

## THE PLANET WRECKERS

1

In his shabby room in the formerly elegant hostelry known as the Grand Atumpquah Palace, Jack Waverly pulled the coarse weave sheet up about his ears and composed himself for sleep.

Somewhere, a voice whispered. Somewhere, boards creaked. Wind muttered around the loosely fitted window, rattling it in its frame. The pulled-down blind clacked restlessly. In the room above, footsteps went three paces; clank; back three paces; clank . . .

Drat the fellow, Waverly thought. Why doesn't he stop rattling his chains and go to bed? He turned on his other side, rearranged the pillow of the consistency of bagged sawdust. Beyond the partition, someone was whistling a strange, unmelodic tune. It was hot in the room. The sheet chafed his neck. Next door, voices muttered with a note of urgency. Waverly made out the words magma and San Andreas fault.

"Geology, at ten minutes past midnight?" he inquired of the mottled wallpaper. Above, bedsprings squeaked faintly. Waverly sat up, frowning at the ceiling. "I thought the clerk said he was putting me on the top floor," he said accusingly. He reached for the telephone on the bedside table. A wavering dial tone went on for five seconds, then cut off with a sharp click.

"Hello?" Waverly said. "Hello?"

The receiver was dead against his ear.

"If this weren't the only hotel in town," Waverly muttered.

He climbed out of bed, went to the high window, raised the roller shade, looked out on a view of a brick wall ten feet away. From the window next door, a pattern of light and shadow gleamed against the masonry.

Two silhouettes moved. One was tall, lean, long-armed, like a giant bird with a crested head and curious wattles below a stunted beak. The other resembled an inverted polyp, waving a dozen arms tipped with multifingered hands, several of which clutched smoking cigars.

"Trick of the light," Waverly said firmly. He closed his eyes and shook his head to dispel the illusion. When he looked again, the window was dark.

"There, you see?" He raised the sash and thrust his head out. Moonlight gleamed on a bricked alley far below. A rusted fire escape led upward toward the roof. Leaning far out, Waverly saw the sill of the window above.

"No lights up there," he advised himself. "Hmmm."

Faintly, he heard a dull rattle of metal, followed by a lugubrious groan.

"True, it's none of your business," he said. "But inasmuch as you can't sleep anyway . . ." Waverly swung his legs over the sill onto the landing and started up.

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As he reached the landing above, something white fluttered out at him. Waverly shied, then saw that it was a curtain, billowing out from an open window. Abruptly, a feminine sob sounded from within. He poked his head up far enough to peer over the window sill into darkness.

"Is, ah, something the matter?" he called softly. There was a long moment of silence.

"Who's there?" a dulcet female voice whispered.

"Waverly, madam, Jack Waverly. If I can be of any help?"

"Are you with the Service?"

"I'm with ISLC," Waverly said. He pronounced it as a word "islick." "That's International Sa-"

"Listen to me, Wivery," the voice was urgent. "Whatever he's paying you, I'll double it! And you'll find the Service not ungrateful."

"No payment is necessary for aid to damsels in distress," Waverly returned. "Er, may I come in?"

"Of course! Hurry up, before one of those slimy Gimps steps out for a stroll up the wall and sees you!"

Waverly climbed quickly in through the window. The room, he saw, was a mere garret, cramped under a low ceiling. It appeared to contain no furniture other than a dimly seen cot against one wall. A vague form moved a willowy arm there. Waverly moved toward it.

"You don't have a molecular disassociator with you?" the melodious voice queried urgently. "There's not much time left."

"Ah . . . no, I'm afraid not. I-"

"They mean to strap me to my own twifler, set the warperators at two and a half busters and aim me toward Neptune," the feminine voice went on breathlessly. "Can you imagine anything more brutal?"

Waverly groped forward. "Now, now, my dear. Don't be upset."

As he reached the cot, his hand fell on stout links looped around the foot rail.

He fumbled, encountered the blocky shape of a hefty padlock.

"Good lord! I thought-that is, I didn't actually think-"

"That's right. Chained to the bed," there was a slight quaver in the voice.

"B-but-this is preposterous! It's criminal!"

"It's an indication of their desperation, Wivery! They've gone so far now that nothing short of the most drastic measures can stop them!"

"I think this is a matter for the authorities," Waverly blurted. "I'll put a call through immediately!"

"How? You can't get through."

"That's right; I'd forgotten about the phone."

"And anyway-I am the authorities," the soft voice said in a tone of utter discouragement.

"You? A mere slip of a girl?" Waverly's hand touched something cool, with the texture like nubbly nylon carpeting.

"I weigh three hundred and seventy pounds, Earth equatorial," the voice came back sharply. "And we Vorplischers happen to be a matriarchal society!"

A pale shape stirred, rose up from the rumpled bedding. A head the size of a washtub smiled a foot-wide smile that was disconcertingly located above a pair of limpid brown eyes. A hand which appeared to be equipped with at least nine fingers reached up to pat a spongy mass of orange fibers matted across the top of the wide face. Waverly broke his paralysis sufficiently to utter a sharp yelp.

"Shhh!" the sweet voice issued from a point high in the chest. "I appreciate your admiration, but we don't want those monsters to hear you!"

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2

"Fom Berj, Detective Third Class, at your service," the creature soothed Waverly. "I'm not supposed to reveal my identity, but under the circumstances I think it's only appropriate."

"D-delighted," Waverly choked. "Pardon my falling down. It's just that I was a trifle startled at your, ah, unusual appearance."

"It's perfectly understandable. A neat disguise, don't you think? I made it myself."

Waverly gulped. "Disguise?"

"Of course. You don't think this is my natural look do you?"

Waverly laughed shakily. "I must confess that what with all this creeping around in the dark, I was ready to leap to conclusions." He peered at the massive form, more clearly visible now that his eyes accommodated to the dim light. "But what are you disguised as, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Why, as a native, of course. The same as you are, silly."

"As I am what?"

"Disguised as a native."

"Native of where?"

"Of this planet."

"Oh, of course." Waverly was backing toward the window. "Of this planet. A native . . . I take it you're from some other planet?"

The detective laughed a rippling laugh. "You have a jolly sense of humor, Wivery. As if a Vorplischer were native to this patch of wilderness."

"And the people who chained you up-are they from, ah, Vorplisch, too?" Waverly made conversation to cover his retreat.

"Don't be absurd. They're a mixed bag of Broogs, Limpicos, Erwalts, Glimps and Pud knows what-all." Fom Berj rattled her manacles. "We'd better do something about these chains in a hurry," she added briskly.

As Waverly reached the window, an eerie, purplish glow sprang up outside, accompanied by a shrill warbling. Waverly retreated hastily.

"I think that's them arriving with my twifler now," Fom Berj said tensely. "It's a brand-new model, equipped with the latest in antiac gear and the new infinite-capacity particle ingesters. You can imagine what that means! My frozen corpse will be three parsecs beyond Pluto before my Mayday beep clears the first boost station."

"Frozen corpse? Pluto?" Waverly gobbled.

"I know it sounds fantastic, but disposing of an agent of the Service is a mere bagatelle to these operators, compared with what they're planning!"

"What are they planning?" Waverly choked.

"Don't you know? I thought you were working for Izlik."

"Well, he, ah, doesn't tell us much . . ."

"Mmmm. I don't know about that Izlik. Sometimes I wonder just how deep a game he's playing. By the way, where is he?"

"He was delayed by a heavy cloud cover over Ypsilanti," Waverly improvised. "He'll be along later." His eyes roved the room, searching for an escape route. "You were saying?" he prompted in an obscure instinct to keep the detective talking.

"They're making a Galacular," Fom Berj said solemnly.

"A . . . Galacular?"

"Now you see the extent of their madness. An open violation of Regulation 69723468b!"

There was a sharp series of bumping sounds above. "Better hurry with that molecular disassociator," Fom Berj said.

"What's a Galacular?" Waverly was close to the door now. He froze as something made a slithery sound beyond it.

"A multi-D thriller," Fom Berj was explaining. "You know, one of those

planetary debacle epics."

"What sort of debacle?" Waverly recoiled at a sound as of heavy breathing outside the door.

"Floods, quakes, typhoons-you know the sort of thing. Audiences love them, in spite of their illegality. The first scene they're shooting tonight will be a full-scale meteor strike in a place called Montana."

"You mean-a real meteor?"

"Of course. According to my informant, they've grappled onto a cubic mile or so of nickel-iron that was parked in a convenient orbit a few million miles out, and nudged it in this direction. I would have stopped it there, of course, but I blundered and they caught me," the detective sighed. "It should make quite an effective splash when it hits."

"They're going to wreck an entire state just for a-a spectacle?" Waverly choked.

"I see you're not familiar with the Galacular craze. To be accepted by discriminating multi-D fans, nothing less than a genuine disaster will serve."

Up above on the roof, heavy feet clumped; something massive bump-bumped.

Fom Berj's voice was icy calm. "Now, Wivery, it's true we Vorplischers pride ourselves on our coolness in the face of peril, but **WILL YOU GET THESE DAMNED CHAINS OFF ME BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE!**"

Waverly darted to the window. "Don't go away," he called over his shoulder. "I'll be right back!"

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It took Waverly forty-five seconds to descend to his room, snatch up his sample case, hastily examine his tongue in the mirror and retrace his steps to the attic. He opened the case, lettered International Safe and Lock Corporation, took out a tool shaped like a miniature crochet hook, turned to the lock.

"Hmmm. A variation on the Katzenburger-McIlhenney patents," he muttered. "Child's play . . ." He probed delicately in the wide key slot, frowning as he worked.

"Hurry, Wivery!" Fom Berj cried.

Waverly wiped perspiration from his forehead. "It's trickier than it looked," he said defensively. "Apparently they've employed a double-reserve cam action."

Feet clumped on stairs, descending from the roof. A mutter of hoarse voices sounded in the hall, just beyond the door. The latch rattled. Waverly reached for his sample case, rummaged among the odds and ends there, came up with a cylindrical object. He sprang to the door, hastily engaged

the chain latch just as the doorknob turned cautiously. The door creaked, swung open two inches, came to rest against the chain. A beaklike nose appeared at the opening, followed by a hand holding a gun.

Aiming coolly, Waverly directed a jet of menthol shaving cream at a pair of close-set eyes just visible above the nose. They withdrew with a muffled shriek. The gun clattered on the floor. Waverly snatched up the weapon, jammed it in his waistband, dashed back to the lock. Five seconds later, it opened with a decisive spong! Fom Berj emitted a delighted squeak, rolled off the bed as the chains clattered to the floor. Waverly gaped at the cluster of supple members on which the bulky detective rippled swiftly across to the window. Outside the door, excited twitters, burbles and growls sounded interrogatory notes. The doorknob rattled. Something heavy struck the door.

"To the roof!" Fom Berj flowed through the window and was gone. The door shook to a thunderous impact. Waverly sprang to the window. On the landing, he looked down. A round, pale face with eyes like bubbles in hot tar stared up at him. He yelped and dashed for the roof.

Pulling himself up over the parapet, Waverly looked across an expanse of starlit roof, at the center of which an object shaped like a twelve-foot gravy boat rested lightly on three spidery jacks. The upper half was a clear plastic, hinged open like a mussel shell. Fom Berj was halfway to it when a small, sharp-featured head appeared over its gunwale. The monkeylike face split vertically, emitted a sharp cry and dived over the side. The boat rocked perilously as Fom Berj swarmed up and in; she turned, extended a long, three-elbowed arm to Waverly, hauled him up as something popped nearby. Pale chartreuse gas swirled about the canopy as it slammed down. The detective lurched to a small, green-plush-covered contour seat, groped for the controls. Waverly scrambled after her, found himself crowded into a restricted space which was apparently intended as a parcel shelf.

"Which way is Montana?" the detective inquired over a rising hum that sprang up as she poked buttons on the padded dash.

"Straight ahead, about a thousand miles," Waverly called.

"Hold on tight," Fom Berj cried as the little vehicle leaped straight up. "On optimum trajectory, the trip will take close to half an hour. I don't know if we'll be in time or not."

3

Level at 100,000 feet, the twifler hummed along smoothly, making the whispering sound which gave it its name. Its velocity was just under 1850 MPH.

"Hurry," Waverly urged.

"Any faster at this altitude and we'd ablate," Fom Berj pointed out. "Relax, Wivery. We're doing our best."

"How can I relax?" Waverly complained. "The headroom is grossly inadequate."

"Well, you know the Q-stress engine produces a lens-shaped field with a minor radius proportional to the reciprocal of the fourth power of the input. To give you room to stand up, we'd need a diameter of about half a light-year. That's unwieldy."

"Hmmm. I wondered why flying saucers were shaped like that. It never occurred-"

"It seems to me you're pretty ignorant of a lot of things," Fom Berj studied Waverly with one eye, keeping the other firmly fixed on the instrument panel.

"I seem to note certain deficiencies in your costume, when it comes to that," he pointed out somewhat acidly. He eyed the three padded foundation garments strapped around the bulbous torso. "Most local beauties consider two of those sufficient," he added.

"You don't know much about these locals. They're mammary-happy. And if two of a given organ are attractive, six are triply attractive."

"What are you trying to attract?"

"Nothing. But a girl likes to make a good impression."

"Speaking of impressions-what are you planning on doing about this meteorite? You did say a cubic mile?"

"I was hoping to disintegrate it outside the outer R-belt, if possible, but I'm afraid we're running a little late."

"A thing that size-" Waverly felt the sweat pop on his forehead-"will vaporize the crust of the earth for miles around the point of impact!"

"I hate to think of what it will do to the native wild life," Fom Berj said. "Their feeding and mating habits will be upset, their nests destroyed-" Fom Berj broke off. "Oh, dear, I'm afraid we're too late!"

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Ahead, a glowing point had appeared high in the sky. It descended steadily, becoming rapidly brighter. Waverly braced his feet as the twifler decelerated sharply, veering off. The glaring point of fire was surrounded by a greenish aura.

"It's about three hundred miles out, I'd say," Fom Berj commented. "That means it will strike in about thirty seconds."

A faint, fiery trail was visible now behind the new star. Through the clear plastic hatch, Waverly watched as a beam of blue light speared out from the swelling central fire, probed downward, boiling away a low cloud layer.

"What's that?" Waverly squeaked.

"A column of compressed gases. It will be splashing up a nice pit for the actual body to bury itself in."

A pink glow had sprung up from the surface far below. The approaching meteor was an intolerable point of brilliance now, illuminating the clouds like a full moon. The light grew brighter; now Waverly could see a visible diameter, heading the streaming tail of fire. Abruptly it separated into three separate fragments, which continued on parallel courses.

"Tsk," Fom Berj clucked. "It exploded. That means an even wider distribution . . . "

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With appalling swiftness the three radiant bodies expanded to form a huge, irregular glob of brilliance, dropping swiftly now, darting downward as quick as thought-

The sky opened into a great fan of yellow light more vivid than the sun.

Waverly squinted at the actinic display, watched it spread outward, shot through with rising jets of glowing stuff, interspersed with rocketlike streaks that punched upward, higher, higher, and were gone from view-all in utter silence. The far horizons were touched with light now. Then, slowly, the glare faded back. The silver-etched edges of the clouds dimmed away, until only a great rosy glow in the west marked the point of the meteorite's impact.

"Fooley," Fom Berj said. "Round one to the opposition."

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Waverly and the Vorplischer stared down at the mile-wide, white-hot pit bubbling fifty thousand feet below and ten miles ahead.

"You have to confess the rascals got some remarkable footage that time," Fom Berj commented.

"This is incredible!" Waverly groaned. "You people-whoever you are-were aware that this band of desperadoes planned this atrocity-and all you sent was one female to combat them?"

"I'll disregard the chauvinistic overtones of that remark," Fom Berj said severely, "and merely remind you that the Service is a small one, operating on a perennially meager appropriation."

"If your precious Service were any sort of interplanetary police force, it wouldn't tolerate this sort of sloppy work," Waverly said sharply.

"Police force? Where did you get an idea like that? I'm a private eye in the employ of the Game and Wildlife Service."

"Wildlife-" Waverly started.

"Brace yourself," Fom Berj said. "Here comes the shock wave."

The twifler gave a preliminary shudder, then wrenched itself violently end-for-end, at the same time slamming violently upward, to the accompaniment of a great metallic zongggg! of thunder.



"I shudder to imagine how that would have felt without the special antiac equipment," the detective gasped. "Now, if we expect to intercept these scoundrels in the act of shooting their next scene, there's no time to waste."

"You mean they're going to do it again?"

"Not the same routine, of course. This time they're staging a major earthquake in a province called California. They'll trigger it by beaming the deep substrata with tight-focus tractor probes. The whole area is in a delicate state of balance, so all it will take is the merest touch to start a crustal readjustment that will satisfy the most exacting fans."

"The San Andreas Fault," Waverly groaned. "Good-bye, San Francisco!"

"It's the Sequoias I'm thinking of," Fom Berj sighed. "Remarkable organisms, and not nearly so easy to replace as San Franciscans."

4

The twifler hurtled across the Rockies at eighty thousand feet, began to let down over northwestern Nevada, an unbroken desert gleaming ghostly white in the light of a crescent moon. Far ahead, San Francisco glowed on the horizon.

"This gets a trifle tricky now," Fom Berj said. "The recording units will be orbiting the scene of the action at a substratospheric level, of course, catching it all with wide-spectrum senceivers, but the production crew will be on the ground, controlling the action. They're the ones we're after. And in order to capture these malefactors red-handed, we'll have to land and go in on foot for the pinch. That means leaving the protection of the twifler's antiac field."

"What will we do when we find them?"

"I'd prefer to merely lay them by the heels with a liberal application of stun gas. If they're alive to stand trial, the publicity will be a real bonus, careerwise. However, it may be necessary to vaporize them."

Decelerating sharply, Fom Berj dropped low over the desert, scanning the instruments closely.

"They've shielded their force bubble pretty well," she said. "But I think I've picked it up." She pointed. Waverly detected a vague bluish point glowing on a high rooftop near the north edge of the city. "A good position, with an excellent view of the target area."

Waverly held on as the flier swooped low, whistled in a tight arc and settled in on a dark rooftop. The hatch popped up, admitted a gust of cool night air. Waverly and the detective advanced to the parapet. A hundred yards distant across a bottomless, black chasm, the blue glow of the fifty-foot force bubble shone eerily. Waverly was beginning to sweat inside his purple pajamas.

"What if they see us?" he hissed-and dropped flat as a beam of green light sizzled past his head from the bubble and burst into flame.

"Does that answer your question?" Fom Berj was crouched behind the parapet. "Well, there's no help for it. I'll have to use sterner measures." She broke off as the deck underfoot trembled, then rose in a series of jarring jerks, dropped a foot, thrust upward again. A low rumble had started up. Brick came pelting down from adjacent buildings to smash thunderously below.

"Oh, oh, it's started!" Fom Berj shrieked. Clinging to the roof with her multiple ambulatory members, the detective unlimbered a device resembling a small fire extinguisher, took aim and fired. Waverly, bouncing like a passenger in a Model T Ford, saw a yellow spear of light dart out, glance off the force bubble and send up a shower of sparks as it scored the blue-glowing sphere.

"Bull's-eye!" Fom Berj trilled. "A couple more like that, and-"

The whole mountainside under the building seemed to tilt. The parapet toppled and was gone. Waverly grabbed for a stout TV antenna, held on as his feet swung over the edge. Fom Berj emitted a sharp scream and grabbed for a handhold. The vaporizer slid past Waverly, went over the edge.

"That does it," the detective cried over the roar of crumbling mortar. "We tried, Wivery!"

"Look!" Waverly yelled. Over his shoulder, he saw the force bubble suddenly flicker violet, then green, then yellow-and abruptly dwindle to half its former diameter. Through a pall of dust, Waverly discerned the outlines of an elaborate apparatus resembling an oversized X-ray camera, now just outside the shrunken blue bubble. A pair of figures, one tall and thin, the other rotund and possessing four arms, dithered, scrabbling at the dome for entrance. One slipped and disappeared over the roof's edge with a mournful wowl. The other scampered off across the buckling roof, leaped to an adjacent one, disappeared in a cloud of smoke and dust.

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"Did you see that?" Fom Berj cried. "They've had to abandon their grappler! We've beaten them!"

"Yes-but what about the earthquake?" Waverly called as the roof under him bounded and leaped.

"We'll just have to ride it out and hope for the best!"

Through the dust cloud, they watched as the blue bubble quivered, swam upward from its perch, leaving the abandoned tractor beamer perched forlornly on the roof.

"Let them go," Fom Berj called. "As soon as the ground stops shaking, we'll be after them."

Waverly looked out toward the vast sprawl of lights, which were now executing a slow, graceful shimmy. As he watched, a section of the city half a mile square went dark. A moment later, the twinkling orange lights of

fires sprang up here and there across the darkened portion. Beyond the city, the surface of the Pacific heaved and boiled. A dome swelled up, burst; green water streamed back as a gout of black smoke belched upward in a roiling fire-shot cloud. The moonlight gleamed on a twenty-foot wavefront that traveled outward from the submarine eruption. Waverly saw it meet and merge with the waterfront, sweep grandly inland, foaming majestically about the bases of the hills on which the city was built. The long, undulating span of the Golden Gate bridge wavered in a slow snake dance, then descended silently into the bay, disappeared in a rising smother of white. More light went out; more fires appeared across the rapidly darkening city. A deafening rumble rolled continuously across the scene of devastation.

Now the backwash of the tidal wave was sweeping back out to sea, bearing with it a flotsam of bars, billboards, seafood restaurants and automobiles, many of the latter with their headlights still on, gleaming murkily through the shallow waters. Smoke was forming a pall across the mile of darkened ruins, lit from beneath by leaping flames. Here and there the quick yellow flashes of explosions punctuated the general overcast.

"G-good Lord," Waverly gasped as the shaking under him subsided into a quiver and then was still. "What an incredible catastrophe!"

"That was nothing to what it would have been if they'd had time to give it a good push," Fom Berj commented.

"The fiends!" Waverly scrambled to his feet. "Some of the best bars in the country were down there!"

"It could have been worse."

"I suppose so. At least the San Franciscans are used to it. Imagine what that tidal wave would have done to Manhattan!"

"Thanks for reminding me," Fom Berj said. "That's where the next scene is due to be shot."

5

"The scare we gave them should throw them far enough behind schedule to give us a decent crack at them this time," Fom Berj said, staring forward into the night as the twifler rocketed eastward. "They only have the one production unit here, you know. It's a shoestring operation, barely a hundred billion dollar budget."

Waverly, crouched again in his cramped perch behind the pilot, peered out as the lights of Chicago appeared ahead, spread below them and dwindled behind.

"What do they have in mind for New York? Another earthquake? A fire? Or maybe just a super typhoon?"

"Those minor disturbances won't do for this one," Fom Berj corrected him. "This is the climactic scene of the show. They plan to collapse a massive off-shore igneous dike and let the whole stretch of continental shelf from

Boston to Cape Charles slide into the ocean."

"Saints preserve us!" Waverly cried.

"You should see what they'd do on a Class-A budget," Fom Berj retorted. "The local moon would look quite impressive, colliding with Earth."

"Ye gods! You sound almost as if you approve of these atrocities!"

"Well, I used to be a regular Saturday-afternoon theatergoer; but now that I've attained responsible age, I see the folly of wasting planets that way."

The blaze of lights that was the Atlantic seaboard swam over the horizon ahead, rushed toward the speeding twifler.

"They're set up on a barge about five miles offshore," the detective said as they swept over the city. "It's just a little field rig; it will only be used once, of course." She leaned forward. "Ah, there it is now."

Waverly gaped at a raft of lights visible on the sea ahead.

"Gad!" he cried. "The thing's the size of an Australian sheep ranch!"

"They need a certain area on which to set up the antenna arrays," Fom Berj said. "After all, they'll be handling a hundred billion megavolt-seconds of power. Now, we'll just stand off at about twenty miles and lob a few rounds into them. I concede it will be a little messy, what with the initial flash, the shock wave, the fallout and the storms and tidal waves, but it's better than letting them get away."

"Wait minute-your cure sounds as bad as the disease! We're a couple of miles from the most densely populated section of the country! You'll annihilate thousands!"

"You really are hipped on conservation," Fom Berj said. "However, you can't cure tentacle mildew without trimming off a few tentacles. Here goes . . ."

"No!" Waverly grabbed for the detective's long arm as the latter placed a spatulate finger on a large pink button. Taken by surprise, Fom Berj yanked the limb back, struck a lever with her elbow. At once, the canopy snapped up and was instantly ripped away by the hundred-mile-per-hour slipstream. Icy wind tore at Waverly's pajamas, shrieked past his face, sucked the air from his lungs. Fom Berj grabbed for the controls, fought the bucking twifler as it went into a spin, hurtling down toward the black surface of the sea.

"Wivery! I can't hold it! Vertigo! Take over . . ." Waverly barely caught the words before the massive body of the feminine detective slumped and slid down under the dash. He reached, caught the wildly vibrating control tiller, put all his strength into hauling it back into line. The flier tilted, performed an outside loop followed by a snap-roll. Only Waverly's safety harness prevented him from being thrown from the cockpit. He shoved hard on the tiller, and the twifler went into a graceful inverted chandelle. Waverly looked "up," saw a vast spread of dark-glittering, white-capped ocean slowly tilting over him. With a convulsive wrench of the tiller he brought the Atlantic down and under his keel and was racing along fifty feet above the water. He dashed the wind-tears from his eyes, saw the lights of the barge

rushing at him, gave a convulsive stab at four buttons at random and squeezed his eyes shut.

The twifler veered sharply, made a sound like ripped canvas and halted as suddenly as if it had dropped an anchor. Waverly pitched forward; the harness snapped. He hurtled across the short prow, clipping off a flagstaff bearing a triangular pink ensign, fell six feet and was skidding head over heels across the deck of the barge.

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For a moment, Waverly lay half-stunned; then he staggered to his feet, holding a tattered strip of safety harness in one hand. The twifler was drifting rapidly away, some ten feet above the deck of the barge. He scrambled after it, made a despairing grab at a trailing harness strap, missed, skidded into the rail and clung there, watching the air car dwindle away downwind.

Behind him, a brilliant crimson spotlight blared into existence. Hoarse voices shouted. Other lights came up. The deck, Waverly saw, was swarming with excited figures. He ducked for the cover of a three-foot scupper, squinted as the floodlight caught him square in the face. Something hard was pressing into his hip. He groped, came out with the compact automatic he had jammed into the waistband of his pajamas. He raised the gun and fired a round into the big light. It emitted a deep-toned whoof!, flashed green and blue and went out.

"Hey!" a rubbery voice yelled. "I thought you boobs stuck a fresh filament in number twelve!"

"Get them extra persons in position before I put 'em over the side," another voice bassooned.

"Zero minus six mini-units and counting," a hoot came from on high.

The gobbling mob surged closer. Waverly clutched the pistol, made three yards sideways, then rose in shadow and darted toward a low deckhouse ahead. He rounded its corner, almost collided with an apparition with coarse-grained blue wattles, two-inch eyes of a deep bottle green, a vertically hinged mouth opening on triple rows of coppery-brown fangs, all set on a snaky neck rising from a body like a baled buffalo robe shrouded in leather wings; then he was skittering backward, making pushing motions with both hands.

"Hasrach opp irikik!" the creature boomed. "Who're youse? You scared the pants off me in that getup! Whaddy want?"

"Izlik s-sent me," Waverly improvised.

"Oh, then you want to see the boss."

"Ah, yes, precisely. I want to see the boss."

"You want the feeding boss, the mating boss, the leisure-time boss, the honorary boss, the hereditary boss or the compulsory boss?" The monster snapped a blue cigar butt over the rail.

"The, er, boss boss!"

"Balvovats is inside, rescripting scene two. Din't you hear what happened out on the coast?"

"As a matter of fact, I just got in from Butte-"

"How did the fireball routine go?"

"Very impressive. Ah, by the way, how long before things get underway here?"

"Another five minutes."

"Thanks."

Waverly sidled past the horror, made for a lighted doorway fifty feet away. Above, invisible behind banked floodlights, someone was gabbling shrilly. Two beings appeared at the entrance as Waverly reached it. One was an armored creature mincing on six legs like a three-foot blue crab. The other appeared to be a seven-foot column of translucent yellow jelly.

"Here, you can't go in there," the crablike one barked. "Ik urikik opsrock, you know that!"

"Wait a minute, Sol," the gelatinous one burbled in a shaky voice like a failing tape recorder. "Can't you see he's just in from location? Look at the costume."

"A lousy job. Wouldn't fool anybody."

"What you got, Mac? Make it fast. Balvovats is ready to roll 'em."

"Ip orikip slunk," Waverly said desperately.

"Sorry, I don't savvy Glimp. Better talk local like the style boss said."

"It's the rotiple underplump!" Waverly barked. "Out of the way, before all is lost!"

"I got to have a word with Mel about his runners, they're a little too uppity to suit me." Waverly caught the words as the two exchanged glances and moved from the doorway. He stepped through into a room dazzling with light and activity. Opposite him, a fifty-foot wall glittered with moving points of light. Before it, on high stools, half a dozen small orange-furred creatures bristling with multi-elbowed arms manipulated levers. On a raised dais to the left, a circular being with what appeared to be four heads shouted commands in all directions at once, through four megaphones.

"Okay!" Waverly heard the call. "We're all ready on one, three and four! What's the matter with two and five?"

"Here, you!" A scaled figure in a flowing pageboy bob thrust a sheaf of papers into his hand. "Take this to Balvovats; he's got holes in his head!" Waverly gaped after the donor as it turned away. The noise around him made his ears ring. Everything was rushing toward a climax at an

accelerating pace, and if he didn't do something fast . . .

"Stop!" he yelled at the room at large. "You can't do this thing!"

"It's a heart-breaker, ain't it, kid?" a bulging being on his left chirruped in his ear. "If I would have been directing this fiasco, I'd of went for a real effect by blasting the ice caps. Now, there's a spectacle for you! Floods, storms-

"Here, take these to Balvovats!" Waverly shoved the papers toward a passing creature resembling a fallen pudding. The bulgy being nictitated a membrane at him, snorted, said, "Okay, okay, I'm going, ain't I?" and pushed off through the press. At a discreet distance, Waverly followed.

6

The room the impressed messenger led him to was a circular arena crowded with screens, dials, levers, flashing lights, amid a cacophony of electronic hums and buzzes, all oriented toward a central podium on which was mounted a red and white, zebra-striped swivel chair, wide enough to accommodate triplets.

"Where's Balvovats?" The unwitting guide collared a jittery organism consisting of a cluster of bristly blue legs below a striped polo shirt.

"He stepped over to Esthetic Editing for a last-minute check," a piping voice snapped. "Now leggo my shirt before I call the shop steward!"

"Give him these!" The bulbous intruder handed over the papers and departed. Waverly faded back behind the column-mounted chair, looked around hastily, put a foot on a rung-

"Two minutes," a PA voice rang. "All recorder units on station and grinding."

"Hey, you, back outside on Set Nine! You heard the two-minute call!" Waverly looked down at a foot-high composition of varicolored warts mounted on two legs like coat-hanger wire.

"Mind your tone, my man," Waverly said. "Balvovats sent me. I'm sitting in for him. Is the, er, power on?"

"Cripey, what a time for an OJT! Okay, sir, better get on up there. About a minute and a half to M millisecond."

Waverly clambered to the seat, slid into it, looked over an array of levers, pedals, orifices, toggle switches and paired buttons with varicolored idiot lights. "Don't monkey with the board, it's all set up," the warty one whined at his elbow. "I balanced her out personal. All you got to do is throw the load to her when you get the flash and push-field is up to full Q."

"Naturally," Waverly said. "It wouldn't do at all to push, say, this little green button here . . . ?"

"If you got to go, you should've went before you come in here. Better tighten up and wait. You only got fifty-one seconds and you're on the air."

"How about the big blue one there?"

"What for you want more light on deck? The boys are crying their eyes out now."

"The middle-sized yellow one?"

"The screens is already hot, can't you see 'em? Boy, the greenies they send out to me!"

"I know; this immense black lever is the one-"

"You don't need no filters, for Pud's sake! It's nighttime!"

Waverly ran both hands through his hair and then pointed to various levers in turn: "Eenie, meenie, minie, moe . . . "

"Lay off that one you called 'minie,' " the instructor cautioned. "You touch that, you'll dump the whole load onto the left stabilizer complex-"

A door banged. Waverly looked up. A vast, white-robed being with arms like coiled boa constrictors had burst into the room, was goggling stem-mounted eyes like peeled tomatoes at Waverly.

"Hey-come down from there, you!" the new arrival bellowed. The snaky arms whipped up toward Waverly; he ducked, seized the forbidden lever, and slammed it home.

A shudder went through the seat under him; then the floor rose up like a stricken freighter up-ending for her last dive. A loud screech sounded in Waverly's ear as the warty being bounded into his lap and wrestled with the big lever. He rolled sideways, dived, saw the vast form of Balvovats cannon past and carom off the control pedestal, ophidioid members flailing murderously. Lights were flashing all around the room. A siren broke into a frantic, rising wail. Gongs gonged. Waverly, on the floor now and clinging to a cabinet support, saw an access panel pop open, exposing a foot square terminal block. "In for a penny, in for a pound," he muttered and grabbed a handful of intricately color-coded leads and ripped them loose.

The resultant cascade of fire sent him reeling backward just as a baseball-bat-thick tentacle whipped down across the spot he had been occupying. A dull boom! rocked the deck plates under him. Smoke poured from the ruined circuitry. He tottered to his feet, saw Balvovats secure a grip on a stanchion and haul his bulk upright.

"You!" the giant bellowed and launched itself at Waverly. He sprang for the door, tripped, rolled aside as the door banged wide. A gaggle of frantic spectacle-makers hurtled through, collided with the irate director. On all fours, Waverly pulled himself up the slanted deck and through the door.

In the corridor, the blare of gongs and sirens was redoubled. Buffeted by milling technicians, Waverly was spun, jostled, shoved, lifted along the passage and out onto the windswept deck. All around, loose gear was sliding and bounding down the thirty-degree slant. Waverly threw himself flat, barely avoiding a ricocheting cable drum, clawed his way toward the high edge of the barge.



"There he goes!" a bull-roar sounded behind him. He twisted, saw Balvovats winching himself upward in close pursuit. One extensible member lashed out, slapped the deck bare inches short of Waverly's foot. He groped for the automatic. It was gone. Ahead, a superstructure loomed up at the barge's edge, like a miniature Eiffel Tower. He scrambled for it, got a grip on a cross-member and pulled himself around to the far side. Balvovats' questing arm grabbed after him. He held on with both hands and one foot and delivered a swift kick to the persistent member; it recoiled, as a yell sounded from the darkness below. The deck lights had failed, leaving only the feeble gleam of colored rigging lights. Something struck the cross-bar by Waverly's head with a vicious pwang! He clambered hastily higher.

On deck, someone had restored a spotlight to usefulness. The smoky beam probed upward, found Waverly's feet, jumped up to pin him against a girder fifty feet above the deck.

"A fat bonus to the one that nails him!" Balvovats' furious tones roared. At once, spitting sounds broke out below, accompanied by vivid flashes of pink light. Waverly scrambled higher. The spotlight followed him. Across the deck, a door burst open and smoke and flames rushed out. Waverly felt a shock through the steel tower, saw a gout of fire erupt through curled deck plating below.

"We're sinking!" a shrill voice keened.

"Get him!" Balvovats boomed.

Waverly looked down, saw white water breaking over the base of his perch. In the glow of the navigation lights, half a dozen small creatures were swarming up the openwork in hot pursuit. Something bumped him from behind. He shied, felt another bump, reached down and felt the hard contours of the automatic, trapped in the seat of his pajamas.

"Lucky I had them cut generously," he murmured as he retrieved the weapon. Something spangled beside him, and a near-miss whined off into the darkness. Waverly took aim, shot out the deck light. Something plucked at his sleeve. He looked, saw torn cloth. Below, a red-eyed ball of sticky-looking fur was taking a bead on him from a distance of ten feet. He brought the automatic up and fired, fired again at a second pursuer a yard below the leader. Both assailants dropped, hit with twin splashes in the darkness below.

"Decks awash," Waverly said to himself. "Dulce et decorum est, pro patria, et cetera."

Another explosion shook the stricken barge. The tower swayed. A shot whined past his face. Another struck nearby.

"Get him, troops? Get hiburpleburble . . ." Balvovats' boom subsided. Waverly winced as a hot poker furrowed his shin. He saw a flicker of movement revealed by a blue rigging light, put a round into it, saw a dark body fall with a thin bleat. The spout of fire rising from the hatch on the high edge of the deck showed a white smother of foam washed almost to the survivors clinging to the rail. A gun burped below, chipped paint by Waverly's hip. He shifted grips, leaned far out and placed a shot between a

pair of overlapping, egg-white eyes. They fell away with a despairing wail.

Abruptly, the fire died with a hiss as a wave rolled entirely across the deck. Waverly felt the tower shake as a breaker thundered against it, bare yards below where he clung. The lower navigation lights gleamed up through green water now.

There was a whiffling sound above. Waverly clutched his perch convulsively, looked upward.

"Fom Berj!" he yelled.

A dark ovoid shape settled down through the night toward him. He saw the cheery glow of running lights, the gleam reflected from a canopy.

"But . . . but our canopy blew away . . . " he faltered.

The twifler hove to, six feet above his head. A face like a plate of lasagna appeared over the edge. Squirmy hands, gripping an ominous-looking apparatus with a long barrel, came over the side, aimed at Waverly. A whirring sound started up. He brought up the pistol, squeezed the trigger-

There was an empty click.

"Superb!" the creature above exclaimed, extending a large grasping member over the side to Waverly. "What an expression of primitive savagery! Great footage, my boy! Now you'd better come aboard where we can talk contract in peace!"

7

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand, Mr. Izlik," Waverly said dazedly, trying not to stare at the leathery-hided bulk draped in a Clan Stewart tartan, complete with sporran and Tam o'Shanter. "One moment I was teetering on top of a sinking tower, with a horde of furry atrocities snapping at my heels-and ten minutes later . . . " He looked wonderingly at the luxuriously appointed lounge in which he sat.

"I left my yacht anchored here at two hundred thousand feet and dropped down to spy out what Balvovats was up to," the entrepreneur explained. "I confess I wasn't above purloining a little free footage of whatever it was he was staging. Then I saw you, sir, in action, and presto! I perceived the New Wave in the moment of its creation! Of course, I secured only about three minutes' actual product. We'll have to pad it out with another hundred hours or so of the same sort of action. I can already visualize a sequence in which you find yourself pursued by flesh-eating Dinosaurs, scale a man-eating plant for safety and are attacked by flying fang-masters, make a leap across an abyss of flaming hydrocarbons and, in a single bound, attain the safety of your twifler, just as it collides with a mountaintop!"

"Ah . . . I appreciate your offer of employment," Waverly interposed, "but I'm afraid I lack the dramatic gift."

"Oh, it won't be acting," Izlik handed over a slim glass of pale fluid and seated himself across from his guest. "No, indeed! I can assure you that all my productions are recorded on location, at the actual scenes of the

frightful dangers they record. I'll see to it that the perils are real enough to inspire you to the highest efforts."

"No." Waverly drained his glass and hiccupped. "I appreciate the rescue and all that, but now I really must be getting back to work-"

\* \* \*

"What salary are you drawing now?" Izlik demanded bluntly.

"Five hundred," Waverly said.

"Ha! I'll double that! One thousand Universal Credits!"

"How much is that in dollars?"

"You mean the local exchange?" Izlik removed a note book from his sporran, writhed his features at it.

"Coconuts . . . wampum . . . seashells . . . green stamps . . . ah! Here we are! Dollars! One Unicred is equal to twelve hundred and sixty-five dollars and twenty-three cents." He closed the book. "A cent is a type of cow, I believe. A few are always included in local transactions to placate Vishnu, or something."

"That's . . . that's over a million dollars a month!"

"A minute," Izlik corrected. "You'll get more for your next picture, of course."

"I'd like to take you up on it, Mr. Izlik," Waverly said wistfully. "But I'm afraid I wouldn't survive long enough to spend it."

"As to that, if you're to play superheroes, you'll naturally require superpowers. I'll fit you out with full S-P gear. Can't have my star suffering any damage, of course."

"S-P gear?"

"Self-Preservation. Developed in my own labs at Cosmic Productions. Better than anything issued to the armed forces. Genuine poly-steel muscles, invulnerable armor, IR and UV vision, cloak of invisibility-though of course you'll use the latter only in real emergencies."

"It sounds-" Waverly swallowed. "Quite overwhelming," he finished.

"Wait!" a faint voice sounded from the floor. Waverly and Izlik turned to the cot where Fom Berj was struggling feebly to sit up.

"You wouldn't . . . sink so low . . . as to ally yourself . . . with these vandals . . ." she gasped out.

"Vandals!" Izlik snorted. "I remind you, madam, it was I who took in tow your derelict twifler, which was bearing you swiftly toward a trans-Plutonian orbit!"

"Better annihilation-than help . . . from the likes of you . . ."

"I, ah, think you have an erroneous impression," Waverly put in. "Mr. Izlik here doesn't produce Galaculars. In fact, he's planning a nice, family-type entertainment that will render the planet wreckers obsolete."

"The day of the Galacular is over!" Izlik stated in positive tones. "What is a mere fractured continent, when compared with a lone hero, fighting for his life? When I release my epic of the struggle of one beleaguered being, beset by a bewildering bestiary of bellicose berserkers, our fortunes will be made!"

"Oh, really?" Fom Berj listened to a brief outline of the probable impact on the theatrically minded Galactic public of the new Miniculars.

"Why, Wivery-I really think you've solved the problem!" she acknowledged at the end. "In fact-I don't suppose-" She rolled her oversized eyes at Izlik. "How about signing me on as leading lady?"

"Well-I don't know," Izlik hedged. "With a family-type audience, there might be cries of miscegenation . . ."

"Nonsense. Take off your disguise, Wivery."

"To be perfectly candid, I'm not wearing one," Waverly replied with dignity.

"You mean-" Fom Berj stared at him. Then a titter broke from her capacious mouth. She reached up, fumbled at her throat, and with a single downward stroke, split her torso open like a banana peel. A slim arm came out and thrust the bulky costume back from round shoulders; a superb bosom emerged, followed by a piquant face with a turned-up nose topped by a cascade of carrot-red hair.

\* \* \*

"And I thought I had to conceal my identity from you!" she said as she stepped from the collapsed Vorplischer suit. "And all this time you were really a Borundian!"

"A Borundian?" Waverly smiled dazedly at the graceful figure before him, modestly clad in a wisp of skintight gauze.

"Like me," Fom Berj said. "They'd never had hired me in my natural guise. We look too much like those Earth natives."

"Here," Izlik interrupted. "If you two are the same species, why is it that she's shaped like that, and you're not?"

"That's part of the beauty of being a, um, Borundian," Waverly said, taking the former detective's hand and looking into her smiling green eyes. "Go ahead and draw up the contracts, Mr. Izlik. You've got yourself a deal."