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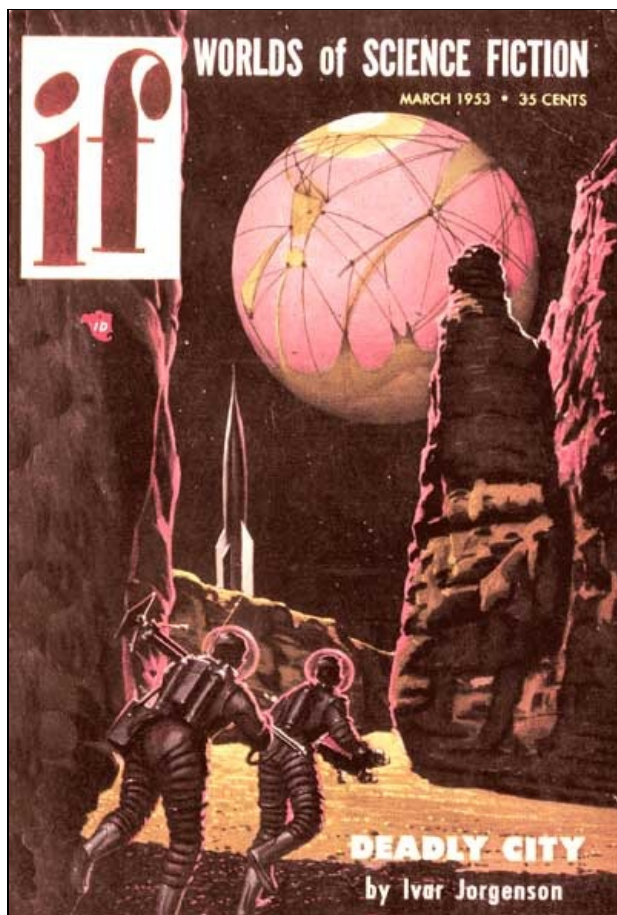
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The BLACK TIDE

By Arthur G. Stangland

Illustrated by Ed Valigursky

Space in its far dark reaches can be fickle with a man; it can shatter his dreams, fill him with fear and hate. It can also cure a man—if he is strong enough.

It filled all the ebony depths of space. Twirling slowly in awesome majesty, the meteor scintillated like a massive black diamond. And with its onrush came a devastating sense of doom. He looked everywhere. To the front, to the side, and below—there was no escape. Transfixed, he stared at the great rock flashing in the fire of myriad suns as it—

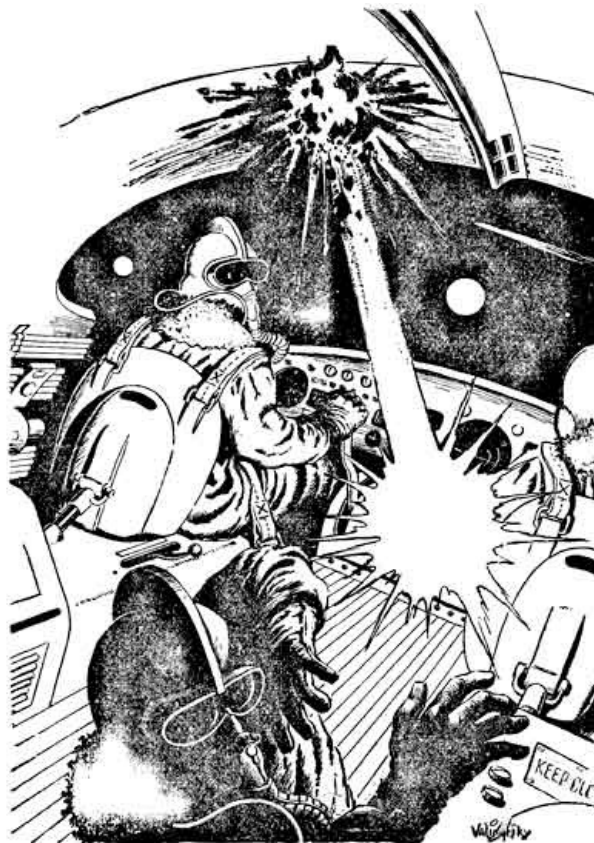
Bill Staker, passenger rocket captain for Interplanetary Lines, came fully awake in his New York hotel room. For a minute, he lay unmoving on his bed, savoring the delicious sensation of weight. No queazy stirring in the pit of his belly for lack of gravity, no forced squinting because of muscular re-orientation.

With a muttered curse he unwound himself from his covers and sat up. For a moment he rested his head in his hands, thinking, only a nightmare, thank God, only a nightmare.

He lifted his head, and found cold sweat on his hands. Then sighing in relief he swung his feet over the edge of his bed.

A glance at the clock showed 10:45 p.m. Monday, June 10th, 2039. Heavily, he clumped across the room in the peculiar flat-footed gait of a spaceman accustomed to magnetic contact shoes. Cigarette in hand he sank into a heavy chair, touched a button on the arm, then sat back to watch the telescreen.

It was a rehash of the day's news. In nasal tones a senator was accusing the Republicrats of raising taxes. Then followed scenes from a spectacular fire. Suddenly, Bill's drooping eyelids popped open.



The small meteor ripped through the Space Bird's crew compartment, blinding the radar scope and severing communication with Earth.

A commentator was saying, "... the two rockets of the Staker Space Mining Company, ready for a scouting trip to the asteroid Beta Quadrant."

A close-up of Tom Staker followed. Tall, rangy, with blond hair like straw in the wind. Bill laid his cigarette in a tray and with critical interest leaned forward to look at his brother.

"We figure to find uranium," Tom was saying, with a glance toward the vertical rockets, "all through the Beta Quadrant. Our departure is waiting on the return of my brother, Bill, from his Mars-to-Earth run."

A reporter asked Tom, "Private enterprise is unique in these days of virtual monopolies. What's the story behind it?"

"Well, our great-grandfather, George Staker, believed passionately in private enterprise," Tom began. "Somewhere around 1952 or 1953 he established a trust fund for his third generation descendants to finance any project they think worthwhile. And he got an ironclad guarantee from the government that the trust fund for private enterprise would be honored in the future. You see, my ancestor was quite a romanticist. In one of his books entitled 'The Philosophy of Science' he says 'People of this dawning Atomic Age little realize they are living in a vast dream. A dream that is slowly taking objective shape. A tool here, a part there, a plan on some drafting table. Men of ideas are pointing the way, structuring the inner dream world of a generation. Even today's science fiction literature contains important ideas for the dreams-become-reality of tomorrow.'" Tom finished up, "With our Project Venture, Bill and I are going to bring a dream into reality—making a little on the side, of course!"

The commentator ended his interview with: "And so, we await with great interest the carrying out of George Staker's dream, a man whose Twentieth Century ideas of private enterprise have blown a breath of fresh air into an age of dull dreams and little imagination."

Bill Staker pressed the control button, darkening the screen. "Dream boy. Tom, you damned fool." He got up and scuffed into the bathroom to stare into the mirror. Twenty-five years old, and already lines were grooving both sides of his nostrils. Tousled black hair like brush hanging over a high bank, and ridged creases in his forehead. Little lumps of flesh bulging over the corners of his mouth from constant tension. The tension of outwitting space on each trip 'tween the planets. But worst of all was the look in his gray eyes. The look that never went away anymore. The look of a man who has spent too much time staring into the enigma of the Universe and—thinking.

"I'm scared—scared as hell!" he blurted at his reflection. "And if I don't get hold of myself, I'm through—washed up!"

Space was no place for a man with imagination—too much imagination. You stared into the empty blackness here, you stared into the inky blackness there, behind you the Earth a tiny pinpoint, the Earth that meant rock solid footing, the caress of wind and land in all directions. But out there in the aching void you raced for Mars like a mouse scuttling across a lighted floor. Raced because of what you couldn't see, couldn't fathom. Yet, you knew *It* was out there, staring back inscrutably.

He rubbed the flat of his hand across his right cheek, sighing from emotional weariness. Then he scuffed back into the room. On the way he collected a bottle of bourbon, mixer and glass, and dropped into the big chair.

As he worked on the bottle, all the anxiety and apprehension in him faded. Once he stared at the bottom of his empty glass. Funny how a guy could panic all of a sudden. He remembered it clearly now. Riding into town yesterday from the rocket port, he started brooding over details of Project Venture. Suddenly, an overwhelming black tide of fear worse than he had ever experienced confronted him. Like a man on the verge of insanity he licked his dry lips, staring about him and feeling as if something strange and terrible were taking possession of his mind. And in the middle of his spell a cloud blacker than space itself started reaching for him. That was when he yelled to the startled bus driver to let him out at this hotel. Maybe he could get hold of himself here.

Now, his arms sprawled over the sides of the heavy chair, he drifted off into a snoring stupor.

In the morning he awoke to a splitting headache. Somehow it helped to hold his head between both hands and swear at it in a running mutter. Finally he roused himself to go to the bathroom for a cold shower. Afterward, donning his powder blue Captain's uniform, he went down to breakfast.

He dawdled over crisp bacon and eggs, glanced at morning editions, and all the while the ashes of last night's emotional holocaust drifted through him. Drifted in fitful vagrant thoughts. He should have said no that first day a year ago. The big law firm made a great to do over the old document from his ancestor. Unique, they said. The chance of a lifetime. And by the end of the first meeting Tom was all fired up. Mining atomic power metals in the asteroid belt would bring the biggest returns, he said. They would be the only ones allowed to compete with the Asteroid Mining Corporation monopoly. And now Tom was building up public excitement in the venture, as if it were a circus. The damned fool. Why had he let his brother talk him into—

Suddenly, his line of thought snapped, and he was acutely aware of staring eyes.

He looked to his left, then felt a warm flush technicolor his cheeks.

"Christy!"

Her blond curls making a soft halo around her jauntily raked hat, the space hostess from his ship gave him a warm smile. She was adequately stacked, Bill reflected, but there was levelheaded firmness and resolution in her too. That was why she was hard to handle.

"Good morning, Bill."

He didn't like the accusing gleam in her eye but he was glad to see her.

"Sit down, Christy. Have some coffee." He held her hands a moment, then eased her into the opposite chair.

He tried disarming her with a show of great enthusiasm. But the way she settled herself into the seat, all the while regarding him with those clear penetrating blue eyes, told him she was going on no snipe hunt.

"When you kissed me goodbye at the port yesterday, Bill, you said you were going directly to the field to be with Tom." It wasn't a statement—it was an accusation.

With an elaborate show of casualness he shrugged his shoulders. "Well, I was fagged out from this last trip. Decided I'd do better getting a full night's rest by myself at a hotel."

The waiter brought her coffee, and she left it to cool. She folded her long tapering fingers on the table, and a delicate lift to her fine brows gave her an expression of sympathetic concern.

Her smile was regretful. "Rocket men don't drink, Bill. You know it too. Bad for muscular coordination."

He said in some surprise, "You mean it's that loud?"

"Uh-huh." Christy leaned forward. "What is it, Bill? You haven't been yourself for weeks. You looked haggard yesterday and when you left the ship you were almost running, as if trying to escape from something. And now this strange avoidance of Tom. He got hold of me this morning early, wanting to know where you were. And I guess it's pretty important that he sees you, Bill. Seems there's been trouble at the field."

It was as if someone had prodded him in an agonizingly sore place and he reacted instinctively. He let his knife clatter on his plate, aware that he was dramatizing himself.

"When I'm ready for a woman's sticking her nose into my affairs, I'll send her a special invitation!"

Christy's delicate nostrils flared, and her bosom rose and fell rapidly. Then she seemed to get hold of herself. "I'm sorry if you got that impression, Bill. I was only trying to help you both."

Cherishing his irritation, Bill went on, "Seems to me you're bending over backward helping Tom, playing messenger, private eye—"

Christy broke in with a catch in her throat, "Oh, Bill, please! Let's not quarrel as soon as we get back."

Bill shoved his dishes aside, the tone of her voice reaching into him to dampen down the fires of anger. Then he managed a slow faint grin.

"Okay, Christy." He reached for the check, saying, "Well, if you can stand my company, would you like to come along out to the field?"

With her eyes glistening, she answered, "I'd love to."

The private rocket landing field of the Staker Space Mining Company was an hour's drive north of the city. Three miles from the field they made out the two gleaming snouts of the rockets pointing skyward. Then as they approached the edge of the field, Bill turned off toward a two story frame structure that served as office and warehouse.

Bill said, "Might as well check to see if Tom is in the office first."

At the door Bill poked his head in and shouted up the stairwell, "Hi—Tom?"

A chair scraped, and footsteps sounded across the upstairs floor. "Yeah—that you, Bill? C'mon up!"

They found Tom at a desk before a wide window view of the field. On the office walls hung big graphs of fuel consumption curves, trajectory plots from Earth to the asteroid belt, ballistics computations, oxygen consumption curves per unit metabolism per man.

Christy looking at the rockets, said, "Gee, Tom, they look beautiful. Like monsters straining their tethers."

Tom looked up at the girl's profile, and to Bill who was watching, he bore the look of a man savoring what he saw.

"Yes, they are. That first one's mine, the *Space Bird*. The other is Bill's, the *Space Dragon*."

Bill cast a professional eye over the charts and graphs on the wall, while far down in his subconscious a sharp twinge of jealousy fulminated, tangling with his fears of space in a hybrid monstrosity. Then like lava in a plugged volcano his obsession found a new outlet. The fear of space now came up disguised as hatred for Tom.

In an unusually calm voice Bill said, "Well, I see you have everything just about completed."

"Yeah," Tom glanced up with a significant look. "Someone else was interested in those charts and graphs too the other day. Someone who didn't bother to use the door."

"What d'you mean—somebody break in?"

Tom nodded. "Yep. Jimmied a window downstairs. But I don't think they got anything, because the door to the office was still locked when the watchman surprised them. They got away in the dark."

Christy's eyes grew large and round. "Who do you suppose it was?"

Hitching his long body erect, Tom said with a gesture of his right hand, "Well, there's only one outfit interested in our destination—and that's Asteroid Mining."

"Good heavens," Christy said in great surprise. "You don't mean a big corporation like that would stoop so low?"

Tom smiled at her. "With a monopoly on power metals Asteroid has been gouging the world. People have become resigned to the situation. But if we can supply uranium ore cheaper there's going to be a clamor for private enterprise again. Under the present system private enterprise has been withering on the vine. This is our big chance and the public is pulling for us."

Bill's hold on his temper slipped another notch. "Yeah, I saw that interview with the television news you had. Saw it last night." He folded his arms across his chest. "If that's your conception of winning support for our venture then you better take up circus advertising."

For a moment Tom looked like a man who's taken a bucket of ice water in the face. Then his feet hit the floor. "Say, now, wait a minute, Bill!" he said, half in anger. "Who d'you think's been shouldering the big share of Project Venture—while you've hung on to your job and a pretty salary?"

"Didn't we agree you'd spend full time on the Project while I acted as consultant between trips?" Bill shot back.

"Yeah, I quit a fair job as first officer on a freighter to handle it."

"And you are guaranteed fair wages and a fat slice of any profits we make," Bill snapped. "The thing I didn't like in that interview of yours was that starry-eyed eyewash about our ancestor being a man of vision, a philosopher and a dreamer. That's a helluva tag to put on us—'The Dream Boys'! Good God!"

Tom stood up, facing his brother in icy silence. Finally he said, "Is that all you've got to offer—a lotta carping criticism?"

The planes of Bill's cheeks flattened under the downward pull at his mouth corners. The black ugly tide was running in him now and he could not stop its sweep. His fear of space, the frantic will to escape from it again, all the irritation and anger were deep currents and he was a mere piece of flotsam tossing on the advancing wave of the black tide.

He said, "No, damn you. I've got something else in my craw too. It's Christy. I've seen the way you look at her, and I know that whenever my back is turned you're doing your damndest to break us up!"

Tom's face turned gray and suddenly his eyes were wide open. Knots stood out on the points of his jaws.

In a strange half choked voice he said, "That's a blasted lie—and you know it. It's an excuse to cover up for your own peculiar behavior lately. I think—"

Christy broke in with. "Bill—Tom, for heaven's sake stop it!" Her beseeching eyes were glancing sharply from one to the other in growing panic.

Bill stood lightly on his feet, his fingers curling and uncurling into balled fists.

Tom went on, a bleak look in his eyes. "I think you've been in a soft berth too long. The monopoly you work for has softened you, taken out the guts a man needs to stand on his own feet—"

Bill suddenly stiffened. His right shot out in a hard, sharp blow that crashed against Tom's chin. Tom grunted, a surprised look in his eyes, and sagged to the floor.

For a moment Bill stood over him, nostrils flaring, his whole body tense and waiting. But Tom was too groggy to get up.

"Oh, Bill, how could you!" Christy cried out, dropping to her knees beside Tom.

Bill strode with measured step to the door. There he turned, and looking back with a sneer, said, "Sweet dreams, Dream Boy!"

In a luxurious office of Asteroid Mining Corporation on the twenty-third floor of a Manhattan skyscraper a furious official of the corporation faced an uncomfortable underling.

"I've heard of some pretty crude tricks in my time, Heilman, but breaking into the Staker Company's office like a common house thief takes the tin medal for low grade brains!" the official ranted, pounding his desk. "I suppose you thought that was an excellent way to advance yourself in the corporation, eh? Finesse, Heilman, finesse. That's what it takes in matters like this. Asteroid Mining, before it got the monopoly, stopped competition, but not by common housebreaking—"

"But—but I thought," Heilman explained lamely, "that we could get a copy of their trajectory and then deal with them after they got out to the quadrant. You know, fire a 'meteor' at them, blanket them with radio jamming, ruin their radar sighting—"

The official snorted and leaned disgustedly back in his leather chair. "No, no you big dumb ox! You're retired from the team, benched. Now you can sit on the sidelines and watch how the first string fix Staker and Company."

When Bill asked for his key, the clerk handed him the key and a faintly lavender tinted envelope.

Mystified by the feminine handwriting, Bill sat in a lobby chair, and tore open the jasmine scented envelope.

The note was brief. It said, "Dear Captain Staker: Please call on me at your earliest convenience, Apt. 5B. It is a matter of utmost importance to both of us. Margo."

Ever since leaving Tom's office, Bill's mind had been spinning about a center of hatred and ugly rumination. But now the stimulus of the jasmine fragrance struck a spark of adventure on the edge of his churning mind. The tangential path led off into inviting mysterious shadows and he was going to follow.

The elevator stopped at the apartment floor of the hotel's north Tower. In the softly lighted corridor his feet fell soundlessly on the deep pile rug. He turned a corner, then walked up a short flight of steps to the door of Apt. 5B.

In response to his knock the door was opened by a vision in white satin. She was startlingly beautiful. Dark heavy lashes, creamy skin, white even teeth in a flashing smile, a lithe body poised with the ease of a jungle cat. She was fulsome and high breasted, and as she followed Bill's quick appraising glance, she seemed to smile knowingly that all he saw was displayed to best advantage.

Hat in hand Bill said, "I'm—I'm Captain Staker."

With a throaty laugh that could have been carefully timed, she said, "And I'm Margo. Come right in Captain."

Bill walked onto a white rug, and unobtrusively took in the rich furniture Twenty First Century Modern, the warm brown of the logarithm ruled walls, paintings in the style of Van Gogh, sharply angled table lamps, the gold drapes at the windows.

"It was kind of you to come so promptly," Margo continued, settling into a chair.

Bill brought his glance back to her. "Well, frankly, I was curious to know what a perfect stranger could have in common with me."

She laughed indulgently. "Nasty of me, wasn't it?—taking advantage of a human weakness." She gestured at Scotch and bourbon on the coffee table. "I'll let you do us the honors, Captain. Bourbon for me."

Presently, glass in hand and a spreading warmth in him, Bill fixed the girl with a quizzical look. "Tell me, Margo, just what is this matter of utmost importance to both of us?"

She put her glass on the table, then sat back and Bill felt the full impact of her dark lustrous eyes. "It's a business matter, Captain. You've been recommended as a man of high purpose and dependability. As the heir to my father's controlling interest in Intercontinental Lines I am badly in need of a man with your experience to handle traffic details."

Bill lifted a brow. "Intercontinental Lines? Never heard of it. Exclusively airline traffic on Earth?"

"It's a new company formed under monopoly regulations. Of course, I realize you're a spaceman, but staying on Earth would have its compensations. You can name your own salary."

Bill leaned forward and mixed another drink. This was something unexpected and pretty tempting too. No more fighting his fear of space. He downed the drink in a few gulps, then stood up.

"Well, I—I'd like to think things over," he said with hesitation, walking slowly to the window.

Margo followed, saying, "I don't mean to rush you, Bill—yet the situation needs your experienced hand."

"I know, but my brother and I are all set to make a scouting trip to Beta Quadrant."

Margo leaned against the window drapes, smiling with frank admiration. "I know you are. How in the world you can take off from Earth and hit a target far out in space is beyond me. Is it something like firing artillery?"

The warm glow already suffusing Bill's senses took on added lustre when he looked into her questioning eyes. Expansively, he began drawing diagrams, and explaining the elements of space navigation.

"Now here's the trajectory my brother and I are planning to use," he went on, drawing a complex curve with loading figures and fuel consumption and point of contact with the Beta Quadrant.

When he paused once, Margo touched the gold sunburst emblem on his arm. "That's fascinating, Bill, but making a trip like yours is all a gamble. I'm not offering you a gamble. I'm offering you a sure thing."

"Yes, I realize that." Bill got to his feet. "But just the same I want to think your proposition over, Margo."

She leaned toward him putting her hands on his lapels. "Bill, don't risk your neck out there in space. I need you desperately in the company."

Suddenly, Bill was electrically aware of cool, smooth arms sliding up and around his neck and her soft red mouth within fragrance distance.

And he was exquisitely aware of the full soft length of her pressing against him. The scent of jasmine reached him with bewitching stealth. That was when he closed the gap to her mouth in a sudden rush.

Bill came out of a whirling state of pure feeling to hear the visiphone buzzing insistently.

"The phone," he mumbled.

Margo opened her eyes dreamily, then comprehended. She walked over to the phone, picked up the receiver.

After a moment she turned around looking at him questioningly. "It's for you, Bill."

He took the phone and said, "Captain Staker speaking."

The desk clerk said, "A gentleman to see you, sir. Shall I send him to Apt. 5B?"

"No," Bill answered. "I'll be down to my room in a few moments and see him there."

He turned to Margo. "I guess business comes before idyll, Margo. I've got to go."

Her lustrous dark eyes searched his face intently. "How long must I wait for an answer, Bill?"

"Can you wait until Thursday—three days?" Time enough to thresh things out with Tom.

"I guess I can," Margo said, touching him with an inviting glance, "but do I have to wait that long before I see you again?"

Bill grinned and shook his head in wonder. "My lord, what persistence! I got an idea any visiting would not be entirely social. Somewhere along the line business would rear its shaggy head. Okay, how about dinner at the Wedgewood Room tomorrow night?"

"Wonderful!"

Later at his own floor to his surprise he found Tom pacing the corridor. In a strained voice he said, "The clerk said a gentleman—"

Tom came back in a conciliatory tone, "And I don't fit the description, eh? Well, anyway, Bill, we got things to talk over. How about it?"

Bill shrugged noncommittally, unlocked his door and the two entered. Perched on the arm of a chair, Bill lighted a cigarette and pulled deeply of it.

"Well, what is it?" He glanced coolly at his brother sitting with his left leg dangling over the arm of his chair.

Tom cleared his throat and said, "I—er, came to see how we're stacking up, Bill. After all we got a big show on our hands and the whole world is waiting for the curtain to go up. But we can't be squabbling between ourselves when we go on stage. Let's settle matters now and get on with our job—after all we both got a lot at stake in the company."

Bill studied the end of his cigarette a long moment. "I guess you might as well count me out, Tom. I'm quitting the show."

Furrows appeared above Tom's brows. "Quitting! And after all you've put into the venture? Bill, have you gone nuts?" He stopped a moment. Then he said, "Oh, I guess I see the light. Christy, eh? Well, Bill, honest—and I really mean this—you can have all the profits of the trip if I'm guilty of trying to take Christy away from you. You've got the wrong slant on things."

Bill shrugged, saying, "It's not that—and I still am not convinced—it's just that I'm considering another proposition."

Tom got to his feet in agitation, looking down at Bill incredulously. "My God, Bill, you sure have changed! What about all those bull sessions we had reading and rereading the George Staker philosophy of free enterprise? The world needs an object lesson to show how far it has strayed from those first wonderful days of the Atomic Age. We are heirs, Bill by special franchise, Old George saw the shape of things to come pretty clearly, and it's up to us to carry out his vision of things as they should be."

Bill ground out his cigarette in a tray. His underlip crowded out stubbornly. "I'm not going."

For a moment Tom stared hard at Bill, and a heavy singing silence lay between them. Then Tom strode to the door and opened it. "All right, Bill—you and I are through!"

The door slammed. For awhile Bill sat looking at it, wondering why the slammed door reminded him of looking at his reflection in the bathroom mirror and telling himself "I'm scared—scared as hell. And if I don't get hold of myself, I'm through—washed up!"

The next day when he was busily dressing, the ultrafax popped out the breakfast edition. "*Space Bird* takes off for Beta Quadrant. Tom Staker gambles all."

Bill stared at the pictures of the rocket climbing savagely at the head of a column of fire. The crazy, stubborn fool. Going it alone, risking his neck and everybody else's aboard. Well, let him go out there and break his blasted neck on the Asteroid Belt.

For the next three days Bill saw much of Margo. She was the most exciting thing he had ever discovered, and he indulged her laughingly when she took to speaking of his position in Intercontinental Lines as an accomplished fact.

On the third day he took Margo to lunch, a Margo with shining eyes, for this was Bill's day of decision. She had done her work well.

He ordered for them, and added, "Also a bottle of champagne."

The waiter brought the champagne first. There was no doubt on Margo's features what this was about, even though it had always been "if", "maybe" "possibly" in Bill's discussions with her about the new job.

In the midst of picking up his glass and proposing a toast, "Here's to my new—" Bill stopped. The ultrafax had popped out a sheet. Carefully putting the glass down, he said, "That's a special bulletin."

Picking it up he read aloud, "Staker Rocket in serious trouble. Home field reports damage by small meteor. Crew on emergency air bottles. Mysterious emanations blind radar scope and disrupt communication with Earth."

Tom—and the others, out there fighting for their lives against suffocation and intense cold. Their quarrel seemed like the antics of teenagers now. He had to get out to the field, see if he could help.

"What are you going to do?" Margo was watching him intently, the knuckles of her small hands white.

"I'm going to the field."

"But—but what about that toast you were making to your new—job, that's what you were going to say, wasn't it?" Her eyes were intense spots of jet.

"I guess that'll have to wait, Margo," he told her. "I can't stand by when Tom needs help."

Margo clutched his hands convulsively. "Bill, don't take a rocket up or you'll die in the same trap he's dying in!" The words rushed out as if through a trapdoor she could not control.

Bill glanced at her with sharp, new interest. "How do you know it's a trap, and how do you know he's going to die?"

Tears began to well up in her large eyes. "All I can tell you is don't go out there, Bill. I don't want to lose you—now."

Dawning realization filled Bill with horror. "Margo—Margo, for God's sake, what kind of a game have you been playing with me!"

Margo's shoulders sagged, and she began to sob out her story. "Bill, please, please believe me. I love you. That was not my part of the agreement with Asteroid Mining—to fall in love with you. Yes. I was hired to separate you and your brother, break up your company."

Before Bill could snarl an answer to that, a hotel service clerk came with a portable phone.

"Call for you, sir."

With his eyes fixed steadily on Margo, he spoke into the transmitter, "Captain Staker."

Christy's strained and tearful voice came over the wire. "Bill, oh, Bill, we're getting terrible news here at the field. Tom's ship is losing oxygen!"

"Yes, I know," he answered. "I just got the Ultra on it. I'll be right out, Christy."

As he replaced the phone he looked at Margo with a grim, loathing expression. "A female trick as old as the universe and I had to fall for it. You and your innocent questions about our Quadrant trajectory! What a sucker I was!" He drew back his hand to slap her but decided against it. She was crying when he left.

On the way to the field the familiar but forgotten black tide of fear rose up like a spectre once more to scatter his gathering ideas for helping Tom. Resigning himself to its power and pulling over to the roadside, he sat still, gripping the wheel. Yes, he told himself tensely, here I sit while Tom and the others drift in space needing help. The realization of their need slowly gave him a greater objective clarity than he had ever had before. He began to see himself now for what he was—a cringing weakling stripped naked of all manliness at the first show of evil. Though he perhaps had been worse than the average, this was the trouble with his whole security minded generation. They never dreamed great dreams like George Staker and his era which wrested atomic power from the treasure house of nature. No, this generation carefully followed safe, charted paths in the world of ideas. It had given up its freedom to a world of government controlled monopolies. And Tom, taking up the torch left by their creatively imaginative ancestor, was trying to recapture a small facet of that golden age.

With the dawning in him of Mid-Twentieth Century mind, Bill felt a thrilling sense of freedom as the black tide receded over the horizon of his inner world. He took a new firm grip on the wheel, and took off again at high speed.

Christy was at the field office waiting outside. As he stepped out of the car, she threw her arms around him.

"Oh, Bill, what can you do for Tom now?"

He said gently, "I'll bring him back for you."

She drew back her head to look at him incredulously, "You still think—! Oh, Bill, you foolish guy, you're the one I love, the one I've always loved."

For a moment he searched her eyes and saw only a revelation of honest feeling. A surging gladness flooded through him, releasing an unconscious hard ball of tension inside.

"Christy, what a knothed I've been!" He gathered her up to kiss her fervently. "So long, Christy. Old Staker was a piker at dreaming compared to what I'm dreaming for you and me!"

The field men had the rocket fueled up and provisioned to go. "This'll be no picnic, but there's a prize out there if we want it bad enough. You'll all have a share in it, instead of handing it all over to the government. Are you with Tom and me?"

"Sure, Bill. Let's go!"

"Yeah, let's open 'er wide up!"

They all clambered up the ship's access ladder in high spirits. In a moment a warning red signal rocket shot into the sky and burst, warning all local aircraft. Another five minutes and the rocket leapt off the Earth with a long, shattering roar.

Bill kept the fissioning metals pouring through the atomic explosive after-chambers until the men screamed at the acceleration. Finally he eased it off to free flight and the *Space Dragon* followed the trajectory of the *Space Bird*.

All the way he hovered over the radar scope. Then after long hours of fatiguing watching he crawled into his bunk.

Later he woke up to Radarman Jones' voice in his ear.

"Captain—wake up. We've picked up a ship on the scope!"

Bill piled out and forced his floating feet to magnetic contact with the steel deck. He followed Jones down the short corridor to the communications cabin.

At the radar scope Bill studied the ship, then gave orders decelerating the *Space Dragon*.

"There's another ship!" Jones exclaimed, pointing at the edge of the scope.

Bill peered at the new ship, studying its characteristics. Then he nodded his head. "It's the *Space Bird* all right. But that first one—I got an idea it must be an Asteroid Mining ship. Margo must have transmitted the *Space Bird* trajectory to Asteroid Mining. I don't see how anybody would know where to find us in such immense distances as Beta Quadrant."

Stepping over to the communications panel he called the *Space Bird*. No answer, and though he kept calling he could not raise the ship.

Then he called Staker Field on Earth.

"Caxton?"

The field came back. "Staker Field. Go ahead."

"Caxton, we've found the *Space Bird* but can't speak to them, so I'm cutting you in on communications with an Asteroid Mining ship that's hanging around. Tape pictures and sound—the whole works."

"Okay."

Flipping another switch, Bill called the strange ship on the all-interplanetary frequency.

Suddenly after long minutes of silence the dark screen lighted up with the impassive features of a round faced, cold eyed man.

"Yeah? This is the *Pluton*. What d'you want—and who are you?"

"This is the *Space Dragon*—sister ship to the *Space Bird* there in your vicinity. What's the matter with our ship?"

The man's eyes darkened and his jaws tightened. "There's plenty wrong with it, *Space Dragon*. And the same thing's going to be wrong with your ship, too. A 'meteor' is going to hit your ship the same as hit the *Space Bird*. Asteroid Mining doesn't like competitors horning in their business!"

Bill shot back grimly, "I'm glad to hear your views on competition, Mister. The whole world is interested in our Project Venture, and when they hear what you said there's going to be hell to pay. Because, you see, everything you say and how you look saying it is being recorded back at Staker Field on Earth!"

The other man's impassive face suddenly turned into a ludicrous mask of a man burning his fingers on hot chestnuts. The two way hook-up abruptly ended. On the scope Bill and Jones watched the image of the *Pluton* begin to move across the scope and finally out of range in the opposite direction toward Asteroid Mining's Omega Quadrant.

Hours later the *Space Dragon* made physical contact with Tom's ship. Bill was the first one through the communicating airlock.

Tom, his face drawn and haggard, met him as he emerged in the ship. The rest of the crew were lying still to conserve air.

"Hi, Bill. Boy, are we glad to see you. That 'meteor' they threw at us confined us on air bottles in the forward compartments."

Bill shook his hand warmly. "We got enough air for all of us. After we patch things up here, let's start carving us a chunk of private enterprise."

Tom's tired eyes lighted up. "Hm, say, you're so right! Our geigers have found enough floating ore in Beta Quadrant already to make a big nick in Asteroid's business."

Bill gave him a mock salute, "Okay, skipper. You've earned the title of Head Dreamer, and I'll help make your dreams come true!"

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BLACK TIDE ***

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