the man's skill, he did not inspire enthusiasm or trust. When Daren suggested opening him up to take a look at him internally, Flannigan was ready with a little white lie.

"I tried that myself," he said, "on a third robot I found. These things are rigged against tampering. They're booby-trapped—so don't try opening me up."

By Sunday morning Flannigan was coated with a base covering that had been baked on. Louise came in at eight with doughnuts and coffee for herself and Daren. She congratulated Flannigan on his changing appearance. He told them he looked like a man freshly skinned.

There was war news in the *Los Angeles Times*. The Puget Sound beachhead had been wiped out, but Alaska was out of communication, presumably taken. Enemy submarines seemed to be as numerous as sardines. There were too many sinkings of allied warships off the West Coast.

But Flannigan scanned the inside pages for small news items, for any reference to odd happenings anywhere in the world that might give him his first clue as to the whereabouts of the other robot. There was nothing. However, he read a short article mentioning that Stalin was still alive in spite of the recurrent illness that had caused him to relinquish his seat of power at the head of the Communist world three years previously. Owing to an alleged improvement in spectacular longevity treatments, it was rumored that he might yet be able to return to his old post as dictator, and Russian propaganda was supporting the belief

that at the proper time he would personally enter the White House in Washington and triumphantly claim that the dreams of Carl Marx and Lenin had been realized.

Disgustedly, Flannigan turned from the news to the comic section. "I may not be able to enjoy my Sunday morning coffee," he said, "but at least I can read the funnies. Talk about longevity! Superman is never going to die! He's still breaking up nefarious schemes and frustrating mad scientists!"

Louise watched him sympathetically. Then her eyes glistened suddenly as he balled the funnies up and threw them on the floor.

"I can read the funnies, yes!" he said. "But robots can neither laugh nor cry! That's the hell of it!"

"At least they can get mad," said Daren, laying his tools to one side. "After I catch up on a little sleep I'll come back. It'll take me several days yet to finish the job. I'll call several of my staff and instruct them to keep the factory closed until Wednesday. No one will be admitted."

ON THE following Wednesday night, Louise had Frank Daren and several friends over to her house for dinner. Her "new acquaintance" claimed he had eaten before he arrived, so he merely sat and watched the others. He was a hard-muscled, athletic type with a deep tan, deep blue eyes and brown hair. Ordinarily he might have attracted the two other women present, but as they remarked to Louise in the kitchen he seemed somehow too cold and mentally elusive. Besides, he neither ate, drank nor even smoked!

Questions might have become embarrassing and Frank Daren's secret triumph might have been detracted from had not the whole process of

curious scrutiny been interrupted—by war.

Invasion rolled over Los Angeles like a Juggernaut. First came atomic bombs brought in by rockets fired from submarines. Of approximately fifty launched, ten got through. These flattened industrial suburbs and crippled all of Metropolitan Los Angeles. By morning the Asiatic aerial armada arrived, carrying fifty thousand glider-carried troops and accompanying ordinance. They landed on the outskirts of a sick and disorganized city, followed by seaborne armored divisions.

The bomb-shelter in which Flannigan, Louise and Daren and their friends had taken refuge was captured, and the survivors soon found themselves in an improvised Communist prison camp. Flannigan might have escaped, but he chose to conceal his superhuman powers until the right circumstance presented itself. To be discovered and destroyed would be futile, he reasoned. Keeping his secret from the enemy—and especially keeping it from the attention of the other robot, wherever it might be—was an indispensable asset.

FLANNIGAN had experienced stranger adventures than any man on the face of the Earth, yet nothing seemed more incongruous to him than that prison camp. Chinese, Korean and Japanese Communist soldiers, under a single white Russian major, garrisoned a prison compound that extended from Coldwater Canyon in North Hollywood to Sepulveda Boulevard, beyond Sherman Oaks, with the Santa Monica Mountains and Mulholland Drive forming the south boundary and Ventura Boulevard the north boundary. Ralph's Grocery Store was just beyond the compound fence, now converted into a Communist army command post and advanced supply depot.

All the cozy-looking little homes along the winding, flower-lined streets, with their modern interior decorating and electric lights and thermostat-controlled heating systems and television sets and two-car garages—the material inheritance of a clever, industrious nation of freedom-loving people—all those things were changed. Electricity and gas were things of the past. Garbage-disposal units would not work. There was no Wednesday and Saturday garbage or trash pickup. The water service was disrupted. Toilets did not function. Precious but filthy drinking water was rationed, being brought in by tank trucks. Sherman Oaks began to smell. And the lawns and trees grew dry and bare, and every yard became infested with flies and mangy, starving dogs. Radio and TV sets were dead. Meals consisted of beans, potatoes, or impossible foreign battle rations. To the squalor was added pandemonium. Lawns were piled up with abandoned Cadillacs, Buicks, Oldsmobiles, Studebakers, Chevrolets, and Fords. The days and nights were filled with the honkings and crashes and drunken laughter that accompanied this process of human retrogression to the simian stage of evolution.

Flannigan was quartered with twenty male prisoners, including Frank Daren, in what had recently been a nice little two-bedroom home with single bath and patio. Women and children were in a group of houses that occupied three city blocks on the other side of Van Nuys Boulevard. Rumor had it—and several interpreters confirmed this—that the women and children were to be exchanged for Communist prisoners from the American side. Flannigan thanked God for that. At least he would not have to worry too much about Louise. He could concentrate on his own problems—which also entailed some of the problems of

the Democratic world.

But his immediate environment proved to be a heavy distraction. There was too much suffering, too much brutality, to the point of atrocities' being committed in broad daylight. In the course of his imposed labors about the camp, at the point of bloodied bayonets, he came upon many a poor cadaver, quietly being buried by the prisoners. Death was expected in war, but not the kind of death Flannigan and his companions came upon. War did not gouge out eyes or cut out tongues or cut off fingers and toes or behead helpless adolescents. Human depravity was responsible for that.

As the days wore on, Flannigan wondered how much more he could take. He was not like some of his human companions whose emotions could betray them into inviting a bayonet thrust or a bullet when they lost their heads and went screaming with rage at the enemy. But his mind was human, and it revolted at the injustice and depravity of the foe. One day he would have to reach out with his bare hands and literally pull a few bowlegged guards apart. And then he would really be under scrutiny. He prayed for an early opportunity to escape before that happened.

There was a Chinese captain over Flannigan's section of the camp. He was huge, brutal and obnoxious, an ex-wrestler and Judo fighter with a round, fat, sweaty face, hunched, muscular shoulders, a bull neck and a very dirty, crooked-toothed smile. King Moto. He scowled when everything was in order and smiled when orders were violated. For in the latter case he could indulge in his favorite pastime—"discipline". One of his favorite tricks was to face a particularly brawny offender and hand all his weapons to an orderly. Then he would proceed to kill the offending prisoner

with his bare hands.

FRANK DAREN had grown daily weaker and more terrified. He also grew proportionately more cooperative. In fact, some of the men told Flannigan they would lay odds on his turning Commie.

"So help me," said one of them, a U.S. Navy Air Force pilot named Bob Lee, "if he does I'll kill him before he's accepted as a collaborator!"

"Which would effectively put an end to your career," put in Flannigan.

"What career? I used to have one. I was going to test-pilot a moon rocket once. But what the hell am I now? A honey-dipper for these flea-bitten Reds!"

Flannigan liked Bob Lee. He was big, powerful, intelligent—and an independent thinker. But for that very reason he placed himself always on the edge of danger. Perhaps that was why Flannigan always worked close to Lee. When trouble came, Flannigan had decided, that would be the time to crack a few enemy skulls.

ONE AFTERNOON an inspection tour passed slowly down Hazel-tine. It consisted of three battered convertibles, a Cadillac and two Buicks. Standing up in the lead car was Major Balaknin, the only white Russian officer in the whole area. The prisoners were lined up in military formation for the inspection. Some were so weak from malnutrition and overwork that they fell to the ground before Balaknin's car passed them, but the Major did not pay the unfortunates the slightest bit of attention.

King Moto was out in front at attention when the Major's car came to a halt. The latter spoke to the Red Chinese captain in English, as neither one spoke the other's native language. After some official business had been

discussed, Moto turned, with a salute, and called out a name.

"Prisoner Frank Daren—front and center!"

Flannigan placed a restraining hand on Bob Lee's arm. He could see the murderous glint in the other's dark eyes.

"The sonafa—"

"Don't get yourself killed," Flannigan muttered. "Maybe you'll be more useful later. I've got an idea. Hold it, Bob!"

Lee relaxed, but he still cursed Daren under his breath as he watched the latter report humbly to Moto. He was introduced to Balaknin. There was a brief exchange of words, and then Daren saluted the Major and climbed into the second car, together with some sleek, well-fed Chinese officers who greeted him with congratulatory smiles.

They'd be glad to get Daren, Flannigan was thinking. A skilled expert in prosthetics...

Then it was that the revolt broke out. It started with boos and verbal threats. Prisoners got out of line and shook their fists. One man even overpowered a Korean guard and took his rifle away. He succeeded in firing a shot that barely missed Daren, and the latter ducked, squealing in terror, into the foxhole formed by the doors and back seat of the car, along with the Chinese.

Machine guns began to chatter. They chattered away at their backs and men both innocent and guilty fell in silent, bloody windrows.

"Do what I do!" said Flannigan to Lee. "Quick!" Whereupon he put his hands in the air and walked toward Moto. "They can't fire this close to the Major's car!"

Bayonets soon stopped their further progress, but since they had their hands up they were not fired upon.

Major Balaknin continued talking to Moto as though nothing at all had occurred.

"Look at that scum!" said Lee. "Wouldn't I like to—"

"Simmer down!" warned Flannigan. "Save it for later!"

Lee looked at him in a bleary-eyed burst of emotion. "What are you made of!" he exclaimed. "By God, I think you're more of a machine than that—Major!"

Flannigan met his gaze steadily. "Maybe I haven't any choice in the matter," he said. But more than this he was thinking of Daren. There was a man who knew the truth about him—and he had turned traitor to his country. Why not to his friends? He could buy himself a high position with what he knew.

"Flannigan," said Lee, "you said you had a plan."

"I have," replied Flannigan. "And the time is getting ripe!"

FLANNIGAN began to formulate a plan of escape. Surprising the night sentries would be a simple matter with his superhuman, atom-powered strength. He and Bob Lee could lose themselves in the Santa Monica Mountains and start out from there. Certainly he knew those hills far better than the enemy.

But another factor soon interrupted his planning.

"Do you know what?" Bob Lee said to him after their evening meal of beans and dirty water. Flannigan always appeared to eat, but did not. He kept up appearances by milling about among the others or going outside on the pretext of having to take care of certain natural functions, and later he would tell Lee he had already eaten. On other occasions he had said he refused to eat, which many of the prisoners did.

"No. What?"

"The women aren't being exchanged. Some of them have been seen in the officers' quarters."

"You mean—"

"Yes!" exclaimed Lee, his eyes blazing. "That's *exactly* what I mean! The dirty—"

"Just a minute!" Another plan came to Flannigan's mind. More bizarre, much more of a risk, but calculated to help the women and make the Commies think twice about molesting them.

"What are we going to do about it?" persisted Lee.

"Maybe we can throw a scare into them," said Flannigan. Perhaps, he thought, under cover of darkness...

"How?" Lee asked him. "I'm willing to try anything!"

"I know you are. We start tonight."

"Doing what?"

Flannigan looked at him for a long moment. "Did you read the funny-papers when you were a kid?"

"What the hell's that got to do with it?"

"We're going to play Superman...."

FORTUNATELY, it was a moonless night combined with a hazy overcast, and since municipal power was a thing of the past, lighting was negligible. The whole San Fernando Valley was like the palm of a dark, dead hand. The once-familiar glow of street lights and advertising beacons was gone. In fact, the Commies wanted it dark, because their own Intelligence had reported an Allied buildup in readiness for a giant counter-attack, with weapons so new that they had not had a chance to use them against the initial invasion. The mounting tension had even brought a peculiar stillness to the valley. There was no loud carousing. The prisoners in the camp

could hear little except the constant drone of transport planes and trucks as the tremendous supplies, equipment and manpower—resulting from more than a decade of preparation in Asia—kept coming in by sea and by air, relentlessly, hour after hour, as it had been doing day after day and week after week.

"Ants!" Lee whispered. "That's what they are—just ants!"

"Quiet!" said Flannigan.

They were behind shrubbery, traveling slowly through back yards and over fences. By careful maneuvering, they had progressed in this manner beyond Valley Vista Boulevard and were now up against the hills among the more expensive and ultra-modernistic homes. In this section many of the officers had quartered themselves.

"We're in a good position," Flannigan said. "Just beyond these houses are the open hills, canyons, firebreaks—perfect country for a getaway. Of course, up higher they've got the fence and guard posts, but maybe that wouldn't stop us." He felt quite sure he could tear steel fence apart, even though it would ruin this rubber plastic coating.

"I'd feel yellow—leaving the women," whispered Lee. He did not seem to notice that Flannigan could not whisper. The latter's robot voice merely lowered in volume.

"We might be able to do them more good on the outside," said Flannigan, thinking aloud. He was thinking three moves ahead, thinking of all the women and children in existence—of Civilization itself. If he could manage to get to the Allied line—get weapons and a good, fast ship, penetrate Russia disguised as a human being and find the other robot—maybe the Allies would have a chance. But against the super science of that deadly, ancient master mind that had asserted

itself over Mnir'ra's personality the world could never prevail.

"Hey!" said Lee. "You aren't going chicken, are you? Getting itchy feet before we take care of a few of these rats?"

At that precise moment, a woman screamed. It came from the second house beyond their position. They could see that a dim light illuminated the drawn shades of a back bedroom.

"Come on!" said Lee, and he began to crawl forward. "Now's our chance!"

"Lee, I—"

"Okay! Stay behind if you're yellow. I'll settle this alone!"

"But you don't—"

"Shut up! I'm on my way!"

There was no use trying to explain. Flannigan followed close behind the other, watching and listening for sentries. Most of them should be at the extremities of the camp.

It was a simple matter to get the screen off the window. Since it was a warm night, the window itself was open. Both of them could hear the sounds of a struggle beyond the shade.

Without even warning Flannigan, Lee climbed up and threw himself into the room. Simultaneously, the shade flapped up and Flannigan saw a hunch-shouldered brutish-looking Chinese minus his shirt struggling with a blonde woman.

The woman was Louise Daren, and the man was King Moto. He did not see Flannigan, but his beady eyes lighted with anticipation as he turned and saw Bob Lee. He threw Louise onto the bed and started for the American.

In that moment, Flannigan thought it strange that he should just now remember Bob Lee's full name, from newspapers of several years back—Robert E. Lee, famous society-boy sportsman and athlete. He had been a

Golden Gloves champion. Moto found out something about that when Bob sprang up and landed a right to his chin. Moto went down, but Louise cried out a warning to Bob as the man came up, mouth bleeding, his massive chest squared for a real fight.

"You die for this, Yankee!" hissed Moto.

Flannigan was just climbing in the window when about a dozen hands pulled him back. He whirled, to see eight Red Chinese soldiers grinning at him over bayonets.

In Flannigan's mind a little verse ran, "The time has come, the Walrus said—"

Before any of the Chinese could shoot or try impaling him on a bayonet, he knocked their weapons out of their hands as though they had been holding broomsticks. Then he jumped into them, whirled, flayed his arms about, struck, grabbed, crushed.

Two of them got away. Six lay horribly dead and mangled. He heard the other two screaming. They were not taking any particular direction and they were not trying to raise an alarm. They were just running and screaming.

Flannigan turned to the window and climbed in. Louise sat on the bed against the wall, justifiably terrorized, bruised black and blue, her voluminous blonde hair disheveled and down around her shoulders, with a bed cover drawn up against her. Moto was sitting on Bob Lee, strangling him.

"Michael!" Louise exclaimed, hardly daring to believe her eyes.

But that was all there was time for. Flannigan simply reached out and grabbed Moto. The Chinese may have resisted, but Flannigan could not register such a comparatively puny force. He was not aware even of the other's weight as he jerked him to his feet.

Lee, not badly damaged yet, sprang to his feet. "It's about time you—"

"Bob!" Flannigan interrupted, still holding Moto in an immovable grip. "You finish him!"

The other's eyes lit up comprehendingly, and he grinned wickedly. "Okay!" he said. "This is for you—meat-head!"

The uppercut landed squarely, and Moto went limp.

"Thanks, Flannigan! Now, let's get this girl out of here. I take back what I was thinking about you."

Louise, wrapping the bedcover about her, got up and came over to Flannigan. "Michael!" she sobbed. "Oh, Michael!" He put an arm around her.

Lee's brows went up in surprise. "Friend of yours?"

"Yes," said Flannigan. "I owe you something for the way you interrupted Moto here."

Lee colored slightly. He had been looking into Louise's blue eyes, but now he looked away. "You finished it. Let's go!"

Louise reached out her hand and placed it on Lee's tanned arm. "Thank you very much," she said, smiling through her tears.

Lee's eyes came back to hers.

"Er—Bob," said Flannigan. "This is my . . . ah . . . cousin, Louise Daren."

Louise looked up at him quickly, then smiled, understanding his generosity. Uncontrollably, Lee's face brightened with renewed interest. "I like cousins," he grinned, "especially when there're somebody else's. Glad to know you." The sound of an approaching siren was heard by all three of them. "We'd better get out of here," he finished.

They all started out the back door, but that was as far as they got. A full squad of the mixed Chinese terrorists came running around the house into the back yard, surrounding them.

If Flannigan had taken them on, one of his companions might have been shot.

THEIR CAPTORS held them where they were, as though waiting for the arrival of someone in authority. In less than a minute, two familiar figures rounded the corner of the house. One was Major Balaknin, the other Frank Daren.

"There he is!" said Daren, pointing dramatically at Flannigan. "That's the one!"

"Frank!" exclaimed Louise. "You turned traitor!"

Major Balaknin instinctively stroked his mustache when he saw Louise. He stepped nearer and spoke in clear, Oxford English.

"The meaning of the word traitor is purely a matter of semantics, my dear," he said. "I like the unmistakable meaning of the word *wisdom* more. It is that which guides Comrade Daren now. He has become a useful Party member. All others are expendable!" There was a menacing gleam in his gray eyes as he finished.

"Be careful!" cried Frank Daren, cowering behind the Major. "He's deadly!"

Bob Lee looked at Flannigan, puzzled, wondering for the first time who and what he really was. That struggle with Moto was beginning to come back to him. How had Flannigan managed to handle that two-hundred-and-forty-pound bulk so easily?

"You know, of course," said Balaknin to Flannigan, "that if you make a move your companions will be shot."

"I'm aware of that," said Flannigan. "You have us so far. Now what?"

The Major was looking him over curiously—even somewhat dubiously, because Daren's claims were hard to swallow—when a corporal in charge

of the squad asked Balaknin to look at something on one side of the house, under the bedroom window. Balaknin excused himself and went to look over six mangled bodies and several twisted steel rifle barrels. He came back impressed.

"This is quite incredible," he told Flannigan. "I am not keeping your little secret for your own sake, but for the sake of my reputation—until facts can be established. If you are what Daren says you are—"

"One question," interrupted Flannigan.

"This is the first time you have interrupted me," said Balaknin coldly. "Please keep in mind that it is also the last. Do not speak until you are told! Now—what is the question?"

"Do you Russians have knowledge of another like me in your own country?"

Balaknin's brows arched. Then his eyes narrowed. "What is this?" he asked. "An extraterrestrial invasion?"

"No, but there was another—"

"Flannigan!" exclaimed Bob Lee. "What the devil *are* you?"

"Silence!" shouted Balaknin.

Just then, Commie air-raid sirens began to fill the Valley with a mournful wailing, and signal flares streaked through a suddenly menacing sky. There were lightning-like flashes, like heat lightning. Lee and Flannigan knew what that meant.

"The Allied counter-attack!" exclaimed Lee. "They're back with more atomics!"

"They are fools!" retorted Balaknin calmly. "They will all be destroyed."

"But they're using new weapons you've never seen before!" retorted Lee. "You'd better start walking backward!"

For answer, Balaknin slapped his face with the back of his hand. "Keep

your mouth shut!" he shouted again. "This night your country will see a new weapon of which you have not even dreamed! You won't have a chance!"

A cry arose from the soldiers. They were pointing at the sky. When Flannigan looked up he felt that he was human again, with a heart—because something actually jumped inside of him. The last time he had beheld such an object had been at Wur'tzoon, in the country of the Djar Li, on Mnir'ra's own world.

It was a spherical space ship, a duplicate of the one that he and Mnir'ra had come here in! Flannigan's robot mind calculated swiftly. It had been four months since his landing in Russia. The other robot must have known how to contact top Soviet authorities immediately. To have achieved that engineering miracle in such a short length of time required top-rank collaboration from the first day. And now he had a simple answer to the puzzle of why Major Balaknin knew nothing about another robot. The *Politburo* had seen fit to advise its underlings of a certain supply of golden eggs—but not a word about the "golden goose"! That was strictly for the top drawer. Now, however, if Balaknin should bring word to his superiors concerning a robot in California, the "golden goose" would hear about it and be on the alert. Clearly, there was only one solution. He had to get to the "golden goose" before it was aware that it still had a mate.

But how?

Balaknin ordered everybody through the house and out onto a modernistic balcony over the double garage. It was a perfect box seat for the show.

"This will be very interesting for you," the Major told them. "You will observe that our new weapon replaces

all other armaments. Your supreme effort is being exerted over there just beyond Pomona, yet not one of our regular aircraft has taken off. Why? Because that space ship up there will take care of everything!"

"Space ship!" exclaimed Lee. "Since when—"

"Since our true leader returned to power," Balaknin replied. "He has not been ill. Instead, he has been working secretly with top Soviet scientists these past three years. What you see before you is the result!"

"You mean Stalin is back in power?" asked Flannigan.

Balaknin grinned in triumph. "He was never out of power. His illness was just a blind."

Flannigan stood firm on his logic. The Soviets could not have created that space ship, which had nothing to do with rockets. It degenerated on the principle of ultrafrequency electromagnetic depolarization of iron. It was definitely a product of the other robot's ancient mentality—proof positive that it existed and was practically Stalin's right hand, perhaps even the power behind the throne.

"God help us!" moaned Lee, watching the space ship as it jockeyed swiftly into position somewhere over Mount Wilson. "If the Russians have overcome gravitation they can rule the world—the whole damned solar system! Think of it! Floating fortresses, any size, any altitude—artificial patrol satellites! They would no longer need a rocket launching station on the Moon!"

Balaknin glanced at Lee speculatively, but said nothing. He chuckled, though, to himself, and Flannigan wondered about that chuckle.

"Look!" cried Louise, pointing at the distant space ship. Luminous patches appeared in its vicinity, in-

dicating that it was drawing Allied fire.

Suddenly, a purplish beam of light shot out from the ship, aimed in the general direction of Pomona. The skyline was limned then in a quick, sharp flash of light, and Flannigan knew that that particular sector of the Allied front was gone—vaporized. He had seen that same ray in action at Wur'tzoon, on the planet Gra'ghr.

That cinched it. The purple ray meant that the other robot still existed. Perhaps. . . But why hadn't he thought of it sooner? Perhaps the other robot was the pilot of that space ship!

"Come!" said Balaknin. "It's time you three were locked up for the night. Tomorrow you will be shot—all but you, of course." He indicated Flannigan. "You will have the honor of being examined by Soviet scientists."

THEY LOCKED Louise in the jail cell with them.

"I don't think even you will get out of here," Balaknin told Flannigan, tapping the heavy steel bars of the cell. "A tank would have a hard time breaking out, so don't damage yourself by trying."

When he had left them, Bob Lee started asking questions, while Flannigan took interest in the view provided by one of the windows. He could see out over the prison wall, eastward, toward the mountains. The space ship was nowhere to be seen, and he assumed that it had flown northward along other Allied fronts, wiping out all resistance. While he looked out there at the night sky, he heard Lee's endless questions. Just who in the devil was he? What was all this nonsense about superhuman strength, about another one of "his kind" in

Russia, and an extraterrestrial invasion?

"Take it easy, Bob," Louise told him. "I know Michael well. He is not human, but—"

"Not *human!* What do you mean? Are you from another world?"

Flannigan turned to look at him. "I came here in a ship exactly like the one you saw tonight," he told him. "But—"

Lee's eyes widened. "And there are others like you—here on Earth—masquerading as humans?" He was instantly estranged. He backed away, keeping his distance. The two were no longer fellow Americans sharing a common fate. "You are an extraterrestrial! What are you doing here? What do you want?" He tensed suddenly as a new thought struck him. "I get part of it now! That space ship is not a product of Soviet science. It is yours—the product of a completely alien science being turned against us! You are being kept prisoner because your threat to the world includes the Russians, but they have been smart enough to capture and use one of your ships. You are the enemy of *all* of us!"

Flannigan was about to defend himself when he saw the space ship again. "Wait!" he exclaimed. "Look! The space ship is landing! It's coming down right across from Ralph's!"

Louise rushed to the barred window to look out, and Lee looked too, albeit sullenly.

"Meaning what?" he said.

"Meaning," said Flannigan, "that if the one I think is on board actually steps out of that ship, I'll know it." He was thinking of his buzzer detector, which would tell him if Mnir'ra's robot, under the ancient Master's control, was in the vicinity. "And if it is, I may be able to do

something constructive before the night is over."

"I still don't get it," said Bob Lee.

The space ship had landed. It was not more than six hundred feet from them. A portable floodlight illuminated an improvised ramp that had been prepared to reach its circular hatch. The hatch opened and four Russian officers swaggered out. The three prisoners could hear the welcoming shout of triumph that greeted them.

"Wrong hunch," Flannigan muttered. "But maybe it's better this way."

"I still don't follow you," said Lee.

Flannigan turned to him. "Bob, there isn't any time to go into explanations concerning my very peculiar background now, but let me ask you this: how would you like to help me capture that ship?"

"Are you insane, too?"

For answer, Flannigan suddenly straight-armed the window casing and the concrete cracked, one section of it moving three inches outward. That section included the whole barred window, as the internal reinforcing rods bent under the blow.

"That was a gentle tap," Flannigan said. "Do you follow me now?"

Lee blanched, struck by a wave of conflicting emotions—fear, shock, wonder. Louise crowded instinctively behind him, seeking protection even though she knew what Flannigan was, and *who* he was.

"No time for explanations now," said Flannigan. "Just assume I have the abilities of Superman." He was struck by the humorous thought that if his degravitator were working he could complete the Superman role by flying.

Lee shook his head and went over to a bench to sit down. "Let me get my balance," he said. "This is too much! Way too much!"

IN THAT moment, three sentries rushed up to the window outside, jabbering at Flannigan in three different languages.

"Come on!" yelled Flannigan. Whereupon he plunged into the wall and half of it burst outward, crushing one of the guards. Flannigan literally threw the other two sentries away like limp rags. He took up a rifle and tossed it in to Lee, simultaneously acquiring one for himself.

"On the double!" he yelled. "Bring Louise!"

The following six minutes were engraved in the memory of all three of them forever. Incredible, blurred moments of swift, herculean movement occurring with a dream-instantaneity and yet comprising a violent concatenation of events which seemed to last a separate lifetime. The two humans remembered Flannigan in the guard tower, mangled bodies hurtling darkly through the air, the howl of alarm sirens, the glare of lights, the chatter of machine rifles—which was soon silenced by Flannigan's counterfire. Louise and Bob distinctly saw and heard his body deflecting steel-jacketed bullets.

Then there was Flannigan running with a heavy-calibre machine gun in his superhuman arms—the armored prison car, with Lee driving and Flannigan on top, exposed, firing at everything in his path.

"Right through the fence!" he had yelled. "Full speed—to the ship!"

Forty miles per hour down Stansbury Avenue, mowing down armed M.P.S. Fifty, sixty, seventy—and then the fence. It parted stubbornly before the ponderous, speeding car, and if Flannigan had been human he would have died, because a piece of it struck him.

But all of them went on, crashing

"Into the ship!" yelled Flannigan. door of the space ship.

"Into the ship!" yelled Flannigan. "I'll cover you!"

The greatest weapon of all was surprise. The Commies were completely unprepared for such a miracle as this. And Flannigan's unrelenting fire was a factor in comprehensible reality which also had its effect. When Louise and Bob ran through the entrance over the dead bodies of two guards which Lee had shot with his own gun, Louise passed through safely but Lee caught a stray bullet in his back and fell.

A whole company of troops closed in between the armored car and the ship, and Louise came back, exposing herself to their guns. "Michael!" she cried out, hardly knowing what she was doing.

"*Banzai!*" yelled Flannigan, with superhuman volume in his voice. The troops were distracted, turning to fire on him as he leaped from the top of the car into their midst.

Human flesh and the comparatively soft substance of bullets and bayonets could not stop his advance up the ramp. Easily, he killed and maimed, running through them like a hot knife.

"Get under cover!" he yelled to Louise, while the Commies scattered in terror. He ran through the door, carrying Bob Lee with him and activating the familiar closing mechanism at the same time, as he instantly recognized the ship as a duplicate of the one he had piloted. Just as the lock closed he heard the swift, crescendoing roar of attacking aircraft.

"I'm taking off!" he shouted. "Brace yourself for bomb concussions!"

Louise fell to the floor as the ship shook under the blow of bombs. But in another moment it was the pressure of acceleration that held her to the floor. The space ship was aloft, and

Flannigan was forcing himself to calculate how many gravities a human being could take in order to preserve the lives of his two companions.

When his altimeter registered a good fifty miles, he locked the ship in neutral and it drifted gently along with the Earth's atmosphere, neither gaining nor losing altitude. Then he turned his attention to Louise and Bob.

He found Louise tearing her petticoat apart in an effort to make bandages for Lee. The latter was conscious, but in great pain. A nasty wound appeared in his left shoulder, but the bullet had apparently passed through him, emerging just under the collarbone.

"Sorry, Bob." Flannigan said. "We're all lucky at that, though, considering. I'll see if there's a first-aid kit around. Looks like your trouble is merely bleeding and danger from infection. We'll try to stop both."

Louise detained him. "Michael," she said, "this is all beyond me too—this ship and—well, everything. What are you going to do?"

Lee's eyes glared a challenge. "If you're on our side, you know how you can prove it, don't you?"

Flannigan looked down at him where Louise held him in her arms. "I'm listening," he said.

Lee sat up, with considerable effort and pain. "You can run this Buck Rogers battle wagon over the whole Pacific Coast and wipe out every last stinking Communist beachhead you can find! I saw what that blue ray did to the Allied counterattack. You can do the same and worse to the Commies!"

Just then, Flannigan detected a motion of the ship which meant nothing to the other two but which in his experience signified that something was wrong—very wrong.



The greatest weapon of all was surprise

"I'll be back," he answered.

Lee tried to get up to follow him, then winced, dropping his head back against Louise's cushioning breasts. "What's all this Michael business of yours?" he accused her. "Can't you see he's an alien? He won't do it!"

Louise wanted to argue with him, but just then he fainted. She got up to look for the first-aid kit herself.

Alone in the control room, Flannigan examined his instruments. The ship was no longer in neutral. It was definitely under way, gradually increasing its velocity. He manipulated the controls but found them dead. Nearby was an operator's panel controlling the purple ray. He tried that and found that it, too, was dead.

In that moment a voice emerged from the speaker of his televiewer, though the screen remained blank, and the words he heard definitely identified the speaker as the one entity Flannigan sought. He was being addressed in Mnir'ra's tongue, the language of the planet Gra'ghr!

"So you were not destroyed after all! I assumed that if you existed, which was probable inasmuch as I could not locate your remains, you would be foolish enough to try to capture this ship, so I took the precaution of setting a trap. You are under remote control, Flannigan Kinri. This ship is no avenging weapon for you. Instead, like the black-winged Ich'nu of Bidjar Tan, it is homing across the Barrier Sea—to me!"

Flannigan answered back, but to no avail. The speaker went as dead as his controls and the ship hurtled swiftly across the Pacific toward Russia.

SEVERAL hours passed uneventfully, during which time the space ship moved unerringly toward its destination. In the meantime, Flannigan helped Louise to treat Bob Lee, who

had regained consciousness. By the time the ship began to descend, he had been given adequate first-aid treatment and was feeling comfortable, though weak. The other two had also told him most of the real story concerning Flannigan's background.

"So you're *that* Michael Flannigan," Lee said finally. "Funny I never made a connection between you and 'Moon Rocket' Flannigan. I guess it was because the official conclusions in regard to your death were so definite and universally accepted. Good God, man, what adventures you've been through!"

"It looks like we still have some more in store for us," said Flannigan. "We are about to land in Moscow. We are about to discover whether Stalin still rules or if my erstwhile robot mate now controls the destiny of the world."

"Perhaps both," replied Lee. "But if that other robot could be destroyed—"

"You forget," said Louise, "that the other robot is also Mnir'sr Nikinra."

Lee looked steadily at both of them. "I'm sorry," he replied, "but I have not forgotten that. What you both seem to forget is that the *world* is at stake!"

It was Flannigan's turn to stare at Lee. The sudden silence was peculiarly eloquent—but it was suddenly interrupted by the loudspeaker in the control room, which could be heard throughout the ship. A distinctly human voice with a Russian accent addressed them.

"Prisoners! You will prepare to disembark under guard! He who is named Michael Flannigan is warned that if he offers resistance his companions will be shot instantly!"

A slight jar was felt as the ship came to rest. Immediately, they heard the airlock open. Louise looked at

Bob Lee helplessly. He grinned back at her.

"There's no hemlock around here to drink," he said. "Might as well try vodka. Come on!"

The three of them went to meet their captors.

MOSCOW sprawled dark, dismal and wet under a solid blanket of rain clouds. In view of still recurrent Allied bombings, much of the city lay in ruins. Disaster crews worked constantly to clear the streets and search the wreckage for bodies. All the military regulations of a great metropolis caught in the throes of war were in effect, including a perpetual blackout.

The car bearing Flannigan, Louise and Lee to their destination twice skirted large blocked-off areas several miles in extent, which had been devastated by atomic bombs and were still unsafe owing to radiation contamination. The prisoners reflected that although the first few days of the war witnessed an international expenditure of atomic stockpiles, production efforts on both sides had supplied enough additional atomic bombs to make possible sporadic forays with the deadly weapons, and the Allies were still striking hard blows in spite of their predicament. They saw weirdly garbed Geiger Patrols gingerly probing the outskirts of these flattened areas.

At another place they skirted a brand-new industrial area several miles long. Here there were violations of the blackout, because great flashes of light illuminated the drizzle above the buildings as though giant foundries and smelting plants were in operation. There was one breathtaking moment when a particularly sustained flash of light illuminated ten giant, spherical

shells, which were instantly recognized by all.

"Space ships!" said Flannigan. "They are building a *fleet* of them!"

"It's later than you think," muttered Lee, cryptically. "That other robot doesn't waste much time. If that fleet ever goes into action, everybody might as well start liking caviar. The Communist Invasion may have made old Lenin turn over in his grave for joy, but this is going to make a whirling dervish out of him!"

They arrived at and were admitted through the formidable walls of the Kremlin, a fact which demonstrated the importance which the Soviet Government had attached to the discovery and capture of Flannigan.

"This way," said the English-speaking captain of the guards who surrounded them. "You first," he said to Flannigan. "Please observe that your friends are in danger of being shot if you do not follow orders to the letter."

Two squares were formed by the guards. The first square surrounded Flannigan. The second square surrounded Louise and Bob Lee, who had to accept the girl's arm for support because of his weakness. In that second square two special guards walked behind the two human captives, holding automatics in their backs. These two guards were watching no one but Flannigan. His actions would instantly govern theirs.

After being escorted through various corridors lined with more military police, they were brought to a halt before a particularly ominous-looking door. It was big and very plain-looking.

"The human prisoners will remain here," said the captain of the guard to Louise and Bob Lee. "You," he said to Flannigan, "will enter here. Before you do so, however, please be advised that an anti-tank gun will be trained

on you at all times during the interview. If you make any unauthorized move, you will be destroyed and your friends here will be promptly shot. Do you understand?"

Flannigan looked slowly about him. He gazed for one long moment into Louise's eyes, then looked at Bob Lee, who watched him steadily.

"I do," he replied at last.

The captain of the guard knocked on the big, plain door. It swung inward silently, and Flannigan saw nothing but an old-fashioned folding screen set up to block the view of those standing outside. Above it he could see a long ceiling, glaring with suspended floodlights.

At a signal from the captain, he entered the place.

UNUSUAL preparations had evidently been made for this meeting. What had been a modest conference room had been quite radically altered. To Flannigan's left a ten-foot square of wall had been uncovered. Through the opening thus made, he saw a long room filled with sandbags. To his right, a similar portion of the wall had been removed, revealing another room. In this room an anti-tank gun had been mounted, trained on the sandbags on the other side. A tense, pale-faced artillery crew waited in firing position beside the gun. They looked at him wonderingly as he walked in, evidently well briefed on what had occurred in Sherman Oaks.

In the direct firing line of the gun and in the center of the room was a slightly raised platform surrounded by steel railings. To these were attached heavy iron shackles, inches thick. The captain of the gun crew indicated by a gesture that he was to take the stand. When he did so, guards fastened the shackles to him. He could

have torn loose from them possibly, but it might take a few seconds to do it. That would have been all the time needed by the gun crew to fire. Once he was firmly installed on the stand, he turned his attention fully upon his interrogator.

The latter sat behind a plain mahogany desk at the end of the room. It was the Dictator himself, easily recognizable from all the pictures Flannigan had seen of him, but evidencing strongly his continuous fantastic struggle against the encroachments of senility. Stalin's sagging, wrinkled physiognomy was ashen gray, as were his hair and brows and mustache, but his eyes alone revealed the stubborn life within him and the titanic power of a will that defied not only the world, but Death itself.

"So there are two of your kind," he said in a tired voice. "The first I consider to be a valuable ally, but you are not. Still, it would be extravagant to destroy you in view of your unusual abilities. If these can be employed to our advantage, your continued existence will be justified.

"I do not propose to argue with you. You will do as you are told or accept the consequences. We are completing the construction of a fleet of space ships identical to the one you tried to capture. This fleet will be used to maintain discipline throughout the world. Whether or not it may eventually be utilized to conquer and colonize other planets of this or other solar systems, will depend upon the degree of shielding from space radiations which can be obtained, in order to make space travel possible for humans. Be that as it may, an additional safety factor against possible future insurrections in any part of the world must be established. In case we are surprised, for example, by any unwonted outbursts of American ingenu-

ity whereby our space fleet could be rendered ineffective, we must be ready with an infallible reserve weapon.

"Such a weapon has been partially completed already, but it has cost the lives of too many valuable technicians. You, however, are a highly efficient and capable automaton equipped, I understand, with a specific human intelligence and formal scientific training. I am aware that you were once that Michael Flannigan who completed two rocket flights to the Moon."

So Frank Daren's information had reached this far already, reflected Flannigan bitterly.

"The weapon to which I refer," continued Stalin, "is on the Moon now. We could perhaps dispense with it and set up artificial satellites which would accomplish the same purpose, but the latter would require time and additional expenditures and too much of an investment has already gone into the lunar weapon to justify its abandonment at this stage. Volunteer rocket crewmen secretly installed it, but in every case each volunteer has died as the result of poisoning from radiations occurring both in space and on the Moon itself. However, a robot such as yourself could work there unaffected by such radiations. You probably would not even require a space suit, and could work without food or sleep.

"The weapon under discussion consists of a multiple rocket-launching station, remote-controlled, from here. The rockets, charged with hydrogen-bomb warheads, can be directed to any desired spot on Earth. They could be used in cases of vital emergency. What remains to be accomplished is the completion of certain electronic circuits there and preparation of the launching cradles for the reception of the first rocket bombs. You yourself

can load the cradles once they are ready. We will keep you exiled on the Moon permanently for that purpose. Any tampering with the station will result in the wholesale execution of ten thousand American citizens. Our instruments here would enable us to detect instantly the result of any duplicity on your part."

Flannigan could not hold back any longer. "What makes you think I'd work for you in the first place?" he asked.

"That is quite simply answered," replied Stalin. "You have just come from the Sherman Oaks prison camp. You know that camp and many of the prisoners there. Tomorrow, one of those prisoners will be shot. On the following day, two more will be shot, and so on, increasing the number of victims by one on each succeeding day, without limit, until you have accomplished your initial purpose and installed our first bombs, which will be transported to you by remote control in one of our space ships. Incidentally, any attempt to capture a supply ship would result in an atomic explosion which would destroy you, so you can eliminate that possibility from your mind."

For a moment, Flannigan contemplated tearing loose from his bonds and ripping Stalin apart, but he remembered his friends outside. Even if he could duck the anti-tank gun, they would be shot as the result of such an action on his part.

"How soon can I get started?" he asked. Perhaps, he thought, there would still be a way to outsmart the Russians once he got hold of that launching station on the Moon.

Stalin got slowly to his feet and gazed upon Flannigan balefully like an aged lion. "This is your project," he answered. "I will place technicians at your disposal. You will be famili-

arized with the plans of the lunar station. As soon as you are ready, a ship will transport you to the Moon."

"But it might take days to get ready! You can't start the executions so soon!"

"This interview is closed," said Stalin heavily. He signalled the guards to unshackle Flannigan and conduct him away.

"But where is the other robot? Mnir'ra—I—that is, if I could talk to it—"

The guards who had unshackled him motioned for him to leave the room. One of them carried a heavy-calibre bazooka. Flannigan surrendered himself to them.

DURING the five days that preceded Flannigan's departure for the Moon, he did not see either one of his recent companions, except on the last afternoon. War prisoners were detailed to load the ship with technical equipment. Among these latter were women as well as men. In the last minute, before entering the ship for the takeoff, Flannigan bumped into Louise and almost knocked her over. She was carrying an armful of cartons containing special crystals and condensers. The ramp leading up to the airlock was lined on either side with armed guards who would not allow the prisoners to slacken their pace, but in this instance Flannigan risked disturbing the routine by talking to Louise. She, however, was the first to speak.

"So you are actually going through with it!" she said accusingly.

Flannigan saw the guards on either side of him tense for action. He remembered that in Sherman Oaks fifteen prisoners had already been executed, that six more would die on the following day. He had to keep going without delay, get to the Moon, figure

out a solution. Louise evidently did not know about the method of coercion Stalin was using. There was no time to explain.

"What else?" he said lamely. But his robot's voice was incapable of expressing all the little nuances necessary to convey his real sentiments. To Louise he sounded coldly indifferent.

"Am I speaking to Michael Flannigan," she asked him, "or to a second alien entity that has dominated him as Mnir'ra was dominated?"

Flannigan was moved to protest against this idea, but the guards prodded Louise up the ramp.

"Bob Lee says Flannigan is gone," she called back to him. "We know what you are now!"

Mentally, Flannigan shrugged helplessly. Another interlude had ended.

That night, five hours after the space ship had taken off, a rare Allied Commando raid occurred in the Moscow area. Ten thousand picked men were involved in the aerial blitz. At an appalling cost, they had come, like *kamakazes*, to capture a space ship, only to discover that the only workable model had left the Earth.

However, the raid was not entirely unsuccessful. Among the few hundred wounded and battle-weary survivors who returned over the North Pole to the Allied lines east of the Mississippi, were a few rescued prisoners of war—including Louise Daren and Robert E. Lee. The latter two proved to be valuable, as was soon ascertained at Allied Intelligence Headquarters.

FLANNIGAN was unaware of the location of the Russian station on the Moon. He had wondered how they had managed to bring such a project close to completion when the entire visible lunar surface had been under close telescopic scrutiny by every na-

tion capable of affording an instrument powerful enough to do them any good. As the ship, under remote control, neared its goal, he soon discovered the simple answer. The station was on the *other side* of the Moon, just over the horizon! With remotely controlled rockets equipped with navigating vanes in their exhausts, the Earth could be hit regardless of which side of the Moon they were launched from. Still, there was quite a technical problem remaining. How could the remote operators of the system activate a station blocked out of radar view from the Earth? The answer to that problem was soon made apparent also.

As the ship drifted slowly across the lunar landscape on the fringe area of Earth visibility, he saw something glistening in the sun's naked rays—something that was nestled on the ridge of a lofty crater facing Earth. In the ship's televiewer he made out a hermetically sealed dome inside of which was a radar transmitter and receiver, connected by transmission and power cables across the fringe to the unseen side. This tiny station could not be detected readily by telescopes, yet it could transmit and receive radar signals to and from the Earth and control a deadly launching station erected on the opposite side of the Moon.

In spite of his predicament, the scientist and adventurer in Flannigan could not be suppressed at this moment. His previous trips to the Moon had brought him only to the known side of the satellite. Now he was looking for the first time at the other side.

It possessed no lost valleys containing air pockets and Moon people. It raised neither living nor dead cities to his view. It was as naked and barren as the known side—yet it *was* different. There was the expected dis-

play of craters, barren mountain ranges and gray seas of cosmic dust, but there was a peculiar "uphill" effect when he looked at the far horizon. Abruptly he realized that the astronomical hypotheses concerning this side of the Moon had been aimed at the truth. Earth's satellite had a teardrop shape, the bulk of its mass being toward the foci of its orbit. The unknown side was a gigantic raised peak, which explained why the Moon did not have a normal diurnal rotation.

Flannigan reflected that if the Moon possessed an atmosphere, a person could walk up beyond its limit by merely going to the central area of its opposite side. It was at least a hundred miles out of line with the mean surface curvature and topped with spectacular, towering, twisted mountains. He saw one distant, titanic mass of volcanic rock that actually twisted upward like the end of a corkscrew. An explorer, standing on its peak, might grow dizzy looking downward at a sloping, twisted, surrealistic world twenty miles beneath him. Here in this hidden devastation and eternal emptiness, Mt. Everest was put to shame. He was reminded of the old metaphysical question: could sound occur where there was no one to hear it? Likewise, it might have been asked: could magnificence exist without an aesthetic sense to respond to it? Yes. Here was magnificence—but vacuous and futile.

There was no further time left for either observation or conjecture as the ship lowered swiftly now for a landing, obedient to the radar control impulses transmitted from the launching station itself. The impulses were being relayed, he knew, through cables connected with the tiny transmitter and receiving cupola on the edge of the known area of the Moon. He marveled at the accomplishment, in-

asmuch as the cable-laying job must have been done by hand and cost many lives. It was at least a fifty-mile extension.

The launching station lay deep within the sheltering walls of a small crater, to protect it as much as possible from meteors. On top of the crater walls were several auxiliary transmitters capable of relaying control beams to the rocket bombs, once launched, to a point where they could be guided Earthward by the other transmitter. A sectionally composed metallic "blister" below indicated the station itself. Outside, also resting on the floor of the crater, were exposed launching cradles.

Just as Flannigan's ship landed beside the "blister", he noticed some blackened areas where previous Russian rockets had evidently landed and taken off. But much more eloquent of the sacrifices made were the fifty or so bloated corpses of previous human volunteers he saw piled up near one of the crater walls.

He could well imagine what had happened. They were probably not all volunteers. Many had no doubt been assigned to this project without any knowledge of its location. Having arrived, they had been forced to accomplish their work in return for a promised salvation, which had come in the form of asphyxiation or fatal radiation infection. Then trusted suicide volunteers had divested them of their nonexpendable space suits. Empty space suits had returned to Russia.

Dying men who had faithfully served the Cause were expendable. They did not deserve a last week or so back on Earth. Instead of the rich rewards they had been promised they spent their last living moments suffering a concentrated form of hell. Then—oblivion, leaving their tortured

bodies alternately to bake during the long lunar days and then freeze solid during the long nights. Without oxidation there could be little decomposition. Flannigan gazed with horror on a graveyard where the dead were neither buried nor carried by Nature into the dust from which they had evolved. He reflected grimly that if he did not do something to put an end to the moral-social depravity he saw demonstrated here, where the End justified the Means, then Man's divine heritage and purpose would soon be an open grave, exposing its ugliness forever to the heavens.

But what could he do?

On the day he landed, six victims were executed in Sherman Oaks, on Earth. During the second day he thought about seven more who were shot, and the eight to be shot on the next. He could easily have wrecked the station, but that would have cost him ten thousand American lives, according to Stalin's grim promise. That the threat would be carried out to the letter he had little doubt. Yet, if he did complete the station and install the bombs, Earth's enslavement would be guaranteed. Any insurrection could cost the opposition an entire metropolis with a much more deadly certainty than was the case with ordinary atomic bombs. On the other hand, he reflected, was the enslavement of Earth not a foregone conclusion anyway, considering the space ship fleet the Russians were building, and considering especially the existence of that other robot, dominated by the representative of an ancient superman civilization?

Flannigan was assailed by a loneliness that was maddening. The remote-controlled space ship had returned to Earth. He was a robot, alone on the Moon, with the fate of the world lying in his hands like a

wailing child—and he did not know what to do about it.

There was only one direction his thoughts could take. Logic pointed firmly to an escape from the Moon, to a return to Earth. If he could manage that, he would put all his eggs in one basket and perform a one-robot blitz against Moscow, in the hope of being able to destroy Stalin or capture the other robot.

Or better yet, if he could bring one of the space ships into Allied hands, then the tables might eventually be turned. But how capture a ship when the only available one was a flying booby trap? The only solution, he reasoned, was to take a chance. Failure would be better than not trying at all.

First, however, he would complete their station for them so that the executions at Sherman Oaks would cease. And this he did, after ten Earth days of unceasing labors—labors which might have taken six months of time without robot help, and perhaps two hundred more human lives.

On the day the space ship returned with a bomb load, the totally unexpected occurred. Flannigan had installed all but one of ten bombs, each of which would have weighed six thousand pounds on Earth. He had carried them to the cradles himself. One bomb remained on board the ship, and the ship waited, like another automaton, to be completely unloaded of its deadly cargo.

SUDDENLY, Flannigan looked up from his labors to see the ship rise into empty space far above him. It had taken off before it had been unloaded! He wondered if this signified that some emergency had come up back on Earth. He hoped it meant the Allies were opening up with some new weapon. He wished now he had

destroyed the ship, even at the cost of his own annihilation.

In the control "blister" there was a transceiver with which he could contact his overlords in Russia. He started toward the "blister's" airlock with this idea in mind when he was struck with a new thought.

Maybe he could tamper with the transceiver and get away with it. He might also put in new wave traps on the relay transceiver fifty miles away, in view of Earth, and communicate with the Allies on secret U. S. military UHF wavelengths he had become familiar with during his rocket test pilot days! If he could do that, he could tell them how to set up a remote-control unit to take over this launching station themselves! Then they could use it against the Russians! Just one of these hydrogen bombs could wipe out Moscow entirely—and that would include their embryonic space fleet!

A dark shadow of remorse concerning Mnir'ra assailed him. If the other robot were destroyed, then she, too—

When Flannigan rounded the "blister" to approach its airlock, he almost collided with the gaping muzzle of a pneumatic bazooka, obviously designed to operate in a vacuum. Holding the bazooka was a space-suited human. He noticed, about the other's waist, some regulation electrical lineman's gear and clippers, and hanging from the belt was a sample of the multiple cable that led to the relay station! The line had been cut! Moscow would interpret that as tampering on his part! He started to think about the ten thousand American lives that was going to cost, but then he saw the other's face. It was Bob Lee.

No smile of recognition met him. Lee scowled, with the deadly glint of murderous hate in his eyes. There

was no way of communicating with him, as Flannigan was not wearing a suit. He reflected that this fact alone must have magnified him in Lee's eyes as alien and inhuman.

Lee motioned to him, directing him to walk toward the wall of the crater. Evidently a rocket ship awaited them beyond the crater somewhere. He was being taken captive. But the last time he had seen Bob he had been a Russian prisoner. Flannigan wondered how he had escaped. He discerned markings on the space suit signifying that Bob was in the service of a technical branch of the United States Army Air Force. He was being taken prisoner as an enemy to the Allies! Flannigan also noticed, with remorse and grim understanding, a small skull insignia under Bob's regulation markings. He was a *kamakaze*—engaged in a mission that was expected to cost him his life. If he succeeded in returning to Earth with his prisoner he would live three or four weeks at the most before radiation poisoning killed him. This particular crater was lousy with hard radiation.

But a startling thought interrupted his thinking on this subject. The Russian space ship! If Lee had cut the relay cable, the ship was not operating under remote control. That meant that somebody was in it now, trying to pilot it home. No doubt Lee had been accompanied by another volunteer, and the latter had taken the Russian ship with the logical intention of bringing it back into Allied hands. Flannigan prayed that the booby trap on the ship had to be triggered by remote control. Because if it were self-activating—

At that precise moment, Flannigan and Lee were engulfed in a blast of searing white light from far above. Flannigan thought briefly of surprising Lee, because he looked upward at the exploding space ship. But almost

as swiftly as he had looked up he looked back at Flannigan through tears of bitter rage.

Again, he motioned him toward the cliff. Obviously, the Earthman thought Flannigan had something to do with the booby trap that had killed his companion and lost the Allies a desperately needed space ship.

Flannigan started obediently toward the crater wall, followed by Lee. Perhaps, he thought, there might be a chance of explaining once they got on board the Allied rocket ship. That was it! Once inside he could talk to Lee and tell him what had really happened.

Hope soared within him. The Russians would think he had been annihilated by the explosion of their space ship. Instead, he would be returning to Earth, to the Allied side! The Allies could still commandeer the rocket launching station through remote controls that he would help them establish! He even knew something concerning the principle of degravitation used in the space ships. In fact, in his own body rested a damaged degravitator. He would permit them to examine it. The battle was not yet lost!

Or so he thought until they reached the rocket. Lee motioned him into the airlock and he obeyed. Which turned out to be a mistake.

It was a dummy airlock, the real one being located on the opposite side of the ship. When he climbed into the dummy lock he found himself surrounded by thick walls of steel. Before he could turn around, a vault-like door closed behind him. He pounded on the thick walls, but to no avail. He could dent the steel surface but he could not break out.

Very obviously, Lee had come to the Moon specifically to effect his capture. Perhaps Louise had informed

U. S. Intelligence about his degravitator, he thought. Or perhaps they considered him to be vitally important from half a dozen points of view. At any rate, Lee had made good, and Flannigan was unable to communicate with him until they returned to Earth.

He hoped for better luck then.

The rocket landed without incident somewhere in Allied territory. After several hours of waiting, Flannigan began to assume that they were preparing a special method of receiving him. He contemplated the possibilities of escaping them and obtaining a point of vantage from which he could bargain. But he rejected this, concluding that it would suffice to be able to talk to Allied authorities when they questioned him. After a length of time that could not be adequately determined, he became aware of movement. The rocket was being laid on its side, with the door of his prison facing upward. Another delay followed which he estimated to be half an hour. Then a three-inch aperture appeared in the center of the door above him. A thick plug had been unscrewed. Air rushed into the vacuum that had surrounded him.

Taking advantage of this, he shouted, calling for help. Through the hole he saw steel girders and a double track made out of heavy I-beams. Along this track traveled an overhead crane. Slowly, it came to a stop above him, and when he saw what it carried he tried to scream, to express sheer mental anguish.

But robots can't scream, even if you start pouring molten metal on them when they are trapped in a steel box from which there is no escape. . . .

LEAD HAS a melting point of 327 degrees Centigrade; gold melts at over 1000 degrees Centigrade. It was a fortunate choice, lead. Although it

ruined Flannigan's rubber-plastic disguise it did not melt his gold laminated outer covering. Yet at the same time it effectively arrested any possible movement on his part after they had poured the dummy airlock full of it and allowed it to cool. Also, lead was easy to cut open, in sections. They could work on him sectionally.

Fortunately for Flannigan, the myriads of tiny condensers connected into his intricate electronic circuits were not the conventional types constructed of foil, wax and paste, as otherwise he might have been destroyed functionally by the temperature to which he had been subjected. On the Moon he had withstood boiling temperatures during the lunar day without detriment. In this instance also he withstood the heat, though it exceeded four hundred degrees Centigrade.

But with his head encased in lead he could not communicate with his new captors! Thus, a new period of mental anguish began for Flannigan. He was aware of being tampered with. A large section of his back had been uncovered. He remembered having told Louise about his degravitator. That's what they would be after. As a matter of fact, he wanted them to save it, but not under these conditions. With his help and slightly superior knowledge of the subject, he could have saved them precious time. Moreover, without his direction they could damage other internal parts of him.

And when they solved the principle of the degravitator, then what? Allied space ships, given time—but no blue ray. If he could only communicate with them concerning the launching station!

Bob Lee had merely put it out of commission in such a way as to preserve it for future investigations, but they knew nothing about its ingenious

triple harmonic combination FM and AM carriers, and before they solved the problem the Russians would take it over again and also bring their space fleet into action.

Beyond this there was the issue of Stalin's threat to assassinate ten thousand American prisoners in retaliation for tampering with the lunar station. And there was Bob Lee, by now fatally afflicted with radiation poisoning and firmly believing him to be an enemy. And Louise—believing the same thing, hating him, considering him in the same light as the technicians who worked on him, expendable except for his degravitator.

Flannigan could think, offhand, of about twenty good reasons why he had to get free and take action, chief among which was to adapt the lunar station to Allied use before the Russian space fleet swung into action. It was the Allies' only chance, because by now at least one or two more Russian ships were probably going through their test flights, and the hydrogen-bomb threat would be the only means of forcing a compromise. He reflected that there might be a thousand reasons for getting free, but how could he do it? He could not move. He could not communicate.

I *can't* get free!—he thought to himself in helpless desperation.

The thought repeated itself: *I can't get free!*

Where had he heard that before? He remembered his arrival on Earth, when Mnir'ra had tripped him in the airlock and he had fallen free without benefit of his degravitator.

He heard her again as she cried, "Help, Flan'ri! I can't get free!"

He remembered also his subsequent interpretation of that cry. She had called to him in an attempt to convey the idea that she was a captive, mentally, of that other, ancient personality.

His thinking processes froze with shock, just as he became aware of a plate being removed from his back by the Allied technicians. If he could have stood up and articulated he would have shouted, "*Eureka!*"

Carefully, swiftly, he retraced his thoughts of a moment before. If, latent within Mnir'ra's robot, there had existed a faint pattern of charges representing the original intellect who had occupied it, then perhaps—perhaps, latent within his own robot brain...

But no. If another entity's residual patterns were there, why had he not been dominated also? In the same instant he perceived a part of the truth. His transference into the robot brain had been of a more permanent nature. He had charged the cells with his own patterns five hundred per cent longer than in the case of Mnir'ra's transference.

It was possible, therefore, that his brain contained the memory and personality—plus the advanced scientific knowledge—of an ancient master mind, of another one of those "secret gods" of which the legends of the green men had told, back on the world of Gra'ghr.

If he could call it up out of Limbo, he thought, how could he control it? Perhaps there was an answer to that, too. If he could lend it strength, maybe he could weaken it also and keep it in check, thus remaining dominant and in a position to force from it any technical knowledge that might come to his aid now.

It was fantastic, he knew, but there was no other choice. Experimentally, he relaxed his mind, trying to lower the barriers and be as receptive as possible. But his anxiety only caused greater mental tension, while the priceless seconds flew irretrievably by and the ominous probings into his dorsal region continued.

Stalin's gray, impassive physiognomy passed before his mind. Ten thousand American prisoners lining up in San Fernando Valley before the executioners. Mnir'ra, his lost love, wandering, herself, in Limbo. Russian space ships and a blue ray of destruction hovering over the world. Two feet of relay cable—on Bob Lee's belt—separating nine hydrogen bombs from the Earth. Nine bombs. Nine major cities. Coercion, violence, enslavement.

Flannigan wanted more than anything else to yell, because it seemed that was the only antidote for insanity.

Then, dimly, as though out of the Nadir of Creation, an alien thought ascended to the level of his consciousness. It was wordless, but it carried unmistakable meaning.

The entity he sought was there. Furthermore, it was willing to help. Definitely, it could help him in his present extremity.

The alien thought grew stronger. Flannigan cringed, mentally, before his sudden awareness of dual identity. Another mental presence soared upward, nameless, dark, as though bat-winged, out of a dreaded Nether World beyond human comprehension.

Be not afraid, came the clear thought of the other, inside his own mind. *I am Ktar Nom. You are in contact with one who has lived beyond your concept of eternity. With age, wisdom is born, and wisdom is not the mother of deception and violence, I assure you. I will not dominate you, Michael Flannigan. Even if I willed it I could not. Did you not know that the roads of your destiny are almost as long as mine? You are of a more ancient line than Mnir'sr Nikinra, or Altinra, as she was called in a previous time. You are descended from Gur, from the mighty Djir Nal-at, than which there are none*

more powerful in the planes of Sar. As such, your mind, your total identity, can never be destroyed or even easily dominated. Until you willed it, I was powerless to act—even in your behalf. But now I can.

Here was the beginning of an answer to the whole riddle of the Lens, to the riddle of Flannigan's curiously predestined life—an answer which had been his supreme goal. Yet, there was no time to dwell on it now.

He posed a question. Was Ktar Nom aware of his present predicament?

I am, came the immediate reply. *And it is a vital one. He who dominates Mnir'sr now is a young renegade, an evil youngster whom I followed, in ages past, to deter him from his destructive and sadistic intentions. Unfortunately, I fell victim as he did to the treachery of the priesthood of the green man, both of us lay in suspended animation until the day you found us, within the Lens. We must conquer him now, without delay.*

Flannigan cynically expressed the thought that it would be a good trick if he knew how. Whereupon Ktar Nom explained that he was one of the original builders of the robots, and that he knew all their secret abilities.

There is a secondary brain equipped with faculties which are foreign to your human mind. I will activate those faculties, with your permission.

All of which suddenly altered procedures within the confines of the laboratory where Flannigan had teetered on the brink of a disastrous "vivisection".

BOB LEE sat up in his hospital bed looking at Louise, who sat near his feet. He had just come out of another morphine sleep and the inexorable, itching fire of radiation

poisoning began to make itself felt again. Yet, he was able to sympathize with her own sufferings.

"I wish I could take you in my arms," he said to her, "and kiss all the rainclouds out of those big, blue eyes, but I can't! That's the hell of it!"

Louise looked at him hard and bit her lower lip to keep her chin from trembling. Why trouble him with her torturing thoughts? In love once with Flannigan, who had heard sirens singing in the Moon. Now in love with a normal, Earthbound American at last, only to see him dying, as Flannigan had been, of radiation poisoning!

She thought for a moment that it might be worth while to be in his arms in spite of the danger of contamination, but she was interrupted. The radio, which had been playing soft music, suddenly brought them the voice of an announcer, and she quickly turned up the volume.

"We interrupt this program to bring you a special news bulletin: Allied Command Headquarters announced tonight that the robot, Michael Flannigan, has escaped!"

Bob Lee straightened up and yelped. He and Louise stared at each other, dumbfounded and alarmed. Then they both stared incredulously at the radio.

"By means unknown to our science, he succeeded in placing the entire laboratory staff that had been studying him in a trance under which they acted to remove him from the block of lead in which he had been encased. This was determined by an examination of the laboratory's furnace shortly after his escape. All personnel subjected to the trance appear to be suffering from an induced amnesia and can remember nothing. This condition seems to apply also to various other military

and civilian personnel who subsequently came in contact with him.

"Here is another bulletin, ladies and gentlemen, which supersedes the foregoing! This is a red flash! Flannigan put in a sudden appearance at Wright Field tonight and forced scientists and fueling crews to refuel the Moon rocket in which U. S. Army Airforce *kamakaze* pilot Bob Lee originally captured him! He has succeeded in actually taking this rocket off the Earth! It is believed—"

Lee turned the radio off and grabbed the telephone.

"Darling!" protested Louise. "There was more!"

"No time to listen," he answered, jiggling the phone desperately. "I know the rest. Hello! Get me General Kaye at Wright Field! This is a vital emergency! No buts! Move!" He signalled to Louise with his free hand. "My clothes," he said. "I'm getting out of here!"

Louise's delicately shaped brows arched, quizzically. "But Bob, you're—"

"About to die?" he cut in, talking between his teeth, his eyes glaring at her. With his free hand he lighted up a cigarette. "Why lie around and wait to die? I can die with my boots on just as well, in fact better! Get me those clothes, Louise!"

"Bob, I didn't mean—"

"Hello! General Kaye? This is Bob Lee. I heard about— The hell you *can't* talk to me now! I'm telling you to listen!... What? Exceeding *what* authority? General, a dying man has only one Authority to answer to, so don't give me that! Now listen! All right! I know the rocket's gone! But England has one they moved to Canada before the invasion. Look! I've seen that launching station, and that's where he's gone. It has nine shiny super bombs in it with the names of nine Allied metropolises on them, be-

son appeared. The general waved the envelope at him. "Where did this come from?"

Henderson only saw the envelope. There was no return address. "Why, in yesterday's interoffice mail, sir. It was addressed to you, so I—"

"You fool!" snapped the general. "How long has it been sitting here on my desk? Never mind! Stand by! This is an emergency!" He threw a switch on the short wave transmitter and barked at his aides in Montreal. "Stop that rocket!" he yelled. "Tell them to turn back and land!"

When he flicked the switch again, Montreal was spluttering. "What's gone wrong, sir?" replied a startled voice. "The rocket took off twenty minutes ago. It's beyond escape velocity now."

"Don't argue with me, Colonel Higgins, or I'll have you court-martialed! I don't know how he managed to mail this, but that robot Flannigan has sent me a letter! He's no enemy; he's an ally! And Lee is commissioned to destroy him on sight! Listen! Flannigan is going to the Moon to revamp that launching station so we can use it ourselves! He's telling us to throw a control unit together and he's given the frequencies and even the schematics! If Bob Lee bumps Flannigan it may be curtains, so haul him back quick! What am I talking about? We can try to get him from here! Forget it! I'll take over! Henderson!"

"Yes, sir?"

"You heard what I said! Contact Lee's ship and ground him!"

Which was more easily said than done. By the time Wright Field operators ascertained the correct transmission frequency and got into operation sufficiently to expect contact, they discovered that the Canadian rocket was out of communication. Observatories reported the ship

well on its way and apparently in good condition, but the opinion was expressed that a small meteor might have damaged its antenna.

Then it was that General Kaye showed Flannigan's notes to other government authorities and more writing was found on the back of his second sheet:

Of course we are hoping that our action will be well publicized so that the Russians will try to intercept us. Our main purpose is to act as decoy for one of their new space ships, which should be about ready to operate now. That we shall deliver into your hands— God willing. But if you can get your own remote controls established in time you can use the lunar hydrogen bombs to blast Moscow before their main fleet goes into action. We'll try converting the station for your controls, which we have changed slightly on the schematics to get around Russian interference, and we'll try capturing a Russian space ship if one shows up.

"Henderson!" barked General Kaye into his intercom.

"Yes, sir?"

"Keep trying to ground Bob Lee!"

"We're trying, sir, but no contacts as yet."

"Don't give me excuses! Tell those operators they're dabbling with ten chapters of the future history of Man!"

"Yes, sir!"

Impatiently, General Kaye clicked off the intercom and turned to face the officials crowded around him. He

cause Flannigan's competing with his robot twin over in Russia for domination over the Earth, and that's the way he'll start. I want to fly that English rocket up there and take that station away from Flannigan *and* the Russians. With that in Allied hands we could make Stalin and his robot side-kick come to terms. It's our only chance, before their space fleet goes into operation. To hell with other volunteers! I'm a natural for you and you know it! If I'm only good for a couple of more weeks, why not use me to the best advantage?"

Louise was getting Bob Lee his clothes, but a determined new glint had suddenly crept into her eyes....

IN SAN FERNANDO Valley the entire occupation garrison was engaged in the task of quelling revolts on the part of the civilian population. The main activity had centered around a pitiable army of ten thousand Americans who had been forced to dig their own community grave. It extended from Fulton to Van Nuys Boulevard, six feet wide, four feet deep, a trench in which was to be buried the end product of one of the greatest mass killings in history. Three trucks mounting machine guns stood ready at one end of the trench. Captain Moto and his men were busy lining up the victims, many of them women and adolescents.

But at that moment a tired Major Balaknin drove up in his battered Buick convertible and halted the procedures.

"Suspend the operation," he ordered.

Captain Moto slumped, visibly. "Why, sir?" he asked.

"It seems Flannigan did not tamper with the lunar station. It was Lee."

The thought of the destructive power of the launching station lighted

Moto's eyes with a sadistic eagerness. "Aren't we going to repair the station?" he asked.

"Perhaps," replied Balaknin, "unless Flannigan beats us to it, in which case this trench the prisoners have dug will be used, after all. Flannigan knows the price he must pay for tampering with that station."

"Flannigan! But the Allies captured him! I thought it was Lee himself who—"

"Flannigan has escaped, and he's on his way back to the Moon."

"But what about our *new* space ship?" persisted Moto.

Balaknin shrugged. "It will undoubtedly follow him. But I believe it was grounded temporarily after its flight test. If they can get it into action fast enough, there may be a chance to intercept Flannigan. Otherwise..."

The two men looked at each other in eloquent silence.

THREE DAYS later, Air Force General Kaye picked up a peculiar-looking envelope from his desk, bearing neither postmark nor stamp. He opened it disinterestedly, as his mind was occupied with worries concerning Bob Lee and his companion who had just taken off from Montreal in the English rocket. His bloodshot eyes surveyed the several sheets of paper and the notes and electronic schematics scrawled hastily in pencil. He hardly saw what lay before him as he was busy listening to a short wave eye-witness report of the take-off, which operation, owing to a special UN disposition, came under his command.

Suddenly, as he gazed at the sheets before him, his eyes widened. He grabbed the papers and stared at the signature: *Michael Flannigan!*

"Henderson!" he yelled, and almost in the same instant Captain Hender-

held out the last message he had read. "What I'd like to know," he said, slapping Flannigan's writing with the back of his hand, "is who the hell is *we*?"

KTAR NOM impressed upon Flannigan the vital necessity of converting the lunar station before any new Russian space ship could put in an appearance. In regard to the penalty of ten thousand American lives Stalin said would be exacted in retaliation for tampering with the station, Ktar Nom had implied that once either one of their two objectives was achieved, Americans would no longer be prisoners. That Russia would be forced to come to terms, including Stalin and his robot ally. Objective number three, of course, was the unfinished space fleet in Moscow.

The somewhat battered American rocket made a crash landing near the crater they sought. Flannigan was painfully aware of the fact that two hundred and forty thousand miles was an awful abyss of distance, but Ktar Nom was not discouraged.

Being marooned here is all the better, he commented, as Flannigan walked toward the crater that concealed the launching station. *Now you have a still greater incentive to capture the other space ship when it arrives.*

"If it arrives!" Flannigan articulated, but no sound came from his metallic lips inasmuch as he moved in an airless world.

It's bound to arrive, replied Ktar Nom, *for the simple reason that it can't afford not to! Your escape will have been publicized and Stalin will undoubtedly hear about it and foresee your purpose in returning here. It's an inevitable conclusion that he*

will dispatch a volunteer crew in one of the space ships—so we'll have to work fast.

"I hope that buck private at Wright Field delivered my message to General Kaye," said Flannigan, again soundlessly, as he climbed the crater.

He had to, returned Ktar Nom. *I planted the command so strongly in his mind that he would either have to deliver it or go insane with frustration. Don't worry. It will get to the General.*

Flannigan stood on the crater's rim near one of the relay cupolas. He looked across it toward the grotesque horizon of the other side of the moon, and he was assailed by a sudden horror of being marooned in this petrified, airless devastation, in this unborn world that was a part of the unwanted dregs of the material of Creation.

Below him, inside the crater, the launching station lay intact, just as he had left it. And the bloated corpses at one side had not changed either. He wondered, as he began his descent, if it would have relieved him to be able to shudder.

After forty-eight hours of intensive labor, using much of the U. S. Army Air Force electronics parts and equipment taken from laboratories at Wright Field, and also using a few special short cuts Ktar Nom showed him, Flannigan succeeded in converting both the distant relay transceiver and the launching station itself. But when they probed Earthward on the slightly altered beams, hoping to pick up a response, they were met with a dead silence.

Flannigan cursed. He was sure General Kaye had not received his message. But Ktar Nom patiently insisted that the letter must have been received and that the necessary re-

mote-control equipment was being assembled.

Give them time, he advised. You will see.

"But in the meantime," Flannigan said, his voice echoing metallicly inside the air-filled control "blister" of the station, "we're giving the Russians time to get here."

All the better, Ktar Nom replied. You don't want to be marooned here, do you?

"Okay, but what's your plan? If a Russian ship shows up, how are we going to defend ourselves against the blue ray?"

AT THAT precise moment, Flannigan's attention, as well as Ktar Nom's, was attracted to the transparent plastic observation panel in the roof of the station. Above, in the exact center of their field of vision, a spherical space ship hovered. It was only a thousand feet above the crater.

Flannigan—Ktar Nom started to say, but he was interrupted by the loudspeaker of their receiver, which Flannigan had just adjusted to the Russian frequency.

"You will emerge from the station," came a vaguely familiar voice, speaking in uncertain English. "If you do not come out and surrender I will come in after you."

You see?—thought Ktar Nom, inside Flannigan's mind. *They still value the station too much to blow it up. The Russian wants us to get clear of the station so he can eliminate us. Don't do it! Let him come here and we'll take him!*

"How do you know he'll be such a fool?" asked Flannigan. "He must know what I am."

Look!—came Ktar Nom's startled thought.

Flannigan was necessarily looking in the same direction, since the two

of them were both using the same pair of eyes, and he saw the Russian ship moving downward and out of their field of vision. "He's going to land, but why not inside the crater?" *He doesn't trust you. He thinks if worse comes to worse you might blow up the station. He is an expendable volunteer, but his ship is not.*

"And so he's going to come on foot himself," said Flannigan. "He probably has another bazooka or something, like Lee did when he captured me."

We have a defense against that, replied Ktar Nom. Allow me to activate you.

When Flannigan did so, he found himself in front of the main panel controlling the hydrogen bombs. Before he could resist, Ktar Nom had guided his hands to the controls. Lights flickered on the panel.

"Hey!" yelled Flannigan. "You launched a hydrogen bomb!"

He looked through the ceiling port where automatic impulses would guide it Earthward.

"What did you do that for? Are you crazy? Without a remote control unit on Earth to guide it, that bomb may land anywhere!"

It will take over thirty hours to reach Earth, replied Ktar Nom calmly, and we can guide it off course toward the sun at any moment during that period. In the meantime, the fact that you and I are the only ones outside of Wright Field who are acquainted with the new control frequencies should prove to be a nice bargaining point when our would-be captor arrives. You can tell him it is headed straight for Moscow. Tell him that unless he surrenders to you both himself and his ship, you may not be inclined to divert the bomb's course.

Flannigan was looking up through

the ceiling port. "Good God!" he shouted. "Do you see what I see?"

Necessarily so. It is another Allied rocket. A very unfortunate and delicate time to put in an appearance.

"But there was no other rocket to my knowledge."

Far above the crater, but lowering swiftly, was the nova-like patch of brilliant light that marked the driver tubes in full deceleration as the rocket came in stern first for a landing, its gyroscopes holding it easily perpendicular to the lunar surface. Flannigan noticed twin drivers.

"It's the English rocket they were working on when I left Earth on my return trip to the Lens! Now what in blazes—"

If the Allies are still seeking to intercept you, reflected Ktar Nom, that would mean your message was not delivered to General Kaye after all. But I can't understand that. Perhaps they left before your message was discovered.

"Then General Kaye would have had them called back," said Flannigan.

Unless their radio was not working, replied Ktar Nom.

It would have been useless to try communicating with the pilot of the rocket, Flannigan reflected, because he would be near to unconsciousness by now owing to the pressure of deceleration. He might not even be aware of the Russian space ship or the hydrogen bomb, which was now speeding Earthward at eight thousand miles per hour.

Let's get out of here! warned Ktar Nom. *That rocket is headed straight for this crater, and if it crashes on top of those bombs there'll be a mess for miles around! Outside the crater, though, you could survive the blast where a human could not.*

Flannigan was already outside and running toward the crater wall with

great bounds but then, suddenly, he stopped. "That hydrogen bomb!" he articulated soundlessly in the lunar vacuum. "We should have diverted it from its course!" He looked at the station hesitantly, then upward at the rocket.

Run! came Ktar Nom's insistent thought. *It's out of fuel! It's falling free!*

It was too late to run. The rocket fell swiftly a remaining five hundred feet and, though it weighed only one-sixth what it had on Earth, it packed a mountain of momentum. It came crunching down one side of the crater and crashed silently in front of Flannigan. Fuel tanks and rocket tubes spilled out into the open, cracked and broken. Some liquid oxygen boiled violently away into the vacuum of space. There was no combustible fuel left to combine with it.

Above the rocket, on the crater's rim, a space-suited figure stood looking down at the scene. He carried a pneumatic weapon of large calibre.

There is your Russian pilot, came Ktar Nom's thought to Flannigan. *Eliminate him and you'll have a space ship!*

Flannigan scrutinized the distant figure, which stood there motionless, looking down at him. He started slowly to walk toward the cliff and the battered rocket. As he did so, the Russian began slowly to descend the path that his suicidal predecessors had carved out for him.

But at that moment the hatch on the upper side of the rocket opened and two space-suited figures leapt into view. One of them carried the same type of pneumatic bazooka that Bob Lee had used to effect Flannigan's capture previously.

Without hesitation, the bazooka-carrier raised his weapon and aimed it at Flannigan. Flannigan jumped just in time as a violent explosion

ripped a fox hole open in the crater's floor. He came in under the hull of the rocket. From his new position he could not see the two above him, but he could see the Russian. The latter was raising his own weapon and aiming at the two rocket pilots. But in the same instant a bazooka shot struck the rocks just above his helmet, and he fell, his face-plate smashing apart as it struck other rocks in front of it. Flannigan saw the faintly discernible cloud of air that escaped from the suit in one swift blast.

So the Russian was eliminated anyway, reflected Flannigan. "Hey, Ktar Nom," he called to his secret ally, "better use your special faculties on those two."

In the same instant, he saw the two pilots slide off the end of the hull and land lightly on the floor of the crater. They were not ten feet away, and they stood there with the obvious intention of taking him prisoner.

Flannigan braced himself to wade into both of them, but then he saw their faces behind their face plates. One was Bob Lee, the other Louise Daren.

In that moment, the battered hull of the rocket slid off the rocks and crashed down on top of Flannigan, pinning him to the ground. He struggled, but he could not get in the right position to give himself a proper mechanical advantage. Tons of steel held him fast.

He looked at Lee, noted that he discarded the bazooka. Evidently he had only carried two charges for the weapon, and now it was useless. . . .

IT WAS Ktar Nom's turn to take action. Through the hidden, secondary mental faculties of the robot which only he could operate, he com-

municated with the two humans telepathically as though he were Flannigan, speaking to them, and Flannigan suddenly discovered that he could read their minds.

He told them the truth of the situation, beginning with the method of coercion which Stalin had used on him in the first place. The two might have interrupted him, but Ktar Nom held them in an inescapable mental grip, impressing upon their minds indelibly the facts which he felt it was necessary for them to grasp. He concluded by repeating the message which had been given to General Kaye.

Under my guidance from here, he telepathed to them, you will enter the station and divert the hydrogen bomb from its course. Then you will take the Russian space ship to Wright Field. Tell them their first objective is a double one. They must destroy not only the Russian fleet, but the other robot as well.

Flannigan caught Louise Daren's objection. To destroy the other robot would be to destroy Mnr'ra as well.

More important to me, Ktar Nom answered for Flannigan, is the safety of the Earth. Earth cannot be safe as long as that other robot remains at large, because it is a deadly menace.

Suddenly, Flannigan saw Louise and Bob Lee turn pale as they looked at something that was beyond his limited field of vision. He saw Louise screaming inside her helmet. Ktar Nom relayed her thoughts to him.

The dead Russian! His face-plate was gone, there was no air in his suit, but he was on his feet, walking toward them with no other weapon than his hands! That face! It was Stalin himself!

"No, not Stalin, came the other robot's thoughts to all of them. Stalin has been dead for three years, but

the Russian Politburo feared to admit it, so it was a simple matter for me to take his place, as well as to acquire a fluency in the Russian language. There were very few who knew the secret, so I eliminated them, and then there were none to doubt that I was actually the real leader of Soviet Russia. It was very convenient. Flannigan, your buzzer was broken when you first landed. Otherwise you would have known it was I when we met face to face in Moscow. I thought you could be used, but I should have destroyed you then."

While the other robot telepathed to them, the two humans backed slowly away toward the station. Ktar Nom caught Bob Lee's thoughts and relayed them to Flannigan. He was urging Louise, over his walkie talkie, to make a run for the other side of the crater—to get up and out of it and take the Russian space ship. Lee stood there on the crater floor, blocking the space-suited robot's path as Louise backed swiftly away.

Now Flannigan could see the other robot as it advanced upon Lee. He could also see that Louise had no intention of running away. Instead, she ran to the control station and let herself in the airlock. The robot hastened its steps.

Ktar Nom suddenly made full use of the secondary brain in Flannigan's robot body. As a result, the other robot's movements slowed considerably, but they did not stop, as would certainly have been the case had it been human. Lee, however, was able to dodge the blows that were aimed at him. He could even run around behind the influence, it rose slowly and moved onward toward the station.

Finally, it reached the airlock and opened it. Flannigan struggled to get free of the weight that pinned him to the ground, but he could not budge.

Then he was reading Louise's mind, with Ktar Nom's assistance, as she challenged the other robot. She had not mastered the controls, but she did have her hand on an emergency switch which would detonate all the hydrogen bombs in the station. Ktar Nom had guided her to it. If the other robot did not surrender at once, she would blow them all to atoms.

After an intolerable pause, the other robot replied, "*How can I surrender? What do you want me to do?"*

Bob Lee furnished the answer to that. He could go outside and help Flannigan get out from under the rocket ship.

Responding to the irrefutable logic that it would be of no use to itself if vaporized in a titanic explosion of hydrogen bombs, the robot followed instructions. It put its shoulder to the mass of wreckage, and with some help from Flannigan the desired result was soon obtained.

In that instant, Ktar Nom took over Flannigan's body, with his consent. He stood there facing the other.

Turn around, he commanded. This is Ktar Nom speaking to you now, so don't try any of your tricks. I know them all!

"*Ktar Nom!*" came the other's startled thought. "*Don't destroy me!*"

You deserve destruction, but you have my word on it. Do as I say and you will not be destroyed.

"*I have known the strength of your word in the long dead past,*" replied the other. "*If you give it, I will do as you ask.*"

By way of reply, Ktar Nom tore away the tough fabric of the robot's space suit as well as the rubber plastic coating of its metal body. He deftly manipulated a hidden spring under one of its dorsal plates and it became

a motionless statue, completely incapacitated.

ONE HALF hour later, Flannigan was inside the lunar station with Bob Lee and Louise Daren. The two humans had taken advantage of the air and warmth by removing their space helmets, which permitted them all to converse.

"Why," said Flannigan to Bob Lee, "did you permit Louise to sacrifice herself this way?"

"It was not Bob's doing," replied Louise swiftly. "The Air Force thought I'd have a psychological effect on you, that I might be able to appeal to the Michael Flannigan in you. Besides that, there were purely personal reasons. It's not every day one has a chance of committing suicide and being constructive at the same time."

As Flannigan looked too long into the depths of her blue eyes, she changed the subject. "There are more important things here than idle conversation. Keep working on that transceiver!"

At long last, Flannigan contacted Wright Field and was able to give them the news concerning the simultaneous capture of the other robot and a Russian space ship. Then he warned them about the hydrogen bomb and asked them if they wanted it diverted.

"We've got it riding on our own beam," came General Kaye's enthusiastic voice, "and airborne radar is tracking it nicely toward Moscow! You stay right there while we hand out ultimatums. We may want some more hydrogen bombs. Once their fleet is definitely out of the picture, we can finish up operations with your ship!"

All of which did not serve to minimize one bitter reality: Bob Lee was close to death, and Louise Daren's

days were as definitely numbered.

"Now look here," said Flannigan. It was Flannigan's robot voice, but Flannigan knew that Ktar Nom was really doing the taking. "Some changes are going to be made. Right now your major concern is the freedom of Mankind. That freedom is about to be guaranteed, with the destruction of the Russian space ship before it gets off the ground. We will pilot the other ship we have captured back to Earth, and with it we will reduce Communist resistance to a point where the Allies can take over. But we will not land on Earth."

Bob Lee, his face drawn with his suffering and eyes deeply blood-shot, asked him what he meant by that.

Flannigan looked into the eyes of both Louise and Bob, but it was Ktar Nom who answered: "Take my word for it. Earth civilization is not yet ready for the responsibility of real interplanetary travel such as that ship would give it. It will be ready to reach for the stars when Human society has caught up with its own technological advancements—not until then. Moreover, unless help can be obtained, the Earth is doomed anyway. You see, true to the predictions of some of your contemporary and past scientists, the atomic explosions which have already occurred since early in the 1940's have precipitated a slow chain reaction in the upper atmosphere. Within less than two generations, the Earth's atmosphere will be sufficiently poisoned by hard radiations to cause universal death." In an aside to Flannigan, Ktar Nom thought: *I have seen this happen before on other worlds.*

"If this is true," said Louise, "what help can be obtained? You implied that was possible."

"Among the stars there are other worlds. On some of those worlds are highly advanced civilizations. Some-

where, some advanced science may be able to offer us a solution. There may be a way of dampening that build-up of radiations just as a chain reaction is slowed in an atomic pile."

"But that's a trip for a robot," said Bob Lee. "Humans can't travel in space. The radiations kill them off. Instead of talking about all this, why don't you get going? Leave Louise and me here. We'll run the station as long as it's needed. There ought to be enough air to last—"

"But you are going with me," said Flannigan, who wondered himself at the incredible words Ktar Nom was putting into his mouth.

"What!" This was from both Bob and Louise.

Flannigan, thought Ktar Nom. There is much you are unaware of which those ships can do, with their Titanium-calcium shielding against cosmic radiation and their time-stasis suspended-animation chambers. Tell them to follow you to the ship. Wright Field can control this station without any help from this end. We'll pick up the other robot when we're ready to leave the moon for good. . . .

THE SPHERICAL space ship was somewhere between Earth's orbit and Mars, traveling outward, away from the sun. Thirty seconds later it passed the orbit of Mars. In ten minutes it was somewhere near Jupiter. No telescope could follow it because its velocity surpassed that of light. A portless, metallic ball streaking toward the edge of the solar system.

Earth had no such ships as this, but there had been such ships in Earthly skies. Three, to be exact. The first had crashed in an atomic explosion, precipitating World War Three. The second had almost succeeded in winning the war for those who refused to believe that the human mind was the private heritage of the in-

dividual and that its self-determination was the sacred gift of its Creator. The third such ship had liberated human thought from enslavement. Now it sped on its long journey outward toward the stars, searching for an antidote to the poison that Man had injected into his own atmosphere. . . .

THE GOLDEN robot turned to its twin, which sat motionlessly beside it before the viewplate and the control banks.

"So Ktar Nom showed me how to build another transference machine," it concluded. "The mind and personality of him who dominated you were reduced to a mere shadowy pattern in you, and your own patterns were brought out and strengthened to a point where you will never be dominated again, Mnir'ra."

The other robot had been cleansed of the rubber-plastic disguise it had worn. As it turned to look at its mate, its golden skin glistened in the lights of the control room.

"Are you still aware of Ktar Nom?" the latter asked.

"Unfortunately, no. I wanted to ask him many questions concerning my connections with Gur and the Lens, but I believe he wants me to infer that the road to those solutions must be traveled on my own. Ktar Nom was voluntarily retired to rest somewhere beneath the level of my consciousness. He has lived so long that nothing much matters to him any more. If I ever need him again, however, I know I can call him back into action."

"And our two human passengers. What of them?"

"In their present state of suspended animation they are certainly much better off than they would be back on Earth where they would only die of radiation poisoning. Ktar Nom says that, owing to the method by which

he obtains suspended animation, radiation reaction cannot occur. We can keep them there until we feel it is safe to bring them out of it. In interstellar space itself there are practically no deleterious radiations, and our hull is highly resistant to penetration anyway. Out there we will permit the sleepers to awaken so that they may join us in our adventure."

After a long pause, Mnir'ra said, "You have not forgotten our original goal, have you?"

"You mean—?" Simultaneously, they both thought of the two human bodies they carried on board, lying in helpless suspended animation, cheating a death that had apparently been inevitable but a short time before, waiting now for whatever fate might bring them. "No," said the first

robot, "I haven't forgotten. Somewhere we'll find what we're looking for."

"Of course," said Mnir'ra. "It's just that—well, I miss you so, Flannigan Kinri."

"Do you need to remind me of my own desire?" replied Flannigan quickly.

The swift vessel plunged onward into the immeasurable depths of interstellar space, where the bridge of Loneliness hangs thinly across an abyss of no reason. In the ship's "Inner Sanctum", Bob Lee and Louise Daren lay side by side under the influence of the time stasis induced by Ktar Nom, knowing not whether they would ever see the stars *with their own eyes* again....

THE END