

PLANET STORIES



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Pell smiled, leveled the blaster and depressed the stud.



Erupting from hyper-space in the teeth of startled DIC patrols and readying all hands for a crash-landing, adventurer Fletcher Pell could still wonder which he dreaded more—the U-235 in the hold . . . or the strange girl by his side.

Z-DAY ON CENTAURI

By HENRY T. SIMMONS

PELL TWISTED INTO THE black maw of the alley and ran silently and swiftly into its depths. His breath came in whistling agonized gasps. Faintly he heard the foot-steps of his assailant—now more clearly as the latter turned into the alley after him. Vaguely Pell could make out his sil-

houette outlined by the dim light that filtered in from the street.

"Ugh!" Pell struck a hard surface at the end of the alley with a grunt that he could not stifle.

Trapped! Frantically he felt about to find an opening. Softly and steadily he cursed himself, trying to keep black des-

pair at bay. Maybe if he . . . but the idea died in birth.

"Chuu!"

A blue lancet of flame arced over Pell's shoulder and struck the wall, turning a small area into running slag. The heat and prickling of the radiation Pell ignored. But the brief flash had given up his position. Then he heard his pursuer laugh softly and he knew the game was up. He felt rather than heard him moving in.

Paumm!

Pell's universe rocked in the reverberating thunder of the explosion.

Paumm! Paumm!

Twice more it was repeated and in the vivid flash Pell saw his assailant twist and collapse on his face. His amazement fought with a new dread. Someone had come to his aid, but with an ancient, chemical-reaction, hand weapon. What did that mean? With his back tensed against the wall, Pell strained his perceptions to the utmost, trying to adjust his eyes once more to the darkness. Then he jumped.

"Pell!" It was a woman's voice! "Fletcher Pell! Come out—I am a friend!"

He was aware of a faint outlander quality in her accent—as if she were a colonial. Dimly he could make out her slight figure at the mouth of the *cul de sac*. He moved cautiously toward her, stopping to pick up the blaster of the fallen DIC agent. The comforting feel of its butt gave him confidence as he walked toward her.

"Who are you?" Pell asked. She was small and lithe, and in the dim radiance of the street lights he noticed that she had brown hair with glints of spun-gold in it.

She did not reply to his question but put a soft hand over his mouth. "Let your questions wait. We must leave quickly, else they find us," she said huskily. She led him from the alley and walked breathlessly down the dark street, two of her steps matching one of his long ones.

There was a fast-looking black speeder at the corner. She motioned him in and no sooner had the door closed than the speeder leaped forward and melted into the traffic. The girl relaxed in the seat

beside him, the sudden easing of the tension making her hands shake.

"Who are you?" Pell asked, repeating his earlier question.

She looked at him keenly in the dim light that splashed through the windows of the speeder. "Perhaps, Mr. Pell," she replied at length, "it would not be too wise to reveal identities yet. I have a certain proposition to discuss and I think it might be better to talk first about that."

Pell shrugged and said, "As long as you choose to remain my unknown benefactor, how about benefiting me with a drink?"

The voice of the driver replied unexpectedly from the front seat. "Here."

Pell accepted a gleaming flask and took a long drink. "Ahh," he said at length. "Do you have much ulcer trouble on Centaura?"

The girl looked at him, startled. "You are very shrewd, Pell. I hope you won't become too clever for your own good."

Out of the corner of his eye Pell saw her hand creep for the pocket of her jumper and it occurred to him that silence would possibly be wiser at that.

THE voice of the driver broke in from the front seat. "Miss Helmuth, the DIC patrols are thick around here—we had better head out of town."

The girl looked through the plastine rear window and the dim glow of the street lamps etched lines of strain about her mouth. "You're right, Heintz. Slip out of the traffic and head for the space port."

Heintz grunted affirmatively and presently the black speeder emerged from the traffic and roared out of the city, leaving behind the red and black DIC patrols aimlessly searching the city for Pell and the unknown killer of the DIC agent.

The girl turned to him once more and began to speak—rather cautiously, it seemed to Pell.

"We have been looking for you for a long time, Pell," she said. "It was only by the purest accident that we found you in time to save your life tonight.

"Formerly you were a space pilot—in fact you owned a business. But you were crushed by the Drake Interstellar Corporation, even to the extent of losing your

license. And now the DIC, taking no chances with you, is determined to kill you. Because you are a hunted enemy of the DIC *and* a space pilot, we felt that you might be interested in our proposition."

"And what is that?" Pell asked.

"If you are to remain alive," she replied, "you must leave Earth. But you have no ship. I have the ship and also want to leave Earth, but cannot without a pilot."

"Then why don't you simply hire a licensed pilot and be done with it?" Pell asked, his eyes narrowed.

"No licensed pilot would accept the job."

"Then how do you know I will?"

"Have you followed in the daily papers the account of the Junta on Centauri V?" she countered.

Instantly Pell realized the fantastic truth. Indeed he had heard of the coup. Insurgents had successfully taken over the government and were keeping the DIC warships at bay with planet-mounted blast rifles. But speculation was rife in the daily papers as to how long they could hold out with their limited supply of U-235, for it was the colonial policy of the DIC-controlled Earth Government never to allow more than a meager amount of the universal fuel to be shipped at any one time to a colonial planet.

With growing amazement, Pell realized that the girl was an agent of old Matt Faradson, the leader of the revolt. And her purpose here on Earth was now obvious to him. He felt a quick rise in sympathy for her, but kept it out of his voice.

"In other words, you want me to pilot you and a load of U-235 to Centauri V?" he asked bluntly.

The girl nodded. "We have managed to secure secretly five kilos of U-235 and it is now stored in the ship's cadmium and graphite vaults. With it, Faradson will be able to stand off the constant skirmishing attacks of the DIC until he can build his own refining plants."

Pell whistled softly to himself, his mind busy on the train of thought the girl had presented. Of course, the Earth Government was little more than a semblance of democracy now; its shortsighted actions of more than two hundred

years ago had brought it to its present situation where it was little more than a mouth-piece of huge economic empires like the Drake Interstellar Corporation, one of the largest.

When the planets of the solar system had been opened up for exploitation, the Earth Government rashly granted proprietary charters to the corporations to handle them. And even then, two hundred years ago, colonial trouble existed. As a matter of fact, they prompted Earth's decision not to allow the refining of U-235 anywhere except Earth, although it could be mined on any planet and shipped to Earth for refining. It was this control of the universal power source that enabled the Earth Government to hold the colonial planets of her interstellar empire in such tight rein. And the DIC practically controlled the Earth Government, so there it was.

Faradson's Insurgents had revolted against that control. In addition they wanted an equal and democratic voice in the Earth-Mars-Venus Federation, as well as freedom to manufacture their own U-235.

PELL looked up at the girl thoughtfully. He noticed that she had been watching him anxiously, apparently awaiting his reply to her proposition.

"Okay," he said at last. "I'm game. Now how about answering a few questions for me, Miss . . . ah . . ."

"Helmuth, Margaret Helmuth — but I prefer Gret. What are your questions?"

"That was one of them," Pell replied, grinning. "Why don't you get one of your own men to pilot the ship?"

"Colonials are not allowed the mastery of space navigation or piloting. It's a security measure," she replied simply. "They are allowed to master space mechanics, however. Heintz is your mechanic, incidentally." She indicated the man in the front seat behind the wheel of the speeder.

"How about weapons? Why do you use such a cumbersome, ancient thing like that pistol?"

Gret Helmuth laughed. "I see you know very little about colonial affairs, Pell. Of course we are not allowed the use of atomic weapons—that would make

revolt all too easy. And naturally I could not risk acquiring one here.

"You see, almost all of our technology is geared on a twentieth century level. Only the DIC-controlled power stations and their mercenary army on Centaura are allowed the use of atomic power and weapons."

Pell shrugged and looked at the dark countryside rushing past the speeder. He had not known that it was really as bad as all that. Obviously the colonials had good reason for their revolution. And now it was up to him to run a DIC blockade and deliver five kilos of U-235 to the revolutionaries. Absently he put a cigarette in his mouth and flicked the stud of his lighter.

Gret Helmuth's startled whistling gasp snapped him out of his reverie. Even Heintz grunted audibly from behind the wheel and the speeder swerved slightly as it sped down the road.

Pell stared from one to the other with surprise. "What's the matter with you two?" he asked.

"That—that thing you're lighting that cigarette with! What is it?" Gret gasped.

"Oh!" Pell laughed. "I see you're not very familiar with Earth technology," he mocked. "This is a 'Rippo Little-Blast Dandy Atomic Cigarette Lighter.' Cute little novelty, isn't it?"

He flicked the stud again, demonstrating its pale blue flame. In spite of herself, Gret shuddered. Heintz sputtered something in the front seat which Pell didn't quite catch.

II

SILENTLY THE SPEEDER drove down the ramp past rows of cradled space ships. In the darkness Pell could see very little more than their shadowy shapes. Over on the east part of the field Pell could make out the nightly DIC liner to Mars loading passengers. He wondered vaguely what kind of a ship they were using. From what Gret had said about not desiring to attract attention, he was already a little dubious.

Smoothly the black speeder drew to a halt and Pell got out to examine the little ship before him. It was an obsolete Mark

III interceptor. Pell whistled softly as he looked at the hull where huge flakes of rust were apparent, even in the dim light. Its jets were in bad condition; their surfaces were corroded and scarred, but he noted with satisfaction that they had recently been scraped clean of exhaust deposits. Followed by the girl and Heintz, he entered the air-lock and looked at the interior of the ship.

"Let me show you the fine points of this can, Pell," the fat man said, switching on the illumination. He squeezed by Pell and shoved his ungainly body up the passage-way to the control room.

When Pell entered, the fat man's face was creased with a smile that extended from one huge ear to the other on his tiny bullet head. Proudly he pointed at the celestial globe for extra-dimensional navigation.

"Ain't that a beauty? And here's the Thelmar Distorter Generator. Installed it myself, just this afternoon."

With a sinking feeling, Pell stared at the incomprehensible maze of cables that spewed out of the thing and slithered across the deck to their unknown destinations. Heintz squeezed by him again and thrust himself back through the narrow passage-way to the waist where Gret Helmuth was waiting.

Heintz demonstrated the jerry-built uranium vaults which had been welded hap-hazardly to any convenient spot. "It's all there," Heintz beamed. "Enough to last ten years."

He motioned for Pell to follow him and disappeared into the stern of the ship.

Pell emerged a few minutes later, his face an unnatural shade of green. With great deliberation he lowered himself into one of the shock chairs and looked up at Gret Helmuth helplessly.

"That creaky converter won't even get us off the ground, much less take the hyper-space jump," he said.

She looked at him coolly and replied, "This is the best we could do, Mr. Pell. If you are afraid, you can back out now, but—" she produced the ancient automatic pistol she had used with such deadly effect earlier in the evening, "I warn you that I will have to kill you if you do. We cannot take chances."

Pell looked at her eyes. They were bleak and frosty and as hard as blue diamonds. He knew she meant what she said. He shrugged. With everyone apparently intent upon erasing him, it didn't make too much difference where he died. And he would certainly prefer death in space rather than in some back alley.

"Okay, baby, I'll pilot this tub. But you'd better be ready to get out and push!"

He turned to go forward, then stopped as if remembering something. "You realize that this ship is strictly contraband, don't you?"

She nodded. "So?"

"So we simply cannot pass the Geiger Check."

"Then we shall blast off without it," she replied, woman-like.

Pell laughed harshly. "Before we reach the Heavside the planet-mounted blasters will fry us to a cinder!"

She was still unperturbed. "Then you must figure a way to get us off without that happening," she replied. "After all, you're the pilot."

Pell spread his hands helplessly. "Ah, woman, thy logic is flawless," he muttered half-aloud.

Thoughtfully he looked through the waist port at the liner which had almost completed loading. An idea struck him. He turned to the girl again.

"Get Heintz and harness yourselves in those shock suits. And use these shock chairs in the waist—they're safer. We will blast off the instant that liner does."

IN SPITE of the iron control which had kept her face impassive, Gret Helmuth gasped.

"Do you think we can evade the planet-mounteds by that means?" she asked, her outlander accent very apparent.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe. They won't be able to shoot even if they track us both all the way to the Heavside because they won't know which one is us. But when we hit Heavside, they'll know—our ship will be pushing 20 G's and the liner a miserable four. We should be out of their range by then, though. However, don't count on it too much—we'll have every DIC warship in the system on our tail and we may have to fight

yet." He turned and disappeared up the little passage-way.

In the control room Pell wriggled awkwardly into the ungainly shock suit that would enable him to live during tremendous accelerations. Squeezing in behind the massive board, he seated himself in the throne-like shock chair and flipped on the intercom.

"Pell to waist . . . can you hear me?"

"Gotcha," the voice of Heintz came over. "We're ready."

"Are the blasters on this tub armed, Heintz?"

"Yeah. Armed 'em myself this afternoon."

"Cross your fingers . . . Pell out."

Briefly the electros shrieked up the scale to inaudibility followed by the muffled, reluctant keening of the converter. Pell looked through the forward plastine observation shield. The liner was also warming up its converters; occasionally a shower of red-hot cinders flew out of the blast pit as the pilot gunned his converters. Any minute now . . . there it was!

Slowly the huge liner wallowed from its elevated cradle cushioned on a pillar of blue flame. Pell opened his own feed valves a trifle and his primitive converter responded nicely, thrusting the Mark III out of its cradle and up after the passenger liner. Slowly Pell advanced the feed, trying to match the liner's lift. Presently he lost sight of the liner as its speed mounted, but he was familiar with the trajectory it used and he followed it at four G's.

His vizer light was blinking an angry red. He flipped it on and the corpulent, blotched face of a petty official blossomed out of the gray nothingness of the screen.

"What is the meaning of this outrage?" he blustered at Pell. "If you do not decelerate at once, I shall order the planet-mounteds to fire on you!"

Pell tried to force a blank look on his face. "What do you mean, sir? This is a DIC passenger liner headed for Mars. Didn't we pass the Geiger Check?"

The official looked sick. Then his face became an enraged, mottled red. "If you think you can get away with this . . ." he sputtered.

Pell laughed at him and flipped the vizer off. He looked at his instruments

. . . another minute now. The back of his shoulders crawled as he contemplated the unpleasant possibility of a planet-mounted blaster burning the little ship to a cinder. Over his vizi-phone he heard the official trying to contact the liner. Again he looked quickly at his instruments. *Now!*

Savagely he opened the converter feed valves and the little ship leaped forward. His fingers played with practiced ease on the jet keys, forcing the ship into a wildly spiralling trajectory. Its path soon resembled a jagged fork of lightning. Let 'em try to get a fix on that, he reflected.

Far off to his left he fancied he saw the dim, almost-spent radiance of a blaster probing for him. Laughing to himself, he straightened the course of the ship and piled on the acceleration. Like the second hand of a clock, the acceleration dial moved up the scale.

An eye-searing 12 G's . . . then 15 . . . 18 . . . Finally the needle came to quivering rest at a lung-torturing, bone-crushing 20 G's. The converter screamed just above audio-frequency. The wheezy thing seemed to be pushing like a little trooper, Pell reflected.

His inter-com crackled for a moment, then he heard the labored voice of Gret Helmuth.

"Nice work, Pell. Do you think there will be any more trouble getting out of the system?"

"No, but hold tight, just in case. How's Heintz?"

"He's . . . asleep."

Pell grunted to himself. He was worried about the fat man; the acceleration wouldn't do his heart much good. He tried to settle back in his shock suit more comfortably, then realized that the acceleration held him like a vice. Already the oil-cushioned buoyancy pads seemed to thrust into him like spikes. Breathing deeply, he manipulated the massagers in his shock suit.

Just beyond Orbit Luna, Pell gradually swung the nose of the ship toward the nadir of the solar elliptic and the ship streaked out of the system. Turning up the detectors to full sensitivity, Pell tried to relax and sleep—because sleep was actually the only thing to do under tremendous accelerations.

PAINFULLY Pell awoke. He let his eyes flicker over the instruments and nodded with satisfaction as he saw that the ship's velocity had reached 400 miles per second. Stiffly he cut the converter to one G and locked in the robot controls. Instantly the tremendous weight was removed from his body. He shrugged out of his shock suit with every bone in his body aching in discord.

When he had clambered through the narrow passage-way to the waist he saw that Gret was likewise divesting herself of the cumbersome garment.

"We're pushing 400 a second now," he reported. "In another 20 hours we can drop into hyper-space. How's it going back here?"

Gret indicated Heintz who seemed to be asleep. But the ragged gasps of his breathing belied this; Pell knew he was unconscious.

"He's been like this since blast-off—his heart, I believe," she stated matter-of-factly.

Pell frowned. "I was afraid of that. We'd better give him some amytal."

He rummaged around in the medical kit and brought out a hypo. He jabbed Heintz and eased him back into his harness. The fat man's breath became more relaxed and even. Then a question occurred to Pell.

"By the way, why didn't you let me know over the inter-com that Heintz was in this shape?" he asked her.

"You would have cut acceleration and we would have lost time—maybe even have been blasted. If the same thing had happened to me, Heintz would have acted as I did." Her soft, tanned features were hard and single-minded determination blazed from her eyes.

"Pell," she continued, "if I don't come through this, you must deliver the U-235 one way or another."

Pell considered that "one way or another". It sounded ominous and he wondered what it meant. He asked her.

She answered bluntly. "DIC has a swarm of blockaders covering the planet. Nothing can get in or out, except with the greatest risk."

"Have you got any ideas?" he asked.

"No. We are depending on you for that. But there is one way that can't fail.

We can drop into hyper-space, evade them, and drop out over the planet. The U-235 is indestructible. They'll find it in the wreckage."

She said it so simply that Pell shuddered in spite of himself. It was nothing more than a proposal of suicide. To drop from hyper-space in the neighborhood of any mass would set up a space-strain that would crush their ship like an egg.

He looked at her thoughtfully. Even in her rough plasto cover-all she was strikingly beautiful. But blue eyes that should have been soft and deep were hard and icy with determination. Her delicate red lips were crushed in a straight brutal line and a beautifully molded chin was out-thrust stubbornly.

Pell chuckled, then said, "You don't seem to remember that you are dealing with a drunken bum whom you picked out of a gutter, Gret. But even though I don't claim to have any ideals and principles, I am a space pilot, not a kamikaze. If there is no better way than that, we won't do it."

She stared at him with disgust in her eyes. "I thought you were a man, not a coward!"

The words stung Pell. Savagely he gripped her arm and snarled, face close to her, "I don't give two cents for your paltry revolution and I certainly don't intend to die in it. Furthermore, I don't particularly give a damn for you and your refrigerated ways. But then I suppose all of you colonial peasant women are of the same mold." He sneered.

Whack.

His face stung and his eyes smarted from the strength of her slap. Her eyes blazed at him furiously.

"Faradson is depending on this Uranium. It will get to him regardless of the means." She produced the ancient automatic pistol. "If there is no other way, I shall force you to do my bidding with this!"

Pell looked at her contemptuously, turned, and groped back to the control room. When he shrugged into his shock suit, she entered similarly clad. She still held the weapon and her eyes were icy. Her mouth twitched out of control. She seated herself in the shock chair beside him, saying nothing.

Pell switched his gaze from the dials before him to her face. With a leisurely motion he reached out, took her pistol, and thrust it into his pocket.

"I'm getting tired of that thing, baby," he said.

He turned his attention back to the maze of instruments spread before him on the control board and spoke to the girl again without looking up.

"You want speed? Well, baby, you'll get it, regardless of our fat friend back there!"

He jerked his thumb back at the waist. The craft leaped forward, slamming him back into the shock chair. The indicators trembled in their pads and the acceleration needle registered 23 G's.

PELL'S HEAD throbbed in rhythm to the shriek of the overworked converter. He goaded his tired eyes to pierce the pain haze that filmed them. The acceleration was more than 600 miles per second. His bones had lead for marrow; each of his joints was a separate discord in a cacophony of pains that tortured him. Bending his will with a great effort, he cut the converter to one G.

Instantly the body-smashing weight lifted from him. For several moments he did not try to move. His heart raced madly as the pressure was removed from it. Pell breathed deeply and looked at the girl. She was slumped forward in the shock chair but even as he looked at her, she began to stir. In spite of himself, Pell felt a twinge of respect for her.

He busied himself with the Thelgard Distorter Field. This would enable the craft to drop into extra-dimensional space, so to speak, by wrapping of folding space about itself. Working rapidly, Pell shot an orbit in the celestial globe, computed it, and jotted some figures down on a pad.

He looked over his shoulder at the girl. "We'll have to fall free for a moment to go into hyper-space, so brace yourself."

He cut the converter entirely and his stomach reacted like that of a diver with the bends. It almost literally tied itself in knots. The girl moaned in pain and grasped the sides of the shock chair. Pell's jaw hardened as he wound up the Thelgard Generator to build up the field

about the ship. The familiar stars danced and flickered; then disappeared. He sighed and stepped up the converter to one G acceleration.

He arose from his chair wearily and shrugged from his heavy suit. Addressing the girl behind him, he said, "We won't be needing these things for awhile. You had better go back to the waist and look at Heintz."

Pell turned and looked at her. She was watching him curiously. Her face was strained and lines were etched deeply about her mouth. Her eyes were no longer cold; they were very tired.

"You're a strange man, Pell," she said at length. "I am sorry about . . . about that business of awhile ago."

Pell smiled. "I am sorry, too, Gret."

For the first time since he had known her, Gret Helmuth smiled. It was a warm smile and it did strange things to Pell. Before she could reply to his peace offering, his arms were around her and he kissed her. She seemed to respond instinctively for a moment, then pushed him away.

She laughed and said cynically, "That was a rather obvious development, wasn't it?" She disappeared down the narrow passage-way to the waist.

Pell savored the memory of her lips for a moment, then grimaced to himself. She was right, of course.

He exhaled a cloud of smoke and watched its tendrils stream around the control panel and fluff against the plastine observation shield. He tried not to look at the blackness outside because it hurt his eyes. Men had been known to go mad from looking too long at the alien strangeness of this extra-dimensional space which was not for human eyes. Its very nothingness seemed to twist at one's mind.

He glanced at his instruments, then at the celestial navigation globe. In normal space the ship had traveled some four and one-third light years. But in hyperspace it had moved very little during the two hours it had been under the Thelmard.

He turned to Gret. "We've arrived—at least that's what this thing says." He patted the globe. "How's Heintz?"

"Okay now. I gave him some more amytal."

"Umm. That's dangerous stuff—be careful," Pell said. "We're going to fall free again—watch it!"

He cut the converter and deftly cranked up the detectors to full sensitivity. Then he held his breath as he cut the Thelmard and dropped out of hyperspace for an instant. He jumped in spite of himself as all hell broke loose. The detector alarm clamored deafeningly and its red light blinked feverishly.

Throwing up the Thelmard again, Pell turned to the girl and mopped his brow. "I don't think they caught us on their own detectors, but we almost dropped out in their laps." He grinned.

"We now have a first class, double-barreled problem on our hands. This bucket has momentum amounting to about 600 miles per second. We've got to get rid of that. But if we do it too soon the DIC boys will be able to match our speed. And if we do it too late, we'll make quite a puddle on Centaura."

"Naturally," he went on, "they've concentrated most of their strength at zenith and nadir. So we'll drop out of hyperspace in the elliptic and try to fall in free from there. They won't be able to detect us for quite a while and they won't be able to match our 600 miles per second in time to catch us. But I'm afraid we'll have to run the gauntlet of DIC cruisers already in position."

He glanced at her. Excitement burned two red spots high on her cheeks.

III

SIXTY-FIVE MILLION MILES out beyond the huge red ball of Centauri VI the small space ship suddenly dropped into normal space. It pitched drunkenly, every separate member of its construction squealing in protest. Pell realized they were all too close to mass, but it couldn't be helped.

At 600 miles per second the ship hurtled toward Centaura, steadily eating up the distance. He cut the converter and every other power source in the ship except the detector sensitives which he fastened to his wrists. On DIC radar the little Mark III would be a black speck, unnoticeable against the huge disc of Centauri VI, and the backlash of enemy

radiation detectors combined with their Heisenberg Factors ruled that method out unless their ships were within a range of 500,000 miles.

The pale glow of the Alpha Centauri sun shed a dim illumination about the control room. Pell turned to Gret and grinned recklessly at her. "You'll have to put up with 72 hours of this—then the fun begins."

The slight motion of his head propelled his weightless body out of the shock chair in which he had been sprawled. He instinctively extended his arm to stop his upward motion and touched Gret's hand. He pulled it slightly and she rose gently from the chair and into his arms.

There was warmth in her lips, but even more in her kisses.

The detector sensitives fastened to Pell's wrists had been twinging more frequently and more painfully. They were less than five million miles from their goal—only three hours from the blue-green disc that blossomed and expanded even as they watched it in the screen.

"Better put on your shock suit, Gret. We've come as far as it is safe—we've got to decelerate now," he said.

Grunting with annoyance, he tried to shrug himself into the weightless garment which slithered about in his grasp. He flipped on the suit's power and sighed with satisfaction at the gentle kneading of the massagers. He clipped his liquid-cushioned eye-stops in place and squeezed into his seat, putting on the helmet.

"Ready now, Pell," Gret's voice came out over the inter-com.

Pell grunted and began to wind up the converter. Somewhere deep in the ship's bowels it began to sing up the scale as the starter electros were clutched in. His detector began to clack and clatter busily as its relays responded to the impact of DIC radar which converged on the ship. Pell smiled mirthlessly as he fed full converter thrust to the braking jets and waited expectantly for the detector to give him the alarm.

It did so—soon.

The red warning lights flickered and the alarm clamored intermittently up and down the scale. They had his position and orbit now.

The minutes of waiting piled up with agonizing slowness. Pell turned down the sensitives of the detector. Its constant shrilling assaulted his ear-drums painfully. Steadily he fed braking thrust to the forward jets until the needle stood at a body-battering 19 G's. He turned up the oxygen flow in his helmet with a flexing of his cheek muscles. His backbone felt as if it were in imminent danger of being forced through his body and blackness hung just off the edges of his vision.

Somewhere out there in that star-studded blackness was the enemy. The main body was not in detector range yet, but it was there, nevertheless. Jockeying into position, warming up their blasters, swinging turrets to hair-line accuracy and waiting . . . waiting . . .

His detector clattered determinedly now. Pell glanced at it. A brief smile flitted over his hard, tensed features. At least two were out of range.

Experimentally he flicked his blaster switch and was pleased with the deadly cones of blue radiance which flickered from the gun snouts.

There! And there! Converging above and below the nose of his ship were swarms of deadly little two-man Mark IX's. Dimly he could make out in the detector screen the deadly blue lattice-work of blaster beams that awaited him.

Under this pressure his mind worked like a machine with the speed of light, analyzing, rejecting, planning, replanning . . . As they blew up in size with fantastic speed on the screen, Pell acted like lightning. In a blurring motion he cut the converter, fell free for an instant, wound up the converter to the aft jets and thrust up—up, and suddenly out of range.

But the enemy had anticipated his move. As he eased the thrust from the aft jets, two points of light twinkled and blossomed in the duration of a single heart-beat into his screen. A pair of DIC fighters! And they had him like a cold pigeon!

FOR one brief instant Pell was paralyzed and that was long enough for the enemy. The whistling *whoosh* of air escaping through a rent in the hull died away as the automatic self-sealers went

into action, but it gave vivid testimony of the enemy's aim.

Reacting like a coiled spring, Pell jabbed his blaster switch, catching one of the DIC fighters squarely in his sights. It seemed to fall to pieces in the midst of the minor nova of its own disintegration. The second enemy fighter flashed past like a bullet, but not before Pell chewed off half its aft jets with his blasters.

For a moment he was in the clear. Quickly he examined the function dials; found to his dismay that his aft jets were nothing more than slag now, with all the tube connections severed.

"What . . . what happened?" Gret gasped.

"We've been in a fight, baby, and we got a black eye," Pell cracked. "But don't worry—I'll set this can down in spite of those missing jets."

He bent over his instruments again, a furrow slowly forming between his brows. That fight had taken time—too much valuable time. He had just two hours to decelerate from the tremendous velocity of the ship to the comparative slow velocity of Centauri V.

Discarding the last of his caution, he crammed all the braking thrust possible on the ancient converter. Up—up went the gravity needle; up past the red line at 23 G's; up past a heart-wracking 27 G's; up to an inconceivable thirty gravities where it quivered sluggishly.

Pell's body weighed over two and a half tons! His eyes weighed five pounds each and thrust agonizingly against their liquid cushion transparent stops. The converter screamed its super-sonic thunder, setting the separate members of the ship's body to vibrating madly. Every moment was red-hazed agony of an eon's duration; every second a year of exquisite pain.

The blue-green disc of Centauri V expanded visibly in the screen. Even through the observation shield Pell could make out its crescent. The brake jets were doing their work—but it would be a near thing—a very near thing. Pell prayed that there would be no more fighters; aside from the fact that he couldn't maneuver, he could still less afford to lose the time.

When the ball of Centaura puffed over all the screen and its edges were no longer visible, Pell broadcast the prearranged signal of recognition to the planet-mounted blaster batteries below. Scrambled almost beyond analysis and recognition, the acknowledging signal came back.

Suddenly Pell realized that Centaura's curvature had ballooned to flatness and on the heels of that realization came the whispering, high-pitched wail of a ship travelling at high velocity in thin atmosphere. Rapidly the wail became an ear-shattering, sustained screech and the small warning lights of the hull thermometers began to glow redly.

Nose *outward*, rather than pointed *down*, Pell continued to brake the ship with all forward thrust, depending upon the planet's attraction to prevent him from hurtling off into space on a tangent and into the jaws of the DIC fleet.

Pell never remembered how many times he blacked out, nor how many revolutions of the planet he made. Shaking the ever encroaching blackness from the borders of his vision, Pell had a fleeting memory of a heavily-forested mountain flashing by beneath, followed by a fertile plateau, a river, then mountains rising ahead.

Streaking over these with a cushion of fire thrust before it, the ship hurtled at a visibly slower pace down a rocky gorge with jagged mountains on each side. Then, decelerated almost to a stop, the battered space ship seemed to poise for an instant, then turned over gently and gouged a deep furrow in the soft ground. For perhaps 400 yards it smashed through low timber and came to a halt at the brink of a small stream where the scream of rending metal finally died away.

The last thing Pell remembered was cutting out the converter.

IV

PELL WAS FIRST CONSCIOUS OF time—a duration between the recurring sequence of pain jags. Gradually the pain left him to be transformed into a dull ache which encompassed his whole body. Every separate nerve end seemed to shoot subtle, rapid messages to his cortex, announcing that they were not feeling well.

He opened his eyes; blinked them several times to shake the web of blackness from them. He tried to move. Pure, unadulterated anguish backlashed at him. With a mighty effort he concentrated his will on the task of overcoming the surging wash of pain.

He rose unsteadily to his feet, gritting his teeth as agony swelled his head. The ship was a crumpled mass of smoking wreckage. Pell noticed dully through one of the shattered ports that it had scorched the area in which it lay and its path through the low timber was charred and black.

Suddenly he realized it was hot inside the shock suit—very hot. He stooped over Gret and picked her up. He tried the airlock in the waist; it was jammed shut. But further aft he found a gaping rent in the ship's metal skin. Gently he lowered her still form through it.

He returned to the waist and unharnessed Heintz from the shock chair. Pell realized that the fat man was too ponderous for him to lift; hence he dragged him awkwardly to the rent in the ship and stuffed him through unceremoniously. Stopping only to pick up the kit of medical supplies, Pell followed.

He stripped off his shock suit and looked at Gret anxiously. He took off her helmet and saw that her face was very pale. Gingerly he pulled her out of the heavy suit and felt in the medical kit for a stimulant. Her gold-blonde hair fell across his arm lightly as he administered the hypo. A touch of color began to come into her cheeks beneath the tan and she breathed more easily.

He turned to Heintz and wrestled for a minute or two with his huge body, trying to extricate it from the suit. The fat man's body sagged lifelessly as if his joints were made of jelly. Cursing under his breath, Pell upended him and dragged off the bulky garment.

Reaching for his wrist, Pell found his pulse with some difficulty. Heintz still lived, but the accelerated shallow pumping of his heart indicated that something would have to be done in a hurry. Hastily Pell jabbed his arm with a hypo and watched Heintz anxiously until he felt his pulse pick up with greater strength.

Sudden reaction hit Pell and he sat down heavily. For the first time he noticed their

surroundings. The crushed wreck of the little space ship was poised on the brink of a small stream and faintly Pell heard it tumbling over rapids in the distance. The stream disappeared around a small rise in ground and to the right and left at a distance of perhaps five miles, Pell could make out rocky escarpments of a mighty range of mountains clearly defined in the light of the late afternoon sun. The air had a distinct chill in it and Pell was on the point of returning to the ship to try to salvage some garments when he heard Gret Helmuth gasp. He bent over her as her eyes opened.

"Pell . . . did we make it?" she asked painfully.

He smoothed the hair from her face tenderly and grinned. "Yeah, we made it. But there isn't much left of the ship."

She tried to rise from her prone position and half succeeded when she fell back with a moan.

PELL laughed and said, "I wouldn't try that so soon, Gret. Better let the corpuscles splash around before you do it again."

He made as if to rise, touching her hand. Instinctively it tightened on his and he settled beside her again. The Centauri sky was a deep cobalt blue and the wind was keen and bracing. He felt in his jumper pocket for a couple of cigarettes and his atomic lighter. The novelty's vicious looking, hazy blue flame made Gret jump in spite of herself and Pell grinned.

At length the girl spoke. "Pell, I don't like the idea of waiting around here. I mean . . . well, I have a feeling that something is wrong."

Pell glanced at her. It was plain to see that she was worried and uncertain; he could almost feel it as a tangible thing.

"How do you mean?" he asked her.

"Well . . . for one thing, these hills. We're somewhere in the Cheon Range and there were remnants of DIC mercenaries dug in here when I left. They were holding out in an abandoned blaster tower around here somewhere. If they should happen to be in the neighborhood—" She shrugged.

Pell felt a distinct chill settle down the base of his spine. "If your Insurgents are worth their U-235, they've tracked us on

their radar. They should be here any minute," he said reassuringly.

He rose and clambered into the ship through the rent in its side in order to salvage some outer garments because the air was becoming colder. When he returned from the ship to the place where Gret lay, he noticed that she was trembling—and not from the cold.

"What's the matter, baby?" he asked, concerned.

She tried to smile at him. "We outlanders are a queer bunch, Pell. We . . . we hear things. There are men—many men down the valley and they are fighting. Both groups want to capture this ship." She shrugged her shoulders helplessly. "But—"

A memory of long-dead hackles rose along the back of Pell's neck. Shadows were growing longer and in the west he could see Alpha Centauri poised over the rocky rim of the mountain, ready to plunge beneath.

SUDDENLY he heard it. Far down the valley carved in the living rocks by the small stream came the sound of firing. And it was moving closer. He looked at Gret who had scrambled to her feet; evidently she had 'heard' this long before him. Silently he handed her the huge automatic pistol which he had taken from her in the ship and tightened his hand on the butt of the tiny blaster which he had taken from the body of the DIC assassin whom she had killed that first night.

Breathing hard, they dragged Heintz to the lee of the ship to shelter him from the fire. Then they waited. In the waning glow of the last of the sunlight the woods off to the right took on an ominous appearance. They could hear the sound of shooting quite plainly now, interspersed with faint shouting. It carried well in the air which had become bitterly cold. Pell strained his eyes in the direction of the firing and for an instant he fancied he could see flashes. But which side was which?

Suddenly Gret grabbed at his arm and motioned violently behind them on the other side of the wrecked ship. Pell swore softly and crawled swiftly around the slag heap of the aft jets, blaster in hand. Dimly he could make out figures hurrying

toward the ship in the cover of the trees.

"Stop!" he called.

A bomb exploding among them could have had no greater effect. They began to run helter-skelter for the ship, the weapons in their hands leaping into life. The ragged hack and roar of their machine-guns and pistols momentarily stunned Pell, but, recovering, he let loose with his blaster. Its cone of blue radiance was bright in the gathering dusk and Pell knew he had given up his position immediately, but he had no choice. The running figures seemed to falter and fall in heaps—then his blaster failed! Rapidly he checked it and found to his dismay that the tiny thing needed recharging.

All at once the attackers were on top of him—and behind him! The thunderous bark of Gret's automatic was suddenly stilled and on the heels of that knowledge, Pell was dealt a staggering blow on the head from behind.

Rough hands dragged him to his feet and dimly he realized he was surrounded by a group of ragged, heavily-armed men. They looked at him curiously, fingering their weapons uneasily. Finally a large man with gimlet eyes came up to the group. He had an air of authority and the men fell back with deference.

The large man looked at him closely and smiled. "Pell! I might have known they'd have hired you. What did you bring us, Pell?"

Pell reeled. This man was Raul Gutridge, the man who had crushed him out of business for the DIC. As a reward, DIC gave him what was thought to be a soft job, that of commander of the colonial garrison on Centaura.

Before he could answer, however, the large man had turned on his heel and was surveying the demolished ship. "Wrecking ships as usual, I see," he remarked with mock pleasantry. "No wonder your license was revoked."

Pell realized one thing and only that. He must keep Gutridge out of the ship! He could not let him find the U-235. Because with it, Gutridge, in spite of his few numbers, could mop up the planet in only a few days. The big man had ruined him once before; he must not be allowed to triumph again.

"Times are tough for unlicensed space pilots on Earth," Pell began casually. "You've got to work to eat. So I took the job of running these two through the blockade."

"What two?" Gutridge asked, seeing only Gret.

Pell cursed himself. He had blundered again. Silently he indicated the fat man sprawled under the ship.

Gutridge walked over to the recumbent Heintz and kicked him a couple of times, but without succeeding in arousing him. Then he looked up at Pell again.

"Still can't lie worth a damn, can you, Pell?" he observed. "I trust you will pardon me while I look in the ship?"

Pell watched helplessly as he entered the ship. If only the Insurgents would arrive in time!

When Gutridge came out, Pell knew he had discovered the secret. He moved slowly, as if in a dream. For once his narrow gimlet eyes were wide as he looked dazedly at his men. Then he pulled himself up and turned to Pell solemnly. All he said was one word, but it shattered all meaning and all reality for Pell.

That word was, "Thanks!"

THE SOUND of firing from downstream was much clearer and louder now. Gutridge looked over his shoulder with a trace of anxiety and nodded to one of his men. "Callen," he ordered, "take my guests back to the tower and entertain them until I return. You'll have to carry this one—but it won't be for nothing. I have something special in store for them."

Pell and Gret were yanked roughly away from their ship, while four men labored heavily with the vast bulk of the fat man. After winding along an obscure path in the woods, they emerged to find a steep cliff facing them. The tortuous path rose sharply up its side.

"Hell!" one of the mercenaries panted. "Callen, we ought to chuck this elephant over the cliff."

"Keep luggin' him," Callen directed. "The chief said he had a treat for 'em." He laughed unpleasantly.

Pell shot a glance over his shoulder. Gret was trudging apathetically behind

him. A pall of black discouragement fell over Pell. Hopelessly he berated the ironic twist of fate which had delivered them into the hands of the DIC mercenaries. To think that they had gone through hell, only to deliver the U-235 to the enemy after all—better to have died out there than this!

It was completely dark when the tired group of prisoners and guards arrived at the encampment. The dim light of Centaura's half-risen moon allowed Pell to make out a few details of the place. He realized that it was nothing more than an abandoned planet-mounted blaster tower. But the warrens in its base provided quite effective dug-outs for its defense.

Pell and Gret were escorted to one of the lower levels of the blaster tower itself. There they were shoved into a hard, bare room and Heintz was dumped on the floor. The door closed behind them.

Heintz began to groan. The coldness of the floor added to the stiffness already present in his joints. Pell bent over him anxiously. The fat man had gone through a terrific strain and his recovery was quite vociferous. Pell wondered how he could explain to him their bad luck. Black despair seized him again as the fat man looked about their bare room uncomprehendingly. Haltingly Pell explained. Gret Helmuth didn't even bother to look up.

"... but as long as we are still alive, we can fight them," Pell finished, trying to keep the hopelessness out of his voice.

Finally Heintz looked up at him. "You *would* have to land us right in the middle of the DIC, wouldn't you?" he snarled.

Then almost immediately he was sorry. "Forget it, Pell. You couldn't help it."

For a long time they remained silent. Pell grasped the girl's hand in his own, but said nothing. She looked up at him. Her eyes were empty and the tiny lines of strain about her mouth seemed to have been etched more deeply than ever. Pell vowed to himself that he could erase those lines in spite of everything that was arrayed against them. He kissed her and she responded absently.

Suddenly she buried her head under his chin and embraced him tightly. For a moment he thought she was sobbing, but she looked up at him, clear eyed and determined.

"I love you, Pell," she said softly. "If . . . if we—"

Pell knew what she was going to say and shushed her gently with his big hand over her mouth. He was about to speak when he was interrupted by the sound of heavy footsteps in the corridor outside. Guttridge entered, his face flushed with triumph.

"You are indeed kind, Pell," he said mockingly. "Five kilos are more than enough for our little task. You will be well rewarded." He laughed.

Pell guessed only too well what the reward would be. Death! Death for all of them. He felt a surge of bitter hate for Guttridge's mocking face. He wanted to batter it to a red pulp with his fists.

Raul Guttridge smiled infuriatingly and turned to Gret. "I believe you know of Major Dallard, do you not?" he asked her. "That was his yokel militia outfit we were scrapping with at the ship. I'm going to save you for a while—I want to give you a lesson in military tactics. I intend to show you the tactical hopelessness of attacking an enemy armed with atomic weapons."

Like an angry cat she lashed out at him, striking him across the face. Her nails left four bleeding welts. "You . . . you sadist!" she burst out helplessly.

Guttridge moved toward her angrily. At the same instant Pell sprang at him like a coiled spring. Guttridge reeled back as Pell's flying body staggered him. Two of the guards at his side, caught unawares for an instant, jumped on Pell and threw him to the floor. They kicked him a couple of times, then yanked him to his feet and dragged him through the door after Heintz.

Dazed, Pell realized that he and Heintz were being separated from the girl. He remembered that Guttridge had not left the room with them, but had remained with Gret. A wave of hate for the DIC mercenary washed over him, choking him.

V

AS THEY REACHED THE ground level of the tower and prepared to descend into its unknown depths, Pell could hear firing in the distance. They were using weapons that had been

obsolete for three hundred years. In spite of what Gret had said, Pell had not really comprehended the significance of her statements in that respect. He was bitter at the shrewdly ruthless policy of the Earth Government. Guttridge wasn't joking when he said the colonials under Dallard wouldn't have a chance when he got his atomics into action. If only Dallard could fight into the fortress in time . . .

But even as the thought flitted through his mind, he crushed it out. Dallard would need days, not hours, to penetrate this labyrinth.

For perhaps ten minutes they were escorted deeper and deeper into the underground fortress. The twisting passageways threw Pell's sense of direction for a loss immediately, but he did remember the long descent in an auto-dropper before they reached the level of their prison.

Finally they turned off into a side corridor which was damp and illuminated only faintly. The walls as he brushed against them were cold to the touch. One of the guards opened a door in the seemingly blank surface of a wall and grunted at Pell.

Shrugging, Pell followed Heintz inside and turned just in time to see the heavy metal door slide back into place.

Sighing, Heintz lowered his vast bulk to the cement floor and surveyed the cell gloomily. Then he looked up at Pell and said, "Boy, if this ain't a mess! If I know anything about atomics, we got about two hours to figure a way out of this clink. Guttridge has one technician who's a genius when it comes to atomics—guy named Bede. That devil will have those blasters ready in no time."

Pell swore to himself and nervously paced the cell looking for a ventilator opening—anything that would allow him to gain egress from the cell. His eyes roved restlessly along the walls seeking for a fault or opening in its maddeningly smooth surface. At last he found the vents—a small series of holes located high in the wall opposite the door. Straining on tip-toes, he managed to insert his little finger in one of them, only to meet with a steel mesh screen inside.

Cursing fluently, he flopped down beside Heintz on the floor and stared moodily at his surroundings. The fat man be-

side him was morosely searching his pockets for a cigarette. He found one at last and began to tinker with his cranky lighter. Pell watched him curiously as he fumbled with its primitive flint. Taking pity on him, Pell produced his own lighter, flicked the stud and held it toward Heintz. The fat man jumped and looked at him reproachfully.

"Say!" he protested, "Don't scare me like . . . like . . ." He broke off, his eyes wide with the dawn of an idea.

"Pell!" he blurted eagerly, "that thing will cut through these walls like butter!"

"Huh?" Pell grunted, startled.

"Yeah," Heintz asserted excitedly. "That gadget of yours will carve out the lock on that door in two shakes."

"Through *decyte* alloy? Not in your life time!" Pell replied sadly.

"Hell, bright boy, you ain't in an Earth jail. Those walls are steel, nothing more."

It was Pell's turn to be excited. Hastily he rose to his feet and approached the door. He examined the metal surface and saw that the fat man was correct.

THOUGHTFULLY he looked at the lighter in his hand. On Earth it was nothing more than a triviality—a novelty that could be acquired anywhere. But here! Yes, here it might be a means to salvation. There was just a chance, he reflected. The whole culture on Centaura seemed to be geared on a pre-atomic level of technology except for the blaster towers. And even the builders of those fabulous machines for defense never considered the possibility that they might be attacked from within. Such things as atomic lighters on Centaura were not dreamed of; jail cells would not be constructed of *decyte* alloys that could resist their weak blasts. He looked at the black metal cylinder in his hand; flicked it tentatively and smiled at its short blue flame.

Holding his breath, Pell felt along the lock edge of the door for indentations that would indicate the critical bolt joints. But it was completely smooth and he was able to find nothing.

"Whatcha think?" Heintz asked from behind him.

Pell shushed him frantically. "Pretty good, I think. But don't speak so loudly—

I don't know whether there's a guard out there."

He bent to the edge of the door and pressed the stud of the lighter. Its small beam began to chew into the steel sheeting around the lock. With agonizing slowness the beam cut into the steel until it reached a depth beyond which it would not penetrate. Pell released the stud and tinkered with the lighter with the thin edge of a coin.

Then he directed it again at the door. Its seemingly innocuous blue flame was brighter and longer. It cut into the steel with renewed vigor.

Suddenly there was a small snap and the door slid slowly back into the wall. Pell crouched, ready to spring upon the guard. But there was none. The corridor was empty and silent as a tomb. Pell glanced at his watch and the need for haste was pressed more firmly than ever upon him. An hour gone by already!

He crept cautiously into the corridor with Heintz on his heels. It was dim and damp; the moisture seemed to congeal on his brow like sweat. With Heintz dogging his footsteps like some huge, bloated shadow, Pell approached the main corridor. It, too, was deserted.

He turned to Heintz and asked in a low voice, "Where do you think they keep the atomic weapons?"

Heintz shrugged and grunted, "Probably on some higher level—some place they could reach in a hurry from the tower. Pell, if we could grab one of those blasters . . ." He left the thought unfinished, but Pell knew what he was thinking.

They reached the main corridor. Cautiously Pell looked up and down its long, deserted length. The lines about his mouth were tense and hard. If they should be caught—he motioned for Heintz to follow.

They had not gone more than fifty feet on the main corridor toward the automatic elevators when one of them suddenly opened and out stepped a uniformed DIC mercenary!

Pell sighed under his breath and muttered to Heintz, "Pay no attention to him—just keep walking as casually as you can. When we reach him, we'll jump him and take his guns."

There was a single affirmative grunt from his rear. Pell watched the soldier tensely while the latter regarded them with a blank and incurious stare as he approached them. Suddenly a flash of suspicion crossed the mercenary's eyes and he slowed his pace uncertainly. Pell was no more than twenty feet from him when he charged, Heintz lumbering at his heels.

With an oath, the mercenary dragged at the heavy automatic pistol at his side. The impact of Pell's body sent him sprawling to the hard surface of the corridor. Like a cat, Pell scrambled on top of him and proceeded to throttle out the cries of the soldier. Heintz pulled him roughly aside and picked up the soldier with one hairy paw on the collar of his jacket and the other over his face, completely eclipsing it.

Swiftly Pell snatched the man's pistol from its holster and slipped it into his pocket. Then he unslung the soldier's machine-gun and handed it to Heintz. Motioning toward the auto-dropper from which the mercenary had just stepped, Pell helped Heintz shove the struggling soldier inside and let the door slide shut.

Heintz released the enemy soldier who immediately began to howl loudly. The fat man shook him and he ceased his useless cries. Terrified, he looked from Heintz to Pell and back again.

"Where's the atomic armory?" Pell asked.

The man remained silent.

Pell repeated the question more vigorously, but still the man remained silent.

Heintz unslung the captured machine-gun and pointed it at the other. He fumbled curiously at its levers and spoke softly, as if to no one in particular. "I wonder how this thing works—now, if I pull this thing here . . ."

The soldier looked pleadingly at Pell, but he merely yawned and watched disinterestedly.

The man made a strangling noise and capitulated. "Okay, you win. The sixth level—that's up." He looked again at Pell. "Tell that idiot to put that thing away," he pleaded.

Pell didn't answer, but looked at the controls for a moment. Then he pressed the appropriate stud and turned to Heintz.

"I'll cover this fellow while you keep

that gun ready. Just to prevent anything from going wrong, we'll let him walk in front of us with his hands in his pockets and his mouth shut," he said, nodding meaningly at the prisoner.

Heintz grunted and held the machine-gun at ready as the elevator drew to a stop. The door whined open softly and Pell tensed. Before his startled eyes a swarm of men hurried up and down the corridor, apparently too intent upon their business to notice Heintz and Pell.

He was about to let the door close again when Heintz stopped him. He pointed significantly at an instrument that flashed above the heads of the hurrying men. Like lightning Pell realized that it was a Geiger Counter and that it was registering the presence of Uranium!

"Come on, Pell. They won't notice us," Heintz called over his shoulder as he stepped from the cage.

BOLDLY he walked into the corridor and melted unnoticed into the crowd of excited, hurrying soldiers. Pell followed him, his hand on the cool, heavy pistol butt and the enemy prisoner preceding him with his hands sunk in his pockets. As the crowd of men jostled and pushed about him, Pell could hear breathless bits of conversation.

". . . blasters—yeah, real atomics. Bede will have 'em in shape in a few minutes."

". . . hell, not a chance. Not when we turn those blasters loose."

Pell went slightly sick. He saw that the main stream of men were pouring into a corridor with a dead end. Tightening his hold on the pistol butt in his pocket, he shoved his prisoner after them.

Then he noticed that they were waiting at the heavily-guarded entrance of a room and it dawned upon him that they were about to be issued blasters.

Quickly he surveyed the situation, noting the position of the guards at the room's entrance, and made his decision. Drawing the pistol from his pocket, he jammed it into the captured mercenary's back and began to shoulder his way boldly through the uncomprehending crowd. As he approached the door he saw a surging around it, then suddenly all hell broke loose.

Berada-da-da-da-da-da . . . Instantly

Pell realized that Heintz had already gone into action. The men melted away from the entrance in time to allow Pell to see Heintz shoulder his way through the half-open door. Forgetting his prisoner, Pell jumped past the bodies of three or four guards and entered the room, slamming the heavily reinforced door behind him. Then he whirled, pistol at ready.

There were only four technicians in the armory and they were frozen into an astonished tableau at the sight of a huge, bullet-headed, fat man crouching before them with a machine-gun in his arms. Pell crouched behind him, letting his glance flicker about the room. On the floor were the cadmium and graphite vaults which had been ripped bodily from the ship. Over half of them had been opened and strewn about the tables were an array of hand-blasters undergoing the delicate process of being charged with pellets of U-235.

Pell broke the short silence. "Don't move, any of you! Heintz, pick up a blaster that's charged!"

Heintz shuffled forward cautiously to relieve a swarthy technician of a blaster which had frozen in his hands when they had burst into the room.

"Okay, Bede, gimme that!" Heintz growled, poking his machine-gun toward the technician.

His action seemed to touch off the fuse of a bomb. Suddenly the technician leaped away from Heintz and leveled the blaster in his hands. The other technicians leaped in unison for the tables, snatching up blasters. Heintz fired at Bede, then whirled and loosed a long, sustained burst at the other three.

But he reckoned without Bede who had fallen to the floor wounded, but not dead. With a look of venomous hate he swung the blaster in his hands toward Heintz and pressed the stud. Pell fired at him, once, twice, then again, but even as the heavy automatic crashed in his hand, Bede fired at Heintz.

Heintz exploded. With cataclysmic violence his body had vaporized in a blue-white sheen of impossibly hot atomic radiance.

Pell became violently sick. Recovering, he looked dazedly at the slaughter about him and realized that he alone was left to

deal with the situation. For the first time he understood how great an ally the fat man had been.

Blind, unreasoning hate for the forces of the DIC surged into his mind. He saw Gutridge's mocking face and it added fuel to the rage burning fiercely within him. He recalled vividly that Gret was in his possession and the fires of bitter hate blasted away all remnants of his former caution.

Outside he could hear the mutter of DIC soldiers who were obviously confused by the shooting of the guards and the sound of further shooting inside. Then the steel-reinforced door began to quiver on its hinges.

Pell slowly looked down at the ancient pistol in his hand and laughed to himself. There was no further need for that thing, he reflected. He threw it away from him and walked purposefully over to the body of Bede, the dead technician. Without the slightest hesitation, he rolled the bloody thing over and took the blaster from its lifeless hands.

He looked back at the door. The pounding had stopped, but he saw a little white flame dancing and flickering around the lock. Pell smiled a bit, leveled the blaster in his arms, and depressed the stud.

In an instant the steel door turned a dazzling white and began to run into slag. The vicious, expanding cone of blue flame played on it an instant more and suddenly it exploded into vapor. The knot of mercenaries around the door disintegrated into exploding cinders. Some of them on the outer edges even had time to scream.

VI

A TREMENDOUS FEELING OF power surged in Pell. He strode into the corridor and stood in the midst of the havoc he had created, letting the hungry, hellish blaster play across a few fleeing figures trying to make the elevators. He was unconscious of the overpowering stench in the hot, searing, almost unbreathable air. He didn't notice that the soles of his heavy insulated boots were burning as he stood in the corridor. He realized now only that he held in his hands the instrument that would enable

him to carry out ruthless vengeance against Gutridge and his DIC mercenaries.

The dead-end corridor off which the armory was located opened onto the larger main corridor which led to the elevators. Pell padded silently to the junction and walked boldly toward the automatic elevators which would take him to the surface. He paused just once to let the blaster play over the mouth of the dead-end corridor which led to the blasters. The roof slowly collapsed in a shower of scorched cement, leaving the lacy interwork of the reinforcing girders bare and skeleton-like. The mass of hot rubble effectively sealed off the entrance to the armory—for the time being, at any rate.

With that action, Pell realized that he was a god. Although not an immortal god, certainly a god armed with a terrible destructive force which was not immediately available to the others who might aspire to be gods.

Pell looked at the devastation he had created and became uncertain as to what to do next. Little thought tendrils of unreason whispered at him, telling him to create a reign of terror throughout the multi-leveled warren which was the foundation of the mighty blaster tower. But he closed his mind to their pleasing prospects and his jaw hardened at the thought of the job before him. He must go to the surface and destroy the mercenaries' defense of the fortress. He must help Daldard crack their resistance as soon as possible so that the precious U-235 might be retrieved from its burying place and turned over to the Insurgents.

Pell's eyes narrowed as he turned again to the auto-droppers. There were so many things he would like to do with his weapon, but first things first. Bleak-eyed Gret Helmuth who could become all woman in an instant—she would have to wait. So would Gutridge. But not for long, he promised himself.

He pressed the button which should send one of the cages hurtling to his level, then take him back to the surface. The first time he pressed the button, there was no response. Nor was there the second time. A third time his hand moved impatiently toward the red stud, only to

freeze in the act as a familiar, hated voice began to crackle from some hidden speaker in the walls. It was Gutridge!

"Pell! Pell! Can you hear me?" came the mocking voice. "You're trapped, Pell. The droppers don't seem to respond, do they?"

The deep, penetrating voice chuckled, then went on. "Pretty soon your head will become heavy and your eye-lids will want to drop. You will want to sleep, Pell, because the gas is very powerful. Do you feel it yet? Its nice stuff, Pell. You will want to sleep so much . . . so much."

The heavy voice began to chuckle and its reverberations thundered evilly in the deserted corridors. Pell found the source of the laugh and blasted it furiously from its concealment high in the wall. But from somewhere far down the corridor the powerful laugh echoed ominously.

Fear began to crawl at his throat, constricting it. He must find a stair-way. Surely there must be one! But would he have time? Frantically he ran down the empty corridors blasting open doors as he came to them. At last he found what he sought behind the gaping maw of a blasted panel. Through the coalescing haze of the vaporized door he saw stairs spiraling upward.

He was about to enter when he saw the first tendrils of smoky whiteness reaching for him and plucking at him. Instantly he realized that the heavy stuff was being forced down the stairwell. Holding his breath, he retreated back down the corridor and let loose a blast from the weapon cradled in his arms in an effort to seal up the shattered door. As he retraced his steps back to the elevators, he realized that his head was getting heavy. Vaguely he noticed the milky smoke issuing from the corridor vents and he began to run.

But with each step his body became heavier and heavier and only the greatest effort of will kept him from collapsing on his face. He knew he was trapped. Desperately he goaded his tired mind to discover a means to escape. Reeling, he reached the elevators, dimly conscious of Gutridge's mocking laugh far down the corridor. The white haze was thick and nauseating and it caressed his nostrils with cloying sweetness.

Suddenly Pell saw a group of masked

figures approach in the sound-deadening haze. In what seemed an eternity he brought the blaster up with tired hands and pressed the stud. As if in some horrible nightmare, the figures seemed to shimmer and explode.

Desperately Pell strived to keep his legs under him, but they wobbled in spite of his control and he fell. His arms and legs were mere dead weight; he could no longer force them to do his bidding, not even to the extent of releasing the stud on the blaster. A wave of heat struck him mightily on the face, as if he had been thrust bodily into an atomic furnace. Then from somewhere a draught of cool, pure air played about him, washing the fumes of the nerve gas from his system.

A STOUNDED, Pell gasped in deep lungfuls of the precious air and painfully stumbled to his feet. Slowly the incredible truth dawned upon him. Accidentally he had blasted open the sliding steel door of the elevator shaft and the cool breath of its untainted air had revived him. Hastily he looked around him, trying to spot more of the enemy creeping through the dense fog toward him. There were none; apparently they had decided to let the gas do its work. They were in for a surprise, Pell reflected.

An idea had occurred to him. He might just possibly escape the trap by climbing up the inside of the elevator shaft. He strained his eyes into the dimness of the shaft and found what he was looking for; a frail-looking steel ladder which extended in both directions up and down the shaft. Looking up, he tried to pierce its puddled blackness but could see nothing. If a dropper should hurtle down out of that blackness, he would be smashed to a bloody pulp. Grimly he thrust the thought out of his mind, slung the blaster over his shoulder, and leaped for the ladder on the far wall of the shaft.

It trembled dangerously as his writhing body struck it and swiftly he began his long climb into the darkness above. For what seemed an eon of agonizing effort, Pell hauled his weary body up the length of the steel ladder. It stretched up and away into an infinity of blackness that housed a sudden and terrible death. As he climbed, Pell strained his senses in the

all-enveloping darkness but could perceive nothing.

Suddenly his hand, groping for another rung, met nothing but emptiness and for one terrifying moment Pell tottered off balance on the ladder. Cautiously he felt about above himself and his hand collided with the underside of a dropper which was suspended just over his head. Had he reached the top? It was impossible to tell in the blackness. He had no choice but to chance it.

Saying a silent prayer, Pell unlimbered the blaster and wrapped himself about the tiny steel ladder as tightly as possible. Then he loosed its devastating radiance at the wall opposite him. The brilliance of its destructive flash blinded him momentarily as he clung tenaciously to the frail ladder which whipped treacherously.

Blessed, precious light filtered in through the shattered door opposite him. Clinging tightly to his blaster, Pell leaped for the opening in spite of the fact that his eyes had not yet adjusted to the sudden light. Pain jagged his eyeballs as his pupils strove to contract but Pell ignored it as he took in his new surroundings with rapid glances.

The corridors of this wide, well-lit level were deserted and the air was free of the deadly gas that had trapped him lower in the labyrinth. Haste was the keynote now. From this point on, regardless of what he did, he must do it quickly and decisively. He realized that he had not yet reached the surface, although he knew he was very close.

His eyes narrowed as he considered the situation. He couldn't use the stairs since they were flooded with gas. And at any minute he might see the deadly, white tendrils of the gas issuing from the vents. There was only one thing to do.

Sighing, Pell aimed the blaster at the ceiling and depressed the stud. The innocuous-looking blue finger took huge bites from the heavily reinforced cement and it cascaded down to the floor of the corridor before him.

Ignoring its burning heat, Pell leaped for a drooping girder and hauled himself painfully through the ragged hole to the corridor above.

Frozen with surprise, several DIC mercenaries watched a haggard, blackened

figure materialize suddenly from the midst of a gaping hole in the floor. One or two fired wildly at Pell, but the majority fled with terror up a low ramp nearby and through an exit at the top. Pell ran after them, noting with relief that the soldiers wore no gas masks.

The ramp continued its sharp upward rise on the other side of the exit. As he panted up its steep ascent, Pell felt the breath of cool air touch his face; with it the sound of firing increased. Evidently Dallard was attempting to storm the fortress. Breathlessly he hammered up the slope on the heels of the fleeing men and ducked instinctively as several shots were fired at him. He was out on open ground. Swiftly he ran for the cover of a clump of bushes and dived into their concealment.

CENTAURA'S lone satellite shed a strong light over the surrounding ground and Pell was able to make out the dim figures of men around the blaster tower. To his right the tower itself rose sharply into the sky, the vicious helix of the blaster being etched by the moonlight into a clearly defined blackness in the midst of the lesser blackness of the star-studded sky.

To Pell's left the sound of firing was intense, the sharp, hacking bark of machine-guns dominating the chorus. But ragged firing seemed to be present everywhere, apparently indicating that Dallard's Insurgents had attacked the fortress from all sides. The mercenaries seemed to be firmly entrenched, but not so firmly that a little diversion from the rear could not root them out, Pell thought, smiling mirthlessly. Gripping the blaster tightly, Pell peered into the darkness to locate a juicy target.

Beyond the clump of trees in which he was concealed there was a rise in the rocky ground and silhouetted against the sky was a group of men crouching around a machine-gun and firing it down the path up which Heintz, Gret and himself had been brought. He had no doubts that discovery would be only a matter of moments—no doubt word was already being circulated about the madman with a blaster.

Grimly he brought the blaster to his

shoulder and depressed the firing stud. Instantly great gouts of dirt began a short-lived trip into the night sky, including the machine-gun and its crew. The effect of his sudden attack was instantaneous and confusing. The startled cries of the mercenaries was like music to Pell's ears. But a more ominous music was the faint, chopping whisper of bullets as they spattered through his clump of trees. Ignoring them, Pell leveled the blaster at every likely place in which the mercenaries might be entrenched.

Hell, in the form of violently reacting stones and rocks erupted into the sky, showering the DIC soldiers with molten, lava-like droplets. Seeking protection from the super-heated rain of molten particles, some of the mercenaries panicked and fled to the blast tower that reared bulkily behind them. Their action was like a trigger for others and presently a whole mass of men were fleeing for the protection of the tower. Heartlessly Pell let his ravaging blaster play among the fleeing men. And on their heels came a shouting, triumphant horde of ragged Insurgents bearing antiquated weapons.

Some of them dropped, but most streamed after the terrified mercenaries into the fortress. Although they did not know whom to credit for the unexpected aid, they knew it was from a friend. Pell, infected with the wild excitement of the Insurgents, threw caution to the winds and left his hiding place to storm the warrens with them.

Somewhere in that mass of cement and steel were Raul Gutridge and Gret Hel-muth. For the Insurgents it was complete and utter triumph, but for Pell it was a hollow victory unless he could find Gret alive and Gutridge dead. His jaw was out-thrust with determination as he entered the fortress with the Insurgents. The DIC had beaten him before, crushing him out of business. But this time he was fighting with their methods and he was determined to win.

As he shoved through the press of Insurgents down the ramp up which he had come a short time before, the revolutionaries looked at him askance and fingered their weapons uneasily. They muttered among themselves and one of them turned to Pell.

"Who are you and where did you get that thing?" the man asked, indicating Pell's blaster.

"I'm with you," replied Pell to the first question. "Where's Dallard?" he asked, ignoring the second.

"Right behind you," replied a new voice from his rear.

Pell turned, startled. Behind him stood a slight man with the bearing of an officer. But his cold blue eyes and the large ancient revolver he pointed at Pell hardly betokened friendship.

"Who are you?" Dallard asked.

Briefly Pell explained, indicating his desire to find Gret and Gutridge. When he had finished, Dallard whistled softly and looked at Pell with new respect.

"We'll give you all the help we can, Pell—and in case we run into some tough opposition, we'd like you to reciprocate—with that thing." Dallard grinned and as he walked away with his men, called over his shoulder, "Luck!"

Pell nodded absently and turned away, considering the almost hopeless hunt that confronted him. Certainly they were no longer in the blaster tower; obviously Gutridge had taken the girl into the depths of the fortress when the Insurgents had attacked. Then the unpleasant possibility that Gutridge might be holding the girl as a hostage occurred to him. It added new drive to his purpose.

PELL'S ACTIONS that night, had they occurred in another age, would have been the fiber of a legend. He never remembered exactly what he did himself and the accounts of the Insurgents who saw only a part of his exploits were disjointed and inconsistent.

Suffice it to say that a haggard, smoke-blackened, wild man almost single-handedly destroyed the last remnants of the DIC mercenary army on Centauri VI that night. In the face of Pell's blaster they surrendered faster than they could be captured. Points of resistance, when they were touched by the deadly blue finger of the blaster, vanished in violently reacting clouds.

Perhaps the toughest struggle of all was with a group of fanatical mercenaries on the sixth level who were scrabbling desperately in the rubble of the entrance

to the dead-end corridor which led to the atomic armory. Fearing that its violent energies would explode the U-235 in the armory, Pell, was unable to use the blaster against them. Desperately the Insurgents stormed the level, only to be cut down sickeningly by the trapped mercenaries. In the end, however, there could only be one result and the weary DIC soldiers had no choice but to surrender.

Pell's search was ended on the thirty-seventh level. Because of its tremendous depth, this level was ventilated only with great difficulty. The air, what there was of it, was close and sticky. The rumbling whine of the ventilator turbine could be heard plainly as it labored to force air into the dimly-lit, narrow passage-ways. The walls and pillars were huge chunks of almost solid, heavily reinforced cement since they had to support the ponderous weight of three dozen levels and the mighty blaster tower itself.

Uneasily the Insurgents crept into the depths behind Pell and Major Dallard. Pell himself was worried. The entire warren above had been combed unsuccessfully for Gutridge and Gret Helmuth. The gnawing fear that had tormented Pell burst out more powerfully. Suppose Gutridge had taken Gret into these depths and was holding her as a hostage? Pell shrugged grimly to himself and strained his eyes to pierce the gloom.

Suddenly the heavy silence that shrouded the place was broken by the crackling of static and the sound of a well-known voice originating from a speaker almost above Pell's head. It was Gutridge!

"I see you've discovered my hiding place, Pell," boomed Gutridge, his voice reverberating in the tomb-like passages.

"I'm entertaining a guest," Gutridge continued. "I believe she is a friend of yours. You wouldn't want anything to happen to her, would you, Pell?" His laughter made the passage vibrate.

"Pell!" thundered the speaker, "I want a guarantee of freedom. In return, I will deliver the girl unharmed. This is a two-way speaker, so you may reply into it."

"How do I know she is alive?" Pell stalled desperately.

"You may speak to her," Gutridge answered. "Say a few words to the gentleman, my dear."

"Pell!" Gret screamed over the speaker, "this whole place is mined. Get out before he kills you all!"

Pell heard distinctly the sound of a meaty fist colliding with flesh and bone, followed by Gutridge's muttering voice, "You talk too much, my dear."

Rage—blind, helpless, unreasoning rage washed over Pell in prickly waves. Then Gutridge spoke again.

"There you have it. I will give you two minutes to decide," the speaker echoed. Its crackling subsided and only the hum of its open circuit could be heard.

Then Pell felt a tapping on his shoulder. He turned and saw Dallard in the dimness.

"Guarantee his freedom, Pell. Offer him a space ship," Dallard whispered. "It's either that or he blows us all up. Personally, I am not particularly in favor of dying—especially with him."

Pell grunted inaudibly and turned to the speaker. "Okay, Gutridge, you win. Send the girl out first, then follow. You will be escorted to the surface and given a ship."

Gutridge chuckled. "If it were anyone but the honorable Fletcher Pell who made that promise, I'd balk. All right, she's coming out."

Straining his eyes in the darkness, Pell presently saw the slight figure of Gret Helmuth approach. When she saw him, she broke into a limping run and threw herself into his arms.

"Oh, Pell, I never thought I'd see you again," she cried, burying her face in his shoulder.

Pell swore and looked up to see Gutridge loom out of the dark. The big man had a small box in his hand which he waved debonairly at Pell.

"You know, just in case. This little gadget can transmit a radio wave that will touch off the explosives," Gutridge chuckled. "That woman of yours is bad medicine—she scratches like a wild cat."

Pell stifled his rage with difficulty, noting with small satisfaction that his face, too, had sustained no small damage.

"Where's that space ship?" Gutridge asked, now all business.

Pell didn't reply, but gestured for the big man to follow and the party made its way to the surface in an elevator that still functioned.

A BEAUTIFUL DAWN was breaking, but it affected Pell not at all. Morosely he stared through the plastine window of his cramped quarters in the blaster tower.

Through the window he could make out the busy activities of the Insurgents. Gingerly they had cleared away the rubble of the demolished entrance to the armory and were now engaged in carrying the vaults of U-235 out of the fortress.

As he watched them absently, the door opened behind him and Gret entered, her brown gold hair gleaming intoxicatingly in the early light. Even her rough jumper couldn't hide the fresh young curves of her body.

"What's the matter, Grouchy?" she teased. "Still worrying about Gutridge escaping?"

"Yeah," Pell growled. "As long as he's alive, the game isn't finished. But—" he smiled—"I've got you. That ought to be enough for any perfectionist."

He was about to kiss her when the door opened again and Dallard entered.

He looked from Pell to Gret and raised his eyebrows. "I trust I wasn't interrupting anything," he drawled slyly.

"Oh, come in, Dallard," Pell said, although not very enthusiastically. "How are your men coming along with the uranium?"

"Fine. Fine. But, I say, you're hardly the bright and cheery fellow one would expect to meet this morning."

"He's worried about Gutridge escaping," Gret explained.

Dallard laughed. "Pell, haven't you heard about his . . . ah . . . little accident? It seems someone forgot to inform the planet-mounteds that our friend would be departing, so I'm afraid he's little more than a cinder now. Frightful mistake, eh?"

He clucked innocently and, twirling his sandy mustache airily, walked jauntily from the room.

Pell looked after him amazed, a small shudder running the length of his spine. "You colonials are forgetful people, aren't you?" he observed.

"Perhaps," Gret replied, wrinkling her nose at him, "but sometimes it pays."

"Well, in the future," Pell said, "don't forget I like my ham and eggs in bed."