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# ASTONISHING

STORIES

APR.



THE  
SPACE  
BEASTS

by CLIFFORD  
D. SIMAK

VINCENT • ASIMOV • KUMMER, JR.



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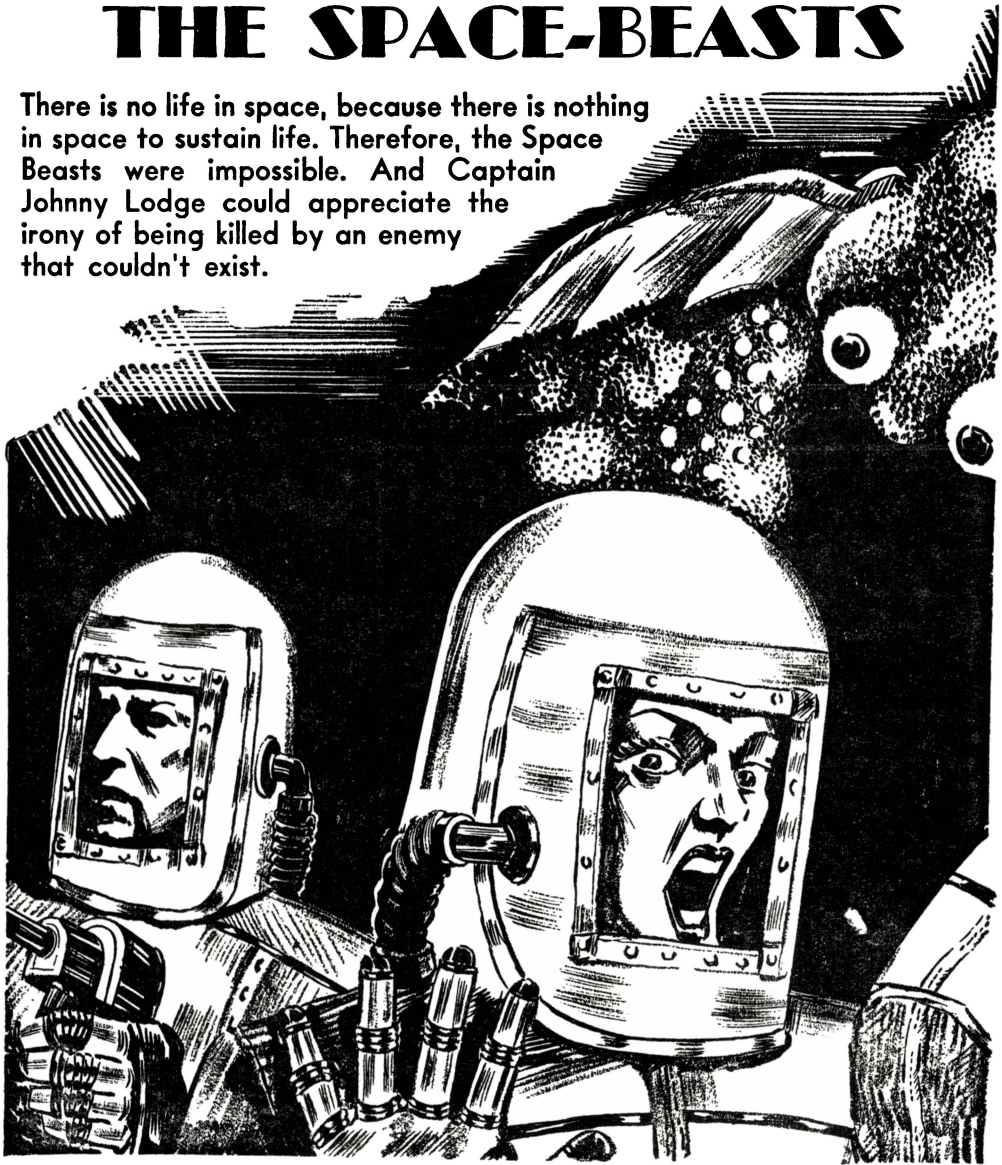
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# THE SPACE-BEASTS

There is no life in space, because there is nothing in space to sustain life. Therefore, the Space Beasts were impossible. And Captain Johnny Lodge could appreciate the irony of being killed by an enemy that couldn't exist.



By **Clifford D. Simak**

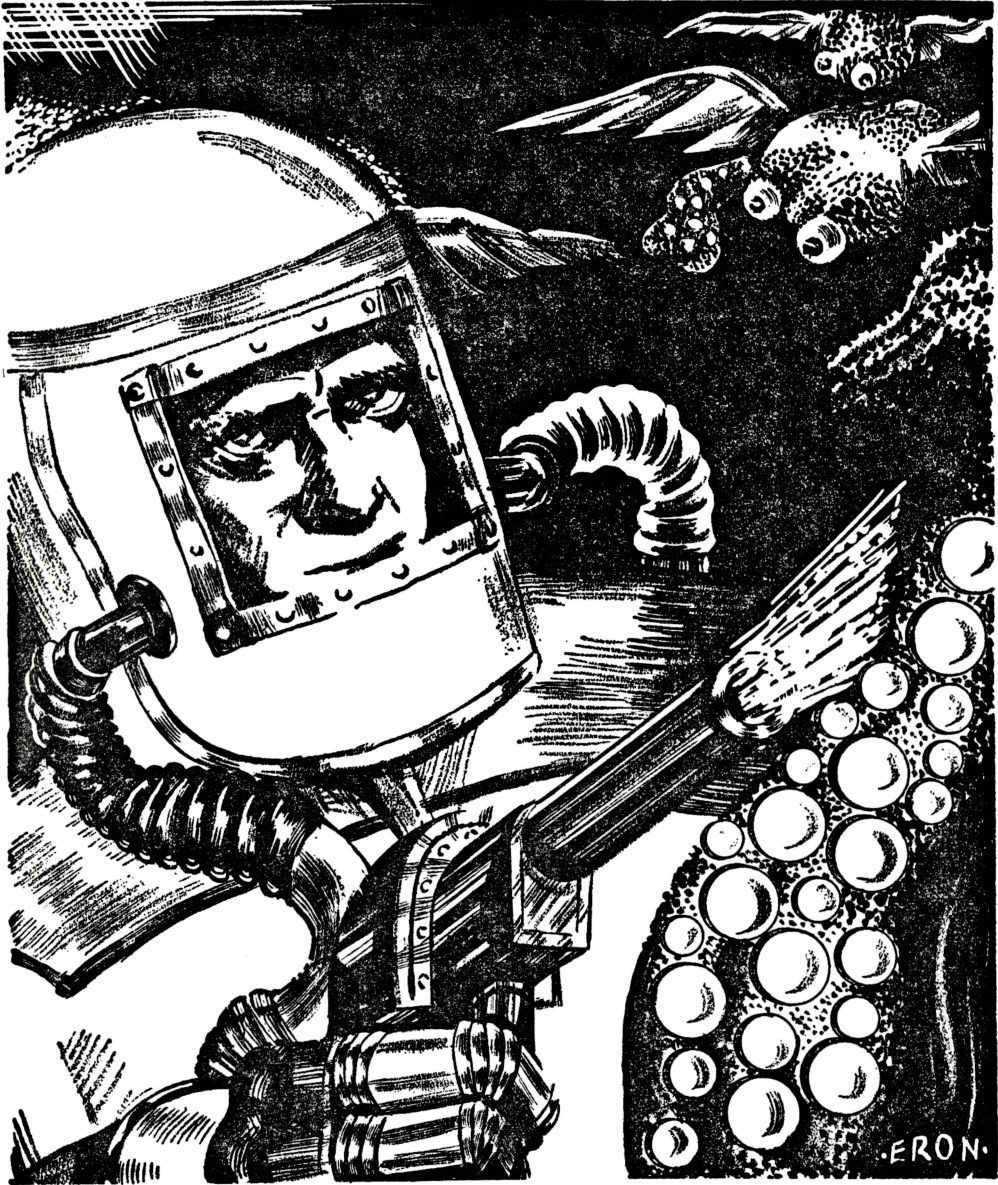
## CHAPTER ONE

### The Flame in Space

**I**T WASN'T possible . . . but there it was! A thing that hung in space on shimmering wings of supernal light. Wings that had about them that same elusive suggestion of life and motion as one sees in the slow crawl of a mighty river. Wings that were veined with red

markings and flashed greenly in the rays of the distant Sun.

The body of the thing seemed to writhe with light and for a fleeting moment Captain Johnny Lodge caught sight of the incredible head . . . a head that was like nothing he had ever seen before. A head that had about it the look of unadulterated evil and primal cruelty.



He heard Karen Franklin, standing beside him, draw in her breath and hold it in her wonder.

"It's a Space Beast," said George Foster, assistant pilot. "It can't be anything else."

That was true. It couldn't be anything else. But it violated all rules of life and science. It was something that shouldn't have happened, a thing that was ruled out by the yardstick of science. Yet, there

it was, straight ahead of them, pacing the *Karen*, one of the solar system's finest rocket-ships, with seeming ease.

"It just seemed to come out of nowhere," said George. "I think it must have passed the ship. Flew over us and then dipped down. I can't imagine what those wings are for, because it travels on a rocket principle. See, there it blasts again."

A wisp of whitish gas floated in space



behind the winged beast and swiftly dissipated. The beast shot rapidly ahead, green wings glinting in the weak sunlight.

Karen Franklin moved closer to Captain Johnny Lodge. She looked up at him and there was something like fear in her deep blue eyes.

"That means," she said, "that those stories about the Belt are true. The stories the meteor miners tell."

Johnny nodded gravely. "They must be true," he said. "At least part of them."

He turned back to the vision port and watched the thing. A Space Beast! He had heard tales of Space Beasts, but had set them down as just one of those wild yarns which come from the far corners of the Solar System.

**T**HE Asteroid Belt was one of those far corners. Practically a No-Man's Land. Dangerous to traverse, unfriendly to life, impossible to predict. Little was known about it, for space ships shunned it for good cause. The only ones who really did know it were the asteroid miners and they were a tribe almost apart from the rest of the men who ventured through the void.

The Space Beast was real. There was no denying that. Johnny rubbed his eyes and looked again. It was still there, dead ahead.

Protoplasm couldn't live out there. It was too cold and there was no atmosphere. Protoplasm . . . that was the stumbling block. All known life was based on protoplasm, but did it necessarily follow that life must be based on protoplasm? Protoplasm, of itself, wasn't life. Life was something else, a complex phenomenon of change and motion. Life was a secret thing, hard to come at. Scientists, pushing back the barriers to their knowledge, had come very close to it and yet it always managed to elude

them. They had found and defined that misty borderline one side of which was life, the other side where life had not as yet occurred. That borderline was the determining point, the little hypothetical area where life took shape and form and motion. But just because in the so-far known Solar System it had always expressed itself in protoplasm, did it necessarily mean it must always express itself in protoplasm?

He watched the metallic glitter of an asteroid off their port. It was only a few miles distant and it would pass well over them, but the sight of the thing gave him the creeps. Those barren rocks reflected little light. Hard to see, they rushed through space on erratic orbits and at smashing speeds. At times one could locate them only by the blotting out of stars.

"Karen," he said, "maybe we should turn back. It was foolish of us to try. Your Dad won't blame us. I don't like the looks of things." He swept his hand out toward the soaring Space Beast.

She shook her head, obstinately. "Dad would have come himself, long ago, if it hadn't been for the accident. He'd be with us now if the doctors would let him take to space again." She looked into Johnny's face solemnly. "We mustn't let him down," she said.

"But rumors!" Johnny cried. "We've been chasing rumors. Rumors that have sent us to the far corners of the system. To Io and to Titan and even in close to the Sun seeking a mythical planet."

"Johnny," she asked, "you aren't afraid, are you?"

He was silent for a time but finally, he said: "For you and for the boys back there."

She didn't answer, but turned back to the vision plate again, staring out into the velvet black of space, watching the Space Beast and the shimmer of nearby rocks, the debris of the Belt.



He growled in his throat, watching the Beast, his brain a mad whirl of thoughts.

Metal Seven had started the whole thing. Five years ago old Jim Franklin, one of the system's most intrepid explorers and space adventurers, had found Metal Seven on Ganymede . . . just one little pocket of it, enough for half a dozen space ships. Search had failed to reveal more. Five years of hectic search throughout the system had not unearthed a single pound of the precious mineral.

Its value lay in its resistance to the radiations that poured through space. Space ships coated with a thin plating of Metal Seven acquired an effective radiation screen.

**B**UT few ships had such a screen . . . because Jim Franklin had found only enough for a few ships. The *Karen* had it, for the *Karen* was Franklin's ship, named after his only daughter. A millionaire back on Mars had paid a million dollars for enough to plate his pleasure yacht. One big passenger line had bought enough of the original find to plate two ships, but one of these had been lost and only one remained. The Terrestrial government had acquired the rest of the metal and locked it in well guarded vaults against possible need or use.

The sale of the mineral had made Jim Franklin a rich man, but a large portion of the money had been invested in the search for more extensive deposits of Metal Seven.

Two years ago Franklin, on one of his rare returns to Earth from space, had visited a rocket factory to watch some tests. A rocket tube exploded. Three men were killed . . . Jim Franklin was saved only by a miracle of surgery. But he was Earth-bound, his body twisted and broken. His physicians had warned him that he would die if he ever took to space again.

So today his daughter, Karen Frank-

lin, carried on the Franklin tradition and the Franklin search for Metal Seven. A search that had taken the sturdy little ship far in toward the Sun, that had landed it on the surface of unexplored Titan, had driven it, creaking and protesting against the tremendous drag of Jupiter's gravity, down to little Io, until then unvisited by any rocket-ship. A search that was now taking it into the heart of the Asteroid Belt, following the trail pointed by the mad tale of a leering little man who had talked to Karen Franklin at the Martian port of Sande-bar.

It might have been an accident . . . just that one little pocket of Metal Seven found on Ganymede. There might be no more in the solar system. Special conditions, some extraordinary set of circumstances might have deposited just enough for half a dozen ships.

But it didn't seem right. Somewhere in the system, on some frigid rock of space, there must be more of Metal Seven, enough to protect every ship that plowed through space. A magic metal, screening out the vicious radiations that continually streamed through space without rhyme or reason, eliminating the menace of those deadly little swarms of radioactive meteors which swooped down out of nowhere to engulf a ship and leave it a drifting hulk filled with dead and dying.

Karen's voice roused him from his thoughts, "Johnny, I thought I saw a light. Could that be possible? Would there be any lights out here?"

Johnny started, saying nothing, staring through the vision plate.

"There it goes!" cried George. "I saw it."

"I saw it again, too," said Karen. "Like a blue streak way ahead of us."

**A** TREMULOUS voice spoke from the doorway of the control room.

"Is it a light you are seeing, Johnny?"



Johnny swung around and saw Old Ben Ramsey. He was clad in a bulky work suit and his twisted face and gnarled hands were grease-streaked.

"Yes, Ben," said Johnny. "There's something out ahead."

Ben wagged his head. "Strange things I've heard about the Belt. Mighty strange things. The Flame That Burns in Space and the Space Beasts and the haunts that screech and laugh and dance in glee when a rock comes whizzing down and cracks a shell wide open."

He dragged his slow way across the room, his feet scraping heartbreakingly, hunching and hobbling forward, a shamble rather than a walk.

Johnny watched him and dull pity flamed within his heart. Radiations had done that to Old Ben. The only man left alive after his ship hit a swarm of radioactive meteors. Metal Seven could have saved him . . . if there had been any Metal Seven then. Metal Seven, the wonder metal that screened out the death that moved between the planets.

"I saw it again!" yelled George. "Just a flash, like a blue light blinking."

"It's the Flame that burns in space," Old Ben said, his bright eyes glowing with excitement. "I've heard wild tales about the Flame and Space Beasts, but I never really did believe them."

"Start believing in them, then," said Johnny grimly. "because there's a Space Beast out there, too."

Old Ben's face twisted and he fumbled his greasy cap with misshapen, greasy hands. "You don't say, Johnny?"

Johnny nodded. "That's right, Ben."

The old man stood silent for a moment, shuffling his feet.

"I forgot, Johnny. I came up to report. I loaded the fuel chambers and checked everything, like you told me to. Everything is ship-shape."

"We're going deeper into the Belt," said Johnny. "Into a sector that is taboo

to the miners. You couldn't hire one of them to come in here. So be sure everything is ready for prompt action."

Ben mumbled a reply, shuffling away. But at the door he stopped and turned around.

"You know that contraption I picked up at the sale in Sandebar?" he said. "That thing I bought sight unseen?"

Johnny nodded. It was one of the jokes of the ship. Old Ben had bought it in the famous Martian market, bought it because of the weird carvings on the box which enclosed it. Somehow or other, those carvings had intrigued the old man, touched some responsive chord of wonder deep in his soul. But the machine inside the box was even more weird . . . an assembly of discs and flaring pipes, an apparatus that had no conceivable purpose or function. Old Ben claimed it was a musical instrument of unknown origin and despite the friendly jibes and bickering of the other crew members he stuck to that theory.

"I was just thinking," said Old Ben. "Maybe that danged thing plays by radiations."

Johnny grinned. "Maybe it does at that."

The old man turned and shuffled out.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Attack!

THE ship careened and bucked as George blasted with port tubes to duck a wicked chunk of rock that suddenly loomed in their path. Johnny saw the needle-like spires as the asteroid swung below them, spires that would have sheered the ship as a knife cuts cheese.

There was no doubt now that the flash they had sighted actually was a light. They could see it, a streak of blue that arced briefly across the vision port, lending its surroundings a bluish tint.



"It's an asteroid," declared George, "and our little friend is heading right for it."

What he said was true. The Space Beast had gained on them but was still almost directly ahead, apparently moving in toward the distant light.

The *Karen* drove on with flaming tubes. The meteoric screens flared again and again, in short flashes and long ripples, as tiny debris of the Belt struck like speeding bullets and were blasted into harmless gas.

"Johnny," asked George, "what are we going to do?"

"Keep going," said Johnny. "Head for the blue light. We want to see what it is if we can. But be ready to sheer off and give it all you've got at the first sign of danger."

He looked at Karen for confirmation of the decision. She nodded at him with a half-smile, her eyes bright . . . the kind of brightness that had shown in the eyes of old Jim Franklin when his fists knotted around the controls as his ship thundered down toward new terrain or nosed outward into unexplored space.

Hours later they were within a few miles of the asteroid. Minutes before the weird Space Beast had dived for the surface, was roosting on one of the rocky spires that hemmed in the little valley where the light flamed in blue intensity.

Speechless, Johnny stared down at the scene. The flame was not a flame at all. Not a flame in the sense that it burned. Rather it was a glowing crown that hovered over a massive pyramid.

But it was not the flame, nor the roosting Beast of Space, nor even the fact that here was an old tale come to life which held Johnny's attention. It was the pyramid. For a pyramid is something which never occurs naturally. Nature has never achieved a straight line and a pyramid is all straight lines.

"It's uncanny," he whispered.

"Johnny," came George's hoarse whisper, "look over that highest peak. Just above it."

Johnny lined his vision over the peak, saw something flash dully. A shimmering flash that looked like steel reflecting light.

He squinted his eyes, trying to force his sight just a little farther out into the black. For an instant, just a fleeting instant, he saw what it was.

"A SHIP!" he shouted.

George nodded, his face grim.

"There's two or three out there," he declared. "I saw them a minute ago. See, there's one of them now."

He pointed and Johnny saw the ship. For a moment it seemed to roll, catching the shine from the blue light atop the pyramid.

Johnny's lips compressed tightly. The skin seemed to stretch, like dry parchment, over his face.

"Derelicts," he said, and George nodded.

Karen had turned from the vision plate and was staring at them. For the first time there was terror on her face. Her cheeks were white and her lips bloodless. Her words were little more than a whisper: "Derelicts! That means. . ."

Johnny nodded, finishing the sentence: "Something happened."

A nameless dread reached out and struck at them. Alien fear creeping in from the mysterious reaches of the Asteroid Belt.

"Johnny," said George quietly, "we better be getting out of here."

Karen screamed even as Johnny leaped for the controls.

Through the panel he saw what had frightened her. Another Space Beast had swept across their vision . . . and another . . . and another. Suddenly the void seemed to be filled with them.

Mad thoughts hammered in his brain



as he reached for the levers. Something had happened to those other ships! Something that had left them drifting hulks, derelicts that had taken up an orbit around the asteroid with its flame-topped pyramid. This was an evil place with its derelicts and its Space Beasts and its flaming stones. No wonder the miners shunned it!

His right hand shoved the lever far over and the rockets thundered. The ship was shaking, as if it was being tossed about by winds in space, as if something had it in its teeth and was worrying it.

Johnny felt the blood drain from his face. For an instant his heart seemed to stand stock still.

There was something wrong. Something was happening to the ship!

He heard the screech of shearing metal, the shriek of suddenly released atmosphere, the crunching of stubborn beams and girders.

His straining ears caught the thud of emergency bulkheads automatically slamming into place.

The rocket motors no longer responded and he snatched his eyes away from the control panel to glance through the vision plate.

The ship was falling toward the asteroid! Directly below loomed the little valley of the pyramid. From where he stood he could look straight down into the glare of the blue light.

A great wing, a wing of writhing flame, swept quarteringly across the vision plate. For a moment the cabin was lighted with a weird green and blue . . . the gleaming instruments reflecting the light from the wing and the pyramid flame. Weird shadows danced and crawled over the walls, over the whiteness of the watching faces.

**T**HE Space Beast veered off, volpaning down toward the flame. Johnny caught his breath. The Beast was mon-

strous! Cold shivers raced up and down his spine. His flesh crawled.

From the creature's beak hung a mass of twisted steel, bent and mangled girders ripped from the *Karen's* frame. Gripped in its talons, or what should have been its talons, was an entire rocket assembly.

The *Karen* was plunging now, streaking down toward the asteroid, headed straight for the pyramid.

In the brief second before the crash Johnny recreated what had happened. Like a swift motion picture it ran across his brain. The Beast had attacked the ship, had ripped its rear assembly apart, had torn out the rocket tubes, had plucked out braces and girders as if they had been straws. The *Karen* was falling to destruction. It would pile up down in that little valley, a useless mass of wreckage. It would mark where its crew had died. For most of the others back there must be dead already . . . and only seconds of life remained for him and the other two.

The ship struck the pyramid's side a glancing blow, metal howling against the stone. The *Karen* looped, end over end, struck its shattered tail on the rocky valley floor and toppled.

Johnny picked himself out of the corner where he had been thrown by the impact. He was dazed and blood was flowing into his eyes from a cut across his forehead. Half blinded, he groped his way across the tilted floor.

He was alive! The thought sang across his consciousness and left him weak with wonder. No man could have hoped to live through that crash, but he was still alive . . . alive and able to claw his way across the slanting floor.

He listened for the hiss of escaping air, but there was no hiss. The cabin was still air-tight.

Hands reached out and hoisted him to his feet. He grasped the back of the an-

chored pilot's chair and hung on tightly. Through the red mist that swam before his eyes he saw George's face. The lips shaped words:

"How are you, Johnny?"

"I'm all right," Johnny mumbled.

"Never mind about me. Karen!"

"She's okay," said George.

Johnny wiped his forehead and gazed around. Karen was leaning against a canted locker.

She spoke softly, almost as if she were talking to herself.

"We won't get out of here. We can't possibly. We're here to stay. And back on Earth, and on Mars and Venus, they will wonder what happened to Karen Franklin and Captain Johnny Lodge."

Johnny let go of the chair back and skated dizzily across the floor to where she leaned against the locker. He shook her roughly by the shoulder.

"Snap out of it," he urged. "We got to make a try."

Her eyes met his.

"You think we have a chance?"

He smiled, a feeble smile.

"What do you think?" he challenged.

She shook her head. "We're stuck here. We'll never leave."

"Maybe," he agreed. "but we aren't

giving up before we try. Let's get into suits and go out. There are radiations out there, but we'll be safe. There's Metal Seven in those suits and Metal Seven seems to be screening it out in here all right."

Karen jerked her head toward the rear of the ship.

"The men back there," she said.

Johnny shook his head. "Not a chance," he told her.

George was opening another locker and taking out suits. He stopped now and looked at Johnny.

"You say there's radiations out there," he said. "You mean the Flame is radiation?"

"It couldn't be anything else," said Johnny. "How else could you explain it?"

"That's what happened to those other ships," declared George. "They couldn't screen out the radiation. It killed the crews and the ships took up an orbit around the asteroid. We were all right because we had the Metal Seven screen. But the Beast came along and ruined us. So here we are."

Johnny stiffened, struck by a thought.

"Those ships out there," he said, speaking slowly, his voice cold with sup-



pressed excitement. "Some of them might be undamaged, might be made to operate."

George stared.

"Don't get your hopes up, Johnny," he cautioned. "They're probably riddled with meteors."

"We could patch them up," said Johnny. "Seal off the pilot room and stay there. We'd be safe in the suits until we got it fixed."

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Beasts of the Pyramid

**T**HE valley of the Pyramid was a nightmare place. A place of alien beauty, lit by the blue radiations that lapped, flame-like, around the tip of the massive monument of masonry. Weird and eerie, with a quality that set one's teeth on edge.

An outpost of hell, Johnny told himself. Lonely and forbidding, with the near horizon of jagged peaks and rocky pinnacles lancing against the black of space. A puddle of blue light holding back the emptiness and blackness of surrounding void. The rocks caught up the shine of the Flame and glowed softly, almost as if endowed with a brilliance of their own. The blue light caught and shattered into a million dancing motes against the drifts of eternally frozen gases, evidence of an ancient atmosphere. which lay in the rifts and gullies that traversed the peaks hemming in the valley.

Hunched things squatted on the peaks. Imps of space. Things that resembled nothing Man had ever seen before. The Beasts, no two alike, Squatting like malevolent demons keeping silent watch. Mind-shattering forms made even more horrible by the play of light and shadow, like devils circling the pit and speculating darkly upon the punishments to be meted out.

"It's pretty terrible, isn't it," said

Karen Franklin and her voice was none too steady.

One of the things spread its wings and lifted from a peak. They could see the cloud of whitish vapor which shot from the "rocket tubes" and lifted it into space. It soared toward the Flame, hovered for a moment above it and then dipped down, almost into the play of bluish light.

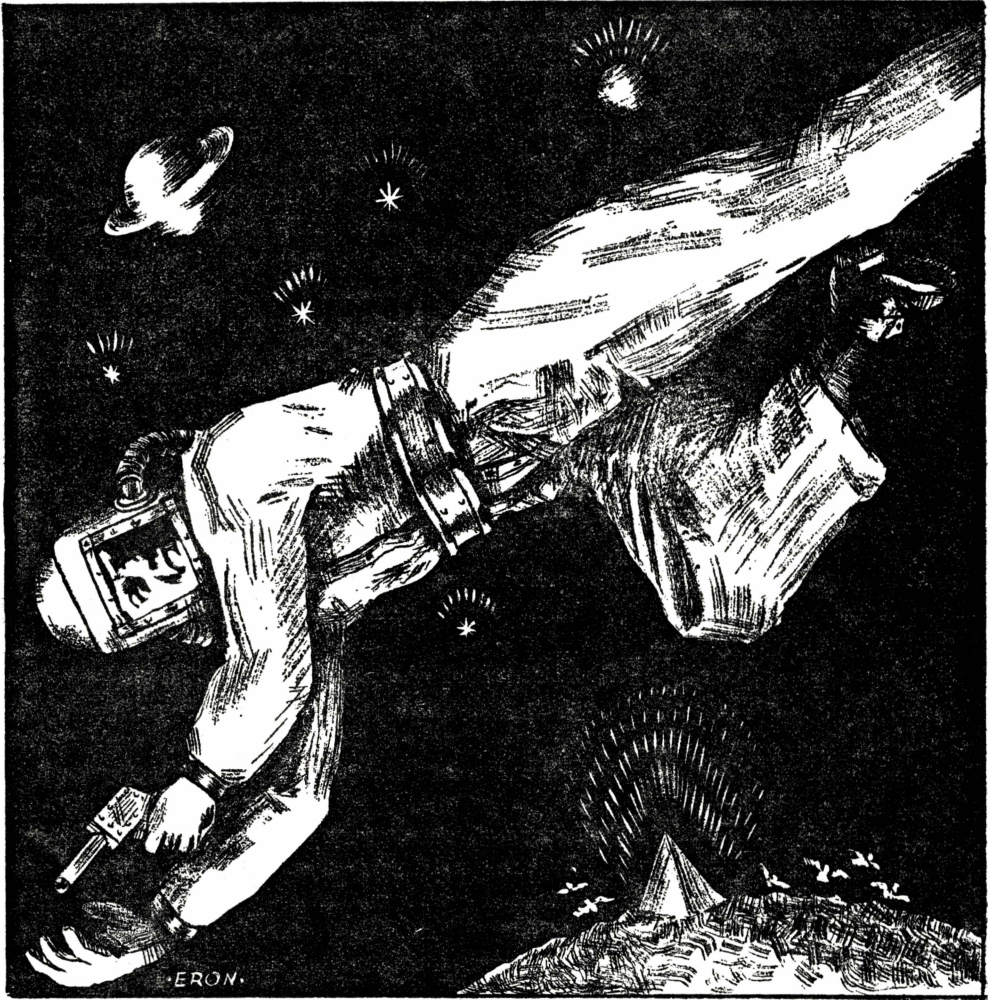
Karen cried out and Johnny stared, unbelieving. For the thing was changing! In the shifting light of the radiations it was actually taking on new form! Old features of its appearance dropped away and new ones appeared. The face of the Beast, seen clearly in the light, seemed to vanish like a snatched-off mask. For a moment it was faceless, featureless . . . and then the new features began to form. Features that were even more horrible than the ones before. Features that had cold fury and primal evil stamped upon them. The wings shimmered and changed and the body was undergoing metamorphosis.

"Mutation," Johnny said, his voice brittle with the terror of the moment. "The Flame mutates those things. A sort of re-birth. From all regions of Space they come to get new bodies, perhaps new vitality. The Flame is the feeding grounds, the source of nourishment, the place of rejuvenation for them."

Another Beast shot down from the blackness that crowded close over the valley, skimmed lightly for a peak and came to perch.

Thoughts banged against one another in Johnny's skull.

**M**UTATIONS! That meant then, the Flame was a source of life. That it held within its core a quality that could renew life . . . perhaps, a startling thought . . . even create life. Back on Earth men had experimented with radiations, had caused mutations in cer-



tain forms of life. This was the same thing, but on a greater scale.

"A solar Fountain of Youth," said George, almost echoing Johnny's thoughts.

The pyramid, then, had been built for a purpose. But who had built it? What hands had carried and carved and piled those stones? What brain had conceived the idea of planting here in space a flame that would burn through the watches of many millenia?

Surely not those things squatting on the peaks! Perhaps some strange race forgotten for a million years. Perhaps a

people who were more than human beings.

And had it been built for the purpose for which it was now being used? Might it not be a beacon light placed to guide home a wandering tribe? Or a mighty monument to commemorate some deed or some event or some great personage?

"Look out!" shrieked George.

Automatically Johnny's hand swept down to his belt and cleared the blaster. He swung the weapon up and saw the Space Beast plunging at them. It seemed almost on top of them. Blindly he depressed the firing button and the blaster slammed wickedly against the heel of



his hand. Swaths of red stabbed upward. George was firing too, and Johnny could hear Karen sobbing in breathless haste as she tried to clear her weapon.

Inferno raged above their heads as the beams from the weapons met the plunging horror. The body of the thing burst into glowing flame, but through the glow they still could see the darkness of its outline. The blasts from the guns slowed it, so that it hung over them, caught in the cross-fire of the blazing weapons.

**S**UDDENLY it shot upward, out of the range of the guns. Shaken by the attack, they watched it flame through space, as if in mortal agony, twisting and turning, writhing against the black curtain that pressed upon the asteroid.

Another Beast was dropping from a pinnacle, shooting toward them. And another. Once again the beams lashed out and caught the things, slowed them, halted them, made them retreat, flaming entities dancing a death fandango above the blue-tipped pyramid.

"This won't do," said Johnny, quietly. "They'll coop us up inside the ship. They'd attack us if we tried to take off in the emergency boat to reach one of the ships up there."

He stared around the horizon, at the roosting Beasts hunched on the jagged rim. Men, he realized, were intruders here. They were treading on forbidden ground, perhaps on sacred ground. The Beasts resented them, quite naturally. He seemed to hear the subdued rustling of wings, wings of flame sounding across countless centuries.

Wings! That was it. He knew there was something incongruous about the Beasts. And that was it . . . their wings. Wings were useless in space. They had no function and yet the Beasts spread them exactly like the winged things in Earth's atmosphere. He racked his brain. Might those wings, after all, have some

definite purpose or were they mere relics of some other life, some different abode? Might not the Beasts have been driven from some place where there was an atmosphere? Had they been forced to adapt themselves to space? Or were the wings only for occasional use when the things plummeted down upon the worlds of Man and other earth-bound things?

Johnny shuddered, remembering the old dragon myths, the old tales of flying dragons, back on Earth. Had these things once visited Earth? Had they given rise to those old tales out of mankind's dim antiquity?

He jerked his mind back, with an effort, to the problem at hand. He had to take up the emergency boat and find a ship. From among all those derelicts there certainly would be several that still would operate, would take them from this hell-lit slab of rock. But with the Beasts standing guard there wasn't a chance.

Perhaps, if all of them could get into the emergency boat they could make a dash for it and trust to luck. But there was only room for one.

If there were only a way. If Old Ben were only alive. Old Ben could think of some way. Old Ben, with his shuffling walk and twisting face. He closed his eyes and a vision of Old Ben seemed to form within his brain. The twisted lips moved. "*I am here, Johnny.*"

Johnny jumped, for the words had actually rung within his brain. Not spoken words, but thought even louder than the words themselves.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Mutation of Old Ben

"**W**HO said that?" asked Karen sharply.

"It's Old Ben, ma'm," said the soundless voice. "Old Ben is speaking to you."

"But Ben," protested Johnny. "it can't be you. You were back in the engine room. You're. . . . ."

"Sure, Johnny," said the voice. "You think I'm dead and probably I am. I must be dead."

Johnny shivered. There was something wrong here. Something terribly wrong. Dead men didn't talk.

"It was the radiations," said Old Ben. "They changed me into something else. Into something that you can't see. But I can see you. As if you were far away."

"Ben . . . . . ." Karen cried but the soundless words silenced her.

"It's hard to talk. I have to hurry. I haven't any mouth to talk with. Nothing like I used to have. But I'm alive . . . more alive than I have ever been. I *think* at you. And that is hard."

Johnny sensed the struggle in the thoughts that hammered at his brain. Inside the helmet perspiration dripped down his forehead and ran in trickling streams along his throat. Unconsciously he tried to help Old Ben . . . or the thing that once had been Old Ben.

"The musical instrument," said Old Ben, the thoughts unevenly spaced. "The musical instrument I bought in Sande-bar. Get it and open the box."

They waited but there was nothing more.

"Ben!" cried Johnny.

"Yes, Johnny."

"Are you all right, Ben? Is there anything we can do?"

"No lad, there isn't. I'm happy. I have no mangled body to drag around. No face to keep all streaked with grease so it won't look so bad. I'm free! I can go any place I want to go. I can be everywhere at once. Any place I want to be. And there are others here. So I won't be lonesome."

"Wait a minute, Ben!" Johnny shrieked, but there was no answer. They waited and the silence of space hung like a heavy curtain all about them. The valley was a place of silence and of weird blue light that sent shadows dancing.

George was running for the shattered stern of the ship. Johnny wheeled to follow him.

He shouted at Karen:

"Get back into the lock and wait for us. You'll be safe there."

The two men climbed through the gaping hole the Beast had torn. Carefully, torturously, they made their way through the twisted girders and battered plates. The engine room was a mass of wreckage, but there were no bodies.

"The radiations," said George. "It changed all of them into the kind of things . . . well, into whatever Old Ben is."

THOUGHTS ran riot in Johnny's brain.

Radiations that changed life. Changing Beasts into other shapes and forms. Changing men into entities that could not be seen, entities that had no bodies but could go anywhere they pleased, could be any place they wanted to, or in all places at the same time!

If the worst came to the worst there was still a way of escape! Still a way open to them. A doorway it would take courage to cross. but it was there. A doorway to another way, to another form of life, to a life that might be better than the one they had. Old Ben said he was happy . . . and that was all that mattered. Just strip off their suits and walk unprotected into the full glare of the light.

He cursed at himself, savagely. That wasn't the way to do things. If it happened and one couldn't help it . . . all right. But to do it deliberately . . . that was something else. Perhaps, if all else failed, if there was no other way . . .

They found the box containing the strange musical instrument and between them they lugged it out. Despite the lesser gravity it was heavy and hard to handle.

Outside, in front of the lock, they pried up the lid. Instantly, music filled



all of space. Not music in the sense that it was sound, but a rhythmic pulse and beat that one could sense. Music that filled the heart with yearning, music that made one want to dance, music that plucked and pulled at the heartstrings with tripping, silvery fingers. Sobbing notes and clear, high notes that rang like the gladsome clanging of a bell, rippling music like wind across the water and sonorous chords like the bellowing of a drum. Music that swelled and swelled, reaching out and out, appealing to all emotions, crying for understanding.

Johnny saw the astonished oval of Karen's face through the helmet plate.

She saw him looking at her. "How lovely!" she cried.

"It's the radiations again," said George, breathlessly. "Old Ben was right. The thing plays by radiation."

"Look at the Beasts!" Johnny shouted.

The Beasts were shuffling toward them, hopping and running, sliding down from their perches on the soaring pinnacles, racing across the boulder jumbled valley floor.

George and Johnny lifted their guns from the holsters and waited. The Beasts advanced and stopped, forming a half circle in front of the wrecked ship. Every line of their gruesome bodies had assumed a pose of rapt attention. They did not even seem to see the Earthmen. Motionless, as if carved from stone, they listened to the swelling paean that swept up and out of the metal box.

Johnny let out his breath, slowly. But he still kept a tight grip upon the gun. The Beasts seemed to be hypnotized, held entranced by the music that poured from out the radiation instrument.

Johnny spoke softly to the others: "As long as the music lasts it will keep them quiet. Keep in the lock and watch. Don't take any chances."

"What are you going to do?" asked Karen, sharp anxiety in her voice.

"There's one emergency boat left," said Johnny. "All the others are smashed. I'm taking it up and see about the ships. They are our only chance."

"I'll help you," offered George.

Johnny turned to face Karen. "Please take care of yourself."

She nodded. "And you, Johnny. You take care of yourself, too."

THE ship was old . . . a thousand years at least, but it seemed to be serviceable. The hull appeared in good shape. The rocket tubes were intact. A meteor had drilled a hole as big as a man's hand through the pilot cabin. But it had missed the instruments and it would not be too big a job to patch the holes. Probably there were other similar holes through the rest of the ship but they wouldn't matter unless the rocketing projectiles had smashed the machinery. The machinery in a ship of this sort was elemental, mostly fuel tanks, combustion chamber and tubes. No niceties.

Johnny walked to the control board and grinned as he looked over the instruments and controls. Not much to them. In the days when this craft had set out to sail the void a space ship was a rocket pure and simple . . . nothing else.

But the ship was the best he had found so far. He had visited three others and all three were damaged beyond repair. The fuel tanks had been smashed in one. In another the control panel had been shattered by a tiny bit of whizzing stone and the third had one of the rockets sheered off.

Johnny walked back to the open lock and peered down at the asteroid. The valley where the pyramid was situated was just coming over the horizon and the light from the flame made it appear that dawn had just arrived on the little world.

He whirled from the lock and went to the door communicating with the stern of the ship. He'd have to look over the

fuel tanks and other machinery, make sure that everything was all right. And he had to hurry. Johnny could imagine what was going on in the minds of the two he had left in the flame-lit valley. The speculation and apprehension, the pitting of hope against hope.

The door creaked open and Johnny stepped through into the living quarters.

The room looked lived in. After all these years it appeared as it must have that day nearly a thousand years before when the men who drove the ship had dared come into the Belt, had left their course to investigate the Flame in Space. They had been trapped, exactly as the crews of all those other ships had been trapped. Caught by radiations that turned them into something that didn't have human form, although human thoughts and aspirations and human hope might still remain. Adventurers all . . . men who felt within them the lure of the unknown, men who had dared to come and see and hadn't been able to get back again.

Broken dishes and crockery lay on the floor, where they had been swept off the table or hurled from the shelving by the rocking of the ship, by the shock of hammering debris. The bunks were unmade, exactly as they had been left when the men had tumbled out to rush forward and look out through the vision plate at the mystery which loomed ahead.

A strange tingle of fear rippled along Johnny's spine. He stopped and listened looking around.

His hand slid down to the butt of his blaster.

Then he laughed, a throaty laugh. Getting jittery in an old ship. There wasn't anything here. There couldn't be anything here. Nothing except the ghosts of the men who had manned the craft ten centuries ago. He shuddered at the thought. Could it be possible that the ghosts of the old crew were still here? Was it possible that the things they had been turned into by the radiations still hovered in this room, keeping eternal watch?

He cursed at his fears and strode forward but fear still rode upon his shoulder, a little jeering fear that taunted him and yelped in hideous glee.

The fuel tanks were intact, the combustion chamber seemed undamaged. His inspection of the ship from the emergency boat had assured him that the tubes were unhurt. The ship could be navigated.

Back in the living quarters he stopped momentarily, his eyes lighting on a desk. The ship's log would be kept there. He had just time for a peek. Find out something about the ship. The name of its captain, the identity of the men who had served under him, its ports of call, its home port back on Earth.

He hesitated. The desk drew him like a magnet. He took a swift step forward and slammed into something. Something that yielded to the touch, but with a sense of terrible strength.

Heart in his throat, he backed away. He felt his legs and arms grow cold as ice, the muscles of his abdomen squeezing in, the sudden surge of fear hazing his brain. But his reflexes were at work. Like an automaton, he reacted to the spur of danger. His right hand swept the blaster free and he paced backward, on the alert, like a retreating cat, poised for instant action.

**H**E FELT his way through the door into the pilot cabin, backed warily for the open port. But there he stopped. Maybe he had imagined he ran into something back there in the living quarters. Maybe there wasn't anything at all. Space sometimes did queer things to a man. He needed this ship . . . Karen and George back on the asteroid needed it. He couldn't let himself be scared away by wild imaginings.

He swung slightly around to look out the valve. The valley of the pyramid was turned broadside to the ship. He strained his eyes trying to make out the wreckage that lay at the base of the pyramid, but the valley was full of shadows that flickered and would not be still and he could see no details.

Swinging around, he stepped forward and ran squarely into an invisible wall that yielded and tried to suck him in. Savagely, he fought free, threshing his arms, kicking with his heavy boots. Teetering on the edge of the valve, he brought the blaster up and pressed the firing button. The red tongue of flame lapped out and mushroomed. Inside the cabin something suddenly blazed into form. For a sickening instant he caught sight of a monstrous form, a nauseating mass of writhing shape.

A thread of sharp, red knowledge snaked through his brain. Some invisible monster of space had taken refuge in the ship, had laired within it, had made of it a home. Invisible until the breath of the gun had reached and scorched it and then the flaring flame had outlined its obscenity.

He tottered and fell backward into space. Floating away from the ship he saw the thing inside, a mass of blazing light, fighting to get through the open valve. With a curse between his teeth he trained the blaster on the port and pushed the button down full power. The kick of the gun hurled him backward, end over end.

Swinging slowly over he saw the port-holes in the living quarters of the ship flare with light.

The thing, in its dying throes, was running madly through the ship.

He lost sight of the ship. Then invisible hands lifted him and flung him away. As he spun he caught the glimpse of a mighty flame blossoming in blackness . . . flame that leaped out and curled and reached for him with fiery fingers in all directions.

The ship had exploded! There must have been a tiny crack in one of the fuel tanks and the blazing monster had rushed into the engine room. In one shattering instant the fuel tanks had exploded. A soundless explosion that tore the ship to fragments, that sent blue and yellow flames tonguing out into the blackness of the void.

He was slowing down. By judicious use of the blaster he righted himself, stopped the spin into which the explosion had thrown him.

He shook his head to clear his thoughts.

The ship was gone. So was the emergency boat.

And he, himself, was trapped in empty space.



## CHAPTER FIVE

## Alone in Space

LOOKING down over the toes of his space-boots, he could see the asteroid, the valley a-glow with the shimmer of the flame. Down there waited two people, who had depended on him. Ones who had waited while he went out. Now he had failed them.

Bitterness rose in his throat and filled his mouth. His mind seethed with terrible thought.

The least he could do would be to go back and die with them. He might be able to do it.

He lifted the blaster and looked at it. He could use it as a rocket, force himself down into the valley.

Calculating carefully, he aimed the gun and pressed the button gently. He moved as the gun flared. Steadily he drove down toward the asteroid. He shifted the angle of the gun slightly to correct his flight and pressed the firing button again.

But there was no kick against the heel of this hand. The gun was dead! He had used up its charge. Feverishly he searched the belt for another charge, but there was none. Usually there were three emergency charge clips, but someone had been careless.

He was still gliding, but he would fall short of his mark. The gravity of the asteroid would grip him, but not enough to draw him to the surface. He would fall into an orbit. Like the derelicts that whirled around it, he would become a satellite of the rock that flamed in space.

He closed his eyes and tried to fight off the certain knowledge of his fate. He might throw away the gun and that would give him some forward motion. He might strip the belt of all equipment and fling it away as well, but he was still too far away. There was nothing else but to face inevitable death.

Life and death in space! He laughed, a short, hard laugh. There was life in space despite the scoffing of the skeptics. Life as expressed in the Space Beasts and in the invisible thing back in the ship. No one knew how many other forms of life. Life clinging close to the Asteroid Belt, making pilgrimages to a flame that flared in space, lairing in old derelicts.

Life that might be formed of silica, but probably wasn't, for that wouldn't explain the sudden flaring of their tissues before the hot breath of the blasters. Probably some weird chemistry of space as yet undiscovered and undreamed of by Earthly scientists.

Myths of space. Stories told by crazy asteroid miners home from lonely trips. But myths based on fact. A flame that burned blue atop a pyramid. A flame that gave new life and mutated the form of living things. Perhaps the silent sentinels of all life within the solar system. Perhaps the great, eternal life force that maintained all life . . . perhaps so long as that flame burned there would be life. But when it was black and dead life would disappear. Radiations lancing out to all parts of the solar system, carrying the attribute, the gift of life.

JOHNNY laughed again. Maybe he'd go crazy out here, make dying easier. Out here it was easier to understand, to take the evidence of one's eyes on faith alone, easier to believe. And now there'd be another myth. The Myth of Music. The instrument down there would play on and on . . . perhaps as long as the blue light shimmered. A Lorelei of space, as asteroid siren!

Music that charmed monsters. He sobered at the thought. There might be . . . there must be some connection between the curious instrument and the flame, some connection, too, with the grotesque Beasts. Establish the inter-relationship of the three, the Music Box, the Flame.

the Beasts and one would have a story. But a story that he, Johnny Lodge, would never know. For Johnny Lodge was going to die in space. A story, perhaps, that no one would ever know.

A red light twinkled on the surface of the asteroid, just above the valley of the flame. Again the red light flashed, a long rippling flash that moved upward, away from the surface. He watched it fascinated, wondering. Up and up it moved, a thin red pencil of flame driving outward from the rock.

The explanation hit him like a blow. Someone was using a blaster for a rocket, was coming out in space to look for him!

George! Good old George!

Hysterically he shouted the name. "George! Hey, George!"

But that was foolish. George would never hear him. It was a crazy thing to do . . . a foolhardy thing to do. Space was dark and a man was small. George would never find him . . . never.

But the light was driving straight toward him. George knew where he was . . . was coming out to get him. Then, sheepishly, Johnny remembered. The helmet light! Of course, that was it.

Limp with the realization that he was saved, Johnny waited.

The pencil of red moved swiftly, blinked out and failed to go on for long minutes, then resumed again, much nearer. The charge had burned out and George had inserted another one.

A space suit glowed in the flare of the advancing blaster flame. The flame shifted slightly and the suit drove toward him. Then the flame blinked out and the bloated suit was bearing down upon him. Johnny waited with outspread arms. His clutching fingers seized the belt of the oncoming suit and hung on. He dragged it close against him. He heard the rasp of steel fingers clutching at his own suit.

"George," said Johnny, "you were a damn fool. But thanks, anyhow."

Then the visors of the two suits came together and Johnny saw, not the face of George, but the face of Karen Franklin!

"You!" said Johnny.

"I had to come," said Karen. "George wanted to, but I made him stay. If I hadn't reached you . . . if something had happened, he would have come out and got you anyhow. But I had to make the first try."

"But why did you bother about me?" Johnny demanded fiercely. "I bungled everything. I found a ship and blew it up. I lost the emergency boat. I threw away the only chance we had."

"Stop," yelled Karen. "Johnny Lodge, you stop talking that way. We aren't licked yet. I brought extra charges. We can use the guns to travel and there are lots of other derelicts."

They stared through the helmet plates straight into each other's face.

"Karen," said Johnny soberly, "you're all right!"

"Is that all?" she asked.

"No," he said, "that isn't all. I love you."

JOHNNY straightened from examination of the controls. The ship would run. Probably take a lot of coaxing and tinkering along the way but they would make it if a big meteor didn't come along. He looked out of the vision plate and shook his fist at space. And it seemed to him that Space stirred and chuckled at the challenge.

"Johnny," came Karen's voice, "look what I found!"

Johnny clumped out of the pilot cabin into the living quarters. Probably an old book or an antique piece of furniture. She already had found a bunch of old magazines, published 500 years before, and a camera with a roll of exposed film that might still be good.

But it wasn't a book or a piece of fur-

niture. Karen was standing at the top of the steps that ran down into the cargo space. Johnny hurried to her side. The hold was filled with glinting ore. Ore that glittered and sparkled and shimmered in the light of their helmet lamps. Unfamiliar ore. Ore that Johnny didn't recognize and he had seen a lot of ore in years of wandering through space.

He went down the stairs and picked up a lump, studying it closely.

"Gold?" asked Karen. "Silver?"

The breath sobbed in Johnny's throat.

"Neither one," he said. "It's Metal Seven!"

"Metal Seven!" she gasped, with a tremor in her voice. "Enough for dozens of ships!"

The log book would tell where the discovery had been made. Perhaps on some lonely asteroid . . . perhaps on one of Jupiter's moons . . . perhaps clear out on the system's rim.

Jim Franklin hadn't been the first man to discover Metal Seven. Intrepid space-men, 500 years ago, had mined a curious new ore and were bringing it home when disaster struck. And now, through the discovery of this ship, Jim Franklin's daughter would give to the world again the long-lost secret of that mine.

"We'll build another ship," said Karen. "We'll go out again and find it."

Johnny tossed the chunk of ore away and scrambled to his feet.

"You better go to the lock," he said, "and signal to George to come on out. He'll be watching."

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

Johnny grinned. "Get this old tub ready to move. Soon as George gets here we blast off. We're heading for Earth with the richest cargo any ship ever hauled through space."