

# PLANET STORIES

VOL. 5, No. 11 • A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE • MARCH, 1953

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Parade of the wordy legions.

T. T. SCOTT, President

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PLANET STORIES • Published bi-monthly by Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc., 1658 Summer St., Stamford, Conn. The entire contents of this magazine are copyrighted, 1952, by Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc. Registered as second-class matter August 15, 1950, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. All rights reserved. Price 25c per copy. One-year subscription: \$1.50; additional postage to Canada, 10c; foreign countries, 80c. For advertising rates address: Advertising Director, Fiction House, Inc., 1658 Summer Street, Stamford, Conn.



# WHAT INHABITS ME?

By ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

*What vast secrets would it hold? What startling discoveries . . . what dire news would it bring back after twenty lost years out in deep space? Fearfully men watched the awesome Andromeda glide into the Plutonian spaceport.*

HERE the universe was so quiet you could hear space creaking and groaning from its internal stresses. Here even the far-off stars seemed to roar like blow torches.

Craig Randall, shivering from the cold of the observatory dome, snapped shut the holders on the exposed plates, pulled them out and quickly replaced them with new ones, opened the shutters on the 20-inch scope. Out here on Pluto a 20-inch telescope did a much better job than a 200-inch scope did on Earth. This was one reason why Earth

Government maintained this station here on a wandering chunk of space-frozen rock.

Plates in hand, he fled into the semi-warmth of the development lab. Here he developed them, compared them with previous plates, saw there was no change, and quickly filed them. Then he fled again, this time to the warmth of human companionship in the big lounge of Pluto Station.

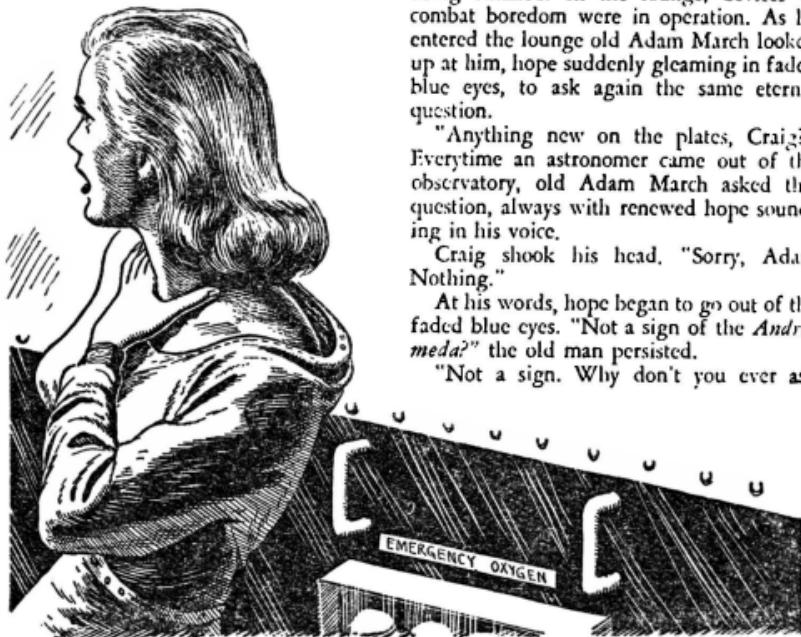
Music from Earth came to him as he entered the room, warm and throbbing, smells, tobacco smoke, the rattle of a pin-ball machine, the riffle of a deck of cards being shuffled. In the lounge, devices to combat boredom were in operation. As he entered the lounge old Adam March looked up at him, hope suddenly gleaming in faded blue eyes, to ask again the same eternal question.

"Anything new on the plates, Craig?" Everytime an astronomer came out of the observatory, old Adam March asked this question, always with renewed hope sounding in his voice.

Craig shook his head. "Sorry, Adam Nothing."

At his words, hope began to go out of the faded blue eyes. "Not a sign of the *Andromeda*?" the old man persisted.

"Not a sign. Why don't you ever ask



about the *Perseus* or the *Hercules*? They went out into deep space too, you know."

"I know," Adam March nodded. "But the *Andromeda* was the first one to go out, she was the first deep-space ship. It seems logical that she might be the first one back. That's why I always ask about her."

"She went out twenty years ago," Craig said, then caught himself. Whatever it was that the old man sought in the *Andromeda*, there was no point in reminding him that the ship had unquestionably smashed up long ago. Let hope remain! "Sorry, Adam. Nothing, yet."

"They might not catch her until she was real close in," Adam March persisted. "She wouldn't be using her drive until she got in real close and you probably wouldn't catch her until the drive was turned on. Let me know, will you, if you catch anything?" The last was said quickly as Craig Randall began to move away.

"Sure thing, Adam, you'll be the first to know," Craig answered. Across the room, Mary Kirkman was trying to catch his eye, a needless effort in this case. If she was in sight, she always had his eye. She also had the eye of every other male in her vicinity, a quality which occasionally gave Craig the impulse to destroy half the unmarried men at the station. She was a bio-physicist, and a good one. She was assigned to the bio-physical research laboratories that were a part of the station. Mary pulled him down to the sofa beside her.

"Craig, we're going to get a whole new bio-physics lab here." Excitement danced in her voice and glinted in her eyes.

"That's fine," Craig said. He knew how much this meant to her. "How do you know?"

"The chief just got the news from Mr. Nuoy," Mary Kirkham answered.

**N**UOY. Oh." Craig's voice dropped a notch as Nuoy's name came into the conversation. He felt his mood shift. "If Nuoy has approved it, of course it will go through. He's got enough pull to get special quarters constructed for him here, at the expense of Earth Government, so he can have the advantages of living under a light gravity. But he never considers that two billion humans scattered through the Solar

System have kicked in with taxes so that he can enjoy life." Bitterness crept into his voice as he spoke. "What are you going to do in your new bio-physics lab—find a way to make Nuoy virile?"

"Craig!" She was hurt at what he said. "You're spreading rumor!"

"Of course," he agreed. What he had said was rumor, without substantiation and without proof. If anyone had been careless enough to try to prove such rumors, the results would have been unpleasant for the investigator. Officially there was no connection between Nuoy and Pluto Station, or between Nuoy and Earth Government. But at high official levels, in wire pulling that went on so far above the heads of the average man as to be beyond his comprehension, there was little doubt that Nuoy owned Pluto Station, and a big chunk of the Solar System as well.

"I hope you're wrong, Craig," the girl said, seriously. "I would hate to think we have such monsters as that riding on the back of all of us."

"I hope I'm wrong too. But I'm afraid I'm not."

"Randall!" the public address system broke in. "Craig Randall. Come to the main observation dome at once, please."

"The military calls," Craig said, rising. "Us lesser mortals must obey."

The military ran Pluto Station, manned it, supplied it, armed it, and used it as a base for keeping watch for mythical intruders who might come wandering into the system from the far-off seas of space. There was not a scientist in the station who did not feel deep in his bones that the military could be dispensed with, that they wasted much money and time keeping watch for non-existent pirates from the depths of space. But the military insisted that this watch was important. Sure, there was peace now, but there might not always be peace. Who knew what monsters might come in from the sea that had no other shore? If space was infinite, the danger might be infinite also. So argued the military. Earth Government backed them up to the extent of manning its planet station with armed forces. On Mars and Venus, they were needed. But here on Pluto what was needed was a way to keep from freezing.

"Probably one of the lieutenants has spotted me down here with you and is trying to get me up to the main dome to look at a meteor while he sneaks down here and makes passes at you."

"Darling, I believe you're jealous. In that case I'll go with you."

"Good," Craig said, vastly pleased.

They used the elevator to the top of the big building. A lieutenant, his face serious, was waiting for them at the landing. He led them into the top dome.

Above them, through the plastic cover, a million stars sparkled. Seen through airless space, the stars were so brilliant they seemed to be just outside the dome. Pluto Station itself was set in the middle of a vast valley, with low hills surrounding it. On the left, were frozen runways extending the length of the valley. Then ended in the vast hump of the huge dome that served as a hangar for the space ships landing on Pluto. The hangar itself was part of the cluster of buildings that made up the station.

Up above the rocky surface of Pluto, slanting downward toward the runways, was a pale blue glow.

"Hell, that's not a meteor!" Craig gasped. "That's a ship coming in from deep space for a landing here."

"That's what I thought," the lieutenant answered. "But I wanted one of you astronomy boys to make a positive identification for me before I aroused the whole station." With one hand, the lieutenant pushed the button marked *Call to Action Stations*. With his other hand, he snapped open the inter-communication line that led directly to the office of Cyrus Stanley, commanding general of Pluto Station.

The long watch of the military was finally paying off. Life was coming in from the void to them. The entire station awakened to the sudden violent jangle of alarm bells.

The military had everything prepared for a situation such as this. Plan A went into operation at once. This plan called for the manning of the powerful Z beams mounted not only in the station but in the low hills surrounding the vast valley. The same power that had made possible the conquest of space had also made possible the building of weapons strong enough to annihilate the targets against which they were directed.

Guided by radar, the Z beams began tracking the incoming ship.

However, Plan A called for the peaceful reception of the visiting ship, if that were possible. Life coming in from the vast void of space was too important to be destroyed if there was any way to make contact with it and to establish peaceful relations. A race that could come across deep space itself probably had enough power at its disposal to warrant cautious and careful handling.

As the alarm bells went into action, radio beams leaped out, attempting contact with the ship. No reply was expected for any reply that came would be a meaningless jumble of sounds. No one knew what a deep-space tongue would sound like. But the attempt was a part of Plan A, and it was made.

With the jangle of the alarm, a sudden flurry of anticipation ran through the whole station. Deep in his heart every man here hoped that some day life might come in from across the void, ending the utter loneliness of the Solar System. Sol and his attendant planets might encompass a fairly large area of space, but this area was microscopically small in comparison to the vastness of the universe. The human race was hungry for contact with another life form.

In his quarters General Stanley hastily donned his jacket.

In his private suite of rooms Meyer Nuoy heard the alarm. Here, the jangle of the bells was a thin whisper of pleasant sound, suited to his sensitive ears. He stirred restlessly in the padded contour chair that had been specially made to fit his body. Irritation rose in him. He hadn't given permission for an alarm to be sounded. He picked up the private phone beside his chair.

"Stanley?" His voice was a growl.

"Why, yes, Mr. Nuoy," the general hastily answered.

"What's all this clatter about?"

"A ship is coming in, Mr. Nuoy."

"What of it? Ships land regularly, don't they? Is this any reason to disturb us with alarm bells?"

"But this ship is not coming in from Earth. It's coming in from deep space."

"Oh!" Nuoy was so startled by this news that he dropped the cigar he was smoking. As he slapped at the coal, the general took

the opportunity to hang up. When he got the cigar slapped out and discovered that the general had hung up, Nuoy was infuriated.

"I'll have that stupid fool transferred to Venus!" he thundered.

The general had had good reason for hanging up. Suddenly, an aide had entered with the astonishing news that this ship was responding to radio contact, and that the ship's operator was speaking English.

"Hell on wheels, do they know English in deep space?" the general gasped.

UP IN the dome, Craig Randall and Mary Kirkham watched the glows move through the sky as the ship approached. They could hear the clatter of voices coming from the radio room as contact was attempted. Suddenly a new voice came from the loud speaker in the radio room.

"Calling Pluto Station? Calling Pluto Station? Go ahead, please."

They heard the startled operator gasp as he caught his breath. "Holy cats, the ship is talking back to me! This boat is not coming in from deep space, not unless they speak English out there too!"

"Correction, please," the loud speaker answered. "This ship *is* coming from deep space."

"But—but—but—"

"This is the *Andromeda* returning to the Solar System after twenty years in space. Contact your commanding officer immediately and advise him that we are preparing to land."

"Whoops!" Craig Randall shouted. "The *Andromeda*!"

The Solar System, like a vast ark riding the flood of infinity, had sent doves into deep space. After twenty years, after all hope had been given up, one of the doves was returning.

The jangling of the alarm bells went into quick silence as the startled station prepared itself to welcome the wanderer home. Home, after years between the stars, home after wandering the vastness of deep space itself.

The Z-weapons in their hidden emplacements left off their tracking of this visitor and the whole station turned itself from an armed camp into a jubilant reception committee.

The *Andromeda* came down to the runway, the vast outer doors of the hangar swung ponderously open, and the *Andromeda* came to a halt at Pluto Station. From the waiting humans came the sound of a tremendous cheer. A sloping runway was run up to the main lock of the *Andromeda*. The lock opened. A tall man, dressed in light shorts and a shirt, appeared in the lock. He was bronzed and lean and he looked thoroughly fit. The only mark of authority on him was on the tattered cap that he wore. The stars of a captain glittered there.

His voice was deep, like a bell. "I am Captain Martin of the *Andromeda*," he said.

As he spoke, the cheer grew to a thunderous volume of sound.

General Stanley advanced. He and Captain Martin shook hands. Still shaking hands, they moved down the runway and disappeared in the direction of Nuoy's quarters.

In the throng, Craig caught a glimpse of Adam March. The old man had been in the very first line had been cheering himself hoarse. When Captain Martin had emerged, old Adam had stopped cheering. The old man had stared at the captain as if he did not believe his eyes, then he had seemed to shrink in upon himself, to become small and unimportant.

Then the crew came out of the lock. They were lean and bronzed, they looked to be in perfect physical and mental health. As the last one emerged, the lock swung ponderously shut behind them. The cheering grew to a volume of sound that shook the I-beams of the vast hangar. The members of the crew were taken immediately to the big lounge of the station. Beer began to flow in vast quantities.

"I am sure Mr. Nuoy will want to hear what you have to say," General Stanley said, over and over again, as he and Captain Martin moved away from the ship. The general was a little uneasy because he had hung up on Nuoy. Unless amends were made, he anticipated possible retaliation. To the general's surprise, they were admitted instantly to Nuoy's quarters. Nuoy seemed not to remember that the general had hung up on him. When Captain Martin was introduced, Nuoy's face showed great pleasure. Nuoy had a kind of compelling magnetism about him. When he chose, he could be a

completely gracious host. All of his personal magnetism was turned on now. He ordered fine wines and foods to be brought immediately. Servants hurried to obey him. Soft music began to pour from speakers in the walls. Hidden jets began to blow pleasant perfumes into the room.

Stanley had rarely been here, mere generals did not often get a chance to enter Nuoy's private quarters. He was always surprised at the pleasure dome vastly more heavenly than any ever decreed by Kubla Khan in Asia existing here on the ice world of Pluto. Captain Martin gasped in frank surprise. He gingerly tasted the wines and the foods, his manner indicating that he was not quite certain that he was supposed to consume such delicacies. Under Nuoy's urging, he tasted everything, apparently with growing enjoyment.

"Now tell us what you discovered among the stars," Nuoy said.

"We made first landfall on a planet which we named Star Goal," Captain Martin said. Leaning back in his chair, he began to talk. General Stanley and Nuoy listened first in surprise, then in growing amazement, then in startled bewilderment.

IN THE big lounge, every man who could be spared from duty or who could manage to sneak away from his assigned post, welcomed the crew of the *Andromeda*. Beer flowed by the gallons. Vast quantities of pretzels and hamburgers were consumed, largely by the staff of the station. The crew of the *Andromeda* tasted food and drink cautiously, in the manner of men long unaccustomed to the modest comforts of civilized life.

"Poor creatures, they probably haven't had a decent meal in years," Mary Kirkham said, indignantly.

"Not a chance to bury their snoots in a can of beer," Craig added. "But when are we going to get the story of what they found out, what they discovered, and what happened to them. Hey, George!" he spoke to the nearest *Andromeda* man. "Where did you land?"

"Sorry, Craig," the man answered, smiling. "You'll have to get your information from Captain Martin."

"Damn the captain!" Craig said. "We

want to know."

"I understand that," George answered. "But we got orders not to talk. Wait until we've been cleared. We'll give you the whole story."

"But that means you'll have to go to Earth first and we'll get all the information second hand," Mary protested.

The man spread his hand. "Sorry, I didn't make the rules."

The staff of the station became quite indignant when it became obvious that they were not going to get any information from the crew.

"You might try making love to one of them," Craig said, in exasperation, to Mary.

"I might at that," she answered. "They all look kind of cute to me."

"Then try making love to all of them," Craig said bitterly. "They'd probably like it. It's been twenty years since they saw a woman. You'd have the time of your life."

"Kindly restrict your allusions," Mary snapped, coloring.

Craig grinned. "You're a bio-physicist. None of the facts of life are supposed to be allusions to a bio-physicist."

"I'll think it over," March said, darkly. "Where's old Adam March?" Craig said suddenly. "Have you seen him?"

"Not since the ship landed," Mary answered. "He was up in the front line cheering himself hoarse. Why?"

"For years he has been asking about the *Andromeda*. From the interest he took in the ship you would think he owned it. Now the ship has arrived, but he's not here taking part in the celebration." Mild concern rose in him as he sensed something wrong in the old man's absence. "I'm going to find him."

Asking questions, he discovered no one had seen Adam March. He went directly to the old man's quarters. The door was closed. He rapped. There was no answer. He tried the knob.

The door was locked.

"Who is it?" a voice quavered from inside.

"Craig Randall. Open up."

There was a moment's hesitation, then the door opened a crack. March peered through the opening. It seemed to Craig that the old man had aged years in hours. He had a heavy monkey wrench in one hand.

"What's wrong?" Craig said. "The *Andromeda* is in?"

The old man opened the door. "Come in," he said. "Yes, the *Andromeda* is in. That's what's wrong."

"What?"

March gestured in the direction of the hangar. "There's something wrong in that ship."

"Why do you say that?"

"I have my reasons."

"But what makes you think so? What proof? If you know what you are talking about—"

March recoiled at the words. "I knew you would think I did not know what I was talking about."

"I'm sorry, Adam, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. But you've got to have some proof." He hesitated, as a sudden thought struck him. "Or . . . maybe you ought to drop in on one of the station doctors in the morning. Maybe you've got a touch of space sickness. You've been here on Pluto pretty long."

The old man recoiled even more. He clutched the wrench. "Leave me alone, Craig," he said harshly. "Go away from me. I don't want to talk to you."

Craig had no choice except to leave. The lock clicked in the door. He hunted up Mary. "I'm going to take a look at the *Andromeda*. Want to come along?"

The expression on his face must have revealed what he was thinking. Her answer was quick. "Of course. But what's wrong?"

"I don't know. Adam thinks something is wrong but he won't talk." He explained what the old man had said.

Her face fell. "I'm afraid you're right. It does sound an awful lot like space sickness. I'm so sorry. He's such a nice old man."

"Maybe I'm wrong. We'll go check."

IN THE dimly lighted hangar the ship dwarfed them, made them pygmies in comparison to its huge bulk. No guard over the ship had been established by the station. No guard was ever established over the ships that landed here. None was needed. They went slowly around the ship. The stout metal of the hull showed the pitting of meteoric dust that had gotten through the screens. On the bow, pitted and faded but

still easily readable, was the word—*Andromeda*.

"Were you questioning that this is actually the *Andromeda*?" Mary asked.

"Not questioning, just checking." He moved to the slanting ramp that led upward to the lock from which the crew had emerged, stared at it. "It's odd that the lock should be closed."

Usually ships in the hangar opened all locks, exchanging their many-times-used air for the cleaner air of the station. They went up the ramp. "If they left a guard, maybe he will open up for us," Craig said. There was no opening in the lock but he knew that an observer inside could detect their presence there.

"Open up," he said.

"What for?" a voice answered.

Craig jumped. The voice seemed to speak from the empty air beside him.

"Don't be startled," the voice said. "This is a simple communication mechanism for transmitting voice tones. All space ships have them."

"All—" Craig caught himself. He had started to say that no space ship had such a device, that he had never heard of a method of transmitting a voice through a steel hull.

"What do you want?" the voice said.

"We want to talk."

"Talk to Captain Martin."

"This is hardly a matter for the captain. There's a party inside. We thought perhaps you would like to join it. Your friends are having themselves a whale of a time. We came to take over the duties of anyone who remained in the ship so you can join them," Craig said, hastily improvising.

"And while you are on duty, you would explore the ship! Is that your plan?"

"What?" Craig gasped. His first dazed thought was that his mind was being read.

"Well, of all things!" Mary said, her voice hot. "Is there something to hide inside the ship?"

"Of course not!" For an instant, the voice sounded startled. Then it quickly became the voice of a book salesman, suavely peddling holy literature. "Your commanding officer will have an opportunity to examine the ship, if he wishes!"

"Then why did you say we would explore the ship?" Mary continued. "If there is

nothing to hide, what difference does it make whether or not we explore it?"

"Captain Martin would have my head if I let you take my place without orders. Sorry. I can be relieved only on orders from him." The voice lost its suavity and became stiff and hard.

"Okay," Craig said. "Come on, Mary. Let's go back and join the party."

Her face indicated she was inclined to continue this discussion but she followed him down the ramp. At the bottom, she spoke quickly, "Craig, you're scared. What's wrong?"

"Nothing that I can put my finger on. It's mostly Adam March. He saw something that he didn't like but he wouldn't talk about it. Now, we run into a closed lock, and a guard with a gimmick that he can use to talk through the wall of the ship. Space ships never post a guard here, they never keep the locks closed. Why is the *Andromeda* doing it?"

"I don't know," Mary answered, hesitantly. "I don't like it either. I keep getting a feeling that something is wrong but I don't know what."

"Walk back up the ramp!" the voice spoke from the air.

Both jumped. "What kind of a pick-up system are you using that can detect our voices at this distance?" Craig demanded.

"A very efficient one. Walk up the ramp. And don't try running! You'll run straight into a dead man if you do."

"Where's a dead man?" Craig gasped.

"You'll be the dead man!" the voice answered. "Walk up the ramp!"

They walked up the inclined runway. Ahead of them, the lock opened. They entered. It swung shut behind them. Ahead, the inner door opened.

For the first time, they saw the source of the voice that had spoken to them. Craig felt every muscle in his body contract. Mary uttered a scream that was pure panic.

**I**N NUOY'S quarters Captain Martin was finishing with his story of what they had found on Star Goal. General Stanley was almost falling out of his chair as he leaned forward to listen. Nuoy's lips were opening and closing and he was breathing in panting gasps. A slobbering sound was coming

from within his throat.

"There is no doubt but that the inhabitants of Star Goal are immortal," Captain Martin finished.

Nuoy swallowed. He swallowed again and again. A gleam came into his eyes.

"Can you prove that statement, Martin?" he demanded.

"Of course!" the captain calmly answered.

Nuoy almost fell out of his chair at the words. He had expected argument, hedging, perhaps compromise. In the world he knew, men told lies to each other, then told other lies to get out of the first ones they had told. As golden as Captain Martin's statement was, Nuoy had thought it was a lie, that there was a catch in it somewhere. He had expected the captain to try to lie out of it. He hardly knew what to do when the captain did not try to lie.

"I would like to see your proof," Nuoy finally spoke.

"You're looking at some of it," Captain Martin answered.

"Eh? You? What kind of proof is that?"

"If you will check the records, you will discover that I was 32 years old when the *Andromeda* left the Solar System. I am now 52 years of age. If you doubt what your own eyes tell you about my physical condition, I suggest you have your doctors examine me."

"They have worked on you. They have made you immortal?"

"They have worked on the whole crew."

"They did?" Nuoy gasped. "How much did they charge?"

"Nothing," Captain Martin answered.

"What? No charge?" Nuoy sounded as if he did not believe his ears.

"No charge," the captain repeated.

"Uh—uh!" Nuoy opened his mouth, closed it, made up his mind, opened his mouth again. "We'll have to change that," he said.

It was Captain Martin's turn to be surprised. "I don't understand you."

Nuoy was on his feet, making plans. "You and your ship will return to Star Goal immediately. I will accompany you." The slurping sounds in his throat were plainly audible.

"Eh?" the captain said.

Nuoy nodded firmly. "We will leave

within two hours, as quickly as you can stock the ship and as soon as my servants can transfer my things to the vessel."

Captain Martin glanced out of the corner of his eyes at General Stanley. The general looked in the other direction. "What about Earth Government?"

"The government will authorize your return to Star Goal," Nuoy said, his voice sharp. "They're in my vest pocket."

Again Martin glanced at Stanley. This time the general did not look away. Pain showed on his face but he made no attempt to deny Nuoy's statement.

"But why are we going back to Star Goal in such a rush?" Martin spoke.

"Don't be stupid, Martin," Nuoy answered. "If there is immortality to be had anywhere in the universe, I intend to have it. Later, we will establish a regular traffic between the Solar System and Star Goal. I know a great many men around the system who will pay handsomely for the privilege of visiting this planet you have discovered. We won't be such fools as to give immortality away."

General Stanley managed to find his voice. "Perhaps Captain Martin does not wish to return immediately. After all, he and his men have been gone twenty years. They may have old friends they wish to see."

"Captain Martin will take orders," Nuoy said crisply. "Just like you do, Stanley."

The general was silent.

THE creature facing Craig and Mary was seated behind an elaborate control panel that was set in an alcove in the wall of the corridor leading into the ship. Craig Randall knew enough about space ships to know that no such alcove belonged here. He did not need to know anything about space ships to know that the creature in the alcove did not belong there. Nor did it belong anywhere in the Solar System.

His first dazed impression was that the creature was made of metal; it had a metallic sheen about it. His second impression was that the creature was composed of many kinds of crystals of a color varying all the ways from infra red to ultra violet. The crystals seemed to be in rapid vibration. A glow like an aura came from it and the colors

changed very rapidly.

The creature was round, two feet in diameter. Appendages of linked crystals extended to the controls on the panel. Apparently these appendages could be extruded and withdrawn at will. As Craig stared, an appendage was withdrawn from the control panel and another was extended from the circular body. If it had eyes, they were not visible, if it had ears, he could not see them. There was no mouth, no nose, there was only this globe of shining pulsing crystals.

"Where—where is the man we were talking to?" Craig whispered. In his mind was still the lingering thought that they had spoken to a man.

"You were talking to me. A slight orange pulsation passed over the crystals as the voice came.

"Who—who—"

"I am Filo of the Sorodromes," the voice answered. The crystals glowed with a deep red color as if being Filo of the Sorodromes was a great thing. "Why did you think something was wrong in the ship?"

"Well—"

"Speak the facts. Have you humans grown suspicious?"

"Suspicious of what?"

"Of the existence of the Sorodromes. Has some member of the crew revealed our existence?" The globe showed a violent green at the question.

"No," Craig answered. "Not so far as I know."

"Then why did you think something was wrong?"

"It wasn't that we *knew* something was wrong."

"You are in a position where lying will do you no good. What is happening inside the station? Are our controls failing?"

"What controls? Do you mean that you can control the crew of the *Andromeda* from here?"

"What do you think?" Filo answered. "If there had been any important loss of control, I would have known about it. But there may have been hints, attempts to convey information, which I did not catch. Have there been such attempts?"

Before Craig could answer another voice was whispering in the air, calling urgently, "Great Filo? Please contact me immedi-

ately." The voice was a thin whisper of sound, as if somewhere a man was thinking and his thoughts were being built up to audible volume.

"Yes," Filo answered, "What is it?"

"Nuoy insists on coming aboard the ship. Please instruct me."

"Who is Nuoy?"

"He seems to think he is the top dog in the System."

"What does he want?"

"I have told him a part of the story of Star Goal and that the race which lives on Star Goal possesses immortality. He insists on returning immediately to Star Goal to obtain immortality for himself. After that he plans to establish a regular traffic between Star Goal and the Solar System to peddle immortality to those rich enough to pay for it." A faint repugnance sounded in the whisper.

Filo digested this information. The color coming from his was almost pure white. He seemed to be vibrating at a tremendously high frequency.

"I await your orders," the whisper came again. "Shall I bring him aboard the ship?"

"I am considering the matter."

"He is very impatient. Please instruct me immediately."

"I must confer with my fellows," Filo answered. "I will have an answer for you in minutes."

"Yes, Great Filo," the voice whispered.

Filo was silent behind the control panel. Craig had the impression that some wordless conference was taking place with other Sorodromes located elsewhere. He stared at Mary in growing horror.

"That whisper was coming from Captain Martin," the girl whispered. "He is the only person from the *Andromeda* who is with Mr. Nuoy. And that means—"

"It means that Captain Martin and the crew are not in charge of this ship."

"And that means—"

"That something latched on to the crew of the *Andromeda* on this planet they call Star Goal. It means that the ship's landing here was a ruse to get into Pluto Station, maybe from here on into the whole Solar System!" His voice grew grim. "It means that the fate the military was always afraid of has finally come in upon us, and has gotten

under our guard. It means we have welcomed a race of monsters into Pluto Station. It means that Adam—How did Adam know that something was wrong?"

"Who is Adam?" Filo spoke.

"Just a man," Craig faltered.

"Ah—" Filo was apparently going to ask more questions but he was interrupted by the arrival of three other Sorodromes. Balls of glowing crystals, they came floating down the corridor from the interior of the ship. Energy seemed to flow from them. Craig felt his skin begin to itch and burn. The three conferred with Filo in a weird, wordless flow of communication between them. From the way their colors changed Craig had the impression that they were laughing at some secret joke of their own.

"Yes?" Captain Martin's voice whispered.

"Bring this human to us," Filo answered. "We will accommodate him in his desire to return to Star Goal. We will also assist him to set up traffic between our planet and his system." Again the colors changed as laughter seemed to ripple through them.

"What if others want to come too?"

"Bring them to the number of twenty. Do they seem suspicious?"

"Not so far as I can tell. Nuoy is burning with impatience to be away. He insists we start loading the ship immediately."

"Then we must cooperate with him," Filo answered. Again the surge of color that was laughter surged through the Sorodromes. "Summon the crew to load and operate the ship. We will be ready when you arrive."

Filo extruded a tentacle, touched a control on the panel in front of him. A section of metal wall that had been folded back slid across the alcove, hiding it from sight.

"My three comrades will direct you," Filo's voice spoke from the empty air.

CRAIG and Mary found themselves being herded down the corridor. They turned a corner. A door leading into a storeroom was open. They were herded through the door. It closed behind them, leaving them in total darkness.

In that darkness was the soft sound of stealthy movement.

Captain Martin and Meyer Nuoy came through the lock. Nuoy was glow-

ing with eagerness.

As they passed through the lock Captain Martin glanced in the direction of an alcove that he knew was hidden there. The expression on his face was momentarily grim, but he said nothing.

"I'll take over your quarters, Captain Martin," Nuoy said. "Show me to them so I can have my servants bring my belongings to them and make the necessary changes as quickly as possible. Of course, I will want to bring my own wines and foods, and I will bring my own staff of servants with me, so I can have proper service on the trip. I understand the accommodations on the deep-space ships are not elaborate."

"Of course, Mr. Nuoy," Captain Martin answered.

If he resented Nuoy's words or actions, no trace of it showed on his face.

In the dark storeroom a voice hissed, "Who is it?"

"Adam!" Craig gasped. "It's us, Craig and Mary."

"Oh!" Craig heard Adam March breathe a sigh of relief. "It's a darned good thing you spoke up. I almost let you have it."

"How—how did you get into the ship?"

"Through one of the discharge locks. I was coming along the passage when I spotted you two coming. I didn't quite recognize you. What—what was them danged things floating through the air behind you?"

Craig explained about the Sorodromes.

"I knew it was something like that, or worse, though I don't know what the hell could be any worse! What are we going to do, Craig?"

"What can we do?" Craig answered, desperation in his voice. "We've got a military force here that is supposed to take care of creatures like these—"

"Only, sometimes, it turns out that the ordinary citizens have got to do the job the military was supposed to do, but didn't!" Bitterness sounded in March's voice. "This is A deck, isn't it, the lowest deck in the ship?"

"I suppose so. I don't know how many decks the *Andromeda* has."

"Hmmm. And this storage room they've got us caught in is just inside the main lock, isn't it. You come in through the main lock and go straight down the passage and

turn to the left and you're here. Isn't that right?"

"I—I hardly noticed," Craig answered. He didn't add that he had too many other things to think about to notice where they were being taken.

"That's right," Mary answered.

"If this is A deck—" the old man muttered. They heard him move away. In the darkness he stumbled over a box and apologized to Mary for the profanity. "Swear all you please, Adam," the girl said. "I'll swear with you, if that will help. What are you trying to do?"

A light flared as the old man struck a match. He was down on his knees against the far bulkhead. The match went out. Adam grunted, Metal scraped in the darkness, thudded on the floor. A square opening was revealed. Dim light came through it. Grunting with satisfaction, Adam crawled through it. "Come on, you two," his voice came from the other side.

They crawled through the opening and found themselves in what was obviously one of the main holds. Adam March, the monkey wrench gripped firmly in his hand, grinned at them.

"How did you know that opening was there?" Craig demanded.

"I kind of sensed it would be there."

"Sensed, hell! It strikes me that you know a devil of a lot about the *Andromeda*. You knew how to get through a discharge port. You knew where this opening was."

The old man blinked guileless eyes at him. "Do I? I'm just lucky, I guess. We've got to figure out what we're going to do next."

"We'll get out of the ship and go straight to General Stanton," Mary said.

"And what will we do when we get to the general?" Craig asked. "Tell him about Filo and the Sorodromes? We'll get our heads examined by the station doctors. By the time they have finished with us, the ship will be gone. If anything is to be done, it has to be done right now."

"Why not let the ship go?" Mary argued. "All they've got is Nuoy and we can sure stand to part with him?"

"And have the Sorodromes come back at us, later, with all his power on their side? Think again, Mary."

"But surely the general—"

"I'm afraid Craig's about right, Mary," old Adam interposed. "The general is not a bad guy and he's not thick-headed, but he would need some kind of evidence, something in the way of proof, before he would believe any story we told him."

"The evidence is in an alcove just inside the main lock. I can point it out to him."

"Yes, but who's going to pry Filo out of there?" Craig answered. "I've got a hunch that Filo is not exactly helpless. If we break in on him, all hell may break loose."

THE door of the hold opened. A voice ordered, "Dump those boxes in here, men."

They moved as if they had one mind, taking refuge behind the remnants of stores that were still in the hold. Directed by a member of the crew, a file of men entered, dumped their loads and trotted out.

"Grab a box," Craig whispered. "We'll walk out of here. If anybody questions us, we're stowing cargo."

Each carrying a box, no one challenged them.

"I want to go to the main control room," Adam whispered. "I've got an idea."

"Do you know the way?"

"Sure. Follow the ramps up." The old man moved with a sure stride toward an inclined runway. They followed. Again Craig was struck with the realization that Adam was very familiar with the ship. He led them upward as if he knew exactly where he was going.

The crew moved along the corridors, preparing the ship for flight. They seemed unperturbed by this sudden order to return to deep space. They paid no attention to the three Pluto Station people who were carrying boxes up the ramps.

No Sorodromes were in sight.

"They're all in their hidey-holes," Adam March muttered.

As they reached the landing on C deck, Captain Martin was coming out of the quarters directly across from them. "I'm sure everything will be all right," Captain Martin said to someone inside the quarters.

"It had better be," Nuoy's voice came from inside.

6—PLANET—March

Martin came directly toward them. Craig had the impression that Adam tried to turn his face toward the wall. Captain Martin glanced at the old man. A startled expression flitted across his features. His mouth opened, he started to speak. Then he seemed to change his mind very quickly. He went past them as if he had never seen them.

As if a ghost were after him, Adam went up the last inclined ramp to D deck.

The main control room was before them. They entered it, found it empty. Above them, through the tough plastic of the observation dome, they could see the girders of the hangar. All around them were the controls by which the ship was directed in flight. In the middle of the room, with all controls in easy reach, was a single huge chair. It was the control center of the ship. Off in small rooms around the control room were plotting centers where the position of the ship in space was mapped. In one small room was a large three-dimensional globe of the heavens.

The crew had not yet arrived in the control room.

Adam dropped his box, went quickly around the control, stopped in front of the big chair, touched it, touched the controls with gentle fingers. He seemed almost entranced by what he was seeing here.

"This is the heart of the whole ship," he mused. "Everything is controlled from here. Power generation, power routing and supply, the auxiliary drives, the main drives, the steering drives—"

"Are you interested in the control room?" a voice spoke behind them.

Adam spun, his hand grabbing for the wrench in his pocket. Captain Martin stood just inside the doorway. There was a smile on his face but his eyes were fathomless.

"Uh, dang it, where did you come from?"

"I'll be glad to show it to you," the captain continued. "Of course, we don't have much time at the moment. Are you going to take the long hop with us?" Polite interest sounded in the voice but under the interest Craig sensed a seething emotional state.

"Why, uh, hadn't thought about it. Yes, we'll take the long hop if we get the chance," Adam answered. He looked like

a man in a fog groping desperately for some familiar landmark.

Smiling, Captain Martin moved to him. "This is the control chair, sir. The operator of the ship sits here. Information is relayed to him—Swiftly he explained the use of all of the controls. Then his voice dropped to a whisper. "You haven't a chance to lick the Sorodromes. I've tried for years, all of us have tried, and we have failed! Forget it!" His voice rose again to normal tones. Politely he continued his explanations of the operation of the controls. "I'll have plenty of time to explain everything to you on the long hop," he ended.

"But—lad—" the old man's voice was a pleading whisper.

"You'll just get yourself killed," Captain Martin whispered. "Believe me. I know what I am talking about."

"Well—uh—Adam March seemed to choke up. "What chance have we got on the long hop?" he whispered.

"Probably none," Captain Martin answered.

Adam's face worked. It twisted into a grimace as some inward torture passed through him. "Well . . . well, could . . ." His face lit up as if the inner turmoil had suddenly been resolved by some deep insight. "Could I stay here while the ship is taking off? Could I, Captain? I've always dreamed of being on the bridge of one of the deep-space ships like the *Andromeda* while she went free. . . . It'll be all right, won't it, Captain?" A pleading note crept into the voice. "I won't be in the way at all."

Martin frowned, then shrugged. "Well, all right. You understand that the crew will be busy with their duties?"

"Of course, Captain. I won't be in the way at all. You go on and take care of your duties. Have you got clearance papers from the general yet? Then you had better get them, Craig, you and Mary keep on lugging freight."

"Clearance papers?" Martin said, exasperation in his voice. "It's been so long since I've taken off from a Solar System port that—"

"The captain of the clearing ship has to apply in person for clearance papers," Adam said. "I mention it, because you might have forgot. That's the regulation."

"Damn!" Captain Martin said. "Well, if I must, I must."

MARY KIRKHAM and Craig Randall, the latter tremendously puzzled, were already leaving the control room. "I don't understand it," Craig was thinking, over and over again. "He knows too much—and seems to know too little—there's a play going on here that is over my head—" He shook his head, but he kept his thoughts to himself.

"What are we supposed to do, just go get more boxes?" Mary questioned.

"I don't know. Play along and wait for your cue. Something is going to happen."

"But I don't want to make the big hop. I don't want to go—" Her voice went into silence as Captain Martin fell into step beside them. The Captain's face was utterly blank. He walked like a man in a deep daze, like a zombie, like a man in a trance. Once his eyes flicked toward the wall. Following the direction in which the captain had glanced, Craig caught the vague outline of a door covering an alcove. Craig shuddered. Now he understood one reason why Captain Martin might be walking like a man in a trance. But were there other reasons?

It was obvious that the Sorodromes had almost perfect control over the captain and the crew.

They moved down the ramps. Members of the crew met them, saluted, continued with their duties. Men from the station were carrying supplies into the huge ship. They approached the main lock.

Craig Randall felt his flesh crawl as he saw the section of the wall that hid Filo of the Sorodromes. What if Filo was watching them? Craig kept his eyes fixed on the opposite wall. He was walking like a man in a trance himself, and he knew it. He held his breath, waiting for the challenge of the voice from the air. It did not come. They passed the hidden alcove; they passed through the lock; they were on the ramp outside. Craig's suddenly furious breathing shook his lean frame to the bones.

The bustle of the hangar was around them.

"Where will I get clearance?" Captain Martin muttered.

"Over there," Craig said, pointing.

They moved down the ramp. Craig stopped breathing again as a voice from the ship's inter-com system shouted from the lock behind them.

**"ATTENTION, ALL HANDS."**

The voice was an excellent imitation of Captain Martin. It spoke with crisp authority and with sureness. It was a commanding voice. It caught the attention of its hearers.

Captain Martin seemed to freeze on the ramp. Suddenly sensing what was about to happen, Craig Randall also froze. The voice came again.

"Attention, all hands! Attention, all Pluto Station men on board the *Andromeda*! A dangerous situation has been discovered in the drive room of the ship. You are hereby directed to clear the *Andromeda* instantly. A delay of a few seconds may mean the difference between life and death."

The voice gained in volume, became more commanding.

**"ALL HANDS CLEAR THE SHIP INSTANTLY!"**

**I**N THE seconds that elapsed while the voice was rolling from the ship's communication system, Craig grasped what was going to happen next, and what he was going to have to do about it.

Captain Martin spun back toward the open lock.

With all his strength, Craig slugged the captain on the side of the jaw. The blow knocked Martin sideways and down to the ramp.

But it did not knock him out. Snarling, he came to his feet. Craig he ignored, the man who had slugged him was not important to him at this moment. Cursing, he started toward the open lock. Craig tackled him around the legs. The captain fell heavily. Craig rolled with him to the edge of the ramp, forced him over it. Both fell to the hard floor of the vast hangar.

In obedience to the voice that had come over the intercom system, and which had sounded very much like the voice of Captain Martin, men were already pouring from the lock.

Beside the ramp, Craig and Captain Martin fought viciously.

In the captain's cabin, Nuoy heard the voice. He snapped open the communica-

tion line between this cabin and the control room.

"What nonsense is this?" he shouted into the mike. "There is no way a dangerous condition can develop in the drive of these ships!" He was speaking the truth. Deep-space ships, all space ships, were hazard proof so far as the drive was concerned. He expected an evasive denial.

"Of course no dangerous condition can develop," the voice from the control room answered.

"Then what do you mean by making so stupid an announcement as this? What are you trying to do, delay my departure? I'll have you stripped of your rank for this piece of nonsense!"

Wrath was in his voice. Before this wrath captains, generals, even the president of Earth Government, trembled.

The voice coming from the control room did not tremble. "Aw, go buy a muzzle for your ugly face," it said, crisply. "Who in the hell do you think you're giving orders to, Dog-face?"

Nuoy was utterly speechless. White with fury, he headed for the control room. He'd teach Captain Martin proper respect for his betters. Charging through the door of the control room, he found there a doddering old man whom he vaguely recognized as having seen around Pluto Station. The old man was sitting in the control chair, a monkey wrench in his hand.

"Who the devil was that who was just speaking to me?" Nuoy demanded.

"Why, I don't know, Mr. Nuoy. No one was speaking from here."

Nuoy glared at him. His suspicions were aroused. "I believe you are lying to me. I believe you were the one who was talking to me like that. I'll have you know—" Nuoy advanced. While he explained what he was going to do, he thrust his head down until it was within a foot of the old man's face.

Adam March slugged him with the monkey wrench. Nuoy went down without a sound. "That's why we call 'em monkey wrenches," March said, satisfaction in his voice. "They're made especially for use on monkeys like you!" Laying the wrench back on the arm of the chair, he ran his fingers over the complex system of controls in front of him.

"Clear the ship, all hands!" his voice went out over the ship. Flipping over to listening, he caught the sound of fleeing footsteps. He smiled to himself. His orders were being obeyed.

"Are all hands clear?" he shouted. "Any-one who is still in the ship, answer at once."

There was no answer. No running footsteps sounded. The ship was clear.

As if his neck had suddenly developed a will of its own, he felt it turn on his shoulders as something entered the control room.

Coming through the open door was a glowing, vibrating, angry ball of flowing crystal light.

Adam did what he had planned to do—what had to be done.

Beside the ramp, Craig knew he was losing the battle with Captain Martin. The captain was tough, hard, strong. He fought like a wild man. Using knees and elbows, he fought as if he was taking orders from someone else and his life was of no consequence.

Kicking Craig in the head, he scrambled to his feet.

The last of the crew were rushing from the ship.

"Yes, Filo," Captain Martin was screaming. "Yes, yes, I know. A horrible mistake has been made. I will correct it."

"See that you correct it immediately!" Filo's angry voice whispered in the air.

Captain Martin leaped up the runway. "Back into the ship!" he shouted at the crew. He ran up the ramp toward the open lock.

Ponderously, the lock swung shut in front of him.

He stopped, dazedly stared at it. The lock could be opened or closed from the control room. He suspected he knew what had happened.

Filo's voice raged at him. "Get into this ship instantly."

"But, I can't! Open the lock for me."

"I can't open it, you fool! Someone has jammed the controls!"

"Ah—" Captain Martin said. The single sound had all the overtones of a prayer.

Craig got to his feet, wobbled up the gangway in time to hear the last of the conversation. He caught Captain Martin's arm. "We've got to get out of the hangar," he

whispered. "If we don't—" He whispered what was going to happen next.

The captain stared at him from bewildered eyes.

A vast throb came from the ship.

"He's warming up the drive!" the captain said. "You're right. Where's the general?"

*T*HE *Andromeda* went out of the hangar without waiting for the vast doors to be opened. There was no time to wait for that, nor would the request to open the doors have been obeyed even if it could have been transmitted. There was a tremendous, thundering screech of tortured metal as she tore the toors down. Then, with Adam March at the controls, she mounted to the sky.

The thing in the air behind him was thrown completely off-balance by the unexpected takeoff. It did not know what to do, consultation with its comrades was necessary before action could be taken. The Sorodrome spun back out of the control room.

Only minutes, perhaps less than minutes, were needed for the Sorodromes to agree on what had to be done.

Filo made the decision. "Destroy that human in the control room!"

Adam March had dreamed all of his life of being at the control of a deep-space ship. Now he had the privilege, now his dream had come true. He felt the surge of vast power at the control of his finger tips as the ship moved out of the hangar. He did not hear the crashing of the big doors. The slight bumps they made in falling was not transmitted through the ship to him. Before him were the bright clear skies of deep space. He pointed the ship upward.

In the long run, he knew what the answer would be. The Sorodromes would certainly conquer him. If they didn't do that, they would clamp down over him the same strange control they had exercised over the men of the *Andromeda*. ..

He did not anticipate that the long run would ever come into being. No! There were men on Pluto who knew what to do and who would do it.

But, even so, he could savor this moment, when a ship of deep space was under his fingers, taking him upward in a blaze of rising glory.

She was still taking him upward when the tracking Z beams struck her. She exploded in a blaze of light that was visible over most of the Solar System.

THE screens in the command center of the station revealed the flare of light that marked the passing of the *Andromeda*. The room was silent. General Stanley turned back to Craig and Mary, asking them to repeat again the story that had moved him to take this action.

Dazed, the general listened. When they had finished, he turned again to Captain Martin.

"But this immortality you talked about on Star Goal?" he questioned.

"The immortality is there all right," Captain Martin answered. "It is both real and unreal. There is no question that the Sorodromes can slow changes in body cells which produces immortality. But the process they use to do this gives them almost complete control over you. And the immortality and the control go together. Once the control is broken, the increased life span goes too. Also, if the control is broken, you begin to age very rapidly, until you come up to your actual age. Thus within the next year every man who flew with the *Andromeda* will find his body processes catching up with his chronological age."

The captain's face had become etched with lines during the past few minutes, mute evidence of the process now beginning in him. But he did not seem to mind the immortality he had lost, the price he had paid for it had been too high.

"There's one blessing anyhow," the general said. "Nuoy went with the ship." His eyes glowed at the thought of that. The Solar System would be a better place to live for many men because Nuoy was no longer in it.

"But I still don't understand about Adam March," Craig persisted. "He knew too much about the *Andromeda*."

"Not too much," Captain Martin said. "He designed and built her."

"What?" Craig gasped.

The captain nodded. "In those days he was a deep-space ship designer. His life's dream was to fly one of them, a dream he was too old to realize. But he designed and built the *Andromeda*. The next best thing to flying her, for him, was to have me fly her."

The general's face showed sudden interest.

"I see," Craig said. "If he designed the *Andromeda*, then he would know about her." His brows wrinkled as a new thought came into his mind. "But he was working here as a janitor. How—"

"Maybe several reasons," the captain answered. "His real life was the *Andromeda*. He probably came here and took any job he could get, because this would be her first landing if she ever returned to the system. If she ever came back, he wanted to be on hand to welcome her."

"Oh," Craig said. In that brief explanation, most of the puzzle of Adam March's actions became clear. "But how did he know that something was wrong on the ship?"

Captain Martin's face grew grim. "I didn't see him when I came off the ship, but I think he saw me. At the sight of me, he knew something was wrong, knew it in a way that made it impossible for him to be mistaken. He took her off alone, not only to save the station, but to save me."

"What?" Craig gasped. "He knew you, twenty years ago, before the *Andromeda* jumped into deep space?"

"Slightly," Captain Martin answered. "His name wasn't March then, it was Martin. He was my father."