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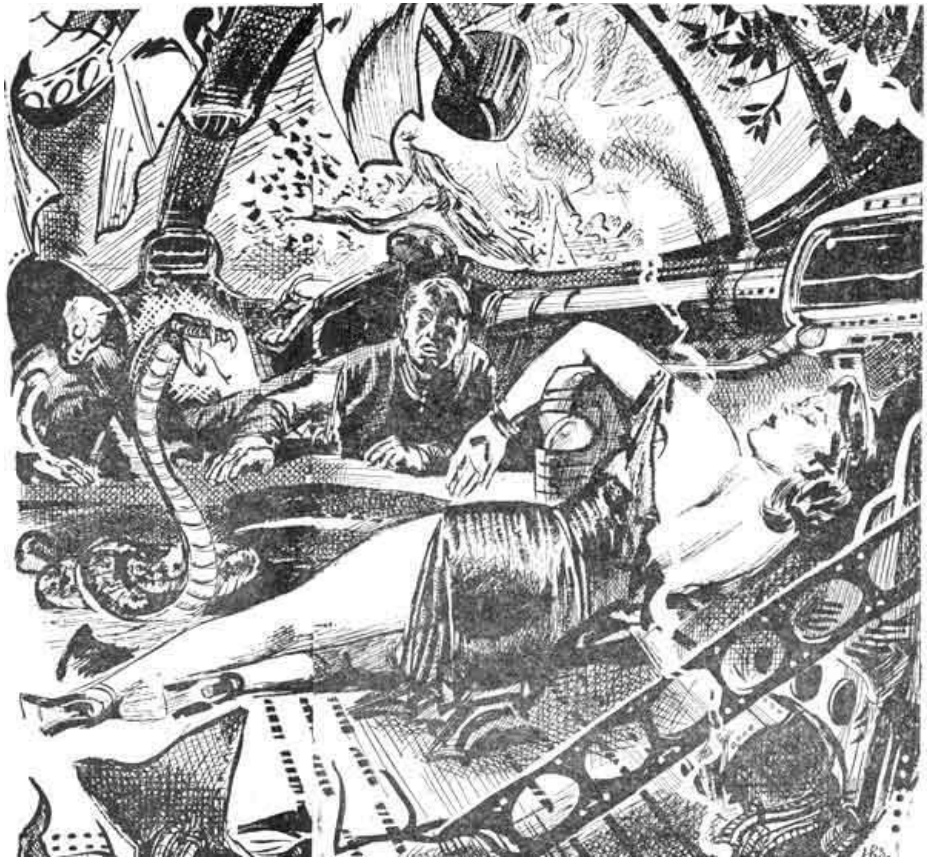
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BEFORE EGYPT

By E. K.
JARVIS

It was Mallison's strangest assignment. The weird little professor wanted to go to Egypt. That meant a trip back to Earth so far as Mallison was concerned. But the professor pointed to a distant star and Mallison wondered: "Who moved Egypt?"



Jaws agape, the hideous serpent hung poised above her slim thigh.

Mike Mallison and Nicko were in the office when the new clients entered. A girl and an elderly man. The girl smiled at Mike. Then she looked at Nicko and a sharp involuntary scream got past her lips.

"It's all right, lady," Mike said. "He won't hurt you. He never injures a client. Won't you sit down?"

Nicko wasn't offended. He was used to women reacting that way at first sight of him. In fact, the hideous little Martian misfit had caused even strong men to turn pale.

The elderly man was also staring but with more clinical interest than horror. He turned his eyes on Mike and said, "I am Professor Arnold Brandon. This is my daughter, Doree."

"I'm Mike Mallison." He indicated with a nod. "This is my assistant, Nicko."

Nicko grinned, thus baring his tusks and adding new hideousness to his face. He waved his four arms and said, "I'm delighted to make your acquaintances. I hope your trip to Outer Port was not too tiring."

Nicko's tones were bell-like—his diction perfect. The girl gasped. The man blinked, then turned again to Mike. "I hope you received our electrogram."

"Yes, but it was a little vague. It merely said you would arrive at Outer Port as of this date."

"Quite. We wish to charter your ship for a cruise."

Mike considered. The *Space Queen* was at liberty but he wasn't sure about these two. Other than the fact that the man was old, the girl gray-eyed, slim, and damned pretty, he knew nothing about them. They certainly didn't look like big game hunters.

"For what destination?"

Professor Brandon hesitated. "Out toward Orion, sir."

"A man could cruise out toward Orion for the rest of his life and still not arrive at a destination. Could you be more specific?"

"There is a planet out there I wish to visit but at this time I'd rather discuss details other than its location."

"Such as—?"

"The cost is very important to us."

Doree Brandon spoke up. "My father holds the Chair of Ancient Cultures at Casa Blanca University, and educators, as you may know, are not very well paid. We've been saving for this trip for a long time—"

She faltered, somewhat embarrassed and Mike asked, "In what segment of Orion is this planet located?"

"The ninth, sir."

Mike leaned forward. "May I assume your trip is of a scientific nature?"

"You may, sir."

"Then I wonder if you are familiar with the Terran Educational Foundation? I happened to have had contact with them some five years ago."

"I'm quite familiar with the organization."

"Did it occur to you that they might assume some of the cost of your trip?"

"They refused. They make the absurd claim that this planet I spoke of doesn't exist."

"But you have proof to the contrary?"

"An ancient document," Doree Brandon cut in. "A papyrus scroll. Father translated it."

"And the Foundation did not agree with his translation?"

"I did not submit the scroll. They know nothing about it."

"Father bought it from two men in Paris and worked three years on the translation." Doree looked at her father with great pride.

"My reasons for not submitting it were personal," Professor Brandon said, "and are not pertinent to this discussion."

"May I suggest," Mike said gently, "that a pair of crooks sold you a counterfeit—"

"You may not, sir!"

Doree reflected her father's indignation. "I'll have you know my father is the foremost authority in his field!"

Mike raised a protective hand. "All right—all right. I'm sorry."

"Then perhaps you'll tell us the approximate cost of the cruise?"

"I can haul you to the ninth segment and back for around seven thousand but that won't leave much leeway for search."

Professor Brandon beamed. "We can just about manage it. And I assure you very little search will be necessary."

"If you'll give me the planet's location I'll plot a course and give you an exact figure."

"It is not my intention to seem mysterious, but I'd prefer to give you that data after blast-off."

Mike scowled and half-rose from his chair. Professor Brandon hastily drew a pack of yellow bills from his pocket and laid it on the table. "There are four thousand. I have the rest at the hotel. We shall demonstrate complete faith in you by paying the seven thousand before we leave Outer Port."

With that he smiled and arose from his chair. "I guess that concludes our business at this time. We'll be at the hotel when you wish to contact us. Come Doree." He herded the girl out quickly and closed the door.

Nicko chuckled. "Smart old codger. He had you pegged dead to rights."

Mike turned his scowl on Nicko and snapped, "For Christ's sake, speak Terran!"

Nicko had inadvertently used a Plutonian hill dialect he'd heard once, this being the hideous little Martian's amazing talent—an instinctive grasp of all tongues. His lingual talents were a tremendous asset to Mike but at times they drove him crazy because Nicko might absent-mindedly use several different tongues during a conversation; some of which he could not classify himself, having forgotten where he heard them.

"I said he had you pegged. He knew you were ready to turn him down so he upped with the mool. He knew once you touched the yellow you'd be his pup."

"I'm not so damned sure about that—"

Mike Mallison was a big game guide—a life he loved. He was a man of action and asked nothing better than the perils of his calling; the stalking of the great Plutonian ice bears; crouching in a Venusian swamp waiting for the ten-ton lizards to blow slime a hundred feet in the air and rise from their lava-hot beds; matching wits with the telepathic Uranian rock wolves, the most elusive beast in the universe; setting his sights on a Martian jet-bat so some Terran millionaire could have a new trophy for his game room.

"You're not sure," Nicko was saying in Ganymedian French, "but you'll stay glued to the mool."

Mike was busy thinking and didn't ask for a translation. After all, he needed the money and if he didn't take it these two deluded characters would no doubt find someone who would.

"Besides," Nicko said in Terran, "the female's a dream. The legs—the torso—very nice to be in space with."

"Shut up! This is a business trip! Remember that. Exactly the same as though we were hauling a couple of fat Terran bankers."

"Sure. But that kitty's got more in the bank than—"

"Get the hell out of here! Go over to the Exchange and see if our new pile came in on that ship."

Outer Port was a man-made satellite artificially oxygenated and gravitated. It was the largest of a group assembled during the experimental period of the late twenty-first century. Later, methods of shifting asteroids and small planets into desired orbits were developed and the construction of space globes and platforms was discontinued.

At that time, the Interplanetary Guild of Space Guides purchased the satellite and moored it on the perimeter of the System to serve as a headquarters for their activities. They smashed a bottle of wine on it and christened it Outer Port after which every guide got drunk by way of celebration.

It was a bleak establishment. With no solar supplement, it lay in the eternal twilight of far space, the artificial heat of its surface rising against eternal cold thus causing a perpetual fogging of its atmosphere mixture.

So when the *Space Queen* blasted fifteen hours later, Doree Brandon brightened perceptibly.

Professor Brandon remained in the lounge. Nicko was aft, watching the tube primers. Doree was with Mike in the control cabin.

"Getting used to Nicko?" Mike asked.

Doree smiled. "I owe him an apology. He is—" She looked up suddenly. "He is *he*, isn't he?"

Mike laughed. "Nicko is male. Beyond that point he's hard to classify."

"That odd face! Those green scales! The four arms were a little difficult to get used to but now I think he's—well, kind of cute."

"Good for you."

"Where did you ever find him?"

"On Mars. I'll tell you about it sometime. Right now I've got to finish setting our primary course."

"I imagine you'd like the exact location of the planet as soon as possible."

"No great hurry. Any time in the next twelve hours will do. Just a matter of pin-pointing the arc of the basic course. Your father didn't appear to feel too well when we blasted. How is he now?"

"He's been under a terrific strain. Perhaps we could let him rest awhile."

Mike turned on her sharply. "Listen—I'm going to ask you a straight question and I'd like a straight answer. Does that planet really exist?"

Her eyes widened, her head came up dangerously; and Mike noted this made her extremely attractive. "Now wait a minute. Don't get sore. I'm not implying your father doesn't *believe* it's there. And after all, I've taken your money, so its a deal but—"

She almost smiled. "You just think that perhaps he's an impractical old dreamer with delusions."

"I didn't say that."

There was a pause while Doree evidently decided not to get angry. "I assure you, Mr. Mallison, I believe with all my heart that father's planet is exactly where he will direct you. Of course nothing is certain in this universe, but—"

Mike grinned and held out his hand. "I believe you. Accept my apology. And please call me Mike. We're going to see a lot of each other for a while."

She took his hand and smiled back. Their eyes held and Mike liked what he saw—pert elfin features; shining chestnut hair; even white teeth.

"We'll let your father rest a while," Mike said. "I'll get the figures from him later."

But he was fated never to get the location of the planet from the old scientist. In fact, he was never again to see Professor Brandon in the confines of the *Space Queen*.

He finished setting primary course and then Nicko returned to report. "Everything grooved. Temp up. Color down. Tubes solid. Primers closed."

Nicko spoke in four languages. Doree, who understood two of them, gasped.

Nicko grinned. "Thought I was a mental void, eh, kitty? Why I can spit dialects you never heard of."

"Cut it out, Nicko. Treat our clients with a little more respect or I'll pry a few scales off your back."

"Okay, but those legs—that torso."

Mike whirled and Nicko bounced out of the cabin. "You've got to know him. He's completely loyal and he'd die ten times for any one of us. But he never learned tact."

"I don't know why you had to cut him off so abruptly." Doree was indignant.

It was Mike's turn to blink. "He was getting pretty personal—"

"I guess I know a compliment when I hear one, Mr. Mallison."

"Mike."

She grinned. "Okay—Mike. I'd like to see the ship when you've got time."

"I've got time now. Let's go."

They started at the prow and worked backwards. Her trip to Outer Port had been her first space flight, a fact that amazed Mike in this age when even the middle-class Terrans vacationed on

Mars.

"We had so little time," Doree said. "And so little money."

He explained the working of the *Space Queen*, enjoying the chore, and they worked their way slowly backward. Amidship, Doree said, "I think I'll look in on father."

She went below and almost immediately, Nicko appeared at the after end of the companionway. "We've got company, Mike."

"What do you mean, company?"

"Ship winging to."

Mike scowled. "Out here? The radio hasn't spoken. Maybe they're in trouble and can't sound out."

He ran aft, Nicko stumping along behind. He looked out the stern port. A ship all right. A slim cruiser of the D class, the light of faraway suns reflecting against its hull, giving it the ghostly appearance of all craft in space.

"Ever see that ship before?" Mike asked.

"Not me. I'll bet my right top arm it never moored at Outer Port. If it had we'd know the boat."

"Lots of ships never moored at Outer Port. Go forward and see if you can speak to them. Maybe they can sound in."

Nicko left and Mike watched the ship arc closer. Mike admired the skill of the pilot, then realized the ship was on complete automatic, taking its impulses from radar bounced against the hull of the *Space Queen*. No human pilot could hold a ship that steady.

She appeared intent on locking to the *Space Queen's* after hatch. Mike wished her all the luck in the universe and hoped he had what she was looking for. In case of illness his stock of medicines was only standard and would not cover any extraordinary cases.

Then he stiffened. There was movement next to the antenna prow on the ship's nose. A small hatch was opening. Mike cursed himself for stupidity. Yet at the same time, he could think of nothing that should have made him suspicious. These were peaceful areas. It would have been ridiculous for bandits to work this area. Raiding here made as much sense as operating in the heart of the Gobi Desert back on Terra.

Even as he whirled to try and reach the control cabin in time, a steel arm shot out from the pit uncovered by the raised hatch. Mike didn't see the fine-wired grid at the end of the arm but he knew it was there and he knew its purpose.

As he ran, he sensed the magnetic wires groping toward the hull of the *Space Queen*. If they made contact—

Contact was made while he ran up the companionway. The electroparalysis bolt hit him while he was still twenty feet from the control cabin. It caught him on his right toe with his left foot extended. It froze him in that position, held him in the grotesque running pose while fire poured through his veins. It held not only Mike and every other living thing aboard, but froze the ship itself into immobility; everything stopped except the raging movement of flaming gases in the jet tubes and these too died out as their source of supply was speedily choked.

Mike blacked out.

When his consciousness returned, Mike figured he had been out for about an hour. He based this on past experience with electroparalysis rays.

Using every ounce of will-power, he forced his elevated foot toward the companionway floor. The magnetic field permeating the dead ship was still potent, forming, in a sense, a maze of invisible wires, holding him in his frozen position.

He knew that in the companionway he had taken the full brunt of the charge. Possibly the others were again able to move about. But no one came to his aid.

His foot touched the floor. He pulled at his back foot like a man striving to loose himself from thick mud. He got it forward. A step, then another. From the control cabin came the sound of dolorous curses emitted in many languages. Nicko was again functioning.

Mike got his hands on the safety bars of the ladder leading down to the lounge. He pulled himself toward it and as he was descending, the magnetism of the electroparalytic bolt loosed its hold and he fell headlong. Picking himself up, he hurried into the lounge.

Doree was alone. She was still frozen to the chair in which she sat. Her legs were drawn up gracefully under her slim body. Only her eyes were alive—questioning, beseeching.

Mike picked her up and laid her on the floor. He knelt and began massaging the rigid muscles, drawing her legs out slowly, watching her eyes for indications of pain.

"You'll be all right in a few minutes," he said. "We have to take it slow and easy or you'll get the bends."

While he worked he was asking himself questions. Who? In God's name—why? What reason had anyone for attacking the ship? There was nothing of value aboard. He had no enemies—to his knowledge—in this part of the universe.

Doree was trying to speak. Her throat worked. Her eyes were frantic. Mike got her legs straightened out without sending her into screaming pain. Now she was rising into a sitting position on her own power.

"Took—took—Fa—him—" she whispered hoarsely.

"Your father—where is he?"

"McKee—Talbot—took him!"

"Who in the hell are McKee and Talbot?"

Gradually, her throat unlocked. "They came in and took him—carried him out."

"I asked you who they were."

Tears welled in her eyes. She bit her lower lip and tried to control her fluttering throat. "I—I tried to scream. When they carried him out I couldn't do a thing." She burst into tears.

She was normal again. Mike got to his feet. "I've got to check the ship. When I get back I want some answers and you'd better have them ready."

He hurried from the lounge and up the ladder, almost slamming into Nicko as he gained the companionway. Nicko's scales were a sickly, pale green. He tottered weakly on his stumpy legs using all four of his arms to support himself against the bulkhead.

He grinned hideously. "Friends of yours?"

"I don't know who the hell they were. You all right?"

"I'm fine."

Mike scowled up and down the companionway. "What shape are we in?"

"Bad."

"How bad?"

"The worst. The pile's gone."

"The *pile*!"

Mike ran aft. The door to the tube cabin stood open. The alley into which the fifteen-pound, lead-crated pile had lately been driven, was empty.

Swiftly Mike assessed the situation. A helpless ship. A derelict. They'd entered through the aft airlock. They'd taken Professor Brandon off that way. Then they'd closed the lock again.

That meant only one thing. Through pure cruelty, they had avoided swift death to the ship's occupant in favor of a long, lingering one. Only the basest of men would do a thing like that.

Mike was not acquainted with McKee or Talbot, but he knew something about them. They were the lowest type of the human species. Only the bloodthirsty pirates of Ganymede ever made their victims walk space.

He returned to where Nicko was clinging to the companionway guard-rail. Nicko said, "You haven't seen it all, yet."

"Is there more?"

"That's only the beginning. They smashed everything in the control cabin. All the navigating instruments. Even if we had a pile this boat couldn't find its way down Main Street at high noon."

It followed, Mike thought grimly. "I'll be drummed out of the Guild for this."

"If you ever get within shouting distance of Outer Port again, which you won't."

Mike doubled his fists. "To stand flatfooted and let a boarder move in and take my pile—and my client. How much of an idiot can a man be!"

Doree came up the ladder, her eyes wide with fright. "Did you find him?"

"No—and don't start crying. Why didn't you tell me about these men? Why didn't you give me a chance to protect my ship?"

"We—we didn't know they'd follow us. We—I didn't dream they had any idea of—"

"They followed you. And they had the idea. They took our pile and shoved us off on a blind orbit. They arranged for us to die out here."

"Won't we—we be found?"

"A million to one shot in these spaces."

"More than that," Nicko said. "A billion to one. It's empty out here, lady."

Mike saw that Doree was again about to burst into tears. He took her by the arm. "We're going to the lounge and you're going to tell me all about this—what's been going on." He drew her toward the ladder, calling over his shoulder. "Clean up what you can, Nicko. See what other devilry they arranged."

In the lounge, Mike sat Doree firmly into a chair. "Now let's not have any tears. Just tell it the way it happened."

Doree had got control of herself. She sat straight, miserable, a little pathetic, Mike thought. She said, "Lorn McKee and Dean Talbott were Paris art collectors. Their reputations were not of the best but when they approached father he listened to them.

"They had a strange looking scroll made of papyrus. It had writing on it in an ancient script and they wanted father to translate it for them."

"Would that have made it more valuable?"

"Of course. At first father was suspicious, thinking it was some kind of a hoax. They told him the scroll had come from an Egyptian tomb but would tell him no more relative to its origination. They brought it to him because he was Terra's foremost authority in that field.

"Father discovered immediately that the scroll was genuine and very old. Papyrus was a material the ancient Egyptians used."

"And—?" Mike asked impatiently.

"He refused to translate it for them because they in turn would not tell him what they proposed to do with it. He felt it should be turned over to the proper authorities—some university—and besides, he was suspicious of the two men. So they went away and tried to get it translated elsewhere. This was impossible, so they came back and offered to sell it to father for a very low price but with the stipulation that he keep what he learned strictly to himself.

"He wanted to make the translation and was tempted because he already had a clue to its nature. He believed the scroll verified a theory long in existence on Terra relative to the extraterrestrial origination of mankind."

"You mean he thought it proved the Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon came from other planets."

"No, not so far back as that. There is little doubt they originated on Terra. Father is a specialist in Egyptology. And it was his belief that a great deal of their early history was purposely distorted. There is confusion in what little can be found concerning them and father sincerely believed they came from another planet. He was sure they brought with them a knowledge of science far greater than any existing upon Terra."

"And the papyrus verified his belief?"

"Completely."

"What did it tell him?"

"That the forefathers of those who later became the Egyptians, left their native planet after a disagreement with the ruling Pharaoh and sought a new home. They cruised for several lifetimes, raising and educating their children and dying off, until they found Terra, a planet almost identical to their own. The papyrus gave the location of their home planet—hieroglyphics which father translated into a table of accurate equations."

"How could he know they were accurate?"

Doree's head came up sharply. "If you were really aware of my father's ability in his field, it wouldn't occur to you to ask."

"I don't blame you for your faith but I still think it was a gigantic hoax—for one reason."

"And that—?"

"If the ancestors of the Egyptians came to Terra, they had to have great scientific and technical knowledge to get there. All right—then what happened to the knowledge and the science? The Egyptians certainly didn't take advantage of it."

"They used some of it. No one has been able to prove conclusively how they built the pyramids."

"Slave labor."

"That is not a complete explanation."

"All right—forget the pyramids. What happened to the rest of their science?"

"The answer lies in a basic trend of the Egyptians as a people. They were completely preoccupied with death rather than life. To them, their years of living was only a period in which to prepare for eternity. Their ambitions and talents were directed toward the building of great tombs and the perfect preservation of bodies after death. In the light of this does it seem so strange that they turned their backs on all knowledge except that which aided them in dead directions?"

Mike was regarding Doree with a new respect. "I owe you an apology. You're a smart girl. You've got a brain in your head. I'm so used to carting empty-headed females around the System that I'd forgotten smart ones existed."

"I'm sure you mean that as a compliment, but the fact remains that father and I blundered you into a perilous position. We should have told you about McKee and Talbott. But we didn't think—"

"Your shortcoming was that you were honest and thought everyone else was. That's a common failing."

"But we knew they had bad reputations."

"It's pretty obvious how their thinking went. They must have had a clue to the contents of the papyrus. They knew your father wouldn't act without integrity but they banked on his eagerness as a student—figured it would cause him to accept their terms in order to get his hands on the scroll because there was certainly nothing dishonorable about buying it from them. They knew also that he would keep his word, being that kind of a man."

Doree's shoulders drooped in misery. "I guess that's about it."

"It was the best way they could think of to get the papyrus translated and still keep the contents secret." Mike rubbed his chin. "They were pretty smart boys. They were certain your father would find a way to act on whatever information it contained and all they had to do was stay on his trail and await their opportunity."

"How could anyone be so vile?"

Mike ignored the question. "I said they were smart, but they weren't smart enough."

"What do you mean?"

"This little trick of marooning us on a fatal orbit in space. It won't work."

"Why not?"

"We'll follow them."

Doree was completely bewildered. "But you said your pile was stolen."

"It was. We won't need it."

"And all your instruments were smashed."

"We won't need them, either. Your father will tell them the planet's location. There's not much else he can do. Then—we'll follow them."

"One of us is crazy," Doree said, weakly.

"No. McKee and Talbott were just badly informed. They have an automatic ship and evidently don't know too much about it. You see, the electroparalysis ray has one basic element around which it functions—magnetism. The jolt they handed us was of such size that it created a magnetic field around their ship. If they had been going through an asteroid belt they would have been bombarded into oblivion. As it is they'll still be bombarded in a sense—by us."

"You mean—"

"The field envelopes their ship and trails out behind it like an invisible chain. They couldn't possibly have shoved us hard enough to get us clear of it. So when they pulled out, the *Space Queen* nosed right around and followed them." Mike grinned. "We're on their tail right now, just as surely as if they had us on a tow-rope."

"Then we can still help father!"

Mike sobered. "We don't know what we can do. We're still not out of the woods. There's a little problem of landing a dead ship on that planet after we come within range of its gravity. Then, too, heaven only knows where we'll set down. If it's a big planet—"

Instead of wincing before this new peril, Doree stiffened against it. "I'm sure you'll do all that any man could do."

"I'll do my best."

"And so long as the whole disaster was our fault—"

"Forget it." Mike conscious of a warmth rising within him, took his eyes quickly from her face and went to check ship....

The slow passage of time was the most difficult factor to contend with. Mike wracked his brain for a means of speeding up the *Space Queen*. He was confident that the craft was moving straight and true in the wake of the other ship and that unless drastic adjustments were made in the course, she would continue to do so. But so slowly—so very slowly. Acceleration caused by the magnetic field had long-since reached its apex and now the *Space Queen* moved at a steady unchanging pace.

He achieved a little more speed by taking charges from three of the primers, placing them in the pile head, and igniting with the fourth primer. He picked up possibly two Gs before the power burned out.

He and Nicko donned space suits, magnetized themselves aft, and opened the suit's drive plugs to the maximum. The resulting force smashed them against the hull, almost breaking their ribs. Some additional acceleration was achieved but pathetically little.

Who would have thought, Mike pondered bitterly, that I'd land out here pushing my own ship through space? What a laugh the wits at Outer Port would get when and if this little adventure was sounded around. *If*—that was the big word that stuck in Mike's mind.

An important facet of the problem was keeping Doree's morale high. Mike enjoyed this. He learned all about her and there came a sudden dizzy moment when he found himself kissing her. After that he was more careful.

Then, at the last came the great thrill—abruptly, as all such things come. Mike was puttering with the radio when Nicko turned from the port to say, "Indescribably beautiful land ho! Luscious round planet dead ahead at five o'clock!"

Mike leaped to the port. Smaller than Terra and with different continental markings, but in other respects, quite similar. Nicko jumped up and down clapping his four hands. Mike grabbed him and lifted him in a bear-hug, scratching himself unmercifully on the little Martian's sharp scales. Then he bolted aft to tell Doree.

There was no restraint in his kiss this time and for a few moments the ship and the landfall vanished from their minds. They did not know where they were; nor did they care.

Then Mike jerked himself back to the business at hand and rushed to the pilot cabin; the dangerous business ahead of them.

They were already in range, being gripped and dragged down by the planet's pull. Mike ordered Nicko and Doree into straps and buckled himself into the pilot's chair.

He surveyed the fast-greatening planet. There would be no choice of landing fields. Mike could only hope to bring the *Space Queen* down on dry land rather than in the center of an ocean.

She was responding to her fins now and Mike put her into a long glide. Below, the land and the water separated themselves and Mike studied the gray expanse below. Ocean.

Mike leveled out and struggled for altitude. There was minor response as the atmosphere outside clawed at the hull, dragging it down, heating it a dull red.

All during the trip he had fought inertia. Now his problem was reversed, rapid acceleration being the demon of the moment. A helpless shell rocketing toward a solid obstacle.

Mike felt a surge of relief as the streaming gray below turned to racing green. At least they would not finish up trapped in a submarine. But the land could be as lethal as the sea and now the moment was at hand.

Mike angled the fins to their maximum. He yelled. "Contact!" Then he prayed.

There was a great crash—and oblivion.

Pain brought back Mike's consciousness. Without opening his eyes, he analyzed the pain. It was in his shoulder. He tried the muscles gingerly and decided it wasn't broken. If that was the case the others could have come through also. The results of crashes of this kind were usually extreme one way or another. Either the passengers came through unhurt or they were mangled into stew meat. Mike opened his eyes.

All was quiet. Both Nicko and Doree lay motionless under their straps; still unconscious but with no visible injuries. But there was something else there in the center of the cabin floor; something Mike's dazed mind had difficulty in accepting.

A snake.

It was coiled lazily, its green and gold body the thickness of a man's arm. It had a flat, triangular head with deadliness written all over it and its eyes were upon the only moving thing in the room—Doree's rising and falling breast.

The chill that went through Mike almost paralyzed him. In hypnotized fascination he watched the sinuous uncoiling of the serpent; the gliding movement in Doree's direction.

Then the girl's eyes opened.

"Don't move!" Mike snapped. "Everything is all right. We got down. But you must stop breathing—hold your breath. Don't even move your eyes! Stare straight at the ceiling."

Doree obeyed, and thus did not see the snake. But her fright was apparent. Mike moved a slow hand toward the buckle on his chest. The serpent's head flicked around at the movement. Mike's cold hand gripped the buckle. He knew the snake's length was such that it could reach him in a single long strike. He could only hope the serpent would hesitate for a few seconds. The snake's head came around, then drew back.

At that moment a voice broke the silence. "You—beautiful serpent. Gorgeous green and gold clothes line. Over this way. Here I am." Nicko's voice and with it the little Martian unbuckled his strap and put his feet on the floor.

A hiss. The snake struck. Doree turned her eyes downward and screamed. The snake's great head slammed against Nicko's leg. The Martian laughed.

The snake ricocheted backward, dazed from the contact, two of its fangs broken off on Nicko's steel-hard scales. Nicko got up and walked over and put his heel on the serpent's head and crushed it. As the long body lashed and writhed, Nicko looked down at it with a kind of compassion. "Good-bye, little sister." Nicko looked over at Mike in assumed surprise. "Was my pretty cousin bothering you? She only wanted to say hello."

"All right," Mike barked. "You've had your little joke. Let's find out where we are."

"In a jungle I guess—from the nature of the welcoming committee."

Mike helped Doree from her couch. She had sustained no injuries other than a slightly sprained wrist. Mike got a rifle from the gun cabinet, gave another to Nicko and armed Doree with a small pistol which she tried to refuse.

Investigation showed the hull to be intact but two of the hatches had been torn off their hinges and were nowhere in sight.

"A beautiful glide," Nicko commented, looking back at the broad furrow that gave evidence of how the *Space Queen* had come in. It was a good thing for them.

"A lucky one," Mike replied. He scanned the thick tropical vegetation on every side.

"We could be down in the green jungles of Terra," Nicko said.

"We could at that. There is a river around here somewhere."

"How do you know?"

"I got a flash of a river as we glided in. Thought we were going to hit it. Then we went over. It ought to be in that direction. Let's go."

Doree, still stunned by the episode of the snake, was mute and pale as she followed close behind Mike. Nicko brought up the rear. The going was hard until Mike broke through into a comparatively open area. He pointed. "There it is."

A silent, ominous river, dark under the hot rays of a high sun. Around them, nothing moved; only the black waters of the river rushing onward toward some distant rendezvous with the sea. Doree shuddered.

Mike drew her into the circle of his arm. "Don't be afraid. This is a break—just what we wanted."

All rivers go somewhere and this one saves us from fighting our way through the jungle an inch at a time."

"But we have no boat."

"We can make a boat." Nicko said. "The rubber mattresses and cushions from the ship. I'll bet no one on this planet has ever seen such a boat as we'll have."

Mike and Nicko struggled back and forth from the river bank to the ship, bringing what was needed. Doree, fearing to remain alone, trailed with them until she was exhausted, whereupon Mike began building the raft, leaving the rest of the trips to the indestructible Nicko. Mike bound the mattresses and cushions to a base of woven reeds. The reeds grew in abundance in a nearby swamp. Doree helped with the braiding and the work went swiftly.

Nicko made a half dozen more trips and returned from the last one with several scales knocked off his back. "Somebody threw a brick at me," he said.

Mike scanned the now-menacing jungle wall. "A brick?"

"That was what it felt like. It hurt like hell."

"You didn't see anybody?"

"I did not. I didn't wait long enough."

"We've got to get out of here."

"An observation of amazing erudition."

Mike lashed a long flat piece of driftwood to the raft as a steering oar, found two other such pieces to serve as unattached oars, and helped Nicko finish with loading the supplies. "All right," he said. "Let's go."

They cast loose and while Doree worked with the stern oar, Mike and Nicko paddled feverishly toward the middle of the river. With this objective achieved, Nicko took over the stern. Mike forced Doree to lie down. He put a pillow under her head, kissed her and sat beside her until her eyes closed. Then he went back and sat down beside Nicko.

The latter had not forgotten his terrifying grin. "We certainly get around, don't we?" he said cheerfully.

"I'm glad it makes you so happy."

"As a matter of fact I'm scared stiff. It is just that my sainted mother told me always to keep a brave front."

Mike looked at his assistant with sudden fondness. "Who was your mother, Nicko?"

Nicko shook his dragon's head sadly. "I can't seem to remember but I know I had one. And of course she was saintly."

"And your father?"

A distant sound intruded, touching Mike's ears lightly. His eyes were still upon Nicko as the latter said, "You've got me—but I have a feeling he was a gallant knight in armor who swept my beautiful mother off her fairy-like feet."

"No doubt," Mike smiled. The sound was louder now, but it still did not catch his attention. He was remembering that encounter in the polar forests of Mars; the day he found little Nicko crouching under a bush; how he'd come within an ace of putting a bullet into the hideous creature's brain. But some vagrant touch of compassion had stayed him. The little monster seemed so lost, so pathetic, so helpless. He'd taken Nicko back to camp, the Martian infant's parentage and ancestry a mystery Mike felt would never be solved.

What sort of hideous mating had occurred, he wondered, to produce this mongrel creature with the brain of a human and the body of a beast? Mike held forth his hand. "You were a vicious little devil," he said. "I'll wear that scar forever."

Nicko sighed gustily. "If you beat me unmercifully each fine morning for the rest of my miserable life, the punishment would be light for such a heinous deed."

Mike laughed and started to get to his feet. Halfway up, he paused, crouching there. Then his voice thundered. "Grab an oar! Pull for shore! Pull for God's sake!"

In an instant both of them were tearing the water in an effort to reach the nearest bank. As they worked, the current upon which they moved swept forward at an ever-increasing speed and the roar about them was like the crashing of skyscrapers under bombardment.

They came ashore a scant six feet above certain death. Fortunately the raft was light and they were able to gain a foothold and lift it from the snarling waters.

Then, gasping for breath, they moved a few feet down-stream and stood looking at the frothing cataract that dropped the great river a sheer two-hundred feet to boulders below.

"I ought to be whipped for not attending to business," Mike said bitterly.

Doree was clinging to his arm looking down at the awe-inspiring sight. "You saved us, darling. Why should you criticize yourself?"

"It was too close—far too close."

Nicko said, "It seems to me the important thing now is where we go from here."

"We carry the raft down those rocks and beyond the rough water."

"But why all that effort? Couldn't we be as happy up here as down there?"

"All rivers lead to civilization," Mike said. "Or at least, they lead to the places civilization naturally springs up."

"A logical observation."

"Also, I've got a hunch about this river. I may be wrong but I think it might take us right where we want to go. I'll bet there are interesting things ahead."

Mike turned and directed his words to Doree. "That papyrus your father translated said the forefathers of the Egyptians sought a planet similar to their own. Perhaps the similarity had to be more than general. Such a thing is indicated by their traveling around for several lifetimes. Anyhow, except for the tropical climate, this river bears a great resemblance to one of the tributaries that feeds the Nile back on Terra."

"You're quite right," Doree marveled.

"And this could well be Victoria Falls. I wonder if another Egypt doesn't lie below."

There was awe in Doree's voice. "Before Egypt—"

"What did you say?"

"An Egypt—a great civilization that flourished on this planet before Egypt—before the Terran Egypt was even dreamed of."

Mike smiled fleetingly. "That's what you and your father have believed, isn't it? So why be surprised?"

"It's just that—well, being so close to it—realizing it might *really* exist—"

Mike laughed. "I understand. But we're still a long way from it." He turned to the Martian. "Come on, Nicko, let's get busy with this stuff."

The portage was laborious and dangerous. It took the balance of that day. Even when the sun set they had still not reached the termination of white water.

They found an open area beside the racing river that would have been covered during high water and Mike decided it would be a good place to camp. While Mike broke out the supplies, and Doree prepared the meal, Nicko stood on the alert with a rifle over his arm scanning the line of undergrowth at the edge of the forest.

After all three had eaten, Mike directed Nicko to bed down in order to be ready for the second watch. He urged Doree to sleep also, but she insisted on sitting with him during his watch. And though her head drooped several times, she remained with him and refused to sleep.

When Nicko took over the watch, Mike stretched out under his blanket near Doree. He dozed off and was then awakened by a pressure against his back. Doree, snuggling close. "It's cold," she murmured, and drifted to sleep with a contented sigh. It was a calm, restful slumber.

The sharp bark of Nicko's rifle awakened Mike after what seemed to him only a few moments of sleep. He sprang up to find dawn breaking and Nicko sending another shot into the undergrowth.

Mike grabbed his own rifle and ran to the Martian's side. "What's wrong?"

Nicko lowered his weapon. "I saw four platoons of infantry charging out of the brush—I think."

"In other words you think maybe you saw something. You don't know what it was. It could have been nothing at all."

"All right. Have it your way," Nicko said serenely.

"Come on. Let's get going. We'll eat something on the raft."

But they never reached the raft. Mike's words had hardly been spoken when the forest erupted with a mass of savagery. Several hundred tall, screaming black men clad sketchily in brilliantly colored feathers and paint.

Both rifles barked. Nicko's shot was high, but Mike brought the foremost of the black warriors skidding forward on his face.

Maybe that will stop them, Mike thought desperately. Maybe they've never seen firearms before. He held up his second shot for the briefest moment hoping the savages would be awed into retreat.

But this was not the case. They charged forward in renewed fury and Mike again went to work. He dropped three more of the charging maniacs while Nicko, probably the poorest shot who ever lifted a rifle, accounted for one unfortunate warrior with a twenty-shot spray of atomic pellets.

The black men, who had had only a scant fifty yards to cover, were now upon the three. Two of them seized Doree, an act which turned Mike into a terrible fighting machine.

Not able to fire the gun effectively at such close range, he reversed it and created bloody havoc, using the butt as a club. Two skulls cracked sharply under its impact and as he fought, Mike saw Nicko go down. He couldn't reach him.

Several warriors raised the iron-toothed clubs they carried and crashed them down upon Nicko's unprotected body.

The result would have been comic under less grim circumstances. The clubs of the warriors caused Nicko's almost indestructible hide to ring like a great bell. The handle of one warrior's lethal bludgeon snapped and the attacker stared at it in amazement. The rest beat down again upon the prone Nicko, their clubs bouncing off and resounding in a sort of anvil chorus.

The attention of the warriors bent upon annihilating Mike was diverted by the intriguing spectacle of this strange four-armed creature refusing to be clubbed to death. So Mike was able to get in some telling blows that felled three more of the terrible warriors.

He knew however, that the end was already written in the bloody sands around him. He could only fight to the last moment, bringing down as many of the enemy as possible.

His heart was sick at what would surely be Doree's fate. He saw her just beyond the perimeter of battle still held by her two captors who were viewing the fight with rapt interest. If he could only reach her. One swing of his gun butt and she would serve no vile purpose in the hands of these raiders.



The beastman's intent was all too clear.

Mike mowed a bloody path in her direction. He covered more than half the distance before he knew he would never make it.

However, the end of this affair was not written in the sands, but in the skies overhead. Mike realized this when the attackers stopped fighting, all eyes turned heavenward in sudden terror. Mike's eyes followed theirs and he saw the ship.

It was a craft such as he could never have imagined in dream or reverie. A great rectangular platform, its polished sides inlaid with gold and fist-sized gems. There was a high railing around its edge over which myriad faces peered down. Above it, elevated upon shining cables, were two glowing balls not more than two feet in diameter, and even in his preoccupation with more serious matters, Mike realized the whole craft was suspended from these two balls, that they were its means of buoyancy.

Then he was in the midst of a disordered flight as the warriors charged screaming back to the forest. The ship was settling swiftly toward the surface of the river and now a crystalline ray of some sort shot out from the forward deck, cutting down the terrorized warriors in their flight.

Every able-bodied one had fled the scene of battle. Some gained the forest where the crystalline ray crisped the overgrowth into black ashes as it nipped at their singed heels. Those not fortunate enough to escape were but small nubs of blackened ashes on the open shore.

The ray had avoided touching the heart of the battleground and Mike found himself standing alone among the bodies of the blacks he had dispatched. Nicko was getting wearily to his feet. Doree stood frozen nearby, abandoned by her captors, the great ship holding her gaze as a snake would hold that of a bird.

The ship hung motionless a few inches above the rushing water, its port side flanking the shore. And as a section of the railing arced down from its position to become a landing ladder, Mike realized the futility of delayed flight.

This was a fighting ship; a patrol craft ready and able to spread devastation in any direction. There were perhaps a hundred men aboard and as a squad filed down the ladder, Mike was struck by the perfection of their six-foot bodies and by the pride and arrogance of their manner.

Their attitude was one of casual contempt mixed with mild interest. Doree had moved into the shelter of his arm and the grumbling Nicko had also come close but with interest centered more upon his aching scales than this new possible enemy.

While the squad stood at attention, their leader surveyed the bloody section of shore. He checked each of the prone men and found only one still alive, a seven-foot, ebon-skinned warrior who got to his feet when the leader kicked him and stood erect but swaying drunkenly from the blow Mike had laid across his skull during the battle.

Shoving the warrior roughly toward the silent trio, the leader took a small object from the gold-inlaid shoulder sack that seemed to be a part of his uniform. The object consisted of a short rod with a crystal ball on one end. The man grasped the ball in his palm, pointed the rod at the fallen men and began spraying them with the same crystalline ray that had emanated from the ship. The resulting fire was instantaneous and intense. The prone bodies crackled for a moment and were reduced to charred fragments. The leader went about this work with the distasteful look of a man cleaning out a garbage pail. When the task was finished, he turned his attention to the four prisoners.

Nicko was the prime object of his interest. He cut the little Martian out of the group, shoving him roughly aside, then walked slowly around him several times as though unable to convince himself that such an improbable creature could really exist.

A sharp command from the deck of the ship terminated his inspection and he spoke brusquely to the group in a tongue Mike did not understand.

"What did he say?" Mike asked of Nicko.

For once, the latter was not interested. "How do I know?" he growled. "Gad! My aching back!"

The leader motioned to the squad, whereupon the prisoners were pushed toward the ladder.

The boarding was accomplished swiftly. The prisoners were herded forward and onto a gold-inlaid bench just above the prow. The ladder was lifted and the craft moved straight upward like an elevator.

After ascending three or four hundred yards, it leveled off and swept gently forward, down-river. None of those aboard laid hands upon the prisoners. Nicko was still the center of attention and also of the conversation passed among the soldiers. They were handsome specimens, erect and beautifully built, clad in identical uniforms the cost of which would have been staggering on Terra or anywhere else in the System.

"This ship," Mike said. "Is there anything familiar about it?"

He had spoken to Doree and the latter looked at him questioningly and then glanced about the ship. "I've certainly never seen anything like it before."

"Of course not, but the styling, the decorations, they could only be classed as—"

"Egyptian!"

"At least a forerunner of what we consider Egyptian. And this river. Look out ahead of us. See how it broadens. See the wide level fields on either side."

"The Nile," Doree whispered.

"Not the Nile, but obviously a sister. The Egyptians who fled this planet certainly hunted until

they found exactly what they wanted—found it on Terra in a system far from their own."

Mike turned his attention to a conversation that was going on between Nicko and the black prisoner. The language was a primitive guttural of some sort but Nicko was obviously using it skilfully. He grinned at Mike and said, "We were wrong about those people. They are fine characters. This is M'landa, a leader of the tribe known as the H'Lorkas—or at least that's as close as I can give it to you in Terran. He is an extremely fine fellow."

"Is that so?" Mike asked grimly. "Then why did they grab Doree?"

"They meant her no harm. They didn't want her injured."

"I can imagine why. And if they're such fine fellows why did they attack us?"

The question seemed to embarrass Nicko. "I guess my aim wasn't so bad after all. They were keeping a sharp eye on us—wishing us no harm whatever. But when I fired, I killed one so they naturally got sore."

"What does he know about this outfit?"

"Scoundrels. We would have been better off with the H'Lorkas. This is a patrol ship of the Ptomenites. They are the tyrants of this planet, their power contested only by the people of Baserite to the north. But the Baserites always come out on the bloody end of the stick."

"Has he any idea what will happen to us?"

"He expects to be sacrificed to some slob of a god they worship. Then his body will be preserved and put in a trophy room they call the Gallery of the Dead."

Mike turned a quick, meaningful look at Doree, but he had no time to comment because at that moment the door of a small cabin opened and a girl came forth. The cabin was aft of the ship and the girl came swiftly forward, pride and arrogance written in every line of her beautiful body.

But it was not these qualities that caused Mike to gasp and Doree to blush deeply. It was the regal figure's almost complete nudity. She wore only the briefest of attire across her breast and hips.

"My dark friend says that's Katal'halee, Princess of the Ptomenites," Nicko whispered. "She rides along with the boys once in a while for the exhilarating pleasure of it."

"I imagine the boys get a little pleasure out of having her along, too," Mike said.

Then, with the queenly nude not a dozen feet away, Doree grasped Mike's arm. He glanced across and saw that her eyes were sweeping past Katal'halee to the small cabin. Its door had again opened. Two men emerged and moved forward. They seemed entirely at home and wore smug smiles.

"Lorn McKee!" Doree gasped. "Dean Talbott!"

The Terran origination of these two was obvious. McKee was bald, paunchy, middle-aged, his face loose from easy living. Talbott tended toward the more athletic figure. He was dark, his eyes clear and sharp, his mouth cruel.

"Surprise," Nicko said with a noticeable lack of warmth in his voice. "Bet you never expected to see us on your front porch."

Talbott smiled coldly. "Yes, and no. After we left you in space we thought we were rid of you. But we saw you tagging after us when we were over the planet and it was too late to do anything about it. Congratulations. How did you manage it?"

"What have you done with my father?" Doree asked.

Talbott pondered the loathing in her eyes. It did not seem to bother him. "Your father is well taken care of. He will be—" McKee raised a delicate hand. "But the details would only horrify you."

Mike was on his feet and had the Terran by the throat. Talbott gagged and flailed helplessly. He was no weakling, but still not a match for Mike's strength and rage.

The haughty-eyed native girl had been standing silent, regarding the tableaux. Now she snapped a command and two soldiers stepped forward and seized Mike. A third hit Mike a vicious blow across the skull with the flat of an ugly jeweled sword he carried. Mike staggered and fell back on the bench, blood running from his scalp.

Talbott rubbed his throat and adjusted his clothing. Viciousness shone in his eyes. "We had no great animosity toward you before, but now—"

"That's why you left us stranded in space?" Mike asked.

"It was just that we did not want to bloody our hands killing you but you had to be got out of the way."

"Well, we're in the way now."

"Not at all. We have had time to put ourselves in solid with these fierce but rather stupid people. We've also had time to arrange for this hostile reception accorded you. We told them—"

"I can't see that it matters what you told them. We can see the result."

"I'm more interested in how you got to them," Nicko said. "You don't know their lingo."

"There are ways if one has the time." McKee had come forward and was regarding Nicko with interest. He was not alone. Katal'halee and every soldier within range was also regarding him with interest. "Just what manner of creature is this, anyhow?" Talbott asked.

"Why you slab-sided slob—!" Nicko yelled.

Talbott flushed and took a backward step. The three soldiers moved forward, scowling.

"Take it easy," Mike said. "We know how we stand. It's just as well we don't antagonize these people any further until we can get some kind of foothold."

"You'll get a foothold," McKee sneered. "In the priests' embalming rooms." With that, he turned and walked away, obviously satisfied with the situation. Talbott turned to follow him. He bowed to Katal'halee as though awaiting her pleasure. The proud native Princess appeared to have had enough of this spectacle and moved haughtily aft. As he followed her, Talbott glanced swiftly back at the prisoners as if to say: *See how solidly we're in? You haven't got a chance.* This was all too evident.

"What do you suppose they're up to?" Mike asked.

Doree looked up questioningly. "What do you mean?"

"They aren't just here to enjoy the hospitality of these people. They've got something more in mind."

"They're after the loot, what else?" Nicko said.

"If you're right and I think you are, they must have a plan. And if the plan is what I think it is, they've got their ship ready for a quick blast-off."

Doree's face was tight with inner turmoil. "We've got to find father! We've got to help him!"

Mike took her hand. "We'll do our best, but you must keep a grip on yourself. Your going to pieces won't help."

Doree made an effort. "I'm sorry. I'll—"

Her words were broken off by sudden activity on the ship. Mike glanced out and noted the landscape had changed to one of broad cultivation. The rough jungle country had completely vanished. Obviously the ship had been moving at great speed, its effect on the passengers lessened by the huge glass shield in front of the ship's prow. Looking ahead, he could see the spires of a city in the distance.

But this was not the object of the patrol's concern. Their eyes were riveted to another ship—a strange shining craft that was moving in from the left at great speed.

Mike heard shouts of both consternation and anger in the odd tongue of these people as they appeared to be girding for battle.

The approaching ship was of radically different design than the one on which they were trapped. It was completely of metal and had no golden or jeweled decorations. It was long and slim and completely enclosed and had the appearance of a true fighting ship. None of its passengers were visible.

Nicko had been talking to the feathered warrior. The latter had sat silent during the brush with McKee and Talbott and Mike had almost forgotten his presence.

Nicko turned in excitement. "He says that's a Baserite raider! He says it's very seldom they come in so close but that one's planning to raise general hell with this scow. This isn't one of the Ptomenite's fighter fleet and we'll have a pretty rough time."

The golden craft was following a two-pronged plan. The Ptomenites were spraying the sky with their deadly crystal ray and at the same time kiting for home as fast as the ship would go. Out beyond, the slim ship did a remarkable roll to avoid the ray and screamed in for the kill.

The wind was howling around the Ptomenite ship now, and her timbers groaned under the

pressure. Then the Baserite craft attempted a strike. It appeared to be trying for only a close arc but at the last moment it nosed down in a breathtaking maneuver and streaked straight for the exposed deck.

Frantically, the Ptomenites brought their ray gun around to bear on the death-laden juggernaut. They were partially successful, spitting forth a deadly barrage just as the prow of the attacker crashed into the deck.

Had the blow been uncontested, the Baserite ship would have roared on through and gone its way in triumph. But the crystalline force-field crashed out with a viciousness of its own. It had no seeming effect upon the hull of the Baserite raider, but it hurled the craft back from its position and far out into the sky.

Great damage had already been done, however. A gaping hole left the bejeweled deck almost split in two. But by lucky chance, the overhead globes had not been damaged and the speed of the Ptomenite ship did not diminish.

It was streaking toward the city, now seen clearly from the deck and as the Baserite ship righted itself, Mike saw similar ships—sleek metal fighters, rising from a port near the city.

The commander of the Baserite ship seemed to be making a decision as his craft hung in space. To attack or flee? Could he reach and demolish the crippled barge before the Ptomenite fighters reached the scene?

Both Mike and Nicko hung upon this indecision. Nicko said, "I hope that stupid codger doesn't commit suicide. If he does, we go down too."

"Maybe it's just as well," Mike said grimly.

"I've always subscribed to staying alive as long as possible," Nicko retorted.

The commander made his decision. The ship streaked in, dancing like a zephyr to avoid the crystalline ray. But there was no longer any great danger from this because the tilt of the deck made accurate aiming impossible for the Ptomenites.

Straight in for the kill now, came the Baserite ship; straight in toward the crippled deck awash with the blood of smashed and maimed soldiers; alive with the screams of the agonized and the dying.

Doree covered her face with her hands and came into Mike's arms. So she did not see that the Ptomenites had one maneuver left; a perilous one, but nonetheless a maneuver.

The craft was now over the level ground on the near outskirts of the city. It hung motionless, allowing the Baserite craft to take deadly aim.

But as the sleek ship rocketed in, the commander of the Ptomenite craft waited until the last moment and then released whatever force held the ship in the air. The split deck dropped like a stone, but too late for the other ship to change course.

The Baserites had gambled and lost. As the ship arced again skyward, a dozen similar fighters closed in from two directions. They emitted the deadly crystalline fire. For a few moments, the Baserite ship seemed unharmed. Then its hull began to glow; a faint pink, a cherry red, a bright crimson. Then a brilliant explosion lighted a sky made hazy by the descending sun. And there was nothing.

Even as the Ptomenite ship plummeted downward, Mike marveled at the effectiveness of the crystalline ray. Nothing remotely resembling it existed in the universe he knew. Then his attention was concentrated solely upon perils of the moment. The Ptomenite commander was not able to stop the rapid descent. He could only lessen it slightly and Mike held Doree tight in his arms when the crash came.

He noted, fleetingly, that neither McKee nor Talbott had been injured by the thrust of the Baserite ship. The door to the after cabin was open and he saw them crouching inside, terror written across their faces. Standing above them, proud and erect in the face of death, stood the Princess Katal'halee and Mike felt a touch of admiration. Then the craft hit the ground....

Mike realized he was not unconscious. He realized also that the ship had braked slightly against the rocketing drop at just the last moment.

It had blunted the force of the impact but little, however, and chaos reigned upon the shattered deck. Mike found that both Nicko and Doree were unconscious but that the H'Lorkan tribesman was shaking his head groggily.

Mike looked swiftly about. The dust cleared slightly nearby and he saw that the prow of the deck had buckled as it hit, leaving a dark opening beneath. There was room for a man in there. Mike glanced around. In the confusion, no one was paying any attention to the prisoners. Help was coming from the city but the rescuers were still quite a distance away.

Mike motioned to the H'Lorkan, gesturing frantically. The other quickly understood. Mike picked Doree up and put her inside the dark opening. He followed her and moved her further inside away from the small opening.

Then he looked out to find that the H'Lorkan had had difficulty with Nicko, but had found a way of grasping him so as not to get cut by the sharp scales. He pushed the little Martian's body in to Mike and followed quickly.

Mike turned immediately to Doree and began examining her for injury. There was a small gash on her forehead and a bruise on her shoulder. She moaned and opened her eyes.

Mike put a finger over her lips. "Be very quiet."

"Where are we? What happened?"

"The ship crashed," he whispered, "but we may be safe for a while."

Doree smiled weakly. "I thought it was the end."

"How do you feel?"

"All right—I guess. Nothing seems to be broken."

"Lie and rest." Mike turned and found Nicko was sitting up, his eyes open but still a trifle vacant. "You okay?"

"Guess so. They couldn't kill me with a club but I get knocked out coming downstairs."

"Something must have hit you on the head just right."

"Something sure did. Tell me, what's the situation?"

"I don't know. I'm playing it from hand to mouth. We're hidden under the ruins of the ship."

"They'll be after us."

"If they weren't killed." Mike found a small opening and peered out. Help had come from the city now and he saw a line of stretcher bearers moving away from the wreck. His spirits rose as he identified three of the casualties. McKee, Talbott, Katal'halee. Were any or all of them dead? He had no way of knowing. But at least they appeared to be past caring about the four prisoners—at least for a time.

This did not insure safety however. The entrance to the improvised cave darkened and a face appeared. Mike held his breath, expecting challenge and exposure.

But none came. Then Mike realized that dusk had fallen and the eyes of the searcher could not penetrate their hiding place with any degree of surety. There were sharp words in the alien tongue. Obviously the searcher was calling for any trapped or injured person.

Desperately, Mike hoped he would let it go at that. But such was not the case. The man got down on his knees and pushed inside.

He found himself taken instantly into the iron grasp of three desperate tenants. The H'Lorkan got him by the legs, Nicko hit him in the middle, and Mike got strong hands on his throat, drove powerful fingers into it, shutting off the man's breath forever.

The man struggled helplessly for a few moments. Then he lay still as Mike snapped his neck suddenly backward and broke it.

The darkness served another purpose. It kept Doree from the horror of seeing a man killed not two feet from her eyes. But she realized what was happening and buried her face in her hands.

"I'm sorry," Mike whispered. "But this is a matter of survival. Try and look at it in that light."

There was nothing to do now but wait. Mike's hopes were slim and desperate ones—that the slain man would not be missed for a while, and that the wreckage of the ship would not be cleared away until the following day.

The time dragged. Activity around the wreck dwindled and died out. Total darkness had not yet come and Mike prayed for a few more minutes of safety. But he was not to get it. A commotion over toward the city brought him to a break in the wreckage through which he could scan the area. A huge derrick-like affair, encrusted with the usual gold and gems, was lumbering toward the wrecked platform. A gang of workmen followed on foot. Incandescent balls were carried by another group, brightly illuminating the scene.

"We've got to run for it!" Mike said. "Out—everybody! Run straight to the left! There's an airfield

over there. McKee and Talbott's ship is on the far edge. I saw it just before we fell!"

The four wormed their way out from under the wreckage. "That ship should be primed to go!" Nicko said with excitement.

"That's what I'm hoping."

"No!" Doree cried, and pulled away from Mike. "No! I won't go away from here and leave my father! We've got to try to help him!"

Mike did not hesitate. He swung a short solid right. It cracked against Doree's jaw and she went limp. "Sorry," he said grimly, "but this is no time to argue."

"We're going to hit that ship and blast out?" Nicko asked.

"What else? She'll hate me for it, but we've got to use common sense. There's nothing we can do for Professor Brandon this trip. Maybe we can come back later."

"It will be hard on the kitty."

"Okay," Mike retorted harshly. "My responsibility is getting Doree out of here alive!"

"I'm not arguing," Nicko said. "Let's move."

The H'Lorkan had remained silent the whole time. He had done what was expected of him promptly and efficiently and proven himself a good comrade. But there was no time now to explain the plan to him. If he had remained where he was they would probably have gone off and left him. But when they started across the open country, he ran with them.

Mike momentarily expected the light from the glowing bulbs to pick them out, but luck was with them and they gained the edge of the airfield without being detected. They disappeared in among the craft. There was quite an assortment of these and from the design and variations in size, Mike got the impression they were pleasure craft and not a part of the fighting force. Encrusted jewels were used in profusion and decorations along with both silver and gold. On this planet these precious materials seemed to have little value as no guards were posted over the field.

There were lights in a few of them. These, Mike carefully skirted until the party came at last to the sleek black hull of the ship McKee and Talbott had arrived in.

No sight ever gladdened his heart more than that of the great, competent-looking monster. The ramp was down and all was darkness inside.

"Shall I go ahead and check?" Nicko asked.

"It wouldn't help. If anyone's in there they'd probably nab you."

"Maybe I don't nab as easily as you think," Nicko growled.

"Anyhow, there isn't time. I think that crew spotted us when we entered the field. We've got to get in and away."

"Once inside we can lock the hatches and hold them off until we blast."

"You think so?" Mike asked. "With that funny fire ray they've got?"

"Well, maybe they just won't see us then."

"Let's hope not."

Nicko went up the ramp first. Mike followed with Doree in his arms. The H'Lorkan warrior brought up the rear. Into the dark maw of the ship they went, where Nicko found a utility flashlight on its hook near the door to the companionway. He sent a beam on ahead. "Holy Mother Mars!" he croaked.

The light flashed back off thousands of brilliant jewels almost blinding them. The companionway was strewn inches deep in multicolored gems.

"That's about what I figured," Mike said. "Those two have been loading loot ever since they set down here. I'll bet every cabin's packed to the guards."

This was true. As they moved through the ship it was like walking in the treasure house of a Neptunian robber baron. "There's well over a billion in here," Nicko marveled. "Whatever you say about our friends—they aren't small timers."

"It will be a touchy job getting this ship off the ground," Mike said.

Nicko grinned hideously. "Want to stop and throw a few tons overboard?"

"There's no time or believe me, I would. Let's get to the control cabin."

It was the one cabin in which no wealth was stored. In the place of jewels and bar-gold there was something else. It seemed McKee and Talbott had not been as negligent of their hoard as it had first appeared.

The half-dozen native guards in the control room allowed the four to enter, standing close against the near wall. Then they fell upon them. Taken by surprise and attacked by a greater number, the fugitives had no chance. The H'Lorkan warrior, last into the room, fought bravely, but when the lights were turned on, the prisoners had been swiftly cuffed and subdued.

Doree had been jerked cruelly from Mike's arms and he saw a tall native warrior just disappearing through the door carrying her in his arms.

Mike's shoulders slumped as he tasted the bitter dregs of defeat....

They were led through the city streets under heavy guard, streets brightly illuminated by myriad glowing balls. The populace eyed them curiously, their importance evidently indicated by the escort of a dozen grim soldiers.

Only Mike and Nicko and M'Landa took the long walk up the avenue, Doree having been spirited away. Mike was a man in deep torment as he wondered helplessly about her fate. Was she already dead? Had she been made the plaything of some high official? Of McKee or Talbott or both? This last thought brought red rage flashing into his heart.

They were taken into a huge, gloomy building and down a long corridor. As they approached it, a sound greatedened before them; a rolling muted thunder of mixed anger, pain, and terror. They entered a long, narrow corridor, one wall broken at regular intervals by small metal doors. Mike realized the sound came from beyond these doors—from the angry throats of prisoners—that this could be nothing other than the city's prison. There was no doubt of it.

The cavalcade stopped. One of the doors was unlocked and thrown open, the three pushed roughly inside. The door slammed, the lock was turned and the guards stalked away as they had come.

The interior of the cell was very dim. Mike blinked his eyes, striving to pierce the dimness. He opened them and got a surprise. This was more of a cage than a prison. The entire wall opposite the door consisted of bars.

The three went forward and stood in mute wonder at what they saw. The cells were elevated and ran in a circle around an amphitheater—a great lighted pit—so that the prisoners were spectators at the drama that went on below.

It was indeed a strange place, this pit, its purpose temporarily obscure to the three prisoners. It contained great vats of steaming, multicolored liquids, many tables, a great number and variety of frames, racks, and instruments.

There were perhaps a dozen men at work down there. They appeared to be making preparation for what was to follow. Mike wondered about their occupation, then turned sharply on Nicko.

"What's the matter with you? Why aren't you finding out about this?"

Nicko stared in amazement. "Me? How the devil can I—?"

"The H'Lorkan. He might be able to give you some information. Ask him!"

Nicko shuddered as though coming out of a daze. "Sure. I guess my wheels got kind of stopped."

M'Landa, who never seemed to speak unless spoken to, answered Nicko's questions calmly. Mike watched the two as they conversed; saw Nicko's increasing indignation and horror. "All right!" Mike snapped. "Don't keep it to yourself. What did he say?"

"Not much. Just that these are the high priests of the Ptomenties. They prepare the bodies of the dead for burial and their job is to make them look so life-like that you wouldn't even know they were dead. This is their experimental laboratory—where they keep their hands in. They experiment on the prisoners."

As the chill went through Mike, he saw four guards who had been stationed on the far side of the pit acknowledge a sign from one of the priests and start toward a staircase leading to the prisoner's balcony.

They stopped at one of the cells and unlocked a door set in the barred front. As they entered a roar of hatred went up from every cell in the dreadful circle.

As he watched, Mike was conscious of the fact that only he and Nicko were watching the proceedings, that M'Landa's face was not glued to the bars. The thing's too horrible for the H'Lorkan to take, Mike thought. He's crouching back there behind us—covering his face most likely. And I can't say I blame him.

The guards came forth from the cell dragging a screaming victim, a tall naked specimen who bested even the Ptomenites in physical perfection. Here, Mike realized, was truly a man.

The screams had been from rage, not from fear. As the door snapped behind him, the victim stopped screaming, evidently realizing this was the end, that escape was now impossible. He raised his head, a look of contempt lighting his handsome features. He walked proudly amidst the guards. He seemed completely indifferent to whatever fate awaited him.

Mike stared as the man was led to the center of the pit. Chains were clamped to his wrists and ankles. Then the guards lifted him, holding him horizontal. One of the priests extended his arms upward, over the prone man, and seemed to be mouthing a prayer or incantation. He appeared to Mike to be asking some deity to accept this poor offering.

This ceremony over, the guards walked with the helpless man toward a great vat of smoking purple liquid. But at this moment, Mike's attention was diverted. A door had opened far down the circle and two figures were approaching. As the guards lifted the unfortunate prisoner and threw him in the vat a great roar of fury went up from the circle of cells. And Mike recognized the approaching figures.

McKee and Talbott.

McKee was amply bandaged about the head and shoulders. Talbott appeared to have come off better, only his right wrist and elbow tightly wrapped.

They moved past the cells until they were confronting Mike and Nicko. There they stopped. McKee, the fat one, grinned and glanced at his companion. "Dangerous looking specimens, aren't they?"

Talbott wore a sneer. "Quite. The priests will have a lot of fun with the scaly creature. I understand they're already discussing him—eager to get their hands on him."

Mike's rage tore at his own throat. He strove for control of his voice. "What have you swine done with Doree?"

A look of disappointment came on Talbott's face. "I wanted her for—for other things, but I wasn't able to handle it. So she comes in here like the rest."

"You mean they're going to throw her into that—?" the question was from Nicko as every scale on his body quivered.

Mike saw that the prisoner below had now been removed from the vat. He had been laid on a table and one of the priests was advancing upon the body with a long shining needle in his hand. He pointed the needle very carefully at a place on the man's skull.

"She's next, I understand," Talbott was saying easily. "She is in the other block. Only male prisoners on this side. They'll bring her in soon. It will be quite a show. Perhaps we'll stay to watch."

Mike could control himself no longer. He flung himself against the bars like a wild beast. Even though in no danger, McKee drew back in alarm. He said, "The sooner that one's in the Hall of the Dead, the better."

Mike had been conscious of a hand touching his arm but he had paid no attention. Now, as the two Terrans turned to leave, he turned also, with tears of helpless anger welling in his eyes. It was M'Landa. The H'Lorkan spoke.

"What's he saying?" Mike asked.

As M'Landa spoke, a quick change came over Nicko. He whirled and stared back in to the cell. "He says there's another man in this cell with us. He's been talking to him. He's a Baserite."

Now Mike saw the man sitting in a shadow against the wall. Two things had kept him from noticing before—the dim light and the incidents of terrible interest down in the pit. As they approached, the man got to his feet and spoke. Mike could not understand what he said, but he now knew the man thrown brutally into the vat of purple liquid had also been a Baserite. This man in the cell could have been his twin.

"Are you able to understand him?" Mike asked Nicko.

"Sure. He said he was watching us—trying to figure out whether we were spies?"

"Spies! Spying on whom?"

The questions and answers were going back and forth through Nicko. He asked the Baserite. The man said, "Upon me."

"Who are you?"

"I am Mertaan, a fighting Prince of Baser. I was taken from a Baserite ship."

"Too bad, fellow. I'm sorry."

"It was no accident. I arranged to be taken."

"That hardly makes any sense."

The man spoke through grim lips, his clear eyes blazing. "That's why I wondered about you—wondered if our plot was suspected. We can't take a chance."

"Your plot?"

"Yes. But I think you are genuine prisoners."

Nicko translated and added, "You can be damned sure about that."

"What plot are you talking about?" Mike asked.

"Baser attacks the Ptomenites in force tonight."

"I'm glad to hear that but I don't see how you can be much help in here."

"This is one facet of the plan. We corrupted a scant few of the Ptomenite guards. They are our men."

An odd thought struck Nicko. "We're glad to hear that too, but could you tell me something? With gold and jewels lying around on the ground what kind of bait lures a man on this planet."

"Our women are the most beautiful and exciting females in existence," the Baserite said grimly.

Nicko whistled and Mike snapped. "Quit taking up time with silly questions. We want to know more of this plot."

Mertaan took a key from the front of his jacket. "There is one or more Baserites in every cell of this block. Each has a key that will unlock his cell. The Baserite war fleet comes over soon. When we hear the whine of the ships, we strike. Are you with us?"

"We could hardly be with the Ptomenites."

Mertaan eyed Nicko suspiciously. "Is the strange one also with us?"

"Just wait and find out!" Nicko said.

The Baserite turned even grimmer of face. "I am taking no chances. This plan must work. My brother just died down there in their reeking vat—"

Mike was astounded. "You mean you had a key? You could send the whole cell block to his rescue? But you let him die?"

Ice glazed over the pain in the Baserite's eyes. "There is much more at stake here than one life. A nation. The time was not right. I had hoped my brother would be spared a few minutes longer but it was not to be."

Mike marveled anew. Truly—these Baserites were men of iron will. "When?" Mike asked grimly.

"Soon." Mertaan took a small, strange-looking weapon from his pocket. It resembled a pistol enough to be identified as such. "I wish I could offer you arms, but smuggling them in was very risky. What few we have are in the hands of picked warriors."

Sweat was standing out on Mike's brow. "Never mind the guns. I just hope it's soon. The next one to go into that vat is a girl who—"

The Baserite's eyes filled with quick sympathy. "One of you, my friend?"

"One of us."

"I can only hope the ships come first."

Mike licked his dry lips. "But if they don't—you say you have some guns—the keys." He was looking at the Baserite with fixed calculation, his thoughts transparent.

Mertaan had no difficulty in divining them. "We cannot move until the ships come. If you strive to change this I shall kill you swiftly and silently. I shall kill everyone in the cell to ensure silence."

Mike's look remained fixed. He knew he did not have the courage to watch Doree die horribly when there was a key and a weapon within his reach. He deliberately forced the cold look from his face but whether the Baserite's suspicion was lulled, he could not tell.

Mertaan smiled coldly and said, "There is another of your kind in the cell block."

Mike took a step forward, but the Baserite stepped warily back. "An old man?" Mike asked.

"A very old man. He is four cells down. We know nothing of him because no one can speak his

language."

Professor Brandon! Mike sent up a silent prayer of thanksgiving. "He will be released when the time comes?"

"If he chooses. None will be forced to go against their wishes, but I cannot imagine anyone refusing."

Mike turned to the bars gripping them hard. Several priests were working ghoulishly over the body of the dead Baserite. Mike looked toward the various entrances to the pit. Through which of these would they bring Doree? He prayed that none of the doors would open.

But as though part of a plan to torture him, one of the doors opened suddenly. Two guards came through.

They were leading Doree.

She was very pale and seemed to Mike to have grown increasingly beautiful. She wore a simple golden robe and the guards did not treat her as roughly as they had handled the Baserite. Small consolation.

She had found a great courage and walked serenely with her head held high and Mike's pride and love almost burst his heart. Desperately he tried to keep control over himself.

Doree advanced under close scrutiny of the guards to the point at which the Baserite had been slain. She appeared empty of all fear.

Then a priest advanced and stood for a moment looking at her. In his hands he held two lengths of golden chain. A great silence fell over the watching prisoners in the cells, every eye glued on the priest and this beautiful girl.

Then a great roar of anger arose as the priest reached out and whipped Doree's gown from her body. She stood naked in the center of the pit.

Mike went mad. With a roar he turned and hurled himself upon Mertaan.

The latter, even though sharply alert for attack, was not quick enough to get his weapon into action against Mike's lightning rush. Mike closed with him and they went down.

The Baserite was probably the stronger of the two, but his strength was no match for Mike's demoniacal rage. His hands went around the Baserite's throat. "Must I kill you?" he snarled, "or will you give me the key?"

There was no fear in Mertaan's expression but now, under pressure of Mike's steel fingers, it changed. He appeared to be listening for his own death.

But not for his death. He tore frantically at Mike's fists and got a few words past them. "Listen—listen, man! Can't you hear them? The ships are coming over! The time is now!"

Mike could not understand the words but the meaning got through to him as a high whining sound transcended the roar of the prisoners. And Mike realized the roar had not been caused by the priest's unveiling of Doree's beautiful body, but by the whine from above. The prisoners knew that the moment had come and they were already pouring from the cells.

Mike sprang to his feet and lifted the Baserite. The latter snatched the key from his jacket and unlocked the front cell-gate. Mike went through first to find himself packed into a plunging, screaming mob.

Here and there he spotted a Baserite frantically trying to establish some sort of order in the ranks of the prisoners. But they remained a snarling, bloodthirsty wave of disorganized vengeance. Mike tore his way savagely through the pack with Nicko and M'Landa close behind him.

"We've got to get down first!" he yelled. "She'll be killed in the rush!" Even now, below them, the panicked priests were knocking each other down in their rush for the exits.

Nicko pushed forward. "Let me go first! I'll make way!"

And he did. He flexed his scales until each one stood out from his ugly body like a razor-edged knife. Then he charged the mob. Blood splashed until Nicko was a great red smear. Those he hit screamed in pain and fell back, leaving an avenue down which the three raced.

They came to a stairway and as they tumbled into the pit, Mike looked swiftly over his shoulder. He was thinking of Mertaan's weapon. But it was not available. Mertaan had been lost in the mob of screaming prisoners.

Mike snatched up an odd-looking instrument from a table he passed. He knew nothing of its original use but it would make an excellent club. He baptized it by catching a fleeing, terrified priest and splitting his skull with one blow. This brought him within a few steps of where Doree lay. She had been knocked to the floor as the desperate priests sought to escape the wrath of

their prisoners.

Mike's eyes were only for her. He did not see a guard nearby who turned suddenly and charged him with the flat ugly sword gripped tight in his fist. Mike knelt down to lift Doree. The sword plunged down. But instead of going into Mike's back, it was driven deep into the breast of M'Landa who had hurled himself forward.

Nicko, with a curse bellowed in some obscure dialect, leaped forward and took the guard into his hands. He lifted the guard and held him aloft with one hand. With the other he tore the man's throat out and hurled him dying and bloody across the pit.

The whole building trembled at that moment, obviously from a bomb hurled off a Baserite ship. But Mike and Nicko were scarcely aware of this new thunder. Mike had set Doree on her feet and was now holding the fallen H'Lorkan warrior in his arms. Gently he withdrew the sword. There was a lump in his throat. He said, "Thanks, friend. You'll never be forgotten. I will always remember."

M'Landa smiled. He spoke and Nicko interpreted. "This is a fine worthy death. I could ask for no more. I die pleasantly, in the hope that the Ptomenites are brought down forever."

Then he was dead and there was no time to mourn him. "Back upstairs," Mike said. "Your father is in a cell there. We've got to get him and then find a way out of here and to the ship—if we aren't too late. I've got a hunch McKee and Talbott will be heading in the same direction."

Nicko had picked up Doree's robe. He threw it over her shoulders and he and Mike formed a cordon in front and in back of the girl, Nicko going first. They headed for a stairway while all about them bloody slaughter was taking place.

The priests had found the exit doors mysteriously locked and what few guards were in the pit proved to be helpless against the outraged horde from above. The priests and the guards were being torn to pieces as though by the fangs of maddened dogs. The screams of terror and agony were a crescendo drowning the whine of the ships overhead.

Professor Brandon was crouching in the far corner of the cell. A man of peace, this place of blood and confusion was beyond his conception. He was in a daze, his mind having thrown up a buffer against horror.

Doree's arms went around him but Mike pushed her back almost roughly. "There is no time," he said. "We've got to get out of here." He picked the frail Brandon up in his arms. "You take the lead, Nicko. Take my club. It's up to you to cut a path through."

They left the cell and went out onto the balcony and discovered that the frantic priests had at last broken through the locked doors of their prison-pit. The ones remaining alive had fled the place with the prisoners on their heels.

Sounds from beyond indicated that some of the frenzied prisoners had abandoned the chase and were now stalking through the building, killing and looting.

"Out this way," Mike directed, indicating an open doorway. "This is the side toward the blast field."

"The passage is empty," Nicko said. "Come on."

"Watch yourself!" Mike snapped.

And it was well that Nicko did because halfway down the passage, three of the blood-crazed prisoners leaped on him from a side passage. One brought a club down viciously, aimed by sheer chance at the base of Nicko's skull, the one vulnerable spot on his body. Nicko avoided the blow and smashed the prisoner's head.

The other two landed astride Nicko. It was like jumping into a nest of sharp knives. Ripped, bloody, screaming, they staggered away and fled.

No one else challenged the right of way and Nicko led the party out into the night. Overhead, the sky was bright with battle and here and there about the area, there were sharp skirmishes, evidently between Baserite and Ptomenite troops. There was no way to tell which way the battle swayed.

"Straight ahead," Mike ordered. "Skirt the wall of that building."

They reached the field, ran across the last open area and faded in among the ships. Mike smiled grimly as he saw the dark, unlighted outline of the Terran space craft. They had beaten McKee and Talbott! Perhaps the two scoundrels had been slain. "Up the ramp, quick!" Mike directed.

But McKee and Talbott had not been killed. Nor had Mike beaten them to the ship. He had preceded Nicko up the ramp and as he came to the hatch, the lights of the ship flashed on and Talbott stepped forth holding a Terran pistol. Beyond him, inside, stood McKee and the Princess Katal'halee.

"I told you all we had to do was wait here—that they would show up," Talbott said.

McKee pushed forward, a somewhat mystified expression on his face. "Sure, but I still can't figure how you convinced this Katal babe they're responsible for the uprising."

Talbott's smile was one of grim satisfaction. "I have persuasive ways," he said. "I'll back them down the ramp and she can pronounce sentence and I'll execute them."

"Why stall?" McKee asked. "Kill all five of them and let's get out of here. About time we started thinking of our own skins."

"I'm taking the Princess with us, you idiot!"

"You're the idiot!" McKee snapped. "Not letting well enough alone!"

The proud Ptomenite Princess pushed forward, her cold eyes on Mike and he realized of course, why the two Terran schemers could talk so freely. Katal'halee could not understand a word they said.

Talbott motioned with the gun and Mike backed slowly down the ramp. He was still holding Professor Brandon in his arms, the old man's eyes blank and uncomprehending.

"That'll do," Talbott said. He stepped aside and the Princess pointed a contemptuous finger at the group. She spoke sharply and Mike looked swiftly at Nicko.

"It's a death sentence," Nicko said. "She's accusing us of everything but stopping up the royal sink."

The Princess now stepped aside and motioned imperiously to Talbott. He raised his gun.

But a new voice barked sharply. A fine needle of crystalline ray shot out of the darkness and melted the gun in Talbott's hand. Talbott jerked his seared member back with a squall of pain.

Mertaan stepped into the circle of light. He looked at Mike. "I had reason to follow you," he said and Nicko quickly interpreted.

"But it can wait a few moments." He turned to the Princess Katal'halee and a hatred built up over generations flashed between them. Yet, their eyes seemed also to mirror a mutual respect. Mertaan said, "You are wrong about your betrayers. It was these two who made the arrangements—contacted our allies within your city. The tall one is very good at getting his points over with gestures and pictures."

Evidently, on this planet, even enemies did not lie to each other. Katal'halee's eyes turned on the pair with a venom that sent every drop of blood from their faces. "What did they ask in return?"

"Only seats of power in the city after we conquered it."

Nicko was translating for Mike and the latter whistled softly. "So that was the idea. The jewels in the ship were only an ace in the hole."

"But they must figure the battle goes bad for the Baserites," Nicko said. "They planned to take off."

"The last minute," Mertaan told Katal'halee, "your fine friends turned milk-white. They had no stomach for the battle they helped arrange."

"A truce between us, Baserite," the Princess said. "Give me these two and a gun with which to march them off into the darkness. You and I can settle accounts later."

Mike was astounded when, without hesitation, Mertaan took another weapon from his person and handed it to the Princess. Mike's flesh crawled as he stood rigid, expecting a blast from the royal Ptomenite that would wipe them all out. He wondered at Mertaan's gullibility.

But evidently the word of these fierce people could be taken at face value. The Princess ignored all but McKee and Talbott. She pointed the gun at them and motioned. Now they understood what had transpired. Sweat streamed from their faces.

"No!—please, no!" Talbott screamed. "He lies! He tells you lies!" They both fell to their knees.

Mertaan smiled coldly at them. "Where are your pictures and persuasive manners now, scum!" He kicked them cruelly to their feet and they staggered off into the darkness before Katal'halee's weapon, still pleading for mercy.

Mertaan appeared to forget about them. He turned to Mike. "Into your ship. Quick! There is not too much time."

"You're helping us to make our escape?"

"I have a reason. Hurry."

They went up the ramp and inside. Mertaan stopped just outside the hatch and Mike turned. The Baserite said, "I know not from whence you came, stranger, but I ask that you go back to your world, wherever it is. Tell your people of us and plead our cause. Tell of the generations of cruelty on this planet and bring help for the oppressed. This I ask of you."

"But this uprising—your attack—"

Mertaan shook his head. "It does not go well. We will fight to the death as my people have fought before but I fear the result. The Ptomenites are powerful."

"Thanks." Mike held out his hand.

The Baserite took it, a little clumsily and smiled a farewell to Nicko who was peering around Mike, interpreting. "Go with your gods," the Baserite said. Then he turned and hurried back to the carnage and the bloodshed....

"Father is resting," Doree said. "I'm sure he'll be all right in a little while. The treatment he received was a shock."

"It would have shaken a far stronger man. He'll be all right when he gets back to Terra and they honor him for this discovery."

The ship rocketed smoothly through space. Doree slipped into Mike's arms. "He found what he wanted. So did I." Mike kissed her.

A while later she asked, "Do you think the Baserites won?"

Mike stared out through the port, his eyes sad. "Somehow I don't think so. We can only hope. But soon a few thousand ships will appear in their skies. Their doors will be opened to all the universe and tyranny will not survive."

"Then we'll go back," Doree said.

"Then we'll go back."

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BEFORE EGYPT ***

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