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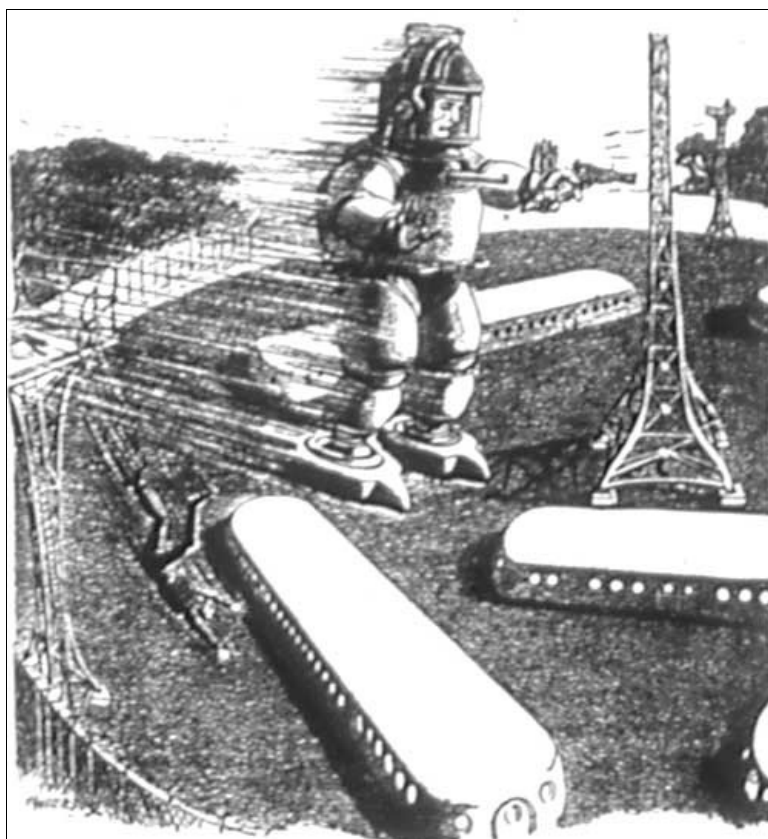
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## Transcriber's Note:

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Nothing there could withstand him.

## The Bluff of the Hawk

By Anthony Gilmore

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**H**ad not old John Sewell, the historian, recognized Hawk Carse for what he was—a creator of new space-frontiers, pioneer of vast territories for commerce, molder of history through his long feud with the powerful Eurasian scientist, Ku Sui—the adventurer would doubtless have passed into oblivion like other long-forgotten spacemen. We have Sewell's industry to thank for our basic knowledge of Carse. His "Space-Frontiers of the Last Century" is a thorough work and the accepted standard, but even it had of necessity to be compressed, and many meaty episodes of the Hawk's life go almost unmentioned. For instance, Sewell gives a rough synopsis of "The Affair of the Brains," but dismisses its aftermath entirely, in the following fashion (Vol. II, pp. 250-251):

"A trick? Carse was famed for them. A trap? But how?"

"... there was only one way out: to smash the great dome covering one end of the asteroid and so release the life-sustaining air inside. Captain Carse achieved this by sending the space-ship *Scorpion* crashing through the dome unmanned, and he, Friday and Eliot Leithgow were caught up in the out-rushing flood of air and catapulted into space, free of the dome and Dr. Ku Sui. Clad as they were in the latter's self-propulsive space-suits, they were quite capable of reaching Jupiter's Satellite III, only some thirty thousand miles away.

"Then speeding through space, Captain Carse discovered why he had never been able to find the asteroid-stronghold. He could not see it! Dr. Ku Sui had protected his lair by making it invisible! But Carse was at least confident that by breaking the dome he had destroyed all life within in, including the coordinated brains.

"So ended The Affair of the Brains.<sup>[1]</sup>

"The three comrades reached Satellite III safely, where, after a few minor adventures, Captain Carse...."

[1] See the March, 1932, Issue of Astounding Stories.

Sewell's ruthless surgery is most evident in that last paragraph. Of course his telescoping of the events was due to limited space; but he did wish to draw a full-length, character-revealing portrait of Hawk Carse, and with "... reached Satellite III safely, where, after a few minor adventures, Captain Carse ..." learned old John Sewell slid over one of his greatest opportunities.

The resourcefulness of Hawk Carse! In these "few minor adventures" he had but one weapon with which to joust against overwhelming odds on an apparently hopeless quest. This weapon was a space-suit—nothing more—yet so brilliantly and daringly did he wield its unique advantages that he penetrated seemingly impregnable barriers and achieved alone what another man would have required the ray-batteries of a space-fleet to do.

But here is the story, heard first from Friday's lips and told and re-told down through the years on the lonely ranches of the outlying planets, of that one dark, savage night on Satellite III and of the indomitable man who winged his lone way through it. Hawk Carse! Old adventurer! Rise from your unknown star-girdled grave and live again!

**T**hirty thousand miles was the gap between Dr. Ku Sui's asteroid and Satellite III, the nearest haven. Thirty thousand miles in a space-ship is about the time of a peaceful cigarro. Thirty thousand miles in a cramped awkward space-suit grow into a nightmare journey, an eternity of suffering, and they will kill a good number of those who traverse them so.

For, take away the metal bulkheads and walls, soft lights and warmth of a space-liner, get out in a small cramped space-suit, and space loses its mask of harmlessness and stands revealed as the bleak, unfeeling torturer it is. There is the loneliness, the sense of timelessness, the sensation of falling, and above all there is the "weightless" feeling from pressure-changes in man's blood-stream—changes sickening in effect and soon resulting in delirium. Nothing definite; no gravity; no "bottom," no "top"; merely a vacuum, comprehended by the human mind through an all-enveloping nausea, and seen in confused spectral labyrinths as the whole cold panorama of icy stars staggers and swirls and the universe goes mad. Such a trip was enough to churn the resistance of the hardest traveler, but for Hawk Carse, Friday and Eliot Leithgow there was more. On Ku Sui's asteroid they had gone through hours of mental and physical tension without break or relaxation, and they were sleep-starved and food-starved and their brains fagged and dull. What would have been a strong reaction on land hit them, in space, with tripled force.

So Friday—our ultimate authority—remembered little of the transit. He had had short periods of wakefulness, when the recurring agony of his body woke and racked him afresh, and only during these did he see the other two grotesque figures, sometimes widely separated, sometimes close, dazzlingly half-lit by Jupiter's light. But he was conscious that one of the three was keeping them more or less together, though only later did he know that this one was Carse—Carse, who hardly slept, who drove off unconsciousness and fought through nausea to keep at his task of shepherding, failing which they would have drifted miles apart and become hopelessly separated. He was able to maintain them in a fairly compact group by his discovery of a short metal direction rod on the breast of the suit, which gave horizontal movement in the direction it was

pointed when its button was pressed.

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**B**ut though it seemed endless, the journey was not; Satellite III grew and grew. Its pale circle spread outward; dark blurs took definition; a spot of blue winked forth—the Great Briney Lake. The globe at last became concave, then, after they entered its atmosphere, convex. This last stretch was the most grueling.

Friday remembered it in vivid flashes. Time after time he dropped into confused sleep, each time to be awakened by Carse jarring into him, shouting at him through the suits' small radio sets, keeping him—and Leithgow—attentive to the job of decelerating. The man's efforts must have been terrific, taxing all his enormous driving power, for he at that time was without doubt more exhausted than they. But he succeeded, and he was a haggard-faced, feverish shell of himself when at last he had them in a dangling drunken halt in the air a hundred feet from the surface.

Primal savagery lay stretched out below, and there seemed to be no safe spot whereon to land. The foul, deep swamp that reached for miles on every side, the towering trees that sprouted their spiny trunks and limbs from it, the interlaced razor-edged vines and creeper-growths—all was a stirring welter of tropic life, life varied and voracious and untamed. From the tiny poisonous bansi insects layers deep on the nearest tree to the monster gantor that crouched in a clump of weeds, gently sawing his fangs back and forth, all the creatures of this world were against man.

Carse scanned the scene wearily. They had to land; had to sleep under normal conditions, and eat and drink, before they could go further. But where? Where was haven? He snapped out the direction rod, moved away a short distance, and then glimpsed, below and to the left, a small peninsula of firm soil which seemed safe and uninhabited. And there was a pool of fairly clear water before it, containing nothing but an old uprooted stump. He came back to the others, shook them, and led them down to the place he had discovered.

They landed with a thump which seemed to shake all life from two of them. Friday and Eliot Leithgow collapsed into inert heaps, asleep immediately. Carse extracted a ray-gun from the belt of Leithgow's suit and prepared to stand watch. But that was too much. He over-estimated his capacity. He had come through thirty hours of hellish sleep-denied delirium, and he could not stave sleep off any longer. He staggered and went down, and his eyelids were glued in sleep when his body hit the ground.

But mechanically, with an instinct that sleep could not deny, his left hand kept clasped around the butt of the ray-gun....

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**S**atellite III's day has an average of seven hours' duration, her night of six. It was perhaps the last hour of daylight when the three metal and fabric-clad figures lying outsprawled on the little thumb-shaped piece of soil had landed. Now quickly the huge sweeping rim of Jupiter plunged down, and night fell over the land.

Fierce darkness. Jungle and swamp awoke with their scale of savage life. Swift swooping shapes winged out from the trees, prey-hungry eyes gleaming green. And from the swamps came bellowings and stirrings from monster mud-encrusted bodies, awakening to their nocturnal quest for food. The night reechoed with the harsh cacophony of their cries.

With lumbering caution, its smooth knob head waving on a long reptilian neck, its heavy armored tail dragging behind its body's folds of flesh, a giant night-thing came stumping out of a copse of jungle growth—a buru. Its eyes were watchful, but centered mainly on the pool of water to one side of the peninsula of firm soil. Its drinking water was there. With several pauses, it went right out on the spit, and a flat-bottomed foot twice the size of an elephant's missed one of the sleeping forms by inches. But the buru cared not for them. It was not a flesh-eater. Its undulating neck stretched far out; its head dipped; water was lapped up—until it caught sight of the uprooted giant stump lying pitched in the pool. The beast drank but little after that, and retreated as cautiously as it had come.

Five or six of its fellows of the swamps followed at intervals to the water, grotesque hulking shapes, odorous and slimy with mud. All drank from the same spot; all ignored, save for a tentative rooting snuffle, the unconscious figures lying puny beneath them. But all noticed the twisted roots of the stump, sticking out in a score of directions, and avoided them.

And then there came smaller, more cautious animals who did not drink from the favored spot, who surveyed it, sniffed, hesitated, and finally retreated. There was a good reason for this caution.

For with the falling of night the stump had been at least thirty feet out in the water; now it was not ten feet from the side of the spit, and not twelve feet from the nearest sleeping figure. The suits that clad the three figures were sealed, the face-plates closed, so there was probably—after their trip through the void—no man smell to attract the giants of swamp and trees. But those

three figures had moved. That was lure enough for one monster.

When the first ruddy arrows of Jupiter's light laced through the jungle's highest foliage, the twisted, gnarled stump was settled on the peninsula's rim, half out of the water. And when day burst, when Jupiter's flaming arch pushed over into view, the long seeming-roots eeled forward in sinuous reptilian life.

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**I**n one second Hawk Carse was snatched from sleep into the turmoil of a fight for life.

Something hard and enormously powerful was wrapping his waist with a vise-like grip that threatened to cut him in two. He felt a leg go up and crumple back, almost breaking under the force of a lashing blow. He was squeezed in, caged, compressed, by a score of tough, encircling tentacles, and his whole body was drawn toward a wide, flexible, black-lipped mouth yawning in the center of the monster he had thought a stump. Moving with loathsome life, its sinewy root-tentacles sucking him whole into the maw, the thing hunched itself back to the water.

The water frothed around Carse. He had been too dazed to resist; he had not known what had gripped him in his unconsciousness and weakness. But he remembered his ray-gun.

The lips of the hideous mouth were pressing close. Both were now under the surface. Carse's suit was still tight and he could breathe even while totally submerged in the water. He strained his left arm against the tentacle that looped it, worked the ray-gun still clasped in his hand in line with the thing's monstrous carcass, and at once, gasping and sick, pulled the trigger clear back.

The orange stream sizzled as it cleared a path through the water and bit true into the gaping mouth. There sounded a curious, subterranean sob; beady eyes on each side of the mouth bulged; the woodish body quivered in agony. Its tentacles slackened, and, half fainting, the Hawk wrenched free. He staggered up onto the land, streams of water running off the suit, and toppled over; and from there he saw the thing drag its writhing shuddering shape farther out from the shore. When perhaps sixty feet away it again subsided into a "harmless" uprooted old stump....

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**C**arse lay resting and collecting himself for a quarter of an hour, while Leithgow and Friday slept on, unconscious of what had happened; then he got to his feet, opened their face-plates and bathed Leithgow's pale brow with water. The scientist awoke with the quickness of old men, but Friday stirred and stretched and blinked and sat up at last, yawning.

The Hawk answered their questions about his wet suit with a brief explanation of the fight, then got down to business.

"There's water here, but we must have food," he said. "Friday, you go back and find fruit; some isuan weed, too, if it's growing nearby. A chew of it will stimulate us. Keep your ray-gun ready. I wouldn't be here if I'd not had mine."

The isuan was a big help. In its prepared form it is degrading, mind-destroying, but in natural state it gives a powerful and comparatively harmless stimulation. Chewing on the leaves that the Negro brought back, they made strength and renewed vitality for their bodies, and came, for the first time since they had started their flight through space, to a near-normal state. Meaty, yellow globules of pear-like fruit, followed by prudent drafts of water, aided also. Friday's long-absent grin returned as he bit into the juicy fruit, and he announced through a mouthful:

"Well, things're lookin' sunny again! We've got food and water inside us; we can reach Master Leithgow's laboratory in these here suits; an' to top it all we've finished high an' mighty Ku Sui. He's dead at last! Boy, it sure feels good to know it!"

Eliot Leithgow was lying back, breathing deeply of the fresh morning air. His lined, worn face and body were relaxed. "Yes," he murmured, "it is good to know that Dr. Ku is now just a thing of the past. He and his coordinated brains." He glanced aside at the Hawk, sitting silent and still, and stroking, as always when in meditation, the bangs of flaxen hair which obscured his forehead. "Why so serious, Carse?" he asked.

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**T**he adventurer's gray eyes were cold and sober. No relaxation showed in them. His hand paused in its slow smoothing movement and he spoke.

"Why I overlooked it before," he said quietly, almost as if to himself, "I don't know. Probably because I was too tired, and too busy, and too sick to think. But now I see."

"What?" Leithgow sat up straight.

"Eliot," said the Hawk clearly, "doesn't it seem strange to you that Ku Sui's asteroid continued to

be invisible after we had smashed through its dome?"

"What do you mean?"

"We've assumed that our smashing the dome and opening it to space killed Ku Sui and everyone inside, and destroyed all the mechanisms, including the coordinated brains. But the mechanism controlling the asteroid's invisibility was not destroyed. The place remained invisible."

The old scientist's face grew tense. Carse paused for a moment.

"That means," he went on, "that Ku Sui provided the invisibility machine with special protection for just such an emergency. And do you think he would give it such protection and not his coordinated brains? Wouldn't he first protect the brains, his most cherished possession?"

Eliot Leithgow knew what this meant. The Hawk had promised the brains in that machine—brains of five renowned scientists, kept cruelly, unnaturally alive by Dr. Ku—that he would destroy them. And his promises were always kept.

There was no evading the logic of this reasoning. The Master Scientist nodded. "Yes," he answered. "He certainly would."

"I couldn't damage the case they were in," Carse continued. "The whole device seemed self-contained. It means just one thing: special protection. Since the mechanism for invisibility survived the crashing of the dome, we may be sure that the brain machine did too. And more than that: we may assume that there was special protection for the most precious thing of all to Dr. Ku Sui—his own life."

Friday's mouth gaped open. The old scientist cried out:

"My God! Ku Sui—still alive?"

"It would seem so," said Hawk Carse.

He amplified his evidence. "Look at these space-suits we're wearing. We got them and escaped by them, but they're Dr. Ku's. Couldn't he have protected himself with one too? He had plenty of time. And then the construction of the asteroid's buildings—all metal, with tight, sealed doors! Oh, stupid, stupid! Why didn't I see it all before? Here, in my weakness and sickness, I thought we'd killed Ku Sui and destroyed the coordinated brains!"

Leithgow looked suddenly very old and tired. The calamity did not end there. There were other angles, and an immediate one of high danger. In a lifeless voice he said:

"Carse, our whole situation's changed by this. We intended to go straight to my laboratory, but we may not be able to. The laboratory may already be closed to us. And even if not, there'd be a big risk in going there."

"Closed to us by what?" the Hawk demanded sharply. "At risk from what?"

Old Leithgow pressed his hands over his face. "Let me think a moment," he said.

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**T**here were very good reasons why Eliot Leithgow maintained his chief laboratory on the dangerous Satellite III. Other planets might have offered more friendly locations, but III possessed stores of accessible minerals valuable to the scientist's varied work, and its position in the solar system was most convenient, being roughly halfway between Earth and the outermost frontiers. Leithgow had counterbalanced the inherent peril of the laboratory's location by ingenious camouflage, intricate defenses and hidden underground entrances; had, indeed, hidden it so well that none of the scavengers and brigands and more personal enemies who infested Port o' Porno remotely suspected that his headquarters was on the satellite at all. Ships, men, could pass over it a score of times with never an inkling that it lay below.

After a short silence, Eliot Leithgow began his explanation.

"You'll remember," he told the intent Hawk, "that Ku Sui's men kidnapped me from our friend Kurgo's house in Porno. There were five of them: robot-coolies. They took us entirely by surprise, and killed Kurgo and bore me to Ku Sui's asteroid."

"Well, I had come to Kurgo's house in the first place to arrange for supplies for building an addition to my laboratory, and I had with me a sheaf of papers containing plans for this addition. The plans are not important; they tell nothing—but there was a figure on one of the papers that might reveal everything! The figure 5,576.34. Do you know what that stands for?"

The adventurer thought for a moment, then shook his head. Leithgow nodded. He went on:

"Few would. *But among the few would be Ku Sui!*"

"You'll remember that on building my laboratory we considered it extremely important to have it on the other side of the globe from Port o' Porno—diametrically opposite—so that the movements of our ships to and from it would be hidden from that pirate port. Diametrically opposite—remember? Well, the diameter of Satellite III is 3,550 miles. This diameter multiplied by 3.1416

gives 11,152.63 miles as the circumference, and one half the circumference is 5,576.34 miles—the exact distance of my laboratory from Port o' Porno!"

"I see," Carse murmured. "I see."

"That figure meant nothing to you, nor would it to the average person; but to a mathematician and astronomer—to Dr. Ku Sui—it would be a challenge! He would be studying the paper on which it is written down. One of Eliot Leithgow's papers. Plans for an addition to a laboratory. Therefore, Eliot Leithgow's laboratory. And then the figure: half the circumference of Satellite III. Why, he would at once deduce that it gave the precise location of my laboratory!"

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**T**he Hawk rose quickly. "If those papers fell into Dr. Ku's hands—"

"He would know exactly where the laboratory is," Leithgow finished. "He would search. Its camouflage would not hold him long. And that would be the end of my laboratory—and us too, if we were caught inside."

"Yes," snapped the Hawk. "You imply that the papers were left in Kurgo's house?"

"I had them in the bottom drawer of the clothes-chest in the room I always use. The coolies did not take them. At that time they wanted nothing but me."

Friday, rubbing his woolly crown, interjected: "But, even if Ku Sui's still alive, he wouldn't know about them papers. Far's I can see, they're safe."

"No!" Leithgow cried. "That's it! They're not! Follow it logically, point by point. Assuming that Dr. Ku's alive, he has one point of contact with us—Kurgo's house, in Porno, where I was kidnapped. He wants us badly. He will anticipate that one of us will go back to that house: to care for Kurgo's body, to get my belongings—for several reasons. So he will radio down—he probably can't come himself—for henchmen to station themselves at the house and to ransack it thoroughly for anything pertaining to me. The papers would fall into their hands!"

"All right," said Carse levelly. "We must get those papers. They will either be still in the house or in the possession of Dr. Ku's men at Porno. But whichever it is—we *must get them before Ku Sui does*." He paused.

"Well," he said, "that means me." He turned and looked down at the old man and smiled. "There's no use risking the three of us. I'll go to Kurgo's house myself."

"If the papers are gone, suh?" asked Friday.

"I don't know. What I do will depend on what I discover there."

"But," said Leithgow, "there may be guards! There may be an ambush!"

"I have a powerful weapon. M. S. Unknown, so far; new to Satellite III. Ku Sui himself supplied it. This space-suit."

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**T**he Hawk scanned the "western" sky and began giving brisk orders.

"Eliot, you've got to go to some place of safety until this is all over. You too, Eclipse, to take care of him. Let me see.... There's Cairnes, and Wilson.... Wilson's the one. He should be at his ranch now. You remember it: Ban Wilson's ranch, on the Great Briney Lake? Right. Both of you will go there and wait. I'll meet you there when I'm finished. And at that time I'll either have the papers or know that Ku Sui has found the laboratory."

Again on his feet, the old Master Scientist regarded anxiously this slender, coldly calculating man who was his closest friend. He was afraid. "Carse," he said, "you're going back alone into probable danger. The papers—the laboratory—they're important—but not so important as your life."

There was visible now in the Hawk's face that hard, unflinching will-to-do that had made him the spectacular adventurer that he was. "Did you ever know me to run from danger?" he asked softly. "Did you ever know me to run from Ku Sui?..." And Eliot Leithgow knew that the course was set, no matter what it might hold.

Carse again glanced at Jupiter, hanging massive in the blue overhead. "About three hours of daylight left," he observed. "Now, close face-plates. We must go up—far up—to get our bearings."

Altitude swept back the horizon as they arched up through the warm, glowing air. From far in the heavens, perhaps twenty miles, Carse saw what he looked for—a bright gleam of silver in the monochrome of the terrain, where Jupiter's light struck on the smooth metal hides of a group of space-ships resting in the satellite's lone port, Porno. Eighty, a hundred miles away—some such distance. Into the helmet's tiny microphone he said:

"That's Porno, over to the 'north,' and there to one side is the Great Briney. It's not far: you won't have to hurry, Eliot. Head straight for the lake and follow the near shoreline toward Porno, and you'll come to Ban Wilson's ranch. Now we part."

The three clinging, giant forms separated. The direction-rods for horizontal movement were out-hinged. A last touch of mitten-gloves on the bloated suits fabric; a nod and a smile through the face-plates; and a few parting words:

"Good luck, old comrade!"—in Leithgow's soft voice; and the Negro's deep, emphatic bass: "Don't know how far these little sets work, suh, but if you need me, call. I'll keep listenin'!"

And then white man and black were speeding away in the ruddy flood of Jupiter-light, and Hawk Carse faced the danger trail alone, as was his wont.

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**C**autious rather than speed had to mark his journey, Carse knew. Several ranches lay scattered in the jungle smother between him and the port—stations where the weed isuan was collected and refined into the deadly finished product. They were worked for the most part by Venusians allied with Ku Sui: the Eurasian practically controlled the drug trade; and therefore, if any alarm had been broadcast, many men would already be on the lookout for him.

So the Hawk dropped low, and chose a course through the screening walls of the jungle. It did not take him long to attain full mastery of the suit's controls, and soon he was gliding cleanly through the hollows created by the mammoth outthrusting treetops in a course crazy and twisted, but one which kept him pointing always towards Porno. Presently he found an easier highway and a faster—a sluggish, dirty yellow stream, quite broad, which ended, he was sure, in a swamp within a mile of his destination.

Flanked by the jungle growth which sprouted thickly from each bank, a gray, ghostly shape in the shadows lying over the water, he sped through the dying afternoon. He kept at least ten feet above the surface, well out of reach of such water beasts as from time to time reared up through the placid surface to scan him. Once a huge gantor, gulping a drink from the bank, snorted and went trumpeting away at the grotesque sight of him—flying without wings!—and once too, on rising cautiously above the treetops to reconnoiter, Carse saw life far more perilous to him: a small party of men, stooping over a swamp-brink and plucking the ripe isuan weed. At this he dived steeply and fled on; and he knew he had gone unobserved, for there came no outcry of discovery from behind.

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**J**upiter lowered its murky disk as the miles streamed past, breeding a legion of shadows welcome to the fabric-clad monster skimming through them and to the creatures who blinked and stirred as night approached. The stream broadened into shallow pockets; patches of swamp appeared and absorbed the stream; and Carse knew he was close to his destination.

He cut his speed and glanced around. Ahead, the dark spire of a giant sakari tree climbed into the gloom. It would be a good place. The man rose slowly; like a wraith on the wind he lifted into its top-most branches; and there, in the broad, cuplike leaves, he warily ensconced himself. For man-sounds came into his opened helmet, and through a fringe of leaves, across a mile of tumbled swamp and marsh, he could see the guarding fences of the cosmetropolis of Porno.

A last slice of blotched, flaming red, the rim of setting Jupiter, still silhouetted Porno, sprawled inside its high, electric-wired fences, and the flood of fading light brushed the town with beauty. The rows of tin shacks which housed its dives, the clustered, nondescript hovels, the merchants' grim strongholds of steel—all merged into a glowing mirage, a scene far alien to the brooding swamp and savage jungle in whose breast it lay. Here and there several space-ships reared their sunset-gilded flanks, glittering high-lights in the final glorious burst of Jupiter-light....

The planet's rim vanished abruptly, and Porno returned to true character.

For a moment it appeared what it was: a blotched, disordered huddle, ugly, raw, fit companion of the swamp and jungle. Then beads of light appeared, some still, some winking, one crooked line of flaring illumination marking the Street of the Sailors, along which the notorious kantrans flourished, now ready for their nightly brood of men who sought forgetfulness in revelry. Soon, Carse knew, the faint man-noises he heard would grow into a broad fabric of sound, stitched across by shrieks and roars as the isuan and alkite flowed free. And all around the lone watcher in the sakari tree the night-monsters were crawling out in jungle and swamp on the dark routine of their lives as, in the town, two-legged creatures even lower in their degradation went abroad after the dope and liquor which gave them their vicious recreation.

The night flowed thicker around him.

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**F**rom somewhere behind, the Hawk heard a suck of half-fluid mud as a giant body stretched in its sleeping place. A tree close to his suddenly fluttered with the unseen life it harbored. A hungry gantor raised its long deep bellow to the night, and another answered, and another.

It grew pitch black. Only a sprinkling of pin-points of light marked Porno to the eye. The sky beyond the town matched the sky to the rear. Jupiter's light now had fled the higher air levels. The time had come.

Cautiously Carse brushed the branches aside, rose upright and pressed the mitten switch over to repulsion. In instant response his giant's bulk lifted lightly. He sped upward, straight and fast; and at two thousand feet, still untouched by the sinking planet's rays, he brought himself to an approximate halt and peered below.

Port o' Porno lay spread out beneath, one thin line of light-pricks off which angled fainter lines, extending only a short distance and then dying widely off. There were perhaps two thousand men in the town—men from all the countries of the three planets inhabited by creatures that could be called human—and of these at least three quarters knew Hawk Carse as an enemy, because of his intolerance for their dope-trade. His approach to the house Number 574 had to be swift, direct, unseen, unheard.

He was able to make it so. Pointing the direction rod, he winged forward until directly above an estimated spot, then dropped a thousand feet. A pause while he searched; another drop. He knew Kurgo's house well, but the scene was confusing from above, and the street the house was on was always dark at night.

He made it out at last. The squat two-storied structure, similar to other merchants' strongholds, seemed unlit and unwatched. Carse swung back the hinged mittens of the suit and slid his hands out ready for action. In his left he took his ray-gun; then, pressing the mitten-switch, he dropped straight, silent, swift, like the Hawk he now truly was.

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**A** single window-port, high up, broke the smooth rear of Kurgo's house. It faced a silent alleyway. The steel shutters were closed, but a pull swung them noiselessly outward. For a brief moment Carse's bulging giant's figure of metal and fabric hung black against the shadowed window-port. The room he peered into was solid black. He heard no sound. Clumsily he thrust out and stepped in.

Silence. Inky nothingness—but the air was weighted with many things, and among them one which brought the short hairs on the Hawk's neck prickling erect. A smell! It was not to be mistaken—a faint, but rank and fetid and altogether identifying smell—the body-smell of a Venusian!

For a moment Hawk Carse's breathing stopped. Metal clanked on metal for an instant as he moved from the window-port and became one with the darkness inside; then silence again, as his eyes trained into the vault and his hand held ready on the ray-gun. He waited.

Was it a trap? He had seen no guards watching the house; had sensed it deserted. But the steep shutters, unlocked, readily permitting entrance—and the smell! Even if not still there, a Venusian had been in the room, and a Venusian of Port o' Porno was an enemy. A Venusian.... There were only some sixty on the whole satellite, and, of these, fifty were the men of Lar Tantril. Lar Tantril, powerful henchman of Dr. Ku Sui, director of the Eurasian's drug trade on Satellite III. But that line of thought had to wait.

"I see you!" he whispered suddenly and sharply. "My gun's on you. Come forward!"

---

**N**o answer; not the slightest sign or stir in the darkness. He breathed again.

Carse knew the arrangement of Kurgo's house. He was in his second-story sleeping-room. There was a door in the wall ahead, leading into the room Leithgow was accustomed to use on his visits, and there the papers should be. But first he would have to have light.

His ears pitched for any betraying sound, Carse moved heavily to his left until a wall arrested him. He felt along it, located the desk he sought for and scoured through it. His fingers found the flash he knew was there.

The darkness then was slit by a hard straight line of white. It shot over the room picking out overturned chairs, a bowl that had toppled to the floor, scattering its contents of ripe akalot fruit, a sleeping couch, its sheets and pillows awry, and—something human.

A half-clothed body lay sprawled beside the couch, its hands thrust clutching forward and its unseeing eyes still staring at the door whence had come the shots that had burnt out the left side of its chest. Dead. Three days dead. The murdered master of the house, Kurgo, lying where Ku



Sui's robot-coolies had shot him down.

The Venusian-smell swept more strongly into his nostrils as the adventurer opened the door into Leithgow's room. No Venusian had ever been in those rooms *before* the abduction.

Carse's light danced over the room's confusion: a laboratory table overturned; apparatus spilled; several chains flung around, one splintered: mute signs of the struggle Eliot Leithgow had offered his kidnappers.

In a corner stood a metal chest. In the bottom drawer was the all-significant answer. Hawk Carse crossed the room and slid it open.

The papers were gone!

---

**M**ethodically Carse hunted through every drawer and corner of the room, but he found no trace of them. Every article that would be of value to an ordinary thief was left; the one thing important to Dr. Ku Sui, the sheaf of papers, was missing.

The presence of the Venusian body-smell started an important train of thought in the Hawk's mind. It signified that the papers had been taken by henchmen of Ku Sui, which in turn signified that Ku Sui had survived the crashing of the dome and was alive and again aggressively dangerous. But was the Eurasian already on Satellite III? Was he already in personal possession of the papers?—perhaps conducting a search for Leithgow's laboratory?

Or did it mean that Dr. Ku had merely radioed instructions for his Venusian henchmen to ransack the house, take whatever pertained to Leithgow, and wait for him?

Venusians.... There was only one logical man; and as Hawk Carse thought of him in that dark and silent house of tragedy, his right hand slowly rose to the bangs of hair over his forehead and began to stroke them....

His bangs were an unusual style for the period; they stamped him and attracted unwanted attention; but he would wear his hair in that fashion until he went down in death. For he had once been trapped—trapped neatly by five men, and maltreated: one, Judd the Kite, whose life had paid already for his part in the ugly business; two others whom he was not now concerned with; the fourth, Dr. Ku Sui; and the fifth—a Venusian....

That fifth, the Venusian, was Lar Tantril, now one of Ku Sal's most powerful henchmen, and director of his interplanetary drug traffic—Lar Tantril, who possessed an impregnable isuan ranch only twenty-five miles from Port o' Porno—*Lar Tantril, who probably had directed the stealing of the papers from this room! The papers, if not already in Ku Sui's hands, should be at Tantril's ranch.*

Carse's deduction was followed by a swift decision. He had to raid Lar Tantril's ranch.

He knew the place fairly well. Once, even, he had attacked it, in his *Star Devil*, seeking to wipe out his debt against Tantril; but he had been driven off by the ranch's mighty offensive rays.

It was impregnable, Tantril was fond of boasting. Situated on the brink of the Great Briney, its other three sides were flanked by thick, swampy jungle, in which the isuan grew and was gathered by Tantril's Venusian workers. Ranch? More a fort than a ranch, with its electrified, steel-spiked fence; its three watch-towers, lookouts always posted there against the threat of hijackers or enemies; its powerful ray-batteries and miscellany of smaller weapons. A less vulnerable place for the keeping of Eliot Leithgow's papers could hardly have been found in all the frontiers of the solar system.

He, Carse, had raided it in a modern fighting space-ship, and failed. Now, with nothing but a space-suit and a ray-gun, he had to raid it again—and succeed!

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**T**he adventurer did not leave immediately. He thought it wise to make what preparations he could. His important weapon was the space-suit; therefore, he took it off and studied and inspected its several intricate mechanisms as well as he could in the carefully guarded light of his flash.

It was motivated, he saw, by dual sets of gravity-plates, in separate space-tight compartments. One set was located in the extremely thick soles of the heavy boots; the other rested on the top of the helmet. He saw why this was. The gravity-plates for repulsion were those in the helmet; for attraction, those in the boot-soles. This kept the wearer of the suit always in an upright, head-up position.

The logical plan of attack had grown in Carse's mind: down and up! Down to the papers, then up and away before the men on the ranch knew what was happening: he could suppose that they, like all others on the satellite, had no knowledge of a self-propulsive space-suit. The success of

his raid depended entirely on keeping the two gravity mechanisms intact. If they were destroyed, or failed to function, he would be locked to the ground in a prison of metal and fabric: clamped down, literally, by a terrific dead weight! The suit was extremely heavy, particularly the boots, and Carse learned that the wearer was able to walk in it only because a portion of the helmet's repulsive force was continually working to approximate a normal body gravity.

A chance to succeed—if the two vital points were kept intact! If they failed, he would have to slip out of the imprisoning suit and use his quick wits and deadly ray-gun in clearing a path to Ban Wilson, his nearest friend, whose ranch, fourteen miles from Tantril's stronghold, was where Eliot Leithgow and Friday would be awaiting him.

It was characteristic of Hawk Carse that he never even considered calling on Wilson's resources of men and weapons to help him. A Hawk he was: wiry, fierce-clawed, bold against odds and danger, most capable and deadly when striking alone....

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**A**fter scanning the whole project, Carse attended to other needs. He ate some of the akalot fruit spilled over the floor of the adjoining room; opened a can of water and drank deeply; limbered his muscles well; even rested for five minutes. Then he was ready to leave.

He soon was again in the cold space-suit, fastening on the helmet. He left the face-plate open. The left mitten he hinged back, so as to be able to grip the ray-gun in his bare hand. Then, a looming giant shadow in the darkness, he shuffled to the rear window-port.

Carse steadied himself on the sill. The night-bedlam from the Street of the Sailors, punctuated by far, hungry bellows from swamp monsters, sounded in his ears. Enemies, human and animal, ringed him in Kurgo's house: but up above lay a clean, cold highway, an open highway, stretching straight to the heart of the danger which was his destination. He turned the mitten-switch over to quick repulsion and leaped up to the waiting heavens.

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**O**n the ground was a world of night: a mile up showed a great circle of black, one edge of which was marked by a faint, eery glow from further-setting Jupiter.

Save for that far-off spectral hint of the giant occulted planet, Hawk Carse sped in darkness. Through the open face-plate the night wind buffeted his emotionless, stone-set face: his suit whistled a song of speed as the gusts laced by it. Down and ahead his direction rod pointed, and with ever-gathering momentum he followed its leading finger. The lights of Porno dwindled to points; grew yet finer, then were gone. Several times a sparse cluster of other lights, lonely in the black tide of III's surface, ran beneath him, signaling a ranch. The last of these melted into the ink behind, and there was a period unrelieved by sign of man's presence below.

And then at last one bright solitary spot of light appeared, far ahead. It was a danger signal to the Hawk. He had to descend at once. From then on, speed had to be forsaken for caution. Watchful eyes were beneath that light, lying keen on the heavens; a whole intricate offense and defense system surrounded it. It was the central watch-beacon of Lar Tantril's ranch.

Carse swooped low.

He came into the night-world of the surface. No faint-lit horizon showed; there was only the darkness, and darker shadows peopling it. At the height of a mile there had been no signs of the satellite's native life, but at an elevation scarcely above the treetops the flying man was brought all too close to the reality of the denizens of the gloomy jungle below. Out of the black smother came clues to the life within it: sounds of monstrous bodies moving through the undergrowth and mud, recurring death-screams, howls and angry chatterings....

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**T**his below; there was more above. He was not the only living thing that soared in the night. Swift fleeting batlike shapes would appear from nowhere for one sharp second, would beset him one after another in an almost constant stream, thinking his comparatively clumsy, bloated bulk easy prey, and then be gone. He snapped shut his face-plate under their assault. Sometimes there came different, more powerful wings, and he would duck in mechanical reaction, sensing the wings sweep past, often feeling them as, with sharp pecks and quick thudding blows, they sought to stun him. But the suit was stout; the repulsed attackers could only follow a little, glaring at him with fire-green malevolent eyes, then leave to seek smaller prey.

The watch-beacon began to wink more often through the ranks of intervening trees as he neared the ranch. Carse was gliding so low that often branches raked and twisted him in his course. His low transit allowed one tree to loose great peril upon him.

The tree loomed a black giant in his path. Fifty feet away, he was swerving to wind around it

when he noticed its dark upper branches a-tremble. He had only this for warning when, with chilling surprise, what appeared to be the entire top of the tree rose, severed itself completely from the rest and soared right out to meet him.

A shape from a nightmare, it slid over the adventurer. He saw two green-glowing saucer-sized eyes; heard the wings rattling bonily as they spread to full thirty feet; heard the monster's life-thirsty scream as it plunged. The stars were blotted out. It was upon him.

---

**B**ut even in the sudden confusion of the attack, Carse knew the creature for what it was: a full-grown specimen of the giant carnivorous lemak, a seldom-seen, dying species, too clumsy, too slow, too huge to survive. His ray-gun came around, but he was caught in a feathered maelstrom and knocked too violently around to use it. Without pause the lemak's claws raked his suit. Unable to rend the tough fabric, it resorted to another method. With a strength so enormous that it could overcome the force of the gravity-plates and his forward momentum, the creature tossed him free. Dizzy, he hurtled upward. But he knew that the bird's purpose was to impale him on the long steely spike of its beak as he came twisting down.

The lemak poised below, snout and spear-like beak raised. But it waited in vain, for Carse did not come dropping down. A touch of the control switch and he stayed at the new level, collecting himself. The lemak, puzzled and angry, wheeled up to see what had become of the victim that did not descend, and found instead a searing needle of heat which burnt through its broad right wing. Then, screaming with pain and in a frenzy to escape, it went with a rush into the far darkness.

The Hawk dropped low again, hoping that his gun's quick flash had not been observed. He had not wished to wound the lemak mortally, for no matter how accurate his shot the monster would take long to die, and scream and thrash as it did so. One short spit of orange was preferable to a prolonged hullabaloo. But even that might have betrayed him....

With elaborate caution, he reconnoitered Lar Tantril's ranch.

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**F**rom above, the ranch clearing was a pool of faint light contained in black leagues of jungle and the edge of the Great Briney. Slanting shadows and the dark bulks of buildings that were unlit rendered the details vague, but under prolonged scrutiny the appointments of the ranch became visible.

The clearing was a circle some two hundred yards in diameter. Just inside the jungle wall was the first line of protection, a steel-barbed, twenty-foot-high fence, its strong corded links interwoven with electrified wires. Well within this fence stood five buildings, low, squat and one-storied, four of them forming a broken square around the central fifth. Two buildings were pierced by low rows of lighted windows, evidence that they were the barracks of the workers; two others, devoted to the processing of the isuan weed, were now dark and silent. The central building was smaller, with window-ports that were glowing eyes in the smooth metal walls. It was the dwelling of the master, Lar Tantril.

Close to the central building rose a hundred-foot tower, topped by the watch-beacon. At three equi-distant points around the encompassing fence, small, square platforms were held sixty feet aloft by mast-like triangular towers, up which foot-rungs led. And on each platform could be made out the figure of a Venusian guard.

Ceaselessly these guards turned and scanned the jungle, the heavens, the unbroken dark prairie of the lake, alert for anything of suspicion. Lar Tantril had good reasons for maintaining a constant watch over his stronghold, and his guards' eyes were sharpened by knowledge of the severe payment laxness would bring. Close at hand in the platforms were knobs which, pressed, would ring a clanging alarm through all the buildings below; and each guard wore two ray-gun holsters.

Despite the guards and the ugly spikes of the fence, however, the ranch from above appeared peaceful, calm and harmless. No men were visible on its shadow-dappled clearing. Even the surrounding jungle, in the watch-beacon's shaded underside, might have been nothing but a stage set, were it not for the occasional signs of the life that crept unseen through it—a long, far-distant howl, a quickly receding crashing in the undergrowth, a thumping from some small animal.

The guards were used to this pattern of nocturnal sounds. It was only when, from a tree not thirty feet from one of the platforms, there came a sudden sharp shaking in the upper branches, that the Venusian on that platform deigned to grip his ray-gun and peer suspiciously. All he saw was a large bird that flapped out and winged across the clearing, mewling angrily.

The guard released his grip on the gun. A snake, probably, had disturbed the bird. Or some of those devilish little crimson bansis, half insect, half crab....

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**H**awk Carse breathed again. He had been sure his position would be revealed when, drifting with almost imperceptible motion into the tree, the bird had pecked at him, then flapped away in alarm. A long, painfully cautious approach from tree to tree to the selected one had been necessary to the daring scheme of attack he had evolved.

He seemed to be safe. Through a fringe of leaves he saw the guard on the platform glancing elsewhere. Carse steadied himself, rose slightly and again scanned the ranch.

Yes, it looked harmless, but he knew that nothing could be further from the reality. Spaced around the inside edge of that spiky fence were small metal nozzles protruding a few inches from the ground; and on the turning of a control wheel, they would hurl forth a deadly orange swathe, fanning hundreds of feet into the sky. He had tasted their hot breath once when attacking the ranch in his *Star Devil*. Then there were the long-range projectors whose muzzles studded the central building. And the ray-guns of the tower guards.

These were dangers that he knew, for he had experienced them. What others the ranch held, he could not well surmise. But he saw one significant thing that gave him pause and brought lines to his brow.

The ranch was expecting trouble. Over to one side of the clearing rested a great rounded object, on whose smooth hull gleamed coldly the light from the beacon—Lar Tantril's own personal space-ship—and alongside it a smaller, somewhat similar shape, the ranch's air-car! The space-ship signified that the Venusian chief was present; the air-car, that all his men were gathered in the barracks, and not, as was their custom, in Port o' Porno for a night of revelry!

All waiting—all gathered here—all ready! All grouped for a strong defense! Did it mean what it would appear to—that he, the Hawk, was expected?

He could not know. He could not know if a trap was lying prepared there against his coming. He could but go ahead, and find out.

The only plan of attack he could think of had grown in his mind. Down and up: that was the essence of it: but the details were difficult. He had worked them out as far as he could with typical thoroughness. He had to reach the heart of the fort lying before him: had to reach the central house, Lar Tantril's own. The precious papers would be there, if anywhere.

The Hawk was ready.

He gathered his muscles. His face was cold and hard, his eyes mists of gray. There was no least sign in the man that, in the next few all-deciding minutes, death would lick close to him.

He poised where he was precariously balanced. His ray-gun was in his bare left hand; his face-plate was locked partly open. He raised his fingers to the direction rod on the suit's breast, gazed straight at the guard on the nearest watch-platform and snapped the direction rod out, pointing it at that guard.

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**W**hat happened then struck so fast, so unexpectedly, that it took only thirty seconds to plunge the quiet ranch into chaos.

The Hawk came like a thunder-bolt, using to its full power his only weapon, the space-suit. The sight of him might alone have been enough to strike terror. From the dark arms of the tree he hurtled, his bloated monstrous shape of metal and fabric dull in the glow of the watch-beacon, and crashed with a clang of metal into the platform he aimed at. Nothing there could withstand him. One second the guard on it was calmly gazing off into the sky: the next, like a nine-pin he was bowled over, to topple heels and head whirling to the ground sixty feet beneath. He lived, he kept consciousness, but he was sorely injured; and he never saw the outlandish projectile that struck him, nor saw it streak to the second watch-platform, bowling its guard out and to the ground likewise, and then repeating at the third and last!

A crash; a pause; a crash; a pause; then a third crash, and the thing of metal had completed the circuit, and all three watch-platforms were scooted empty!

Then came confusion.

There had been screams, but now a crazed voice began crying out mechanically, over and over:

"Space-suit! Space-suit! Space-suit! Space-suit!"

It came from the second guard, who lay twisting on the ground. His tongue, by some trick of nervous disorganization, beat out those words like a voice-disk whose needle keeps skipping its groove—and the effect was macabre.

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**T**he central buildings disgorged a crowd of men. Shorty, wiry, thin-faced Venusians, each with skewer-blade strapped to his side and some with ray-guns out, they came scrambling into the open, swearing and wondering. The second guard's insane repetitions directed most of them in his direction; and they piled in a crowd around him. They had no attention for what was happening behind, within the buildings they had emptied. That was what Hawk Carse had planned.

A voice of authority roared up over the general hubbub.

"Rantol! Guard! Rantol, you fool! What happened? What attacked you? Cut that crazy yelling! Answer me!—you, Rantol!"

"Space-suit! Space-suit! Space-suit! Space—"

"Lar Tantril!" A man with suspicious eyes caught the attention of the one who had spoken first. "Space-suit, he says! A flying space-suit! Only Ku Sui has space-suits that fly; or only Ku Sui *had* them, rather. You know what that must mean!"

He paused, peering at his lord. The coarse yellowy skin of Tantril's brow wrinkled with the thought, then his tusk-like Venusian teeth showed as his lips drew apart in speech.

"Yes!" Lar Tantril said. "It's *Carse*!"

And he ordered the now silent men around him:

"Circle my house, all of you, your guns ready. You, Esret"—to his second in command—"out gun and come with me."

---

**E**ven as Lar Tantril spoke, a giant shape was passing clumsily through the kitchen of his house. Carse had entered from the rear, unseen. With gun in hand and eyes sharp he crossed the deserted kitchen with its foul odors of Venusian cookery. Quickly, his metal-shod feet creating an unavoidable racket, he was through a connecting door and into the well-furnished dining room. All was brightly lit; he could easily have been seen through the window-ports rimming each wall; but he counted on the confusion outside to keep the Venusians engaged for several minutes more.

Then he went shuffling into the front room of the house, and saw at once the most likely place.

It was in one corner—a large flat desk, and by it the broad panel of a radio. Scattered over the desk were a number of papers. In seconds Carse was bending over them, scanning and discarding with eyes and hands.

Reports of various quantities of isuan ... orders for stores ... a list that seemed an inventory of weapons—and then the top page of a sheaf covered with familiar, neat, small writing. Yes!

Plans and calculations dealing with a laboratory! And, down in the margin of the first page, the revealing, all-important figure—5,576.34!

He had them—and before Ku Sui! Now, only to get away; out the front door, and up—up from this trap he was in—up into clean and empty space, and then to Leithgow and Friday at Ban Wilson's!

But, as the Hawk turned to go, his eye took in a little slip on the desk, a radio memo, with the name of Ku Sui at its top. Almost without volition he glanced over it, hoping to discover useful information about Ku Sui's asteroid—and with the passing of those few extra seconds his chance for escaping out the door passed too.

Carse's back was partly toward the front door when a voice, hard and deadly, spoke from it:

"Your hands up!"

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**T**he adventurer's nerves twanged; he wheeled; and even as he did so another voice bit out from the rear door:

"Yes, up! One move and you're dead!"

And Hawk Carse found himself caught between ray-guns held unswervingly on his body by a man at each door. He was not fool enough to try to shoot, even though his own gun was in his hand; his best speed would be slow-motion in the hampering space-suit. He was fairly caught—because for a few precious seconds he had let his mind slip from the all-important matter of escaping.

At a shout from someone, both doors filled with men, and thin faces appeared at the window-ports. Their ray-guns made an impregnable fence around the netted Hawk.

And then a well-remembered voice, harsh as the man from whom it came, cut through the room.

"Apparently you're caught, Captain Carse!"

The cold gray eyes narrowed, scanned the room, the blocked doors, the barricade of guns held by the grim men at doorways and window-ports.

"Yes," Hawk Carse murmured. "Apparently I am."

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**L**ar Tantril, the Venusian chief, smiled. He was tall for one of his race, even taller than the prisoner he faced. Clad in tight-fitting, iron-gray mesh, he had the characteristic wiry body, thin legs and arms of his kind. Spiky short-cropped hair grew like steel slivers from the narrow dome of his long hatchet head, and the taut-stretched skin of his face was burned a deep hard brown. He looked what he was: a bold and unscrupulous leader of his men.

"The gun in your belt," he said, "—drop it. Right on the floor. There—better. I like you not with a gun near your hand, Carse."

The Hawk regarded him frigidly.

"And now what?" he asked.

Lar Tantril continued smiling. His ray-gun did not move for an instant from the line it held on the metal and fabric giant. He said at a tangent, quite pleasantly:

"Think fast, Captain Carse—think fast! Isn't that one of Dr. Ku's new suits?—a little space-ship all your own? Why not plan a sudden sweep for that door in an attempt to crash through my men and get free up in the air—eh?"

"Why not?" said the Hawk.

"It might be possible," Tantril continued, "with your luck. *Unless something went wrong with your helmet gravity-plates.*"

At this the Venusian's gun moved. Deliberately it came up and aimed at the crown of the adventurer's helmet. Tantril squeezed the trigger.

*Spang!*

A pencil-thin streak of orange stabbed between Venusian and Earthling; sparks hissed out where it struck the tip of the helmet; and for an instant life and strength seemed to leave the grotesquely clad figure. Carse slumped down under a quick crushing weight. Weight! It bent him low, and it was only with a great effort that he was able to straighten again. For the suit's full load of metal and fabric was upon him now, its enormous boots binding him to the ground since their weight was unrelieved by the partial lift of the helmet plates. An inch-wide, black-rimmed hole in the mechanism above the helmet told what had happened.

Lar Tantril chortled, and his men, most of them only half comprehending what he had done, echoed him.

"But even yet you've got a chance," the Venusian went on. "There's another set of plates in the boot-soles, for attraction. If you got a chance to stand on your head outside, you'd be gone! So—"

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**T**his time he lowered the gun, and carefully, accurately, he sent two spitting streams of orange through the soles of the great boots.

The danger Carse had feared had come to pass. His one weapon had been destroyed. He was worse than helpless; he was in a cumbersome prison, all power of quick movement gone. He was a paralyzed giant, tied to the soil, the ways of the air hopelessly closed. The slightest step would cost great effort.

"You have protected yourself well, Lar Tantril," he said slowly.

Now Tantril laughed deeply and unrestrainedly. "Yes, and by Mother Venus," he cried, "it's good to see you this way, Carse, unarmed and in my power!" He turned to his circle of men and said: "Poor Hawk! Can't fly any more! I've put him in a cage! So thoughtful of him to bring his cage along with him so I could trap him inside it! His own cage!" He guffawed, shaking, and the others laughed loud.

Through it all Hawk Carse stood motionless, his face cold and graven, his slender body bent under the burden of the dead suit. He still held in his right hand, limp by his side, the sheaf of papers and their all-important figure—and the thumb and forefinger of his hand were moving, so slowly as to be hardly noticeable, in what seemed to be a lone sign of nervous tension.

"You know, Carse," Tantril observed after his laugh, "I've been half expecting you, though I don't see how you knew I was the one who took those papers you're holding. Dr. Ku radioed me, you see. I think you were reading his message at the time I entered. Did you finish it?"

"No," said the Hawk.

"You'll find it interesting. Let me read it to you." And Tantril took up the memo.

"From Ku Sui to Lar Tantril: Search House No. 574 in Port o' Porno closely for anything pertinent to Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow or giving clue to his whereabouts. Keep what you obtain for me; I will come to your ranch in five days. Watch for Hawk Carse, Eliot Leithgow and a Negro, arriving from space at Satellite III in self-propulsive space-suits." There followed some details concerning the suits' mechanism; then: "Carse caused me certain trouble and came near hurting my major inventions. I want him badly."

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**A**t this the adventurer's face tightened; his gray eyes went frosty. All he and Leithgow had deduced, then, was true. Dr. Ku had survived the crashing of the asteroid's dome. The mechanisms had also survived—and certainly the coordinated brains—the brains he, Hawk Carse, had promised to destroy! Now trapped, it seemed that promise could never be fulfilled....

Yet even through this torturing thought of a promise unkept, the Hawk's thumb and forefinger moved in their slight grinding motion on the first sheet of the sheaf of papers....

Lar Tantril reached out his hand for the sheaf. "So, obeying Dr. Ku's orders, I had the house searched and got these papers. They, must be valuable, Carse, since you wanted them so badly. Ku Sui will be pleased. Hand them over."

With but the barest flick of gray eyes downward. Hawk Carse gave the sheaf to Tantril.

But his brief glance at the top-most sheet told him all he wanted to know. Gradually, methodically, the motion of thumb and forefinger had totally effaced the revealing figure 5,576.34, the one clue to the location of Leithgow's laboratory. Enough! What he had set out to do was finished. The chief task was achieved!

"And now, perhaps," Lar Tantril chuckled, "a little entertainment."

His men pricked up their ears. This language was more understandable. Entertainment meant playing with the prisoner—torture. And alkite, probably, and isuan. A night of revelry!

But Hawk Carse smiled thinly at this.

"Entertainment, Tantril?" his cold voice said. He paused, and then added slowly: "What a fool you are!"

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**L**ar Tantril was not annoyed by the words. He only laughed and slapped his thigh.

"Yes?" he mocked. "Truly, Captain Carse, you must be frightened, to try and anger me so I'll shoot! Do you fear a skewer-blade so much? We would leave most of you for Ku Sui!"

Carse shook his head. "No, Lar Tantril, I don't want you to shoot me. I'm telling you you're a fool—because you think me one."

With a wave of his hands the Venusian protested: "No, no, not at all. You're infernally clever, Carse. I'll always be the first to admit it."

"Then do you think I'd attack your ranch alone?"

"You'd like me to believe you have friends hidden somewhere?" Tantril asked, smiling tolerantly.

Carse's voice came back curtly. "Believe what you like, but learn this: It's your boast that your ranch is impregnable, guarded on every side and from every angle. I'm telling you it's not. Its vulnerable. It's wide open to one way of attack and my friends and I know it well."

For a second the Venusian's assurance wavered.

"Vulnerable?" he said. "Open to attack? You're just stalling!"

Whip-like words cut through.

"Wait and see. Wait till the ranch is stormed and wiped out. Wait twenty minutes! Only twenty!"

Hawk Carse was always listened to when he spoke in such manner. Lar Tantril stared at the hard gray eyes boring into his.

"Why do you tell me this?" he asked. Then, with a smile: "Why not wait until my ranch is wiped out, as you say?" His smile broadened. "Until these hidden friends attack?"

"Simply because I must insure my living. Nothing my friends could do would prevent your having plenty of time to kill me before you yourselves were destroyed. I think, under the circumstances,

you *would* kill me. And I must go free. I have made a promise. A very important promise. I must be free to carry it out."

"Just what are you aiming at?"

"I'm offering," said the Hawk, "to show you where your fort is vulnerable—in time for you to protect it. I'll do this if you'll let me go free. *You need not release me till afterwards.*"

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**L**ar Tantril's mouth fell half open at this surprising turn. He was unquestionably taken aback. But he snapped his lips shut and considered the offer. A trick? Carse was famed for them. A trap? But how? He scanned his men. Fifty to one; fifty ray-guns on an unarmed man helpless in a hampering prison of metal and fabric. If a trap, Carse could not possibly escape death. But yet....

Tantril walked over to his man Esret, and, stepping apart, they conferred in whispers.

"Is he trying to trick us?" the chief asked.

"I don't see how he can hope to. He can hardly move in that suit. It ties him down. We could keep tight guard upon him. He couldn't possibly get away. And at the slightest sign of something shady \_"

"Yes; but you know him."

"What he says is sensible. Naturally he wants to live. He knows we'll shoot him if he tries to trick us, and he knows we'll do it if we're attacked! We'll of course leave men at all defensive stations. If there *is* a weakness here, if the ranch *is* vulnerable—we should learn what it is. It'll cost us nothing. We can't lose, and we might be saving everything. Of course we won't let him go afterwards."

Tantril considered a moment longer, then said:

"Yes, I think you are right."

He turned back to the waiting Carse.

"Agreed," he said. "Show this vulnerable point to us and you'll be released. But no false moves! One sign of treachery and you're dead!"

The Hawk's strong-cut face showed no change. It was only inwardly that he smiled.

---

**T**heir very manner of accompanying him showed their respect for the slender adventurer.

He had no gun; he was stooped by the unrelieved weight of the massive helmet, the suit itself and the chunky blocks of metal which were the boots; his every dragging step was that of a man shackled by chains—but he was Hawk Carse! And so, as he shuffled out through the front door of the house and lumbered with painful effort across the clearing, he was surrounded by a glitter of ray-guns held by the close-pressing circle of men. Tantril's own gun kept steady on his broad fabric-clad back, and of its proximity he kept reminding Carse.

New guards were already on watch on each of the three watch-platforms, their eyes sweeping around the clearing and the jungle and the dark stretch of the lake, and often returning to the crowd which marked the stumbling giant's progress below. Each point of defense was manned. In the ranch's central control room, a steel-sheathed cubby in the basement of Tantril's house, men stood watchful, their hands ready at the wheels and levers which commanded the ranch's ray-batteries, their eyes on the vision-screen which gave to this unseen heart of the place a panoramic view of what was transpiring above. And all waited on what the grotesque, bloated figure they watched might reveal.

Watch—watch—watch. A hundred eyes, below, above, beside the Hawk, were centered and alert on each move of his clumsy progress. The barrels of two-score ray-guns transfixed him. Under such guard he arrived at the ranch's fence where it approached the Great Briney.

"Open the gate," said the Hawk curtly. "It's down there."

He pointed to where the lake's pebbled beach shelved downward to the tiny murmurous waves, a ten-foot stretch of ghostly white between the guarding fence and the water.

"Down there?" repeated Tantril slowly. "Down to the lake?"

"Yes!" Carse snapped irritably. "Well, will you open the gate? I'm very tired: I can't bear this suit much longer."

---



**L**ar Tantril conferred uneasily with Esret, while his men cast shivering glances out over the dark wind-rippled plain of the lake. But no enemy showed there. The beach was clear for fifty yards on each side.

"By Iapetus!" the adventurer complained harshly, "are you children, to be afraid of the dark? Tantril, put your gun into me, and shoot if I try anything suspicious! Open the gate!"

Finally the lock was unfastened and the gate swung out. Tantril stationed a man there, ready to close and lock it in case of need, and then, Hawk Carse, still surrounded by the alert Venusians, shuffled down to the edge of the water.

Over the Great Briney was silence. No shape broke its calm. The air held only the nervous whispers of the crowd and the scrape and crunch of the lone Earthling's dragging boots as they made wide furrows in the hard pebbly soil of the beach.

The men had fallen back a little, and now were a half circle around him down to the water's brink. The watch-beacon's light caught them full there, and threw great blots of shadows lakeward from them. Their ray-guns were gripped tighter as their shifty eyes darted from his huge bulk to the water ahead, and back. Doubt and fear swayed them all.

The Hawk wasted no time, but stepped out to knee-high level on the sharply shelving bottom. At this Tantril objected.

"Hold, Carse!" he roared. "You play for time, I think! Where is this point of attack?"

The bloated figure did not answer him, but bent over as if searching for something under the tiny waves which now were slapping his thigh. He reached one hand down and probed around with it, apparently feeling. The eyes watching him were wide and fear-fascinated.

---

**"H**ere—or no," the Hawk muttered to himself, though a dozen could hear him. "A little farther, I think.... Here—but no, I forgot: the tide has come in. A little farther...." He stopped suddenly and straightened, turned to the Venusian chief. "Don't forget. Lar Tantril, you have promised I can go free!"

Then he resumed his search of the bottom, the black surface of water up to his waist. Again the fearful Venusian leader roared an objection:

"You're tricking us. Carse, you little devil—"

"Oh, don't be an ass!" Carse snapped back. "As if I could get away—your ray-guns on me!"

Another half minute passed; a few more short steps were taken. A muttered oath came from one of the wet, uncomfortable men in the grip of fear. Several there were on the brink of turning in, a panicky dash for the safety of the enclosure behind, the warm buildings, guarded by ray-batteries—and yet an awful fascination held them. What metallic horror of the deeps was being exposed?

"Just a second, now," the Hawk was murmuring. "You'll all see.... Somewhere ... right ... here ... somewhere...."

He held them taut, expectant. The water licked around the waist of his suit. One more slow step; one more yet.

"*Here!*" he cried triumphantly, and clicked his face-plate closed. And the men who stared, faces pale, hearts pounding, ray-guns at the ready, saw him no longer. The water had closed over that shiny metal helmet. Only a mocking ripple was left.

Hawk Carse was gone!

---

**G**one!—and laughing to himself.

The space-suit, his heavy prison of metal and fabric, would protect him from water as well as from space! It offered his golden—his only—opportunity. It had been pierced by Tantril's shots, back in the house, but only the gravity-plate compartments, which were sealed and separate. It was still—after he had closed the mittens—air-tight, an effective little submarine in the dark waters of the Great Briney!

So Carse followed his black course over the lake-bottom laughing and laughing. In his mind he could see what he had left behind: the men, shivering there in the water for an instant, completely befogged, and perhaps firing one or two shots at where he had disappeared; then turning and breaking back in a grand rush for the fence and safety. And the ray-batteries, all manned and centered on the lake; Tantril, in a very fury of rage, but fearful, preparing for a siege; preparing for anything that might loom suddenly from the water! And all of them wondering what lay beneath its calm surface; what he, Hawk Carse, had gone to join!

For days they would stare fearfully at the lake, while the tides rolled steadily in and out; for days the ray-batteries would be held ready, and none would venture outside the fence. It might take hours for the realization of his trick to sink in—but they still would not be sure of anything, and would have to keep vigilant against the still-possible attack.

Fourteen miles up the coast was Ban Wilson's ranch, and Eliot Leithgow and Friday waiting there. He would rest for a while, and then the three of them would go home to the laboratory—whose location was now still secret. And then, later, there was his promise to the coordinated brains to be kept....

But that was in the future. For the present, he went his dark, watery way, laughing. Laughing and laughing again....

Yes, John Sewell, first of all Hawk Carse's traits was his resourcefulness!

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\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BLUFF OF THE HAWK \*\*\*

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