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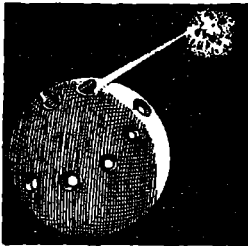
April, 1950

Featured Complete Novelet

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By MURRAY LEINSTER

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As I directed our repair crew,
Helen was still in back of my mind

LITTLE JOE

By CLEVE CARTMILL

AS we used to say when we were kids in school, more people killed and blood all over the stars.

That's the way it was, and only my choice of being eaten alive rather than burned to death got me—or what's left

of me—off the Piratoid alive. The doc says most of my skin will grow back.

Oh, everything was fine last Tuesday morning. The *Dolphin* was almost loaded, we'd been paid for our Acton jobs, and Cap, Carroll, Pat and I were study-

The Space Salvagers Pit Themselves Against Pirates!

ing star charts in the control room.

Pat had worked out what he thought was the probable orbit of the lost asteroids we wanted, and was explaining his reasons when the green light flashed on our screen. I toggled the switch and looked at the grim face of the Port Patrol Officer, Colonel Gray Hardy.

"Which one of you is Jake Murchison?" he asked.

"Oh, Glory!" I said. "What have I done now?"

"Come to my office immediately," he ordered.

"Sorry," I said, "I'll have to kiss you good-bye from here. We're blasting off in an hour."

His grim expression relaxed. "Good! I didn't know you were so near ready. Come over here—now!"

"Aw, Colonel. I haven't even told my girl friends so-long."

"This is serious, Murchison. And an order."

"Okay," I grumbled, and cut out. I called for a taxi, and glared at Cap. "What do you suppose Solar has done now?"

Cap pushed his skipper's hat back on his silver hair. "You've got to go along with it, Jake. The Space Patrol is law."

Pat raised his weather-cracked face from the chart and his emerald eyes twinkled. "It's your charm, Jake. People always wanting you for something."

I grunted. "Might as well hold up on charting a course. I got a hunch we'll never start hunting Phamign's laboratory. Come on, Carroll, let's get out on the landing stage."

Carroll straightened his seven-foot frame and widened his eyes. "Me?" he asked in that crooning, gentle voice that was like music coming out of a mountain. "With you?"

"Sure, you might as well get in the act. I may have to let you sock somebody."

WE went out on the stage, three hundred feet from the ground, and presently a cab landed. Carroll folded himself into it, and I told the jockey where. We swooped up and across the

field, with me giving the far side of it the aching eye.

There, dwarfed by distance, the *Andromeda* stood on her tail in the launching cradle, her nose a proud mile in the air. There, Captain Helen Wall of Solar System Salvage Co., Ltd., would soon be waiting for me to come and tell her those things you tell girls when you aren't going to see them for a while.

We whooshed over the vast station and the stream of shuttle cabs loading passengers into the *Andromeda*, over the gay, colored roofs of the residential section of Arcton City, and came to rest on the heavily guarded Space Patrol building with a gentleness that would have made a falling feather seem like a bomb.

"Nice going," I said to the jockey, and flipped him too much.

A guard demanded information. I identified myself, and he gave Carroll the eye.

"And this character?" he asked.

"My shadow."

"Awful big shadow, bud. I got orders about you, but none about him."

"Then I'll give you some. He goes with me."

We had something of a hassel, involving a call to Colonel Hardy, and finally went to his office.

Oh, not as simply as it's stated. Not by a long shot. We went through the usual screening, and had to take an oath never to reveal anything we saw or heard inside the sanctum. The penalty was read to us officially. They were colorless official phrases, but my spine turned cold anyway. Then we were allowed to go inside.

Colonel Gray Hardy sat at his desk and motioned us to chairs. I didn't sit down immediately, for the room hit me right smack in the mind. It was big enough, but no bigger, to hold the things it held, plus a few inhabitants. These were either men or women, and all were busy at their appointed tasks. They did or did not notice us. And that's all I can say about it.

The colonel flipped a switch. A ship filled a screen. It was a gigantic thing,

that poor, crippled ship, and its Space Patrol emblem—bright Earth seeming three-dimensional—was scorched with spots of brown.

Its side showed a gaping ragged tear, about one hundred yards long. It spun slowly and lazily on its long axis.

I whistled. "Mice?" I asked.

"Yeah," Hardy grunted. "Little Joe mice."

There was a name to conjure with. Pirate, murderer, dirty dog. Escapee from Kragor, head of the worst gang of cutthroats in history.

"No survivors, then," Carroll murmured.

"On the contrary," Hardy corrected. "Our ships carry weapons that—" He outlined the weapons, their type and destructiveness. "Captain Tommy Garfield knocked out the pirate fleet of five ships, damage ranging from negligible to total disablement. The ships withdrew and limped off. For their base, we think. But none of our personnel were killed. However, the ship—" He gestured.

"If it had had a coat of herculium," I said.

"But it didn't," he snapped.

"Solar's fault. We've got plenty of it, but they tied it up until recently."

"Never mind that," Hardy said. "I want you to get that ship into operation. If you can do it quickly, it can seek out the pirates' hiding-place and wipe out the worst band of— Well, you know what they are. There's plenty in it for you, including part of the reward when we capture or kill Little Joe and his murderers."

"What's the matter with the Patrol's repair ships?"

"The nearest is a week away. You're here. You have or can get the necessary materials to patch that hull and let the men aboard get out of space suits."

"We're not a repair outfit," I grumbled.

He smiled and shook his head. "That won't get you anywhere. Space Salvage, Inc., has hung up a record of being all things to all men in trouble. You can do the job—and you will do it. This is an

order, Mr. Murchison."

"Don't be so formal. Just call me Hard Luck Jake. Look what you're doing to me—and this is confidential. We have a lead on the possible whereabouts of Professor Phamign's laboratory—you know, the guy who invented the founding process for herculium?"

"I know."

"No doubt you also know about our salvaging all the herculium in the System?"

"From the derelict," he broke in, "the *Astralot*. Go on."

"Okay. Now, when we thought that was all the herculium and all there would ever be, we got dough-happy. That was worth an incalculable fortune. But we learned a short time ago that he left notes on the process—probably—in his private laboratory on an asteroid that's wandered off in space. And we think we can find it."

"Do this job first, and then happy hunting."

"But listen, Colonel. You know that Solar System Salvage is after our necks. They tied up the herculium so we couldn't sell it, and otherwise heckled. I'm sure they're doing everything they can to beat us to that formula."

HE shrugged and said negligently, "So what? What difference does it make who has it, just so it's found?"

"Just this. I want to give it to the Council so that it will belong to the race, so it can be produced and utilized to the best possible advantage to everybody. I don't know what Solar would do with it, but I got ideas. Some pretty sharp operators in that outfit. They'd probably manufacture it and give it away for a while just to keep us from selling ours. So I want to beat 'em to it and turn it over to the Council on a royalty basis."

"Very laudible, Jake, and I sympathize with you. But if they steal a march on you, they steal it. Wiping out this gang of pirates is the most immediate important thing, and you're going to help. And we're wasting time."

"Don't get me wrong," I said. "I

don't mean that I don't like doing your job. I'm just sorry we're the nearest outfit that can do it. Oh, well." I looked at Carroll. "Ready?"

He had been making notes. He frowned at them. "I guess so. Oh! What's the course?"

The colonel gave us a chart. I took a last look at those amazing panels, and we took off.

"You can take care of that," I told Carroll. "I'll drop you off and go on to see Helen. Nobody, even the Space Patrol, is going to cheat me out of that."

Carroll grinned. "Kiss her good-by for me."

"No spares," I said. . . .

I still had Helen in the back of my mind as we riveted plates on the hull of the *Starshot*. I saw red hair, green eyes and coral—but soft—lips everywhere as I directed our repair crew. My magnetic shoes held me to the hull, and standing in the dark vacuum of space was like lying down where there was gravity. All I had to do was close my eyes and I could see and hear:

"Jake, Jake." This was a remembered whisper. "Good-by, Jake." This was filled with tears.

"Heck," I said, forgetting I was speaking into my talker.

"Trouble?" asked Captain Tommy Garfield's voice.

"Need me?" from Carroll.

"Sorry," I said. "I was just remembering my last crap game. Snake eyes. Hey, Pete," I said to the welder. "Make it bluer."

Finally, I sent the crew back to the *Dolphin* and told Tommy Garfield: "All finished."

"Good," his voice answered. "Will you and that giant—uh, Carroll?—come aboard?"

"Why, certainly. But why? We're finished."

"This is confidential."

"Okay. Carroll, you there? Bring the life boat."

"Right, Jake."

Captain Garfield welcomed us in the control room, with one arm in a sling. His face was drawn and you wouldn't

think he was under thirty. He was though, as were all Space Patrol active personnel. The ship had been pumped full of air, and we took off our space suits. He seated himself in front of a panel of things I can't talk about and put it to us bluntly.

"You're going along."

"For reasons?"

"Several of our weapons," he said, "were damaged and are no good. My chief repairman was hurt much worse than I am. We can travel now, but I want you and Carroll to fix things en route. You'll get added pay."

"Okay, on one condition."

"Wait." He raised one weathered hand. "Before you raise any questions, I want to tell you this is not part of your job. You don't have to go. I intend to go into action once we find Little Joe and his crowd. You might be killed. So it's a volunteer job."

"All right," I said impatiently, "but we bring our own pilot."

"Oh, no. My pilot's all right."

I SAID pointedly, "But he's only a Space Patrol pilot."

"And is that bad?" he queried.

"Sure, comparatively. I have schemed a good trick. Cap—oh, the devil—Tommy!"

He grinned. "Yeah, Jake?"

"Understand my attitude first. I regard you as a Space Patrol captain and I know what that means. One man in a million can qualify for it. I'm just a fair salvage bum, and I feel properly humble, even if I don't show it. So what I'm asking is a favor, with a sound commercial basis."

"I'm willing to listen. You're never dull."

"Thanks. I know your job is to wipe out those pirates. Thanks to us, you're able to follow hot on their trail and maybe find them. From what I've seen here and in Colonel Hardy's office you'd need to blast only once if you find them in a group. Right?"

"Right."

"And that would be total destruction?"

"There wouldn't be enough of anything left," he said gravely, "to make a counterfeit dime."

"That's what I thought. We're a salvage outfit, in the business to make money. If we could salvage those five ships, crippled or not, this job would pay off big. Regulations prevent you from cashing in on it, but you can really do us a good turn if you'll give me the chance."

He turned this over in his mind for a few moments. "But why your own pilot? I'm not saying," he added hastily, "that I can turn you loose on any scheme, but I can listen."

I told him about Pat's qualifications, and described the rescue of the *Andromeda*. "It was touch and go, holding the exact distance and speed necessary to do the job. There's the whole point. Space Patrol men are trained to operate along regulated lines, but we're an informal outfit. We have to improvise. and I'd feel safer with Pat at the controls."

"But what's your plan?"

"I don't have one yet. I need more data. And Pat's a kind of lightning calculator. He astrogates in his head."

"Sorry," Tommy said after a long silence. "Rules."

All of us stood on one foot for a moment. Then Carroll murmured: "He was a Space Patrol pilot until he reached the age limit."

"That's right," I said. "He was retired at thirty, but he never talks about it. I'd forgotten. So you've got nothing here that Pat doesn't know something about, at least. And he's never said a word to me about Patrol secrets."

"Well," Tommy allowed, "that does make a difference. All right, he can come aboard. But I want it strictly understood that what I say goes. I'll string along if you come up with something good, only because I know your reputation for landing right side up, but my decision is final."

"Thanks a lot, Tommy."

I sent Carroll after Pat, and talked to Cap over our shielded screen. Shielded, that is, so nobody could see the gim-

micks in the control room. They were really something.

"Follow as best you can," I said. "We'll want to come back aboard sometime."

"How?" Cap asked mildly. "You can run circles around me."

I glanced at one of the panels. "Never mind," I told him. "Do anything you like. We'll find you. You can't get lost."

It wasn't long, then, before we got out of our acceleration bunks and I asked Tommy for blueprints of what needed repair. He sent an orderly for them.

"Heaven help you," he said, "if you ever breathe a word about these things. They're really out of the System."

"We won't. Pat," I said, "you know how to operate those what's-its. If you get a fix, stay outside the pirates' range and let me know."

CARROLL and I studied the blueprints and went to work on some of the most interesting things I have ever seen. We could be intercommmed by Pat and vice versa, and we had just finished the last job when Pat called.

"Well, Jake," said Pat's voice from the intercom, calm as if he were asking what time it was, "I'd have laid odds we'd never find 'em, but here they are."

"Hold everything then. We're coming in."

In the control room, while I looked at the screen, Pat translated dial readings into concrete data.

"Planetoid," he said. "About a thousand miles in diameter. Gravity o-point-nine. That's apparently their landing field, where all those guys are working on those five ships. No sign of living quarters or buildings of any kind. Must be some somewhere, because they've got an artificial atmosphere."

"Hmm," I said. "How ve-ry interesting. Artificial atmosphere. That means an atmosphere plant. Don't anybody speak," I said. "I'm getting an idea."

They waited, and I looked at the gimmick that showed the fleet. "They can't detect us?" I asked Tommy.

"Not at this distance. The various devices"—he waved a hand at them—

"which we have are manufactured in one place by one company. Exclusively for the Patrol. Nobody can possibly get hold of any one of them."

"How does this sound, then?"

I roggled it around in my head and it began to come out clear.

"Suppose Carroll and I take the *Dolphin* life boat and land at the base of that range of hills just at dusk. We could go through that pass at night and be in sight of the pirates' field at dawn. We'll take along all the weapons we can carry—one of those side arms, for example, and a paralysis bomb—and I let myself get captured."

"Hey, slow down, I'm lost!" Tommy said.

"Would it not, Captain Garfield, be of use to the Space Patrol to know certain things about that set-up? For future reference?" I queried.

"Certainly. That's the only reason I'm stringing along with you."

"Very well. I get captured, but strapped to my thigh will be one of those things." I pointed. "I leave the switch open, and you can record whatever goes on. Carroll will have one, too, and can gauge when to move in with his paralysis bomb. Then we'll tear like crazy for the atmosphere plant and shut off the air. All they can do is surrender. No bloodshed, no fuss."

"It's just idiotic enough," Tommy reflected, "that it might work. You can see the odds. There must be two hundred men working on those ships."

"So they wouldn't be scared of one man. And we're a cinch, in the end. Even if something went wrong, you could still wipe that crowd out."

"Including you, don't forget," he pointed out. "If I have to blast, everything within fifty miles dies."

"Mmm, yes. That's a consideration." I looked at Carroll. "Think we can swing it?"

He smiled that slow, gentle smile that reminds you of a pretty girl. "Don't we always? Give me one paralysis bomb, and I'm happy."

"Well?" I asked Tommy.

"Sure, I'll try it," he answered. "But

I'll give you fifteen hours, Space time. They can repair those ships in twenty hours, and I don't want another battle with them coming in from five directions. At the end of fifteen hours, I attack. And if you haven't got things under control, you know what happens to you. This is of your own volition, and you'll sign a statement to that effect, just in case you get caught in the middle."

"Let's get stared, then."

WE landed at the mouth of the pass, sneaking up to it with dusk from the dark side. There was no road, of course, nor even a path. Bare black rocks were everywhere, and threaded among them in ragged stringers was a mosslike substance, colored a sullen greenish-brown, that was dry and crackly and smelled like wet linoleum.

This was not the only smell, we discovered as we removed ourselves and lethal baggage from the life boat. The air was clean and sweet, but it had a faint, odd odor that reminded me of the color powder blue. Why this was so I never found out. It was pleasant, though.

We worked our way up the pass for an hour and made a camp. No light, of course. We stood watch alternately until morning, then went down the pass to within a mile and a half of the pirate stronghold. It didn't take much of a look to show, we were maybe a couple of dopes.

The buildings all resembled piles of rocks, so that the planetoid looked deserted from the air, provided no movement showed to a passing ship. There was plenty of movement now, of course, with men swarming all over the crippled ships. Little Joe probably wanted those ships in flight, so he could go back and really finish off the Patrol. So let anybody who would, see whatever was going on.

I called Tommy on the gadget I had strapped to my leg. I gave him the picture as I saw it.

"Now's your chance to be sane, your last one," he said.

"You agreed," I reminded him. "And we've still got four hours and thirty-two minutes."

"I stick by my agreement, but you're taking a lulu of a chance."

"Maybe, but it's all worked out, step by step."

"Don't say I didn't try. Better leave that gadget on from now on, Jake," he urged. "If things go wrong, I'll have to use my own judgment."

"Tommy, you're making me nervous. I know that if you have to come in and blast, Carroll and I are dead kids. But please give me every chance, right up to the last second."

"I will."

"Then let me turn this gimmick off until I can give you something good. If I thought you were listening and something did go wrong, I could just picture you swooping down and drawing a bead on the back of my neck."

He chuckled. "I see what you mean. Okay! Be careful."

I switched off. "Well," I said, "how about it?"

"Let's rehash it once more," Carroll said. "You go on in and let 'em grab you. Then you turn on your gadget, and I'll have mine receiving. I'll use my judgment when to move in with the paralysis bomb and my superspecial shootin' iron. You try your best to learn where the atmosphere plant is, and we both get to it if we can. Right?"

"Sure sounds simple, doesn't it? Say, what do you suppose those cages are for, around the edge of the field?"

"Darned if I know. I wondered about that, too."

We found out what they were for—the hard way. Now everything was set, it was time to go. We shook hands, and I turned down the hill. That's when the voice came.

"Stand absolutely still," it commanded, "till we disarm you."

That was perhaps the deadliest, most vicious voice I've ever heard. Believe me, I did exactly as it ordered. I even wished I could hold back my blood corpuscles until that voice said it was all right.

Feet clattered down the pass, and Carroll was relieved of his weapon and the bomb. Hands patted me all over, found nothing, and I allowed myself to turn my head and look at our captors.

The leader, the voice, was even more evil-looking than he sounded. He had one eye and dirty ears. The other two were just run-of-the-prison guys.

"Now," rasped the voice, "where did you two drop from?"

"Funny," I said, "I was wondering the same about you."

I didn't see the blow start or finish. All of a sudden I collided with a tremendous something I learned later was his fist, and I promptly lost interest in proceedings.

When I came to, my first terrified thought was about time. Was Tommy already on his way to give us all, including Carroll and me, the business?

BUT even that terror was as nothing to what I felt when I opened my eyes. Standing almost directly over me was the most revolting and fearsome countenance I had ever seen. Not even my worst nightmares had ever created anything like this blunt, broad head with hot, yellow eyes and powerful jaws with four-inch fangs. It made no sound. It just laid its ears back and looked at me.

I yelled and rolled away across a thick, wonderful rug. This brought a big laugh from many throats, and I saw that the two-hundred-pound Kragorian hound was caged. It began to pace restlessly when I moved, its six legs moving in a smooth blur. It still made no sound, and if I'd had a weak heart I'd have died from the baleful look it held on me with unwinking steadiness. Its mate lay sleeping in one corner of the cage, uninterested.

I turned then, to see where the laugh came from. There was a bunch of men watching me, cackling gleefully. Their faces ranged from hard and ugly to positively nauseating.

"Big joke," I said, when they got quiet.

I discovered Carroll, inside a ring of

men. They all had him covered with unwavering weapons. His nose slanted off to one side and was bleeding in a small trickle which he kept wiping away with the back of one hand. He had one swollen, black, green and yellow eye. But his grin was as sweet and gentle as ever.

Next I saw two men lying in a corner, as if they had been flung there like old laundry. They didn't move, and looked thoroughly dead.

All this took two seconds. I looked at my watch. We still had an hour. Under cover of getting to my feet, I switched on the gadget strapped to my leg. I'd give Tommy some information, at least.

A small, dapper man spoke. "Show's over, men. Back to work."

All but a handful moved toward the doors. One, a sniggerer with broken teeth, said, "Boy, was you ever funny!"

"You're not," I said.

"Just wait'll them hounds is turned loose in the same room with you," he sniggered. "That I wanta see."

I kept a dignified silence at this, and presently there were in the room Carroll, his captors, the crumpled bodies in the corner, and the dapper man, Little Joe. And the hounds.

I shot a nervous glance at the cage. The pacer seemed to have taken quite a fancy to me. Those smoking yellow eyes never left me, and the beast was drooling a little.

"Shall we—get down to business?" Little Joe asked courteously.

I turned to face him. So this was Little Joe, reputedly the most vicious, desperate and wily criminal in existence. He had managed the impossible—escape from Kragor, where pirates were exiled after conviction, and he had brought off not only his band of thugs but a collection of those deadly hounds. There must be more than just these two, else why all those cages outside?

"Business?" I asked. "Whose?"

His thin dark face lighted genially. "I believe you'll agree, Mr. Murchison, that mine is more important—to me, at least. My patrol sighted the life raft of the *Dolphin* and came down to in-

vestigate. Amazingly enough, they found you. Where did you come from?" He snapped this last at me.

"The stork brought me—my mother always said."

He sighed. "I may not be able to force you to answer my questions, but I can offer you a choice. You'll die in any case. Your choice is—in what fashion."

He waved at the cage behind me. "If you don't give me the information I want, I'll set the dogs on you. Even though Carroll here is the strongest man I've ever seen"—he glanced at the crumpled figures in the corner—"he's no match for one of those hounds. And they love live and fighting meat. I won't play it safe, either, and put more hounds in here. One against each of you ought to make exciting sport. It's been some time since—" He let it hang.

"And ruin this beautiful rug?" It was really a fine thing.

He shrugged. "I have a warehouse full of such trinkets."

"I should imagine you've accumulated quite a hunk of stuff."

He smiled again. "I don't mind your pumping me, Mr. Murchison. You're as good as dead, anyway. Yes, I have accumulated a hunk of stuff in the course of my—business."

"Murder and torture!"

"Oh, yes," he said pleasantly. "I find it most amusing to see people die. Not those we kill when we intercept a rich ship. That's merely business. The most amusing are the captives we pit against the hounds. All of us get a good laugh from that." He chuckled, as if remembering.

I decided to be blunt. "Where's your atmosphere plant?"

HE hesitated, his black eyes sharp, then raised his slim shoulders. "Oh, well. You can't do anything with the information. At the end of that corridor. Now, where did you come from?"

"You seem to know everything else about me, why not that?"

"Because your presence here is an impossibility. I know the *Dolphin* was at Arcton City yesterday, and that it

blasted off suddenly. That tub could never reach here in four times the time."

"Maybe we got into a warp."

He fluffed that off. "Be sensible. There's no such thing. You couldn't have repaired that Space Patrol ship, either, in the time you had. So, how *did* you get here?"

"Maybe this is only a dream," I suggested.

He frowned. "You're in a condition of shock. I believe you'll see wisdom in answering if we let you think it over."

"You haven't told me the rest of the choice," I reminded him.

"Oh, yes. If you answer my questions truthfully, you may choose the method of death."

"Then I choose to have my great-grandchildren stuff me to death with goodies."

He smiled. "Heroics."

He was right, plenty. But if your upper lip is as limp as a wet butterfly, you've got to stiffen it somehow.

"We are going out of here," he said, and I looked surprised. "If you decide not to cooperate, you're free to leave at any time."

What was this? "Double talk, yet," I murmured.

"Watch." He went through the other exit from the room, an archway that led into what looked like a council chamber, furnished with chairs and a long table. He did something out of sight that sounded like flipping a switch and stepped quickly back inside. "Wait for the relay," he said.

He and two of the men guarding Carroll took short tubes of metal from their belts and faced the caged hounds.

"Now," Little Joe said quietly.

One of the men walked through the archway, and as he did the door of the cage clicked and snapped open. Both hounds leaped through almost faster than light, soundless, with bared fangs, drooling. Little Joe and his guard pointed the metallic tubes, and the hounds crouched, quivering.

They didn't whine, but their giant bodies shook and cringed, and it seemed there should be whines. Little Joe moved

forward and the hounds retreated, shuddering. They made a rush into the cage and cowered against its far wall. Little Joe snapped the door shut.

"Energizer," Little Joe explained, displaying the tube. "It emits energy at a frequency that's intolerable to the hounds. The doors—" he gestured—"are rigged with simple electronic viewers hooked up with the cage mechanism. So—" the genial smile again—"you're free to leave. We'll be where we can see the show, of course, but I hope you make a wise choice."

He took the Patrol side-arm and the paralysis bomb from one of the guards.

"I can see this is a very advanced type of weapon," he said, "but what is this thing?" He held the paralysis bomb gingerly.

"Just press that switch," I said, "and you got a salt shaker."

He didn't even smile at that. "Very well, think it over," he said and then called out, "We're coming through."

The switch clicked in the council chamber, and Little Joe and his playmates backed through the doors, weapons levelled. The switch clicked again, the relay flipped, and our hosts departed.

Carroll and I stared at each other, and he looked as hopeless as I felt. Not that his great shoulders sagged, not that he'd lost his gentle smile. It was deep in his dark eyes. There was no need for words. He wiped blood from his nose.

"Are you hurt bad?" I asked.

He shrugged and glanced at the crumpled forms in the corner. "Does it matter?"

"Yes."

He gave me a questioning glance. "Well, I'm still a good man in a brawl, but—" He gestured helplessly at the hounds.

"But," I pointed out, "can we do anything else?"

"I guess not," he muttered.

I sat down on the floor and cradled my head in my arms and between my knees. I heard Carroll come up behind me. He laid a hand softly on my head.

"Don't go to pieces, Jake," he crooned. "It'll be easier to fight."

I SHRUGGED him away and whispered into my leg gimmick, so softly that even Carroll couldn't hear, much less anybody listening in. The hound pacing, pacing, pacing with its hot eyes fixed on me, helped cover any possible sound of my voice.

"Listen, Tommy. We've got to make a try for it. I think it's suicide, but we're dead anyway when you come in and blast. And that's in twenty minutes. Give us every second you can. We can't win, but we've got to try. I only hope it's over with fast. Tell our friends the usual things. I kind of messed this one up, didn't I?"

I got up and raised my eyebrows at Carroll. He nodded. I took off my jacket, motioned for him to give me his. I nodded at the corridor door. We sauntered over. We took stances like runners at the starting line.

"One," I whispered softly, "two . . . THREE!"

Carroll was off like a deer, the switch clicked, the hounds were dark streaks of death. I flung our jackets back, whirled and fled after Carroll.

The jacket dodge almost gave me time enough. Almost, but not quite. It slowed the beasts so that I had a good lead. Carroll made it through the door at the end of the corridor, leaving it open for me. I plunged through and whirled to slam it against the hounds.

But one got through. The Pacer, my playmate. It hit the door with a crash that almost tore it loose from the wall and slithered inside. I slammed it, then, before the second hound crashed, and turned to see what was going on.

We were instantly fighting for our lives. Carroll had leaped to one side of the door as soon as he made it, and the two guards, whom I saw now, had swung their blasters. But hot on Carroll's heels was me, and that confused them.

Then the hound, a flashing deadly projectile, came pinwheeling in, and the place was an immediate shambles.

The hound leaped first for the guards and—it looked like a friendly lick—took the throat out of one, sort of in passing. I looked around for a club, anything, but you can't fight with panel switches.

Then the hound leaped at me. I jumped to one side, felt a sharp pain in my leg and jumped harder. The communicator fell off in a corner. I fell, and the hound hit in the middle of my back. I tensed against the next move, tearing my head half off, and heard a sharp *crack* and the hound was gone. I rolled to my knees, saw Carroll duck and the hound sail over him into a panel. The panel became junk.

I didn't see the guard fire, but I heard the crackle as I leaped for the dead guard's blaster. The hound and I met head-on, and there was a ripping of flesh—mine.

I was conscious of three things. The first, I was really being eaten alive and had the means to stop it. The second was a couple of sharp cracks like a stick being broken. The third was pure reflex: I stuck the muzzle of the blaster into its stomach and pressed the activator.

Then I blacked out. . . .

A GAIN I had that terrible fear of the deadline when I came to. I smeared blood off my watch before I did anything. Five minutes left.

The guard who had been quick when I last saw him was now dead, his head at an impossible angle to his body. I understood those cracks I had heard. Carroll looked dead against the wall. The hound was a smoking mess. I was weak from bleeding, and footsteps were pounding down the corridor outside. The other hound was giving them trouble. I dragged myself to the door and shot all the bolts and things I could find.

"Tommy!" I kept babbling. "It's okay, Tommy." Then I remembered the communicator and crawled over to the corner, leaving a trail of blood. "Tommy!" I yelled. "Answer me!"

"Yes, Jake."

"I think we've done it, but hold off until I find out."

"All right, Jake. I'll give you an extra fifteen minutes."

I took both weapons and burned everything in the room into smoking ruin. While this was going on, the voice of Little Joe hailed from outside several times.

"Okay," I said when I was finished. "Your atmosphere plant is done for, and so are you, bud."

"Jake, Jake," he chided gently. "Surely you don't think I'd give you a chance—impossible as it was—to get into my main atmosphere plant. That room you're in is only an emergency auxiliary. It wasn't even operating when you busted in there. That's why the door was unlocked."

"You're lying," I said, but the hollow feeling in my stomach messed up my voice.

"Not so," he said pleasantly. "And now the real fun begins. We're bringing up reinforcements—lots of reinforcements, because that door was not meant to be broken down—and a battering ram. We're not going to kill you and Carroll. We're just going to take you out on the field and turn you loose against one hound at a time. You may kill a few but we've got lots of hounds. Do you want to come out, or do we come in?"

"Go fry," I said.

I looked around the room. All that ruin, all that blood, and Carroll maybe luckily dead—all for nothing. Tommy would have to blast now, and all I would get out of it would be a prominent and flattering obituary.

"Tommy," I said into my gadget, "we picked the wrong room. Carroll looks dead, and all of me is dripping onto the floor. You better take over. Don't think it's been nice knowing you. So long."

I listened for him to say something. He didn't. I waited. He still didn't.

I felt like crying. The least the guy could do was say something, if only to tell me he'd been right and I was a complete dope.

"Tommy," I pleaded, "say something for heaven's sake!"

An orderly commotion in the corri-

dor announced the race with me as the prize. Would they get me first, or would Tommy? Thinking of the hounds, I prayed for Tommy to win.

The commotion suddenly grew to a roar of pounding feet and excited voices. This subsided, and I leaned weakly against the door, ready for anything. Tommy's voice hailed me.

"It's all over, Jake."

I let him in and stumbled over to Carroll. His heart was beating. I passed out again. . . .

WE were both in the sick bay of the *Starshot* when I came to again. Carroll was in an adjoining bunk. He grinned.

"Back so soon, Jake?"

"Is it all over?"

"All over. Tommy decided to land, since we were the center of attention, and take 'em from the rear. Are you in bad shape?"

I shrugged. "I'm still here. Considering I operated only during brief flashes of consciousness, we did all right. Did you kick that hound off me when he lit on my back?"

"And almost broke my leg. Did you actually kill it? That guard bent his blaster over my skull at the same time I was busy breaking his neck."

Tommy came in. "Hey," he said. "Are you guys lucky! You ought to see the loot. You're rich."

"Fine. I'll buy you a drink."

"You got so many holes in you you won't be able to hold anything for a long time." He grinned. "I understand they've got the intravenous feeding equipment all polished up for you at the hospital."

"Hospital?" I said. "Oh, no, they don't. Some damsel in distress or some incompetent Space Patrol captain would be sure to find me. I'm tired of being a sucker. We're going to transfer to the *Dolphin* in space, and hide from characters like you."

He shook his head. "You'll never do it, Jake. Somebody in trouble is sure to find you. You're that kind of a guy."

I sighed. He was probably right.