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# THE WOMAN-STEALERS OF THRAYX

By FOX B. HOLDEN

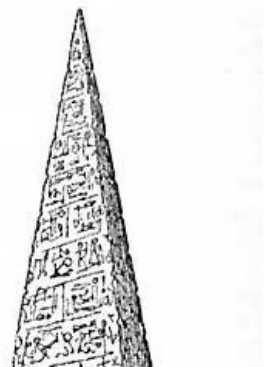
*"And that is why you will take us to Earth, Lieutenant," barked the Ihelian warrior. "We do not want your arms or your men. What we must ask for is—ten thousand women."*

Mason was nervous. It was the nervousness of cold apprehension, not simply that which had become indigenous to his high-strung make-up. He was, in his way, afraid; afraid that he'd again come up with a wrong answer.

He'd brought the tiny Scout too close to the Rim. Facing the facts squarely, he knew, even as he fingered the stud that would wrench them out of their R-curve, that he'd not just come too close. He'd overshot entirely. Pardonable, perhaps, from the view-point of the corps of scientists safely ensconced in their ponderous Mark VII Explorer some fifteen light-days behind. But not according to the g-n manual. According to it, he'd placed the Scout and her small crew in a "situation of avoidable risk," and it would make a doubtful record look that much worse.

The next time he'd out-argue Cain with his rank if he had to. Cain was big enough to grab things with his brawny fists and twist them into whatever shape he wanted when the things were tangible, solid, resisting. But R-Space was something else again. Nobody knew what it did beyond the Rim.

He materialized the Scout into E-Space, listened for trouble from her computers, but they



chuckled softly on, keeping track of where they were, where they'd been, and how they'd get home.

It was as though nothing had happened. But Lieutenant Lansing Mason was still nervous, his slender fingers steady enough, but as cold as the alien dark outside the ship they controlled.

"You look a little shot again, skipper!" Cain said, grinning like a Martian desert cat. "What's the matter, Space goblins got you again?"

A retort started at Mason's taut lips, but his third officer was already speaking.

"Here's a dope sheet from the comps, if anybody's interested in knowing just where outside the Rim we are," she said. "I make it just a shade inside the outermost fringes of the Large Magellanic Cloud." Sergeant Judith Kent's voice had its almost habitually preoccupied tone, as though the words she said were hardly more than incidental to a host of more important thoughts running swiftly behind her wide-set, deep gray eyes. They were serious eyes, and in their way matched the solemn set of her small features and the crisp, military cut of her black hair and severe uniform.

"Our little boss-man knows where we are, all right!" Cain said.

Mason gave Cain's six-feet-two a quick glance, wondering as he always wondered why the big redhead's shoulders always seemed too broad for the Warrant Officer's stripes on them. "Sergeant Kent's right," he said. "Here's her comp-sheet. You can look for yourself. Fringe, Magellanic. And look at that while you can—" he jabbed a forefinger at the main scanner, its screen studded with unfamiliarly close constellations—"because we're on our way back. Set up a return on the comps, will you, Sergeant?" For all his tenseness his voice was low, and the words it formed were even and swift.

"Hell, Lance, this is the sort of stuff the brain trust pays us bonuses for."

"Not out here they don't. R-drive when you're ready, Sergeant!"

Cain turned from the deep control bank and gave his full attention to the scanner as the slender, efficient girl started feeding a tape of reversal co-ordinates into the computers.

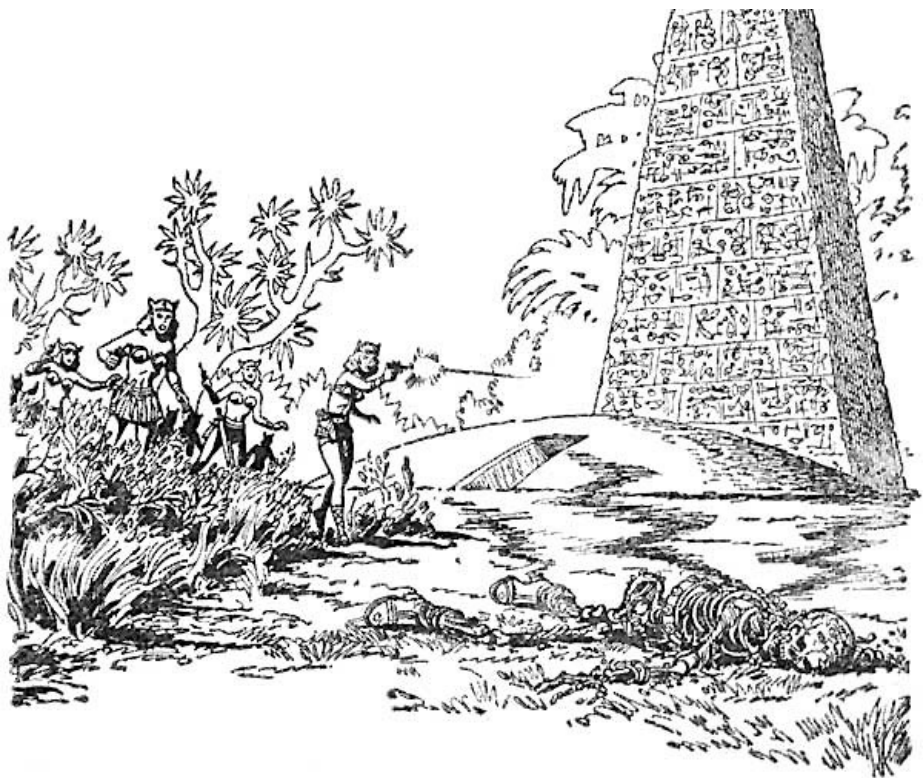
Mason waited the few necessary seconds, pushed disarranged dark hair out of his eyes and felt the clammy dampness on his forehead, and wished silently to himself that opportunists like Cain were kept where they belonged—on the Slam-Bang Run out of Callisto. That's where the money was. That's where a Warrant like Cain ought to be.

"Ready, sir," he heard Judith saying quietly.

"Hey, skipper!" There was a sudden urgency in Cain's voice, and the equally sudden racket of an MPD alarm going off. Cain was gesturing at the scanner, stubby finger tracing a slewing pip of light. The alarm stopped, and Judith's cool voice was relaying information. "About a thousand miles," she was saying, "mass, approximately three hundred tons. Speed—"

**B**ut Mason wasn't listening. He was watching the pip of light as Cain got the scanner's directional going, tracked it. Suddenly there were others coming as though to meet it, and it swerved violently, obviously in flight. And now there were more yet, this time from the starboard quadrant of the screen.

"Radiation reading, Sergeant!" Mason clipped out.



While the two men watched, Judith read back the cryptic information interpolated by the ship's mass-proximity detector.

"That's not all engine junk!" Cain exclaimed as she finished.

"We don't know what drive they've got," Mason answered. "Could be anything—"

"Nuts! You wouldn't get that much from an old-fashioned ion-blast, skipper! That's a shooting war, that's what it is!" There was a glitter in Cain's narrowed brown eyes; a new edge on his heavy voice. "Which side do we take, boss-man?"

"No side at all," Mason said, hardly moving his lips. "We're getting the hell out of here."

"Look, Lance. We've got a crew of ten—we've got a couple of m-guns aboard because we're a Scout. No telling how one of those outfits may show their gratitude if we pitch in, help their side out. That's what we're out here for, isn't it? Dig up new stuff for the double-domes to sink their slide-rules into? Think of the bonus, skipper! Hell, this is made to order—"

Mason turned a quick glance to the girl, but her face told him nothing. It never did when things like this came up between himself and Cain. And it was something he knew he had no right to expect. But he was tired ... too damn much Space, and there was nothing else he knew how to do.

But this time Cain had a point. Aliens—extra-galactic, even if almost neighbors—and his help one way or the other could mean an engraved invitation, a key to the city.

He turned back to the screen, watched as the careening pips massed, mixed, whirled in an insensate jumble. He didn't want any more mistakes. They'd ground him for good, tell him he'd had his limit of Space, and park him on one of the rest-planets with a pension for the rest of his life.

No, he had to think, and quickly.

Earth had only too recently gotten an entire history of wars out of her system. Perhaps for good, this time. And that was it; that was his answer. Better keep his nose clean—

"For God's sake, skipper," Cain snapped. "Come out of it! This is a natural, we'll clean up!"

"Sergeant Kent! R-drive!"

There was a moment's sensation of nothingness as the Scout made the Euclidean-Riemannian Transition; the scanner paled and the segment of the universe it framed twisted, changed.

Cain didn't say anything. He glowered, and Mason could feel the big man's contempt. But he didn't have time for it.

This time there wouldn't be any error. This time he'd be a step ahead of the situation and stay there. "Scratch those reversal co-ordinates, Sergeant! Set up to diverge thirty degrees!"

Cain's sarcasm was little disguised. "Mind if I ask a question?"

"Just stay at ease, Mister Cain, until we're out of this!"

Mason watched the scanner's distorted image as the Scout hurtled through a curved pencil of four-point Space; she didn't have a fraction of a powerful Explorer's speed, and her small powerframe physically limited her to that of light. Yet it could be fast enough, for the aliens might



know nothing of Transition technique, or could be as wary as Earthmen of the Rim. His precautions could be needless. But he had seen them and they were war-like, and he had no intention of being followed, either back to the Explorer, or ultimately to Earth itself. He'd have to maintain the diverged course until he was certain.

There was a black pip on the fog-colored scanner. Judith saw it even as he did. There was a fleeting look of fright on her intent young face that she hadn't been able to mask.

Cain saw it too.

"You got a tail, skipper!" he said, and the grin was back on his big freckled face.

Cain was right. The alien was capable of Transition. And he obviously had little fear of the Rim. His ship grew larger in the scanner.

Mason felt his fingers grow cold again.

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**L**ance told the girl to eject the tape of co-ordinates from the nav-computers, and he took over manually, hoping the comps would keep up. It would be up to him where they went, and up to the comps to keep track of the Scout's position relative to both the Solar System and the Explorer.

His fingers played across the control-banks as though they were the keyboards of a great organ, and he felt his insides writhe as he slipped the hurtling ship back into E-Space, then back to R-level again. He played the tiny craft between levels as though it were a stone skipping across water, and altered course with each Transition with no attempt at plan or pattern. Rivulets of ice water trickled down across his ribs, and the flesh of his thin face was stiff.

"Wrong again," he heard Cain saying. "At least we can tell the brain trust that their precious R-factor is constant beyond the Rim ... maybe that'll be worth a buck or two. At least those kids back there are playing around in this galaxy like it was their own front yard. Go on, skipper, take a look yourself!"

Mason didn't have to look. He knew that he hadn't lost the alien; had known somehow that he wouldn't be able to. Too apparently, their own galaxy, near as it was to the Milky Way, was of the same Space, its continuum forged in the same curvature matrices.

"Shall I order our m-guns placed, sir?" It was Judith, and he knew she had grasped the implications of the situation as quickly as she always did. Sometimes he wondered if she were a computer herself, clad in the graceful body of a young woman rather than in a shell of permasteel. And other times....

He didn't even think about his answer. The "No" was automatic.

"I'll give the order, then, myself!" Cain said flatly.

"As you were, Mister Cain!"

"So it's rank, now, is it?" And he was grinning that damn grin again.

"Take it any way you want. If you think three meson cannon will stop a ship that's obviously built for battle, you're hardly thinking well enough for the responsibilities of your post."

"Well listen to who's sounding off! So we're just going to let 'em overhaul us; just let 'em blast us out of Space, or come tramping aboard if they want to!"

Mason didn't reply. He looked at the scanner, and now the alien craft was no longer a dot, but taking definite shape. It would be a couple of hours, yet, perhaps. And then it would have to be the way Cain had said.

The alien overhauled them hardly a billion miles inside the Rim, and Mason offered no resistance when he felt their magnetics touch the Scout and draw it gently to the flank of their great ship. It was necessary to scale down the scanner's field to see the huge shape in its entirety. Beside it, the Scout was like a sparrow's egg.

He punched the stud that would swing in the outer lock as the two craft touched with but the slightest jar.

Cain's ham-like fists were knotted at his sides, and Judith stood quietly, as though waiting for nothing more than the presence of an inspecting officer. But her delicate face was white, and Mason wondered if the brain under that crisp, dark hair was still functioning as a well disciplined piece of machinery, or if it felt the same fear that was in his own. He knew what was in Cain's thoughts. But at least when he'd told their small crew the score, they had accepted his decision—and his order to keep the m-guns where they were. So maybe this time it was Cain who was wrong.

The three of them stood in the compact confines of the control bubble, silent, waiting.

And when the alien stepped through their inner airlock port and faced them, Mason knew he was not succeeding in keeping his surprise from his features.

The alien could have been human. Even clad in his Spacegear, he was little taller than Cain, and his hair and eyes could have been those of an Earthly Viking of another day. Humanoid, so far as physical appearances went. But in thought—?

There was a smile on the Viking face as the alien removed the transparent globe of his helmet. He seemed to realize instinctively that Mason was the Scout's commander.

"I am Krijorl," he said. "I extend the greetings of Ihelos." And he proffered his right hand, Earth fashion, toward Mason!

Lance grasped it as he tried to organize the sudden scramble of his thoughts. It was a strong hand. He could feel the sinews of it beneath its gauntlet; like Cain's, yet different, somehow. "You are peacefully received, and welcome," he said. But there was a hollow sound to his words that he had not been able to help.

The smile still played on the alien's sun-darkened face.

"Thank you. I hope that I use your language not too clumsily. Our teleprobes may leave something to be desired in the matter of semantics. You will, I hope, forgive us for taking the liberty of their use. But since you employed no protective screens, and because of the necessity of our meeting—"

Cain broke in without hesitation. "I don't know what you've been up to while you've been tagging us, mister, but I—"

"At ease, Mister Cain!" Mason snapped. "We must allow our guest to explain his action and his mission."

The alien nodded slightly, glanced at Judith.

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"It was your woman officer aboard," he began. "When we became aware that you also represented a bi-sexual race, as do we, we realized at once that you afforded us an unexpected opportunity. Otherwise, we should have remained at our business and spared you this intrusion.

"We of Ihelos, as you doubtless have noted, are at war. It is perhaps not war as your culture understands it; it is perhaps more accurately described by your word 'feud,' I think, and it has continued between us and our only similar neighbor, the planet of Thrax, for many thousands of your years.

"We have been quite self-sufficient cultures for all that time, and have taken great care that our conflict not infect any other area in either our galaxy or yours, for neither of us, by inherent nature, is war-like in the sense of aggressiveness. Our conflict is between us and us alone.

"However, we of Ihelos recently received a staggering setback from our traditional enemy due to a certain unexpected innovation in their battle techniques, and we realized that our cause could end only in eventual defeat. As it shall, unless your people will help us."

There was a moment of silence, and Mason found himself wondering how often this had happened in Earth's own bitter past. It was, wherever men lived, an old story.

"What," Cain was asking, "is in this for us?"

"Could you tell us," Judith said before the alien could answer Cain, "just why you chose us? Certainly, you must have noticed our techniques of warfare are quite inferior to your own. We have not employed them for more than two hundred years—"

"Nor," Mason finished for her, "do we intend to again. You must seek help elsewhere, sir."

"That, for us, would be quite impossible," the alien replied slowly. "The chances of finding other life forms like our own are billions to one, the immensity of both our galaxies notwithstanding. Had you not ventured within range of our screens we would in all probability never have known you existed. And to organize a search..." and now the smile on his lips was almost a sad thing, "a search of two galaxies—it would take us aeons, even at a thousand times the speed of light, simply to cover the vast distances involved, to say nothing of finding a similar life and thought form. And we do not have aeons, Lieutenant. We have but two—three, at most—generations.

"There is too little time to search for allies. We have no other choice, as you can see, than to take what advantage we can of those upon whom we may chance."

"But as my sergeant has already pointed out," Mason said, "our arms would be worthless to you. And, more importantly, we wish no more part in warfare. I am afraid, in that respect, you must excuse us, sir.... It has been a pleasure to have you aboard."

And suddenly, the smile was gone from the alien's face.

"I must demand of you, then—force you, if necessary—to take us to your planet, Lieutenant. For you can quite obviously help us. It is not your arms we want."

"I fail to understand you sir." Mason felt the icy sweat start again, repressed a shiver as it

trickled the length of his spare body.

"Our planet, as our enemy's, is encircled by a wide ring of floating cosmic debris," the alien said. "In both instances, the rings are remnants of what once may have been satellites. In the ring which encircles us, we have successfully secreted refrigerated, lead-sheathed stores of male sperm, quite impossible for our enemy to locate. That is a necessity, of course, for any race that is constantly at war and is obliged to take all possible safeguards to insure its continued existence. We assume that Thrayx has done the same.

"However, our cell stores are useless if they lack ova to fertilize. On their last attack, Thrayxite ships succeeded in penetrating our innermost planetary defenses, and heavily damaged a number of our cities. Many of our women and young were victims.

"We therefore evacuated our planet's entire female population to an uninhabited world far distant. It was a young world and covered with thick forests, much like the labor planetoid which circles Thrayx, and we believed our breeders would be quite sufficiently camouflaged."

"Breeders?" Cain broke in.

"Our philosophy concerning women is slightly different than your own," the alien said. And then he resumed, "But in our haste we underestimated our enemy's cleverness. Thrayxite scouts located the planet, destroyed it, our women, and our seeds.

"And that is why you will take us to Earth, Lieutenant. We do not want your arms or your men. What we must ask for is—ten thousand of your women!"

## II

A Cepheid Variable winked tauntingly at the edge of the Milky Way, the Large Magellanic Cloud strewn like diamonds in a vast cosmic spume behind it. It corruscated in glorious display as, far off, a great silvery ship of Space and a tiny jot of man-made metal resumed their headlong motion through the mighty legion of the stars.

And then for an instant, the Cepheid's bright wink was dulled; eclipsed. A tapering streamlined shape slipped silently across it, and then was gone in the blackness, and the white dwarf resumed its brilliant display.

But the commander of the Cepheid's interruptor had been giving little time to appreciation of the myriad beauties in the great darkness that had swallowed her ship. She had trebled her screens and had taxed her craft's colossal power installation to its limit, forcing it to absorb and reconvert every erg of radiant energy possible as it labored to maintain the awful output necessary to cling to the very edge of R-Space, barely clear of the E-continuum itself.

She might have been an Amazon of Earth save for the great intelligence behind the high plane of her forehead, yet she was not without beauty, nor were those of her ship's complement. On their close-fitting uniforms were emblazoned the Planet-and-Circle insignia of their homeland, for they were of the galactic hosts of Thrayx.

"They proceed toward a planet on the near side of this galaxy called Earth," the second officer said. "Their mission is to replenish their supply of breeders."

"You are certain of that?"

"I admit it is peculiar, for the breeders they seek are women of that planet."

"*Women?*"

"Yes. However, the Earthmen's minds indicated a strong tendency to refuse cooperation."

"I see. Do you think our probe was detected?"

"No. I withdrew it immediately when the Earthmen were taken aboard the Ihelian destroyer."

There was a long moment of silence. The commander's eyes stayed unwaveringly on the control sphere mounted in gimbals before her. They remained concentrated on it when she spoke again.

"Women, you say. Hardly conceivable, Daleb, unless—unless it was *not* simply a penal planetoid which we destroyed!"

"A startling thought, Lady!"

"Yes. And the Earthmen, you say, did not have cooperative thoughts?"

"That is correct. They are not taking the Ihelian craft to their planet of their own volition."

"That is difficult to understand, Daleb, for the Ihelians are like ourselves in at least one respect. They are not aggressors. And if they are refused their strange request, they will leave the planet Earth peacefully. But if they are not refused it, perhaps the Earthman's superiors will cooperate, Daleb! In which case—"

"Whatever their mission, it is our duty to prevent its success, Lady. But to do this without violating the Book, without infecting a foreign area of the galaxy with our conflict?"

"I think there is a way," the commander said. She twisted the sphere slightly, and again the two tiny pips it held were caught squarely at the intersection of the curving light tracteries within it. "There is a way," she said. "Give me a complete description of the clothing these Earthmen wore, Daleb...."

A tapering, streamlined shape slid shadow-like across the face of an undulating globular cluster, and then was swallowed quickly in the strange gray void of hyper-space.

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**M**ason and Judith waited outside the towering New United Nations building in Greater San Francisco, their chauffeured government helio parked on a sky-ramp adjacent to the three hundredth floor.

They waited for Krijorl; they had been assigned, as Earthmen best acquainted with the alien, as his official hosts during his stay on their planet. Mason had protested, but Judith had kept the protests from reaching the wrong ears.

"You won't make any mistakes. You're home, now!" she had whispered. "After all, he's only human!"

It had been the first time Mason had heard a hint of levity in her voice, and he had liked it, and decided to take the assignment gracefully. And, the orders said, Sergeant Judith Kent went with the assignment. Without Cain!

He hardly felt nervous at all as they waited for the Ihelian to leave the General Council chamber.

"Wonder how he made out?" he said idly, offering the girl a self-lighting cigarette. "Been in there for hours...."

"We'll know soon enough," she said. "But I—I personally can't conceive of it, sir. Of course, the New-UN is very practiced in dealing with all kinds of cultures. Remember the time they had with those awful five-legged things from Canis Major? Wanted to trade all the tritium we'd need to blow up a planet just for trees; because they worshipped trees! Any and all kinds of trees...."

Mason smiled. He was good looking when he smiled and the Space-tension was gone from his slate colored eyes. "I remember. But it looks as though they're going to have the toughest time with somebody just like us—two legs, two arms, oxygen-breathing.... Women, the man said. Just what the devil does he expect us to do? Draft 'em? Have an international lot drawing?"

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**S**he smoked quietly, and her gray eyes were thoughtful. "A matter of view-point, sir," she said finally. "As it always is. To them, females are for breeding only, to keep their war machine well stocked. From what Krijorl said, they do not understand love as we do. There's simply one purpose...."

"Well, that's why I think the whole thing is—well, as you say, inconceivable from our point of view. Our culture, our women just aren't conditioned for such an existence."

"Think back two centuries, sir."

"You don't have to keep calling me 'sir' like that!" Mason said, feeling a sudden warmth at the back of his neck as he said it. And then, "Two centuries back. Yes. After every war, Earth's birth rate would go crazy. Mother Nature ruled the roost in those days, didn't she? Supply and demand, cause and effect. It's a wonder Man ever got anywhere."

"More wonder some men do—"

Mason looked up. But Judith's face was, as usual, quite calm and detached. "You say something?"

"I said I'd like to have you get Krijorl to demonstrate that teleprobe thing of his for us, if you can, s— Lance. How did he say it worked?"

"I still don't get it completely. A peculiar mixture of radio and the electroencephalograph, I think. He said it replaced radio on Ihelos and Thrayx centuries ago. You can communicate to a group or an individual with it in language, or in basic thought pictures. That's what they use it mostly for, of course, and as such, it's termed a mentacom. But he told me that it can also be used as it was on us as a teleprobe when the subject isn't screened. They use a specially tuned carrier wave of some sort, he said, that impinges on a thought wave pattern, but instead of registering the pattern's electronic impulse equivalents as does the electroencephalograph, it 'reflects' them. Like a basic radar system. And the receiver, it's a tiny thing, breaks the reflected pattern down into values equivalent to those in which the 'listener' thinks; amplifies, and that's it! Mind reading made easy, I guess."

Judith squirmed a little uneasily. "I'm glad they're not natural telepaths, anyway," she answered. "And even with a gimmick like that—"

And then the conversation was lost as Krijorl, flanked by two New-UN guides, strode from the building. The stiff breeze at three hundred stories of what had once been called Nob Hill flicked

his scarlet short-cape behind him and rippled the broad front of his black and silver tunic.

He climbed into the helio with a smiled greeting, seated himself to Judith's right as he knew Earth custom demanded, and the craft was lifting slowly over the central area of the ancient city before Mason spoke.

"Well, how did they treat you in there, sir?"

"Not as well as I had hoped," Krijorl answered. "Your President-General spoke with me privately after the World Delegates Council met to question me, and he held out extremely little hope. However, the issue is to be debated. I think perhaps more out of diplomatic courtesy than actual consideration. I am to be informed of the official decision tomorrow...."

"There were scientists present, of course?"

"Yes; you have brilliant men on Earth, Lieutenant. They are good thinkers. I am certain they were interested in me for more than the sole fact that I am an alien of a race so precisely a replica of your own. But it is again the old factor, cultural difference. Your entire world simply regards women differently than we. I imagine my request, to persons less learned than those with whom I spoke, would be quite shocking anywhere on the planet."

"Perhaps," Judith murmured. "Yet somehow I wonder. Somehow I wonder how much two hundred years has really changed us. Our history in such things is not pleasant, Krijorl. Many of our women once gave their bodies for money. Shock us? I'm not sure you really could. For your breeders simply give their bodies to produce the flesh for war. And there was a time when we did that, too."

There was silence between them for a while, and then Lance began directing the Ihelian's attention to points of interest as the air phase of the diplomatic tour got under way.

The blue-green beauty of the Pacific stretched lazily below them from the colorful California shore line to the west. Surrounding air traffic was light, and the tour proceeded smoothly eastward; over the Great Divide, and then swung north. Krijorl seemed impressed and grateful for the momentary respite.

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**I**t was near the end of the tour's air phase that Mason remembered Judith's request, and Krijorl obliged with an amused smile, producing a personal mentacom for Judith to examine.

"And the receiver simply fits about the head like earphones?"

"Like this," Krijorl said. They were nearing Denver, and air traffic at their level had picked up, and the helio was proceeding more slowly so that Krijorl's demonstration caused him to miss little of the tour.

He fitted the compact headpiece to his ears and flicked a small switch. It was suddenly bathed in a warm orange glow. "This way, the device functions as a limited range mentacom," he began. And then he flicked the switch again. "And now, as a teleprobe, you see, I could tell you, Lady Judith, just what—"

She flushed furiously, but Krijorl had suddenly stopped speaking. His face had blanched, and a look of bewildered fury was suddenly in his eyes.

"Lieutenant! That air bus! There!" He pointed to a thick egg shaped vehicle speeding to the north. "Tell your chauffeur to pursue it at once! It carries a full passenger-load of Earthwomen!"

For a moment Mason thought the Ihelian was attempting some strange joke. But a look at the man's face told him that here was no joke; that here was something he was failing to understand.

"Earthwomen? Sure—"

"Plus two other beings, Lieutenant. Two others using Thrayxite probe screens!"

On Mason's order the government chauffeur swiftly heeled the helio about. "Those buses can make nearly a full Mach when they're wide open like that one," he told Krijorl. "We can't overtake them, but maybe we can keep up. I'll have the chauffeur try for radio contact—"

"No, no! They'll be alert for any signs of awareness of their presence! Wait—" The Ihelian made a third adjustment on the mentacom, and it emitted a slight humming sound, and the orange glow vanished. "This will screen us for a short period, at least," he said. "And if we've not been already detected, perhaps we'll be able to follow. If you'll continue to help me, Lieutenant—"

"Looks as though they've got some of ours, doesn't it?" Mason said evenly. There was a strange heat in his veins now, and with the Ihelian, his nervousness was somehow evaporated. "But how the devil—"

"They are clever, Lieutenant. We were somehow followed here even as we at first followed you in your Scout ship. We may have been probed before you were taken aboard our screened destroyer."

"But you said nothing about destroying *their* breeders," Judith said above the throbbing roar of



the helio's fast accelerating jets. "Why would they want—" and she let the sentence die as comprehension snapped in her gray eyes. Her dark, slender eyebrows arched nearly together as she pushed the thought further.

The borderlands of Canada sped beneath them, and then there was pine forest, but the helio kept the fleeing bus in sight even as the shadows of a dying day crept inexorably from the east to engulf them. And then, abruptly, the bus had started down.

"They're hanging a neat frame on you, sir," Mason said. "Making certain you don't get the women you ask. By kidnaping some, they plan sure as hell to make it look as though Ihelian desperation is responsible. And bingo, your side's in the dog house in nothing flat. No deal!"

"They're damnably cunning," Krijorl said. "It will not be the first time they have come near making utter fools of us. I can't understand that."

"But how would they have gotten those women?" Judith asked. The helio was slanting downward, and was now less than five miles distant from the fast vanishing bus. It began to skim the tree tops of a great tract of spruce, its chauffeur awaiting Mason's signal to drop quickly out of their quarry's line of sight.

"Video ads, of course," Mason answered quickly, straining his tensed eyes to estimate distance in the fast gathering darkness. "Some big deal. Spaceliner hostess at twice the going rate of payment. Anything like that..."

The bus finally vanished less than a half-mile ahead of Mason's helio, and there was a dark vertical shadow jutting just above the tree tops. He knew it was one of their shuttle boats, and from its apparent size would easily hold all the bus would be able to carry—perhaps a full three hundred. He gave orders quickly to the chauffeur, and then the helio was hovering inches above the tree tops, and he tossed a plastiweave ladder over the side.

"Don't use the radio," he snapped to Judith. "Just get back to New-UN headquarters. Inform them any way possible of what's going on, and then flash the air patrol and tell 'em to come gunning!"

He didn't give her a chance to argue. He simply swung over the helio's side, Krijorl after him, and within moments they were on the ground, and running with what silence they could through the darkness toward the towering Thrayxite ship a quarter-mile distant.

"Their action is incomprehensible to me," the Ihelian grunted between gulps of air. "It violates the most basic tenets of the ancient Book of the Saints, sacred to us both—"

"Better save your breath for running," Mason told him, and they sprinted across the soft pine needle forest floor, shielding their eyes from treacherous, low hanging boughs, dodging the trees themselves as best they could in the moonlit darkness.

And they burst upon the clearing in which the Thrayxite ship had landed almost before realizing it.

Mason caught a glimpse of Earthwomen, being led as though drugged into the yawning flank of the silent vessel.

There was a sudden movement in the darkness to his left, and he heard the start of an outcry on the Ihelian's lips. But it was all he heard or saw. There was a quick knifing pain in his skull, and he crumpled to the ground.

### III

"You may wait in here, sergeant," the New-UN orderly said. She was ushered into a small, comfortably appointed chamber adjoining the main conference hall, and the perfectly controlled coolness of her bearing was at its peak. To the casual glance of the orderly, perhaps, it flawlessly masked the vital convictions which had long seethed within her and made her the little known woman she was. The studied mask itself had made her the efficient Space officer she was. And at the moment she was glad for it, because it also concealed the anxious uncertainty that twisted coldly inside her.

She was to wait, the Council had informed her. Wait, while the information she had given them was analyzed, digested. As though, perhaps, what she had said was part of some insidious plot; as though it were too fantastic to be the truth.

They had not even immediately authorized the dispatch of a patrol cruiser to the spot where she'd left Lance and Krijorl over two hours ago, and by now—?

She tried not to think or what the Earthman and the Ihelian might be facing, alone and in the darkness. Nor of the conclusions to which the Council, called into emergency session by the President General himself when her information had been rapidly relayed through the correct channels to him, might arrive.

She could only wait.

And her waiting was terminated with an abrupt suddenness that made the twisting cold thing inside her a churning confusion. It had been only minutes, hardly minutes.

Only one of them came into the small room where she sat. She rose quickly to attention. It was an aide to the President General himself; a brevet-Colonel wearing the uniform of the World Police.

"Sergeant Kent," he said, "it is the Council's decision that you be placed under temporary arrest. Your case will be heard at the next sitting of the martial court to which your unit is assigned. If you will accompany me, please...."

"May I ask, sir, what the charge against me is?" Her voice was steady by cultivated habit.

"You are to be held on suspicion of acting as accessory before and after the fact of conspiring to assist an alien power in the achievement of its objective within the governmental jurisdiction of Earth without official permission of the New United Nations."

"But the Ihelians have not done that, sir!" she protested. "It is a plot of their enemy, as I explained to the Council—"

"You will be given full benefit of due legal process, sergeant," the officer said. "You will come with me, please."

The Women's Detainment Barrack was not unpleasant, yet, Judith thought, it may as well have been a medieval dungeon. But her own problem, she knew, was nothing beside the cunning success of the Thrayxites.

The call-buzzer at the side of her bunk interrupted her thoughts; it meant she was wanted in the main guard room. She straightened her uniform quickly, and within moments presented herself before the barrack warden.

Roger Cain stood beside the warden's desk. There was something white in his hand, and she knew what it was.

"You're at liberty, Sergeant Kent," the beefy-faced warden informed her in a tone as casual as though she'd asked her for a cigarette. "Warrant Officer Cain has posted a release voucher; you're ordered into his custody until your trial. That's all. You may go."

She left the barrack with Cain, wordlessly. None of it made sense. Unless—

"Well, don't I even get a thank you?" the red-haired giant asked.

"Yes, Mister Cain, sorry. But I don't understand—"

"Why I did it?" He chuckled, and she didn't like the sound of it. "I'm only too glad to have you in my custody, young woman! And, you know, you're not supposed to be out of my sight any—that is, *any* of the time!"

She felt her face redden, and spun about to face him. There was sudden anger at her lips and her coolness had evaporated.

"You contempti—"

"Easy there, sergeant! Always knew there was a little more to you than that ice cube exterior of yours! But tell me—d'you want to sit back there in that dump, or shall we stick our noses into the lovely mixup your precious Lieutenant Mason has set off?"

She stared up at him wordlessly, the blood hot in her cheeks. And she tried to think. This was Cain as she knew he was. This was Roger Cain, angling for a deal.

"I'm in your custody," she bit out. "I must stay within your sight. That is your responsibility."

He laughed at her, then gripped her elbow.

"Come on," he said. "I've got a R-IX waiting at the field. I think we should go on a little trip, sergeant. There are people I want to see!"

They were streaming for open Space within less than thirty minutes from the time Cain had freed her. She didn't ask him how he'd gotten permission for the fleet R-IX's use, or how he'd obtained her voucher, nor did she ask him how he had learned of what had happened to Lance and Krijjorl, yet she knew that somehow he was aware of the Thrayxites and their plot. Cain had ways of learning the things he wanted to learn, getting the things he wanted to get.

"Keep an eye on the scanner for me, will you, beautiful?"

"Yes sir."

"And forget that sir stuff! Look, Judy—"

"For what do you want me to watch, sir?"

Cain grunted, gave a shrug of his powerful shoulders and turned his attention back to the pursuit's compact control console.

"Two blips, honey. Tearing hell-for-leather out of old Sol's little family. One'll be chasing the other, if my guess is any good. We want the front one."

"But—but that would be the—"

"The Thrayxite crowd. Right?"

For a moment she was silent. She knew he could not mean to attack; not with a tiny pursuit, swift as it was.

"Mister Cain, I can only guess at what you intend doing. But it will be my privilege in court to testify concerning your conduct of custodianship—"

"You must be working on the assumption that we're going back there, sweetheart!"

"You—"

"A deal is where you find it! Watch for that front blip, sergeant. With what we know of Krijorl and his crowd, this oughta be a natural!"

---

**T**he cubicle in which he awoke was softly lit, and the painful throb Mason knew should be splitting his head apart was strangely absent. Krijorl was bending over him, loosening the tightness of the military collar at his throat.

"They certainly were taking no chances with you," he said. His long Viking's hair was matted with blood just above the temple, yet he seemed to be suffering little pain, himself. "How do you feel?"

"O.K. I guess. Don't feel anything, really...." Krijorl unbuckled the wide straps that held him solidly in an acceleration-hammock, and he sat up. The steel-walled room rocked for a moment, then steadied.

"The Thrayxites are not vicious, any more than we. If they do not kill outright, they apparently take medical precaution to see that their victims suffer as little pain as possible. We're captives, however, together with your Earthwomen. We've been in flight for about an hour; putting us well out of your system, if we're hyperdriving—moving in what you term R-Space."

"Then—"

"Apparently no help of any kind arrived in time, Lieutenant."

Mason remembered, then. Judith.... Somehow she hadn't made it. Or hadn't made them believe her. This trip, he was strictly on his own. Not just a space weary Scout Lieutenant any more.

"What'll they do with us?"

"Pump us for information, probably. Kill me afterward. You should be safe enough in that respect. You're an alien, not a part of our conflict. Their labor planetoid for you, I would imagine. It is a jungle covered sphere at the edge of their planetary ring; our scouts have sighted it on numerous occasions. A handful of men in each of its camps, mining, probably, for the ore used in Thrayxite engines. But it will be better than death."

"What are our chances, Krijorl?" Mason felt the familiar nervousness returning to his wiry body, yet this time it was in some way different. Not the kind that ate your insides out from too much Space, for too long.

"Of escape, you mean?" Mason nodded. "There is no reason for you to risk—"

"Sure as hell is, friend. First because I believe you're my friend. Second, there were a couple of things you said awhile back that got me thinking. And third, I got myself shanghaied, and I don't think I'll like where I'm going!" Cain, Mason thought to himself, wasn't the only guy in the universe with a muscle!

The Ihelian grinned. "We'll watch for a chance of some kind, then. But I will not let you risk your life. We of Ihelos obey the Book, even if our enemy sees fit occasionally to violate the spirit in which it was conceived."

"Tell me something," Mason said. "This feud of yours. What's it all about? You mentioned that Book business once before, and it seems a people with your apparent piety and maturity and general advancement would certainly find a way to arbitrate such a dispute. What are you fighting about?"

Krijorl's answering smile was thin, and there was a puzzled look in his craggy features.

"We fight because the Book of the Saints says we must!" he answered at length. "And further than that—"

"Yes?"

"Further than that, I'm afraid we do not know!"

Mason felt his features twisting into an incredulous expression despite his efforts to realize and appreciate the wide gap of cultural differences between them.

"Don't *know*! But you can't fight a war without knowing why! You—"

"It is in the Book of the Saints," the Ihelian said, "and, therefore, it is our command. And—" he

looked into the Earthman's face with the slightest hint of a smile, "from what I've learned of Earth's history from your own lips, Lieutenant, what of your own past wars? Who among your own soldiery has really known why he fought?"

"Well, but—" And then Mason returned the smile. "No, it isn't so different, is it? But tell me more about this Book. Is it based on law, religion, ethics?"

And this time there was no smile on the Ihelian's broad face.

"Legend says all three," he replied.

"Legend? And yet you blindly obey—"

"We always have. Its writings, such as we understand them to be, have governed us for millenia, Lieutenant. The Book is our way, our life. We are told we could not be a civilization without it."

Mason was silent for a long moment. He did not want to question too deeply the beliefs sacred to another, yet it was so damnably peculiar. They fought bitterly, and they did not know why.

"Could you—would you let me see a copy of this Book, Krijorl?"

"If I could I'd be glad to, Lieutenant. For I have often wished I could see the words it contains myself."

"You've never read it?"

"Never. Nor has any Ihelian or Thrayxite for thousands of years. There is, you must understand, only one Book of the Saints."

"Just one copy?"

"Yes. It has long been deemed sacrilege for mortal eyes to view the ancient writings. The single copy is kept in a great vault, built of indestructible metals, and protectively sheathed to last for all Time. The spot above its burial place is marked by a tall spire of stone. It is jealously protected."

"You said that its commands commit you and Thrayx to eternal battle. But if you could only read it, you might learn the basic cause of your conflict—and, knowing, certainly—"

"The thought has often occurred to me. But, there is even more prohibiting such an impossible undertaking than the powerful bondage of tradition and belief alone, Lieutenant. And that is the Book's very location."

"And that—?"

"The subterranean vault in which it rests is guarded in the Forest of Saarl. And the Forest of Saarl, my friend, is on Thrayx."

## IV

"It is something completely beyond my understanding," the Ihelian was saying. The two men stood, each flanked by two guards, at the threshold of a great ramp which led from the main air lock of the Thrayxite ship to the reddish surface of the spaceport upon which it had landed but minutes before. Mason felt a chill of awed amazement, not because of the unexpected beauty of the verdant hills that rolled in a delicate blend of kaleidoscopic pastels on every side of the 'port and as far as the eye could see, nor was it even from the sight of the exquisite towers that rose as though from the heart of some fabled fairyland scant miles to the south.

"They're all—all *women*!" Mason breathed. "Not a single man!" And he looked quickly to Krijorl. "You mean you did not know this?"

"Know? By the teeth of Jhavuul, we never so much as suspected, Lieutenant! We have not looked upon a Thrayxite face for five thousand years."

The guards spoke to them tersely in the common tongue of Ihelos and Thrayx, although peculiarly accented to Ihelian ears, and Krijorl gestured with a slight movement of his head to Mason. At a quick pace they started down the ramp.

"We're sunk, kid," Mason said. And he saw the heaviness in the great Viking's face. "We'll never make it out of here in a million years. Even if we made a break for it; even if we had our hands free, where could we hide? Couldn't make a move. Two men among an entire female populace—"

He let the sentence trail off as he realized that Krijorl wasn't hearing him. And as their brief view of Thrayx was terminated by their entrance into a smaller shuttle-ship, he saw the hint of a smile flicker at the corners of the Ihelian's lips.

Their captors strapped them into hammocks, and when they had gone to assist others in herding a portion of the Earthwomen aboard the same craft, Krijorl finally spoke.

"I think for the moment their probes may be off us," he said quickly. "I was relieved of my own during my unconsciousness, so we're no longer screened. And the fact that we speak in your tongue does us little good. But hear me. If we are being taken where I hope we are, then they are

playing into our hands almost as well as we could have asked. There will be a limited freedom there, and a chance, if we are clever enough, to get to a mentacom installation. A planetary unit of unlimited range."

"But among women?" Mason asked, and his throat was dry.

"That is the point," Krijorl replied tersely. "We shall be among males almost exclusively, save for the Earthwomen and those Thrayxites who periodically will be sent to breed."

"You mean the planetoid that you talked of before...? But I—"

"Think a moment! Thrayxite is a matriarchy, something we of Ihelos never suspected. And therefore we erred further—what we believed to be a labor planetoid is not, of course!"

"Breeders!"

"Exactly. And if we can make it to one of their mentacoms, perhaps our problem will be solved. Except that—" His voice hesitated, and Mason saw doubt in the sudden frown. "I—I have no right to sacrifice your life nor those of your women. If we were to get to a mentacom it would be to contact my people, to inform them of the planetoid's true nature, so that we may even the score for what was done to our own breeders, and perhaps even form a plan to take prisoners to replace them. But such a message would be intercepted, of course."

"Hell, we could dodge 'em long enough—"

"Perhaps we could, Lieutenant. But the ships I summon will be fighting their way through a trebled Thrayxite guard—and once within range of our enemy's breeder satellite, they will have little time to seek us out and effect our rescue. Destruction will have to be immediate. Now do you understand?"

Mason wet his lips. He understood. Death for the breeders. For the Earthwomen. And for themselves.

"Nuts!" he clipped out. "That means that as far as you're going to be concerned, I'm just another Ihelian private first class for awhile, not a space-neurotic Earthman! And our girls ... well, I think—I think they'd prefer anything to the living death in store for them—the rotting away of their lives in some infested alien jungle. Anyway, somebody's got to be judge. So let's get this damned thing doped out!"

The Ihelian began a reply, but the words were stopped in his throat by the sudden pressure of acceleration as powerful engines fumbled suddenly to throbbing life and lifted the Thrayxite craft quickly toward the eye of a great white sun.

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**F**or the second time in her life, Judith Kent watched the warp configurations of the Large Magellanic Cloud from the far side of the Rim; somehow it frightened her, as though some awful deadliness must lie within it.

Helplessly, she carried out Cain's orders, and as hopelessly, wondered of the fate of Lance and Krijorl. Captives, with the Earthwomen, in the Thrayxite ship with which Cain was so rapidly closing? Or lying dead somewhere, as she more than half believed, in the chill wilds of northern Canada? The odds had been so great. She knew that to hope without reason was folly, and yet not to hope was no longer to care.

She twisted away quickly from Cain's muscular arm.

"What's eating you, duchess? Your conscience giving you trouble, or are you just plain scared?" When she didn't reply, he laughed shortly, and gestured toward the scanner. In it, the slender Thrayxite craft was growing steadily larger as Cain's swift pursuit gradually folded the gap of curved Space between them. "In a couple of minutes, we'll be ready to talk turkey, sweetheart. They ought to be aware of us right this minute. I think they'll listen to what we have to offer."

"To what *you* have to offer!"

He laughed again. "It's more than Mason ever had! You know, sometimes I think you were torching for that space-happy has-been!"

She felt the burn of rising color in her cheeks and turned quickly away from him.

"You don't get it yet, do you duchess?" his heavy voice was saying behind her. "It's never occurred to you that there are other places to be beside with your own flock; that there are other men among whom to seek your fortune if the ones you were born among didn't offer the opportunities you expected. What are we among the stars at all for if it's not to find our destinies anywhere we think they might lie? What's this Big Freedom for, if not to use to some kind of advantage? And me, I'm sick of being a Warrant under worn out space-neurotics like Mason! And I don't want to end up being one, either!"

Judith held her lips tight against the thing that surged hotly inside her. There would have to be a way to stop this man. And if there weren't—How the pampered friends whom she'd left so proudly to choose this calling would laugh at her, would say "*that was what the hot-headed little*

*rebel deserved ... she had it coming if she couldn't act like a lady.*" And they were wrong!

But this man was hideously twisting all the things she had thought were good and right, worth hoping and striving for. All the priceless things that had stood for more than the soft, idle and pointlessly shallow existence to which she'd been born.

"But I guess you wouldn't get it," Cain was saying. "Born with a silver shovel in your mouth, you don't have to worry about sweating out your pile! Quit any time and there it all is after your little adventure, still waiting for you to come home to! Maybe they'll even want you to write a book! But me—my father wasn't a lucky g-prospecter."

A proximity alarm clanged, and Cain quickly turned his attention to the control banks. He jacked out the auto control and took over manually. And within seconds the pursuit was hovering over the great whale-like back of the Thrayxite craft, and then was drawn slowly to it as its powerful magnetics reached out, ensnared it. Then Cain cut the pursuit's drive, and they both waited.

The airlock opened, and the two women stepped through. There were weapons in their hands.

"I want to see your commander," Cain barked.

"I am the commander of this complement," the taller of the two said in an almost unaccented English. "You will consider yourselves my captives. Daleb...."

"What? Not all *women*." There was a curious look on Cain's face; thoughts were racing behind the thin blades of his eyes.

"You are prisoners of the matriarchy of Thrayx," the officer called Daleb said. "If you do not resist, you shall be unharmed."

"All right, come off that alien-meets-alien stuff," Cain said as though the two briefly-uniformed women before him held toys rather than weapons in their hands. "I didn't just tag after you at a billion times the speed of light to get thrown into one of your dungeons! I've got some information I think you can use. And—" and the curious look was again on his face, "—there are some—shall we say—services, I think I can profitably perform for you."

"Profitably, Earthman? Profitable to whom?"

"To both of us. To me—that's why I'm here—and to you."

Judith's face was white. Perhaps this was some clever trick of Cain's. She could have been wrong.

"Tell me this information you have, Earthman."

"Let's dicker about price, first, Goldylocks!" He stood there, confident, defiant, great muscles bunched beneath the fabric of his tunic.

"You, Earthman, are hardly in bargaining position!" Only the woman's mouth moved; her eyes bored straight into Cain's like fine diamond drills.

"Chuck me," Cain said with a grin, "and you chuck the best chance you've ever had to take your Ihelian friends to the cleaners. What information I have concerning Ihelian plans is one thing." Judith caught her breath. She knew Cain was lying now. Even Lance had learned little of the Ihelian strategy, above Kriijorl's attempt to enlist Earthwomen for Ihelian breeding colonies. It was all, she realized suddenly, a colossal bluff, from which Cain planned to play his cards as he went along! And now he had found a wedge of some sort, some new bargaining point. There was still that curious look on his face, that careless grin at his lips. "But what service I can render you," he was continuing, "is quite another! Ladies, how good are your teleprobe gadgets against an Ihelian screen? A big blank, aren't they? But I still think you'd give those cute shirts of yours to find out what's going on inside the thick skulls of our Ihelian friends."

A puzzled look flickered across the Thrayxite commander's face, yet she remained immobile, and her weapon held steady.

"First of all, bright eyes," Cain said swiftly, "may you be the first to know that they're all men! *All men*, get it?" There was a soft gasp from Daleb, and the commander's eyes flickered, widened almost imperceptibly. "And better yet, I'm a pal of Kriijorl, their commander who picked us up just inside the Rim that time you followed us into Earth. So think it over. It ought to be worth a fancy little pile to you, ladies, since women agents would be kind of conspicuous in an all-male civilization!"

"You expect us to believe this fantasy? Do you expect us to accept your proposal on the basis of nothing more than words? And the technique you describe. It has never been used, never even considered as a legitimate method of battle!"

Cain laughed easily. "Then maybe you better consider it if you want to come out on top! And as to the rest of it, if I was part of some counter-plot against you do you think I'd've gone to the trouble of bringing along some security?" And Judith felt something freeze inside her as he threw a careless glance in her direction. "There she is—Sergeant Judith Kent. Your hostage for this little operation! If I misbehave, she should make a pretty good bargaining point with Ihelos. From all I gather, they've got Earth sore enough at them as it is!"

There was an instant's silence, and then the commander said, "You have not proven your

statement that our enemy is a male enemy."

"What do you think they wanted women for on Earth after you blasted that planetoid of theirs? A quilting party or something? Add it up."

The quiet in the small control bubble was electric. Judith watched the Thrayxites' faces as they weighed the incredible thing that Cain had said.

"I haven't got all eternity!" Cain snapped. "You think you can afford not to believe me?"

"Very well. Our Book has never mentioned this technique of spying, and therefore there can be no rule against it. As for the rest—that could be immaterial. You could be of value to us. Outline your plan."

"That's better, girls. Only take it just a little slower. We both know what we are, but let's haggle for awhile about the price, shall we?"

## V

Judith shivered, partly from an uncontrollable terror and partly from the pre-dawn dampness creeping from the thick jungle surrounding the small clearing which held one of the breeder planetoid's many secluded colonies. The camp and the tangled growth which bounded it was her prison; a place in which there was freedom, yet where none were free. To walk or to run or to hide—but where? And so it was with the rest—the hard-muscled, obviously drug-clouded males who had never known any other world than this; who never questioned from whence came the periodic groups of Thrayxite women for them to fertilize; who only glared dully at her, dimly understanding that she was to be, although captive here, left to herself and unmolested. Yet despite her status as hostage and Earthwoman, she was afraid.

The brute of a camp leader, Bruhlla.... Not drugged like the rest. There was more to his sidelong glances than curiosity and vague resentment. Too often, she could sense his eyes upon her. And she wondered at the increasing frequency of his visits to the camp's well guarded mentacom installation.

She had lost count of night and days under the white sun of Thrayx and its ringed host. There had been two, perhaps, or three. Three days in which Roger Cain had been doing what? Was he with Krijorl and Lance posing as their friend, their fellow captive, listening to their plans against their Thrayxite captors ... remembering? Or would they be freed, if indeed they still lived, in order that Cain could, with them, learn even more of Ihelian stratagems on a far greater scale?

And the Earth girls—she had heard the cries of some, the desperate curses of others.

Bruhlla, entitled to use of the mentacom for daily contact reports with Thrayx as he was, was the only other alien being on the planetoid who could converse with her. He had lost little time in probing her to learn her tongue. And he had already hinted at the fate of the women from her planet. In other camps on the planetoid, held in small isolated groups, unmolested, Bruhlla had said. But prisoners, as was she.

Somehow, the Ihelians would have to know.

For there was no Earth to which to turn now.

The shiver again shook her slender body, and her tattered uniform did little to shield her from the damp cold.

"Still one apart from the rest of us, are you?" The growl of Bruhlla's voice behind her startled her, and she turned quickly to face the loose grimace of derision on his thick lips.

"I am to be left to myself," she said with what assurance she could muster. "That is your order."

"I know my order, little one! No need to tell Bruhlla his orders! But perhaps you will grow colder; perhaps you will grow hungry."

"You couldn't—"

"I have no order about feeding you, little one!"

Somehow she found the strength to voice her defiance. For she could still think. And thought, Lance had once told her, was the ultimate strength....

"You lie! There was such an order! But if you wish to bring the wrath of your masters down upon your ugly head." She watched his unkempt face, fanned the sudden puzzlement she saw growing in his red, sadistic eyes. If his intelligence were blurred enough by the self-made drug of his lust. "I myself heard such an order; and if you can prove me mistaken you may do with me what you will!" *God, would he stop to realize that she understood not a word of the Thrayxite tongue?*

"Quickly proven, my little one! Quickly enough proven! And then if what you say is untrue...." He left the sentence mercifully unfinished, and turned toward the sturdily-built cubicle that housed the colony's mentacom.

"Wait! I'll only believe your proof if I can hear it for myself!"

"Come along then and you shall hear it!" The thick lips slackened into a lascivious grin that sickened her, but she hastened to follow him. And he did not see her as she scooped the jagged stone from the ground, thrust it into a tattered tool-pocket of her uniform.

Past the quiescent, sweat reeking bodies of the bull-muscled guards, into the dimly lit chamber beyond, Bruhlla half walking, half shambling before her.

She watched him as he switched the device into life; waited until its dull orange glow assured that it was ready for use. So much like the communications room of an ordinary ship of Earth, she thought. So like the familiar things of her life, yet so alien.

He had barely slipped the mentacom's headpiece on his skull and adjusted a simply calibrated control dial when she struck him at the base of his thick neck with the stone, all the force of her supple young body behind it.

Blood spurted as its ragged edges tore through flesh, bone and nerves, and slowly, Bruhlla crumpled from the rude chair that held his dying bulk.

Thought images as well as words, Krijorl had explained during their flight so long ago in the helio. Language would be no barrier. Over the head, like this ... and this switch—

She twirled the large dial from its setting, watched a slender thread of light within a transparent sphere above it fluctuate in breadth as the dial twisted. And when it was at its widest, she gambled that it indicated the broadest transmitting beam of which the mentacom was capable.

And then she marshalled her thoughts, carefully chose the simplest words.

*Warning, Ihelos! There is an Earthman among you at work as a spy for Thrax! I am a captive.*

Over and over, the same words, the same thought images which they formed; of Cain, of this hell-planetoid itself.

The orange glow pulsed as though itself alive with the desperation of her signal. And she heard the guard barely in time.

A howl of rage bellowed from him as she turned, twisted frantically just outside his grasp, darted headlong through the door.

And she was quicker than those outside; she was beyond them, running, the breath sobbing in her throat.

Away from the blood-soaked thing she'd left crumpled in death behind her, and toward the jungle's edge. Toward some new horror, perhaps, and toward a freedom that would be short-lived at best. For she had killed Bruhlla, and she knew they would not stop now until she had been run to earth.

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**T**he three men watched as the six ships landed in the jungle clearing; emptied of the selected Thraxite women who would in little more than a day's time re-enter them, the breeders' seed within their bodies, for the journey back to the mother planet.

It had been the same the day before, and the day before that, and in the distance, they had watched similar craft descend toward other of the many colonies with which the lush planetoid was dotted.

"Nuts!" Cain said. He turned to Mason. "What the hell else is there to do? Sit here and rot? They won't kill us. They'll just let Nature take its course—"

"There's more to be done than simply make a run for it to one of their ships," Mason snapped. "The mentacoms on them, Krijorl's said a dozen times, haven't the necessary range."

"So what's your plan? Or don't I get to hear any of the details?"

Mason studied the big man's face. Captured in his attempt to rescue the Earthwomen, he had said. His explanation had been that simple. New-UN hadn't believed Judith, but she had convinced him, and so he'd tried on his own responsibility, and simply hadn't made it. And then they'd brought him here, scarcely hours after Mason and Krijorl had themselves been delivered to the teeming colony.

Logical enough, yes. Cain was the kind who would try such a crazy stunt, alone, with such supreme overconfidence in his own muscle power. Yet—

"We must not be impatient," Krijorl interrupted his thought. He stood up, his blond head nearly touching the top of the plastifabric tent. "We must be certain and wait for the best time, Mister Cain. For if we fail in our first attempt, there will not be a second. And it has only been three days. As yet, we have been left quite to ourselves; even my life has not been threatened."

Mason noticed the puzzled frown that was across the Ihelian's forehead. "Do you think—"

"I cannot even guess the reason for that," Krijorl murmured, as though more to himself than in answer to Mason's question. "By all the rules of our conflict, I should be stretched naked for the



jungle beasts by now."

"Forget it!" Cain broke in quickly. "You're alive now, and if we can have a little action around here maybe you'll stay that way. We've watched long enough. They don't guard those ships at all. These breeders they keep drugged to the eyes, so why should they? I say we just grab one and blast off! Unless somebody's got a better plan, and I still haven't heard one—"

"Awfully anxious, aren't you, Mister Cain?" Mason asked.

"I'm not afraid of 'em if that's what you mean!"

Lance turned to Krijorl. "Maybe he's right. We've watched for three days. What do you think?"

The Ihelian looked out across the colony of low, square-shaped enclosures and to its far side where the twisted jungle began; to the spot where the mentacom was housed in a squat, guarded dome of crudely-shaped steel. Then he turned back to the Earthman, and Mason saw the uncertainty in his eyes.

"We have gained far less than I had hoped by watching," he said slowly. "We have learned the number of their guards, and the period of their change, but perhaps that is all we shall learn. If you think that as soon as there is darkness—"

"About time!" Cain said sourly. "And it'll be straight for the—"

"To the mentacom first," Mason said quietly. "And after that, to the ships if we can, Mister Cain." He felt strangely calm as his eyes met Cain's squarely. Somewhere within him, there was something changing. "Take it from an ex-has-been, big man! That's how it's going to be!"

---

**T**he camp was dark and silent as the three men left the tent. They walked as if from boredom, changing direction often as though at random; yet they moved with a deceiving swiftness, and each step brought them closer to the crude dome. The sound of their movements was as a whisper that lost itself with the quiet murmur of the night wind through the web of the jungle, and when they were close enough, they halted, to wait; to watch.

There was the soft clink of metal on metal and the mutter of dead-toned voices as the guard changed. Four hulking shapes walked at last in a tired shamble from the structure housing the mentacom. Four others prepared to take their posts.

And there was little to disturb the silence after that.

A muffled grunt, a choked off curse lost in a brief rustle of undergrowth as though a sudden breeze had momentarily ruffled its languid calm. And that was all.

Four breeders lay dead outside the dome.

Mason felt the warm stickiness of blood on his face, and the sting of a deep cut somewhere upon it. He saw that Cain was straightening over a mangled form; that Krijorl had overcome odds of two to one. The breeder at his own feet had died swiftly of a deftly broken neck, a reddened dirk still clutched in his stiffening fingers.

Then they were inside the dome, and Krijorl was placing the head-unit of the mentacom over his matted yellow hair.

Mason watched in the half-light of the pulsing orange glow, listened to the heaviness of Cain's breathing.

And he saw Krijorl's face stiffen suddenly. With a swift movement the Ihelian had handed him the head-unit, and with slippery fingers he fumbled the device into place over his own head.

Before he could think he had given Cain all the warning that he had needed.

"My God, it's Judith! Somehow she's—"

Krijorl lunged too late. The man whom Judith's mentacom message had branded as a spy was already through the dome's door, running.

Mason moved more quickly than the Ihelian then. Ahead in the jungle there was a crashing sound, and Mason tripped suddenly himself as he ran, fell. Krijorl leapt past him in the darkness, as though he could somehow see through it, and then Mason had regained his feet and was following blindly.

And suddenly he thought of the empty ships behind them, and Cain's abrupt uselessness to his Thrayxite employers. Then—

But the gamble was too great. Cain might not double back, but instead plunge headlong further and further into the concealing morass before him. No, Cain would not double back. Not now. For in Krijorl he had met an even match, and now he was afraid!

Fully an hour had passed when, his tunic torn and the exposed flesh bleeding, Mason caught up with Krijorl.

"He was nearly within my hands for a moment—" the giant whispered hoarsely. He breathed with difficulty, and there were long slashes gleaming redly in the darkness across his great muscles.

Mason stood silently for moments, toying with a thought that nagged insistently at the edge of his brain. He knew Cain. He knew the man.

Then suddenly his thoughts were interrupted by the muffled sound of a rocket blast, and within moments there was a vertical trail of fire above them as a Thrayxite ship hurtled skyward.

"By Jhavuul—"

"No!" Mason exclaimed. "The blast was from in front of us, he didn't double back! Must be another colony near our own, and he stumbled out of this overgrown mess and right into it. There was simply an empty ship—"

"Then the traitor has won!" Krijorl's face was tilted upward, and in the faint glow of the planetesimal belt that girdled Thrayx, it seemed more than ever that of an heroic Viking king of ages gone.

"There's a chance he hasn't!" Mason breathed. He had the thought now, pinned down, clear in his head. "If there has been no alarm back at our own camp we may still have the mentacom to ourselves. We'll signal Ihelos as you planned and then—then there is something else you will say. Something else that I think will, as the saying goes on Earth, kill two birds with a single blast."

Mason had lost track of time; perhaps it was as many as two hours before they had fought their way through the clutching undergrowth back to the mentacom at the fringe of their own camp. Several times they had had to stop, for there had been sounds in the jungle other than those they had made themselves. Animals, Krijorl had said, who had got the scent of their blood. But the noises had not been fast and crashing—more those of stealth, as were those of their own steps. A single animal, perhaps, with the scent of their blood; or that of the breeder guard they had slain. And stalking.

The dome was still silent, and the stiff corpses outside it lay undisturbed in the thick undergrowth. In the clearing the six empty Thrayxite ships towered in the sleeping quiet, star-shine glinting faintly from their polished hulls.

Wordlessly, they entered the dome, and it was as they had left it.

Krijorl again adjusted the headset, and the orange glow pulsed and waned as Mason watched.

And then at length, "If they are to know, they know now," Krijorl said. "And the Thrayxite host as well. What was there you wished to add, Lieutenant?"

Mason spoke quickly. "Say that you have discovered that the priceless—and you must say *priceless*—Book of the Saints is in the Forest of Saarl on Thrayx. Say that we have discovered it to be less well protected than is generally believed. Then give the location of the subterranean vault as precisely as you can!"

"But my people are well aware—"

"I realize that, but our friend Cain doesn't!"

The Ihelian's face was still puzzled, but he projected the thought-message Mason had dictated.

And then in seconds the Ihelian had hastily but thoroughly wrecked the mentacom, and the two men left its silent dome for the empty ships that beckoned so tantalizingly a scant quarter-mile distant.

They had run perhaps a dozen steps when the undergrowth behind them ripped and tore, and Mason spun.

There was a muffled cry, and he had barely time to catch Judith's bleeding body as she fell in exhaustion into his arms.

## VI

The muscles in his arms and legs trembled with fatigue as he lifted the semi-conscious girl up to Krijorl, and then with what seemed an impossible effort, hauled himself through the deserted ship's stern airlock.

The Ihelian seemed to carry Judith as though she were a feather as he climbed the narrow ladder above Mason, infinitely upward, the Earthman thought ... an infinite distance to the ship's forehull, to its control banks.

There was only the sound of his own hoarse breathing in his ears as he climbed, rung after rung, and the hollow echo of Krijorl's boots as they mounted resolutely above him.

Then they had made it, and were strapping Judith into a hammock, were taking their own shock-seats before the control-banks of the Thrayxite shuttle-craft.

The Ihelian did not hesitate. His fingers deliberated for only a moment above the firing studs in the blue-green glow of the banks, and then they flicked home, and engines muttered, roared into

terrifying life.

Within moments, saying nothing, moving the swift, silent movements of desperation, they had freed themselves of the grasping snare of the jungle beneath them; were once more strong, liberated things in the vast freedom of Space.

"And now Ihelos!" Krijjorl cried as they broke swiftly from the ecliptic of the great spangled ring of Thrayx. "If we can but escape their fleet. Any moment they should be on the scanner, forming to meet the onslaught of Ihelian squadrons—"

"No!" Mason said, and his voice was like a solid thing clogging his throat. "No, not Ihelos—not yet!" His eyes burned, and the red welts that covered his body had begun to sting, to pain, and it was hard to think.

He saw the frown forming on Krijjorl's face.

"Thrayx, and the Forest of Saarl," he bit from between teeth clenched against the creeping agony in him. "The Book of the Saints, Krijjorl. It is the key, don't you see. Key to all this, your feud."

For an instant the Ihelian said nothing, but groped in hidden pockets of his battered space harness. His long fingers quickly produced a tablet, thrust it into Mason's hand. The Earthman swallowed it and almost at once energy coursed as though from some hidden well in his body through his flagging muscles and nerves.

Then Krijjorl spoke. "I do not understand, Lieutenant. I know only that it would be almost certain death. Intrusion near the vault would bring a flight of guard ships within minutes."

"I know that," Mason said. "But perhaps not down upon us! And we must have that Book. I've been thinking about it, comparing it with similar writings in Earth's own past. Such books are not new, such motives, such methods. Your Book is priceless in a way that even you don't know, Krijjorl. I'm certain of it. For it must contain the reason that you fight."

"And that reason?"

"A reason, if I'm right, that would end your feud once and for all. A nasty bit of logic which the people of Ihelos and Thrayx were quite deliberately kept from knowing from the beginning. I'd make book on it that at one time both planets were very hungry places—"

"But if you are wrong, Lieutenant?"

Mason fastened his gaze straight before him on the diamond-studded scanner, and saw that some of the smaller diamonds were moving in a tiny echelon.

"Then I guess we die young," he answered the Ihelian. "Want to try?"

The Ihelian's face loosened into a wry smile. "Sometimes you ask rather foolish questions, Lieutenant! I've been bred to such business, and not given my life so much thought before this! But—"

"Yes. Judith."

And then they heard a woman's voice speaking behind them. "Thrayxite acceleration hammocks could stand improvement," it said. "And when we leave the Forest of Saarl, I think I'll just lie on the deck instead."

---

**K**rijjorl's knowledge of the spot's location in the great forest was far more accurate than he had given Mason reason to hope. And with a deftness that matched that with which he had eluded the screens of the Thrayxite fleet hurtling to protect its breeder planetoid, he brought the ship to rest at Mason's direction, little more than a quarter-mile from where the Book of the Saints lay entombed.

It was marked by two spires. One was of hewn stone, as Krijjorl had said, immobile, with ancient symbols carved from its base to its pinnacle.

And the other was smooth, and of metal; its gaping airlock testimony to the haste with which it had been landed, unhidden by the natural camouflage of the soaring trees with which the grass-carpeted clearing was surrounded.

"Who—"

"Muscles," Mason answered her. The three were crouched at the clearing's edge, waiting. "Thought he'd made it some way. Must've ducked in before their fleet got into Space. Gambling that our signal that he picked up wouldn't bring out a special reception committee ready and waiting to meet him."

"But he has preceded us by many minutes," Krijjorl said. "I do not see—"

"Not so many. He was in flight two full hours before you mentacommended Ihelos. And if I know him, it was straight out of this galaxy at full blast! So he had to back-track all that time and distance. He had to risk a trap down here, as well as the Thrayxite fleet which he knew would be rushing to

protect its breeders."

"You had counted on those factors, Lieutenant?"

"Two birds with one blast, like I told you before," Mason said. "Ask Judith, here. She'll tell you how well I know him." The girl was silent, but her eyes voiced her thoughts more eloquently than her tongue might have.

"Some will do anything to obtain the 'priceless'—" Krijjorl said softly.

"Cain, any time!"

"You have laid a clever trap, Lieutenant."

"If it springs, sure. But where are those guard ships you were so worried about? I was counting on them, too. They should be all over the place by now."

And he was interrupted by the high-pitched scream of the flat, finned shapes that hurtled suddenly over the tree tops, circled, slid quickly downward.

"FLAT!" Mason yelled. And as they stretched prone, they saw Cain running toward the ship from a great open shaft in the ground, a round, shiny thing beneath one arm.

A probing needle of white hot flame stabbed out from one of the descending ships, and there was a scream, and then Cain fell, a charred skeleton, to the ground. The shiny thing he had carried rolled lazily along the grass, teetered on edge, plopped silently over.

Mason was poised like a runner awaiting the starting gun. For a split second he hesitated as the guard ships touched down, their weapons momentarily screened by the lush foliage at the clearing's edge.

And then Mason was running, Judith and Krijjorl only steps behind him.

There were perhaps seconds before the armed women of the Thrayxite guard detail would break from the forest's edge.

He stumbled, fell, and his outstretched hands touched the round, shiny thing, and he could smell the reek of Cain's smouldering skeleton.

Krijjorl and Judith hesitated.

"Damn it, run!" and he felt his scream tear at his dry throat, and then clutched the metal disk to him and regained his feet in a single whip-like motion, and bolted after them toward the gaping air lock of the ship that Cain had never reached.

There was a hissing sound and a wave of heat crackled behind him, seared his flesh beneath his tattered tunic. And there was another, inches before him, scorching smoking scars in the soft green turf, and shouted orders filled the air scant yards behind him.

Then somehow he was at the air lock, and strong hands were pulling him over its edge, and it swung to, glowed red as a bolt of raw energy spent itself harmlessly against it.

"Now Ihelos!" Mason said as he fought for new breath.

---

**I**t was white, all white around him.

He tried to sit up but there was the touch of gentle hands that stayed him, lowered him back upon the bed.

There were two of them—tall, like Vikings, and memory returned slowly. There was a smaller one, too, standing straight and erect beside him, like a proud queen from the pages of Earth's colorful history.

Judith. And Krijjorl. And another. And in his hands there was the silver disk. The can.

The can of records. The Book of the Saints.

He tried again to straighten, and then heard the voice of the one whom he did not know.

"I am Yhevvak, Grand Liege of Ihelos," the voice said. "And I hold in my hands, Earthman, the Book of the Saints. I have read it, and I have broadcast to all of Thrayx what I have read. A truce delegation has already departed from that planet to meet us here in Space."

"But—" the word stuck in his throat, and it was hard to think.

"Commander Krijjorl said that you suspected it was the key to our great trouble. You were right.

"For it tells of a conference among the leaders of our two worlds many millenia ago; a conference held in secret, because of the nature of its subject—the very people of our worlds themselves. Secret, because of the decision concerning them and their staggering number. Too staggering for either planet any longer to feed. And the record itself was then committed to this single microtape, and itself, kept in secrecy since the day it was recorded.

"At first shrouded in deliberate mysticism, it was at length remembered only as the Last Word of the Saints in the sudden wars which so quickly followed its creation, the true cause of which was skillfully falsified to the people of the time, and truly known only to those who made the microtape I hold here.

"They were our greatest leaders; in them was invested the responsibility for the welfare and livelihood of our two planets, both materially and spiritually.

"When they lived, those records say, travel in Space beyond the speed of light had not been accomplished; they believed such a feat an impossibility imposed by a condescending Nature that could be challenged too far. And they therefore knew no way of reaching beyond the planets of Ihelos and Thrayx for the food and resources that became so sorely depleted as both planets became, at length, stripped nearly bare as their populations swelled beyond saturation point.

"Medical science had permitted the old to grow older; granted the new-born an almost certain purchase on life once first breath had been drawn. Yet its greatest offering was rejected by the people; there were indignant cries at the merest suggestion that they intelligently regulate their number, so that their posterity might live in greater plenty than had they.

"There was but one solution for our desperate leaders. For although warfare had long since vanished from our civilization as it had matured, it took with it Nature's own unpleasant balance for her overgenerous fecundity.

"The new balance, then, had to be of Man's making. And so it was made.

"Our leaders, our Saints, as we have come through the years to know them, were of course adept masters at the many subtle arts of propaganda, and they used those arts to the very limits of their skill. They deliberately fomented, as their ancient record shows, the wars, small at first and then ever larger, between Ihelos and Thrayx.

"They could not have foreseen that one day there would be conflict for existence between the sexes; logically calculating intellect against intuitive, wily cunning in a battle to determine the most fit, who would then enjoy the right to survive.

"Nor could they have foreseen that one day, because of the very conflict they fomented, the science of controlled genetics would at last be recognized as a necessity of survival to both factions.

"Today we have our answer to the age old problem of keeping our consumption within the limits of our ability to produce for it; we have used it to survive. But to survive war, not peace.

"And that, as you apparently suspected, Earthman, is the key.

"We know now why we fought. And with the knowledge of the life forces with which we insured our continued existence during our years of battle, we may now become united worlds of peace again. For we shall use that knowledge to take more advisedly of Nature's fruits than we took before.

"Well done, Earthmen. And with our thanks, know that we shall be always in your debt."

Then Yhevvak bowed low, and left just the three of them together in the white hospital bay of his flagship.

Krijorl was smiling, and there was a shininess in Judith's eyes.

Mason grinned. "I hope those Thrayxite babes get a wiggle on," he said. "Those Earth gals gotta get 'em home! Their mothers'll be frantic. Hey, girl, not in front of company!"

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\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE WOMEN-STEALERS OF THRAXX \*\*\*

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