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Destination: Saturn

by David Grinnell and Lin Carter

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I

The moose stood atop a low hill and stared ruminatingly through a row of evergreens at the long, low-slung house beside the shores of Great Slave Lake. And you couldn't blame this fine specimen of *Alces americanus* for staring, for this particular structure was an eye-stunner even by the sophisticated standards of 2080.

After all, you expect the home of one of Earth's youngest and most adventurous multibillionaires to be a bit on the palatial side. And so it was: almost an acre of glistening plastic, elaborately sculptured and friezed in a flamboyant, Imperial style of architecture that might be best described as Neo-Napoleonic Baroque with a few touches of Ivan-the Terrible Pseudo-Gothic added for extra impressiveness. As a modest little lakeside cottage, it had everything, including an artfully camouflaged private airport, a lake-front harbor filled with new-model racing craft of the air-cushion type currently popular, and a complete staff of robot servants. And there it was, right smack in the center of the chill Canadian wilderness, kept comfortably warm by concealed electronic mirrors placed amid the exotic flowering shrubbery.

Yes, even a simple moose might be expected to goggle at the home of Ajax Calkins, sole heir to the incredible *Calkans* industrial complex upon which the space age was built. This particular moose, raised to roam the near-Arctic tundras of northern Canada, had probably never been exposed to the luxurious splendors of modern living, and he seemed fascinated—especially by the living room, which was clearly visible through the wide floor-to-ceiling windows.

It may have been that the moose had never seen a quarrel between two humans before. For that was what was taking place at this moment within that luxurious living room.

Ajax Calkins, a slim, fairly good-looking but not overly impressive young man of twenty-five or -six was engaged in heated argument with a young girl (with whom, in fact, he was also engaged to be married). Ajax was personable enough to the casual eye, but he would himself be the first to agree with the statement that his appearance gave no suggestion of a fantastically wealthy Captain of Industry, and even less of the Leader of Men he so earnestly

wished to be. His eyes were blue, but pale and dreamy rather than keen or intense. His straight hair was brownish, and a mediocre shade of brown at that. His mustache was slight and (to be frank) hardly visible, unless you stood very close to him. The crowning disappointment, from Ajax's point of view—was his height, something short of the six full feet for which he longed. It wasn't any comfort to remember that he was taller than Julius Caesar or Napoleon. Ajax's appearance belied his dreams. In an age of over-security and hyper-civilization, with no more frontiers to cross or kingdoms to conquer, he dreamed of carving empires of his own from virgin wilderness... of emulating the heroic kingdom-builders of the past, like Pizarro, the bold *conquistador* who pulled down the Incas and won a continent for Spain, or Cecil Rhodes, who hacked a mighty nation out of trackless jungle and named it after himself, or that great explorer, Captain Cook, who found and claimed virgin Australia for his Queen. Ajax had a mental picture of himself that was part Clive of India and part Lawrence of Arabia, with a little "stout Cortez" and even a pinch of the White Rajah of Sarawak for seasoning.

Alas, he was none of these... only the richest young man on Earth, or anywhere else for that matter. But filthy lucre (even when you have it by the trainload) cannot assuage the pangs that afflict one born to a high, heroic destiny yet lacking the means wherewith to implement it.

Abandoning all sense of pride, Ajax had even sunk so low as to *advertise* for a kingdom. Much to his delighted surprise, just as he was about to give up all hope, one of his "Kingdom Wanted, Price No Object" ads in the *Syrtis Major Sentinel* actually brought in a customer! One Anton Smallways, on behalf of a group of miners and space-prospectors, invited him to come out to the Zone and be king of their tiny world. You can imagine the alacrity with which Ajax Calkins sped to the Asteroid Zone in his private spaceyacht, the *Destiny* ... Clive of India—hah! He was going to be *Ajax of the Asteroids*!

Sadly, though, his glorious dreams fell through. His private world, the Imperial Kingdom of Ajaxia, proved to be no natural planetoid at all, but a stupendous prehistoric spaceship left over from some lost, primordial Asteroidal civilization. And on top of that, Anton Smallways and the other miners, his royal subjects, proved to be phonies. They were revealed as agents of the clever, ambitious Saturnians, and not human beings at all.

Out of this disillusionment, however, Ajax had salvaged a little something. Due to its strategic position at the edge of EMSA—in a sort of "no-man's space" between the territory controlled by the Earth-Mars Space Administration and the hostile and cunning Interplanetary Empire of Saturn—and due to the enormous potential value of the mysterious machines and instruments with which the planetoid-spaceship was crammed, King Ajax the First had been able to bulldoze EMSA into officially recognizing him as an independent monarch, in exchange for all scientific rights to the Asteroidal machines. This concession, while it rescued his prestige, still left him in a sorry position... a King without subjects, a ruler without a realm over which to reign.

It was over details of the terms of the EMSA/Ajaxian Treaty that King Ajax the First was quarreling on the afternoon in question. From his hilltop observation post, the inquisitive moose could see quite clearly both the angry young monarch and his equally vehement opponent, Miss Emily Hackenschmidt, former Field Investigator for the North American Sector of EMSA, now Ambassador Plenipotentiary to the Royal Court of Ajaxia, and fiancée of Ajax Calkins.

Like Calkins Hall, she was also an eye-popper, and although she did not occupy a fraction

of the house's acreage, her architecture was equally admirable and even more symmetrical. She had deep-blue eyes (glaring, at the moment, in a determined frown); warm pink lips, obviously designed with osculation in mind, and an appealing tousled mop of short black curls arranged in poodlelike bangs. Her slim figure, with its superb collection of breath-taking curves arranged in just the right places, was at a disadvantage in the severe and workmanlike maroon service uniform of EMSA's women's division, although the knee-length culottes did succeed in displaying tantalizing glimpses of her long, graceful legs which were clad in lacy satinelle pettipants and calf-high boots. All-in-all, as the curiosity-smitten moose might have observed, Emily was a fitting future consort for this 21st Century Alexander of Macedon.

At the moment, however, her views of Ajax Calkins were anything but consort-like.

"You fumble-headed, slack-jawed *idiot!*" she hissed between tightly clenched teeth. "Of *course* EMSA'll have to break up your precious planetoid in order to take apart the Asteroidal drive-engines and weaponry—and why shouldn't they, you dense-witted *cretin?*"

"Why shouldn't they, you ask? I'll tell you why!"

"Tell me then, Ajax, you idiot."

"*King* Ajax!" he snapped.

"*King* Ajax, you idiot," she complied.

Ajax drew himself up and fixed the angry girl with an Imperial eye. "I say, Miss Hackenschmidt, you do leave something to be desired, as an Ambassador Plenipotentiary, in the tact-and-diplomacy department."

"Oh, *flack* tact and diplomacy! Ajax, you make me so *mad!* And stop calling me 'Miss Hackenschmidt' as if I were your high-school cybernetics teacher or something!"

Ajax looked pained. "Please watch your language before royalty. Shall I call you 'Miss Hackenwhacken'?—No, but," he overrode her reply and continued serenely: "really, though, my objection to this item in the treaty should be blatantly obvious. I yielded exploitation rights to EMSA in return for EMSA's recognition of my sovereign state. But if EMSA dismembers and carts off the planetoid-ship, there goes my sovereign state."

"Your so-called 'sovereign state'"—she pronounced the words with scathing emphasis—"is going to have to go, anyway, Ajax, dismembered or not. EMSA can't leave that flying treasure trove of scientific secrets within grabbing range of the Saturnian border. Which reminds me. I should never have let you persuade me to join you here on Earth... it's pretty dumb for *both* of us to be here, leaving the planetoid-ship unattended. What if the Saturnians make a grab while we're sitting here yelling at each other? Where's your 'sovereign state' then?"

Ajax smiled his infuriatingly superior smile, plucked a stimulette from the rosewood box on the nearest end table and drew on it until the self-igniting tip caught. He did this with the practiced smoothness of a stereovision actor performing a bit of "business" designed to communicate something to the effect that "cooler heads than thine, my saucy miss, are at work and have already anticipated the eventuality."

"You forget the Wuj," he said calmly.

As ever, the thought of the diminutive Martian spider-being made him smile with quiet pride. Out of all the recent mishmash of phony planetoids and amoebic pseudo-subjects and interplanetary war, the one good thing that had happened to him in his quixotic quest for a private planetary empire was—the Wuj. Alexander had his Hephaestion, Dr. Johnson his Boswell... and Ajax the First, the Third Least Wuj of the Northern Panel Spinnery and the Eggery of the Silvery Downs!

Emily looked dubious.

"I don't know... the Wuf is certainly *loyal*, but... well, he's not human and doesn't think like a human, and who can predict what hell do in an unexpected situation? Besides, those Saturnians are tricky, unscrupulous, and about as trustworthy as a homicidal maniac with a blowtorch."

He smiled smugly. "I know... and they learned it all from your precious EMSA, didn't they?"

Emily glared, but bit her lip in silence; it was uncomfortably true. When the first manned expedition from EMSA had reached Saturn some thirty years past, they discovered that the surface of the Ringed Planet supported life despite all scientific predictions to the contrary. The gravity was considerable, but not as bad as had been anticipated, since the actual planet proved very small. What had showed up on Earthside telescopes as a vast orb, only a trifle smaller than giant Jupiter, proved mostly atmosphere. The native dominant lifeform was a bit odd, however: a race of plastic, large amoebas whose bodily configuration was under conscious control and who could extrude rubbery pseudopods at will. They had a childlike, malleable mentality to match their outward form, and soon hero-worshipped the Earthmen from EMSA, copied their ways and imitated their institutions—a situation which led to rapid industrialization, to the growth of imperialistic dreams of conquest, and to the present impending interplanetary war whose first major engagement the Earthmen had won, with the aid of the age-old Asteroidal arsenal on Ajaxia.

"Well," she said at last, "wherever they learned it from, they have mastered their lessons. And unless you agree to our terms and let EMSA break up the planetoid-ship and carry it into an in-world orbit somewhere safe, the very next move the Saturnians make will be to seize 'Your Majesty's sovereign state.' Wuj or *no* Wuj!"

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II

Ajax shook his head decisively. "This EMSA-Saturnian war has nothing to do with the Imperial Kingdom of Ajaxia! Our reign shall be one of peace and plenty for all... providing EMSA leaves me anything to rule. Ajaxia stays just where it is. Oh, I agree to let your scientists study the drive and the weapons and all, but they've got to leave my kingdom intact."

Emily sighed and shook her head despairingly. "Ajax, I don't know what I'm going to do with you! Look: you're already in the war, whether you like it or not. Ajaxia is right smack on

the front lines, in fact. And the Saturnians have already made one aggressive move against your flacking kingdom—by hoaxing you into thinking your so-called 'loyal subjects' *were* loyal subjects, and not sneaking, treacherous Saturnians in disguise. Now, we're going to get this settled, Ajax if it takes all night! But we've *got* to have your full permission or we can't do anything. EMSA has officially recognized you as the government of Ajaxia; our people can't touch your planetoid-ship without repercussions that would shake the very foundations of Interplanetary Law. You must allow the Treaty to stand as I've drafted it: EMSA must move Ajaxia sunwards, and soon—before the Saturnians have recovered from the loss of their fleet and are ready to strike again. And we have to break up the planetoid and take those machines apart! Their potential military value is incalculable, and we have no time to hanky-panky around being careful to leave your precious kingdom intact!"

Ajax drew himself up with a superb gesture and a flawless sneer of regal contempt which he had been practicing before a mirror for days. "Oho!" he said witheringly. "So that's it, eh? I am to permit my kingdom to be taken from me—I am to stand by while you maroon-clad monkeys break it up for scrap? And where does that leave me? Will the Earth-Mars Space Administration agree to a swap?"

"A... swap? For what?" she demanded suspiciously.

"One kingdom for another. Little Ajaxia with its store of scientific secrets ... for some other planetoid whereon I can settle my loyal subjects (when I have recruited some)... Let's see... how about Vesta? Ceres would be nice. Or maybe Pallas...?"

She gave a little ladylike snort of contempt. "Oh, shut up Ajax, you fool! You want to trade your vest-pocket antique spaceship for one of the largest, wealthiest asteroids in the Solar System, eh? Come off it! You know perfectly well EMSA has no power to make a swap like that. Besides, there are fifty-'leven interplanetary laws and treaties covering those worlds right now. It would take years of red tape to arrange such a deal. Then again, Vesta, Ceres and Pallas already have considerable populations and legal local governments. It's no good trying *that* one, Ajax."

"*Ahem!* Pray pardon the intrusion, Sir, and Miss. Dinner will be served shortly."

They turned to the door where Jenkins, the robotler, stood, his bland countenance beaming obsequiously. One of Earth's most noted roboticists had designed Jenkins inside and out to reflect the appearance and obedience-patterns of a typical butler from Queen Victoria's golden reign.

"Oh, bother!" Ajax snapped pettishly. "We've been jawing on forever, and I wanted to get in a spot of hunting before sitting down to table!"

"Hunting?" Emily repeated incredulously. "With the fate of the System hanging in the balance?"

"Certainly, hunting," he said, nonchalantly (he had practiced that, too). "Why do you think I built this hunting lodge up here in the middle of the great Canadian wilderness? Perfect hunting country. And as a royal sport, it goes back to the days of Nimrod. King Edward VII was a famous hunter. Napoleon himself..."

She shrugged. "Oh, all right! Forget the genealogies. If you want to call this gigantic Grand

Hotel of yours a hunting lodge, it's perfectly all right with me, Ajax Calkins! And if you want to go hunting, there's a big fat moose out there that's been watching us for half an hour..."

Ajax Jumped. "What? Is that moose still hanging around here? Why, he's been nosing around the property for days! If he gets to moosing around in my begonias... Jenkins!"

"Yes, sir?"

"My elephant gun. I'm going to shoot a moose."

There was a long moment of silence. The benign expression carved on Jenkins' face did not, of course, change, but you sensed a certain question in the air.

With great dignity, Ajax said carefully, "I don't *have* a moose gun, you know."

Jenkins nodded deferentially. "Very good, sir." He vanished through the door.

Emily regarded him doubtfully. "Ajax... you're really going to kill the poor little thing?"

He snorted with fine masculine contempt for typical feminine daintiness. "I certainly am! Surely a monarch has the royal right to protect his begonias from bestial molestation. I'll show you what good hunters we kings are! *Jenkins?* Step on the jets with that elephant gun, before the beggar ambles off somewhere into the tundra!"

"Here you are, sir." Jenkins reappeared, holding a 21st Century needle-beam laser rifle, custom-fitted to resemble an antique African safari-gun out of the days of Allan Quatermain. Hefting it with manly anticipation, Ajax strode out onto the porch, followed by Emily.

"Hah! The great hulking beast hasn't even got the sense to move along when a *hunter* hoves into view! Gad, Emily—what a triumph! To cut down a moose right on one's own veranda! What a trophy!" He leveled the elephant gun; allowing the robot sighting-mechanism to adjust the aiming mechanism automatically. Then a small light flashed amid the scrollwork of curlicues with which the stock was adorned. Ready to fire...

"Oh, Ajax... couldn't you just shoo him away, or something?"

He fired.

Now moose are not noted for any razor-keen intellect; but this particular moose displayed not only a very un-moose-like curiosity about the doings of humans, but also an incredibly agile instinct for self-preservation. It had been gazing at the two people on the veranda quite intently. As Ajax lifted the rifle to his shoulder, something inside the animal seemed to snap alert. Its eyes dilated with an expression *distinctly* un-moose-like, and it dodged to one side with a fantastic blur of speed...

But not fast enough to frustrate the radar-guided, computer-linked aiming mechanism with which this rifle had been fitted out. The dazzling needle-beam of ruby fire slashed directly through the central region of the moose.

Its reaction to this was even more un-moose-like.

It *exploded* with an eye-searing flash of green flame and a clap of thunder that shook the evergreens!

When the smoke had cleared away; Ajax and Emily stood open-mouthed and spellbound.

Emily said firmly, "*That* was no moose!"

It was the most accurate statement of the day thus far. Ajax closed his mouth, gulped, and agreed in a shaky voice.

"Let's get over there and take a look at the remains," Emily suggested.

"Righto!"

Within moments the two, astride a low-flying ground-skimmer, had whistled across the shore and the rows of evergreens that bordered the estate and arrived at the scene of the explosion.

The moose had been a moose only to the unaided eye, as a quick glance at the corpse proved. It was a hollow shell of a moose, in fact, stuffed with machinery. And for the pilot of this weird contraption, they found a now-quiescent mass of what looked like a poor grade of lime gelatine swiftly melting away.

"A... *Saturnian*," Ajax said dumbly. He exchanged a long look with the equally flabbergasted Miss Hackenschmidt. And he was right. Over the decomposing Amoeba-Man, they looked at each other with a wild surmise.

The interplanetary war had not waited on Ajax's royal decision; it had landed smack on his front doorstep.

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III

Dinner was a moody, silent *Affair*. Jenkins had put together a few snacks from the pantry, with the aid of Tompkins the robo-chef: roast brisket of Martian land-eel in sandberry cream sauce, Venusian swamp-cabbage stuffed with chives, the whole washed down with a bottle of antique Taylor's port of the fabulous 1967 vintage, worth a bureaucrat's ransom. Despite the elaborate, gourmet-tempting variety of this modest little "snack," neither Ajax nor Emily did more than pick at their meal. The torrent of questions seething through their minds, distracted them from their appetites.

Why had the Saturnian spy been lurking about the grounds of Ajax Calkins' country cottage (as he thought of it)?

When had the mechanical moose first begun spying on the wealthy monarch of Ajaxia?

What was this overtly hostile act of electronic espionage a prelude to?

Heaving a heartfelt sigh, Ajax pushed aside the heavily laden plate of now-cooling food, and permitted the solicitous Jenkins to pour him a snifter of after-dinner brandy. He took a heavy gulp of it with no more attention to its tender bouquet than if it had been plain cold water and

not a rare vintage of Martian snow-grape brandy, fetched hither at enormous expense from the Calkins' vineyards in the snowcap region of the South Pole of Mars.

Standing up, he gestured listlessly toward an adjoining room.

"Well... shall we adjourn to the conservatory?"

Emily shrugged, but rose and joined him.

"I *still* think you..."

"I know, I know." He nodded wearily. "You think I should videophone the Wuj and ask if everything is all right in my kingdom of Ajaxia."

"Yes I *do*," she bristled. "And I can't for the life of me understand why you *don't*!"

Preceding the girl into the conservatory (a royal prerogative), he collapsed limply in a large contour chair that conformed pneumatically to his position with a *wheeze* of compressed air. She sat down across from him, setting her crystal brandy goblet down on the bench with an angry little *clack*.

"My dear Miss Hackenschmidt..." he began.

"A-jax! I warned you not to call me that. I am your fiancée, you know."

"Miss Hackenschmidt, my dear," he corrected with vast aplomb, "in my absence, the Wuj *is* acting Prime Minister of the kingdom and perfectly capable of making all decisions of state needed in such small matters as may arise."

"But... !"

"But," he added amiably, "it behooves me, as his beloved leader and sovereign, to bestow my trust in the Wuj. It is the first duty of a monarch to permit his ministers to perform their duties without constant supervision. How can I encourage the executive abilities of my underlings, if I constantly peer over his—over *their*—shoulders every moment?"

She stamped a small booted foot angrily.

"Ajax, you are just impossible! You live in this dreamworld where you are some kind of latter-day Kublai Khan... At first, I thought it was just a gag, but I'm beginning to think you're really serious. You really *believe* in this guff about owning a kingdom, don't you?"

Shocked from his reverie, he flashed her a wrathful look.

"*Believe* in it? Of course I believe in it—the EMSA-Ajaxian Treaty..."

She waved a hand as if to clear the air.

"Oh, stop. Of course—*legally, technically*—you are a king. But I'm talking about *facts*! This kingdom of yours is nothing more than a big, fat antique spaceship left over from pre-explosion days—the largest surviving artifact of the unknown Asteroidal civilization that was destroyed when the fifth planet was exploded aeons ago and its pieces formed the asteroids. And these 'underlings' and 'ministers' you keep yammering on about just—don't—*exist*! There's nothing to your flacking 'royal kingdom' but one forlorn little spiderman sitting

up there all alone. Come down to Earth, Ajax, and talk *facts*."

"All right!" he exclaimed, stung by her blunt talk. "I *will* talk facts. There is no conceivable link between this crazy mechanized moose that's been lurking around the begonias and your hypothetical, purely imaginary Saturnian plot to invade and conquer Ajaxia during my absence. *You*, my dear Miss Hackenschmidt, are the one who is talking guff, not I! Where's your proof the Saturnian fleet—if they still *have* a fleet (and I doubt it, after we used the Asteroidal telepathically-aimed projectiles to smash their fleet during the heroic and glorious Battle of Ajaxia)—where's your *proof* they intend striking at my kingdom? How would they dare face such terrible weapons again?"

Equally stung, she lashed back at him furiously:

"*Ajax, you blithering idiot, we used up the projectiles—all of them—in destroying the fleet!*"

He smiled again, that utterly infuriating "cooler heads than thine, my fiery miss (etc.)" smile of his, and, toying with the brandy goblet, said: "Of course we did. But the *Saturnians* don't know it."

Baffled, she turned away and took an enormous gulp of the potent liqueur as if to soothe inward fires. Unfortunately, the brandy was powerful stuff; unable to swallow it, her cheeks bulged, her eyes watered, and she flushed crimson.

He watched with absorbed fascination as she jumped up and ran over to the nearest group of potted plants with which the conservatory was crowded in exotic profusion. She spat the brandy out in a huge orchid bush, paying no attention to his anguished yelp.

"Not in my prize Tibetan *odontoglossums*—please!"

Too late; the lush orchids throbbed from root to blossom as the Martian brandy bubbled into their soil. He watched with suspended breath to see if the fiery fluid would have any adverse affect on the rare blooms, but instead of wilting into seared shadows of their former selves, the flowers opened even wider than before, lifting higher as their stalks drew taller and straighter. A gorgeous purple flush spread slowly over the flaring petals.

Marveling open-mouthed, Ajax reached out and stroked the radio-sensitive globe suspended beside the contour chair. When Jenkins appeared in the doorway, Ajax said absently: "Oh, Jenkins—fetch a glass of cold water for Miss Hackenschmidt. And order another case of that snowgrape brandy flown in, will you?... Better make it *two* cases, now that I think of it... I think we'll have another gold-ribbon championship in next year's Shanghai Flower Show, Jenkins! I've just discovered the most marvelous orchid-invigorator..."

"Very good, sir. And my congratulations!"

Emily drank the water down greedily and subsided, gasping and speechless, on the bench. Ajax smiled at her distractedly.

"Very good Emily! You'll make a fine mistress for Calkins Hall... and a first-rate Queen of Ajaxia. Come along, now. Into my study."

"What for?"

"I'm going to call the Wuj, dear, just as you've been suggesting. I'm going to show you just

how wrong you are about these Saturnians."

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IV

They went into the ground-floor study. Ajax went over to the far wall where, in lone splendor, a superb and incredibly expensive original Emshwiller hung in a platinum frame. Night was coming on, and as the last rays of the Arctic sun drew their ruddy and lingering caress across the row of evergreens beside Great Slave Lake, the floor-to-ceiling glass window slowly polarized itself into opacity, displaying a full-length portrait of Ajax the First in full dress uniform, with the purple, gold and crimson Ajaxian national flag behind him. Etched into the glass windowpane by focused ion-beams, the portrait was only visible when the polarization was in effect. The result transformed a cozy if slightly pretentious study into something as monumental and national-shrinish as Westminster Abbey.

Ajax pressed his right hand at a radio-sensitive place in the picture frame. An electronic "key" implanted in the gold signet ring he wore unlocked something, and he drew the rare painting aside, revealing a private interplanetary videophone installation almost as expensive as the mid-20th Century masterpiece it was concealed behind.

Adroitly, he activated the mechanism, while saying, "Now, my dear, you'll shortly see the folly of yielding to female impulses and whims. Ajaxia will be safe and the Wuj securely in command, with naught to disturb the tranquility of my royal realm."

Emily set her small jaw stubbornly.

"I sure hope so, Ajax, but—if you're *wrong*—then don't blame me for saying I told you so!"

"Never fear." He smiled complacently and dialed the number. There was a wait of several minutes while connections were made, then a brief delay while his photonic signal went winging many millions of miles through space. Across the gap of interplanetary space, they heard the phone ringing. It rang and rang. Finally, the squeaky, solemn voice of their friend the Wuj came to them from the receiver.

"Independent Kingdom of Ajaxia, good afternoon, sir or madam. Prime Minister speaking."

Turning to tip a significant wink at Emily, Ajax said with odd emphasis, "*Heigh-Ho*, Wuj! How is everything—and what's wrong with your visual at that end?"

There was a curious pause. Then...

"Who is speaking, please?"

"Who's speaking? Who d'you think is speaking? Me! King Ajax, of course!"

Again came the annoying lag which was the one thing Ajax disliked most about modern interplanetary communications. No matter how the technicians improved their gadgetry, they could not come up with a method to make light travel faster than light. The light-lag between

Earth and Ajaxia was only a handful of seconds; but what would happen when even distant Pluto on the edge of the Solar System was colonized, as it eventually would be? How could you conduct a conversation between two parties when you had to wait *minutes* between question and reply?

"King who?" asked the Wuj squeakily.

"King Ajax, your beloved leader! *Heigh-Ho*, Wuj! What's the matter with you? Is anything going on at Ajaxia?"

The Wuj stated solemnly, "You are an impostor, sir, and it is a capital crime to impersonate reigning royalty. I shall now switch on the visual and expose you for a foolish hoaxer. One moment, please."

Fuming, Ajax turned a bewildered look at Emily.

"He's gone nuts! He doesn't seem to recognize me, *me*, his beloved leader, his beneficent and Imperial sovereign!"

They waited. The video screen became a swirling haze of intermingled hues that gradually focused into the features of the loyal little Martian. They saw a furry, reddish basketball perched precariously atop eight thin, spiderish legs. A face like a sad Pekinese dog peered at them solemnly, great green compound eyes twinkling.

Ajax impatiently started to speak, but the Wuj's comment dried up the strings of speech. "An amazing impersonation, sir! Although it little becomes the highest ranking public official of the Kingdom to congratulate a hoaxer on technical, though criminous, expertise—may I say your disguise is impressively similar to the royal features of my monarch?"

Ajax gaped blankly and fumbled helplessly, trying to think of something to say. The situation seemed mad, impossible, nightmarish.

"But, Wuj" he stammered, "I *am* your monarch! I am Ajax Calkins! Don't you recognize your beloved leader?"

The furry snout wrinkled in a disbelieving smile.

"Despite the resemblance, which is, as I have already stated, impressively realistic, sir, I know this to be an untruth. For both King Ajax and his consort-to-be, Miss Emily Hackenschmidt, *are still here on Ajaxia* ... they are, in fact, right in the next room."

While the stunned Ajax groped feebly for a rejoinder to this startling item of information, Emily pushed him from the instrument and addressed the Wuj herself.

"Wuj! This is Emily... We demand to see the truth of your words for ourselves."

The Wuj shrugged politely—a rather interesting sight, since he had eight shoulders to shrug—and did something to the controls at his end. The screen blanked momentarily, then cleared, showing a view of one of the other rooms which Ajax and Emily recognized as a storeroom currently housing some of the more interesting and advanced mechanisms of the Asteroidal trove. There, busily taking inventory were—*themselves*! Two exact likenesses of Emily and Ajax, complete to the smallest, most insignificant detail, with calm, impassive faces were rifling through the scientific treasures of Ajaxia!

"Having seen for yourselves," the squeaky voice of the Wuj said, "you will I hope realize the futility of continuing your hoax. Farewell, and be warned that any further attempts to impersonate the royal Ajax will be met by the sternest rigors of Ajaxian law."

The spiderman hung up.

White-faced, Emily and Ajax stared at each other.

"I told you so," said Emily. Ajax groaned.

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V

There was no time to be lost. Something would have to be done, and quickly. But Ajax found himself unable to act, to think, even to move, he collapsed limply into the nearest chair and stared feebly at Emily.

"Of course, you realize what is going on," she said in her most brisk and businesslike tone.

"Of course," he echoed hollowly.

"You noticed the impassive, expressionless faces on our duplicates? And the jerky, stiff way they moved their arms and legs?"

"Quite."

"*Saturnians!* In plastic, mechanical suits. Just like the ones Anton Smallways and the other imitation miners wore. Only, these are modeled on you and me!"

"Right..."

She walked over to him and snapped her fingers in front of his face.

"Come on, Ajax, snap out of it! We've got to do something. I don't know *what*, but—something."

"Yes-yes," he agreed.

"Stop moping about as if the Nine Worlds had just fallen apart beneath your feet! I warned you that the flacking Amoeba-Men might seize the opportunity to make a move against Ajaxia. I told you we shouldn't both have come to Earth, leaving the Wuj alone to cope with the Saturnian problem..."

He shot her a look of annoyance.

"Miss Hackenbush, let me point out to you that I am not, regardless of your self-evident opinion of me, stupid. I foresaw just such an eventuality. My royal mind keenly projected the range of possibilities, and took certain precautions. *That's* what has got me flabbergasted!"

"What precautions? Ajax, what *are* you talking about?"

"When I left, I arranged a *recognition-code* with the Wuj, just on the chance that the Saturnians might try to get in by some pretense or pretext. I told the Wuj that when I called him, my very first words would be 'Heigh-Ho!' "

"Oh, so *that's* why you winked and gave me that weird grin when you first spoke to the Wuj...*

"Quite. But, taking the recog-code into consideration, I don't see how any impostors could have gotten past the Wuj and into Ajaxia without *using* the code—which they couldn't have known anything about."

Emily set her small jaw grimly. "Well, we'll worry about that later, Ajax. Right now, the Saturnians are on Ajaxia and if we don't do something to stop them, they'll make off with the loot and leave *you* holding the royal bag!"

"The bag? What do you mean?"

"Really, Ajax! Hasn't it percolated through your armor-plated skull yet? *EMSA recognition of you as monarch of Ajaxia depends entirely on your agreement to hand over that junkheap of prehistoric gadgets—intact.*"

"Oh-oh..." He was appalled. The full import of the Saturnian impersonation of himself had not yet sunk in. Now it did, and he felt as if the floor had just dropped out from under him.

"Exactly! EMSA would rather not have to recognize another independent planetary state—and if you show up with empty hands and some story about Saturnian pirates having made off with everything, they will be delighted to seize the opportunity to cancel their official recognition of the Kingdom of Ajaxia, to tear up the treaty and forget the whole mess!"

"Great Scott!"

Galvanized, Ajax sprang from the chair and palmed the radio-sensitive globe, summoning Jenkins.

As soon as the placid face of the robotler appeared in the doorway, Ajax burst into a flurry of activity.

"Jenkins! Pack my things, and collect Miss Hackenschmidt's luggage instantly! Call the launching complex and have the *Destiny II* prepared for take-off immediately. We will be departing for Ajaxia just as soon as the ship can be made ready... oh, and get the commandant of EMSA's Ceres station on the 'phone for me."

"Yes sir. Immediately, sir. By the way, sir, there's something on the video now that might interest you—a news broadcast from Radio Vesta about Ajaxia."

"What? Turn it on, quick!"

Jenkins opened an ornate cabinet of pseudo Victorian *chinoiserie*, revealing a commercial video set. Within a moment they were listening with shocked, unbelieving ears to an interview with King Ajax of Ajaxia. The imitation Ajax spoke in a most convincing replica of Calkins' own voice, and he looked—even in video close-up—amazingly like Ajax. Emily Hackenschmidt, or a simulacrum suitably garbed in ambassadorial costume, stood behind the phony monarch as he made public warning to other planetary governments and military

installations to beware of criminals currently impersonating the King of Ajaxia and the EMSA Ambassador to the planetoid. Also present was the military commander of EMSA forces in the Asteroid Zone, Vice Admiral Milton A. Kreplach, who firmly voiced EMSA's intention to be on the lookout for such impostors, who would, he vowed, be prosecuted to the full extent of interplanetary law, whenever found.

Ajax switched off the video, and sighed. "Ahh... Jenkins, cancel that call to the EMSA commandant..."

"Yes, sir," said the robotler imperturbably.

Destiny II sped through space, bearing a despondent Ajax and a silent Emily Hackenschmidt. For the past hour or two since take-off, they had been hashing over the incredible predicament they had somehow gotten into. Thus far, no tenable solution had occurred to them. Ajax's plan to seize the defenseless planetoid-ship with the aid of EMSA was made a hollow mockery by the swift action of the pseudo-Ajax in announcing the existence of his "impersonator." The quickest way to wind up in Deimos Prison, would be for Ajax to call Admiral Kreplach for assistance in capturing Ajaxia. Kreplach would have a hearty laugh over Ajax's claim that two Saturnian amoebas were currently in charge of the planetoid-ship, and would pop the disconsolate monarch and his feminine accomplice into jail so quickly that they would register a Doppler effect.

"But Ajax, don't you have any plan at all? Are we just going to land on Ajaxia and try to force our way in? The moment the *Destiny* shows up on Ajaxia's detector screens, our duplicates will command the poor old Wuj to shoot it out of the sky!"

Hunched over the controls, Ajax (in his second-favorite role, the grim-jawed, steely-eyed Man of Action) rasped tensely: "Courage, girl. Don't despair. Wuj can't, you know. As you said yourself, back home, we used up all of the projectiles when we destroyed the Saturnian fleet. Unless our duplicates have discovered and managed to get into working order some Asteroidal version of anti-spacecraft guns, which I doubt, we can land without harm."

"So? So we can land—big deal. And how are we going to persuade the Wuj to open those tremendous airlock doors and let us in? Have you thought of *that*?"

With a sudden sinking feeling, Ajax realized he hadn't thought of that... but Calkins, Man of Action, did not know the meaning of the word "Helpless." He tensed his steely jaw, and turned his best profile at Emily, who sat beside him in the co-pilot's chair.

"Buck up, girl! Leave it to me. I'll get us inside. Be brave, and rely on Ajax Calkins!"

Emily eyed him dubiously, but made no comment. She had seen him in this Man-of-Action mood before, and knew there was no arguing with Steely-Eyed Determination. Besides... come to think of it, Ajax *was* capable of resourcefulness under pressure... so the best thing she could do was to shut up.

But, being a woman, Emily could not remain silent for any extended period of time.

"You've had the *Destiny* armed with laser cannons haven't you, Ajax? Couldn't we just blast our way in?"

He permitted himself a reassuring grin.

"Nope. That would cause explosive decompression—all the air in the planetoid-ship would rush out. Can't take a chance on injuring the Wuj. We'll have to think of another way to get in..."

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VI

Time passed slowly. The worst thing about space trips was not the odorless, recycled air or the queasiness of artificial gravity, but the boredom... the sheer, enervating *sameness* of travel. Back on Earth a couple of centuries ago, sea voyages had been of comparable length, and even longer; but there was the constantly changing variety of the sea and sky to watch, so that you didn't notice the slow passage of time. Things were different in space: *there was nothing to look at*. Unless you were almost within landing orbit of a planet or moon, the worlds were simply blank spots of light against the unrelieved blackness of space, only slightly larger than the tiny pin-pricks of light that were the stars.

Back in the pre-space era, there used to be a form of entertainment-narrative the ancients called "Science Fiction." A major portion of it dealt with the wonders of interplanetary flight. According to these antique writers, space was a region of bewildering beauty and wondrous splendor. After all (they must have reasoned), look how gorgeous the night sky is, laced and dusted with the glittering patterns of twinkling stars! Their tales portrayed space vehicles of odd and amusing types flashing at immense speed through this dazzling profusion of stellar bodies, the duration of the flight made constantly exciting by near-collisions with spectacular comets, or flaming clouds of meteors, all set against the stupendous backdrop of the mighty planets—golden-yellow Saturn with her scintillating rings, brown-and-orange Jupiter, his titanic bulk banded and mottled, crimson Mars, cross-hatched with the mysterious canals... all *bosh*.

Without an atmosphere to make them "twinkle," the stars are simply minute flecks of colorless, unwavering light, almost swallowed up and submerged in the dense blackness of the void. Comets enter the Solar System at the rate of one or two every year or so, but are completely invisible until close enough for the Sun to cause the spectacular "comet's tail" effect: otherwise, they are just hurtling chunks or clumps of rock and ice. Meteor swarms infest the plane of the ecliptic, quite true, but they are past your ship and out of sight before you know they are near, so colossal are the speeds at which they travel. So much for the wonders of space!

But a trip takes a certain period of time, and that time must be passed. Since there is hardly ever any "scenery" to look at, other pastimes had to be invented. Hence each ship commissioned for space contains a comprehensive library of books, films, and music, all preserved on tape.

Once safely clear of the double-planet orbit of Earth and Luna, Ajax put the ship on autopilot, instructing the computer-brain to select a seldom-used, out-of-the-way course. Since

it had been sundown when they left, it was now well into late evening, even though they felt too excited and worried to be sleepy. A nightcap of blended tranquilizers took care of that, and then Ajax said goodnight to Emily, put her in one of the three compact but comfy suites the *Destiny's* designer had arranged, and went to bed himself.

After breakfast next morning, they busied themselves with the tape library. Emily, a devotee of pre-space cinema, watched an ancient George Arliss film called *Disraeli*, while Ajax read a new biography of Napoleon.

Time passed... slowly, yes... but it *did* pass.

They traversed the orbit of Mars without seeing the Red Planet; it was on the other side of the Sun during this season, as were most of the asteroids. Lunch and dinner were consumed in turn, and after a period of time Ajaxia hove into view.

Or, rather, it should have hove, but didn't.

It wasn't there—not at all.

Seething with frustration, Ajax ran the computer tapes again. Could the *Destiny's* autopilot-brain have slipped a cog or dropped a decimal somewhere? Perhaps the planetoid was on the other side of its orbit, like Mars.

But no... the computer was quite firm on this point: Ajaxia should have been dead ahead, right smack in the center of the radarscopes. But it wasn't; space was as empty as a spinster's heart, and twice as cold.

Emily gave him an unsympathetic fish-eye.

"What's gone wrong *this* time, O Royal Man of Action, O Man of Steely Eyed Determination, O Superbly Competent One? Any Idea?"

"Now cut that out!" he groaned. "It's not my fault—I don't know what happened. Ajaxia just plain ain't where it ought to be!"

She sneered. "I suppose your kingdom just got up and walked away... *Gakk!*"

"Of course not—*Ulpp!*"

The same thought occurred to both of them almost simultaneously. Again Ajax felt that sensation of queasy vertigo, as the bottom dropped out of his plans. Of *course* ... Ajaxia *had* gotten up and walked away! That is, the planetoid-ship was equipped with stupendous drive-engines and jet-tubes, being a ship, not a real planetoid, and...

". . . The Saturnians must have figured out how the engines worked!" Emily gasped.

"And they've started it up! They're driving my kingdom straight to Saturn!"

They exchanged a hopeless look.

"Well, if one of the most important bodies in the Asteroid Zone left its orbit and zipped off for outer space, I should think there'd be something about it on the news broadcasts," Emily mused.

"Good idea! Let's see . . ."

Ajax tuned in the ship's set.

**... ministration officials state. The EMSA/Ajaxian treaty thus declared null and void, Minister Fotheringay further points out that, by thus defecting to the hostile Saturnian Interplanetary Empire, former Earth-citizen Ajax Calkins, playboy-heir of the Calkins billions and self-styled 'King of Ajaxia'—has automatically made himself a renegade and outlaw. The Space Minister's further comments on the Ajaxian situation reveal that EMSA's own ambassadress to the so-called 'Kingdom of Ajaxia,' Miss Emily Hackenschmidt, voluntarily joined her lover, Ajax Calkins, in defecting from Earth citizenship, thus also falling under the automatic ban. No word has yet been received from Vice Admiral Kreplach, commanding the squadron of pursuit ships dispatched one hour and forty minutes ago, as to whether they have caught up with the renegade ship. As our commentator, Conrad Wintersmith, remarked in his last broadcast on the Ajaxian defection, if the pursuit-squadron does not come back at the EMSA/Saturnian border, it will constitute an act of war against the Saturnians ..."*

Ajax turned off the newscaster in mid-perjoration, and sat rubbing his brow with numb fingertips. It was bad enough to have a couple of giant economy-size amoebas assume his identity and Emily's, replace them in the affections of the Third Least Wuj, and denounce them as criminal impostors. Now they were defectors, traitors, renegades, outlaws, to boot! Gad! Just when things look as if they've reached the bottom of the barrel of bad breaks, and couldn't possibly get worse—*whammo!* Fate up and smacks you with a superduper calamity she's had warming up in the wings for just such a moment...

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VII

Ajax Calkins climbed into the pilot's seat and switched off the autopilot. Seizing the manual controls, he kicked the little ship around in a shrieking curve—paying no attention to the ear-rasping groan of structural steel strained to the limits of its stress-capacity—and sent the *Destiny* whizzing like a deranged meteor towards Saturn and his runaway kingdom.

"Ajax? What are we going to do?" Emily wailed.

"Go after 'em and get my kingdom back!"

"How?"

"I dunno, but we'll do it. We've got to do it! If Admiral Kreplach reaches the planetoid-ship first, he'll blow it out of the sky rather than let the Saturnians get their slimy pseudopods on all those precious weapons. If the planetoid-ship gets within protective range of the Saturnian border patrols before we or Kreplach catch up to it, my kingdom and poor old Wuj are lost forever. So—the only thing to do is that *we've* got to reach Ajaxia—and soon!"

There was a new note of *genuine* steely determination in Ajax's flat tones that made Emily

do a double-take, and look at him with speculative, suddenly admiring eyes. For all his pompousness, play-acting and pretense, Ajax Calkins was an active, capable and remarkably determined young man... or, at least, he *could* be, when the situation urged him to the point of putting aside his romantic dreams and actually *doing something*. Still, you could forgive Emily Hackenschmidt for being a bit dubious...

"That's all very well, Ajax, but *can* we get to Ajaxia first? Remember what the broadcaster said. Admiral Kreplach's squadron left over an hour and forty minutes ago!"

"Yes, but Kreplach left the EMSA station on Ceres, Emily! We're millions and millions of miles nearer to Ajaxia than that... why, Ceres is halfway across the Zone from Ajaxia! Not only that, but I'll bet my bottom credit the *Destiny* can outfly anything that EMSA can put into space. Now shut up and let me fly this thing..."

Nervously, Emily shut up, sat down, and drew on a stimulette till the self-igniting tip caught. She forced herself to calm down. And it occurred to her that, perhaps, after all, Ajax *could* beat the pursuit-squadron to the runaway world! For there was a certain amount of truth in what Ajax said about the *Destiny* ... it was one of the fastest craft in space. After all, as one of Earth's richest multibillionaires, Ajax could buy the very best; and he had not stinted a mini-credit in constructing the *Destiny*. The slim, trim little yacht, superbly streamlined for atmospheric flight as well as hyper-powered for interplanetary trips, was a miracle of fine engineering, a sleek projectile, gleamingly enameled in purple and gold, and surely the fastest, most powerful private spacecraft money could buy. They just might have a fighting chance to beat Kreplach to the punch and get to Ajaxia first!

Like a glittering steel arrow, the *Destiny* cut through space on roaring jets. Their velocity was already terrific, but instead of cutting the jets and allowing the ship to speed through the non-resisting medium of a hard vacuum at top speed, Ajax was piling on the power. With no atmospheric friction to make additional speed a hazard, there was no theoretical reason Emily could think of why *constant acceleration* wouldn't double and triple and quadruple the *Destiny's* speed all the way up to the fantastic borders of the speed of light itself. Beyond that, of course, no known form of energy or matter in the physical universe could travel... but there would certainly be no need to go any *faster* than light. Emily stopped to do some rapid mental math problems.

Light traveled at the incredible velocity of 186,000 miles *per second*! That worked out to something like an inconceivable speed of 661,600,000 miles per hour... that's right, six hundred and sixty one billion miles an hour! Even if the *Destiny* could only achieve a healthy fraction of that mind-boggling speed, it could still outfly anything else around... why, Saturn itself was considerably less than *one* billion miles from the Sun!

But . . . what was to keep Admiral Kreplach from trying the same trick? Why couldn't he just keep constantly accelerating even as Ajax was doing... ?

In a moment, Emily knew why the Admiral would and could not. She suppressed a snicker. The simple fact of the matter was that atomic fuel was frightfully expensive. Think about that for a moment, then stop to think that an Admiral, for all the glory of his gaudy uniform and medals aside, is primarily a *management official*, not a warrior or a hero. He's a bureaucrat, a department head, traditionally deskbound, and far more accustomed to firing off

a salvo of memoranda than a salvo of weapon-fire.

Kreplach would be trained in cost-cutting and red tape from his ensign days. Extensive waste of high-priced nuclear fuel would be anathema to his soul; his habitual thought-patterns should react as violently to the notion of frightfully wasteful continuous acceleration as to the idea of giving his office-team an extra quarter-hour coffee break or permitting his men to use expense accounts while on vacation.

In other words, he simply would never *think* of it!

But what did such as Ajax, the Calkans King, care about wasting a little money? When Ajax was *born* he already owned more of the folding stuff than any normal person could ever spend... so what price plutonium?

"Step on her, Ajax," Emily urged. "Give her the gun, pile on more coal, full steam ahead and damn the fuel-bill!"

Beyond the Asteroid Zone lies Jupiter, largest of all the planets in the Solar System. Besides its many moons, the giant planet with its enormously powerful gravitational field has, over millions of years, gradually pulled into its sphere of influence a number of worldlets filched from the belt of asteroids that stretches between Mars and Jupiter. Among these are a group called the Fore-Trojans, to which Ajaxia had belonged before the Saturnians disguised as Ajax Calkins and Emily Hackenschmidt activated its age-old drive engines. It is a moot point as to whether Ajaxia and the other Fore-Trojans belongs to the Jovian system or to the Asteroid Belt; however, a good case could be made for the Jovian side of the argument.

It was, in fact, upon this point that Ajax Calkins' claim to independent sovereignty for Ajaxia rested. EMSA had legal claim over all spatial bodies from Mercury to Mars, and including the Asteroids. EMSA jurisdiction, however, did not extend to the system of moons and asteroids about Jupiter, partly because these had not yet been explored or colonized, and partly because the Jovian system made a convenient buffer-state between the hostile Saturnians and the inner worlds. The precise location of the boundary was an imaginary line some millions of miles beyond the orbit of Jupiter, and it was towards this line that the runaway planetoid-ship, the pursuit squadron and the *Destiny* were all traveling.

From the view screens of Ajax Calkins' speeding yacht, Jupiter was a blurry area of mottled and striped ochre and yellow. Here and there in near space the dull globes of three of the nearer Jovian moons were faintly visible—visible, that is, only because their under-portions reflected the ochre radiance from their giant primary.

Visible in the upper portion of the screens were two of the larger moons, Io and Callisto both of which had been discovered by Galileo in ancient times. Although they seemed to be very close to each other, they were actually separated by a vast distance. Io was the second closest moon to the surface of the planet, only some 260,000 miles above the atmosphere; and the slightly larger moon, Callisto, was the fifth closest. The intervening bodies, Europa and Ganymede, were on the other side of the planet and thus invisible.

The only other moon visible, tiny Alcmene, was a framed curiosity and Ajax would have liked to have had time enough to pause and investigate it. The smallest of all Jupiter's twelve

moons, only fourteen miles in diameter, it was discovered in 1951 by S. B. Nicholson and was the last of the Jovian satellites to be found. Its outstanding mystery, however, was not its incredible smallness, but the fact that alone of all the other moons, it revolved *backwards!*

The *Destiny* tore through the Jovian lunar system, missing the smaller, outer moons, Semele, Leda, Antiope, Danae and Taygete, and curved off into space for the EMSA/Saturnian border. The misty yellow bulk of Jupiter fell below, and dropped behind them as they raced against time.

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VIII

At last, the invisible, probing fingers of radar "sighted" the hurtling shape of Ajax's fugitive kingdom. Hastily, Ajax focused the vision screens and got a visual fix on the runaway planetoid-ship.

"My own Kingdom!" he cried dramatically, as the monster ship gleamed on the velvet backdrop of the void like a great steel ovoid. It was shaped very like an egg, a thick, blunt oval several miles in length along its longitudinal axis.

There were a few features to be observed, for the main airlock (huge enough to swallow a spaceship) was recessed into the unbroken, sweeping curve of its sheer hull and whatever mysterious mode of propulsion thrust it forward, it at least did not show any visible jets.

Then the radar alarm chimed again.

And there was Kreplach! Like a swarm of angry silver bees, the EMSA pursuit squadron sped after the giant planetoid-ship. They were running about neck-to-neck with the *Destiny*, although they still seemed unaware of her presence as yet. Who was going to get there first?

A glance at his velocitometer—and a careful reading of the squadron's average speed through the dopplerscope—gave satisfactory proof that the *Destiny* was gaining, rapidly overtaking, and would very soon pass the EMSA ships.

He reported this happy news to Emily. She remained unenthusiastic.

"What'll we do when they spot us?" she asked worriedly.

"I dunno. But they haven't seen us yet!"

"They will, though, won't they? They must have an automatic radar alarm like ours..."

He grinned confidently. "Don't bet on it! A team of Calkans technicians dreamed my alarm system up, designed and installed it to my specifications. Oh, they *may* notice us, but I'd say we've got a good chance to pass 'em by before Kreplach's eagle-eyed lads even know we're anywhere in the immediate neighborhood..."

On the second screen, five of the pursuit ships broke formation to curve swiftly in their

direction. Ajax's self-assured expression faded into a glum look. Wrong again!

"Well—maybe we can outrun 'em!"

But that proved useless; the pursuit vessels were on a converging course and any extra speed from the *Destiny* would only hasten the inevitable...

Ajax set his jaw grimly and hunched over the controls.

"All right, I'll outmaneuver the slobs!" he grated between clenched teeth. "Don't tell *me* this baby can't fly circles around those clumsy tin cans EMSA builds—I designed the *Destiny* myself!"

The sleek yacht abruptly changed direction, curving under and around the pursuit-segment in a complex figure-8 flightpath.

"Hang on, Emily!"

The radio buzzed angrily as Ajax whipped the *Destiny* around and up in an ascending spiral—obviously, Kreplach wanted to know who the blue blazes was trying to outrace him to Ajaxia—but Calkins was too busy to answer the call. As the pursuing ships broke formation to follow his spiral, he looped over and back, hurtling past them so close he virtually clipped the rivet-heads off a couple of the nearer ships, doubtless scaring the eyebrows off the pilots.

Ah, *this was the life!* In his mental eye, Ajax Calkins, that romantic dreamer, was now "Ace" Calkins of the Lafayette Escadrille, hurtling through the seething fury of a tense dogfight above the fields of France. All about him buzzed the ominous biplanes of Baron von Richthofen's Flying Circus... *if only I had a machine gun in this crate* (Ajax thought, happily), *I'd blow these Jerries out o' the sky!*

He kicked his tough little Spad around in a tight circle, motor snarling and almost going into a stall, and zipped down and under the hurtling belly of von Richthofen's crimson triplane, when—*blammo!*

"What happened?" Ajax asked fuzzily, coming back to Earth (or the *Destiny*, rather—Earth was some hundred million miles behind them) with a thump.

"They shot off your engines," Emily said bitterly.

He did a double-take, and checked the panel. Power was failing rapidly in the drive units, and the *Destiny* was careening out of control towards the monstrous bulge of Jupiter, which glowed beneath them like the angry bloodshot eye of some infuriated Cyclops.

"Oh, *no!*" he groaned.

"Oh, *yes!*" she countered. "While you were doing those fancy loop-the-loops, one of Kreplach's squadron cut loose with a laser unit and hit us somewhere in the aft-section."

The crippled yacht fell helplessly towards Jupiter in a broad flat spiral. The pursuit ships circled for a moment or two—then sped off to rejoin the rest of the squadron and were swiftly lost to sight on the trail of Ajaxia.

Clutching the dead controls, Ajax remembered his philosophical observation about *Destiny*

whopping you over the head with a meat-axe just about the time you decided all she had to clip you with was a baseball bat.

This latest calamity made him revise his maxim a bit... for *Destiny* had just smacked the *Destiny* with a laser-cannon.

"Are we completely flooey?" Emily asked.

"Well... almost, but not quite. That beam knocked out the main drive engine, but we still have the auxiliaries as well as the forward and lateral steering jets. Lot of good *they'll* do us, though!"

"What do you mean?"

He cocked a thumb at Jupiter, now a great brown shield banded with orange, no longer a visible sphere.

"The big boy has too much 'pull'... *Destiny's* auxiliary jets don't pack enough moxie to push back against this kind of gravity," he explained moodily.

She looked at him, round-eyed.

"So what do we do? Throw in the sponge and radio Kreplach for help? Surely, he wouldn't let us f-fall to our ... d-death... ?"

"What? Surrender? Never!" He cast a hungry eye over the dials and meters with which the control panel was studded. "I'll figure out something... just you wait."

They continued to fall...

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IX

The Third Least Wuf was very unhappy. For hours he had moped about his tiny cabin in the planetoid-ship, dreaming of the good old days back at the family spinnery before he had lost his job as a young apprentice bus driver and had been facing the dismal prospect of disownment from the Nest for disgraceful negligence. From this sad event, Ajax Calkins had rescued him; they quickly became fast friends, and the odd little Martian spider-being had been willing to follow his beloved leader to the very last strand of the Web. Or as we would say, to the ends of space.

But *not* to Saturn.

Heaving a woebegone sigh, the Wuj leaped up and seized the chandelier. Wrapping his eight furry, jointed legs about the light, he hung head downwards. This position, unlikely as it may seem, was one of ultimate comfort to members of his race, although it would have been highly disagreeable to you or me. The Wuj always felt that he thought better, somehow, in this inverted position. The blood rushing to his brain seemed to loosen up the thought-process and

to provide extra stimulus and mental lubrication to one struggling with an unwieldy problem.

For a long time, after he had entwined his destiny to that of Ajax Calkins, they had comfortably spun on the same strand. Everything had been simply *eggy*, in fact, right up to the time when his dear leader and Emily Hackenschmidt had embarked for Earth to thrash out the details of the treaty between the Royal and Independent Kingdom of Ajaxia and the Earth/Mars Space Administration. Leaving the Wuj, his faithful Prime Minister in full command of the reins of power, King Ajax had zoomed off... only to return a half a day later a changed person.

The Wuj heaved a sigh (and if you have never seen an upside-down sigh, it is a harrowing sight, I can tell you!)... suddenly his brave leader had become a very different web-mate. Suspicious. Speaking in falsely-hearty tones, but guarded and watchful. Claiming that he and Emily had decided not to go after all, they swiftly forgot all about the difficulties of the forthcoming treaty and spent the next couple of days taking a detailed inventory of the largely unexplored interior of the self-navigating planetoid.

It was all very bewildering to a Third Least Wuj, but for a while he passed off their strange behavior as only *seemingly* strange. After all, a brief and hardly meteoric career as a young apprentice bus driver had but ill-equipped him for the role of Prime Minister of Ajaxia, and his knowledge of the ways of Earthfolk was still strictly limited. Take for example, the male/female sex polarity so common among terrestrials... the intricacies of the explosive and hyper-emotional pre-connubial phase were all too complex for the Wuj to fully comprehend.

Among his people, the spider-beings who were but one of the many differing races who made up the United Beings of Mars, things were of course vastly different. In their pre-connubial period they frankly neither knew nor cared whether they were going to eventually mature as eggers or spinners. Your typical Martian spider-being might very well turn out to be either; there was little way of telling in advance, so to speak.

The Wuj was still quite young. When Ajax had come upon him (or *her*, as the case might be), the Wuj was still going through a sort of tribal testing period. After a dozen years of this, he (or she) would have achieved sufficient status to travel to the Main Web and the Central Egger and proclaim his- or herself sexually. Until then, it was anybody's guess! The Wuj regarded his (or her) current Prime Ministership as a sort of extension of the testing period: having failed in his (or her) first profession driving the bus wheel, he (or she) was having another chance—this time at interplanetary politics and diplomacy. It was all rather exhilarating for the Wuj, and he (or she) was very happy not having to be continuously distracted by the male-female attraction-repulsion polarity that so obviously plagued Ajax and Emily... (But let's regard the Wuj as male for the time being, since Ajax and Emily did.)

Although... come to think of it, that was yet *another* way in which his dear leader and his dear leader's future consort had changed recently. Before they had left the Wuj at the helm (so to speak) of the ship of state (in a very literal sense), the two of them had been always sneaking off to look at the stars together, or something. And he frequently had come upon them standing very close together so that their forelimbs had been enraptured about each other's thorax, and once or twice he had noticed that their nutriment-ingestion orifices had been touching in a peculiar fashion. At his interruption, the two always sprang quickly apart and seemed strangely flustered and shy. It was all *very* peculiar, but he set it down to mere mammalian habits.

But since their sudden and unexpected return, Ajax and Emily had completely changed in this respect; they never attempted to dream up some pretext whereby they might be alone together, and they rarely touched each other except by sheer accident.

The Wuj sighed again. It was all so strange!

Wearied of his inverted position, the Wuj dropped down from the chandelier and waddled stalk-leggedly over to the interphone. He felt so miserable and woebegone ... perhaps a chat with his dear leader might perk up his spirits (for, ever since Ajax had magnanimously adopted the Wuj, the little spider-being had begun to think of itself as a "him," and had pretty much made up his mind to declare himself a spinner when he came at last before the Main Web).

The interphone rang and rang, but no one was in the control center. Despondently, the Wuj ambled off down the corridor in search of his king. Doubtless he would be yet once again rebuffed by Ajax, who seemed to be deliberately avoiding the Wuj since his return, closing him out of his councils... why, even so important a decision as this latest one, in which the kingdom had declared for the Saturnians and boldly defected from EMSA-space... even *this* decision had been made by Ajax and Emily between themselves, without so much as a by-your-leave to the Royal Prime Minister!

The Wuj progressed by the jerky, eight-legged walk peculiar to those of the spider persuasion among the United Beings. He strolled down the long central corridor that divided the egg-shaped planetoid into two hemispherical halves, like a sliced orange, passing room after room of unknown purpose, chamber after chamber packed with mysterious equipment, artifacts and mechanisms of alien design and unsolved use and purpose. Only by a singular stroke of accidental luck had they been able to discover the location and control-system that powered and drove the planetoid-ship.

The control center or "bridge" (as his beloved leader called it) was the nexus of all the control systems. It literally bristled and bulged with dials, switches, panels, studs, meters, connections and bus-bars. Certain of them were under automatic, not manual, control—such as those which regulated the supplies of air, heat, light and water. Others—the as-yet-undiscovered protective systems and defensive machinery—were buried somewhere amid the profusion of weirdly-labeled dials and buttons.

Accident alone—the matter of a chance stud depressed by a careless elbow—had activated the drive engines. A few hours of careful, prudent experiment had proved enough to enable them to turn on and off the drive, and to maneuver the giant ship in space. Right after that discovery, Ajax and Emily had proclaimed their defection, and—without even discussing the matter with the Wuj, or inquiring as to his opinion in the matter—they had driven the ship out of orbit and started in off along the long, long road to Saturn.

Wandering out of the corridor, the Wuj took a narrow catwalk which stretched above a truly enormous room, large enough to house a herd of dirigibles, with room left over to bunk a dozen or more elephants, if the situation should ever arise. This capacious hall was the largest storeroom they had yet managed to find in all the hundreds of chambers and compartments with which the planetoid-ship was filled. Here the newly changed Ajax and Emily had sequestered themselves for hours at a time, striving to discover the uses and natures of the

bewildering complexity of machines with which the elephantine store-room was crowded. The Wuj paused on the narrow catwalk, gazing solemnly down at some of the peculiar objects far below, over which they had exhausted their imaginations and ingenuities fruitlessly.

For what conceivable purpose, for example, could that system of concentric spheres of milky jade be designed? Or that silvery cylinder resting on fat coils of brass-colored tubing? Or that huge system of odd-angled mirrors arranged about a light-projector, there in the center? The little Martian's pugdog nose wrinkled in a grimace: curiouser and curiouser, he thought, and curiouser *yet*.

This particular device, the mirror-thing, worked from the bridge. This had also been discovered by accident, when idly polishing the control panels one day in order to seem useful in the eyes of his strangely changed master and mistress, the Wuj had depressed one of a series of large flat crimson studs within a blue circular board. A shout had come up from Emily, then busily engaged in categorizing the unknown mechanisms in the store-room, that the mirror-thing was clacking and clanking and its reflective components were adjusting themselves into curious and seemingly purposeless new alignments about a multi-tube-studded globe. In hopes of eliciting some clue as to the function of the odd device, the Wuj had promptly, if gingerly, depressed another of the large red pedals. A beam of intense light had shot from one of the tubes to impinge upon and reflect through a series of the mirrors... but nothing seemed to come of it, and they had at length discontinued further perhaps risky puttering...

"Oh! Oh, my mighty Egg!" the Wuj gasped, his green compound eyes suddenly riveting upon a totally unexpected and heart-stopping sight. He gasped, frozen with sheer surprise and shock.

There, far below his high and aerial vantage point, he suddenly saw something that made the spiderfuzz tingle on the nape of his neck. He clasped several pair of hands together in an ecstasy of despair, meanwhile not daring to take his insectoid eyes off the horrific scene being enacted far below his perch.

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X

While reminiscing, the Wuj's eyes had wandered about the gadget-cluttered hall, suddenly spotting Ajax and Emily busily at work unpacking a mad device that looked like an aluminum spaghetti dinner gone mad, all a tangle of glittering spikes and intertwined metallic loops and coils. While lifting this weird object carefully from its nest of plastic foam, Ajax had allowed the heavy machine to slip, with the result that one of the projecting spines struck him a resounding blow on the top of the shoulder.

With the result that his whole left *arm* fell off.

Emily, apparently undisturbed by this organic catastrophe, calmly set the bulky thing down, picked up the dismembered member and coolly handed it back to one-armed Ajax,

who remained unflustered, simply popping the limb back in its shoulder socket. He stood there for a moment, grotesquely engaged in screwing his arm back in, for all the world as if it were nothing more personal than a section of sewer pipe.

The Wuj closed both eyes; opened the left one; closed it; opened the right one; closed it; then opened both. Nothing did any good. The ugly scene remained the same in all details: Ajax calmly standing there screwing on his arm, which revolved slowly about as he turned it, wrist flopping loosely. Once back on securely, he tested it once or twice, and calmly went back to his work.

The Wuj groaned.

While it is true that he knew, as yet, remarkably little about the ways of Earthfolk, this he definitely did know. Arms do not fall off Earthmen *that* easily. And, when and if a loose limb does happen to pop off and flop about on the floor somewhere, one does not take it as suavely as if it was no more serious than knocking a pencil off a table. In fact, remembering a time Ajax had banged his thumb with a hammer by sheer mischance, and recalling the anguished yelps and yawps his poor leader had voiced whilst hopping wildly about the room, wringing and waving the throbbing digit, the Wuj assumed (not incorrectly) that a certain amount of bodily discomfort might reasonably be expected to occur if one chanced to knock off an entire arm.

Thus it was with Earthfolk. Assuredly.

Thus, Ajax—or the individual below who certainly *looked* like Ajax—was neither truly Ajax, nor even another Earth-man pretending to *be* Ajax.

Nor was he (and here the faithful Wuj could of course, speak from a certain sum of personal experience) any member of the United Beings of Mars, all of whom were highly sensitive to physical pain, with the possible exception of the squirrel-beings. None of them within living memory of any Martian had ever been able to wake up long enough to report on the matter—the entire *genus* had hibernated forty-seven million years ago when the Red Planet began to cool towards its currently frosty state, and so completely had the highly advanced squirrel-beings perfected hibernation, they slept to this day.

The conclusion was inescapable: Ajax could only be a *Saturnian*. There was simply no one else in the entire Solar System! Not counting, of course, the cabbage-men of Deimos. No one ever bothered about them. The entire race had been simply vegetating for aeons.

Now, surely, Ajax had not always been a Saturnian. The Wuj was certain he would have noticed... come to think of it, he could not have been a Saturnian when he banged his thumb with the above-mentioned hammer. Therefore (the Wuj summed up the situation with the remarkable mathematical reasoning for which his kind were so widely noted in interplanetary circles)—therefore, he concluded, at some time after this hammer-banging episode, the *real* Ajax had been replaced with a *fallacious* Ajax.

And (obviously!) the same had happened in the case of Miss Emily Hackenschmidt. For, had that been the genuine original Emily Hackenschmidt down there, one might have expected a somewhat less phlegmatic and more violently emotional reaction from her when Ajax knocked off his entire arm.

The two humans below were *not* his master and mistress, but *Saturnian spies*.

Doubtless this explained the curious, un-Ajax-and-Emily-like behavior he had noticed in them ever since their abrupt return after leaving a few days ago.

Hence the *real* Ajax and Emily had never returned to the planetoid-ship, but were still back on Earth.

Hence... and here the Wuj's heart sank and he began to realize the true enormity of what he had done!... hence when the two "impostors" whom he had threatened with legal punishment 'phoned earlier in the day... *they had been the real Emily and Ajax!* The Wuj's curious Martian mind reeled at the import of all this.

"Will my beloved leader forgive me," he whispered sadly. "I called him a criminal impostor... alas, I have torn my web for good this time! The old family spinnery shall never see my face again, and all my eggs shall be scrambled for this unforgivable mistake! Should I ever dare set foot in the spinnery, the ancestral Web will vibrate with humiliation for my shame! *Woe is me! Woe...*"

For a moment, the Wuj gave way to unrestrained woe-saying, but the little spider-being was made of sterner stuff. Resolutely, he squared all eight shoulders, metaphorically speaking, and muttered in a determined little voice:

"The error is mine and mine alone. I should have known, now that I think of it, that no conceivable impostor—no matter *how* clever his disguise—could ever have guessed the code recognition-phrase my master and I arranged together in strict secrecy! Yet, of course, at the time he called, it seemed somehow to be a perfectly natural assumption... after all, the beloved leader and his nest-mate-to-be were right there in the next room all the time!"

The Wuj lifted his furry little chin doggedly. Through his carelessness, the kingdom of Ajaxia had fallen into grave times. It was almost within the hands (pseudopods, rather) of the Saturnian Empire, along with the scientific treasure trove of weapons it doubtless contained. And he and he alone was to blame for this fact.

Therefore, it was up to him to *do* something about it.

"Fear not, dear leader, the Wuj will defend the realm to the last drop of his faithful blood!" he said grimly.

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XI

The *Destiny* fell slowly towards the vast curve of Jupiter. The bulk of the giant planet filled more than half the sky. It glowed with dim light, its surface a seething turbulence of stupendous, tossing streamers of methane and ammonia, underlit with weird radiance. Colossal bands of variegated coloration spread from horizon to horizon: umber, rich browns, lighter bands of palest cream, sharp yellow and sanguine gold and orange. Each of these bands were thousands of miles across; some of them were so enormously huge that the entire planet Earth could fall into them and be lost without a trace.

In comparison, the *Destiny* seemed to shrink into insignificance, to become a mote lost in immensity. The boiling, cloud-wrapped surface of the upper atmosphere roared with continent-spanning storms of a violence inconceivable to watchers raised amidst the little storms of tiny Earth. Titanic jets of seething gas were forced from the cloudy surface by cataclysmic pressures: among these gigantic plumes, Earth itself would be but a fleck of spinning dust.

The chemical imbalance of the Jovian atmosphere generated lightning storms whose ferocity beggared description or comparison. The energy released by a single one of these king-sized thunderbolts could supply light and power to an entire metropolis, enough to last it a good month. And the size of the blazing bolts was on a similarly Brobdingnagian scale: the jagged flare of exploding energy flickered across abysses into which the entire Atlantic Ocean could be put a dozen times over.

Emily Hackenschmidt shuddered delicately, and shut her eyes to close out the awful vision of Nature in one of her most titanic rages. She knew their chances of survival amidst such a convulsion were miniscule. Were the trim little yacht to fall into the upper regions of that seething turbulence, the craft would be shattered to atoms within moments. No man-made structure, regardless of its strength, could resist the stupendous forces that raved and raged below. She turned to Ajax helplessly.

"What can we do, anything? Anything at all?" she asked despairingly.

It was at moments like this that the very best that was in Ajax Calkins came to the fore.

"There's just one chance," he said thoughtfully. "I've got to admit it's a mighty slim one, Emily, but even a slim chance is better than none."

"What's your idea?"

"Just this. We're being pulled straight down into that boiling inferno—with our main drive shot out, we can't command enough oomph to fight that pull and push ourselves back up into a stable orbit. But—our auxiliary and lateral steering jets combined should give us enough pazazz to push *sideays* against the pull..."

She didn't get it, obviously. "Sideways? For what? Sideways to what?"

"To one of the moons," he said calmly.

Her blue eyes widened as the sheer simplicity and beauty of his plan hit her.

"Ajax!" she marveled. "What a perfectly *lovely* idea! Of course... it's so logical it, why it takes my breath away!"

"It's nothing," he grinned. "I've got a million of 'em! Now—hop over to the scopes and start finding me a moon. Quick now!"

She hopped. Her EMSA training included a full course in spaceship control operations and she knew how to manipulate many of the most sophisticated concoctions devised by modern technology. She spun the wheel with deft hands, and began a search-pattern.

"This has got to work the first time, or never," he said tightly. "Yon rising moon has got to match our elevation just about right on the nose... we haven't enough juice in the tanks to do

much flying to keep in horizontal flight against the pull of that monster down there .. ."

"Here's one!" she said. "Elevation twenty point four..."

"No good. We're at sixteen-point-nine, and we couldn't get that high. Next please."

The sudden relief from tension engendered by Ajax Calkins' lovely scheme lent a mildly hysterical note of holiday gaiety to Emily's spirits. Even though they were not yet out of the woods by a wide margin, she felt confident and happy.

"Next it is!" she sang. "Would you believe Semele, at eighteen-point-two... or little old Alcmene, now marked down to thirteen-point-six?"

"Semele is for the birds," he said impolitely, "but Alcmene is just what the astronaut ordered. Give me a distance reading—hurry, we're dropping even faster now!"

She read off the figures, and he relaxed with a deep wheeze of relief.

"Righto, I'll buy Alcmene—that's the little goofball that goes backwards, I believe? Well, here goes nothing..."

He spun the gyros on manual and kicked over the ship, bringing the small auxiliary jets into their strongest play. They engaged with a keen whine that steadily deepened into a drone that sounded like a Metropolitan Opera baritone gargling mouthwash. Imperceptibly, at first, their descent lessened, then, gradually, slowed as their lateral progress intensified. Wobbling along on its emergency jets, the little craft fought against the overpowering gravitational pull of the largest giant in the Solar System next to the Sun itself.

Bit by bit they inched across the face of Jupiter. The famous Red Spot, that vast ocean of seething crimson vapor, glared up at them like an angry Cyclopiian eye. The giant roared with its storm-voice; it was hungry, and saw a succulent steely mote escaping.

Alcmene, the mystery moon that had puzzled astronomers for a century, drew steadily closer.

The main drive worked, of course, on plutonium ingots. The auxiliary jets in the tail, and the lateral steering jets set about the midsection of the ship like a belt, were powered only by highly compressed chemical fuel, and thus had a strictly limited firing-time. The flight to Alcmene, as the computer read it, was pushing the margin of safety perilously close. Ajax kept this uncomfortable fact to himself, seeing no point in scaring Emily. But it would certainly be heartbreaking, if the jets died before they had safely maneuvered into Alcmene's field—heartbreaking and ship-breaking, for that matter.

Ajax set his jaw hard, and jiggled the controls, trying to squeeze every possible erg out of the rapidly diminishing supply of go-juice in the cans. The trouble was, Alcmene was so flacking *small*—only 14 miles in diameter—that her gravity field was trifling compared to the giant pull of that ravenous glutton down there. They would have to get very, very close to the mysterious little moonlet before the jets ran dry, or Jupiter would get them yet.

He sweated the short journey every painful, suspenseful mile of the way.

Alcmene grew in the screens, but with torturous slowness. The lumpy little chunk of asteroid-rock would certainly... Hmmm, that was odd, that sound...

"*Ajax!*" Emily shrieked as the ship gave a sickening lurch to one side. Simultaneously, the jets died to a wheeze... a whisper... then to a silence that roared deafeningly. Ajax felt his heart, or whatever the large lumpy organ was, rise into his throat, then drop like a lead balloon into his boots.

Close, but no cigar...

"Courage, Miss Hackenwhacken," he said.

They fell like a stone... or *did* they?

He did a double-take at the meters, and felt his heart lurch back to its accustomed roost. *They were no longer falling!*

"What's happening?" Emily demanded.

"Search me! But we're being pulled into Alcmene's gravity field—although no moon that small ought to have a gravity field one fiftieth *this* strong..." His eyes gleamed with sudden curiosity.

"*Now* what?" she snapped.

"Don't ask me! But these geigers have either gone stark, staring mad, or there's enough radio-activity out there to fry a carload of ostrich eggs!"

"Well," she said, somewhat baffled, "there's supposed to be a lot of radioactivity in space, isn't there?"

"Sure—but not enough to slam these meter-needles over into the red!" Swiftly, he activated the dampener. This device projected a series of overlapping, heterodyning magnetic fields that enveloped the *Destiny* like a vast "sponge," trapping and repelling on magnetic currents the alpha, beta, or gamma particles which were disturbing the geigers so. Without this kind of protection, the very fabric of the ship would soon become dangerously contaminated, so intense was the radiation now bombarding the ship.

Ahead of them, filling the heavens, tiny Alcmene loomed like a flying cliff, Jove-light gilding its jagged circumference with orange luminance. They drifted to it. As they came very near, Ajax set the gyros into action and revolved the ship about into a new position. He had exhausted only the lateral steering jets on one side; now he used those on the other side, to bring the ship floating into a "soft" landing on the worldlet. Its gravity was mighty feeble by Earth-measure, but incredibly powerful when you stopped to consider how very weak it *should* have been, by all the laws of 21st Century physics.

Mysterious little Alcmene was certainly living up to her reputation...

"Well, here we are." Ajax sighed with relief. "And here we stay, without a bucketful of plutonium nuggets to speed us on our way. Shall we call EMSA and ask for help?"

Emily made a sour face. "I suppose so, Ajax. There's no other way we... *what is that?*"

"*That*" was a twenty-foot robot which stood up against the nose of the ship and peered in the control-room port. Ajax almost fainted. Emily wrapped one arm around his neck and managed to keep him on his feet.

"Ajax, you idiot! Don't pass out now—do *something!*"

"Ikk, gikk," he said, commenting on the strangle hold she had on his throat. When she let go, he collapsed into the pilot seat and tumbled the vision screens to front/full.

Yes, there it was. And maybe more like *twenty-five* feet tall. It had several arms—or appendages of some kind—radiating in a circle about the middle of its thorax. The "head" looked more like a television camera than anything *else*, with a multiplicity of lensed tubes protruding from the front and sides. It had three legs—a tripod effect—which made it look, when walking, something like a drunken praying mantis. It was altogether a grisly bit of animated hardware. So far, at least, it wasn't doing anything in particular—just looking in. But if it had a mind to crack open this mysterious steel walnut, it certainly had the equipment to hand. In fact, two at least of the robot's arms looked very much like power drills, and there was a third hand in back that bore a spine-chilling resemblance to a 30-power laser torch.

Ajax made flapping motions. "Shoo! Go 'way!" he said.

"A lot of good *that's* going to do," Emily commented scathingly.

"Well, would you rather I went out there and wrestled that scrap-iron King Kong two falls out of three?" He took another shuddersome look...

"Hey! Look—it *did* work! Monstro is going off in a huff!" And so he was. Within moments, the gigantic robot vanished behind some jagged rocks. Ajax got very busy.

"What are you doing now?" she demanded.

"Getting ready to call EMSA and give up. Better a few years in Deimos Prison, than any more of Alcmene's little surprises. I'll bet I've aged twenty years in the last half-hour. Emily, check the back of my head for gray hairs..."

"Oh, stop clowning and be *serious* for a change."

"Boy, *am* I serious! We're getting out of here just as soon as EMSA can dispatch a nice safe prison ship..."

Emily patted him soothingly on one flushed cheek. "Now, now, relax, Ajax, and turn off that flacking radio. Plenty of time to call EMSA if trouble comes..."

"Yeah? Well, there won't be much time to yell for help if that walking junkyard comes back with a few of his pals and decides to open us up for inspection!"

"No, listen, Ajax, I've been thinking..."

"Well?" he demanded suspiciously. He didn't like that speculative tone in her voice.

"If there's as much radioactivity outside as you say there is... and if the only reason we're marooned helplessly here is lack of plutonium..." She arched an eyebrow at him.

His mouth fell open. Awe shone in his wide eyes.

"Migawd, Emily, you're a genius! Why didn't I think of that? We'll run a soil-analysis and see. Maybe, if the deposits are high-grade enough, we can get out of here after all—and by ourselves."

He jumped up and strode back into the store compartments.

"Ajax? You're not putting on a suit and going out there, are you? What about the radioactivity?"

"I've got a repairs robot back here with complete visual hookups. Ordered a few of them made back when I decided to have the *Destiny* completely automated. The robot has a radio-link with the ship's computer, and can be controlled manually from within. Ah—here he is!"

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XII

Before very long, they had the robot ready to go. It was considerably smaller than the Alcmenian monster who had gazed in the port and then stalked away, but only a little taller than Ajax. He settled himself down in a reclining chair, and slid the visor-cowl down until it enveloped his face. The robot's control panel rested on Ajax's stomach. He fiddled with the controls a bit, warming up, then rapidly punched a series of keys. The robot walked into the airlock, cycled, and went out onto the surface.

It was a weird sensation... for with the visor-cowl covering his face, and the wide-angle television lenses in the robot's head operating, Ajax had the definitely peculiar feeling of being "in" the robot. He "turned" his head (that is, revolved the TV segment of the robot's upper thorax), and took a good long look around the landscape. Then, not spotting anything that looked particularly interesting, suspicious or odd, he bent down and scooped up a bucketful of loose debris, and, turning about, stumped back into the ship.

Ajax lifted the cowl and put the robot on stand-by while they fed the mineral samples into a chemical bath and then a centrifuge. The computer ran a fast analysis, and with a slight *burp!* ejected the results from a small slot. Ajax read the tape, and sat down with a thump.

"What's the bad news?" Emily asked, resigned for the worst.

"*Bad* news—hah! This kind of news makes me wish I wasn't a multibillionaire. Wish I was a penniless prospector instead," he gulped.

"What is *that* supposed to mean?"

"It means, my dear Miss Hackenwhammer, that this whole blinking moon we are sitting on is one big chunk of green cheese... I mean, *uranium*."

"Really...?" she asked in a faint little voice.

"Really! So high-grade, that this ore is like money in the bank. Offhand, I'd say everything you can see out there is worth in the neighborhood of... well, let's see... how much would you say the combined total wealth of Europe, Asia, North and South America would be?"

"But... maybe it's just those particular rocks you picked up? I mean, is there any reason to

suppose the whole flacking *landscape* is the same ore?"

"Ah, you do not use your eyes, my dear! Those rock samples were marked with a very characteristic striation... analysis shows it to be high-grade uraninite, containing lead, helium, radium and a whopping percentage of uranium trioxide. *And,*" he said with emphasis, relishing every word, "the whole bunking landscape out there shows the same very characteristic striation, bless its little heart! Emily, we're sitting on top of a gold mine... I mean, uranium mine... the likes of which beggar the imagination!"

"Oh, my," she said faintly.

"Quite. No *wonder* there's such a gravity field! The entire asteroid must have been a chunk of core-material from the lost planet!"

"Come at me again with that last one, Ajax?"

"I mean," he said patiently, "it is well known that *heavy* metals, such as radioactive ores, tend to form the core of planets, rather than floating around on top of the soil, so to speak. Now, when the lost Fifth Planet blew up millions of years ago, this asteroid must have been one great big fourteen solid miles of radioactive matter from the *core*! It got blown out as far as Jupiter, got entangled in the gravity-field, and settled down to spend the rest of Eternity as a moon. Why... no wonder it's the only moon that revolves around Jupiter backwards! The others are *real* moons, but this one was zipping past in the opposite direction, blown out there in the explosion when the Asteroidal planet broke up, and was just roaring along in its merry way when the Jovian gravity slowed it down and bent its straight-line flight into a closed-circle orbit."

This was all a bit much for Emily, but Ajax was obviously in his element and seemed to know what he was talking about. (The fact of the matter was that Ajax was a modern, enlightened monarch, and in preparation for his royal career, had studied the physical sciences very deeply, firm in his belief that a king nowadays should be up on his "hard" science.)

"Well... that's all very well, Ajax, I'm sure... but the immediate problem is getting the drive fixed and fueling up. Can your engines *take* uranium? I thought your pile was designed for plutonium ingots."

He nodded. "That's right, but don't worry. All we have to do is just dig up enough of this stuff and get it down to purified form. Plutonium is *made* out of uranium, you know—manufactured—it doesn't exist naturally. If we can extract enough Uranium-238, and, with the whole blinking landscape out there to use, I'm sure we can, then we just bombard the stuff with neutrons and it'll decay into neptunium."

"Neptunium? What about plutonium?"

"Tut, child's play, m'dear. Deuteron bombardment of neptunium will give us plutonium aplenty... then to get the isotope we need, Pu-239, sufficient neutron-capture, followed by a spot of spontaneous emission of two jolly old beta particles..." He broke off humming happily, sketching out the process on a scratchpad.

"Oh... uh... Ajax."

"Hmm—?"

"Ajax. If you plan to have Fido here do any digging, you'd better have him hop to it spit-spot."

"Umm? Why's that, my dear?"

"Because that tin-plated Frankenstein Monster is back, along with about two dozen of his pals. And he looks like he means business..."

Startled, Ajax looked up. Sure enough... coming over the so-close horizon of tiny Alcmene was the inquisitive giant robot, accompanied by a veritable clanking horde of his compatriots. The avalanche of robots converged upon the crippled *Destiny* with fire in their eyes...

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XIII

The Wuj made his way along the catwalk and through a maze of corridors into the central control suite. This was the brain-center of the asteroid-sized supership, and a mighty complicated place it was. Walls covered with flickering lights... panel after panel of mysterious controls whose labels were in the peculiar and still undeciphered hieroglyphics of the Asteroidals. Ajax, Emily and the Wuj had only managed to figure out the functions of few—a very few—of the control systems as yet. The hundreds of others were still beyond conjecture.

The little spiderman looked around, his pugnose wrinkled with dogged determination. It was up to him and to him alone to keep the planetoid-ship out of the clutch of the ambitious Saturnians... but the question was, *how*?

He could, of course, turn off the drive engines and lock the control panel. But a few moments of thought persuaded him this plan would contribute but little to foiling the amoeboid spies. The drive was *already* off, and the planetoid-ship was on direct course for Saturn. And, unfortunately, the Wuj did not know enough about the drive-controls to be able to reverse the alignment, turn the planetoid-ship around and pilot it back to EMSA-controlled space. It was an oversight, but not his fault at all, that Ajax and Emily had taken the largest part in experimenting with the drive-controls. So much for *that* idea...

Another possibility occurred to the little being. Once Ajaxia arrived in Saturnian space, and was established in a permanent orbit about the ringed planet, perhaps the Wuj could somehow incapacitate the two Saturnian impostors and keep the airlocks closed so that the Saturnians could not enter. Since the airlock was controlled from here on the bridge, it seemed an idea likely to succeed. But *how* to lock up or knock out the two Amoeba-Men posing as Ajax Calkins and Emily Hackenschmidt? *That* was the question...

Until the planetoid-ship arrived at Saturn, the Wuj resolved to continue pretending that he believed the two spies were really his master and mistress.

After the close brush with the pursuit squadron, Ajaxia continued on its merry way

unimpeded. It seemed that discretion overcame the natural valor of Vice Admiral Milton A. Kreplach, for the choleric commander ordered his ships not to pursue the runaway planetoid across the EMSA/Saturnian border. The phony "Ajax" and "Emily" watched the EMSA squadron turn about and head back home like a flock of cowed puppies, tails between their legs, so to speak. The Wuj observed them closely while the two spies chortled with amusement and made pointed comments on the behavior of the EMSA commander. The Wuj sighed quietly; he had hoped that perhaps Admiral Kreplach would indeed ignore the boundary and continue to attempt to overtake and capture the defecting asteroid. But no such luck... no, there was no one else who could be expected to foil the Saturnian hands (or tentacles). It was up to the Wuj.

He had plenty of time to think about the problem and decide on a course of action. Saturn lies over 400 million miles beyond Jupiter and that's an awful lot of miles when you stop to think about it. The planetoid-ship had powerful engines of course, but they had to push a considerable tonnage. The planetoid was as heavy as all the other spacecraft in the entire Solar System combined, and no engine—not even the electronic monsters in the center of Ajaxia—could push all that dead weight and break any speed records at the same time. Hence the voyage was long, dull, and slow.

Most of the time, the Wuj avoided "Ajax" and "Emily" to reduce the possibility of making a conversational slip, and revealing that he knew they were naught but a couple of overgrown jellyfish in disguise. This was easy enough to do, since "Ajax" and "Emily" were also avoiding the Wuj's company to reduce the possibility that *they* would make a conversational slip, and reveal the fact they were naught but two jellyfish in disguise. Hence, the better part of the immensely long voyage was spent with the two Saturnians and the Martian spider-being slinking around carefully avoiding each other. It would have been an amusing spectacle, had anyone been there to see it.

The Wuj spent most of the long days moping about in his cabin, wondering where the real Ajax and Emily were, and what was happening to them. It was just as well for the Wuj's peace of mind that he could not know. However, he had a vague inkling of what might be happening to his dear leader and the royal consort-to-be, since he had overheard the pseudo-Ajax make his scornful announcement of defection to Saturnian Imperial space. The Wuj was sharp enough to deduce that if the real Ajax and Emily were not in hiding somewhere, they would be slapped into jail as criminals and traitors. It was all bitterly unfair to his beloved monarch, and the mournful little spider-being determined to do his level best to wreak a satisfactory revenge...

Daily, the yellow bulk of Saturn grew in the 'scopes, like a baleful giant eye glaring at the hurtling planetoid-ship from the blackness of space. The famous rings were not in evidence at this season, or perhaps the planetoid-ship was approaching the Ringed World at a poor angle for getting a good view of them. Nor were any of the several moons to be seen, at least not yet. The Wuj watched the giant planet grow bigger and bigger with each day, and felt trepidation and suspense. "Ajax" and "Emily" also observed their approach, but with relish and satisfaction; their plastic faces were immobile, and could neither smile nor frown, but the Wuj could tell how they felt from the gloating pleasure in their voices.

At last the fateful moment was at hand. Saturn filled half of the forward view like a stupendous custard pie. The Ringed World's atmosphere was so dense and soupy, that only its

very upper level or exosphere could be seen. Unlike Earth or Mars, whose surface features are clearly visible from space, naught of Saturn's face could be seen behind its impenetrable mask of clouds. These clouds were made up of noxious, unbreathable gases like methane and ammonia, and the atmosphere was unbelievably frigid—something like minus 143° Centigrade. That made even chilly little Mars sound like Acapulco in August, thought the Wuj nervously, remembering a phrase his sovereign used. He hoped they would not make a landing on the surface, but would remain in orbit for unloading purposes.

Saturn was a mighty strange planet, all things considered, and full of weird contrasts. Although its diameter is *nine times greater* than that of Earth, the gravity on the surface is only a fraction more. This puzzled the first EMSA scientists, and induced them to take a good close-up look at the ringed giant; they decided the planet's density was very slight, and that it was made up of light materials almost to the complete exclusion of heavier minerals. When EMSA specialists got into contact with the Saturnian Amoeba-Men, they found this to be true.

Saturn is like a giant mud-pie, and nothing on it is tougher than poor-grade balsa-wood or cardboard; thus, for millions of years, the Saturnians had been held in a very low level of technology. But the coming of EMSA changed all that, and once EMSA sold the Saturnians some used space ships, the ambitious Amoeba-People began to exploit the mineral wealth of their several moons. Titan, for example, proved a goldmine... or perhaps iron-mine would be more correct.

Until EMSA's help enabled the Saturnians to begin mining the satellites, the Saturnians had made ingenious use of the natural resources of their inhospitable planet. Since the Saturnian atmosphere is very deep and made up of dense gases, its weight is terrific and everything on the surface of the planet is subjected to terrific pressure. Hence the EMSA explorers were surprised to see how structurally strong slabs of frozen mud could be... They were so strong, that the Saturnian cities were *built* out of this substance exclusively!

In place of metal, the Amoeba-Men used ice. Most everything on the surface of Saturn is covered beneath a thick layer of methane or ammonia ice. Squeezed under tremendous pressure, it was of such great tensile strength that the primitive Saturnians used it in tools and machines and weapons as Earth-folk use metals. EMSA released some extraordinary pictures of Saturnian mining camps where ice-drills were used to open up mines of pure mud.

Unfortunately, the Saturnians proved to be the greatest imitators in the Solar System. For millions of years they had been perfectly content to continue along their primitive ways, building cities of mud and fighting with swords of ice. But when the EMSA people came along and showed them the superiority of a metals technology, they happily adopted the new ways; in fact, they hero-worshipped and copied everything the Earthmen did. As soon as they looked into Earth history, they happily adopted first the warring ways of the Middle Ages, then developed Imperial ambitions, and set about planning to conquer the Universe. EMSA leaders would have been relieved if the Saturnians had not hero-worshipped them to quite *that* extent, but it was too late. The damage had already been done...

At least, up until now, the Saturnian plans for conquest had been very seriously hampered by this inability to do any more than just copy EMSA; they were constantly behind the progress of EMSA's scientific know-how. Unfortunately, with the wealth of weird new weapons and machinery in the ancient Asteroidal spaceship, they would soon be *ahead* of Earth science, and perfectly able to make their dreams of universal conquest start coming true!

No one knew just what kind of weapons might yet be discovered in the planetoid-ship... but now that the asteroid had defected to the Saturnian side, the first Earth would know of these weapons would be when they were used *against* Earth!

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XIV

With the phony Ajax and Emily at the controls, the giant planetoid-ship slowed on its retrojets and maneuvered into a stable orbit about the giant planet. Securing orbit for such a large and unwieldy vessel as Ajaxia was a slow, time-consuming process and it took the full attention of the two Saturnian spies—which left the Wuj to his own devices. And you may be sure he took full advantage of this opportunity to take certain steps unobserved.

When at last Ajaxia was in parking orbit, the two Saturnians relaxed, locked the controls and sat down to await the arrival of a Saturnian patrol. But they did not wait very long; the Wuj came scrambling into the control room, burbling with excitement.

"What is it? Slow down—I cannot make out a single word you are saying! What? Begin all over," the pseudo-Ajax demanded of the excited little creature.

"Quickly! Come quickly, beloved master! Come and see the astonishing thing I have discovered!" the Wuj babbled, hopping about the control room excitedly.

"Well, what is it?" the pseudo-Emily snapped.

"Come—come and see! Oh, you will not believe it! Even I could hardly believe it, when I first discovered it—come—come along—I'll show you—right through here—hurry, before it goes away!"

"Well, the Ring Patrol won't arrive for some time yet, uh, Emily. Perhaps we had better see what this fellow discovered."

"Very well, uh, Ajax. Let us go with him."

Hopping about from one of his eight spidery legs to another the Wuj hustled and bustled them out of the bridge and down a corridor towards a seldom-used portion of the living quarters.

"Right through here—right through this door," he wheezed and panted, green compound eyes revolving with suspenseful excitement. Grumbling a bit, the two Saturnian spies followed him through the door into a large square chamber with heavily-insulated walls. Across the chamber against the farther wall was a curious black box.

"That's *it!* There—look at it—go ahead!" the Wuj panted. As they started across the room to investigate the odd container, the Wuj, unnoticed, slipped out of the door behind them and closed it softly. It shut gradually with a sigh of compressed air. This sound was followed by a humming drone, as motors starting up in the walls. The temperature began to drop with remarkable swiftness, although in their air-tight, plastic Earthman-body-suits, neither of the

two Saturnian amoeboids could be aware of it just yet. Besides, their attention was diverted to the peculiar black box.

Gingerly, the pseudo-Ajax Calkins picked it up. It seemed remarkably light. He turned it over. It was just an empty packing crate, spray-painted with black rubberoid. The two Saturnians exchanged a puzzled look, and both turned around to question the Wuj, assuming that the little Martian was still standing behind them. To their considerable surprise they discovered he was not there; and to their consternation, the door was locked. Not just locked, but *sealed airtight*.

Although they could not know it, this particular chamber was a giant refrigerator, made for the storing of food. The insulated walls contained giant coolant coils, capable of plunging the temperature of the interior of the chamber to remarkably low degree. Meat thus quick-frozen, could be perfectly preserved for months, even years.

It did not take "Ajax" or "Emily" very long to discover they had been tricked. The door would not open, despite everything they tried; nor would the Wuj answer them when they used the standard intercom mounted in every compartment of the ship. They were not terribly disturbed at all this, for they assumed the Wuj was only attempting to imprison them and keep them from permitting the Saturnian patrols to land and enter.

So—after futile attempts, to rouse the Wuj on the intercom, and several tries at opening the sealed door—the Saturnian disguised as Ajax Calkins reached up and removed the top of his head. It unscrewed as easily as the lid on a jar of mayonnaise. Once off, a deadly looking lens was revealed to view.

The pseudo-Ajax leaned over facing the door and from this lens a laser beam of superheat splattered over the door, frying off the enamel, and bit in, slowly burning through the tough metal.

"This won't take long comrade," said pseudo-Ajax to pseudo-Emily. "We'll be out of here within minutes, then we'll take care of that Wuj creature... we don't need him any more. Within the hour, this planetoid and all the scientific mechanisms it contains will be possessions of the Saturnian Interplanetary Empire."

Pseudo-Emily removed the top of her head too.

"Perhaps, comrade," she gloated, "you will permit *me* the honor of being the one to sizzle the little Martian spider!"

Her compatriot graciously yielded.

Two laser beams dug into the door to the refrigerator room; and all the time, the temperature continued to drop...

The Wuj scuttled back to the bridge as fast as his eight legs could carry him. He arrived not a microsecond too soon, for already the Saturnian patrol was beaming a radio message to its newest moon, Ajaxia, demanding landing instructions.

The little Martian turned on the radio set.

"Independent Kingdom of Ajaxia," he replied. "Who is calling, please?"

From the radio, came the harsh, grating voice of a Saturnian.

"Supreme Commander Grauschmitz speaking! Prepare for our immediate entry, and be sure all of the scientific treasures are ready for instantaneous transshipment!"

Struggling to think of a plan, the Wuj said feebly: "Sorry, no landing possible for forty-eight hours. Quarantine laws regarding immigration from one planet to another, you know, Commander."

"Quarantine laws? What are you talking about, fool—*we* have no quarantine laws here on Saturn!"

"T-that may be, sir. But we have them here on Ajaxia. Forty-eight hours..."

From the set came a strangled series of weird sounds representing Saturnian profanity. When he had calmed down sufficiently, the Saturnian demanded: "Who is this speaking? Where are..."

"Prime Minister the Wuj, speaking for King Ajax and Miss Hackenschmidt. Both of whom are—ah—temporarily indisposed..."

"*Indisposed*, are they? I'll 'indispose' them! Listen to me, you Prime Minister—this is Saturnian space and in this region of space, Saturnian laws are obeyed. Either permit us to land, or we will blow the planetoid-ship out of the sky! *Answer—now!*"

The Wuj wilted.

"V-very well. Just one moment..."

The little Martian set down the receiver. He got up from the pilot's chair and spider-legged it over to one wall of the bridge. Here, hundreds of control panels of unknown purpose winked and twinkled away. No one knew what mechanisms these controls controlled; the Wuj reached out blindly... now was the time to find out!

His attention was caught by one particular control system. It was a series of large flat crimson pedals set in a circular blue board. Each large stud was labeled with the mysterious Asteroidal script, but that didn't do any good. The Wuj recalled how he had accidentally activated this particular system one day while polishing the panels. Now on sheer impulse he reached out, and at random depressed one of the pedals.

Deep down in the central hold, a mysterious machine that was a system of odd-angled mirrors arranged about a central light projector—stirred into action! Mirrors clicked into new position; a humming arose from the multi-tube-studded globe at the center of the system; a beam of intense light shot from one of the tubes and impinged on one of the mirrors. From this mirror, fragments of the light-ray angled off into other mirrors set at various alignments and angles...

Out in space, the furious Saturnian commander glared at the vision screen depicting the planetoid-ship. Delays, delays, *delays!* What were they doing out there all this time? With a jerk of restless tendrils, the lump of protoplasm that was Supreme Commander Grauschmitz extruded two lips and a larynx, moulded by will from his consciously malleable amoeboid

flesh. He was about to bellow angry commands into the radio transmitter when a flash of blinding light erupted from the vision screen. Extruding another eyestalk in amazement, the commander gawped in amazement.

The planetoid-ship had just vanished into empty space!

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XV

The robots surrounded the *Destiny* and stood glowering at it. Most of them were multi-armed, with pincher, drilling or laser components, and Ajax knew they could make mighty short work out of the trim little yacht if they wanted to.

"For the luvva Space, Ajax, aren't you going to *do* something? Are you just going to let those monsters just stand there like that? Aren't you going to *assert* yourself?" Emily demanded shrilly.

He cleared his throat. "Of course, dear. Now let me see..."

"What about Fido here?" she suggested, gesturing at the immobilized repairs robot. "What about him?"

"Well, I don't know... couldn't you send him outside to talk to those animated tin cans? I mean... he's one of their kind and... you know!"

Ajax mulled it over. In the absence of any other idea, he couldn't see that it could do any harm.

"Why not?" he asked rhetorically, and seating himself in the reclining chair, he donned the cowl-like visor. Fingers twinkling over the console, he guided the repairs robot out the airlock and into the ring of metal giants. There, Fido elevated one arm portentously, then squatted and began drawing a series of concentric rings in the loose soil.

Emily regarded this through the port with growing curiosity.

"What's Fido *doing* out there?" she asked. His voice muffled by the cowl, Ajax mumbled something about "sign-language, the universal tongue." Suddenly he jumped as if tweaked on a sensitive spot. "What is it?"

"Radio signals," he mumbled. "The big boy in the middle is hitting Fido with a radio beam!"

"Can you make out what he's saying?" Emily inquired. "Nope. Mathematics. Arithmetical symbols. Sort of like what they call 'computer-noise'... but... I *wonder* ..."

"What?"

Ajax wriggled with excitement. "If it *is* anything like computer-noise, maybe a computer can figure it out! When I had the ship built, I wanted it completely automated so I wouldn't need a crew. I had a whopping big computer built in to run just about *everything*—it takes up

nearly half the ship. Maybe it can figure out what King Kong is saying to Fido. Emily—hook in the ship's radio to the computer bank over there with that extension... let's see if we can get a fast translation. Hurry!"

Sure enough, the ship's computer proved to have enough think-power to work out the kind of mathematical symbology the Alcmenean robots talked in. In no time flat, Ajax and Emily were poring over the translation. It read:

"ATTENTION, MOBILE UNIT! MINING REGULATIONS 14-A THROUGH SUBPARAGRAPH M-32, FORBID UNAUTHORIZED PERSONNEL AT THIS DEPTH. YOUR BORE-VESSEL MUST LEAVE IMMEDIATELY, OR MASTER CONTROL WILL SUMMON AID FROM SURFACE-MONITORS! (*click-buzz*) ATTENTION, MOBILE UNIT! MINING REGULATIONS 14-A THROUGH SUBPARAGRAPH M-32 ..."

Ajax's jaw went slack and his eyes glistened with incredulous awe.

"*Mining* regulations!" he gasped.

"Ajax, stop it," demanded Emily, who found his imbecilic expression highly offensive.

"At this *depth*!" he mumbled, glazed eyes shining. Emily tightened her jaw.

"A-jax..." she said between clenched teeth.

"Bore-vessel! *Surface* monitors! Holy Incandescent Asteroids, Emily, do you understand what that means!?"

"No, I don't. It's gibberish to me. But *will* you wipe that expression of adolescent idiocy off your face?"

He goggled at her. "I was right! This asteroid *was* core-material... what's more, the ancient Asteroidals were *mining* the core when the planet blew up ages ago..."

"So what does that m—oh. *Oh!*" Emily's jaw dropped in slack surprise and her lovely eyes glazed into the identical, idiotic expression she had objected to in her betrothed.

He chortled gleefully. "Now you get it! The Asteroidals were mining the planet's core with *robots*—the same robots that are out there *right now!* When the lost planet blew up, they went along with this chunk of core-material as if they were part of it! Migawd, Emily, they've been mining and mining away for the last five or six *million* years!"

"Oh, my" she marveled. "Why it hardly seems possible, Ajax... why weren't they smashed to splinters when the Asteroid-planet exploded?"

"Perhaps some of them were—who knows? But they must have had a portable machine-shop along for on-the-spot repairs. Then again, to withstand the terrific pressures of the core, the robot miners would have to be built mighty strong—heavily armored against shocks and that sort of thing—why, Emily, the mind boggles at the thought!"

"It certainly does..."

Filled with sudden determination, Ajax became a figure of dynamic action. In terse phrases

he instructed her to fit a two-way circuit through the computer's mathematical translator, so that he could talk into one end and a radio beam of mathematical lingo would emit from the other. This was accomplished in a remarkably short time. Once in communication with the Asteroidal robots, Ajax fed them a line of guff that was, actually, only partly untrue:

"ATTENTION, MINING UNITS! THIS UNIT'S BORE-VESSEL TEMPORARILY INCAPACITATED DUE TO PARTIAL DESTRUCTION OF DRIVE-MOTORS BY LASER BEAM! REQUEST EMERGENCY AID AND REPAIR FACILITIES."

The twenty-foot robot who seemed to lead the others, mulled this over for a bit, then shot back a radio beam in reply:

"MESSAGE RECEIVED, MOBILE UNIT. EMERGENCY REPAIRS TAKE PRIORITY OVER MINING REGULATIONS 14-A THROUGH SUBPARAGRAPH M-32, SUBJECT: UNAUTHORIZED PERSONNEL IN MINE. (*click-whirr*) REPAIR UNIT STANDING BY FOR DIRECTIONS, AS ORDERED BY SECTION 12-F, CODE 44, SUBJECT: EMERGENCY REPAIRS."

While Fido guided the repair robots through the engine room, Emily whipped up a spot of something nourishing and hot. Once the ship was buzzing and echoing with the sound of power drills and welding torches, Ajax slipped out of Fido's control unit and enjoyed a snack. So efficient were the robot repairmen, that it seemed like no time before the damages done by the pursuit-squadron's laser gun were fixed up and the ship was ready for flight.

The problem of fuel, of course, was even simpler.

"THIS UNIT THANKS MINING CONTROL-UNIT FOR AID IN EMERGENCY REPAIRS, (*clank-whine*) WONDER IF YOU CHAPS COULD SPARE A COUPLE OF INGOTS OF PLUTONIUM-239. THIS UNIT IS A BIT LOW ON THE OLD GO-GO JUICE!"

On a 14-mile-thick asteroid of almost solid uranium, it was sort of like asking a Brazilian plantation-owner if he could spare a cup of java. Ingots a-plenty were forthcoming, and the *Destiny* was soon fueled up and ready for space again. With Fido back aboard and safely stashed away in the decontamination chamber, the yacht rose from the surface of little Alcmene and headed out for the Jovian border of EMSA space.

"Thanks a lot, King Kong, and a hearty '*click-buzz*' to all the other Kongs!" Ajax chuckled. He was in rare good humor... after all, for the first time since this particular adventure had begun, something *good* had happened to him!

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The trip to Saturn was long and dull, and I will not bore you with an account of such an uneventful voyage. Except to say that it was not as long as it could have been: Ajax tried his trick of continuous acceleration and found that it did indeed work after all.

Before very long he was nudging the *Destiny* into velocities that pushed close on the lower mileage of true light-speed. While his luck lasted, Ajax was strongly tempted to see what would happen if he did exceed the speed of light—at least, he wanted to see if he *could*.

"Theoretically," he explained things to Emily in his best Oxford-professor's voice, "at or near photonic velocity, the traveling object should grow in mass until it equals the rest of the universe put together... although, of course, 'universe' is a poor term—romantic, hardly scientific. Say the space/time *plenum*, to be accurate."

"Ajax, I hate you when you get into your 'more knowledgeable-than-thou' mood. Cut it out. I took plenum mechanics in high school, and know my Einsteinian physics."

"Quite." He was not listening, of course, being Ajax. "As an interesting corrolary relative time-rate on the accelerating mass (the ship, in this case) should slow to near-zero in exact correspondence to the growth of pseudo-mass. Now some authorities postulate that two *plenum-sized* masses cannot exist simultaneously in the same continuum; hence the small must give way and pop into some jolly old sub-space or another dimension, or something like that. It would indeed be interesting to see what *did* result from travel at photonic velocities! What do you say we... ?"

"A-jax, cut it out, you're giving me the willies! Leave sub-space alone and tend to business. We're here to recapture the planetoid-ship for the benefit of all mankind, and down with the vile Saturnians, remember?"

"Oh, very well," he muttered. And from there on he tended to business.

They ate, and slept, and ate again. They listened to programs of taped music (Ajax was particularly fond of Strauss' "Emperor" Waltz, for obvious reasons). They read books with which the little yacht was well-stocked. They watched old movies on television. Often they held hands while looking at the stars. One way or another, they passed the time.

Saturn grew and grew in the 'scopes, a big yellow peach against the blackness of space. At last the Ringed Planet neared to the point at which they could make out Titan, its largest moon, with the naked eye.

That wasn't *all* they could see, either!

Emily grabbed Ajax by one arm and squeezed.

"Ajax! That's a Saturnian fleet out there!"

"Hmm—so it is. What are they buzzing around like that for? They look like a nestful of hornets hunting for someone to sting."

"I don't know, but they don't seem to have spotted us on their radar yet. Hadn't you better slow down or something?"

"Quite right! Maybe if they don't notice us, they'll sort of go away quietly. I wonder where the good old Kingdom is? We didn't see it on the trip out, so it must have gotten here already..."

could they"—his voice dropped to a horrified whisper—"have *dismantled* Ajaxia already, do you think?"

He slowed the yacht to the merest crawl. Baffles cut down most of the ship's ion-emission and concealed it from radar or even mass-detectors—or so he *hoped*—and they watched as the Saturnian patrol buzzed about like a crew of homesick hummingbirds hunting for the nest. It was puzzling. They seemed to have lost something—but *what?*

"*There!* Oh, dear, it's Ajaxia!"

And so it was. The planetoid-ship popped into sight out of thin air, so to speak, although it had not been visible a moment before. As they watched enthralled, the angry buzzing Saturnian ships zeroed in on the fat egg-shaped ship and flung themselves at it with the abandon of suicidal flies doing a kamikaze act against a windowpane. Just before they reached it, the planetoid-ship vanished again.

"What in the Nine Worlds do you think is going on out there?" Ajax marvelled.

"Search me," Emily said. They continued to watch. Again the giant planetoid-ship appeared—this time way off by the rings, those dangerous rivers of whirling icebergs so numerous as to seem like solid sheets of light at any distance. Again the Saturnian patrol zoomed after their elusive quarry—and again it snapped out of sight, leaving the forefront of the patrol to go whacking and banging through the outer fringe of the rings, cracking up at least two ships.

"It *must* be the Wuj!" Ajax chortled. "Jolly old Wuj! He's certainly leading them a merry chase... although, for the life of me, Emily, I can't figure out what in Space he's doing. How do you suppose he makes the planetoid-ship just vanish like that?"

"Search me. But he's driving those Amoeba-Men *nuts!*"

And so he was. In their mounting frenzy to catch the extremely elusive planetoid, some of the Saturnian vessels were smacking into each other. The Amoeba-Men by this time were in a veritable frothing *suit*.

"Three down! Four!" Ajax crowed happily. "Keep up the good *w-w-erk! Gakk! What's happening?*"

What indeed! Ajax was hurtled half out of the pilot's chair as the *Destiny* gave a maniacal lurch. Consequently, their ears were assaulted by the most ferocious clamor you could imagine. Picture a truck-load of hollow anvils falling down a tool-steel staircase—truck and all—and you have a decent idea of the noise. The *Destiny* stopped dead, and her lights died. So did her air-conditioners, with an exhausted wheeze.

"Good gracious—Ajax—we've rammed *into* something!" Emily shrieked.

"Steady, steady now. We were only going at a crawl," gasped Ajax, crawling on his hands and (bruised) knees across the sloping, up-tilted floor to the forward 'scopes. "Perhaps we smacked into a moonlet, although radar alarms ought to have rung up a storm... I... *say ...!*"

Ajax stopped, transfixed by the sight of what they had rammed into.

"Well? Speak up—what *was* that?" Emily snarled, fighting her way out of a pile of spacesuits into which she had tumbled. With an outraged gasp, she batted away the mitten-hand of one spacesuit which had impertinently come to rest on her rounded knee.

"S-search me," he goggled. Then, turning to her with his expression of slack-jawed idiocy, he wheezed: "E—Em, girl! Do you know what I see out the front 'scopes?"

"Of course I don't, you flacking, pixilated cretin! *What* do you see?"

"*Nothing*, that's what. Nothing at all... just lotsa space. Stars, and so on. *Nothing*. I say... Emily?"

"Well?"

"I think we've discovered *an invisible planet*..."

"... Oh." she said. It was rather an inadequate reply, he thought, but, on the whole, it would serve.

And he was right. The *Destiny* had rammed nose-first into an invisible something or near planetary mass. What it was, only time would tell...

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XVII

When the planetoid-ship vanished into thin space, Supreme Commander Grauschmitz let out a startled squawk that rang through the bridge of the Saturnian cruiser. The Amoeba-Man was seated (if that is the word) in a sort of saddle-cum-hammock before the viewer. So violent was his reaction, that if the viewer had been an open window he might have tumbled through it.

Extending a pseudopod, he slapped down a few keys. The radar-antennae emitted their searching beams, but with no result. Trembling like a bowlless jelly, the radar operator formed a larynx-and-lips set of vocal equipment, and yapped: "Commander Grauschmitz, sir! The planetoid is not in immediate space—the Ajaxia is not invisible—it *has* disappeared!"

The Supreme Commander fumed visibly. "Nonsense, idiot! The planetoid-ship weighs millions of tons... no process known to science could cause such a vast body to simply disappear... no process known to our glorious *Saturnian* science, that is!... and, as is widely known, our glorious Saturnian science is the most advanced science in the entire Universe!"

"Hail to our glorious Saturnian science, hail," the radar operator clacked mechanically, but he sounded rather dubious about it.

"Hail, hail," repeated the other Saturnian spacemen present on the bridge. Their tone of voice was notably lacking in enthusiasm.

Supreme Commander Grauschmitz extruded another eye-stalk and bent the full force of

his binocular vision on the recalcitrant view-plate. But even this did not summon the missing planetoid-ship back into being once again.

His eye-stalks wilted.

"Oh, I shall be liquefied," he quavered. "How will I ever explain this to His Imperial Magnificence, Our Beloved Emperor? Surely he will castigate me sorely..."

"Hail to our Beloved Emperor, hail," the other Amoeba-Men clacked tonelessly.

"Hail, hail," Commander Grauschmitz mumbled in automatic response. "Oh, what will the Utterly Supreme Admiral of All Admirals, the dreaded 'Mad-dog' Heimmerschlitzer, say, when he hears that I had the famous planetoid-ship right here within my very pseudopods... and let it slip away? Oh, he will put me through a court martial so fast I will not even have time for one last salute to Our Glorious Flag—and, *pop!* will go poor old Grauschmitz into the centrifuge to be homogenized..."

"Hail to Our Exalted Flag, hail," chorused the crew, with slightly more enthusiasm than usual.

"Yes... into the centrifuge... or perhaps the *boiling vats!* The ultimate punishment for one who betrays the splendid destiny of our magnificent Saturnian people's cause—poor old Grauschmitz—*blap!* Into the boiling vats..."

"Hail to the splendid destiny of our magnificent Saturnians people's cause—*Hail!*" chanted the crew with enthusiasm. Grauschmitz cocked a suspicious eye-stalk at them, whereupon they busied themselves guiltily at various tasks.

One of the crew-members shrieked in high falsetto, and bounced up and down in his saddleseat with such excitement that he nearly pitched out onto the deck.

"Fearless Commander!" he yipped. "Look—behold—the planetoid-ship has returned..." He babbled on, pointing with a trembling pseudopod at the screen. Commander Grauschmitz slithered around and craned a half-dozen quivering eye-stalks at the viewer.

"Sacred Slime-Pits, so it has!" he gargled. "Quick—Lieutenant Blatzheim—summon the forward ships! Command them to fling themselves bodily upon the elusive vehicle!"

"Ay, aye, Commander!" clacked the excited little amoeba.

"And remind me to promote you to the honorable rank of *Captain* Blatzheim, Lieutenant!" the Commander said indulgently.

"Oh, aye, *aye*, Commander," the amoeba said delightedly, his protoplasm suffused with a blush that made him resemble for all the worlds a bowlful of cherry gelatine.

"Advance squadron on the—*erk!*"

Dead silence. The blush faded from Blatzheim; in fact, he paled.

"What is it, Captain? What?" the Commander yarbled. "I can't see from here..."

"The, *ulp*, the planetoid-ship vanished again, sir," said the amoeba in a shaken voice.

"... Oh. I see." The Commander wobbled weakly. "Remind me to *rescind* that promotion Blatzheim," he said grimly.

"Aye, *gulp*, aye, sir," the Lieutenant intoned faintly. Suddenly, the flagship was pierced by a powerful radio beam that crackled madly from the overhead speaker. Within a moment the screen cleared and a bloblike Amoeba-Man glared down at the sagging bulk of Grauschmitz fiercely from bristling eye-stalks. His protoplasmic form was glittering with military decorations.

"*Achtung*, Grauschmitz, you cretin! Utterly Supreme Admiral Heimmerschlitzer speaking. What in the Name of Ten Thousand Blazing Comets are you doing up there..."

"Hail, the Utterly Supreme Admiral, hail," the crew-members chorused fearfully. The bloodshot eye-stalks of the Admiral swiveled, sweeping them with a piercing gaze.

"Thirty lashes to all you swine," he grated harshly. "As I was saying, what are you doing up there, Grauschmitz, you simpering fool? You should have reported to Grand Ineffable Prime Base 14-poinf-oh-four minutes ago. What of the precious and, indeed, irreplaceable planetoid from Inner Space, with its superb and priceless treasure-trove of scientific weapons, any single one of which is worth the lives of the lot of you? *Eh?* Speak up, Grauschmitz, you quavering lackey!"

"Hail, hail," mumbled the Commander, eye-stalks waving feebly.

"Speak up, or I'll vaporize the lot of you! You have taken complete control of the planetoid-ship, haven't you, Grauschmitz? *Haven't you?*" he roared.

"Well... uh... not *exactly*, Your Ultimacy..."

"What do you mean, 'not exactly'—Grauschmitz, if you fumbled this vital mission, it's the searing chambers for you... the electric needle in the nucleus, Grauschmitz, you gibbering clot?"

"Aye, aye, Your Ultimacy," the Commander whimpered, wishing he could liquefy on the spot. "But it's not *my* fault! Whoever's on the planetoid-ship, is using some novel device by means of which the ship is slipping in and out of subspace, or hyperspace, or *some* kind of space! They keep slipping away every time my ships get near—our radar and visual equipment *is* no good, and..."

"*Silence!*" the Admiral thundered. Grauschmitz yelped and the crew-members collapsed into quavering puddles. The Admiral raked them with a glare of searing contempt.

"Grauschmitz"—his voice sank to an ominous whisper—"you do understand, don't you, Grauschmitz, that my *own* commanding officer, His Indescribably Superior Lordship, Prince Zarfbladder, the Minister of Imperial Space Affairs, is *personally* interested in this mission? If *you* fail, it means that I have failed... and if I fail, it means the (*shudder*) super-heated whips for me... and in that case, Grauschmitz, you slobbering zany, it means *thirty-seven hours under the Giggling Hooks for you!*"

The Commander quailed: "No! Not *the Giggling Hooks*, Your Ultimacy! Not that!"

"Yes, Grauschmitz, the *Giggling Hooks*," he snarled. "... and then, the *Acid Tanks*. Do you

follow my meaning, eh?"

"I'll take the planetoid-ship, Your Ultimacy! I swear it!" the trembling Amoeba-Man babbled.

"Very well. See that you do. Utterly Supreme Admiral Heimmerschlitzer signing off," he grated. The screen went dead.

Then it flickered on again. The bulging eye-stalks surveyed the shivering crew for a final time.

"Make that sixty lashes for all," he grated. "Hail the just punishment inflicted on malingering reactionaries under Sublimely Imperial Justice!" he concluded as the screen faded for the final time.

"Hail the j-just punishment inflicted on m-malingering reactionaries under Sublimely Imperial J-justice, hail," the crew repeated dispiritedly.

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XVIII

During this harrowing interview, the elusive planetoid had appeared and disappeared about sixteen times—each time in a widely different area of space, and each time the advance squadron had plunged after it, since they had not received a message countermanding Grauschmitz's previous order. Such was the effect of Glorious Imperial Naval Discipline, they would gladly have continued darting about space like a flock of maddened sparrows after a succulent but infuriatingly evasive June-bug until the inevitable energy-death of the physical Universe, unless receiving orders to the contrary.

Desperation written all over his protoplasm, and showing in the tension of his straining voice, Supreme Commander Grauschmitz craned his eye-stalks to the view-plates once again.

"Come, come, men! Cheer up! We have not failed yet—we have only, uh, less than succeeded!" he said heartily.

"Aye, aye, sir," the crew-members mumbled.

"Captain—I mean *Lieutenant* Blatzheim—let us sum up the situation, eh?"

"Aye."

"Now: the planetoid-ship is somehow eluding the finest tracking radar systems known to glorious Saturnian science, right?"

"Right, sir... but that simply cannot be true, for, as you yourself said only moments ago, Saturnian science is the finest and most advanced science known in the, uh, known Universe. Sir."

"Very good; quite true; yes, yes. And what, Blatzheim," the Commander inquired

encouragingly, "do you deduce from that fact—lowly swine and mere Lieutenant that you are?"

Lieutenant Blatzheim revolved his eye-stalks thoughtfully for a moment, while the other crew-members goggled at him in suspense.

"Well..."

"Yes, yes? Speak up, lad? Come—come!" the Commander urged in a fatherly, indulgent tone.

"Well... sir ... from this fact, I deduce that the deviationist-reactionary-anti-Imperial planetoid-ship can *not* be actually protected in a superior manner against the finest instruments of our glorious Saturnian science... can *not* be, in point of fact, really slipping in and out of subspace (or hyperspace, as the case may be), since these techniques are unknown to our glorious beloved Saturnian science! Hence it is only a *trick*—an *illusion*!" Lieutenant Blatzheim babbled in one breathless rush of words.

The Commander beamed, or *would* have beamed, that is, if he were not just a featureless blob of translucent jelly.

"Good work! Very good work, Lieutenant... oh, by the way, remind me to promote you to Captain on the next roster, will you! Now—in other words, the Ajaxian ship is using some clever-but-fundamentally-politically-decadent scientific *trick* to merely *seem* to be eluding us. Hence, by the rigorous laws of Imperial Saturnian Logic..."

"Hail, the rigorous laws of Imp—"

"*Silence, Dogs!* You are breaking my train of thought... hence, by pure logic, the Ajaxian vessel is *not* really eluding us at all," the Commander summed up the matter complacently, "but is right there before us and has been all this time!"

The crew-members marveled at this triumph of logic. The Commander basked for a moment in the warming glow of their humble admiration, lowly swine though they were.

"Now, then, lads," he said briskly, in his best Glorious Naval Tradition style, "all we have to do is *englobe* the immediate area of space, driving slowly inward all the time in a shrinking sphere, laser-cannon blasting way, and, of course, ignoring whatever manufactured illusory tricks and hallucinations the Ajaxian vessel may project... until we have the reactionary pigs hopelessly *trapped*, whereupon..." His voice died to a gloating whisper.

"Whereupon, sir?..." the crew-members whispered.

"Whereupon we *sizzle* the swine and triumphantly carry home to the Sacred Soil of Our Beloved Motherland the planetoid's scientific treasures!" he yapped, victory ringing in his exultant tones.

"*Hail the Sacred Soil of Our Beloved Motherland, hail!*" the assembled crew-members chorused, ending with a rousing cheer for "Good Old Supreme Commander Grauschmitz, our Fearless Leader" (led by soon-to-be-Captain Blatzheim, or, at least, his voice was the loudest).

The Commander chuckled paternally.

"Ah, now, thank you lads! Ahem! Captain Blatzheim, remind me to promote you to Major on the roster-after-next, will you?"

"Certainly, fearless leader, sir," Blatzheim fawned, flushing even more scarlet than earlier.

Within moments the flagship's radio operator, "Sparks" von Hohenzollern, contacted the advance squadron which was still zig-zagging blindly about in close pursuit of the planetoid-ship, which had been popping in and out of sight with alarming frequency. Sparks commanded them to assemble for englobement, which they were very happy to do, as the past twenty minutes of futile zig-zagging had not only jolted the crewmen so ferociously as to result in nineteen cases of sprained pseudopod and three black-eye-stalks (from collisions with unpadded machinery), but also nine ships had cracked up, exploded, losing all hands. A pity, of course, but after all this was War!

As the patrol force assembled for englobement, Supreme Commander Grauschmitz watched proudly as his boys snapped into formation with the sort of verve and zest one naturally expected from His Imperial Majesty's Loyal Crack Troops... it touched an old officer straight to the nucleus to see such precision, such dedication, and he felt like a father to his men, not just a commanding officer! Roseate visions of the titles, honors, promotions, and medals that would be his after the successful completion of this operation swam before his eye-stalks...

He gave the word.

Lasers flaming, the gigantic sphere of warships closed in on the helpless planetoid-ship, where the loyal Wuj alone defended the realm of Ajax against the armed might of the Saturnian Interplanetary Empire...

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XIX

Whatever it was, the invisible body into which the *Destiny* had rammed had stopped the sleek little yacht cold. The first thing to do was assess the ship for damage. Luckily, the yacht had been moving very slowly when it rammed into the invisible planet, or whatever it was; hence Ajax and Emily soon discovered to their relief that, outside of some sprung seams and a severed power-line or two, the *Destiny* was not badly hurt.

Using Fido, the radio-controlled repairs robot, for the outside work, the popped seams caulked temporarily and Ajax rapidly spliced in replacement cables, restoring light and power. The *Destiny* was spaceworthy again.

But she couldn't fly. Not stuck nose-deep into the invisible surface of the mysterious planet.

Clad in a spacesuit, Ajax left the cabin and clambered outside. The stars burned cold and clear, unflickering in the vacuum of deep space. Saturn hung like a gigantic lemon drop away to the left, banded by glittering rings. The erratic flashes of hurtling Saturnian ships formed a distracting sight, but he tore his attention away from this and focused on the problem at hand.

Anchoring his magnetic boots firmly against the dented hull of the yacht, Ajax inched forward, giving Emily a reassuring wave of the hand as he passed the observation ports.

The pointed needle-prow was dented like a half-collapsed accordion. He clambered over the folds of metal—was soundly clonked on the head, or helmet, by an invisible projection—and cursed sulphurously for a while until the spinning lights cleared away. Then he reached up and felt the projection gingerly. It felt like a bent steel beam. He tested his boot-magnets and found it *was* steel: invisible steel! Then, taking a deep breath and thinking himself into the role of Ajax Calkins, intrepid space-explorer, he climbed out onto the surface of the mystery planet.

It was an eerie and definitely uncomfortable sensation, standing on an invisible surface. Peering down, he could see the stars glinting between his feet. Stepping carefully, he walked a bit, dragging his feet in the shuffling, spaceman's stride so that the magnetic boots did not break contact with the surface. It was like the old phrase, "walking on air"—except that there was, of course, no air.

He reached the edge of the steel surface, a jagged hole through which the *Destiny* had plunged. With great care, he clambered into the opening, gingerly avoiding the ragged edges which might puncture his suit. Once inside, he found himself standing on a level surface. Behind him, the crumple-nosed yacht hung motionless at a slight angle.

He pressed on.

It is certainly a weird feeling to walk through invisible rooms, as Ajax discovered. You keep bumping into walls and odd-angled objects, and missing doors. But then he turned a corner, and found his surroundings fading into visibility. He was in a metal world!

Puzzled, Ajax stopped and peered about him. Halls and corridors and chambers, stretched away in endless profusion in all directions. Either he had penetrated the mystery world to such an extent that the invisibility-effect wore off, or he was *within* the field of its influence. He wondered if he was himself now invisible, from Emily's viewpoint. He decided he must be...

He wandered about cautiously, one hand hovering near his belt-gun. No telling *what* might be encountered in this robotic planet... he hoped there would be no more robots. Alcmene's crew of animated erector sets was enough to satisfy him, robotwise, for a long time.

Then he found a viewer on the door of a closed-off chamber. Carefully he flicked it on... and waited with bated breath while the screen cleared. He now peered within a small chamber to see... to see...

"Oh, *no*," he groaned. "No more surprises... please!"

He looked again. Yep. It was no use pretending he didn't see them...

Inside the room were Ajax Calkins and Emily Hackenschmidt.

Frozen stiff.

With the top of their heads off.

Ajax took a deep breath, but then released it with a whoosh.

There was just no point in a grown man screaming.

The Wuj watched the plates with delight. The Saturnian squadron was really going batty. Now they were forming into a vast hollow sphere, all the ships pointing inwards. Gleefully, the little spider-being slapped the red pedals in a combination he had been testing for the past half hour.

The image of the Ajaxian planetoid-ship popped into being in the center of the globe of ships. As if that were the signal the Amoeba-Men had been waiting for, they began to converge upon it. The sphere began to shrink. Laser guns in full blaze, the squadron hurtled towards the center of the sphere-formation.

It was a grand and glorious sight. Driving at full blast and coming from all sides, the Saturnian ships drove *right through* the illusory planetoid, and crashed into each other in a spectacular holocaust. After the flash of light died down, there was nothing left but a fiery ball of molten metal.

The Wuj whooped with glee. Oh, if only his dear master could be here to see the splendid triumph!

Just then the floor jumped and something went *bongk*.

The Wuj wobbled a bit, but he stayed on his feet. After all, if you happen to have eight legs, it takes *quite* a bump to knock you off your feet. The little spider-being hobbled over to the controls and watched for warning lights.

Aha! There had been a penetration of the planetoid-ship's hull at Sector F-12, Band 109-IV; air was leaking out of the surface compartments, but no further damage seemed forthcoming. Probably a meteor... but the Wuj decided to have a look himself. Now that the Saturnian patrol had obligingly destroyed itself, he was needed no longer in the control room to operate the mirage-making mechanism.

The Wuj clambered into his specially-built spacesuit. It had been tailored (so to speak) to his measurements, and wearing it he presented the distinct appearance of a sort of robot octopus with a globular body through whose small transparent port his goggling eyes and pugdog snout peered. His eight ungainly legs splayed out like a brace of water-pipes all about the sphere. He was very proud of his suit.

It was but the work of moments to clatter though the empty corridors to the point of impact... but he never got there. For his route, a short-cut, took him past the huge refrigerator wherein he had cleverly tricked and trapped the phony Ajax and Emily.

But it seemed his cleverness has backfired, for as he came spider-footing it down the corridor, he saw the fake Ajax outside the refrigerator-room, peering in through the viewer. From somewhere, the phony Ajax had gotten a spacesuit, he noticed. The Wuj summoned his courage and crept up on the Saturnian hoaxer. One of his eight legs carefully drew his blaster... the Saturnian's spacesuit had a belt-holster, he noticed... but the Wuj decided the best thing to do was to blast the blighter down before it could spot him.

This time, he would make doubly certain he had the hoaxer! He'd simply creep up on him

and shoot him in the back! Oh, how proud the real Ajax would be of his loyal, devoted friend if he could only see him now, defending Ajaxia to the death!

Creeping up on the spacesuited alien, the Wuj aimed his pistol at the Saturnian's back...

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XX

Miss Emily Hackenschmidt was not the sort of girl to sit by idly and watch menfolks go off intrepidly into danger. She was, in fact, a mighty adventurous girl, who more often than not was the first to poke her pert little nose into peril, leaving it for the menfolks to catch up with her if and when they could.

Hence she highly resented the way Ajax coddled her. Why should *he be* the only one to explore the unknown invisible planet they had discovered? Why should *she* be left behind, while he—the great lug—had all the fun? Was she supposed to sit here dabbling with her knitting, or something?

The longer she sat the more curious she got. She had a little lunch and puffed irritably on a stimulette, and waited and waited and waited for Ajax to return. But nothing seemed to happen; nothing at all. She began to fidget. She found it harder and harder to sit still... eventually, she got up and paced the cabin deck. *Still* no Ajax. Wouldn't you think (thought Emily) the stupid lummoX would call her on the radio or something, just to let her know he was all right, and that he had not been shot down by invisible monsters, or something? Nope. Not Ajax! He was out there somewhere, having all the fun, while she had to cool her heels behind in safety. He went to adventure, while she had to stay here and mind the spaceship. *It wasn't fair!*

Finally she could stand it no longer. Setting her small chin grimly, Emily climbed into her spacesuit and set off after the man she loved, and would love (right now) to clobber over the skull with a nice blunt instrument.

She climbed out on the hull and made her way down the sloping nose into the invisible compartments through whose outermost layer the *Destiny* had smashed. After a bit, she found the invisibility-field wearing off and could make out vaguely her surroundings as they faded into vision again.

Unlike Ajax, she recognized her surroundings.

She was on Ajaxia. She knew it, because she had once helped clean up this very corridor. She couldn't be mistaken: there was that Utah-shaped patch of rust below the stern-cock outlet, and that white patch where she'd forgotten to mop up all the detergent from the corners.

Not only that, but she picked up a long-since-fallen hairpin she knew at a glance for her own.

Her brows frowned in puzzlement.

It was crazy: surely this was Ajaxia—but it *couldn't* be Ajaxia! Because Ajaxia was out there in space, hopping about, being chased hither and thither by a flock of frothing mad Saturnians. She had been watching it elude the Amoeba-Men, while waiting for Stupid to return; there had been no doubt about it. There was only one planetoid-sized spaceship known, and she would have bet her bottom credit on it!

Miss Emily Hackenschmidt was a practical young lady of great strength of character. She was not given much to a study of philosophical problems, or puzzles in logic. If she were standing on Ajaxia, and if Ajaxia seemed to be way out in space, then it only *seemed* to be. Emily could not debate the reliability of evidence at hand, or underfoot, rather. Hence the elusive planetoid-ship which was keeping the Saturnian patrol hopping was only some kind of a mirage... an illusion... projected from the stationary Ajaxia, rendered invisible by some unknown process.

There was little difficulty in accepting such a theory. After all, the planetoid-ship was packed to the walls with unknown and mysterious machinery created at a high level of technological sophistication by the lost Asteroidal civilization of yore. Obviously, the Wuj, or whoever was running the kingdom at the moment, had fiddled around and figured out how to use some of the machines. It was *that* simple.

Emily pressed forward. She thought of using the intercom on the wall to phone the Wuj, but then decided to see if she couldn't find Ajax first. He'd be poking about here somewhere. She'd be running into him any moment now.

Emily went down the corridor, and past a series of unused rooms, down a cross-walk and into another main artery—and spotted a spacesuited figure ahead. *Ajax... ?*

She was about to call him over her suit-phone, when she saw it was not one figure—but *two*.

The second one looked for all the world like a sort of robot octopus, with a globular body from which protruded eight jointed legs like a mass of waterpipes.

Not more robots! Not on Ajaxia!

Then she noticed an odd fact: the steel-plated octopus was sneaking up behind the human figure, with a *gun*.

The figure looked like Ajax, so far as she could tell from behind; at least, the spacesuit was similar. Anyway, Emily had to do something—*something*—she couldn't just stand helplessly by and watch a human spacesuit be shot down by a mechanical octopus...

What could she do? Shoot down the octopus!

She drew her own pistol gingerly. During her EMSA training, Emily had received many hours of experience with a blaster, and she could pick off a robot octopus at this range with the best of them. She lifted her pistol.

Wait a minute. What's a robot octopus doing on Ajaxia?

She stopped short.

Her mind whirling, she tried to think of who might be on Ajaxia who would in any way look like a robot octopus. Although the circle of her acquaintances was large and varied, there was only one candidate who could possibly qualify on both points...

That was no robot octopus; that was the Wuj.

Sneaking up behind Ajax with a drawn blaster? Why should the Wuj attack his beloved monarch, fearless leader, kindly sovereign, and dearest friend?

Anyway, what could Emily do about it? Shoot the Wuj? Of course not! Shoot Ajax! Don't be silly!

Being a woman, she did the only logical thing, under the circumstances. *She yelled her head off.*

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XXI

Of course Emily was still wearing her space-helmet, so she almost deafened herself. Nor had she happened to think of switching on her suit-phone so Ajax might hear. But, as it turned out, her hair-raising screech was clearly audible both to Ajax and the Wuj, for they both stiffened as if pole-axed, and jerked around to stare at her.

What it was, of course, was that this corridor was still "tight." When the *Destiny* breached the hull of the planetoid-ship, much air had whooshed into the vacuum of the void. But the ancient Asteroidal builders had thought of the possibility of an accidental hull-breach—although they were thinking more of meteors than of space yachts. They had built a simple alarm system: on hull-puncture, atmospheric pressure-drop automatically activated the compartment doors, closing and sealing off the stricken area. Hence the part of the ship they were presently in was still air-tight. Emily and Ajax had both come through several sealed doors which cycled them through just like airlocks. They had been too busy puzzling about their environment to notice or pay much attention. Hence, though muffled by the helmet, Emily's scream reached them and they spun about—simultaneously seeing each other.

"*Wuj!* Dear old Wuj!—Quit yelling, Emily. And what in the name of Space are you doing here, anyway? I thought I told you to stay in the ship—I say, Wuj, that's a gun. Pointing at me... don't you recognize your beloved monarch?"

"S-stay where you are, both of you. I don't know how you escaped from the refrigerator, but..." The Wuj wavered, his gun wobbling back and forth between Emily and Ajax. He could not blast both down at the same time, and both were armed. Whichever one he picked to sizzle first, the other would blast him in the next second.

"Escaped from the refrigerator? What are you talking about? Don't you recognize us? I say, Emily, the old Wuj has cracked up—he seems to think we're a couple of frozen foods or something!"

The Wuj's compound eyes glinted madly.

"You can't fool me with your clever talk, you despicable Saturnians, you!"

"Ajax, you idiot!" Emily snapped. "Wake up! Don't you see what's happening—the Wuj is mistaking us for those two *phonies*, just like when we phoned him from Calkins Hall back on Earth."

"Oh, that's it, of course!" Ajax sounded relieved. "I say, Wuj, if *that's* what's troubling you, then take a look in the old viewer here. The impersonators are still in the ice box, all right. Emily and I are the genuine article—go ahead take a look, if you don't believe me!"

The Wuj shot him a suspicious glance, but edged over to the wall screen and peered in with his left eye, while his right eye kept a keen gaze on the two of them. This sounds difficult, I'll admit, but with compound eyes such as a Martian spider-being has, it's quite practical.

And there they were, pseudo-Ajax and pseudo-Emily, frozen stiff; even their lasers were frozen in the middle of beaming through the door. The brand of synthetic rubies used by the Saturnians crack under extremely low temperatures, but the two were quite stiff and covered with frost. He relaxed, pistol drooping with relief.

"Oh, dear leader... Miss Hackenschmidt, ma'am!" he quavered. "That I, your loyal subject and Prime Minister should mistake you for vile Saturnian spies! That I should lift a weapon against you! Oh, the ancestral Web will vibrate with my eternal shame, and all my eggs will be sc-scrambled!"

"Tut, tut," Ajax said soothingly. "Never you mind. Mistakes *will* happen—don't blame yourself—there's a good fellow!"

"B-but fearless leader! If Miss Hackenschmidt had not vocalized at the exact moment she did, I—I would have blasted you down! I th-thought you were..."

"*Erk!* Ulp. Well, well! I didn't realize that... I apologize, Emily, for telling you to stop yelling. Henceforth, you have our Royal Permission to scream your head off at will, under such circumstances!"

"Oooh, Ajax, I could clobber you!"

"Now, now. No clouting of crowned heads. I say, everybody, we all have fifty million questions... why don't we go up to the bridge and get out of these suits and relax and pass around some explanations. Good idea? I, for one, would enjoy it if somebody could tell me how we happen to be on Ajaxia—an *invisible* Ajaxia—while I clearly saw Ajaxia out there by Saturn, dodging around being chased helter-skelter by a horde of Saturnian ships... ?"

On the bridge they unsuited and relaxed, exchanging stories. The Wuj told of the accidental discovery of the mysterious mirage-maker. This instrument, a weird conglomeration of tilted mirrors and splitting light beams, did some peculiar things to an object's visual image through an astounding variety of maneuvers at considerable distance, while rendering the object itself totally invisible to ordinary light or even radar. With it, the Wuj had stood off some distance from Saturn and put the Ring Patrol through their paces, resulting in the final destruction of

the patrol fleet.

He told them how he had at last discovered that the "Ajax" and "Emily" were Saturnian impostors, and how he tricked them into the giant refrigerator and plunged the temperature into sub-Saturnian levels. Below minus 250°, the Saturnian Amoeba-Men automatically hibernate, which is how they withstood the super-Arctic Saturnian winters before reaching a city-building technology. While the two impostors were trying to laser their way out of the 'frig, the temperature dropped to hibernation-level and the two spies went to sleep in mid-laser. Thus, with the local enemies safely "on ice," all they now had to worry about was Saturn itself.

"And, dear master, it won't be long until more ships come up to investigate. I intercepted and overheard a conversation between the patrol leader, Supreme Commander Grauschmitz and *his* superior, Utterly Supreme Admiral Heimmerschlitzer, calling from Grand Ineffable Prime Base on one of the Saturnian moons, threatening to have Grauschmitz broiled in the acid-pits or subjected to even worse punishments, if he didn't succeed in capturing Ajaxia! Now that Commander Grauschmitz has destroyed his own patrol, and himself, the Admiral will be coming into the picture promptly, I have no doubt."

Emily looked sad. "Poor Grauschmitz, he went down with his ships! Still, I guess it was quicker than the acid-pits..."

"Quite," the Wuj agreed soberly.

"Never mind all this sympathy," Ajax said, "we'd better think about getting out of here before the Admiral shows up. The Wuj was smart enough to trick one squadron into wrecking itself, but we can hardly expect to keep that sort of thing up indefinitely—and, don't forget, the planetoid-ship has no defensive weapons or armament."

Emily snapped open her compact and did some cosmetic repairs. "Is there any reason why we can't just keep the invisibility-illusion turned on, and fly back to EMSA-controlled space, leaving the Saturnian fleet to chase a mirage of Ajaxia headed the opposite direction?"

The Wuj agreed with her reasonable suggestion. Ajax did not seem to be listening.

"Say Wuj..."

"Yes, fearless monarch?" replied that faithful subject.

"Where is this Grand Ineffable Prime Base, anyway? Where did Utterly Supreme Admiral Heimmerschlitzer call from?"

The Wuj smiled. "I thought that information might come in handy, so I traced the Admiral's beam. Prime Base is on Saturn's tenth moon—I forget its name—the one that orbits just above the outermost edge of the rings."

"Why all these fancy titles, I wonder?" Emily wondered, although it was not relevant. "And where did the slimy old jellyfish-men get all these German names from?"

"Earth history, pre-space age," Ajax said abstractedly. "They were fascinated by the grand old days of Kaiser Wilhelm and the German Empire. Their whole civilization is built in imitation of Prussian imperialism. If they had heads, instead of just being blobs, I imagine they'd wear spiked helmets and that sort of thing... The tenth moon, eh, Wuj? That's the one

discovered way back in 1967 by that French astronomer—whatzizname?—Audorium Dollfus." He cleared his throat, complacently, for as a Monarch he felt it the first obligation of Royalty to be well-informed. "It has an eighteen-hour orbit and is middling in size, under two hundred miles in diameter, as I recall. They could be here in no time..."

"Well"—Emily snapped her compact shut—"let's get hopping, I'm ready. Why wait around for the Utterly Admiral or whatever he is?"

Ajax turned a solemn, thoughtful face on her. Just a hint—a glint—of devilry danced in his eyes.

"Not quite yet, dear. I have a jolly idea... you know, we're wanted for treason, desertion and everything in the book from barratry to nepotism back home. When we show up in EMSA space, we'd better have a good hefty argument for being defectors."

"But *we* didn't defect—it was two *other* people!"

Ajax smiled calmly.

"Yes, dear. *You* know that—I know that—even our very good friend and loyal Prime Minister the *Wuj* knows that. But EMSA doesn't know it, and could reasonably be expected to doubt our story."

"Well, we'll just have to take our chances," Emily snapped.

"After all, we've got those two stiffs in the freezer to back us up."

"Yes, that's true... but I have an idea. We'd be a lot welcomer (if there is such a word?) back home, if we brought EMSA a little present."

Emily eyed him dubiously. "What *kind* of 'little present' do you have in mind, Ajax?" she asked doubtfully. Ajax's ideas usually resulted in cataclysmic disasters; she was not at all inclined to listen to another one at this late date.

"It's a very good idea," Ajax said calmly, "and I think it has a good chance of working. Now, *Wuj*, Emily, listen carefully. Here's my plan...**

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XXII

Utterly Supreme Admiral Heimmerschlitzter was just about to boil over with fury. No message had come in the past half-hour from that addle-pated nincompoop, Grauschmitz, and although Heimmerschlitzter had called repeatedly, no reply was forthcoming. The Supreme Commander of the Ring Patrol, that incompetent cretin, was about to hurl his entire forces against the elusive planetoid-ship when he signed off during their last communication. So what had happened?

If the Admiral had been fortunately gifted with legs, he would have paced like a caged lion.

Unfortunately—being naught but a foul-smelling blob of protoplasm—he could do nothing but sit in his saddle-hammock and fume. He fumed, however, very effectively. In fact, the entire Command Bridge of Prime Base reeked like a slime pit.

Down below, half the Saturnian fleet sat ready at their entry ports, prepared at the drop of an eye-stalk to blast into space, loaded to the gills with seventeen-thousand-six-hundred-forty-nine of Saturn's leading scientists, mathematicians, linguists, engineers, physicists, naval officers of flag rank and even that sterling worthy and member of the Imperial Royal Family, the Heir Obvious, His Indescribably Superior Lordship, Crown Prince Zarfbladder, Minister of Imperial Space Affairs—every last one of them primed and ready to start picking apart the scientific treasures of Ajaxia. *And where was Grauschmitz and his go-ahead signal?*

The acid-pit was much too good for such a blithering nogoodnik. The electric whips would be a favor. The nuclear needles, or even the radioactive centipedes would hardly be sufficient to alleviate Grauschmitz's crime against The State. Some incredibly ingenious *new* torment... some ferociously clever and original punishment would be needed... hmm.

The Admiral was deep in the pleasant paths of creative imagination, when a sub-lieutenant came up to him, quaking with terror, squeaking quickly to get his message out before the Admiral's notorious temper would explode upon being so interrupted.

"Y-your UI-UI-*Ulp!*-Ultimacy!" he clacked, "a message from the p-planetoid-ship!"

The Admiral bent an icy eye-stalk upon the quivering amoeba.

"You mean a message from that brainless blackguard, Grauschmitz, fool!" he corrected. "Thirty lashes for your stupid error, cretin!"

Almost collapsing into a deck puddle from terror, the sublieutenant clacked on.

"N-no, Ultimacy, I *don't* mean the Supreme Commander—the message is from the Ajaxian vessel!"

"Hmm. Very well. Plug it into my board and wobble off. And make that *forty* lashes—the extra ten are for daring to correct a Superior Officer! Discipline! Must have discipline! Entire service going to rot," he grumbled as the quavering blob plugged the cable into his board and wobbled off, eye-stalks drooping forlornly, headed to the Disciplinary Chamber.

As the screen cleared, the face of Ajax Calkins filled in—expressionless and wooden.

"Utterly Supreme Admiral Heimmerschlitzer, I am the Saturnian posing as Ajax Calkins, as you know," his voice crackled coldly over the receiver.

"Ah! Secret Agent F-109-X, is that you? Good! What in the name of Ten Thousand Cosmic Hells has been going on—where is Grauschmitz and his squadron?"

"Dead, Admiral. Gone to glory in the service of the heroic Saturnian Interplanetary Empire," said the face in the viewer. "Tricked by this fiendish devil of a Martian spider-being, the one Calkins left behind in command of the planetoid-ship." The face of Ajax faded back to show a tense scene in the rear of the Ajaxian bridge: poor Wuj, tied up in plastic cable, held at gunpoint by a stiffly wooden Emily Hackenschmidt, who saluted mechanically as the

Admiral's eye-stalks filled the screen.

"Tricked, F-109-X? How?"

Ajax shrugged. "Somehow the spider-being discovered that my comrade-agent and myself were not truly the humans, Calkins and Hackenschmidt. He tricked us into a refrigerator-room, lowering the temperature to such a degree he hoped would freeze our amoeboid bodies solid. Then he deluded the Grauschmitzian patrol with a clever mirage-effect—one of the ancient Asteroidal machines recently discovered here—and led them to their glorious doom. However, the spider-being was not quite clever enough. He did not know our pseudo-bodies contained laser equipment. We cut our way out of the refrigerator before freezing, and took him prisoner, shutting off his malicious device. Unfortunately, we were not in time to save Commander Grauschmitz and his squadron from plunging to a hideous flaming doom."

"Well, we can't have everything," the Admiral grunted placidly. "Then I presume all is prepared for our scientific experts to board the craft?"

"All is ready—I am maneuvering the planetoid to orbit just beyond the moon the Earthlings call Phoebe," Ajax said woodenly. "My comrade awaits your coming, as do I, with great anticipation: it will be a truly historic moment!"

"Ah! Good! Heimmerschlitzer signing off—good work, F-109-X! I have no doubt that His Indescribably Superior Lordship, the Crown Prince Zarfbladder, Heir Obvious to the Imperial Saturnian Crown, will agree with me that you deserve the ultimate honor: elevation to the rank of Secret Agent G-109-X! Congratulations!"

"My thanks to your Admiralship!" Ajax said sweetly. "And it is the sincere wish of myself and my comrade-agent, here, that your Admiralship will shortly receive the reward *you* deserve, too!"

Glowing with pleasure, Admiral Heimmerschlitzer cut the beam, and switched to Full Circuit.

"*Attention!*" His gloating voice thundered through every hall, chamber, suite and conduit of the entirety of Grand Ineffable Prime Base. "Due to my own highly superior grasp of space tactics and heroic leadership abilities, I take pleasure in reporting that the recalcitrant planetoid-ship, Ajaxia, has at last fallen into our pseudopods and is even now held by two of our finest Secret Agents! Scientific and engineering personnel, and distinguished military observers and Royalty may now disembark for the planetoid, according to System Red! I will myself join the vanguard in my private gig! Another magnificent chapter has been added to the heroic and glorious annals of our Beloved Saturnian Empire! That is all!"

Within moments ships by the dozen, the score and even more, began blasting up out of the entry-ports sunk like huge torpedo tubes in the rocky surface of Saturn's tenth moon. They blazed a fiery arc against the splendor of the mighty rings, and hurtled towards the orbit of Phoebe where the planetoid-ship awaited them.

Another glorious chapter of history was about to be written, true. But in *whose* history?

XXIII

No one could possibly hold to the opinion that Vice Admiral Milton A. Kreplach was anything else but a fair man, and in the Earth-Mars Space Administration he had a fine reputation as being an officer noted for scrupulous self-control. In fact, his self-discipline was such that he was affectionately known to his subalterns as "Old Cast-Iron Head."

However, even the mildest observer of recent events would have to admit that if ever a man—even an officer of Vice Admiral Milton A. Kreplach's standing—ever had cause to get a bit riled, maybe even to blow his top, it was Vice Admiral Milton A. Kreplach.

No one in EMSA had anything bad to say concerning the very honest way Kreplach had comported himself during the recent and distressing affair of the defection of Ajaxia to the Saturnian side. No one could feel anything but sheer admiration as to his self-restraint in not attempting to pursue the fleeting planetoid-ship across the interplanetary border and into Saturnian space. Of course, an observer must realize how very frustrating it was to chase the defecting planetoid that far and then have to turn back with empty hands so to speak. But everyone in the know was well aware that for Vice Admiral Kreplach to have *crossed* the border between EMSA and Saturnian space would have been to cause an interplanetary incident and perhaps even precipitate *war*. So Kreplach turned back, after watching Ajaxia happily sail off in the general direction of the Ringed Planet. And no one could much blame the Admiral if he had not cussed every foot of the way back to his base on Ceres in the Asteroid Zone. And cuss he did. Some of his younger lieutenants, surreptitiously overhearing his marvelous wealth of colorful profanity on the intercom system, went so far in their admiration for the Admiral's remarkably inventive grasp of Creative Linguistics as to turn on portable tape recorders so that at least a portion of his philological expertise could be preserved for history.

Experts in invective were particularly admiring of his analysis of Ajax Calkins and his ancestry, both paternal and maternal, going back some seventeen generations. In this genealogical survey, it was noted that the Admiral did not *once* stoop to repeating himself. This feat awoke awe even in the breast of the most eloquent top sergeants in EMSA's Space Corps!

Once back on Ceres, Admiral Kreplach locked himself in his quarters for twenty-four hours with no external solace beyond a half-case of a liquid refreshment affectionately known to the Space Corps as "Old Paint-Remover."

And he sulked. It little mattered to Kreplach that his own actions were wholly irreproachable—in fact, highly admirable. It did not matter a smidgeon to him that no one in the System had a single bad word to say about his conduct of *la affair Ajaxia*. For he condemned himself.

News Commentator Conrad Wintersmith referred to his actions as "commendable self-restraint." Kreplach's comment (or as much of it as we may print) was: "*Blank* that *blanking* Wintersmith right in his fat *blank!*"

Now, some days later, and almost at the bottom of the case of his liquid solace, Vice Admiral Milton A. Kreplach was annoyed by a buzzer from the intercom.

He had been, well, not *dozing*, but day-dreaming when the rude, jarring note of the intercom jarred him from his delicious reverie. He had been pretending that Ajax Calkins was strapped down to a table... helpless... and, although Admiral Kreplach had not been part of the audience when Utterly Supreme Admiral Heimmerschlitzer had threatened the late Supreme Commander Grauschmitz with a pretty variety of disciplinary treatment, running the gamut from the searing chambers to the electric needles, and the Acid Tanks to (*shudder!*) *The Giggling Hooks*, his own ingenuity was not far behind that of the Saturnian.

Growling, he snapped on the intercom and focused a fuzzy but searing glare on the pinkcheeked young lieutenant in the screen.

"Well?" he snarled. "I thought I told you goons not to disturb me unless you had Ajax Calkins in chains!"

The young lieutenant flinched from the vision of Kreplach's blueblack jowls and bloodshot eyes, but gamely rose to the occasion.

"Sorry, sir, but we *do* have Ajax Calkins in chains!"

Kreplach boggled. He clutched at the intercom dial as a thirsty man clutches a straw.

"What? Did I hear you correctly, Lieutenant?" He leaned closer to the screen, breathing heavily. "Lieutenant... you wouldn't lie to poor old Kreplach, would you? Tell me you wouldn't deceive an old man, Lieutenant!"

"Of course not, sir," the lieutenant said, uncomfortably. "It's true, sir."

Milton A. Kreplach's eyes blazed with an unholy light.

"You mean you have *him* . . . Ajax Calkins... a p-p-prisoner? Calkins in chains?"

"Yes, sir! Well... not in chains, exactly. Not yet, I mean, sir. But we've just received a call from Calkins aboard the Ajaxian planetoid. He has just surrendered to EMSA and requests we meet him at the planetoid's former orbit in the Fore-Trojan Group between Jupiter and the edge of the Asteroid Zone."

The lieutenant flushed, averted his eyes, and switched off. It was embarrassing to see an Admiral cry.

It took Vice Admiral Milton A. Kreplach about fifteen quick minutes to recover his usual self-possession, shower, shave, climb into a freshly starched uniform, and zip up to the communications center of Ceres Base. He came into the large room looking none the worse for his ordeal, although a close observer might have noticed the rabid luster of his eyes—they gleamed with a gloating expression comparable to that of a cannibal at a Cub Scout camp—and a sort of pinched-in, white look around the corners of the mouth.

He strode up to the comms desk and sat down carefully in front of a screen. To the flustered lieutenant in charge of external relays, he said, in a mild, sweet voice:

"Oh, Lieutenant. Would you... would you kindly call Mr. Calkins aboard the Ajaxian planetoid for me? I'd like to speak to him," he said in a masterpiece of understatement.

"Yessir, certainly sir," the lieutenant stammered, making the connection. Behind him, he

could see a flock of Junior officers gathering excitedly; they had all listened with ill-concealed awe to the bootleg tapes of Kreplach's recent virtuoso performance in plain and fancy cussing; they looked forward to an All-Time Championship outburst.

The screen blurred, sparkled, and cleared, showing Ajax lazily sprawled out in the pilot's chair of the bridge, glancing through a slim volume of verse. The young man glanced up, recognized Kreplach's apoplectic features and smiled.

"Ah, there. You must be Vice Admiral Milton A. Kreplach. I thought you'd be calling pretty soon."

Kreplach smiled like a grizzly preparing to devour a succulent but unwary hunter. "And *you* must be Ajax Calkins," he said tenderly. Saliva glistened on bared incisors.

"Right-oh: H.M., Ajax the First, King of Ajaxia," the young man said complacently. "How's everything on jolly old Ceres?"

The faintest flush of crimson suffused Kreplach's new-shaven jowls.

"Things are, well, rather quiet around here right now, Mr. Calkins... but I think they'll warm up rather soon... when do you estimate you'll arrive at the Ajaxian orbit?"

Calkins lazily consulted a clipboard to which were fastened several strips of computer-tape.

"Oh, a couple hours or so. I say, Kreplach, old man, you will have some ships there to meet us, won't you? *Knew* I could count on EMSA to come through!"

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XXIV

The crimson deepened through the spectrum to a lovely shade of lavender. Kreplach's voice broke a little on the high notes, but his remarkable self-control held firm.

"Oh, yes, we'll have some ships there, waiting for you—yes, sir, quite a few ships. Waiting for you."

Ajax smiled. "Good-oh! Make sure you have a goodly Flock of empty personnel-carriers will you, Kreplach old man?"

The Admiral blinked; his smile wavered.

"*Empty* personnel-carriers?"

"That's right: empty."

"What for, you *mealy*-mouthed, *pig*-snouted, *lard*-hearted, *milk*-livered..."

"Temper! Temper!" Ajax reproved with a wagging finger. "Apoplexy one of these days, Kreplach. Self-control's the thing, you know."

"... *swine-gutted, pea-brained, pox-ridden, donkey-faced, jug-eared, jelly-spined...*"

"But, to answer your question, for the *prisoners*, of course," Ajax added with superb nonchalance.

"... *quarter-witted, fat-headed, cross-eyed, milk-hearted, snake-... hmm? What prisoners?*"

Ajax absently examined the polish on his fingernails. "The prisoners I am bringing back from Saturn, of course," he said casually.

The delicate lavender hue which embued Vice Admiral Milton A. Kreplach's jowls deepened into a rich, turgid purple. Ajax viewed it admiringly.

"I *say!* Wish I could capture that shade in my prize odontoglossums, Kreplach. What's your secret, man? I'd take home every prize ribbon in the Shanghai Flower Show if I could..."

"*What prisoners from Saturn?*" Kreplach roared, rattling every loose object in the entire room.

"Little gift for our gallant boys in EMSA," Ajax said modestly. "After all, you couldn't expect the likes of Ajax Calkins to make a daring raid behind enemy lines—all the way to the enemy's home planet—without bringing back a few prisoners, could you?"

The rich purple suffusing Kreplach's jowly visage became mottled with patches of leaden gray, all except for the pinched white about his lips and nostrils. His eyes goggled and glared as if about to burst free of their sockets and bounce about the room like two blood-shot Ping-pong balls. He clenched his teeth so hard the blood drained from his gums.

Breathing heavily, Kreplach stared at Ajax's amused expression.

"Daring raid... enemy lines... prisoners?" he asked, pitifully. Ajax nodded.

"Of course, Kreplach. Why do you think I made that speech about my so-called, ha ha, 'defection'—of course you'll understand I had to play it straight. Couldn't let anyone else into my plan, even *you*, Kreplach. Enemy has eyes and ears everywhere, you know. So... I am bringing you back a few prisoners from Saturn's Prime Base, the naval headquarters."

The mottled hue gave way to dead gray. Milton A. Kreplach reached out and held onto both ends of the control panel. I won't say his grip was *tight*, but observers did notice that the enamel flaked off and cracked quite badly.

"Who... did you take... prisoner?"

Ajax mused.

"Well, let's see. There's Utterly Supreme Admiral Heimmerschlitzer, that's one. He's supreme commander of all interplanetary military and naval forces, you understand. *And* the head of the Tactical Command planning the invasion fleet—can't remember his name, Baron something-or-other. *And* his staff officers, about fifty-nine of them. *And* most of Heimmerschlitzer's staff commanders, thirty-odd, of course. There's also the head of the Secret Service, and two of his top Secret Agents. *And* a passel of high-ranking Code experts. Not to mention some scientists. About three thousand of them: space scientists, electronics men, linguists and mathematicians, physicists, all kinds of chemists and energy-weapon men,

engineers, and I don't know what-all."

Kreplach was quite pale by now, and breathing heavily.

*... Really?" he said faintly.

Ajax nodded.

"I may as well be immodest, and admit I carried off about two-thirds of the top-ranking scientific geniuses of the whole Saturnian Interplanetary Empire," he grinned. "They *all* wanted first crack at the planetoid's scientific treasures... so we let 'em all on board and captured the lot of 'em!"

"... D-do you mind telling me... *how*?" the Admiral said in a faint whisper. Ajax smiled affably.

"Why, of course not, Kreplach old sport! It was just a minor variation on a trick my Prime Minister played to capture a couple of spies who infiltrated the Kingdom of Ajaxia! You see, below minus-250 degrees, Saturnians hibernate. It's an automatic environment-response, and despite all their civilized conditioning, it can't be stopped. Any more than we humans can avoid going to sleep every dozen-or-so hours, you understand?"

"Yes... k-keep talking... I understand!"

"Well, then! My Prime Minister, the Wuj, worked his trick by luring the spies into a storage room used for meat refrigeration and turning up the juice so that the spies hibernated. A very ingenious device and even a monarch such as myself is not above complimenting his underlings on the use of mechanical ingenuity. Once we fooled the Saturnians into thinking the planetoid-ship was in friendly hands, we guided them down to the main-air-lock which fronts, let me explain, on a very long large corridor. We let them all in—there were some thousands of them—and shut the door behind them. The door in front of them was already shut, but they had to go the length of the corridor before they could find *that* out, you see?"

"Yes. I see. And?"

Ajax grinned triumphantly. "And we refrigerated them! We had rigged up some refrigerator coils in adjacent rooms all along that corridor. Wasn't much trouble—simply stripped the planetoid-ship of all its refrigerator equipment, and rigged it up anew. Seems like the planetoid-ship was built to house hundreds of thousands of ancient Asteroidals, you see, probably for some long-term voyage to the nearer stars for colonization purposes, or some such. Anyway, with all those people aboard—they never *got* on board, of course, the planet blew up before they loaded on—anyway, to feed all those people all the way to jolly old Alpha C or wherever the Asteroidals were going, they needed plenty of grub, and that meant plenty of refrigerators. So we locked the blighters in this long corridor and refrigerated the lot of them until they hibernated smooth as pie!"

"... Very clever, Calkins..."

"Tut, tut, nothing to it. All the Wuj's original idea, of course," Ajax said modestly.

"And... *this* was why you, uh, 'pretended' to defect? To make a raid on the Saturnians?"

"Well, perhaps we didn't exactly have *everything* worked out beforehand, Kreplach old

thing, but it all worked out pretty well, I must say."

"Calkins... Calkins... don't you think the Saturnians are going to... uh, shall I say, *resent* this kind of a raid? Just a little? I mean, you know, we aren't officially at *war* with the Saturnian Empire, you know? Don't you think this sort of thing might—just possibly—start off such a war?" Kreplach's voice was dangerously soft. Color had returned to his face—most of it, anyway—and he smiled sweetly at Ajax Calkins, who returned the smile with a boyish grin of his own.

"Not a chance of it, old sport!"

"*No?*" A strangled note on the rising inflection.

"Positively not. Not a chance. For one thing, we've got about half of the general staff—nearly cleaned out the whole Admiralty, we did. You'll be able to get enough information out of these brass-hats to make a war impossible. Also, from their code-experts you can get all their latest codes. From their engineers and scientists, you can get the dope on every last weapon and latest model warship they've got in the whole dang Saturnian navy! With *this* kind of information, how could you not beat the pants off 'em, even if they *were* stupid enough to start a war?"

Kreplach stopped dead. He pondered heavily.

"You know, Calkins... you've got a point there." There was a fresh note of hope in his voice.

"You bet I have," Ajax said firmly. "And then there's my ace-in-the-hole. I didn't plan on it, but it just happened..."

Kreplach frowned.

"Ace-in-the-hole?"

"Um! An ancient pre-Space expression denoting a superior advantage for our side. One of the prisoners I forgot to list for you."

"Who did you capture? The Emperor of Saturn?" Admiral Kreplach's lips twitched; it was *almost* a smile.

Ajax's face, however, displayed a genuine smile.

"Not quite. *But I got his eldest son.*"

Dead silence.

"To be brief, Kreplach, one of my prisoners included His Indescribably Superior Lordship, the Crown Prince Zarf-bladder, Heir Obvious to the Saturnian Imperial Throne."

A dull, thumping sound, followed by even deader silence.

"I say, Kreplach, are you still there?" Ajax queried. For the viewscreen had just gone blank as the Admiral slid off it. In a second, a flushed officer's face replaced the leaden jowly visage of Kreplach.

"Sorry, Your Majesty. Admiral Kreplach has, uh, just had a slight, uh, accident. He's being

carried off to the infirmary right now..."

"Accident? Serious, I hope?—Ahem! I mean, *nothing* serious, I hope" said Ajax.

"Oh, no, Sire. Quite minor, I'm sure."

"That's good... I wouldn't like to think anything I said or did... what seems to be his trouble anyway, Lieutenant?"

The officer assumed an expression of polite seriousness. Was he repressing a grin? Ajax wondered.

"Uh, apoplexy, I think. Your Majesty."

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EPILOGUE

The Royal and Independent Kingdom of Ajaxia hurtled through space. Saturn had fallen behind, and ahead of the planetoid-ship, mighty Jupiter bulked, its swollen face banded with brown, and orange. The technique had worked well: utilizing the ancient Asteroidal's mirage-maker, Ajax and his faithful crew had rendered the Kingdom invisible, and sent its image zipping off in the general direction of Neptune, closely followed by half the Imperial Saturnian space-navy in frenzied and furious pursuit.

In about an hour, Ajaxia, the asteroid, would be able to take her rightful position among the planetary bodies, and Ajaxia, the Kingdom, her proud place among the sovereign states that made up the international scene. All charges against Ajax Calkins and Emily Hackenschmidt were dropped—or would be as soon as Vice Admiral Milton A. Kreplach recovered from his attack. Peacefully, EMSA ships would take on the horde of frozen Amoeba-Men... and another entangled crisis would have been smoothed, another impending outbreak of interplanetary war averted, another glorious victory for civilization won... by Ajax Calkins.

It certainly had a nice, fulsome ring to it—"Ajax Calkins, Savior of Solar Civilization"...

When Emily Hackenschmidt entered the planetoid-ship's bridge together with the Third Least Wuj, she found Ajax sprawled out comfortably in one of the swivel chairs, dreamily gazing into space and abruptly breaking out of his reverie from time to time to scribble something on a clipboard held on his lap.

"All secure in the frozen jellyfish department," Emily announced cheerfully. "Nary a twitch from pseudopod nor eye-stalk. They're safe in cold storage until EMSA thaws them out for questioning."

"Um," Ajax said absently.

"Um? What's with you, anyway?"

"Sorry. I've just been jotting something down, you know, a bit of verse... little session with the old Muse, as it were..." he said dreamily.

"What's with this Muse news—are you turning poetaster or something?" Emily demanded.

"No, nothing like that. But, after all, you know, I've been thinking... once EMSA has drained the Amoeba-Men of war information and traded them off to Saturn for a peace treaty, there'll probably be all sorts of ceremonies and celebrations in my honor, you know."

"*Oh?* Your honor, eh?" Emily said. If Ajax had not been so Muse-smitten, he might have noted a dangerous tone in the voice of his bride-to-be.

"Well, yes," he said modestly. "After all, you know... Savior of Civilization and all that sort of rot. Well... I imagine the President of the Solar Council will want to hang the old *Croix de Pax* around my neck, and there'll be an infernal round of banquets and speeches and cheering millions in torchlit processions, chanting my name. All that sort of thing. Well, I've been thinking..."

"I'd like to hang something on you, myself," Emily said sweetly, "and it's not the *Croix de Pax*. But go ahead, get it off what you laughingly refer to as your mind. What's the big idea *this* time?"

He cleared his throat. "Nothing, really. But when I enter the Council Hall—crash of trumpets, guidons dipped, arch of swords you know—wearing my dress uniform of gold and purple, with a big crimson cape trimmed (I thought, maybe) with snowy ermine—I think it would be nice if the assembled thousands would-well burst into song, perhaps, you know... a bit of an anthem?"

"Go on, Ajax..."

He cleared his throat self-consciously.

"Well, then, here goes—just a rough draft, you understand, very rough. Kind of along this line... to the tune of 'Rule Britannia'... always been fond of that song."

Emily snorted.

"Come on, Ajax, stop stalling. Let's hear it!"

"Right-oh... Here goes, then... very rough you understand... hum de dum de dum dum DUM..."

"Rule, Ajaxia!"

"Ajaxia—rule the Void!"

"Of your Beloved Sovereign, the Ajaxians never, never will be devoid! (last line needs a little work; doesn't quite scan, you know—have to see about getting a Poet Laureate for the Royal Court to handle this kind of thing) Rule Ajaxia! Hum hum tee tum tee tum..."

Ajax's voice rose in a wavering baritone and Emily and the Wuj exchanged a long, mutually

commiserating glance. Then Emily's expression softened. She regarded Ajax fondly. She began to sing along softly.

The Wuj watched, listened, winced, then shrugged with all eight shoulders. His reedy, piping voice joined them, and the three citizens of the Royal and Independent Kingdom of Ajaxia sang, as the planetoid-ship hurtled on through interplanetary space, their song beating out against the blazing stars:

"Rule, Ajaxia!

Ajaxia—rule the Void! Of your Beloved Sovereign, the Ajaxians never, never will be devoid!

Rule, Ajaxia..."