

## The Project Gutenberg eBook of A Coffin for Jacob, by Edward W. Ludwig

This ebook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this ebook or online at [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org). If you are not located in the United States, you'll have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

Title: A Coffin for Jacob

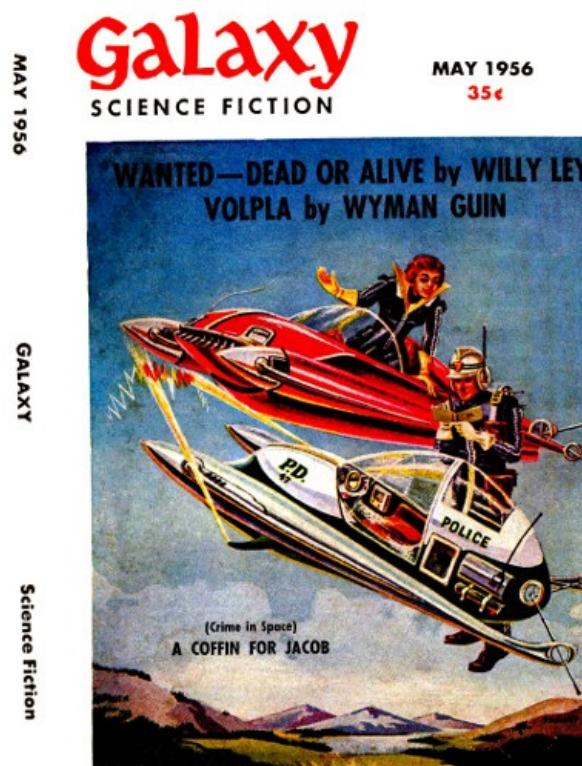
Author: Edward W. Ludwig  
Illustrator: Ed Emshwiller

Release date: February 14, 2016 [EBook #51203]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Greg Weeks, Mary Meehan and the Online  
Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A COFFIN FOR JACOB \*\*\*



# **A Coffin for Jacob**

**By EDWARD W. LUDWIG**

**Illustrated by EMSH**

**[Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from  
Galaxy Science Fiction May 1956.  
Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that  
the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.]**

---

***With never a moment to rest, the pursuit through space felt like a game of hounds and hares ... or was it follow the leader?***

---

Ben Curtis eased his pale, gaunt body through the open doorway of the Blast Inn, the dead man following silently behind him.

His fear-borne gaze traveled into the dimly illumined Venusian gin mill. The place was like an evil caldron steaming with a brew whose ingredients had been culled from the back corners of three planets.

Most of the big room lay obscured behind a shimmering veil of tobacco smoke and the sweet, heavy fumes of Martian Devil's Egg. Here and there, Ben saw moving figures. He could not tell if they were Earthmen, Martians or Venusians.

Someone tugged at his greasy coat. He jumped, thinking absurdly that it was the dead man's hand.

"*Coma esta, senior?*" a small voice piped. "*Speken die Deutsch? Desirez-vous d'amour? Da? Nyet?*"

Ben looked down.

The speaker was an eager-eyed Martian boy of about ten. He was like a red-skinned marionette with pipestem arms and legs, clad in a torn skivvy shirt and faded blue dungarees.

"I'm American," Ben muttered.

"Ah, *buena!* I speak English *tres fine, senior.* I have Martian friend, she *tres pretty* and *tres fat.* She weigh almost eighty pounds, *monsieur.* I take you to her, *si?*"

Ben shook his head.

---

He thought, *I don't want your Martian wench. I don't want your opium or your Devil's Egg or your Venusian kali. But if you had a drug that'd bring a dead man to life, I'd buy and pay with my soul.*

"It is deal, *monsieur?* Five dollars or twenty *keelis* for visit Martian friend. Maybe you like House of Dreams. For House of Dreams—"

"I'm not buying."

The dirty-faced kid shrugged. "Then I show you to good table,—*tres bien.* I do not charge you, *senor.*"

The boy grabbed his hand. Because Ben could think of no reason for resisting, he followed. They plunged into shifting layers of smoke and through the drone of alcohol-cracked voices.



---

They passed the bar with its line of lean-featured, slit-eyed Earthmen—merchant spacemen.

They wormed down a narrow aisle flanked by booths carved from Venusian marble that jutted up into the semi-darkness like fog-blanketed tombstones.

Several times, Ben glimpsed the bulky figures of CO<sub>2</sub>-breathing Venusians, the first he'd ever seen.

They were smoky gray, scaly, naked giants, toads in human shape. They stood solitary and motionless, aloof, their green-lidded eyes unblinking. They certainly didn't look like telepaths, as Ben had heard they were, but the thought sent a fresh rivulet of fear down his spine.

Once he spied a white-uniformed officer of Hoover City's Security Police. The man was striding down an aisle, idly tapping his neuro-club against the stone booths.

*Keep walking*, Ben told himself. *You look the same as anyone else here. Keep walking. Look straight ahead.*

The officer passed. Ben breathed easier.

"Here we are, *monsieur*," piped the Martian boy. "A *tres fine* table. Close in the shadows."

Ben winced. How did this kid know he wanted to sit in the shadows? Frowning, he sat down—he and the dead man.

He listened to the lonely rhythms of the four-piece Martian orchestra.

The Martians were fragile, doll-like creatures with heads too large for their spindly bodies. Their long fingers played upon the strings of their *cirillas* or crawled over the holes of their flutes like spider legs. Their tune was sad. Even when they played an Earth tune, it still seemed a song of old Mars, charged with echoes of lost voices and forgotten grandeur.

For an instant, Ben's mind rose above the haunting vision of the dead man. He thought, *What are they doing here, these Martians? Here, in a smoke-filled room under a metalite dome on a dust-covered world? Couldn't they have played their music on Mars? Or had they, like me, felt the challenge of new worlds?*

He sobered. It didn't matter. He ordered a whiskey from a Chinese waiter. He wet his lips but did not drink. His gaze wandered over the faces of the Inn's other occupants.

*You've got to find him*, he thought. *You've got to find the man with the red beard. It's the only way you can escape the dead man.*

---

The dead man was real. His name was Cobb. He was stout and flabby and about forty and he hated spacemen.

His body was buried now—probably in the silent gray wastes outside Luna City. But he'd become a kind of invisible Siamese twin, as much a part of Ben as sight in his eyes.

Sometimes the image would be shuffling drunkenly beside him, its lips spitting whiskey-slurred curses.

Again, its face would be a pop-eyed mask of surprise as Ben's fist thudded into its jaw. More often, the face would be frozen in the whiteness of death. The large eyes would stare. Blood would trickle from a corner of the gaping mouth.

You can forget a living man. You can defeat him or submit to him or ignore him, and the matter is over and done. You can't escape from a memory that has burned into your mind.

It had begun a week ago in Luna City. The flight from White Sands had been successful. Ben, quietly and moderately, wanted to celebrate. He stopped alone in a rocketfront bar for a beer. The man named Cobb plopped his portly and unsteady posterior on the stool next to him.

"Spacemen," he muttered, "are getting like flies. Everywhere, all you see's spacemen."

He was a neatly dressed civilian.

Ben smiled. "If it weren't for spacemen, you wouldn't be here."

"The name's Cobb." The man hiccupped. "Spacemen in their white monkey suits. They think they're little tin gods. Betcha you think you're a little tin god." He downed a shot of whiskey.

Ben stiffened. He was twenty-four and dressed in the white, crimson-braided uniform of the *Odyssey's* junior astrogation officer. He was three months out of the Academy at White Sands and the shining uniform was like a key to all the mysteries of the Universe.

He'd sought long for that key.

---

At the age of five—perhaps in order to dull the memory of his parents' death in a recent strato-jet crash—he'd spent hours watching the night sky for streaking flame-tails of Moon rockets. At ten, he'd ground his first telescope. At fourteen, he'd converted an abandoned shed on the government boarding-school grounds to a retreat which housed his collection of astronomy and rocketry books.

At sixteen, he'd spent every weekend holiday hitchhiking from Boys Town No. 5 in the Catskills to

Long Island Spaceport. There, among the grizzled veterans of the old Moon Patrol, he'd found friends who understood his dream and who later recommended his appointment to the U. S. Academy for the Conquest of Space.

And a month ago, he'd signed aboard the *Odyssey*—the first ship, it was rumored, equipped to venture as far as the asteroids and perhaps beyond.

Cobb was persistent: "Damn fools shoulda known enough to stay on Earth. What the hell good is it, jumpin' from planet to planet?"

*The guy's drunk*, Ben thought. He took his drink and moved three stools down the bar.

Cobb followed. "You don't like the truth, eh, kid? You don't like people to call you a sucker."

Ben rose and started to leave the bar, but Cobb grabbed his arm and held him there.

"Thas what you are—a sucker. You're young now. Wait ten years. You'll be dyin' of radiation rot or a meteor'll get you. Wait and see, sucker!"

Until this instant, Ben had suppressed his anger. Now, suddenly and without warning, it welled up into savage fury.

His fist struck the man on the chin. Cobb's eyes gaped in shocked horror. He spun backward. His head cracked sickeningly on the edge of the bar. The sound was like a punctuation mark signaling the end of life.

He sank to the floor, eyes glassy, blood tricking down his jaw.

Ben knew that he was dead.

Then, for a single absurd second, Ben was seized with terror—just as, a moment before, he'd been overwhelmed with anger.

He ran.

---

For some twenty minutes, he raced through a dizzying, nightmare world of dark rocketfront alleys and shouting voices and pursuing feet.

At last, abruptly, he realized that he was alone and in silence. He saw that he was still on the rocketfront, but in the Tycho-ward side of the city.

He huddled in a dark corner of a loading platform and lit a cigarette. A thousand stars—a thousand motionless balls of silver fire—shone above him through Luna City's transparent dome.

He was sorry he'd hit Cobb, of course. He was not sorry he'd run. Escaping at least gave him a power of choice, of decision.

*You can do two things*, he thought.

*You can give yourself up, and that's what a good officer would do. That would eliminate the escape charge. You'd get off with voluntary manslaughter. Under interplanetary law, that would mean ten years in prison and a dishonorable discharge. And then you'd be free.*

*But you'd be through with rockets and space. They don't want new men over thirty-four for officers on rockets or even for third-class jet-men on beat-up freighters—they don't want convicted killers. You'd get the rest of the thrill of conquering space through video and by peeking through electric fences of spaceports.*

Or—

There were old wives' tales of a group of renegade spacemen who operated from the Solar System's frontiers. The spacemen weren't outlaws. They were misfits, rejectees from the clearing houses on Earth.

And whereas no legally recognized ship had ventured past Mars, the souped-up renegade rigs had supposedly hit the asteroids. Their headquarters was Venus. Their leader—a subject of popular and fantastic conjecture in the men's audiozines—was rumored to be a red-bearded giant.

*So, Ben reflected, you can take a beer-and-pretzels tale seriously. You can hide for a couple of days, get rid of your uniform, change your name. You can wait for a chance to get to Venus. To hell with your duty. You can try to stay in space, even if you exile yourself from Earth.*

After all, was it right for a single second, a single insignificant second, to destroy a man's life and his dream?

---

He was lucky. He found a tramp freighter whose skipper was on his last flight before retirement. Discipline was lax, investigation of new personnel even more so.

Ben Curtis made it to Venus.

There was just one flaw in his decision. He hadn't realized that the memory of the dead man's face would haunt him, torment him, follow him as constantly as breath flowed into his lungs.

But might not the rumble of atomic engines drown the murmuring dead voice? Might not the vision of alien worlds and infinite spaceways obscure the dead face?

So now he sat searching for a perhaps nonexistent red-bearded giant, and hoping and doubting and fearing, all at once.

"You look for someone, *senor*?"

He jumped. "Oh. You still here?"

"*Oui*." The Martian kid grinned, his mouth full of purple teeth. "I keep you company on your first night in Hoover City, *n'est-ce-pas*?"

"This isn't my first night here," Ben lied. "I've been around a while."

"You are spacemen?"

Ben threw a fifty-cent credit piece on the table. "Here. Take off, will you?"

Spiderlike fingers swept down upon the coin. "*Ich danke, senor*. You know why city is called Hoover City?"

Ben didn't answer.

"They say it is because after women come, they want first thing a thousand vacuum cleaners for dust. What is vacuum cleaner, *monsieur*?"

Ben raised his hand as if to strike the boy.

"*Ai-ye*, I go. You keep listen to good Martian music."

The toothpick of a body melted into the semi-darkness.

Minutes passed. There were two more whiskeys. A ceaseless parade of faces broke through the smoky veil that enclosed him—reddish balloon faces, scaly reptilian faces, white-skinned, slit-eyed faces, and occasionally a white, rouged, powdered face. But nowhere was there a face with a red beard.

A sense of hopelessness gripped Ben Curtis. Hoover City was but one of a dozen cities of Venus. Each had twenty dives such as this.

He needed help.

But his picture must have been 'scoped to Venusian visiscreens. A reward must have been offered for his capture. Whom could he trust? The Martian kid, perhaps?

Far down the darkened aisle nearest him, his eyes caught a flash of white. He tensed.

Like the uniform of a Security Policeman, he thought.

His gaze shifted to another aisle and another hint of whiteness.

And then he saw another and another and another.

Each whiteness became brighter and closer, like shrinking spokes of a wheel with Ben as their focal point.

*You idiot! The damned Martian kid! You should have known!*

---

Light showered the room in a dazzling explosion. Ben, half blinded, realized that a broad circle of unshaded globes in the ceiling had been turned on.

The light washed away the room's strangeness and its air of brooding wickedness, revealing drab concrete walls and a debris-strewn floor.

Eyes blinked and squinted. There were swift, frightened movements and a chorus of angry murmurs. The patrons of the Blast Inn were like tatter-clad occupants of a house whose walls have been ripped away.

Ben Curtis twisted his lean body erect. His chair tumbled backward, falling.

The white-clad men charged, neuro-clubs upraised.

A woman screamed. The music ceased. The Martian orchestra slunk with feline stealth to a rear exit. Only the giant Venusians remained undisturbed. They stood unmoving, their staring eyes shifting lazily in Ben's direction.

"Curtis!" one of the policemen yelled. "You're covered! Hold it!"

Ben whirled away from the advancing police, made for the exit into which the musicians had disappeared.

A hissing sound traveled past his left ear, a sound like compressed air escaping from a container. A dime-sized section of the concrete wall ahead of him crumbled.

He stumbled forward. They were using deadly neuro-pistols now, not the mildly stunning neuro-clubs.

Another hiss passed his cheek. He was about twelve feet from the exit. *Another second*, his brain screamed. *Just another second—*

Or would the exits be guarded?

He heard the hiss.

It hit directly in the small of his back. There was no pain, just a slight pricking sensation, like the shallow jab of a needle.

---

He froze as if yanked to a stop by a noose. His body seemed to be growing, swelling into balloon proportions. He knew that the tiny needle had imbedded itself deep in his flesh, knew that the paralyzing mortocain was spreading like icy fire into every fiber and muscle of his body.

He staggered like a man of stone moving in slow motion. He'd have fifteen—maybe twenty—seconds before complete lethargy of mind and body overpowered him.

In the dark world beyond his fading consciousness, he heard a voice yell, "Turn on the damn lights!"

Then a pressure and a coldness were on his left hand. He realized that someone had seized it.

A soft feminine voice spoke to him. "You're wounded? They hit you?"

"Yes." His thick lips wouldn't let go of the word.

"You want to escape—even now?"

"Yes."

"You may die if you don't give yourself up."

"No, no."

He tried to stumble toward the exit.

"All right then. Not that way. Here, this way."

Heavy footsteps thudded toward them. A few yards away, a flashlight flicked on.

Hands were guiding him. He was aware of being pushed and pulled. A door closed behind him. The glare of the flashlight faded from his vision—if he still had vision.

"You're sure?" the voice persisted.

"I'm sure," Ben managed to say.

"I have no antidote. You may die."

His mind fought to comprehend. With the anti-paralysis injection, massage and rest, a man could recover from the effects of mortocain within half a day. Without treatment, the paralysis could spread to heart and lungs. It could become a paralysis of death. An effective weapon: the slightest wound compelled the average criminal to surrender at once.

"Anti ... anti ..." The words were as heavy as blobs of mercury forced from his throat. "No ... I'm sure ... sure."

He didn't hear the answer or anything else.

---

Ben Curtis had no precise sensation of awakening. Return to consciousness was an intangible evolution from a world of black nothingness to a dream-like state of awareness.

He felt the pressure of hands on his naked arms and shoulders, hands that massaged, manipulated, fought to restore circulation and sensitivity. He knew they were strong hands. Their strength seemed to transfer itself to his own body.

For a long time, he tried to open his eyes. His lids felt welded shut. But after a while, they opened. His world of darkness gave way to a translucent cloak of mist. A round, featureless shape hovered constantly above him—a face, he supposed.

He tried to talk. Although his lips moved slightly, the only sound was a deep, staccato grunting.

But he heard someone say, "Don't try to talk." It was the same gentle voice he'd heard in the Blast Inn. "Don't talk. Just lie still and rest. Everything'll be all right."

*Everything all right*, he thought dimly.

There were long periods of lethargy when he was aware of nothing. There were periods of light and of darkness. Gradually he grew aware of things. He realized that the soft rubber mouth of a spaceman's oxygen mask was clamped over his nose. He felt the heat of electric blankets swathed about his body. Occasionally a tube would be in his mouth and he would taste liquid food and feel a pleasant warmth in his stomach.

Always, it seemed, the face was above him, floating in the obscuring mist. Always, it seemed, the soft voice was echoing in his ears:

"Swallow this now. That's it. You must have food." Or, "Close your eyes. Don't strain. It won't be long. You're getting better."

*Better*, he'd think. *Getting better...*

At last, after one of the periods of lethargy, his eyes opened. The mist brightened, then dissolved. He beheld the cracked, unpainted ceiling of a small room, its colorless walls broken with a single, round window. He saw the footboard of his aluminite bed and the outlines of his feet beneath a faded blanket.

Finally he saw the face and figure that stood at his side.

"You are better?" the kind voice asked.

---

The face was that of a girl probably somewhere between twenty-five and thirty. Her features, devoid of makeup, had an unhealthy-looking pallor, as if she hadn't used a sunlamp for many weeks. Yet, at the same time, her firm slim body suggested a solidity and a strength. Her straight brown hair was combed backward, tight upon her scalp, and drawn together in a knot at the nape of her neck.

"I—I am better," he murmured. His words were still slow and thick. "I am going to live?"

"You will live."

He thought for a moment. "How long have I been here?"

"Nine days."

"You took care of me?" He noted the deep, dark circles beneath her sleep-robbed eyes.

She nodded.

"You're the one who carried me when I was shot?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Suddenly he began to cough. Breath came hard. She held the oxygen mask in readiness. He shook his head, not wanting it.

"Why?" he asked again.

"It would be a long story. Perhaps I'll tell you tomorrow."

A new thought, cloaked in sudden fear, entered his murky consciousness. "Tell me, will—will I be well again? Will I be able to walk?"

He lay back then, panting, exhausted.

"You have nothing to worry about," the girl said softly. Her cool hand touched his hot forehead. "Rest. We'll talk later."

His eyes closed and breath came easier. He slept.

When he next awoke, his gaze turned first to the window. There was light outside, but he had no way of knowing if this was morning, noon or afternoon—or on what planet.

He saw no white-domed buildings of Hoover City, no formal lines of green-treed parks, no streams of buzzing gyro-cars. There was only a translucent and infinite whiteness. It was as if the window were set on the edge of the Universe overlooking a solemn, silent and matterless void.

The girl entered the room.

"Hi," she said, smiling. The dark half-moons under her eyes were less prominent. Her face was relaxed.

She increased the pressure in his rubberex pillows and helped him rise to a sitting position.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"Venus."

"We're not in Hoover City?"

"No."

He looked at her, wondering. "You won't tell me?"

"Not yet. Later, perhaps."

"Then how did you get me here? How did we escape from the Inn?"

---

She shrugged. "We have friends who can be bribed. A hiding place in the city, the use of a small desert-taxi, a pass to leave the city—these can be had for a price."

"You'll tell me your name?"

"Maggie."

"Why did you save me?"

Her eyes twinkled mischievously. "Because you're a good astrogator."



His own eyes widened. "How did you know that?"

She sat on a plain chair beside his bed. "I know everything about you, Lieutenant Curtis."

"How did you learn my name? I destroyed all my papers—"

"I know that you're twenty-four. Born July 10, 1971. Orphaned at four, you attended Boys Town in the Catskills till you were 19. You graduated from the Academy at White Sands last June with a major in Astrogation. Your rating for the five-year period was 3.8—the second highest in a class of fifty-seven. Your only low mark in the five years was a 3.2 in History of Martian Civilization. Want me to go on?"

Fascinated, Ben nodded.

"You were accepted as junior astrogation officer aboard the *Odyssey*. You did well on your flight from Roswell to Luna City. In a barroom fight in Luna City, you struck and killed a man named Arthur Cobb, a pre-fab salesman. You've been charged with second degree murder and escape. A reward of 5,000 credits has been offered for your capture. You came to Hoover City in the hope of finding a renegade group of spacemen who operate beyond Mars. You were looking for them in the Blast Inn."

He gaped incredulously, struggling to rise from his pillows. "I—don't get it."

"There are ways of finding out what we want to know. As I told you, we have many friends."

He fell back into his pillows, breathing hard. She rose quickly.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I shouldn't have told you yet. I felt so happy because you're alive. Rest now. We'll talk again soon."

"Maggie, you—you said I'd live. You didn't say I'd be able to walk again."

She lowered her gaze. "I hope you'll be able to."

"But you don't think I will, do you?"

"I don't know. We'll try walking tomorrow. Don't think about it now. Rest."

He tried to relax, but his mind was a vortex of conjecture.

"Just one more question," he almost whispered.

"Yes?"

"The man I killed—did he have a wife?"

She hesitated. He thought, *Damn it, of all the questions, why did I ask that?*

Finally she said, "He had a wife."

"Children?"

"Two. I don't know their ages."

She left the room.

---

He sank into the softness of his bed. As he turned over on his side, his gaze fell upon an object on a bureau in a far corner of the room.

He sat straight up, his chest heaving.

The object was a tri-dimensional photo of a rock-faced man in a merchant spaceman's uniform. He was a giant of a man with a neatly trimmed *red beard!*

Ben stared at the photo for a long time. At length, he slipped into restless sleep. Images of faces and echoes of words spun through his brain.

The dead man returned to him. Bloodied lips cursed at him. Glassy eyes accused him. Somewhere were two lost children crying in the night.

And towering above him was a red-bearded man whose great hands reached down and beckoned to him. Ben crawled through the night on hands and knees, his legs numb and useless. The crying of the children was a chilling wail in his ears.

His head rose and turned to the red-bearded man. His pleading voice screamed out to him in a thick, harsh cackle. Yet even as he screamed, the giant disappeared, to be replaced by white-booted feet stomping relentlessly toward him.

He awoke still screaming....

A night without darkness passed. Ben lay waiting for Maggie's return, a question already formed in his mind.

She came and at once he asked, "Who is the man with the red beard?"

She smiled. "I was right then when I gave you that thumbnail biog. You *were* looking for him, weren't you?"

"Who is he?"

She sat on the chair beside him.

"My husband," she said softly.

He began to understand. "And your husband needs an astrogator? That's why you saved me?"

"We need all the good men we can get."

"Where is he?"

She cocked her head in mock suspicion. "Somewhere between Mercury and Pluto. He's building a new base for us—and a home for me. When his ship returns, I'll be going to him."

"Why aren't you with him now?"

"He said unexplored space is no place for a woman. So I've been studying criminal reports and photos from the Interplanetary Bureau of Investigation and trying to find recruits like yourself. You know how we operate?"

He told her the tales he'd heard.

---

She nodded. "There are quite a few of us now—about a thousand—and a dozen ships. Our base used to be here on Venus, down toward the Pole. The dome we're in now was designed and built by us a few years ago after we got pushed off Mars. We lost a few men in the construction, but with almost every advance in space, someone dies."

"Venus is getting too civilized. We're moving out and this dome is only a temporary base when we have cases like yours. The new base—I might as well tell you it's going to be an asteroid. I won't say which one."

"Don't get the idea that we're outlaws. Sure, about half our group is wanted by the Bureau, but we make honest livings. We're just people like yourself and Jacob."

"Jacob? Your husband?"

She laughed. "Makes you think of a Biblical character, doesn't it? Jacob's anything but that. And just plain 'Jake' reminds one of a grizzled old uranium prospector and he isn't like that, either."

She lit a cigarette. "Anyway, the wanted ones stay out beyond the frontiers. Jacob and those like him can never return to Earth—not even to Hoover City—except dead. The others are physical or psycho rejects who couldn't get clearance if they went back to Earth. They know nothing but rocketing and won't give up. They bring in our ships to frontier ports like Hoover City to unload cargo and take on supplies."

"Don't the authorities object?"

"Not very strongly. The I. B. I. has too many problems right here to search the whole System for a few two-bit crooks. Besides, we carry cargoes of almost pure uranium and tungsten and all the stuff that's scarce on Earth and Mars and Venus. Nobody really cares whether it comes from the asteroids or Hades. If we want to risk our lives mining it, that's our business."

She pursed her lips. "But if they guessed how strong we are or that we have friends planted in the I. B. I.—well, things might be different. There probably would be a crackdown."

Ben scowled. "What happens if there *is* a crackdown? And what will you do when Space Corps ships officially reach the asteroids? They can't ignore you then."

"Then we move on. We dream up new gimmicks for our crates and take them to Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, Pluto. In time, maybe, we'll be pushed out of the System itself. Maybe it won't be the white-suited boys who'll make that first hop to the stars. It *could* be us, you know—if we live long enough. But that Asteroid Belt is murder. You can't follow the text-book rules of astrogation out there. You make up your own."

---

Ben stiffened. "And that's why you want me for an astrogator."

Maggie rose, her eyes wistful. "If you want to come—and if you get well." She looked at him strangely.

"Suppose—" He fought to find the right words. "Suppose I got well and decided not to join Jacob. What would happen to me? Would you let me go?"

Her thin face was criss-crossed by emotion—alarm, then bewilderment, then fear. "I don't know. That would be up to Jacob."

He lay biting his lip, staring at the photo of Jacob. She touched his hand and it seemed that sadness now dominated the flurry of emotion that had coursed through her.

"The only thing that matters, really," she murmured, "is your walking again. We'll try this afternoon. Okay?"

"Okay," he said.

When she left, his eyes were still turned toward Jacob's photo.

He was like two people, he thought.

Half of him was an officer of the Space Corps. Perhaps one single starry-eyed boy out of ten thousand was lucky enough to reach that goal.

He remembered a little picture book his mother had given him when she was alive. Under the bright pictures of spacemen were the captions:

"A Space Officer Is Honest" "A Space Officer Is Loyal." "A Space Officer Is Dutiful."

Honesty, loyalty, duty. Trite words, but without those concepts, mankind would never have broken away from the planet that held it prisoner for half a million years.

Without them, Everson, after three failures and a hundred men dead, would never have landed on the Moon twenty-seven years ago.

---

Ben sighed. He had a debt to pay. A good officer would pay that debt. He'd surrender and take his punishment. He'd rip the crimson braid from his uniform. He'd prevent the Academy for the Conquest of Space from being labeled the school of a murderer and a coward.

And by doing these things, the haunting image of a dead man would disappear from his vision.

But the other half of Ben Curtis was the boy who'd stood trembling beneath a night sky of beckoning stars.

The eyes in Jacob's photo seemed to be staring at the boy in him, not at the officer. They appeared both pleading and hopeful. They were like echoes of cold, barren worlds and limitless space, of lurking and savage death. They held the terror of loneliness and of exile, of constant flight and hiding.

But, too, they represented a strength that could fulfill a boy's dream, that could carry a man to new frontiers. They, rather than the neat white uniform, now offered the key to shining miracles. That key was what Ben wanted.

But he asked himself, as he had a thousand times, "If I follow Jacob, can I leave the dead man behind?"

He tried to stretch his legs and he cursed their numbness. He smiled grimly. For a moment, he'd forgotten. How futile now to think of stars!

What if he were to be like this always? Jacob would not want a man with dead legs. Jacob would either send him back to Earth or—Ben shuddered—see that he was otherwise disposed of. And disposal would be the easier course.

---

This was the crisis. He sat on the side of the bed, Maggie before him, her strong arm about his waist.

"Afraid?" she asked.

"Afraid," he repeated, shaking.

It was as if all time had been funneled into this instant, as if this moment lay at the very vortex of all a man's living and desiring. There was no room in Ben's mind for thoughts of Jacob now.

"You can walk," Maggie said confidently. "I *know* you can."

He moved his toes, ankles, legs. He began to rise, slowly, falteringly. The firm pressure around his waist increased.

He stood erect. His legs felt like tree stumps, but here and there were a tingling and a warmth, a sensitivity.

"Can you make it to the window?" Maggie asked.

"No, no, not that far."

"Try! Please try!"

She guided him forward.

His feet shuffled. Stomp, stomp. The pressure left his waist. Maggie stepped away, walked to the window, turned back toward him.

He halted, swaying. "Not alone," he mouthed fearfully. "I can't get there by myself."

"Of course you can!" Maggie's voice contained unexpected impatience.

Ashamed, he forced his feet to move. At times, he thought he was going to crash to the floor. He lumbered on, hesitating, fighting to retain his balance. Maggie waited tensely, as if ready to leap to his side.

Then his eyes turned straight ahead to the window. This was the first time he'd actually seen the arid, dust-cloaked plains of the second planet. He straightened, face aglow, as though a small-boy enthusiasm had been reborn in him.

His tree-stump legs carried him to the window. He raised shaking hands against the thick glassite pane.

Outside, the swirling white dust was omnipresent and unchallenged. It cut smooth the surfaces of dust-veiled rocks. It clung to the squat desert shrubbery, to the tall skeletal shapes of Venusian needle-plants and to the swish-tailed lizards that skittered beneath them.

The shrill of wind, audible through the glassite, was like the anguished complaint of the planet itself, like the wail of an entity imprisoned in a dark tomb of dust. Venus was a planet of fury, eternally howling its wrath at being isolated from sunlight and greenery, from the clean blackness of space and the warm glow of sister-planet and star.

The dust covered all, absorbed all, eradicated all. The dust was master. The dome, Ben felt, was as transitory as a tear-drop of fragile glass falling down, down, to crash upon stone.

"Is it always like this?" he asked. "Doesn't the wind ever stop?"

"Sometimes the wind dies. Sometimes, at night, you can see the lights from the city."

---

He kept staring. The dome, he thought, was a symbol of Man's littleness in a hostile universe.

But, too, it was a symbol of his courage and defiance. And perhaps Man's greatest strength lay in the very audacity that drove him to build such domes.

"You like it, don't you?" Maggie asked. "It's lonely and ugly and wild, but you like it."

He nodded, breathless.

She murmured, "Jacob used to say it isn't the strange sights that thrill spacemen—it's the thoughts that the sights inspire."

He nodded again, still staring.

She began to laugh. Softly at first, then more loudly. It was the kind of laughter that is close to crying.

"You've been standing there for ten minutes! You're going to walk again! You're going to be well!"

He turned to her, smiling with the joyous realization that he had actually stood that long without being aware of it.

Then his smile died.

Standing behind Maggie, in an open doorway, was a gray, scaly, toadlike monster—a six-and-a-half-foot Venusian. He was motionless as a statue, his green-lidded eyes staring curiously at Ben. His scaly hand was tight about the butt of an old-fashioned heat pistol holstered to his hip.



---

Maggie suppressed a smile. "Don't be frightened, Ben. This is Simon—Simple Simon, we call him. His I. Q. isn't too high, but he makes a good helper and guard for me. He's been so anxious to see you, but I thought it'd be better if he waited until you were well."

Ben nodded, fascinated by the apparent muscular solidity of the creature. It hadn't occurred to his numbed mind that he and Maggie were not the sole occupants of the dome.

But Maggie had acted wisely, he thought. His nightmares had been terrifying enough without bringing Simple Simon into them.

"Shake hands with Ben," she told the Venusian.

Simple Simon lumbered forward, then paused. His eyes blinked. "No," he grated.

Maggie gasped. "Why, Simple Simon, what's the matter?"

The gray creature rasped, "Ben—he not one of us. He thinks—different. In thoughts—thinks escape. Earth."

---

Maggie paled. "He *is* one of us, Simon." She stepped forward and seized the Venusian's arm. "You go to your room. Stand guard. You guard Ben just like you guard me. Understand?"

Simple Simon grunted, "I guard. If Ben go—I stop him. I stop him good." He raised his huge hands suggestively.

"No, Simon! Remember what Jacob told you. We hurt no one. Ben is our friend. You help him!"

The Venusian thought for a long moment. Then he nodded. "I help Ben. But if go—stop."

She led the creature out of the room and closed the door.

"Whew," Ben sighed. "I'd heard those fellows were telepaths. Now I *know*."

Maggie's trembling hands reached for a cigarette. "I—I guess I didn't think, Ben. Venusians can't really read your mind, but they see your feelings, your emotions. It's a logical evolutionary development, I suppose. Auditory and visual communication are difficult here, so evolution turned to empathy. And that's why Jacob keeps a few Venusians in our group. They can detect any feeling of disloyalty before it becomes serious."

Ben remembered Simple Simon's icy gaze and the way his rough hand had gripped his heat pistol. "They could be dangerous."

"Not really. They're as loyal as Earth dogs to their masters. I mean they wouldn't be dangerous to anyone who's loyal to us."

Silently, she helped him back to his bed.

"I'm sorry, Maggie—sorry I haven't decided yet."

She neither answered nor looked at him.

Grimly, he realized that his status had changed. He was no longer a patient; he was a prisoner.

A Venusian day passed, and a Venusian night. The dust swirled and wind blew, as constant as the whirl of indecision in Ben's mind.

Maggie was patient. Once, when she caught him gazing at Jacob's photo, she asked, "Not yet?"

He looked away. "Not yet."

---

He learned that the little dome consisted of three rooms, each shaped like pieces of a fluffy pie with narrow concrete hallways between.

His room served as a bedroom and he discovered that Maggie slept on a pneumatic cot in the kitchen. The third room, opening into the airlock, housed a small hydroponics garden, sunlamp, short-wave visi-radio, and such emergency equipment as oxygen tanks, windsuits, and vita-rations. It was here that Simple Simon remained most of the time, tending the garden or peering into the viewscreen that revealed the terrain outside the dome.

Maggie prepared Ben's meals, bringing them to him on a tray until he was able to sit at a table. As his paralysis diminished, he helped her with cooking—with Simple Simon standing by as a mute, motionless observer.

Occasionally Maggie would talk of her girlhood in a small town in Missouri and how she'd dreamed of journeying to the stars.

"'Stars are for boys,' they'd tell me, but I was a queer one. While other gals were dressing for their junior proms, I'd be in sloppy slacks down at the spaceport with Jacob."

She laughed often—perhaps in a deliberate attempt to disguise the omnipresent tension. And her laughter was like laughter on Earth, floating through comfortable houses and over green fields and through clear blue sky. When she laughed, she possessed a beauty.

Despite her pale face and lack of makeup, Ben realized that she was no older than he.

*If I'd only known her back on Earth*, he thought. *If I—*And then he told himself, *You've got enough problems. Don't create another one!*

Finally, except for a stiffness in his leg joints, he'd fully recovered.

"How much time do I have?" he asked.

"Before you decide?"

"Yes."

"Very little. Jacob's ship is on its way. It'll be here—well, you can't tell about these things. Two or three Earth days, maybe even tomorrow. It'll stay in Hoover City long enough to discharge and load cargo. Then it'll stop here for us and return to—to our new base."

"What do you think Jacob would do if I didn't want to go with him?"

---

She shook her head. "You asked me that before. I said I didn't know."

Ben thought, *I know a lot about you, Jacob. I know you're based on an asteroid. I know how many men you have, how many ships. I know where this dome is. I know you have men planted in the I. B. I. Would you let me go, knowing these things? How great is your immunity from the law? Do you love freedom so much that you'd kill to help preserve it?*

Fear crawled through his mind on icy legs.

"Maggie," he said, "what would Jacob do if he were me?"

She looked amused. "Jacob wouldn't have gotten into your situation. He wouldn't have struck Cobb. Jacob is—"

"A man? And I'm still a boy? Is that what you mean?"

"Not exactly. I think you'll be a man after you make your decision."

He frowned, not liking her answer.

"You think the dream of going into space is a boy's dream, that it can't belong to a man, too?"

"Oh, no. Jacob still has the dream. Most of our men do. And in a man, it's even more wonderful than in a boy." Then her face became more serious. "Ben, you've got to decide soon. And it's got to be a *complete* decision. You can have no doubt in your mind."

He nodded. "On account of Simon, you mean."

She motioned for him to come to the window in his room. He gazed outward, following the line of her finger as she pointed.

He saw a man-sized mound of stones, dimly visible beneath the wind-whipped dust.

A grave.

"He was a man like you," Maggie said softly. "God knows Simon didn't *try* to kill him. But he was escaping. He—he made the decision not to join us. Simon sensed it. There was a struggle. Simon's hands—well, he doesn't realize—"

She didn't have to explain further. Ben knew what those mighty scaly paws could do.

---

The moments were now like bits of eternity cloaked in frozen fear. Somewhere in the blackness of interplanetary space, Jacob's rocket was streaking closer and closer to Venus. How far away was it? A million miles? Fifty thousand? Or was it now—right now—ripping through the murky Venusian atmosphere above the dome?

A *complete* decision, Maggie had said.

Jacob didn't want a potential deserter in his group. And you couldn't *pretend* that you were loyal to Jacob—not with monstrosities like Simple Simon about.

Soon Jacob, not Ben, might have to make a decision—a decision that could result in a second cairn of stones on the wind-swept desert.

Ben shivered.

Before retiring, he wandered nervously into the supply room. Maggie was poised over the visiradio. Simple Simon was intently scanning the night-shrouded terrain in the viewscreen.

"Any news?" Ben asked Maggie.

The girl grunted negatively without looking up.

Ben's gaze fell upon the array of oxygen masks, windsuits, vita-rations. Then, on a littered shelf, he spied a small Venusian compass.

Almost automatically, his hand closed over it. His brain stirred with a single thought: *A compass could keep a man traveling in a straight line.*

Simple Simon restlessly shifted. He turned to Ben, blinking in the frighteningly alien equivalent of a suspicious scowl.

Ben's hand tightened about the compass. He tried to relax, to force all thought of it from his mind. He stared at the viewscreen, concentrating on the ceaseless drift of dust.

The Venusian's eyes studied him curiously, as if searching his mind for the illusive echo of a feeling that had given him alarm.

"I think I'll turn in," yawned Ben. "'Night, Maggie."

Simon frowned, apparently frustrated in his mental search. "Ben—not one of us. I—watch."

---

Without answering, Ben returned to his room, the compass hot and moist from the perspiration in his hand.

He took a deep breath.

Why had he taken the compass? He wasn't sure. Perhaps, he reflected, his decision had already been made, deep beneath the surface of consciousness.

He stood before the window, peering into the night. He knew that to attempt to sleep was futile. Sleep, for the past few days an ever-ready friend, had become a hostile stranger.

*God, his brain cried, what shall I do?*

Slowly, the dust outside the window settled. The scream of wind was no longer audible. His startled eyes beheld dim, faraway lights—those of Hoover City, he guessed.

It was as if, for the space of a few seconds, some cosmic power had silenced the Venusian fury, had guided him toward making his decision.

He whipped up his compass. He barely had time to complete the measurement.

"Sixty-eight degrees," he read. "Northeast by east."

Fresh wind descended onto the plain. Dancing dust erased the vision of the lights.

"Sixty-eight, sixty-eight," he kept muttering.

But now there was nothing to do—except try to sleep and be ready.

Strong hands shook him out of restless sleep. He opened his eyes and saw complete darkness. He thought at first that his eyesight had failed.

"Ben! Wake up!" Maggie's voice came to him, crisp, commanding. "The rocket's coming. I've decoded the message. We only have a few minutes."

The girl snapped on a small bulkhead light. She left him alone to dress.

He slid out of bed, a drowsiness still in him. He reached for his clothing. Abruptly, the full implication of what she had said struck him.

Jacob's rocket was coming. This was the time for decision, yet within his taut body there was only a jungle of conflicting impulses.

---

Maggie returned, her face hard, her eyes asking the silent question.

Ben stood frozen. The slow seconds beat against his brain like waves of ice.

At last she said, "Ready, Ben?" She spoke evenly, but her searching gaze belied the all-important significance of her words.

In the dim light, the photograph of Jacob was indistinguishable, but Ben could still see the image of the dead man.

He thought, *I can't run away with Jacob like a selfish, cowardly kid! No matter how bright the stars would be, that brightness couldn't destroy the image of a dead man with staring eyes. No matter what Jacob and Simon do to me, I've got to try to get back to Earth.*

He suddenly felt clean inside. He was no longer ashamed to hold his head high.

"Maggie," he said.

"Yes?"

"I've made my decision."

Outside the window, a waterfall of flame cascaded onto the desert, pushing aside the dust and the darkness. The deep-throated sound of rocket engines grumbled above the whining wind. The floor of the dome vibrated.

"The rocket's here!" Maggie cried.

The flaming exhaust from the ship dissolved into the night. The rocket thunder faded into the wind.

The alarm on the dome's inner airlock bulkhead rang. Maggie ran like a happy child through the concrete corridor, Ben following. She bounded into the supply room, pushed Simple Simon aside, stopped before a control panel. Her fingers flew over switches and levers.

The airlock door slid open. A short, stubble-bearded man clad in windsuit and transparalite helmet stomped in. He unscrewed the face plate of his helmet. His ears were too big and he

looked like a fat doll.

"We're ready for you, Mrs. Pierce," he said.

Maggie nodded eagerly. She whirled back to Ben. "*Hurry!* Get your helmet and suit on!"

She spun back to the big-eared little man. "Cargo unloaded? All set for the flight home?"

*Home*, Ben thought. *She calls a place she's never seen home.*

"Cargo's unloaded."

"No trouble with the I. B. I.? No investigation?"

"Not yet. We're good for a few more hauls, I guess."

---

Ben slipped on his windsuit. He glanced at the control panel for the airlock. Yes, he could manipulate it easily. He contemplated the heat pistol at Simple Simon's hip. A tempting idea—but, no, he wanted no more of violence.

Then he bit his lip. He cleared his mind of all thought.

Simple Simon evidently had not noted the impulse that flicked his adrenals into pumping.

The big-eared man stared strangely at Maggie. "Mrs. Pierce, before we go, I'd better tell you something."

"You can do that on the rocket."

Maggie stepped forward to seize her helmet. The man blocked her movement.

"Mrs. Pierce, your husband—Jacob—was on the rocket."

"What?" The girl released a broken, unbelieving little laugh. "Why, he wouldn't dare! That idiot, taking a chance like—" Alarm twisted her features. "He—he wasn't captured—"

"No, he wasn't captured. And he took no chance, Mrs. Pierce."

A moment of silence. Then she sucked in her breath.

Ben understood. Words echoed in his mind: "Jacob and those like him can never return to Earth, not even to Hoover City—except dead."

Maggie swayed. Ben and the big-eared little man jumped to her side, guided her back into the compartment used as a kitchen. They helped her to a chair. Ben turned on the fire beneath a coffee pot. Simple Simon watched silently.

Her eyes empty and staring, Maggie asked, "How did it happen?"

"We were heading into a clump of baby asteroids the size of peas. The radar warning was too slow. We couldn't pull away; we had to stop. The deceleration got him—crushed him. He lived for five minutes afterward."

The little man produced a folded paper from a pocket of his suit. "Jacob said he had some ideas he had to get down on paper. God knows why, but during those five minutes he drew up this plan for improving our deceleration compensator."

"Plans for—" she gasped.

"He was a spaceman, Mrs. Pierce." The man handed her the paper. Ben caught a glimpse of scribbled circuits, relays, cathodes.

"When he finished," the man continued, "he said to tell you that he loved you."

She started to hand the paper back.

The spaceman shook his head. "No, the original is yours. I've made copies for our own ships and for the brass in Hoover City."

---

Maggie kept talking to the little man, lost in the world he was creating for her. Ben was excluded from that world, a stranger.

Then Ben saw his opportunity.

Simple Simon's face was expressionless, but tears were zig-zagging down his gray, reptilian features. Ben stared for several seconds, wondering if his vision had deceived him. Till this instant, he'd somehow assumed that the big Venusian was devoid of emotion.

But Simple Simon was crying.

It was unlikely that the creature would peer into his mind at a moment like this.

Step by step, Ben backed toward the open door in the rear of the compartment. Silently, he slipped through it. He attempted to move automatically, without feeling.

He darted into the supply room. The continued drone of voices told him his action had not been observed.



He didn't like it at all. Escaping this way was like crumpling Maggie's grief into an acid ball and hurling it into her face. But he had no other choice.

A few seconds later, he was dressed in windsuit and oxygen helmet. A can of vita-rations was strapped to his back and his compass was in his hand.

Heart refusing to stop pounding, he threw the levers and switches to open the airlock. He cringed under the grinding, scraping noise, as loud to him as the ringing clash of swords.

But the murmur of voices continued.

He stepped outside. The airlock door clanged shut. He was caught by the biting dust and the shrill banshee wind. He fell, then scrambled erect.

To his right, he saw the silver sheen of Jacob's rocket shining behind a row of golden, eyelike portholes. Beneath it were black outlines of moving, helmeted figures.

He bent low to study the luminous dial of his compass.

Behind him was a grating and a sliding of metal. A movement in the darkness.

He turned.

Dimly illuminated by the glow from the rocket ports was the grim, stony face of Simple Simon.

---

The Venusian was like a piece of the night itself, compressed and solidified to form a living creature. The impression was contradicted only by the glowing whiteness of his eyes.

The reptilian body shuffled forward. The scales on his great face and chest reflected the lights from the rocket like Christmas tree ornaments dusted with gold.

His hands reached out.

Words thundered in Ben's memory: *God knows Simon didn't try to kill him. Simon's hands—well, he doesn't realize—*

Ben hopped away from the groping hands, slipped the compass into his pocket, balled his fists. The wind caught at his body. He stumbled, then recovered his balance.

Despite the wind and his suit's bulkiness, he was surprised at his own agility. He recalled that the gravitational pull of Venus was only four-fifths of Earth's. That was an advantage.

Crouching against the wind, he stepped to his left, away from the rocket. He was reluctant to enter an area of greater darkness, but neither did he want to risk observation by the men he'd seen near Jacob's ship.

Simple Simon followed. He moved like an automaton, functioning with awkward, methodical slowness. His hands, speckled with reflected light, rose up out of the darkness.

Ben stepped back, wiped the dust from his clouded face-plate. One swoop of those hands, he knew, could shatter his helmet, destroy his oxygen supply, leave him choking on deadly methane and carbon dioxide.

But, so far, Simon seemed bent on capture, not destruction. That fact gave Ben a second advantage.

Scaly fingers, moving now with greater swiftness, closed over the shoulder of his suit. Ben felt himself being pulled forward, a child in the grasp of a giant. His brief surge of confidence vanished. Cold terror swept upon him.

He lashed out wildly. His right fist found his target, found it so well that the skin split on his gloved knuckles.

Simon's head snapped back. The grasping fingers slipped from Ben's suit.

But still the Venusian lumbered ahead, an irresistible juggernaut, the hands continually groping. Ben ducked and slipped aside. The can of vita-rations was ripped from his back.

He crouched low, fighting the wind, maneuvering for another blow. His lungs ached, but he had no opportunity to increase his helmet's oxygen flow. His weak leg muscles were beginning to pain as though with needles of fire.

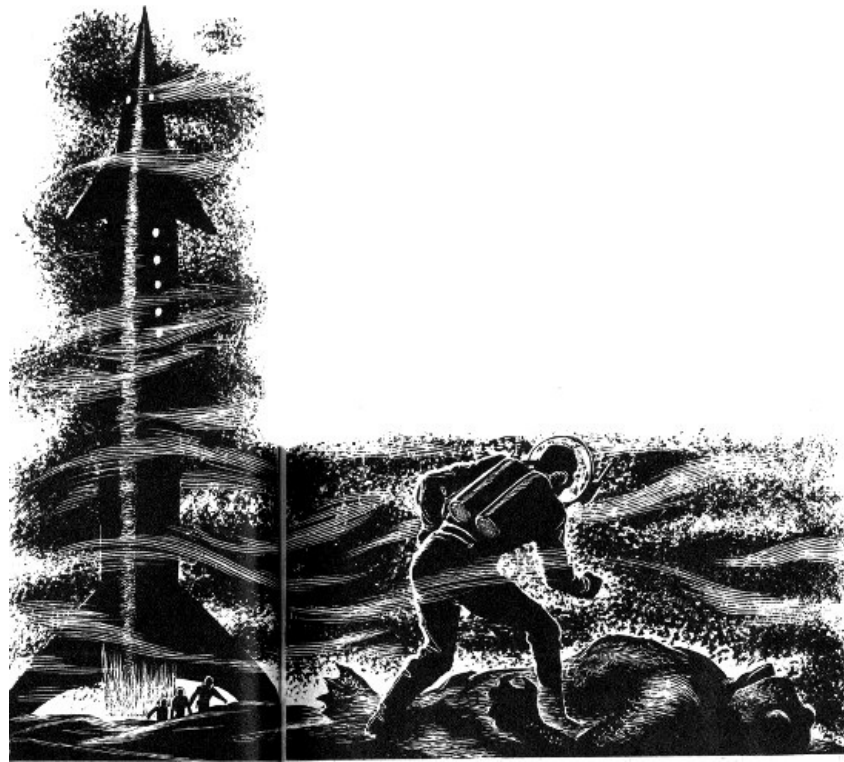
---

The hands crashed down upon his shoulders. This time, his fist found Simon's stomach. The creature released a grunt audible above the howling of wind. His body doubled up.

Ben struck again and again. His lungs throbbed as if they'd break through his chest. A fresh layer of dust coated his face-plate, nearly blinding him. He fought instinctively, gauntleted fists battering.

Simple Simon fell.

---



---

Ben brushed away the dust from his face-plate, turned up his helmet's oxygen valve. Then he knelt by the fallen creature.

A new fear came to Ben Curtis—a fear almost as great as that of being caught in Simon's crushing grip. It was the fear that he had killed again.

But even in the near-darkness, he could distinguish the labored rise and fall of the massive chest. *Thank God*, he thought.

From the direction of Jacob's ship, a flash of light caught his eye. The black shapes of helmeted men were becoming larger, nearer.

Ben tensed. The spacemen couldn't have heard sounds of the struggle, but they *might* have noticed movement.

Puffing, Ben plunged into the darkness to his left, slowing only long enough to consult the dial of his compass.

"Sixty-eight degrees," he breathed.

The compass dial was now his only companion and his only hope. It was the one bit of reality in a world of black, screaming nightmare.

---

At first Ben Curtis fought the wind and the dust and the night. His fists were clenched as they had been while struggling with Simon. Each step forward was a challenge, a struggle and—so far, at any rate—a victory.

But how far was the city? Five miles? Ten? How could you judge distance through a haze of alien sand?

And were Simple Simon or Jacob's men following? How good was a Venusian's vision at night? Would the scaly hands find him even now, descending on him from out of the blackness?

He kept walking, walking. Sixty-eight degrees.

Gradually his senses grew numb to the fear of recapture. He became oblivious to the wailing wind and the beat of dust against his face-plate. He moved like a robot. His mind wandered back through time and space, a pin-wheel spinning with unforgettable impressions, faces, voices.

He saw the white features of a dead man, their vividness fading now and no longer terrifying.

*A Space Officer Is Honest. A Space Officer Is Loyal. A Space Officer Is Dutiful.* The words were like clear, satisfying music.

He cursed at the image of a pop-eyed Martian boy. *A tres fine table, monsieur. Close in the shadows.*

And yet, he told himself, the boy really didn't do anything wrong. He was only helping to capture a murderer. Maybe he was lonesome for Mars and needed money to go home.

Ben thought of Maggie: *While other gals were dressing for their junior proms, I'd be in sloppy*

*slacks down at the spaceport with Jacob.... If I'd only known her back on Earth—*

Maggie, sitting alone now with a wrinkled paper and its mass of scrawled circuits. Alone and hollow with grief and needing help. Ben's throat tightened. Damn it, he didn't want to think about that.

What was it the little big-eared man had said? *I've made copies for our own ships and for the brass in Hoover City.*

Why had he said that? Why would renegades give their secrets to the Space Corps? The Corps would incorporate the discoveries in their ships. With them, they'd reach the asteroids. Jacob's group would be pushed even further outward.

Ben stopped, the wind whipping at his suit and buffeting his helmet—but not as hard as the answer he had found.

---

Jacob and his men had an existence to justify, a debt to pay. They justified that existence and paid that debt by helping humanity in its starward advance.

Maggie had said, *We carry cargoes of almost pure uranium and tungsten and all the stuff that's getting scarce on Earth and Mars and Venus. If we want to risk our lives getting it, that's our business.... The dome we're in now was designed and built by us a few years ago. We lost a few men in the construction, but with almost every advance in space, someone dies.*

The wind pressed Ben back. The coldness of the Venusian night was seeping into his suit. It was as if his body were bathed, at once, in flame and ice.

He slipped, fell, his face turned toward the sandy ground. He did not try to rise.

Yet his mind seemed to soar above the pain, to carry him into a wondrous valley of new awareness.

Man would never be content to stay on nine insignificant globes—not when his eyes had the power to stare into a night sky and when his brain had the ability to imagine. There would have to be pioneers to seek out the unknown horror, to face it and defeat it. There would have to be signposts lining the great road and helping others to follow without fear.

For all the brilliancy of their dreams, those men would be the lonely ones, the men of no return. For all the glory of their brief adventure, they would give not only their cloaks, but ultimately their lives.

Ben lay trembling in the darkness.

His brain cried, *You couldn't rig up a radar system or a deceleration compensator, but you could chart those asteroids. You can't bring a man named Cobb back to life, but you could help a thousand men and women to stay alive five or ten or twenty years from now.*

Ben knew at last what decision Jacob would have made.

The reverse of sixty-eight on a compass is two-forty-eight.

---

Like flashing knitting needles, strong hands moved about his face-plate, his windsuit, his helmet. Then they were wiping perspiration from his white face and placing a wet cloth on the back of his neck.

"You were coming back," a voice kept saying. "You were coming back."

His mouth was full of hot coffee. He became aware of a gentle face hovering above him, just as it had a seeming eternity ago.

He sat up on the bed, conscious now of his surroundings.

"Simon says you were coming back, Ben. *Why?*"

He fought to grasp the meaning of Maggie's words. "Simon? Simon found me? He brought me back?"

"Only a short way. He said you were almost here."

Ben closed his eyes, reliving the whirlwind of thought that had whipped through his brain. He mumbled something about pioneers and a scrawled paper and a debt and a decision.

Then he blinked and saw that he and Maggie were not alone. Simple Simon stood at the foot of his bed—and was that a trace of a smile on his reptilian mouth? And three windsuited spacemen stood behind Maggie, helmets in their hands. One was a lean-boned, reddish-skinned Martian.

Simple Simon said, "Ben—changed. Thinks—like us. Good now. Like—Jacob."

The little big-eared man stepped up and shook hands with Ben. "If Simon says so, that's good enough for me."

A blond-haired Earthman helped Ben from the bed. "Legs okay, fellow? Think you're ready?"

Ben stood erect unassisted. "Legs okay. And I'm ready."

He thought for a moment. "But suppose I wasn't ready. Suppose I didn't want to go with you. I know a lot about your organization. What would you do?"

The blond man shrugged untroubledly. "We wouldn't kill you, if that's what you mean. We'd probably vote on whether to take you with us anyway or let you go." His smile was frank. "I'm glad we don't have to vote."

Ben nodded and turned to Maggie. "You're still coming with us?"

She shook her head, a mist shining in her sad eyes. "Not on this trip. Not without Jacob. I'll get one of our desert taxis back to Hoover City. Then I'll be going to Earth for a while. I've got some thinking to do and thinking is done best on Earth. Out here is the place for *feeling*." Her eyes lost a little of their pain. "But I'll be back. Jacob wouldn't stay on Earth. Neither will I. I'll be seeing you."

The big-eared man put his hand on Ben's shoulder.

"Think you can get us back to Juno?" he asked.

Ben looked at Maggie and then at the big-eared man. "You're as good as there," he said confidently.

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A COFFIN FOR JACOB \*\*\*

Updated editions will replace the previous one—the old editions will be renamed.

Creating the works from print editions not protected by U.S. copyright law means that no one owns a United States copyright in these works, so the Foundation (and you!) can copy and distribute it in the United States without permission and without paying copyright royalties. Special rules, set forth in the General Terms of Use part of this license, apply to copying and distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works to protect the PROJECT GUTENBERG™ concept and trademark. Project Gutenberg is a registered trademark, and may not be used if you charge for an eBook, except by following the terms of the trademark license, including paying royalties for use of the Project Gutenberg trademark. If you do not charge anything for copies of this eBook, complying with the trademark license is very easy. You may use this eBook for nearly any purpose such as creation of derivative works, reports, performances and research. Project Gutenberg eBooks may be modified and printed and given away—you may do practically ANYTHING in the United States with eBooks not protected by U.S. copyright law. Redistribution is subject to the trademark license, especially commercial redistribution.

START: FULL LICENSE  
THE FULL PROJECT GUTENBERG LICENSE  
PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE YOU DISTRIBUTE OR USE THIS WORK

To protect the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting the free distribution of electronic works, by using or distributing this work (or any other work associated in any way with the phrase "Project Gutenberg"), you agree to comply with all the terms of the Full Project Gutenberg™ License available with this file or online at [www.gutenberg.org/license](http://www.gutenberg.org/license).

**Section 1. General Terms of Use and Redistributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works**

1.A. By reading or using any part of this Project Gutenberg™ electronic work, you indicate that you have read, understand, agree to and accept all the terms of this license and intellectual property (trademark/copyright) agreement. If you do not agree to abide by all the terms of this agreement, you must cease using and return or destroy all copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in your possession. If you paid a fee for obtaining a copy of or access to a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work and you do not agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement, you may obtain a refund from the person or entity to whom you paid the fee as set forth in paragraph 1.E.8.

1.B. "Project Gutenberg" is a registered trademark. It may only be used on or associated in any way with an electronic work by people who agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement. There are a few things that you can do with most Project Gutenberg™ electronic works even without complying with the full terms of this agreement. See paragraph 1.C below. There are a lot of things you can do with Project Gutenberg™ electronic works if you follow the terms of this agreement and help preserve free future access to Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. See paragraph 1.E below.

1.C. The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation ("the Foundation" or PGLAF), owns a compilation copyright in the collection of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. Nearly all the individual works in the collection are in the public domain in the United States. If an individual work is unprotected by copyright law in the United States and you are located in the United States, we do not claim a right to prevent you from copying, distributing, performing, displaying or creating derivative works based on the work as long as all references to Project Gutenberg are removed. Of course, we hope that you will support the

Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting free access to electronic works by freely sharing Project Gutenberg™ works in compliance with the terms of this agreement for keeping the Project Gutenberg™ name associated with the work. You can easily comply with the terms of this agreement by keeping this work in the same format with its attached full Project Gutenberg™ License when you share it without charge with others.

1.D. The copyright laws of the place where you are located also govern what you can do with this work. Copyright laws in most countries are in a constant state of change. If you are outside the United States, check the laws of your country in addition to the terms of this agreement before downloading, copying, displaying, performing, distributing or creating derivative works based on this work or any other Project Gutenberg™ work. The Foundation makes no representations concerning the copyright status of any work in any country other than the United States.

1.E. Unless you have removed all references to Project Gutenberg:

1.E.1. The following sentence, with active links to, or other immediate access to, the full Project Gutenberg™ License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg™ work (any work on which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” appears, or with which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org). If you are not located in the United States, you will have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is derived from texts not protected by U.S. copyright law (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase “Project Gutenberg” associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg™ trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg™ License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg™ License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg™.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg™ License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg™ work in a format other than “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg™ website ([www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org)), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg™ License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg™ works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works provided that:

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg™ works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive

Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, "Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation."

- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg™ License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg™ works.
- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.
- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg™ works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the manager of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread works not protected by U.S. copyright law in creating the Project Gutenberg™ collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain "Defects," such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the "Right of Replacement or Refund" described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you 'AS-IS', WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg™ work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg™ work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

## **Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg™**

Project Gutenberg™ is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg™'s goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg™ collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg™ and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation information page at [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org).

## **Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation**

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non-profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's website and official page at [www.gutenberg.org/contact](http://www.gutenberg.org/contact)

## **Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation**

Project Gutenberg™ depends upon and cannot survive without widespread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine-readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations (\$1 to \$5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit [www.gutenberg.org/donate](http://www.gutenberg.org/donate).

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: [www.gutenberg.org/donate](http://www.gutenberg.org/donate)

## **Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg™ electronic works**

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg™ concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg™ eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg™ eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as not protected by copyright in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our website which has the main PG search facility: [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org).

This website includes information about Project Gutenberg™, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.