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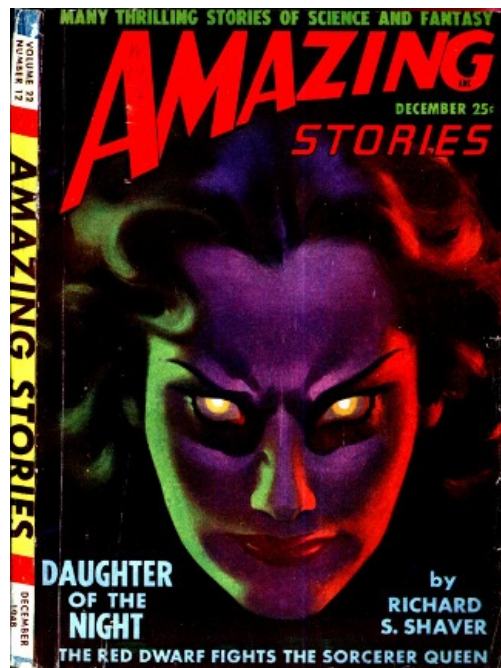
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## BEYOND THE THUNDER

By H. B. Hickey

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Ten thousand persons in New York looked skyward at the first rumble of sound. The flash caught them that way, seared them to cinder, liquefied their eyeballs, brought their vitals boiling out of the fissures of their bodies. They were the lucky ones. The rest died slowly, their monument the rubble which had once been a city.

Of all that, Case Damon knew nothing. Rocketing up in the self-service elevator to his new cloud-reaching apartment in San Francisco, his thoughts were all on the girl who would be waiting for him.

"She loves me, she loves me not," he said to himself. They were orchid petals, not those of daisies, that drifted to the floor of the car.

"She loves me." The last one touched the floor softly, and Case laughed.

Then the doors were opening and he was racing down the hall. No more lonely nights for him, no

What was this blinding force that came out of a hole in the sky, and was powerful enough to destroy an entire city? Case thought he knew....

more hours wasted thumbing through the pages of his little black book wondering which girl to call. Case Damon, rocket-jockey, space-explorer, was now a married man, married to the most beautiful girl in the world.

He scooped Karin off her feet and hugged her to him. Her lips were red velvet on his, her spun gold hair drifted around his shoulders.

"Box seats for the best show in town, honey," he gloated in her ear.

He fished around in his pockets with one hand while he held her against him with the other. They'd said you couldn't get tickets for that show. But what "they" said never stopped Case Damon, whether it was a matter of theatre tickets, or of opening a new field on a distant airless planet.

"Turn off that telecast," he said. "I'm not interested in Interplan news these days. From now on, Case Damon keeps his feet on terra firma."

And that was the way it was going to be. His interest in the uranium on Trehos alone should keep him and Karin in clover for the rest of their lives. They'd have fun, they'd have kids, they'd live like normal married people. The rest of the universe could go hang.

"If you'd stop raving, I might get a word in edgewise," Karin begged.

"The floor is yours. Also the walls, the building, the whole darned city if you want it," Case laughed.

"That telecast is ticking for you. Washington calling Case Damon. Washington calling Case Damon. Since you left an hour ago it's been calling you."

"Let it call. It's my constitutional right not to answer."

But his mood was changing to match Karin's. His lean, firm-jawed features were turning serious. Tension tightened his powerful body.

"It must be important, Case," Karin said. "They're using your code call. They wouldn't do that unless it was urgent."

He listened to the tick of the machine. Unless you knew, it sounded only like the regular ticking that told the machine was in operation. But there were little breaks here and there. It *was* for him.

Three long strides took him to the machine. His deft fingers flicked switches, brought a glow to the video tubes.

"Case Damon," he said softly. "Come in, Washington."

It was Cranly's face that filled the screen. But a Cranly Case barely recognized. The man had aged ten years in the last three days. His voice was desperate.

"Good grief, man! Where've you been? Get down here fast. But fast!"

"Listen, Cranly. I'm on my honeymoon. Or have you forgotten? Remember three days ago you were best man at a wedding? Well, the fellow at the altar was Case Damon."

That should have gotten a smile out of Cranly. But it didn't. He was even a little angry now.

"This is an order, Case! I'm giving you the honor of being the first non-official person to know about it. Supreme Emergency Mobilization and Evacuation Order. New York was blasted out of existence an hour ago!"

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All flights grounded, the skyport in a turmoil, but that little silver card got him and Karin through. Nobody knew yet what was going on. They were readying for something big, but they didn't know what as yet.

Case hurried Karin to his own hangar, hustled her into the small speeder.

"The fishing cabin on the Columbia, honey. Stay there! And don't worry if you don't hear from me."

He didn't even wait to see her take off. Karin would be safe enough. The cabin was a hundred miles from any possible military objective. All he had to do was sit tight until things were straightened out. New York blasted! That could have been an accident. It *must* have been an accident. The only alternative would be war. And there were no more wars. Somebody at Supreme Council must have lost his head to issue the E.M.E. order.

Sure, that was it. Leave it to the politicians to get excited and jump out of their skins. Below him the glistening towers of Kansas City flashed and faded and were replaced minutes later by the towers of St. Louis. Chicago was batting out a "clear the sky order."

All three of those cities would have been gone by now if there were really a war, Case told himself. But Cranly was no politician. And he wasn't the kind that scared easily.

It was Cranly who met him at Washington skyport. Cranly was scared, all right. He was more frightened than he'd been the time their ship had started to tear loose from their mooring on that moon of Jupiter. His face was gray.

"I'll fill you in as we go," he said. The official car jerked into high speed and Cranly talked. "It was no accident. Get that straight. New York was hit from the outside."

"But how? By what? Under the Unified Council there's no one who'd have anything to gain by war. There isn't even anyone on Earth with the power to make war."

"That's why we wanted you here. It figures to be an enemy from another planet."

"That doesn't make sense." Case swivelled around to face Cranly. "You and I know our system as well as anyone alive. Cut out the guessing and give me the facts."

"All right. Enough people saw the thing from Jersey so that we know what happened. They say there was a rumble like thunder. Out of a clear sky, mind you. Then—get this—the sky seemed to open! There was a blast of light. That's all. New York was gone."

"Atom blast?"

"Hardly. No mushroom cloud. Accident? No, and you'll learn why I'm so sure shortly."

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Case Damon had met some of these men before. A few others he recognized from their pictures. The Supreme Council. They were plenty worried. Strogoff was chewing his mustache; Vargas drummed nervously with thick fingers. Cunningham and Osborn were pacing the floor.

"Thank heaven for one thing," Osborn said. Vargas looked up at him quickly, his dark eyes slits in his swarthy face.

"For what?" Vargas asked bitterly.

"That there has been no panic. Urban evacuations are proceeding quietly."

"I still think it could have been some natural phenomenon," Case interrupted. "Even a terrific bolt of lightning."

Cranly's big shoulders lifted as a recorder was wheeled into the room. He indicated where the machine was to be set down.

"We've wasted a little time in letting you make these guesses," he told Case. "All for a reason. We want you to realize fully what sort of weapon we are up against. Now listen to this message that was beamed onto the Council's private line a few minutes after the blast."

He went to the recorder and tripped a lever. The instrument settled to a low whine that soon disappeared as the recording tape entered the converter. The voice might have been in the room with them.

"To the Supreme Council of the Planet Earth: What happened to New York was only a token of what can be done to your entire planet. Our terms are complete and unconditional surrender, to be telecast within one week. To hasten your decision, there will be other tokens at twelve-hour intervals."

"Now you know," Cranly said heavily. "Either give up or be destroyed. And that ultimatum from an enemy which has no compunction about murdering ten million people to prove its power."

A thousand questions jumped to Case Damon's mind. The horror of the thing stilled most of them. He checked over possibilities quickly.

"You say many people outside of New York saw the flash. What about skyports, observatories, the fleet base on the Moon? Did they try to get a triangulation?"

"I can see why Cranly wanted you here," Vargas said, smiling faintly. His own people had been the last to join the Unified Council. He had held out to the last, had demanded and received concessions, but he was considered one of the Council's ablest men.

"Naturally there were attempts at fixing the source of the flash," he continued. "Had those attempts met with success the fleet would already be on its way."

"I don't get it," Case said bluntly. "If they attempted triangulation, they must have got it."

"Precisely," Cranly interjected. "They got it. The source of the flash was an *empty space* between Mars and Venus!"

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Case was rocked back on his heels by Cranly's disclosure. This was *something*. An enemy who loosed his blasts out of unoccupied space, who could cut into the Council's own line at will!

"What about a fast moving asteroid? That could have been gone before it was observed."

"Not a chance," Cranly said.

And Cranly should know. So should the rest. Every one of them was in charge of a department of the Earth's services. But there was that emphasis on Mars and Venus. Strogoff interrupted that line of thought.

"I say we might as well give in." Even his thick mustache drooped in despondency. "Why have millions more killed?"

"Never!" Osborn thundered.

"I should hesitate to admit defeat," Vargas shrugged. "But how can we defend ourselves?"

Outside the chambers, in the corridor, Cranly gripped his friend's shoulder hard. "That's been going on for an hour," he said, "this one for, and that one against."

"And meanwhile the fleet can't do a thing," Cranly added.

"Exactly. Whoever blasted New York is doing it from an invisible base. That's my guess. It's an invader from space. My job will be to stay here and keep the Council from giving up. Your job is to find the base."

"Are you sure the attack was from space?"

"Positive."

"Well," Case mused, "I've found uncharted planets, even discovered a city on Mars that the experts said didn't exist. Maybe I can get beyond the thunder, through a hole in the sky."

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It was night, and that was a good break. Cranly had been sure he could hold the Council together another twelve hours. Even through a second attack. Fine. For a job like this, Case thought, twelve hours of night were better than twenty of daylight.

He grabbed an aero-cab for the skyport. The pilot looked twice at the silver tab, finally nodded. Case had a few minutes with his thoughts. He'd wanted to talk to Karin, but Cranly had turned thumbs down.

"You can talk to her if and when you get back," he'd said. Fine stuff for a guy who was supposed to be enjoying a honeymoon.

"Hey!" the pilot blurted, cutting into Case's thoughts. He pointed out the window.

Case saw a red streak cut through the sky toward them. A rocket ship, and moving fast. It flashed closer. No mistake about this, it was aiming right for them. They were a couple of dead ducks.

"Look out," Case said.

His big hands flung the pilot out of his seat. Case took over the controls. A whoosh of fire swept past the cabin, missed them as Case sent the ship into a dive.

"Break out the glider chutes," he called back over his shoulder.

Luckily, the pilot didn't try to argue. He was too scared. He snapped a chute around his own shoulders, fought his way forward and got the other one around Case. Another blast cut past the cabin, then another. The rocket ship was using all guns now. They were over the Potomac, then over a wooded area.

"We'll jump at a hundred feet," Case yelled.

A streak of flame caught the cab's right edge, and Case told himself they'd be lucky to jump at all. The little craft was almost out of control. His pretended spin was turning into the real thing. Keeping his eyes glued on the plummeting altimeter, he got his left foot up and kicked out the side window. A flash melted the dial and singed his sleeve. One-fifty.

"Go!" Case barked.

The pilot's heels vanished out the window and Case banked sharply to the right and flung himself out of the seat. Hard earth of a clearing looked like it was going to smack him right in the face.

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**The chute billowed out as he hit the ground, and he pulled hard at the cords to get his footing**

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Then the small chute billowed and pulled out glider wings. Case pulled cords and dropped leftward. The cab hit the ground to his right, the rocket ship on its tail for a final blast. He saw that, and then got his hands in front of him and hit the ground in a rolling fall.

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The pilot was a still shape near him in the gloom. Case got out of the chute and ran to him, slid expert hands over the man, and felt the messy pulp that had once been a face. The pilot hadn't known how to fall properly.

Case took a quick look upward. His trick hadn't worked. The rocket was making a tight curve for a landing. Smart operators; they weren't taking any chances. Case cursed them, whoever they were, even as he dug his silver identification plate out of his pocket and slid it into the dead pilot's flying jacket.

Then he ran. Maybe he'd fool them. Maybe he wouldn't. They'd probably take a few minutes to think it over. He skipped around a bush and heard voices and the pound of running feet behind him.

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So Cranly was wrong. This wasn't strictly a space job. There was a tie-up on Earth, and the tie-up had to be on the very inside of the Supreme Council! Nobody else knew Case Damon was in on this deal. He ought to head back and warn Cranly.

No, that wasn't right. He had to trust Cranly to handle his end. Only nine hours now till the next blast, and if he took time out to reach Cranly he wouldn't ever make it. Besides, his stunt might have worked. Why tip them off he was still alive?

Brilliant headlights came up the road and Case stepped out onto the highway. The lights came on at two hundred miles an hour, caught him and made him blink. Then there was the hiss of automatic brakes.

"Hey!" a man yelled "What if those brakes hadn't worked?"

Case jerked the car door open and saw that the man was alone. A young fellow, and plenty frightened at sight of Case's torn clothes and scratched and dirty face.

"Don't take your hands off that wheel," Case said sharply. "Head for Washington skyport and keep your foot on the floor all the way."

The young fellow's hand fell away from the dash compartment. He gulped, nodded, and threw the car into gear. He got his foot all the way down and kept it there. They took a sweeping curve at full speed.

Washington was a dot of light, then a haze, a glare. All departments working overtime tonight, Case thought. They hurtled toward the city, smack toward Pennsylvania Avenue.

"Slow down," Case said. "I don't want to be picked up."

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The young fellow slowed down. He must be thinking he's got a desperate character next to him, Case mused. If he only knew how desperate! The skyport was less than a mile away now.

"Take the side road around to where the hangars are," Case directed.

The young fellow took the side road. They swept past the main gate, along the ten-mile fence, slid without lights now behind the row of hangars. The hangars looked like rows of cigars standing on end, the ships inside them pointing up and ready to go.

"This is where we get out," Case said. He shoved the driver out of the door and followed him. His fist came up in a short arc and cracked against a jaw-bone.

"Sorry," Case told the inert figure. "I just can't take any chances."

He dumped the unconscious man beside the road and then went back to the car. Wheeling it around so it pointed back toward the main gate, he left the motor whirring and stepped out. One hand depressed the accelerator button, the other held the motor release.

When he jumped clear, the car sputtered. With lights off in the darkness the automatic brake wouldn't work. A hundred yards down the car slowed, swerved, hit a concrete abutment. Quite a crash, Case thought. That ought to turn a few heads the wrong way for a while.

He was at the high fence in a flash. His fingers searched for and found crevices. Those fingers were strong as steel. They hauled Case Damon upward and over the top. He grinned into the darkness.

Men were running from the hangars toward the site of the crash. With no incoming traffic slated, the control tower had swung all lights that way. Somewhere a crash siren sang its song.

Case dropped completely relaxed. His feet hit first as he fell forward. His hands hit next, then his head was down between his shoulders and he was rolling forward onto the back of his neck and then onto his feet again. He came up running.

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It was going to be a slow start without rocket-boosters. But rockets made light and sound. This had to be a silent takeoff.

He knew his way around this tiny ship even in complete blackness. He had designed it himself, and it was completely functional. Case Damon had wanted no comforts; those came at the end of a journey. When there was a race for a newly discovered ore field, it was the man who got there first, not most comfortably, who won out.

A sharp click told Case that the anti-grav was on. He was looking through his forward visalloy plate straight up into a starlit sky. That wasn't too good. Small as the ship was, it still would make a dark blot.

His eyes roved, discovered a few wisps of cloud. He prayed them closer. Now!

This wasn't the first time he'd taken off in darkness, depending on spring power to lift him silently out of the hangar cradle. He'd beaten them all to Trehos only because they'd figured to catch his takeoff by the rocket flashes. They'd figured to tail him that way, too, only by the time the competition had found out he was gone, he'd been half way there.

Cranly hadn't called him in on this without good reason. Together, he and Cranly had made many a rocket jaunt to distant and dangerous places. They'd been a good team before Cranly had sought election to the Council. Cranly was the cautious kind; but when he knew exactly where he stood, he could move fast enough.

Case slid the ship behind a cloud and felt his speed slacken. He had to risk a short burst of the jets. The odds were against anyone seeing the flash now.

At his present low speed, it would be a while before he was out of range of detection apparatus. He had time to wonder whether he ought to buzz Karin on the telecast. Better not; there was always the chance his call might be picked up.

He was sorry now that he hadn't thought to shoot cross-country to get Karin. Who knew for certain where the next blast would hit? He could have dropped her off at the moon base.

The moon was full in his vision plates now. He was close enough to tune in their local telecast to the moon colonies. The machine was ticking away and Case switched it onto the pitted satellite's local beam.

They had the news all right, and they were making preparations for an attack. The fleet base was assuring all colonists that it would furnish them all possible protection.

A fat lot of good that was going to do! Case had had enough time now to think this over, and he was beginning to see the ramifications of the thing.

Someone on Earth, someone *inside the Council*, wanted to take over. But with Earth supervision

of military manufacture so thorough, he hadn't a chance to get started. So he must have enlisted the aid of some power from outer space.

But how? And what power? And who was the traitor inside the Council?

Case wasn't going at this blindly. That first question, for instance. There had been in the last year several strange disappearances. Two space liners from Mars to Venus had utterly vanished, without a trace. Smaller ships, too, had never reported back. They had last been heard from in that same area.

But space liners just didn't vanish. They had equipment for any emergency, were able to contact Earth at a moment's notice.

A hole in the sky, observers of the flash had said. Between Mars and Venus, Cranly had told him. It was beginning to add up. It was Case Damon's job to figure the total.

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Now the moon was far behind. Case looked at his watch and saw that he was making real time. Another couple of hours was all he'd need.

He got out the chart Cranly had given him, set it up alongside his own navigation map, figured the time element and aimed his ship at a blankness in space. He would hit that empty space at exactly the right time.

After that? Case didn't know. But he wasn't the kind to cross bridges before he got to them.

What if Cranly was the traitor within the Council? That was hard to believe, but you could never tell what lust for power might do to a man. Cranly wasn't the type. Yet, there was a planet to be won. They said every man had his price. And Cranly was in charge of Earth's intelligence services.

The ticking of the telecast broke into his thoughts. There were breaks in the steady sounds. His code call.

Case switched on the video and got a blank. What the devil! Automatically he reached for his transmitter switch. And caught himself in the nick of time. It might be a trick to get him to reveal his position. Instead, he turned up the audio.

"Damon," a voice said. "Case Damon." It was not the same voice he had heard in the Council chambers. This was vaguely familiar, but definitely disguised.

"Better turn back, Damon," the voice said. "You almost tricked us. Don't let a small success go to your head. We cannot be defeated. Why sacrifice your life for a lost cause?"

"You know where you can go, brother," Case said aloud.

It had been bad psychology to use on a man who had never feared death anyway. Besides, if they were so omniscient, why bother to try to stop him with words?

The voice had tried to impress him with power. It had only succeeded in disclosing a weakness. They didn't know where Case Damon was, and they were worried.

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Hours had become minutes, and the minutes were ticking away with the sweep of the hand on Case's watch. Ten minutes more to go. Using Cranly's figures and chart, he was only a thousand miles from that point in space.

He swung the ship around and cut speed, but held his hand ready at the throttle. There might not be much time to act. And the telecast was using his signal again. He didn't want to turn it up, but he wanted to hear that voice again.

"Damon," the voice said. "Case Damon. This is your last chance."

"Change your tune," Case snarled at the instrument.

But the voice was going on. "If your own life means nothing, perhaps you value another more. Turn on your video and you will see something of interest to you."

That got him, brought him bolt upright in his seat. The voice could mean only one thing—Karin! Somehow they had got to her!

Maybe this was a trick. Only five minutes or less now. They might be trying to distract him. But he couldn't take the chance. With fingers that were icy cold, Case Damon flicked on the video.

A wall was what he first saw. Only a wall. It was a trick. But wait. That wall was familiar, rough, unpainted. The focus was shifting to a section that showed a mounted fish. Now down the wall and across to a familiar couch. The fishing cabin!

"Karin!" Case blurted.

Then he was mouthing incoherent curses. Her figure had been flung across the screen, on the couch. She had put up a fight. Her face was scratched, her blouse ripped. There was a gag in her mouth and her hands were tied behind her.

"She dies unless you turn back!" the voice said. It meant every word.

Karin had guts. She was shaking her head, imploring him with her eyes not to turn back.

If he only had time to think! What did the rest of the world mean to Case Damon? Nothing, if it was a world without Karin. Yet, she was his own kind, this girl he had married. Were their positions reversed, it would have been Case who shook his head. Better to die than live in a world dominated by a murderous, merciless power.

And yet, she was ... Karin. Without her there was nothing. Already Case's hands were busy, throwing switches that would cut in the retarding jets, swinging the responsive craft about. He had to give in. He didn't have time to think.

"All right," he started to say.

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His right hand reached out to turn on his transmitter. His lips framed the words again. But it was too late!

The video was distorting into a mass of wavy lines, the audio brought nothing but a jumble of sound. Interference was scrambling the telecast waves beyond hope of intelligibility. He couldn't get through. The first rumble rose to audibility and made the ship shiver.

"Too late," Case said, and was beyond cursing.

Too late to turn back now. But not too late to go ahead. Air waves were pitching the ship like a cork. He fought to control, and finally swung back on course.

Case took a last quick look at Cranly's chart, and flicked his eyes ahead to the vision plate. Only blackness yet, but the sound was growing and rising in pitch past the point where he could hear it. There was the sense of enormous strain, of the tug of unbelievably powerful and overwhelming contending forces.

And then the blackness split!

First, he could see only a pinpoint of light. It grew larger, widened, spread until it became a cleft in the void. Case flung his ship forward.

The last rumble of thunder was fading. He kept his eyes on that cleft in space, knowing what would come. Yet, when it came, he was almost blinded. A blast of light, a light so intense that it was a tangible, solid thing, roared through the cleft and hurtled Earthward.

Then the bolt was gone and the cleft was closing. The tug of forces was growing less. He had just seconds left to reach that diminishing crack in the blackness.

Like a streak of vengeance itself, Case sent his ship across the void. His lips moved in silent prayer. There were only seconds now. The crack was growing smaller, and that meant his speed was not great enough. To risk more power might blow the ship apart. But he had to get through. He must, he must....

He *was* through!

---

Case was through, through the cleft and beyond the thunder. He was hurtling out of blackness into a world of light. Frantically, he cut down his speed, not knowing whether he was going into open space or the side of a mountain, whether in this new world he would be going up or down.

His altimeter had switched on automatically. That was a relief. A quick glance showed the dial at 90,000 feet. The retarding jets were slowing his drop, and Case had time for a look at strange terrain below.

From his present height, it looked like rolling country. There were hills, valleys, a checkerboard of green and tan that might be cultivated ground, a river.

But most important of all, there was a city, a city of towers and pinnacles more impressive than any on Earth. Three of those towers interested Case. They stood apart, the center tower hundreds of feet higher than the two which flanked it, and all three were like fingers pointing directly at the place where the cleft had been.

Case made decisions rapidly. He had to get the ship out of the air before someone saw it. First, though, he'd have to make sure it would be air he stepped into when he got out. He had a space suit in the forward locker, but putting that on would slow him up.

An intake valve hissed away. Soon, there would be something to test. Then the hissing stopped. That was a good sign. Pressure outside the ship was almost the same as inside. There was an



atmosphere.

But of what was that atmosphere composed? That was now the big question. Case set the controls and turned to the intake tank. With the turn of a petcock, there came another hiss. Case got out his cigarette lighter and flicked it into flame.

He held his breath as the flame wavered. The air in the ship was being forced away from it. But the flame did not die. Case sighed with relief. If the atmosphere supported combustion, it would support breathing.

With that important question answered, Case turned to others. Where the devil was he? He couldn't answer that, but perhaps he might discover a clue. The telecast was one way.

But the telecast had stopped ticking. Case ran the thing over the entire frequency range and got nothing. If that was a clue, it was a negative one.

He had to think it over even as he swung the ship into a long glide for a hill which looked like it might have a good deal of growth on it. Coming in low, Case saw that vegetation was sparse. But there was not another ship in these strange skies. He had to land soon.

Running his eyes over the landscape below, Case discovered tall vegetation along the base of another hill. It would have to do. He came in low over the green, and swooped in for a landing. Luckily, this ship could land on a handkerchief.

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Strange trees, these which encircled the tiny clearing. They were all shades of green, taller and broader than sequoias, and yet more like ferns in the delicacy of their gigantic fronds.

Case stepped through the forward hatch into a warm, humid atmosphere that was quite comfortable. He had thought of waiting for darkness, but there was no way of knowing whether darkness ever came to this strange world which seemed to exist in nowhere.

Too bad his compass was no good here. There seemed to be no magnetic polarity. He'd have to trust to his sense of direction.

The city Case had seen was at least fifty miles away and past a couple of low-lying hills that hid it from sight. That made it a good hike, even for Case Damon's long and muscular legs.

And after he got there, if he got there? Case shrugged. Another bridge to be crossed later. He hitched at his holstered gun and started moving through the ferns.

He'd have to be careful; on closer scrutiny from a low level the land had proved to be cultivated. And that meant people about.

A humming drew his eyes skyward. Huge ships of weird design were crisscrossing the air above, obviously looking for something. Probably himself, Case thought grimly. They must have cleared the air for that blast. Now they're out in force. Still, there was a chance they'd thought him one of their own pilots who'd disobeyed. He'd come in too fast for anyone to have had a good look at his ship, he hoped.

He jumped five feet at an ear-splitting roar, whipped out his gun and had the stud under his fingertip for a quick blast. He felt foolish when the source of the roar turned out to be a purple bird that soared up out of the foliage overhead.

There were other sounds now, from small animals that scooted about on six legs and looked like fur-bearing armadillos. Then the ferns were behind him, and he was out onto a road that came over the hill.

Case got off the road in a hurry. Well tended fields lay on either side of it with spaced rows of grain that was taller than he. He could walk between the rows and be out of sight of the road.

He took a few quick steps, pushed aside a stalk of grain, and tripped. His gasp was involuntary but loud. For a second he lay still, then got to his feet. He had tripped over a root.

"Natsa!" a voice shouted. There was the thump of heavy feet behind him.

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Case whirled. Just in time. A big orange-skinned man in a metallic suit came bursting out of the next row of grain. He took one look at Case, and reached for the holstered weapon at his side.

But few men could outdraw and out-shoot Case Damon. A flash of green played about his opponent's head. And then there was no head.

"Natsa to you," Case grunted at the body.

He was used to death in many forms, and it upset him not at all to handle the body. The fellow had been about his own size. At least he would now have a suit that wouldn't attract attention. He decided to keep his own gun rather than trust a strange one, but he exchanged holsters with the corpse.

"Now, if only Natsa doesn't show up, I'll make tracks out of here," Case said to himself.

But the Damon luck was wearing thin. There were shouts from along the road. More than one voice now, and all using a strange language. They must have come over from the field across the way, Case thought.

He flattened himself against the last row of stalks and took a deep breath. With the first sight of somebody coming through the row of grain, he stepped out and onto the road.

There were three of them, all big men, and none were looking his way. By the time their cries of consternation rose at sight of the body, Case was across the road and into the grain on the other side.

He ran until his heart began to hammer, and then he slowed to a fast walk. When the field curved around a bend, he breathed easier.

Along the road there was activity now, and the sound of vehicles moving fast. They were looking for him. Then the field ended, and Case was in a grove of wild fruit. Heavy brush caught at his face, but he stuck close to the road.

Voices drifted in toward him. He had to chance a look. Stretching himself full length, Case parted thick brambles and peered out. More men, all wearing the same metallic suits. This group was walking slowly, munching on the same sort of fruit that grew overhead.

Case thought it over. He didn't have a chance. His own tanned skin would stand out like a sore thumb against the orange brightness of these people.

But he was not without resources. The fruit had given him an idea. It dripped an orange liquid. If the stuff was good enough to eat, it certainly couldn't hurt to smear a little over his face and hands!

---

When he hit the road again, Case Damon was as orange as any man he'd so far seen in this new world. Maybe he wouldn't get away with it, but he had to try.

Vehicles sped by and nobody gave him a second glance. So far, so good. When he passed the group he had seen from the grove without drawing undue attention, he relaxed.

A long row of chugging trucks rumbled by, apparently loaded with produce for the city. Case looked up and a man on the back of the last one waved and shouted to him. Case waved back and the truck slowed.

He wished now that he hadn't waved. The truck had stopped, and the man in back was waiting to give him a hand up. Too late to back down now. Case took a short run and swung aboard and the truck moved on. The man who'd helped him up said something.

"Hmmm?" Case hummed. If this fellow made a suspicious move he'd have to slug him.

"Kanato?" the man said. It was a question. They came over the brow of a small hill and the man pointed to the city in the distance. He was asking if Case was bound for the city.

Case bobbed his head. He was going to play dumb. He pointed at his mouth and shook his head. His companion nodded understandingly, but wanted to get chummy anyway. Then he looked down and saw Case's holster and changed his mind.

Small cars of a strange sort were buzzing past them, going away from the city. They were filled with orange-skinned men carrying shoulder arms. Probably Kanato police on their way to investigate a very recent killing. Case gave silent thanks he had got this ride.

There was a tense moment at the gate of the city. Heavily armed men swarmed about. But produce trucks seemed to be exempt from close scrutiny.

Case's companion traded jeers and coarse laughter with the gendarmerie, and the truck rolled on down a wide avenue. The old feud between city dweller and rustic, Case guessed. He noticed that the citizens of Kanato wore clothing of high lustre and fine mesh.

They must be a scrappy people. Almost every male citizen carried a gun. His own wouldn't be noticed, then.

Before a huge building, the truck stopped. The end of the journey. Case hopped off, nodded his thanks for the lift and started walking.

---

Those three towers were at the edge of the city. Case made his way through a crowded square, turned down a fern-lined street and headed for them. From behind him a light breeze came, wafting a familiar aroma to his nostrils.

Cigarette smoke! But until now he had seen nobody smoking. Acting on impulse, Case drifted over to one side of the walk and bent as though to tie his shoe.

Men walked past. Case straightened up, got a look at the backs of their necks, and gasped. White—as white as his own skin. These were no inhabitants of this world, but men of his own kind!

There were three of them. And now, as they finished lighting up, they were talking plain Earth English with as little concern as though they were strolling down the street of any Earth city.

"By the time we get back, there ought to be news," one of the men said.

"Yeah. That last one should have brought them around."

The second voice was another surprise. It stirred memories. Somewhere, Case had heard that coarse tone before. He thought hard.

Sure, now he had it. Pete Engels, hotshot engineer cashiered out of the space fleet and turned adventurer bum. The other two men Case didn't know.

"I'd give plenty for a look at Davisson's face now," Engels was saying. Davisson was commander of the moon base, to which Engels had been attached.

"He's probably running around in circles," one of Engels' companions laughed.

"Yeah. And don't think he ain't number one on my list when we take over."

A sudden humming filled the air as they drew closer to the three towers, and Case stopped listening to the conversation for a moment. The man ahead had paused briefly, but they were now moving on.

Pedestrian traffic had fallen off, Case noticed. He and the three ahead were the only ones heading for the towers. It looked like the towers were out of bounds for most citizens. A moment later he was certain of that, when he saw the number of armed guards around the entrance gate.

But the guards didn't stop Engels and the pair with him. They jerked their heads in a brief greeting and walked right through the cordon. Case paused, let them get inside the building.

---

Here goes, he thought. Nothing like a bold front in a spot like this. He stepped forward briskly.

But the bold front wasn't working. Hostile eyes swung his way. Fingers came down to rest on triggers that could send death winging.

Case looked up, pretended to be startled. A foolish grin spread over his face. Would they believe he'd been day-dreaming? They would. He was turning around and walking back the way he'd come and nobody was stopping him.

He cursed under his breath. Somehow he had to get inside that tower Pete Engels had entered. But how?

An inviting doorway yawned back along the avenue, and Case stepped inside. He looked at his watch. A few hours left until the next blast. He'd have to move fast.

Fighting his way into the tower was absolutely out of the question. He'd never get past the guards. Maybe not, but he was sure going to try. This time the grin on his face was far from foolish.

Case Damon had an idea, and he wasn't one to let time slip by before he acted on it. The idea was simple, so simple it might even work.

An orange dye had gotten him into Kanato. But it would never get him into that tower. Yet, Pete Engels and his pals had walked right in. Maybe that was one place where an Earth complexion would turn the trick.

Case got out his handkerchief, spit on it a few times and started rubbing. It was slow work, but he'd better not leave any telltale streaks.

When he came out of the doorway a few minutes later, he had left behind him a handkerchief and as much of the dye as he could remove. Lucky he'd always been an outdoor man. Whatever was left would be too faint to show against his tan skin.

His walk was not too slow, not too fast. His step was the step of a man who knew he wasn't going to have any trouble. The guards looked up and saw him coming.

Case kept his head down as though in deep thought. They could see his color, but not his face. His right hand swung close to his holster. Now a booted foot came into his line of vision.

The foot moved toward him. Case bobbed his head up and down briefly, much as Engels had done, and kept walking. The guard hesitated, stepped out of his way. He was through the cordon and going up through the entrance.

Then the yelling came from behind him. They had caught on.

---

One leap took Case through the doorway. Over his head, a pellet burst. They were shooting now. Somewhere in the building, a warning whistle cut loose.

He ran down a long corridor, saw figures pop out of a room ahead. But there was a corridor running crossways. Case skidded, made a fast turn and pounded along that one. Plenty of shouting now. It sounded like he had an army after him.

These halls were too long. He was a dead pigeon if he didn't find a place to hide soon. There were plenty of doors, but he didn't know which one to try. Then a series of the deadly pellets broke around him and made up his mind. The next door was the one.

It opened into a big room filled with electrical equipment. Case barged around something that looked like a big transformer, and headed for a door at the other end. The door swung toward him, disclosing a mass of men.

His gun was in his hand now and spitting death. But there were too many. Their corpses blocked the doorway. He couldn't get around them.

Something heavy cracked against the base of his skull and knocked him to his knees. Half dazed, he turned and tried to fire and was buried beneath an avalanche of charging men. The gun was knocked out of his hand.

"Hey!" A startled voice came through the roaring in Case Damon's ears. "Hey! This guy is white!"

Rough hands twisted his arms behind Case and other hands hauled him to his feet. He shook his head to clear it and found himself facing Pete Engels. There was instant recognition.

"Case Damon. Well, I'll be! I told Yuna to warn those guards, but I didn't really think you'd make it."

"I didn't, did I?" Case said bitterly.

"What is it?" A voice said from behind Engels. "What is going on?"

That was in Earth English, but with a heavy accent. The voice belonged to an orange skinned man who came through as the guards parted. This was someone of importance, Case realized. His metallic suit gleamed with the lustre of spun gold, and it filled his big body as though it had been moulded to it.

"Meet Case Damon," Engels said with mock ceremony. "Damon, this is Yuna, ruler of Kanato and soon to be half ruler of the Earth."

Haughty yellow eyes flashed at Engels and stilled his tongue. Then the eyes swung back to Case and gave him a thorough scrutiny.

"So this is the one of whom we were warned," Yuna said. "I can see why the Earthlings do not surrender so quickly."

"They'll surrender all right," Engels snarled.

Case saw an opening and lashed out with his foot. The kick caught Engels low in the belly and drew a yell of pain. A fist thudded against Case's jaw.

"You rat," Case said through drawn lips. "You'd sell out your own mother."

"For the right price," Engels admitted, cheerfully. He turned to Yuna. "What'll we do with him?"

"Put him with the rest. We can dispose of them later."

---

As a cell it was not too bad. But there was a stench that was nauseating. Case adjusted his eyes to the gloom and looked about.

There were bunks along one wall, a few of them occupied. With the shutting of the door behind Case, men stirred. Two thin legs swung over the top of a bunk, followed by an equally thin body.

"Take your gloating elsewhere, Engels," a sharp voice said.

"The name is not Engels. It's Case Damon."

"Huh?"

There were more legs now, four pairs. Men were spluttering excitedly. Thin bodies slid out of bunks and feet came toward Case. There was one man he knew, Burnine, the pilot of the Mars-Venus liner which had vanished.

"Case Damon! I knew sooner or later someone would get through."

"Don't let your hopes run away with you," Case said. "I'm the only one, and it looks like I'll be the last."

Burnine was crying, definitely and without shame. He fought to bring himself under control.

"They're going to get away with it," he said, brokenly. Long imprisonment had broken him down.

"Maybe," Case said. "It all depends on what the chances are of getting out of this cell before the next blast. The Council hasn't given up yet."

"I know. But that humming means they're building up voltage for the next shot. It won't be long."

"How do you know?"

"Engels. He comes down here every couple of days to tell us we're chumps for not coming over to his side. Meanwhile, we've learned what goes on. In a year you can learn a lot if you keep your ears open."

"A year," Case mused. "Since those liners disappeared."

"Yeah. Engels and his pals were on the one I was piloting. They stuck guns in our ribs and took over and brought us here."

"There are a couple of things I've got to know," Case said. "First, what kind of weapon are they using? Second, where are we?"

"I can't quite answer the first. And I don't know exactly where we are, but I know how we got here. Maybe that will help."

"It seems that someone on Earth was experimenting with a new force. He discovered that he could put a crack in the curvature of space. Once he got through that crack and found Yuna, he realized that with this weapon of Yuna's he could take over the Earth. I don't know who this person is, but Engels is working for him. So are a lot of other people."

"What about these towers?"

"They work automatically. Two of them contain the apparatus for building up energy. The blast is fired from this one. It's all timed to fit with the machine on Earth. That's why it takes exactly twelve hours."

"Do you know where the main works are?"

"On the level below this one. But what's the difference? We'll never get out of here."

"Maybe not. But we can sure try. Are you game?"

Burnine stared at him, looked around at the other three. Their thin shoulders had lost some of the sag. A spark had been kindled in their eyes.

"What can we lose?" Burnine said.

---

They could tell when Engels started down the corridor outside their cell. His feet made a heavy sound. There were several guards with him.

"What do you guys want?" Engels shouted through the door.

"I've got a message for your boss," Case shouted back.

"Go ahead. I can hear you."

"It's in writing," Case called.

Engels laughed sourly. "This better not be a trick. You're a dead tomato if it is. Back away from the door."

He came through, closely followed by four guards. All of them carried guns in their hands, but when they saw Case in the middle of the room with the men behind him, they put up the weapons and moved forward.

"Where is it?" Engels asked.

"Here." Case put his hand out and Engels reached.

Too late, Engels and the guards realized that there were only three men behind Case. From behind the open door, Burnine's frail body hurtled and crashed into the guards, knocking them off balance.

Engels was thrown forward, his chin meeting Case's fist on its way upward. There was the crack of a neck breaking. Case had put all his strength into that punch.

Burnine kicked at a guard's head, dropped down to one knee and came up with a gun. The other guards didn't have a chance. Burnine peppered them with pellets that ate away flesh wherever they hit.

"Let's go," Case snapped. "You take the lead. And don't stop to argue if anyone gets in our way."

Then they were racing down the long corridor toward a heavy door at the end. A pair of guards looked up and saw them coming and died before their hands could reach their guns. Case paused

to pick up a heavy weapon that leaned against a wall.

Another guard stuck his head out of a side room and popped it back in. Within a second, warning whistles pierced the air. But over the whistles Case could still hear a hum.

"Not much time," Burnine panted. He was completely winded.

A stairway made a dark opening and they plunged downward through it. The sound of motors pounded up toward them. They were in darkness for long minutes. And then the darkness gave way to light and they were racing into a vast chamber filled with scurrying men.

Case brought up the heavy gun he was carrying, triggered it and was gratified by the streak of flame that issued from the muzzle. But other guns were popping steadily. Behind Case, a man went down.

There was a sharpshooter behind a bank of instruments, and Case took steady aim. The sharpshooter dropped. Meanwhile, Burnine and the other two had not been idle. They had both flanks cleared.

"This is it," Burnine gasped. "Good thing Engels liked to brag. That big panel is the converter."

He reached out a bony hand for a maze of wires, but Case stopped him.

"Wait. We don't want to do just a temporary job. And we don't want to die here either. There's a debt I've got to settle on Earth. What are our chances of getting a ship?"

"Not much," Burnine told him. "The liner we came in is in a hangar beyond the last tower."

"Close enough," Case snapped. "You four watch the doors. They've got a tank of atomic fuel here, and if I know my stuff I ought to be able to rig up something that will do a permanent job on this installation."

---

Only two of them came up out of the lower level—Burnine and Case Damon. Behind them, they left a pile of corpses. Burnine was kept going by sheer strength of will, lugging a shoulder gun that weighed half as much as he.

The corridor on the main level was packed with armed men, but they cleared it by keeping a blast of fire always before them. Men melted away into side rooms, slid down intersecting halls. But at the entrance, the big door was closed.

"Looks like we're stuck," Burnine grunted. "We can't burn our way through that. And if we move, we'll have a hundred men popping out again behind our backs."

"We'll try one of these rooms back here," Case said. "Always the chance of it having a window."

The first room they tried was a blank. So were the next couple. While Case kept the corridor cleared, Burnine stuck his head inside and investigated.

"This one," he said at his fourth try. "Bars on the window, but maybe we can burn them off. Looks like a council room."

They darted inside, slammed the door behind them. Outside there was the pounding of many feet. While Burnine watched the door, Case turned his fire on the barred windows.

One of the bars turned red, glowed bright and started to melt. But it was going to be a long job. And they hadn't much time now. Case snatched a quick look at his watch and saw there was but an hour left.

"Damon!" That was from the corridor. Yuna's voice. Too calm, Case thought. Yuna had a card up his sleeve. "Better give up!"

"Make us," Case called.

"There is a telecast machine in the room," came the reply. "Turn it on."

Yuna wasn't just wasting time. He knew something. Case hesitated, looked around and sighted the machine. It was the familiar kind, but with an unfamiliar attachment. He fiddled with it, got it going.

"Damon," said a voice he remembered but could not identify. "Turn up the video."

There was a threat in the words. But Case Damon was beyond being frightened. He had nothing to lose. Only curiosity made him flick the switch.

There was that room again, with its unpainted walls. There was the couch. And there was Karin!

"We decided to save her on the chance you'd get through," said the voice. A moment later, a man walked into view.

---

It was Vargas. Somehow, Case was not surprised. It all made sense. Vargas had not wanted to join the Council. He'd held out for concessions, and those concessions had included a certain freedom from supervision of his country.

"Listen," Vargas said. "It is possible you have managed to do some harm there. If so, undo it at once."

His hand dipped into his pocket and came out with a gun. He calmly pointed it at Karin's head. With a sinking heart, Case realized that this time there would be no interference, this time Vargas would go through with it.

"All right," Case said. "You win."

He turned away from the video, and swung his gun around at Burnine. He hated to do this, but it had to be done. His eyes avoided Burnine's as he said:

"Open that door."

But before Burnine could comply with the order, there was a shout from the machine. Case whirled, startled. The room in the fishing cabin had erupted into a maelstrom of struggling men. He saw Vargas go down, smothered by blue-jacketed men of Earth Intelligence.

And then there was Cranly, his broad back bent over Karin's figure on the couch. He straightened with a length of rope in his hands. She was free. Cranly turned and his face filled the screen.

"Nice going, Case. I had a hunch Vargas was behind this, but I couldn't move until I had him dead to rights. But it was you who helped me to fight the Council for the time I needed."

"How much time have I got?" Case wanted to know.

"Not much. The Council can't take a chance on having another city blasted. Within fifteen minutes they will destroy the machine Vargas built."

"That's time enough," Case said. "Give me a look at Karin."

He got his look, and then turned to Burnine. Yuna and his men had got the news elsewhere, apparently, for they were hammering at the door. But the lock was holding.

Together now, Case and Burnine turned their guns on the bars of the window. It went faster now. One bar melted away, another, still another. There was room enough for Burnine, then room enough for Case's broad shoulders.

They dropped through and hit the ground, running. With Burnine leading the way and Case keeping him covered from behind, they raced around the edge of the tower, cut down a pair of surprised guards who weren't expecting them here, and skirted the outside tower.

Then the hangars were only yards away and they were sprinting toward them. Now there were no more men to block their way. Only time was the enemy.

And time ticked away on Case's watch as he and Burnine strapped themselves into their seats. Five minutes was all the time they could hope for. With his own ship that would have been enough, but this space liner was not built for speed.

---

Case had deliberately spoken with more confidence than he'd felt. If that was to be his last look at Karin, he'd wanted her to have a smile on her face.

"All set," Burnine said. His skin was drawn tight over the long bones in his face.

They took off with all jets wide open. From stem to stern, the big liner shuddered. Even with all power on, they lifted slowly. From overhead, a small attack ship flashed in. Fire darted at them, slid harmlessly off the liner's duralloy plates.

"Wish that was our biggest worry," Case said. He could still grin weakly.

Now their speed was mounting steadily. The altimeter climbed past 60,000 and kept going. Case kept his eyes glued to the vision plate.

Now was the time. Thunder rumbled, roared in their ears. Far, far below and behind them there was another roar. Then came the single blinding flash that spelled the end of Kanato, and afterward a billowing mushroom cloud. It was the end of Yuna and his devilish weapon.

Over them, in the heart of the brightness, there was a black speck. It grew larger as they roared toward it. It was a black cleft in the azure. Case flashed a desperate glance at his watch. Seconds left, that was all.

With a prayer in their hearts, and with all jets blazing, they aimed for the blackness. It grew smaller, almost too small. There was a rumble of thunder. And they were through, into a black sky dotted with a myriad of stars.

Case reached up and flicked on the liner's telecast. It warmed up slowly, first the click coming through, and then the audio. Last of all, and best of all, the video.

Karin's face filled the screen. She was smiling, none the worse for her experience. Her hair was in disorder but it still looked like spun gold to Case. He could almost taste those velvety lips.

"Be with you soon, honey," Case said. "We've got a honeymoon to finish."

Her face beckoned him Earthward.

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