

PLANET STORIES



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Total Recall

By LARRY STERNIG

Buried under layers of horror in the old scientist's brain was the only thing that could save the System—and Roger Kay had exactly half an hour to dig it out!



"Shh," said Roger gently. "Watch." He drew her to the screen.

THE face of Brian Wargan, chief of the Solar Bureau of Investigation, was gray with strain and fatigue.

"This Corvo North business," he said. "It's almost a myth by now, but it's our only chance. We might as well face that."

His features and that of the younger

man across the desk from him might have formed a study in contrasts. Roger Kay was keen, alert. There were signs of weariness about his eyes, but the firm set of his jaw revealed a tendency to action rather than introspection.

"Then, sir," he urged, "let's take that chance. The department has located him, I believe? I haven't seen the reports."

The S. B. I. chief nodded. "His laboratory is right here on Gany." He indicated a spot on the global map of Ganymede, some distance from the spaceport.

"That's the mining district," Kay observed.

"Yes. He's been doing some research for the Inter-Planetary Mining Syndicate. We've assigned a special wave band and are in constant communication. Here, I'll introduce you."

Wargan set the dials on the visi-communicator that occupied one corner of his desk; then looked up at the screen on the wall. A blurred rectangle of light flickered and then coalesced into sharpness—and Roger Kay involuntarily drew a deep breath. The girl looking out from the visi-screen was the most beautiful he'd ever seen.

"Is your father making progress, Miss North?" asked Wargan.

The girl in the screen shook her head. "I'm afraid not, Mr. Wargan. He's in the lab now, working, and won't let me disturb him except to bring in coffee and sandwiches. I've been trying to get him to sleep."

"This is Roger Kay, Miss North," said the S. B. I. chief. "One of my assistants. I'm sending him out to your place to see if he can help."

Ann North frowned slightly. "We're doing everything we possibly can already."

"I'm sure of that. But Mr. Kay is rather outstanding as a scientist himself, Miss North. He'll be able to help—at least in some of the detail work, to save time."

Roger Kay grinned. "He means, Miss North, that I can clean the test tubes and solder the wires and let your father save his energy for the brain-work."

His smile was infectious, and the scientist's daughter capitulated. Wargan flicked the switch and threw the screen into blankness.

"I'll give you an order for the fastest helio we have," he said. "You'll be there

in three hours. And that means there will be a little less than three days left!"

Roger Kay drew a deep breath, his face suddenly serious. Three days to save the System from an invasion that could not possibly prove to be less than a major catastrophe, less than the end of things as he knew them.

EVEN now the invaders from Andromeda were approaching the System's outermost defenses; converging upon the virtually helpless garrisons on Pluto. Patrol spacers off the frigid planet had already contacted spearheads of the huge armada—with fatal results.

Once before the System had been periled by these devils from the distant galaxy. Victory had been costly then, but the combined Planetary fleets could not now hope to stave off the full force on this new attack. They would have to yield space; fall back to more favorable positions.

Trionite alone would prove the decisive factor in any war of worlds, and the United Planets had not been able to learn the secret of manufacturing the new explosive, one ton of which could wreck an invading army.

As Roger Kay set the robot-course dial of his speedy helio for the mining settlement, he switched in for a moment on Wargan's private wave-band. "Leaving now, sir," he reported crisply. "Be there in two hours. Any further instructions?"

"Do your best, Kay, that's all," came the weary voice of the S. B. I. chief. "New reports in confirm the old ones. We expect the first blow by noon Friday. Pluto is doomed; now being evacuated."

"We've got to stop them," Roger Kay said fiercely as he snapped the switch. "We've just got to!"

He settled back to get in a much-needed two hours of sleep while the robot pilot held his course.

The alarm bell awakened him, and he pointed the craft down under the great red disk of Big Jupe, toward the low range of purple cliffs indicated on his map.

A few minutes later he was knocking at the door of the dome-shaped laboratory.

Ann North was twice as beautiful in the flesh as she had seemed on the visi-screen. Attired in the modish shorts and tunic that had become universal garb for Earth-women, she looked like a figure from a

Grecian frieze. She led him to the library.

"Dad's asleep at last," she said. "I persuaded him to rest for a few hours—on the strength of my argument that he'd accomplish more in the long run if he kept his brain clear."

Roger Kay nodded understandingly. "I just had a bit of sleep myself en route. Nobody at headquarters has slept much the last few days. By the way, I'm woefully in the dark about a lot of things. Will you tell me just what your father's trying to re-discover? If you can enlighten me, I'll not have to ask him so many darn-fool questions."

"You know, of course," said Ann North when they were comfortably seated, "that it's a ray that will explode any explosive at a distance. Or perhaps I shouldn't have said a ray—it's really a sound wave, in the ultra-sonic belt, traveling on a beam. It disrupts any unstable chemical compound."

Roger Kay nodded. "That much I know. I've examined one of the projectors. We've installed them at all the outposts. They're all ready, except—"

"Except for the catalyst. The part of the discovery that's lost in the chemical compound that produces the catalytic gas. The ultra-sonic waves, passing through the gas, change their vibration in some way."

"I see now," said Kay, "why it is directional. The ultra-sonic waves go in all directions, of course, but only those passing through the gas are disruptive. Right?"

The girl nodded her beautiful blond head. "It's all very simple, and it's all in the hands of the government, except for the formula for that catalyst. Fortunately my father has a reputation as a scientist. That's why the government was willing to take a chance on having those projectors set up, even though—"

Roger Kay smiled wryly. "Your father is the outstanding scientist of the System, Miss North. But even if he wasn't, we might have taken that chance. It's about the only chance. If he fails, three days from today—"

"As bad as that?"

"I'm afraid so. But let's not talk about it. One thing I don't know: How was the formula lost?"

"Dad destroyed it. He discovered it accidentally twenty years ago, while working on something else. Never thinking

that the fate of worlds might hinge upon it, he destroyed his notes almost as soon as he had made them. He's always been awfully opposed to war, you know, and he saw the terrible possibilities in the weapon if it should fall into the wrong hands."

"That is still true," said a quiet voice from the doorway. Roger Kay recognized Corvo North at once from the many photographs he had seen. He rose and offered his hand.

"I'm glad you're here, Mr. Kay," said the scientist. "Ann told me you were coming. Yes, it's still true that I'm opposed to war—but this isn't war. Even disregarding personal interests and patriotism, it's an attempt to save the human race. Come on into the laboratory. We've no time to waste."

ROGER whistled softly under his breath as Corvo North closed the door behind them. The laboratory, spacious and well equipped, was a research worker's dream.

The scientist led the way past rows of pieces of apparatus whose purpose Roger could but dimly guess, to a table at the far end of the room. Upon the table was a small box bristling with dials. The back and top were open, showing a maze of wires and coils and condensers.

"Looks like a radio set with hydrophobia," Roger observed. "What connection has this with the catalyst formula?"

"Nothing, directly. There's no chance, through experimentation, of my recovering that formula in time. Three years, possibly. Three days, never."

"You mean that it's hopeless to try? That the System is lost?" Roger Kay was appalled.

"I don't quite mean that," said North. "But what chance there is lies through this apparatus you're looking at now. Sit down; I'll explain while I work. You can help later, when I've explained the machine."

He began to tinker amidst the maze of wires.

"My discovery of trionite was purely accidental. It was empiric; not based on any theory. There were six or seven chemicals, and I recall the identity of only two of them. The others? Well, count the chemicals in the pharmacopoeia! The only way

I could re-discover it would be by accident as I did before—and that would involve too many experiments and too much time. But the formula is buried somewhere in my subconscious mind. I *might* remember it."

Roger Kay eyed the box with some misgivings. "You mean this is—"

"The memory of everything we've ever done or seen is latent in our minds—in the molecular structure of the brain.. Almost, I might say, in concentric layers. When the present crisis arose, I had been studying the human brain and the nature of thought and memory. Do you follow me?"

He looked up from his work and as Roger nodded, he saw how haggard and weary was the face of the elderly scientist.

"Consciousness is basically electrical in nature. The act of memory is the shift of that electrical impulse back to a buried stratum of the brain. But the shift is never complete; most of the consciousness stays in the present. We never remember anything perfectly."

"Then this machine is to—"

"To create a magnetic field of such a nature as to shift the consciousness *as a whole*. By shifting the magnetic field's intensity, I can move back the consciousness, or memory, to complete remembrance of any given moment of the past. In other words, under its influence, I hope to send back my memory to the moment when I jotted down the formula. Earlier or later won't do; I didn't memorize it at any time."

His interest completely gripped, Roger Kay stared into the intricate mechanism. "But, sir," he asked, "do you know the exact time that was—down to the minute?"

"Fortunately, yes. I recall that it was the day Ann was being given a party for her third birthday. My wife had told me to be home at three o'clock in the afternoon. I was a little late—didn't leave the lab until on the stroke of three, and it was two or three minutes before then that I wrote down the formula."

"And you think you can hit that exact moment?"

"With a couple of preliminary experiments, yes. If I find that given setting of the dial and the vernier adjustments give me a certain date and time of day, I can

calculate the proper adjustment for the time I want."

"Amazing!" exclaimed Roger. "Frankly, if it weren't for the wonderful things you've accomplished in other fields, I'd say it was visionary."

Corvo North shook his gray head. "The theory is sound; it should work. But three days! Man, we're working against a deadly deadline!" He grabbed a pad and pencil. "Here, I'll show you what to do and you can start on the headpiece that connects to the machine here."

AND thus started the busiest, dizziest hours of Roger Kay's life. Sleep was a chimera that haunted every leaden-eyed hour, a mirage that beckoned and pleaded in vain.

And the hands of the laboratory clock crept inexorably onward. At three in the morning on Friday, Terran time, with nine hours left before the invaders would strike, Kay staggered to the televis and dialed Wargan.

"I think we'll finish in time," he reported. "We'll be ready for the first test in a couple of hours. Have you made the preparations we suggested?"

The S.B.I. chief nodded. "At the base of each projector we've installed practically a chemical warehouse. There is at least a small quantity of every available known chemical. And expert chemists waiting at each."

"Good. Then within fifteen minutes after I send you the formula, the projectors can be in operation?"

"Ten minutes, unless the formula is more complex than you believe. You say that Corvo North believes there are but six or seven ingredients?"

Roger Kay nodded wearily. "And the communications?"

"Open constantly. An operator on duty at each projector at all times. Test messages going through every fifteen minutes. Incidentally, latest reports still confirm early ones. The deadline is still noon today."

Roger Kay saluted, then snapped the switch. Back to work at the little box in the laboratory.

During those last hours, as well as the ones preceding them, Ann North had been a ministering angel. Sleeping almost as

little as the two men, she was ever ready with encouragement—and hot coffee. At times, almost by force, she would pry one or the other of them away from their work for a brief period of rest.

On her own initiative she had called in Dr. Dane. Once he understood the situation, the doctor was invaluable. He took no part in the work on the machine, but he watched over Corvo North constantly and kept him at the highest point of efficiency under the circumstances.

Ten o'clock came—and ten-thirty—and they were ready for the preliminary test.

As he placed the metal plates on his head with shaking hands, Corvo North seemed a mere shell of his former self.

Roger Kay sat at the controls. At North's instructions they ran the wires to an easy chair several yards away, as they were uncertain just how far the magnetic field would extend beyond the headset.

"Better tie me to the chair," North cautioned. "When the field is thrown on, I'll have no recollection of the present or why I'm here. Don't forget that. Until you bring me back by setting the dials to zero, mentally, I'll be back where I was whatever time we hit upon. It will seem to me that I'm waking suddenly in utterly strange circumstances and surroundings. You know what questions to ask, of course."

"Yes, Mr. North," said Roger. He turned to Dr. Dane. "Will you attend to the tying? Just sufficiently so that he can't rise in his bewilderment."

Ann North brought straps, and a few moments later Corvo North nodded that he was ready; then leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

Roger Kay glanced at the instruments and then shifted two of the dials. There was a sudden hum from within the box, and Corvo North's eyes snapped open.

"What—what is this?" he demanded. "Why am I here?"

"Everything's all right, Mr. North," said Roger soothingly. "We'll release you in a moment. First please tell us what is the date."

"It's January twelfth, of course. Why do you—"

"And the year?"

"Twenty forty-five. Now will you kindly—"

"Just one more question, Mr. North. Do you know the exact time of day when you awoke here?"

"How can I when I don't know how I got here? The last thing I remember is walking through the door of the bank to keep my appointment, at nine. What's happened? Did I faint?"

A glow of satisfaction lodged itself in Roger's mind; they were getting the time more accurately than he'd dared expect on the first trial. He pushed his luck a bit farther.

"Were you on time to make that appointment, Mr. North?"

"I'd have been five minutes early. Now will you—"

"Perfect!" exclaimed Roger. He turned back the dials.

Corvo North went limp for an instant, then reopened his eyes. Dr. Dane rushed to him and unbuckled the straps.

"Get anything?" asked the scientist weakly.

"Perfect!" said Roger again. "I've got a note of the exact setting—and you were able to give the time exactly." He scribbled hasty calculations on the pad. "And that setting took you back to January of Twenty forty-five. To be exact—six thousand seven hundred twenty-eight, twenty-seven hours, seven minutes!"

Corvo North nodded weakly, but excitedly tried to rise. Dr. Dane, his hand on North's pulse, motioned him back.

"That was a tremendous strain on your heart, North," he cautioned. "I forbid you to do it again until you've rested."

"Absurd!" Corvo North glanced at the clock. "There isn't time! It's eleven now!"

"Repeat that again right away and you'll never live to report what you see," warned the physician solemnly. "Half an hour of rest—or the entire experiment will be in vain."

ANN NORTH'S face was pale; she looked from her father to Roger Kay pleadingly.

He nodded slowly. "We can just do it. I'll check and recheck the calculations meanwhile—get the dial settings exact. And the next try—Well, it's make or break anyway." His voice was grim. "One more chance, and we get it or we don't."

During that half hour he checked and

counter-checked his figures until he was as sure as possible to hit the exact instant in the past—the instant when Corvo North had jotted down the lost formula.

At eleven-thirty, the headset was replaced on Corvo North's head. This time his arms were left free and a pad of paper placed on his lap. His fingers held a pencil. He leaned back and again closed his eyes.

Roger Kay turned the dials.

Corvo North's face tensed, then relaxed. His eyes remained closed. For a half minute, aside from the faint hum from the machine, there was utter stark silence in the laboratory. It was maddening.

Then a faint scratching sound. The others, holding their breath from sheer suspense, saw the pencil in Corvo North's hand begin to move across the pad. Three lines it wrote; stopped.

The formula!

SUDDENLY the scientist's eyes snapped open, widened with terror and bewilderment. With a movement so swift that no one could stop him, he ripped the sheet of paper from the pad, crumpled it, and hurled it at the glowing coil of an electric heater!

The paper flashed into flame, crumpled into ash as Corvo North himself crumpled, went limp in the chair.

Roger Kay turned the dials back to zero as Ann and the doctor leaped forward, unstrapped the unconscious scientist. Dr. Dane felt the fluttering pulse, then picked up the frail body and headed for the living quarters. Ann, her blue eyes wide with anxiety, ran ahead to open doors and prepare for the doctor's ministrations.

When she returned, Roger Kay stood

before the visi-screen. Ann put a hand on his shoulder. "Dad will be all right," she said, her voice flat with despair, "but we've failed. Dr. Dane says it will be days before he'd dare—"

"Shh," said Roger gently. "Watch." He slipped his left arm around her slim waist, drew her toward the screen.

The vista past the purple range showed at once that the view was eastward from the spaceport. There was no shipping in sight. In the red sky, far out and very high, was a thin silvery line, growing larger.

"The invaders." Unconsciously, Roger Kay whispered rather than spoke. "A thousand spheres at least for us alone. Watch, in a moment we'll know."

"Know what, Roger? Do you mean—"

The visi-screen answered for him. Out there high up in the sky there was a single bright flash—and then a thousand flashes that blended into one blinding one. A roar from the receiver rose to deafening pitch, stopped abruptly.

"Shattered the diaphragm of the transmitter," said Roger quietly. "That was trionite in action, Ann, it's all over. Your father—won!"

"But the formula! He destroyed it!"

Roger Kay put his other arm about her, smiled down. "That was why I was sent here, Ann. To eliminate possible hitches."

"But how—"

"Your father destroyed the formula the first time, and I guessed he might do it again—in his mind he was back some twenty years ago, remember—so I took the elementary precaution of placing carbon paper between the third and fourth sheets of that pad of paper. And I sent Wargan the formula while you were with your father, twelve minutes ago."

