Vandals of the Void

Walsh, James Morgan

Published: 1931
Type(s): Novels, Science Fiction
Source: http://gutenberg.net.au

Chapter 1

Off to Mars

THE message that was to change the whole course of my life came through on the General Communicator about 10 P.M., Earth Time, while we were still within the planet's atmospheric envelope. The interstellar liner *Cosmos*, bound from New York (Earth) to Tlanan (Mars) had lifted from the Madison Landing scarcely an hour before and we were still making altitude when the call came through from Harran.

This was to have been my first interplanetary trip as a private passenger, my first carefree holiday in years. Not that the journey itself held any attraction for me or that I was new to the outer reaches of space. On the contrary.

As an official of the Interplanetary Guard, which is responsible for the smooth running of traffic and the maintenance of law and order in the void between the inner planets, I had seen rather too much of them. Nevertheless I was looking forward to a holiday free from emergency calls, the long restful voyage to the Red Planet and the hope, if time allowed, of a stopover on Venus on the way home.

Captain Hume—a man of Earth parentage, though he had first seen the light on Mars—and I were old friends and I expected a heartier welcome than usual, since on this particular trip I had no official status. As a rule the captains of the interplanetary liners look askance at us.

We mean trouble for them, the endless scrutinizing of passengers and documents and often as not the complete suspension, where the need justifies it, of the skipper's own functions.

I boarded the *Cosmos* early in the evening while the liner was still tilting in the slips. Captain Hume was then in his cabin. His own particular duties would not begin until after the takeoff and in the meanwhile the running was in the hands of the first and second officers.

The first, a man named Gond with whom I had some slight acquaintance, came up to me as I crossed the gangway and told me the skipper

would be glad to see me as soon as I could make time, presumably after I got settled in my cabin.

That did not take long. To one used to the stark simplicity of the Guard-ship accommodation, the passenger cabins spelled luxury. But I did not linger, as my training had taught me how to dispose of my few belongings in the minimum of time with the minimum of effort. Then I made my way in what I judged to be the direction of Hume's cabin.

The *Cosmos* was a new type of craft to me. She was the first to be commissioned of the new giant liners that were meant ultimately to ply to the outer planets, though until the entire fleet was ready she was being tried out on the home run between Earth, Mars and Venus.

She embodied features with which I was not familiar, and in many ways her designers had departed from the standardized plan laid down by the Board of Control in the year 2001, when the first regular space service was begun following on that disastrous business of the War of the Planets.

I had some difficulty in finding my way and once I was stopped by an officer I did not know with the intimation that this part of the ship was not free to passengers. I flashed my badge at him however, that silver model of a Guard-ship with the letters I. P. G. stamped across it, asked to be directed to the captain's quarters. Rather surlily he conducted me through a maze of cross-passages to a stairway and told me that I would find what I sought at the head.

I came out on the observation deck and here I was more at home, for in this part of the ship the original design had not been departed from, I pressed the button on the door that would show my face in the vision-plate on the captain's table and waited. Almost immediately the door swung open and Hume's hearty voice cried, "Come in!"

IT was like coming into another world after the bare bleak passage outside—a warm cozy room lit by suffused daylight from the store-tanks, a room picked out in restful white that some how lulled the senses and soothed the eyes.

In most respects it was like any other skipper's cabin, with the televox, the ground screens of the television, the dial charts and the thousand and one compact gadgets necessary to an interplanetary captain's hand at any hour of the day or night. One new feature however caught my eye, the book-machines racked up on the shelves.

"So you've come along at last, Sanders, and for once other than as a trouble-maker," Hume boomed at me. "Make yourself comfortable. I've nothing to do for thirty clicks or so."

He nodded at the clock above his table. I had been subconsciously aware of the humming buzz of the seconds passing but almost on the heels of his words came the click-click-click of three minutes past the hour. This, too, was a new feature. We in the Guard-ships have another type of clock, one that measures in half-seconds, for when we travel it is at a tremendous speed and our chronometers need to be accurate to the last least degree.

In answer to a question of Hume's I told him something of my plans. My knowledge of the surface of the planets was rudimentary, I had been a dozen times in Tlanan and once to Shangun, the capital of Venus, but these had all been flying trips—literally—and I knew nothing of either land in the way I had come to know my own world.

Hume chuckled. "Mars you'll like," he said. "Next to Tellus"—he meant Earth—"it's the sweetest little planet I know and I've seen some and mean to see more. But Venus—" He gave a mock shudder. "It's certainly beautiful, though I can't abide the perpetual cloud-drift. I like empty skies with the hot sun pouring down."

"I don't," I said. "Perhaps too much work in the absolute zero of space has tempered my regard for the sun."

"You chill being! But all you Guards are the same. Have something as a warmer for a change."

He did not wait for my nod but pressed a button in the wall behind him. A panel slid away and a tray shot out with two glasses on it filled with—pure water!

He chuckled again at my look, then took a small metal box from a drawer of his table. The box held a hundred or more tiny brown pellets, of which he selected two, dropped one in each glass and watched the water discolor as the pair dissolved. When a stream of hissing bubbles rose to the surface he handed me my glass.

"Martian Oxcta," he explained, though it was a thing I had never heard of. "It has all the virtues of Earth whiskey without its drawbacks. Drink up."

I tasted it, just the merest sip. Liking it, I swallowed the rest at a gulp. There was exhilaration in the draught and something more. In all my interplanetary experience I had never tasted the like and I said so.

"You wouldn't. Earthmen don't as a rule. Mars still keeps some of its own secrets, But I happened to have been born there. As you know my wife's a Tlananian, and that counts too."

He slipped the box back in the drawer and I heard a click as the automatic lock engaged. The care he took of it made me wonder about some of those other secrets at which he had hinted and what, if anything, would happen to anyone who betrayed them.

It came to me suddenly, sitting there, that the situation had its illegal side. "Hume," I said. "I'm a friend of yours, you're a friend of mine. Put it that way. This stuff of yours we've just drunk?"

"Yes?" He cocked one eye at me.

"Only this. I'm a Guard. They pick us for integrity, moral, physical and every other way. Should I, knowing what you have, say nothing? There's an Earth-law banning alcohol even on spaceships in the void."

He laughed heartily. "There's not a taste or trace of alcohol in it. Giving it to you transgresses no law in the Universe. Can you take my word for that?"

I nodded. "I know you, Hume."

"Good." And there the matter dropped.

QUITE a little thing, it seemed—then. Looking back I'm not so sure. That odd Martian Oxcta, it appears to me, had something to do with the events that were to come.

We never felt the lift, the *Cosmos* rose so lightly from the slips. Insulated from all sound as we were in the cabin, we heard none of the blare of departure either. Only, the warning glow of the red bulb above the dial chart on the opposite wall told us that New York, the whole American continent indeed, was sliding away beneath us.

In the old days there was none of this gentleness in the take-off. We had not as yet learnt to control gravity with our screens. We could only nullify it, a practice that sometimes had dire results.

We sat and talked and time went on. Soon the call would come for Hume to take over and sling the ship out of the Earth's envelope of air, always a ticklish business. Already he had his eyes on the ship's communicators, awaiting reports from the various control departments.

A shutter dropped in the wall, and a call came through from the communications room. Hume touched a button. The face of the operator glowed in the screen and his voice came.

"Call through for Mr. Sanders," he said. "Televox."

I rose to my feet and Hume caught my eye.

"I'd better leave you to it," he mumbled.

"No need," I said. I knew it didn't matter. He couldn't hear what was said if I didn't wish.

I stood before the screen, my fingers on the buttons that made contact. The surface of the screen flashed the room first of all, that room in Headquarters Building I knew so well. Then the view narrowed, centering on Harran's chair until Harran's face itself, lean, tanned and immobile, completely filled the picture.

"Hello, Jack," his voice came. "Release."

The command might have been Greek to Hume but it carried a definite meaning to me. I released one button, that which intensifies the voice, and clapped my free hand over my ear. Hume could not have seen, even had he been looking, the flat black disk no larger than a penny that I held against my ear.

The moment I put it into position the disk functioned. Harran's voice, which before had filled the room, faded away entirely. The screen itself grew dark. But I could still hear him talking, a tiny voice in my ear, clear and marvellously distinct, though a man standing at my elbow could not hear a sound.

What Harran had to say was startling enough. Two spaceships had come in that night with all communications paralyzed. In each case the trouble had occurred in open space and was preceded by a feeling of intense cold, though the heating apparatus in each ship was working perfectly. Some passengers, indeed, had succumbed to the cold. Whether they could be revived had not yet been ascertained.

"Where do I come in?" I asked. Harran told me. It might be some as yet undiscovered property of space that had caused the trouble. It might—he thought it quite likely—be the work of some alien forces. But whatever it was I was to keep an eye lifted.

"Hold on," he cut in on his own orders. "There's something else."

"Quickly," I warned him. "We're near the edge of the atmosphere now." Once we were away from the Earth's atmosphere, of course, the televox would not function.

Why is beyond me.

"Reports through from entry ports of Venus and Mars," Harran took up again, "state number of craft overdue and failing to answer calls. The Guards are being notified at their stations but to be on the safe side we're tuning in on all, who like yourself, are space-traveling. Use your own discretion but solve your end of the mystery if you can."

"Is that all?" I asked.

The screen flashed up again and I saw him nod. "That's all," he answered.

"Good… "

He meant “Good-bye,” but the last word came to me only as the thin ghost of a whisper. We had passed beyond the atmosphere and were now out in free space.

I slipped the disk back into my pocket, and looked around.

The cabin was empty.

Chapter 2

Sanders Acts

FEELING free of the cabin I sat down to think the matter out. Some space-ships overdue—two others reporting excessive cold though the heaters were working all right—that was all. Yet it was enough to galvanize Harran to activity, enough in his opinion to justify him calling me on duty.

What did it mean? What was that odd hint of alien forces? One felt disposed to say nonsense.

Nothing is nonsense nowadays. Less than a century ago mankind sighed because there was nothing left to explore. Today we have reached beyond the world. We have discovered other worlds or had them discover us—not quite the same as I may some day relate. At least we know that we have much to learn.

We have set foot on four of the nine planets, the other five are in the process of being explored and we are not without hopes that soon the Galaxy may be penetrated by our space liners. Not much when one comes to think of it.

Idle speculation, of course, which took me nowhere. Hume, I must see and talk to. It was clearly a matter of which he should be informed.

I got up in search of him but the moment I sealed the door behind me I turned the other way and went instead down to my own cabin.

Everything was as I had left it. My baggage was still packed. My steward would have opened it and stowed my things away in the ordinary course had I not warned him to leave it alone. There were things in it I had no wish for anyone to see.

I opened one grip, delved down t the bottom and sighed with relief as I felt my hand touch the cold metal of the box I had hidden there. It was sealed and locked but I broke the one and undid the other and drew out the ray tube from its nest of cottonwool.

It was a queer little weapon, six inches long and no thicker than a lead pencil, but it could do deadly work up to fifty yards. I slipped the full magazine of twelve charges, no bigger than match heads, into the hollow butt and slid the catch over. A spare tube and the two thousand extra charges that were still in the box made me hesitate.

There was a little ledge over my bed, One of the supporting girders of the deck above rested on the partition separating my cabin from its neighbor, formed an angle and a dark shelf where the light did not penetrate. I slipped my little box in there, pushed it far back so that no abrupt motion of the ship would dislodge it.

Then I went in search of Captain Hume. On the way up to the control room I slipped my silver badge out of my pocket and fastened it in my coat. A warning would not hurt him. He would guess the moment he saw it and not be altogether taken by surprise.

A light metal ladder—had it been detached I could have carried it easily in one hand—led from the promenade deck to the control deck above. The upper end of it was closed by a bar set into place, charged, as I knew too well from experience, with a current that would give a nasty shock to any unauthorized person who attempted to force a passage.

One of the crew stood guard beside it, a ray tube in hand. It was all more or less show for not once in a hundred trips does the need arise to use it. But routine is routine. The man flung the tube forward dramatically as my head appeared above the level of the deck flooring.

"I want to see Captain Hume," I said. "It's important. The name is Sanders."

As I spoke I kept my hand clutched over the left lapel of my coat. It looked like a purely nervous gesture such as any man might make but it was not. I did it of design, to hide the blaze of the badge pinned to my coat. I had no mind to broadcast my service before the appropriate moment.

THE fellow stared doubtfully at me. "Stay there," he said harshly. I could see him plainer now, as he could see me. A touch of the Martian in him, I thought, though I could not be sure.

The scrutiny no doubt satisfied him of my lack of evil intent for he touched a button on the rail beside him and the bar lifted, giving me passage. The pressure of the button, too, must have set a signal for Hume, for even as I reached the deck level a door opened and a face looked out.

It was Hume himself. He looked by no means pleased to see me. Perhaps from what had gone before he already guessed at the possibilities of disturbance behind me.

"You wanted to see me?" he said. "What is the trouble now, Jack?"

I slanted an eye towards the control room. "You're not alone?" I said.

"Something for my private ear?" he said with a frown. "Well, you can say it just as well out here. There are four pairs of ears in there, you know."

I dropped my hand from my lapel, and the flash of the badge caught his eye. His face went nearly purple at the sight.

"By the Planets!" he exploded. "This is intolerable! No man's command is his own these days."

"Steady," I hushed him. "It's not as bad as that. I've no wish to supersede you. What I want is cooperation. I'll tell you why."

He cooled down at that and I gave him the gist of my communicator message. "I don't like it," he said at the end. "There may be nothing in it—on the other hand there may be a lot. What am I to do?"

"What I'd like you to do, if you don't mind;" I said mildly, "is this. Call me the moment you sight or find your instruments recording anything out of the ordinary. I'd like a chat with any other space-ship we pass. And, of course, if we meet a Guards Patrol… "

"May the Guards fuse!" he snapped. "No, I didn't mean that, Jack. But no skipper likes to think that at any click of the clock he may cease to be master in his own ship. You know that."

"I know. I'd prefer not to take command. I've never done it yet where I could find a skipper willing to work in conjunction with me."

I held out my hand. For a moment he hesitated, then gripped it.

"There will be no trouble between us, that I'll warrant you," he assured. "I'll see you're kept posted and whoever is on watch will have instructions to call you at any hour of the twenty-four if anything appears."

He stopped. His eyes lingered on my badge. I slipped the badge into my pocket. "There's no need," I said, "to advertise trouble before it comes."

He looked relieved. "I'm having you put at my table," he remarked. "I'll see you there the first meal I'm free. By the way, do you want to scan—"

"The ship's papers?" I said and hesitated.

He met me halfway. "Perhaps it would be better if you did. I'll have the purser warned. He's a discreet soul. You'd better confide in him."

He walked back with me to the bar at the head of the stairs and spoke to the man on guard. "Mr. Sanders is to be admitted whenever he wishes," he said and the man saluted. I fancied he looked at me more curiously than ever and I wondered if he suspected my official status.

Parey, the purser, was still in the throes of documentation when I appeared but he took my intrusion in good part. "I've seen you before," he said. "What's it now? Something broken loose?"

"I hope not," I returned. "I'm coming to you in confidence though." I told him much of what I had told Hume.

I THOUGHT he was a little shaken by the revelation but he tried to make light of it.

"You fellows are always alarmists," he said, "particularly the shore-end." It was odd how the old sea-jargon still lingered in speech.

"The shore-end, AS you call it," I reminded him, "is staffed with men who have all graduated in space."

"That's the trouble," he grinned "They don't realize that conditions have changed since they came back to the atmosphere. However, here's the passenger list, shore-compiled, so any errors aren't mine. You'll mark that."

I took it—the crew list too. Nothing startling in either—an average ship's company, an average passenger list Earthmen preponderantly, the minority of Martians and Venusians about equally balanced. One name caught my eye as I ran down the list.

"Nomo Kell?" I said puzzled. "Queer name, that. It isn't of Earth origin."

Parey smiled. "Nor Mars nor Venus either, I'll be bound. Like to see his prints?"

He meant the duplicate identification papers and photographs that are always handed in for checking at the office when an interplanetary passage is booked. Strictly speaking Parey had no right to offer me the documents. They are supposed to be confidential and even had I demanded sight of them he should have surrendered them only under protest. But I think he realized that in my case the more I knew the less harm was likely to come to anyone.

The details were not illuminating. They ran to the effect that Nomo Kell was a Martian citizen, qualification the statutory one of twenty years residence. The spaces that should have contained his birthplace, parentage and so on were bracketed by the one word *Unknown*.

"Queer," I commented.

"Queerer still," said Parey as he handed me the photo. "Look at this and see why."

I held the thing up to the light and looked it over. The colors came out exceptionally well and threw the man's features into vivid relief. The scale at the side of the picture showed that he stood between seven and eight feet in height, a giant of his kind.

His eyes were an odd kind of purple. Even in that color print they seemed extraordinarily alive. His skin, face, ears and hands, was an odd red that gave the suggestion of having been boiled.

But the queerest thing of all about him was the shape of his head, I had never seen anything like it before. It was crested. A ridge of something that looked like horn started a little above his forehead and ran back, as I found from the note, to his occiput.

"Where in the Universe does such a one come from?" I asked. "Is he a freak?"

Parey frowned. "Anything but that," he said. "He came across on our last drift. In talk with some other passengers certain questions about Mercury came up. He flatly contradicted the others' views, told them quite definitely they were wrong, let it appear that in some way he knew what he was talking about. See the suggestion?"

"That he is a Mercurian. But that's nonsense."

PAREY looked at me owlishly. "Because we haven't made that planet yet eh? Too close to the Sun our scientists say, too risky. Perhaps so. Nonetheless it would be easier for Mercurians, granted there are any such, to come to us than it would be for us to go to them."

"We don't even know it is inhabited," I pointed out.

"We don't even know that it isn't," he countered.

He was right there. I drew up a report that night before I went to bed, condensed it as much as possible and took it to the signals room for transmission to Harran. The operator looked it over in a puzzled fashion.

"What the blazes is this?" he asked. "Don't you know all messages must be written in a recognizable tongue?"

"That doesn't apply where I'm concerned," I said. "Send it as it stands."

"Why?" he said, a trifle defiantly.

I showed him why. He stared at my badge with a droop to his lip. It was marvellous the effect that little silver shape could have on the recalcitrant.

I could see, however, that he was still curious as to the language in which the message was written. I did not tell him it was a tongue that had ceased to be a living language on Earth nearly fifteen hundred years ago. He was too young to know that it was only three-quarters of a century since it had ceased to be taught in the schools as a so-called classical language.

I waited until the fading of the helio glow showed the message had gone through and the flash-back brought an acknowledgment of its receipt. Then I went off with the intention of turning in.

I had been but a few hours on the *Cosmos* but in that short space of time my plans had been materially altered. What else might happen before we entered the Martian atmosphere was purely a matter of conjecture. I preferred not to speculate.

Chapter 3

The Lunar Call

I AWOKE to the sound of buzzing in my ears. It came to me that I had overslept, that this was the warning note of the breakfast call. How many, I wondered, would face the tables this morning.

Not many, I fancied. Even in these enlightened days a goodly proportion of folk still suffer from a kind of space-sickness akin, no doubt, to the *mal-de-mer* that once used to attack travellers on Earth's oceans.

However the tables were fairly crowded when I reached the saloon. Either our doctor was not a popular man—there was a fair sprinkling of ladies present—or else he knew his work so well that he preferred prevention to cure.

Hume, heavy-eyed and with his face lined, was halfway through his meal when I appeared. He caught my glance as I entered and beckoned me to a vacant space beside him. I noted as I took my seat that my name had already been affixed to the chair-back.

A Martian woman was my opposite, quite the loveliest creature I had ever seen. She could not have been more than twenty-five and the full glow of health made her fine eyes sparkle and her dark cheeks glow with a greater vitality than we Earth people are used to seeing on our own planet. Strange how, despite their height, these Martian girls seem so wonderful. Her name, I learnt as introductions went around, was Jansca Dirka.

The man who sat a plate away was a Dirka too but it did not transpire whether he was her father or her brother and there was nothing outwardly to show which he was. The way that they wear their age is, to an Earthman, another puzzling feature of the Martians. I have heard it said that they retain their bloom right to the very last, then fade and die almost in a night.

Knowing Hume's leaning towards his wife's folk I was not surprised to find I was the only Tellurian at the table. I had expected more

Martians if anything. Instead the remaining four were Venusians, those quaint, not unlovable people, who somehow remind one almost equally of a bird and a butterfly.

Father, mother and two daughters they were, the latter three very interested in everything strange and new, yet with an interest that one felt was purely evanescent. That, I am told, is the impression one always receives on first making contact with Venusians. How far from true of the race as a whole it is may be judged from the fact that it was the Venusians who first discovered for us the practically inexhaustible deposits of rolgar on our moon.

Rolgar, as everyone knows nowadays, is the substance—one can hardly call it a mineral—without which space-flying could not have attained its present ease and safety. The Venusian himself was an official of the Rolgar Company, he told me, and was bound for the Archimedes Landing on the Moon with a party of Earth miners. His wife and daughter were stopping over with him. "No place for women," I hazarded.

"Not such a wilderness as used to be imagined," he answered me. "Little troubles to be faced—due to variations of pressure and extremes of temperature but on the whole quite a change for short period."

His wife and daughters seemed anxious to sample the new experience as all women, no matter what their planet, welcome a novel sensation. Mir Ongar himself—such was his name—had paid more than one visit to our satellite, so counted himself something of an authority on it.

HUME rose from his seat in the midst of our talk, gave me a careless nod, then as he came round the back of my chair dropped a whispered word in my ear. "Control room as soon you're ready," he said.

I could have lingered there at the table merely for the sake of stealing glances at Jansca Dirka but something in Hume's look more than his speech made me imagine an urgency behind his parting words. Also, oddly now I come to think of it, I had a wish to see what Nomo Kell looked like in the flesh.

As I came out onto the promenade deck I glanced through the quartzite windows. We were veering in now towards the Moon and its disk was beginning to fill the void ahead of us. The Earth behind was dwindling, though its size was still considerable. I judged we had not yet reached the midpoint gravity, for an odd quiver of the hull showed the propulsive power of the rolgar engines was still on. In a little they would be cut off and we could use the Moon's attraction to draw us onward until it became necessary to counteract the pull and decelerate.

"A light-message for you," said Hume as I entered. He took an envelope from the drawer and handed it to me. "I thought it better not to mention the matter at table. One never knows."

Cautious, extra cautious man. Well, better that than a loose-lipped babbler. I spread the flimsy out in front of me and translated as I read. Though it came over Harran's signature it was merely an acknowledgment of my overnight report, with the added note that if in the event of a Guard's ship being handy when anything untoward occurred I need not interrupt my holiday but could hand over investigation to the patrol.

"Formal acknowledgment of my last night's report merely," I said offhandedly to Hume.

"I thought as much," was his comment. "Though if more of these messages keep coming and going our operators will be getting headaches. It's a code none of them has handled before."

"If they'd lived a century ago," I said a mite incautiously, "it would have been child's play for them to read it."

He flashed a glance at me. "A dead language," he remarked and said no more about it.

"By the way," I asked, not that it mattered much, but it gave him something new to think about, "these Dirkas—who are they?"

"They're friends of my wife and myself. Dirka himself—her father—is a Director of the Martian Canal Company. The girl is nothing. Being a Martian woman she need not work for a living."

That, from an Earth-man, was a subtle jibe at conditions on his own planet or rather the planet of his race. I passed it by, however. There was nothing to be gained by retorting that on Earth many women preferred to work.

He eyed me curiously. "Sanders, how old are you?"

"Thirty-three," I said. "Why?"

"And unmarried as yet," he went on. "Well, there's time and, friend of mine, by the comet's tail, the best I wish you is no worse luck than I had myself."

I grinned. Thoughts of love had never come to me. Even now they seemed as remote in thought as Alpha Centauri was in fact.

He ran on. "I suppose you have the whole ship's company more or less neatly taped by now."

"No need of that," I returned."There's only one person aboard this ship that I'm interested in and that only as a matter of curiosity."

"Who?" he said with a lift of the eyebrows. "I had no idea we were harbouring any interesting personages—from your point of view—this trip."

"Nomo Kell," I said.

He drew his eyebrows together at that, as though the name seemed familiar, yet he could not quite place it. Briefly I described the fellow to him.

"Queer," he remarked. "It strikes something in my memory, something I wish I could recall clearly," he explained. "I can't, though. Some legend of my wife's people."

"Perhaps the other Martians on board?" I hazarded.

He shook his head. "They would not know," he said quite definitely but did not explain why.

AS I passed back along the promenade deck, I met Nomo Kell himself for the first time in the flesh. It was well that I had been warned of his appearance. Had I come upon him without foreknowledge of what I would see I don't quite know how it would have affected me. Yet he was not fearsome. It was the utter unexpectedness of him that astounded.

Nomo Kell's print had flattered him. Leave out the flaring purple of his magnetic eyes, the crested abnormality of his head—size of his body apart—and there was little to differentiate him from the ordinary planetarian.

But seen now, walking within a few paces of me, I sensed something else. A force, perhaps—a radiation. I could not tell.

He gave me a fleeting incurious glance and passed by. I might have stood there staring after him but for a voice in my ear and the touch of a hand on my arm.

"You find him interesting, Mr. Sanders?"

It was Jansca Dirka at my elbow. I reddened. I had been caught in an act of rudeness, no light matter when one is likely to tramp on touchy interplanetary conventions.

"And a little more, Miss Dirka," I said, using the Earth style of address. I have never quite accustomed myself to the long string of phrases, flowery and complimentary, which these Martians employ.

"I thought you would," she said gravely. "You have noticed his steps?"

I had not. I hardly gave them a glance until she drew my attention to them. Now I saw that he walked with a peculiar mincing gait, a sort of gingerliness, as though each movement was carefully timed and measured.

"He seems," I said slowly as it dawned on me, "to be deliberately shortening his steps, walking with extra care as we would on the Moon's surface."

"Exactly. The *Cosmos* is adjusted Earth gravity. We travelled Martians and Venusians have become so accustomed to its variations from our planets that our reaction is automatic, But he… " She flung out her hands with a curiously expressive gesture.

I caught the flash of the idea in mind. "It looks almost," I said, still a trifle doubtfully, "as though he was used to a larger planet than we."

"It looks like that," she mimicked. "I might even suggest it would be well not to let such an idea—or its opposite—lie dormant in the back of your mind."

With that and a tingling glance she turned and was gone, leaving me wondering. What did she see or know I could or did not? What indeed made her suggest anything of the sort to me? No hint of my office, I could swear, escaped Hume. I could only think I somehow, uncannily, she may have guessed.

Our engines shuddered, a shiver ran through our whole framework, then died away. We had passed the midpoint of gravity, and with our motors off were utilizing the Moon's pull to draw us rapidly towards her.

Chapter 4

The Wreck in the Void

I have spoken of the Moon as airless, yet that is not strictly correct. Habit, however, is a hard thing to cast aside, and one clings stubbornly to old beliefs even in the face of the newer facts. Our satellite, as we have known for centuries, lacks atmosphere such as we possess, and its day and night, each of fourteen Earth days in duration, swing from torrid heat in the one to the extremes of perishing cold in the other. But in the rifts and hollows and the abysmal depths of the craters, air still lingers, tenuous and all but unbreathable to us, but air nevertheless. Such life as there exists on the Moon lives mostly underground, or did until the advent of the rolgar mines.

To counteract the extremes of heat and cold, and secure a constant supply of air at earth pressure, huge buildings have been erected. Each mine is practically an enclosed city, entered through airlocks. It was on one of these airlocks that the *Cosmos* had come to rest; one of her ports was jointed to a port in the airlock, forming a sort of enclosed gangway, through which passengers ascended and descended.

Apart from the mechanical ingenuity that aided the embarkation there was nothing to see of any interest. Give me a landing in the free air every time. From where I stood I could see through the quartzite side of the promenade deck above and beyond the airlock, while I was able at the same time to run a speculative eye over the passengers leaving and arriving. Those taking off were mostly Earth miners, rough, rugged fellows, with an odd Earth official with them, and, of course, my acquaintances the Venerian family of Mir Ongar.

There were not so many coming on board. Mostly Venerians. A couple of those ubiquitous planet-trotting Martians with them to add a leaven to the dish. We took on no Earth-men. When one comes to think of it, it is a curious thing that the Moon should hold least attraction for those who are closest to it. If it had not been for the Venerians and their discovery of rolgar I believe we would have been content for ever to sheer past it into

space. As it is the Moon—or rather its rolgar mines—gives us the means of holding the balance of peace in the Universe; the sinews of interplanetary war are to a great extent ours, and none can fight should we decide to cut off supplies.

Our stay on the Moon was only of short duration. An airport inspector or two donned oxygen helmets and made a thorough examination of our landing gear and gravity screen apparatus before passing us out. As soon as that was done and our clearance had been issued our port was sealed and disconnected from that of the airlock, the signal given, and the lift begun.

Beneath us Archimedes dropped away until the black circle of its crater was no more than a shrivelled ring. Mars flared up redly ahead, though presently we shifted our course a little as though we meant to leave it to our left. This however, was due merely to the fact that we were in a sense, circle sailing. It must not be forgotten that if we were travelling in space, so too was the planet of our destination. Our course was set exactly for that point in the void, where, according to our astronomical charts, our orbit, if one can use the expression, and that of Mars should intersect. A ticklish job, you must understand, is this of space navigation, requiring a remarkable intricacy of calculation and cross-calculation.

So the days passed. Once we sighted a meteor heading, it seemed, directly for us, but our repeller ray sent it rocketing off on a new path.

A finger touching me lightly on the shoulder brought me with a jerk out of the depths of sleep. I touched a button at the wall side of my bunk and the light tube above my head glowed brightly. I blinked. Gond, the first officer, was standing beside me. Seeing that I was awake:

"Quickly, Mr. Sanders," he said in a half-whisper. "The skipper wants you."

"What is it?" I queried.

"I don't know. Something I sighted out in the void of space. It was my control hour. I called him, he sent me to call you."

"I'm coming." I slid out of my bunk. "I'll be there—control room, I suppose?—as soon as I can dress."

"Quickly, quickly," he breathed again. He knew not what it was he had sighted—some wandering mystery of space, no doubt—but that the urgent need of my presence had been impressed on him deeply enough it was plain to see.

"I won't waste a minute," I said. "You can go back. I'll follow almost on your heels."

Indeed, I was half dressed before the door shut on him. A Guard sleeps often in his clothes; when he does not he can get into them with a minimum loss of time.

It wanted two seconds to the minute I had allowed myself when I slipped through the door in my turn, fastening buttons as I went. At that hour no one save the officers and crew was likely to be about; I need not fear that, half-clad, I would run into any of the passengers.

Hume himself awaited me, dressed only in tunic and shorts. The control room was warm enough to make up for any deficiencies of costume.

"What is it?" I asked the moment I stood beside him. He did not reply but motioned me to the screen that communicated with our look-out "eyes." The screen darkened momentarily, then flashed into light as the beam from our searchlight shot out and picked up the object that had occasioned the alarm.

For some seconds I was not quite sure what it was. Possibly because it was drifting towards us end on, I thought for a moment that it was a meteor, but the slowness of its approach should have warned me from the start that it was not that at all. Then as we swung round and I could see it broad-side on it looked more like a space-flier. That indeed was what I would have felt satisfied it was but for the absence of lights on board. A long cigar-shaped object, tapering to a point at one end, made blunt and warty at the other by the discharge tubes that clustered there.

"Can you get her name?" Hume whispered to me.

I could not. But I made sundry adjustments to the scale knobs at the side of the screen and the projection of the space-flier seemed suddenly to leap forward and become closer.

With some little difficulty I at last picked out her name. "M-E 75 A/B," I read from the line painted near her prow.

"Mars-Earth," Hume amplified. "Carrying A and B class traffic, passengers and freight. Um. This is your job, Sanders, I think. I wonder what's gone dead in her?"

"That's yet to learn. How did you pick her up?"

"Our locator positioned her long before we were able to see her. We—Gond, that is—thought it was another meteorite. But you see it isn't."

He paused and looked at me.

"Sanders," he said abruptly, "I am in your hands. What am I to do?"

"I'd like a look at her, a closer one, if I may. Can we lie alongside?"

"We can board her if you wish."

"I'd better. I wish you'd give the orders."

He threw me a smile at that. This big bluff man had his weakness, and I played on it that night, partly from a sense of courtesy, partly because it was policy. As long as I did not interfere with his command, just so long as I asked him as favours what I was entitled to order or demand, he was my grateful warm-hearted friend. Something of his appreciation of my consideration, my care not to humiliate him before his own officers showed in his face. I left it to him to give instructions, and set myself to watch the craft itself. We had veered a little, our speed was slackening, yet we would have to move round in a wide circle before, perhaps in another half-hour, we could come back and sheer in beside the stranger craft. Our engines, which had for a while been silent—for in free space once a certain pace is reached impetus and freedom from friction carry us onward—took up an odd pulsation, just enough to steady us.

Momentarily I lost sight of the derelict, picked her up again and again from all sorts of odd angles as the movable "eye" mounted on our prow swung round as we altered our course. Then abruptly I saw the length of the derelict looming large beside us, a black bulk that almost filled the vision screen. Came there a slight jar and I realized that our attractors had caught and held her.

Word came up from the port control that we were connecting and that our air-tight extension had been sealed against the derelict's nearest port.

As I turned away from the vision screen Hume caught my arm.

"Can I come?" he whispered in my ear. "I'm interested… "

I nodded. "Certainly. I'd like a witness, and someone to check my own observations. What are her tests?"

He spoke into a tube, then turned to me. "Normal interior air pressure," he reported. "Temperature 28 degrees Fahrenheit."

I whistled. Four degrees below freezing point. Something queer there. Either she should have dropped to absolute zero, or else maintained the normal interior temperature. What in the name of the Universe was holding her constant?

I took down one of the emergency coats from a hook, a heavy fur-lined fabric that covered me from chin to ankle, slipped my feet into the

insulated boots one of our helpers held towards me, and drew them thigh-high. With the coat drawn in and its bifurcations buttoned tightly round each leg I was insulated against cold. I could even feel the warmth of the heater wires in the fabric as the current from the battery fixed to the back thrilled through them. I drew on my gloves and someone clamped on my air helmet, sealing it temperature tight on to the metal collar at the neck of my coat.

Each helmet contained a radio attachment that provided means of communication with each other and with the ship if necessary. I tried mine. It sparked, and a fraction of second later I heard Hume's voice burring in the receiver at my ear. Sealed against air and temperature variations, we could yet converse as we chose.

"Ready, Sanders?" he said, and when I answered in the affirmative he led the way down the direct ladder to the connecting port.

The connecting port, really a long metal tube that could collapse in on itself telescope fashion, had been extended to the wall of the derelict and clamped there. The door the latter's port had been opened mechanically, but the blasts of normally heated air the fans were sending through our craft pulsed along the connecting tube and kept the temperature there from diminishing perceptibly.

The moment we stepped through the open port of the stranger vessel, however, we sensed the change. Despite our heated emergency kit the cold air lapped round us, clutching our limbs with icy fingers. For the moment the grip of it, no less than the inky blackness of the ship's interior, halted us. I had a feeling that the cold was not so much the absence of heat as a sentient thing in itself.

Hume touched the button of the portable light at his belt and I followed suit. The white beams sprang out, filling the place with a light akin to natural daylight.

There was nothing to see there, but then neither of us expected that there would be anything. It was up in the control departments and the living quarters that we hoped or feared; neither of us was quite sure which—to make our discoveries.

The direct ladder that led straight to the upper control department seemed clear, and with my place as an Interplanetary Guard to sustain I took the lead. The trap-door was closed, but it opened at a touch and I climbed into the compartment, then turned to give a hand to my colleague. A moment later we stood together, staring round the cabin.

It was nothing like as modern as its equivalent on the *Cosmos*. From some of the devices, it seemed the craft was at least ten years old. I made for the log book. Search brought it to light in the drawer of the captain's table, and a comparison of dates showed that it had been written up within twenty-four hours. Therefore whatever had happened to render the craft derelict had occurred within the measure of one Earth day.

Both of us had naturally expected to find some trace of humanity in the control room, bodies, if not living creatures. But there was no sign of anyone and no sign of a struggle. For all we could see the men on duty might have walked out the door in as orderly a fashion as though they were going ashore.

"What do you think of it?" I asked Hume.

His voice buzzed with a perturbed note in my ear. "I don't know what to think," he said. "It's weird, uncanny. It's—" Whatever else he was going to say, he pulled himself up with a jerk.

"We can't form any definite opinion about anything until we've searched the ship from control to keel."

"Quite so," I agreed, but as he made a move towards the door I stayed him.

"Let us read the dials before we go," I suggested.

He moved towards me again, and we studied the indicators. The engine dials showed an ample supply of fuel, and the stud had been pushed over to "Stop." No question about that then. The engines had not run down or been brought up automatically. Human agency or something akin to it had been at work here.

Mindful of what Harran had told me, I turned to the heating machinery indicator. It showed that the apparatus was still running. Yet here we were in an atmosphere at present a few degrees below freezing point, whereas the thermometer should actually have registered something between sixty and seventy degrees Fahrenheit.

Curious on this point I turned to the wall thermometer. The glass was shattered, the mercury had vanished. From the way in which the glass had broken it was impossible to say whether the damage was deliberate or due to excessive cold. If it was the latter the control cabin itself must have at one period endured a temperature of at least forty-four degrees below zero!

Hume clutched my arm convulsively.

"What is it?" I asked, starting.

"I thought… I felt," he spoke in a strained voice, "as though someone… or something… had just come in."

I swung round sharply. The door, which a moment or so before had been closed, was now open a space. Even as I stared the gap seemed perceptibly to widen.

Chapter 5

The Sleepers

As a man I am no braver that the rest. I know there are more things in the Universe than we have as yet managed to tabulate, forms of life, abodes of intelligence, that may appear monstrous to us, just as perhaps we appear monstrous to them. But as against this I believe— and experience has yet to prove me wrong—that everything there is must face dissolution sooner or later, that it can indeed be killed suddenly and violently, provided only that one can reach a vital spot.

My courage was oozing from the tips of my insulated boots as I turned towards the door, and I was already aware of an uncomfortable, prickly sensation about the region of my backbone. Nevertheless the fact of another's presence gave me comfort, so, taking my ray tube in my free hand, I swung the door wide open with the other, and sent the beam of my lamp searching down the dark passage outside. I saw nothing. No visible entity appeared. My audiphones, which would have recorded the sound of any movement, however faint, remained stubbornly silent. Only a wave of cold that threatened to bite through the warmth of my emergency coat seemed to flow in on us like a living thing.

"Nothing there," I said in a tone meant to be reassuring.

"Nothing," Hume repeated, and I could have sworn to a faint note of relief in his voice. "I'll tell you what, Jack," he ran on, "it's the uncanniness of this place that's giving us the creeps, that's what it is. The sooner we pry into every nook and corner the better. We're losing time as it is and letting our nerves get the better of us."

There was sound good sense in that, but oh, how I wished we had brought some others with us. I would have given much then to have had a couple of my own sturdy, hardheaded Guards beside me. Something of what I was thinking must have impinged on Hume's consciousness. "It's a pity we didn't bring a man or two with us," he grumbled in his helmet.

"And have them take a risk we don't care to face?" I countered.

"Oh, well, there's that to it," he answered. "Let's get ahead before we start thinking over things."

He tried to push past me, no doubt in the hope that in action he would find a spur to his own courage, but I stayed him. These space-captains may rate themselves as highly as they please, but when it comes to facing the dangers of the unknown it is the Guards' privilege to lead. I think he guessed my motive, for he flung me a whimsical smile, plain to see through the glass front of his helmet.

I shut the door carefully behind us. I was more or less sure now that some unnoticed motion of the vessel had sent it stealing open, but I had no mind in case I was mistaken that I should be taken unawares. If that door should open again I would know of a certainty that there was an intelligent agency at work.

As we traversed the passage to the promenade deck my mind played round what was to me the most significant feature we had so far come across, the utter emptiness of the control room. I could not imagine any officer of the Interplanetary Service leaving his post unless there was good reason for it. And everything pointed to the supposition that the desertion, if such it could be called, had included everyone on duty in its scope.

Our beams wavered down the line of the promenade deck, fell on the chairs spread about the space, and simultaneously we stopped dead, and looked fearfully at each other.

"Did you see it?" Hume whispered.

"See what?" I asked, for I wanted corroboration of the reliability of my own eyesight.

"The people sitting in their chairs… still… lifeless."

So I was not dreaming. Hume had seen what I had seen.

"Hume," I said abruptly, "we haven't thought of it before. We've taken certain things for granted. But there should be buttons about the wall here… lights… better than our own portable lamps. Perhaps after all they may be working."

He swung the beam of his own lamp round, then his mittened hand closed over a stud and drew it down. Instantly the length of the promenade deck sprang into light. I shuddered. Row on row of chairs, most with occupants, met our eyes. They sat as stiff and still as figures carven from wood. Dead, it seemed, without a doubt.

I leaned over and touched the nearest figure, a woman, on the cheek, and even through the heated thickness of my gloves her flesh struck cold. I drew back with a gasping sigh.

"Hume," I said, "this is beyond us. We must know how these people died, if they're dead; if not, what's wrong with them. And that's a doctor's job."

"That's what I'm thinking," he agreed. "I'd better call him up?" He looked to me for approval.

I nodded.

He adjusted his communicators to the ship's, and purely out of curiosity I listened in on him.

"That you, Gond?" I heard him say. "Good. It's Hume speaking. Send Dr. Spence over at once. What's he to bring? I'm sure I can't say. Oh, yes"—I'd whispered to him—"say it may be suspended animation, or cold exposure. That's data enough for him. And, yes, better send two men with him. The most reliable. And give them a ray tube each. They can reach us through the control room. No, nothing yet… of any importance."

I liked that. He was not giving anything away, forgetful, no doubt, that with the stranger ship's lights on and the two craft riding side by side the deck we were on would be plainly visible. Thanks be it was during the sleep-hours, else we would have had eager, excited, curious, perhaps fearful passengers peering at us across the gap from the quartzite windows. I thought of that, thought too what might happen if some sleepless individual began to wander along the deck, saw, gaped, and went off to wake his friends.

"Tell Gond," I cut in in a quick whisper, "to close his shutters on the promenade deck. Else we may be watched. What we have to do may be better done without curious onlookers."

He put that through, and I heard the click as he cut out.

"We'd better wait," I said in answer to Hume's unspoken question. "More may turn on what Spence can tell us than we think." Nevertheless I put in some of the time of waiting by looking about me. It seemed that everyone had been frozen into immobility as he or she sat. The thing itself had come upon them suddenly, for there was nothing either of surprise of horror in any face.

The doctor came with his attendants, stared at the still figures, made such tests as he could, then straightened up and faced us. In the white

light of the vessel's deck I could see his face show blank through the glass front of his helmet. His hand went up to make some adjustment of his audiphone before he spoke.

"Frankly," he said in answer to my question, "I can't tell you what it is. They've been frozen, that's what it amounts to, but several of the characteristic signs are absent."

I guessed what he meant. I'd looked closely for the blue and purple splotches, the other signs of a man frozen to death, and had failed to find them. Frozen they were in a sense, yet perhaps turned to stone more nearly described them. A little bead of perspiration trickled from my forehead down my nose; the glass front of my helmet seemed to be clouding a little; there was a feeling of warmth that I had not noticed before beginning to permeate my body under the emergency coat. Of a sudden the meaning of it came to me.

"Hume, Spence," I called through the audiophone, "It's getting warmer. Can't you feel it, both of you?"

Something akin to a blank consternation showed for the moment in Hume's face; the doctor looked interested, albeit a trifle puzzled.

"Don't you see," I ran on, "this cold's disappearing? The heaters are beginning to make themselves felt. All the time they've been warming up the air, not perceptibly until now. But it's a big lift from forty-four degrees below zero up to the twenty-eight it was when we came on board. That means that from the time this happened—whatever it was—- until the moment we stepped aboard the heaters had raised the temperature a matter of seventy-two degrees, from minus to plus, a tremendous lift. What's more, they're still doing it. It must be getting back to normal now."

"But why," said Hume, puzzled, "didn't the heaters freeze out too when this happened?" He made a clumsy gesture of his mittened hand to include the figures on the chairs.

The answer to that hit me almost the instant he asked the question.

"Simple," I explained. "The heater plant runs in a vacuum. External cold couldn't effect it."

"Of course." His voice was tingling. "I should have thought of that before."

"I didn't until just now." I put my hands up clumsily and caught at the fastenings at the back of my helmet.

"Steady, man, what are you doing?" Hume said agitatedly.

"I'm beginning to roast. Perhaps we can take our kit off now. At least I'll be the first to try."

"But the air," Hume's voice was vibrant with warning. "We got a normal pressure, but there may be something in it, something inimical to life."

"I'll take the risk," I answered. I had seen something out of the corner of my eye, something that looked a mite uncanny. I preferred not say what it was—yet. But it made me think that the air was safe, breathable at any rate.

I fumbled at the fastenings myself, for Hume mumbled he did not want what might happen on his conscience if anything went wrong, and in the circumstances I was not inclined to press him to help me. But I saw the doctor was following my example, though the two men waited to see what their skipper was doing first.

The helmet came off at last and the cool air hit my face. Cool air, not cold. The temperature, as I had surmised, was lifting degree by degree as the heaters struggled with and overcame whatever it was had caused the cold. The air was breathable. At least I could sense no foreign element in it, nothing to account for that abrupt drop in temperature.

In a moment I had stripped my emergency coat, leaving only my boots. They did not matter so much. The doctor was free of his trappings by this time, too. He took one gulp of the air, and looked across at me, then I saw his eyes widen.

His glance had travelled past me to the chair at my back. I whirled round. The woman whom I had first examined was stirring, yes, visibly stirring. Her bosom rose and fell, gently at first, then more rapidly as she gulped in the air. Her eyes opened… wide. She stared about her. Her glance fell on us. One expression after another chased with the rapidity of light across her face—astonishment—incredulity, fear, I thought.

An inarticulate cry, a sort of strangled scream, issued from her lips, and her head dropped forward in a faint. Spence sprang to her aid.

But the little cry, almost soundless though it was, might have been some signal already agreed upon. All over the deck figures were stirring. It seemed that one surprise on another was being stacked up in front of us.

Hume, with his helmet off and himself half-way out of his coat, uttered an exclamation. I gasped as I followed the direction he indicated. A tall man with the insignia of an Interplanetary skipper on his collar

and coat-sleeves had risen languidly from a chair some distance down the deck, coming to his feet slowly, with a bewildered expression on his face, as though he had just been roused out of a sound sleep.

His expression changed as he saw us. Surprise, anger at this seeming alien invasion of his vessel, seized on him. He made a quick movement forward, then came striding down the deck towards us.

"What's… what's the meaning of this?" he demanded. Then a puzzled look came into his eyes and he passed one hand across his forehead.

"How… how did I get here?" he said bewilderedly. "The last I remember was in the control room, thinking it was getting rather on the cold side, wondering if anything had gone wrong with the heaters."

I took his arm. "Captain," I said, "there's a mystery here. With your help we'll solve it. We came on you, floating in free space, without lights, you… your people stretched out apparently dead… as you were just now."

"Who… what are you? From what ship?" he asked quickly, the light of an odd fear in his eyes.

I slipped my fingers in a pocket, found my badge and extended it flat in my palm towards him.

"You're safe… in good hands," I said. "Whatever you have to tell, you can say without fear."

For the moment he hesitated, staring away from us through the quartzite windows of his ship at the black shadow of the shuttered bulk of the *Cosmos* floating a few yards away.

"My officers, the men who were with me… " he said a trifle incoherently, running his eyes down the long lines of chairs.

The passengers were stirring now, coming back to life, all a little bewildered if one could judge from their expressions. The woman who had fainted had now revived, and it struck me that she was the only one of the lot who had shown any sign of fear on regaining consciousness. Could it be that she alone of all that company had seen something? At least I was not minded to leave the ship until I had had a chance of questioning her.

"Good," I said, "your first duty is to your officers. I think you'll find them all here, on this deck." You see, I was beginning to have a glimmer of what had happened, though the precise motive behind it all eluded me. "Get them together, bring them somewhere where we can talk. All that were on duty when… when whatever it was happened."

I dropped my voice an octave, came a little closer to him. "Captain," I said, "Don't look round. But tell me quick, who is that woman just behind us?"

He turned slowly as though looking down the run of the deck. I could have sworn his eyes did not so much as touch the woman in passing, but:

"A Mrs. Galon," he whispered back. "An Earth-woman, she says, though I take leave to doubt it. Why?"

"We'll want her," I told him. "After we've talked with you. But see she doesn't move away. I'd rather she had no opportunity to speak with the others in the interval."

"As you wish," he said deferentially. There was magic in that little badge of mine, a magic that made me proud to belong to the Service it represented. After all, we Guards may hold up schedules, and interfere much in many ways, but it can never be said that we use our power at any time for anything but good. Perhaps that is in the long run the secret of our power.

"Better," the captain shot at me in a whisper, "better get your men to tend her. Mine… I don't know… Everything's bound to be disorganized."

I gave the cue to Hume, and he passed the word to his two men. I gathered they were to cut Mrs. Galon out a moment after we left, shepherd her after us, and keep her waiting in the outer room until we were ready for her. As it was, while the skipper was rousing the watch on duty, the others of us unobtrusively slid between her and the rest of the passengers.

I don't think she noticed it, or if she did she gave no sign. Her interest seemed centred on Spence, perhaps because the was the first of our company with whom she had come in contact, the only one at any rate who had paid any sort of attention to her. That it had been purely medical attention did not, I felt certain, matter in the least.

A moment it seemed and the space-ship's captain came striding back to us, behind him a little straggle of his men.

"I'm ready now, gentlemen," he said, "if you will follow me."

He led the way along the deck, but it struck me in the instant's glimpse I had caught of his face as he passed that he seemed of a sudden to have grown worried and a little afraid.

The captain of the *M-E 75* pushed open the door we had so recently shut, switched on the light and stood aside for us to enter. We went in followed by the duty man, the second in command and the captain himself.

When the door was shut—"My name is James Bensen, am I am captain of this ship," he said. "We are homeward bound from Enghan, Mars, to London, Earth. Crew, sixteen all told. Passengers, forty-three adults, two children. Cargo, Marsonite in bulk. Here"—he flung open a drawer of his table, and drew out a steel box—"here are my papers."

"Thanks," I said, as I took them. He had made merely the formal declaration and carrying traffic that is required of every space boat that is stopped and challenged by the Interplanetary Guard. Before I went further I ran through his papers, found they agreed with his declaration.

"And now," I went on, "before you start your story, it may help if I tell you what I found."

I gave him in detail a sketch of all that had transpired from the moment our locators had picked up his ship drifting free until the time he regained consciousness on his own promenade deck. I was careful, however, not to hint that other ships had apparently suffered in the same way.

His brow knitted as my story proceeded. It was plain he was more perturbed and bewildered than ever.

"I don't know that I can tell you anything much at all," he said half apologetically. "Things were going as usual, I was in control. My second and duty man were with me when I fancied it was getting a bit on the cold side. The indicator showed, however, that the heating machinery was running as usual."

I interrupted. "Can you give me any idea of the time of this?"

He did a brief calculation in his head. The Pause made me realize that he was still running on Enghan (Martian) time.

"It would be the equivalent of about eight P.M. Earth Western time," he said. "The passengers would have just finished dinner, I fancy. I was on the point of ordering the duty men to call up the heater control and ask what was wrong when I suddenly dropped into unconsciousness. When I came to I was propped up in a chair on the promenade deck."

"Thank you," I said formally.

He looked at me a trifle anxiously. "It doesn't help matters much, does it?"

"It's hard to say—as yet," I told him.

"Now the others."

The second and the duty man had much the same story to tell.

"On the face of it," said Bensen at the end, "it looks as though we were carried from here down the deck while we were unconscious. Though," he added thoughtfully, "I can't see how anyone could have existed through the sort of cold that we felt."

"You did," I pointed out. "All of you."

"I'm afraid I didn't put that too well," he said. "I should have said 'retained consciousness' rather than 'existed.' A cold chilling enough to send us into a torpor for some hours should have had the same effect on anything—anybody else, I mean."

"Not necessarily," I said. "Suppose the people—we'll assume that's what they were—who moved you came on board in emergency suits like ours, insulated against cold."

A light sprang up in Bensen's eyes. "You're assuming, of course, that the cold was an artificially induced state but it seems to me that there's one point you've overlooked. Assuming you're correct, the cause of the cold must have been introduced from outside, perhaps in the form of a gas. The biggest argument against that however, is the fact that we are to all intents and purposes hermetically sealed between ports besides being insulated against the cold of space."

"We're dealing with facts," I said a trifle testily, "not with theories. The fact is that something happened here to lower the temperature to such a degree that everyone lost consciousness. The heaters are functioning perfectly normally, so whatever occurred was not due to any breakdown on their part.

"And if you want any further evidence that it was the work of an intelligent agency you have it in the fact that you and the others on duty recovered consciousness in another part of the ship."

THE captain looked crestfallen. "That's true," he admitted wryly. "That being so," I went on, "the point to clear up at the start is whether the trouble originated on board or arrived from outer space."

"You mean to say," Bensen cut in with a light in his eyes, "that there's a possibility that someone on board, some passenger perhaps, was at the back of this? That would appear too patently impossible."

"In what way?" I demanded.

"Cold like heat has to be manufactured," he explained. "You need apparatus and chemicals and so on."

I saw what he was driving at. Even in the fourth decade of the twentieth century science was beginning to realize that cold was not the absence of heat but a state quite as distinct and as readily induced, even though it happened to be at the other end of the temperature scale.

"And what you're working up to, I've no doubt," I said, "is that no such apparatus or chemicals could possibly be smuggled on board. The examination of passengers' baggage on embarking is pretty strict at the Earth ports but how about the other planets?"

"Mars," Hume put in in his deep voice, "is even stricter if possible. No, my friend, you can rest assured that nothing of the sort could have got past the examiners at Enghan."

"Very good," I said. "That's impossible. Remains the other alternative then—that some space visitors half-froze you into a state of unconsciousness then boarded the vessel with some object yet to discern."

"One moment." It was Hume who interrupted. "Tell me why everyone was half-frozen—if you're correct in saying that—instead of being wholly frozen, stiff and stark."

"The answer seems simple enough," I retorted. "The heaters were running all the time, and once the nadir of temperature was reached they gradually managed to overcome the condition. No one was left in the frozen state long enough for harm to ensue."

"But even that's only the beginning," Bensen said glumly. "Admitting we've reasoned rightly up to this juncture, admitting further that by some means yet to be discovered space raiders made a entrance to the ship, we've still to settle who or what they were and what exactly they came for."

"What of value have you on board?"

"Nothing," he told me, "other than our Marsonite cargo and that as you can see from the indicators still shows intact. Looks as if the whole thing was absolutely without motive."

I wondered what, if anything, had been removed from the other spaceship Harran had told me about.

"If I'm not mistaken," I said, quickly "we have a witness of sorts— Mrs. Galon. I think she knows or saw something. Will you have somebody bring her in?"

She came, glancing questioningly from one to the other of our little group. Even the presence of the doctor did not seem to reassure her. I imagine that during the wait she must have been turning matters over in her mind, perhaps finding a lengthening fear beginning to throw its shadow across her path.

Yet she was a woman of character and decision. Before any of us could speak she lifted her head, quite regally and swept us with a glance one could almost call defiant. "Well, gentlemen," she said, "why have I been brought here and kept under guard awaiting your pleasure?" She turned to the one man of our little group she knew. "Perhaps you, Captain Bensen, can explain it?"

"The doing is not mine, Mrs. Galon," he said. "I'm under orders too. We are in the hands of the Guard."

IN such a moment one can imagine all sorts of things, most of them with no foundation in fact at all, I thought, however, though probably I was mistaken, that a glance of understanding passed between them.

"At least in the hands of one representative of it," I said, and bowed.

She looked at me with a genuine interest she had not hitherto displayed, irritation at her detention appeared to have vanished entirely.

"Then—" she said. "Then, I wasn't dreaming. It wasn't a nightmare if the Guard is playing a part in it."

"You saw something," I said sharply. "In those few minutes on the deck in it chair before you fell asleep something happened. What was it?"

"If I said just what I saw or rather what I fancy I saw—noone would believe me," she said a little fearfully.

"No one will doubt you," I told her. "Listen to me, Mrs. Galon. I can tell you something that may help you. I can trust you to keep it to yourself, not breathe a word

of it to the other passengers?"

"Of course," she said. "I won't say a word to a soul."

Frankly I did not believe her. Not that it mattered much. But thinking she was being taken into my confidence she was almost certain to tell me without reservation everything she knew.

"This, then," I said slowly, "is not the only ship that has had a similar adventure. This, however, is the first ship I've boarded and it is my

business to get to the bottom of this particular mystery. If you can give me the slightest help, the Service and I will forever be your debtor."

Flowery, you will say, and so I thought and hated myself while saying it—but something told me she was the type to whom such phrases were meat and drink. Out of the corner of one eye I saw Hume frowning.

"Oh," she said. "We-ell, I don't know if there is much to tell really. I was just sitting in my chair on the deck just where you found me. Of a sudden I began to feel cold. I wondered if anything had happened to the heaters. Then I thought perhaps I'd better go to my cabin for a wrap.

"But I could not move a limb, not even a finger, only my eyes. Why they weren't paralyzed too I can't say. Then there was that feeling of intolerable cold and another feeling on top of it just as if I were sinking away into unconsciousness under an anesthetic. Not actually an unpleasant feeling at that.

"I think I must have been on the verge of going, for things seemed very misty before my eyes. Then the odd thing happened that I'm still not sure wasn't something I dreamt. Two figures carrying someone came down the length of the deck, The person being carried, a limp unconscious body, must have been Captain Bensen or one of the officers. I could see only the uniform.

"But it was the people, things, whatever you care to call them that were carrying the body that—that made me think I was dreaming. Figures perhaps eight or nine feet high, higher than any Martian. They weren't real, not tangible, They seemed just like mist.

"But the most horrifying thing about them was that I could see clean through them. As they passed I could see the side of the deck and the quartzite windows and even a star or two in the black void beyond, just as if they were transparent, made of glass themselves. It was horrible!

"Well, after that I don't quite know what happened. Either I fainted right off or the lights went out: I don't know which. All I can say is that everything seemed to go dark. The next I remember is seeing you good folk round me."

Chapter 6

The Guard-Ship

SHE finished and looked expectantly from one to the other as though she fancied we would treat her tale with derision. Yet there was nothing in it to laugh at.

"Can you describe the figures more closely?" I asked, but she shook her head.

"I'm afraid I can't. I saw only the vaguest outlines and they seemed to flicker."

"As though a faint light were playing on them?" I suggested.

"Yes, that's just what it looked like," she said quickly. "How do you know?"

"I don't," I said smiling. "I merely guessed right, it seems."

Truth to tell all the while she had been speaking one idea after another had been tumbling through my mind. Something about light and its refractive qualities, something about things being made invisible through the light beams' being bent. I had a book in my luggage on the *Cosmos*—one of the old print books—that dealt with problems of the kind.

"I'd better take her disks and prints," I said when she had gone.

The radio operator, who had been with us all the time and whose business it was to attend to such matters, turned to the little wall machine. A compact piece of mechanism that recorded every word that had been uttered and every gesture made in the room since the moment Mrs. Galon entered. It was so cleverly hidden that I doubt if any outsider would have suspected its existence.

The operator pushed a button placed in an inconspicuous part of the machine and a little panel slid back, revealing the cavity from which he took a roll of still dripping film, and three or four disks. The spoken word was recorded at the side of the film, of course, but since it was not always possible to run the film through when one wanted to consult it,

the sound was also recorded on the disks rather after the style of old gramophone records.

"Be careful of that film," the operator said as he handed it over. "It's not quite dry yet. Perhaps I'd better dry it out for you."

"Go ahead," I answered. I could spare five minutes.

I saw Hume shift from one foot to the other, then glance nervously at watch. It was evident he was getting impatient and wondering how much longer he was going to be held up. I tried to hurry things as much as possible.

"Captain Bensen," I said, "you been boarded in mid-space and subjected to a deal of inconvenience and annoyance. On the other hand your cargo shown by your indicators is intact and nothing has been touched here in this cabin. Is that a fair summing up?"

"More or less," Bensen agreed. "Except that you'd better record that there's nothing to show who our visitors were or even that we had any at all."

"Only Mrs. Galon's statement," I cut in.

"Barely visible entities!" he said.

"I imagine," I said mildly, "that it would be hard to explain what has happened in any other way."

"I think," said Bensen with almost my own intonation, "that you will find it hard to explain matters in that way."

WHAT more he might have said can only guess, for at that moment came the low whine of the locator, a shutter on the wall of the cabin dropped and a red bulb glowed to life.

The operator sprang to the television screen, connected the communicator, and with the receivers to his ears took the call. "Interplanetary Guard-ship E Twenty-two calling," he said. "Want to know what the trouble is."

The *E. 22!*—my own Guard-ship! For the moment no one moved in the little control room.

"What shall I reply, sir?" the operator asked abruptly.

It was significant that he looked not at me but at his own captain.

Bensen flashed me a look. "It's for Mr. Sanders to say," he said dryly.

"If I may," I said, "I'd like to answer that call."

"Go ahead," said Bensen gruffly. To the operator he added, "Mr. Sanders will tell you what to reply."

"Do you mind," I said silkily, "if send the message myself?"

HE did not answer but stepped aside with what I thought an ill grace. There is a certain close communion between these service operators that leads them to resent the intrusion of an outsider, more particularly when the latter has the power to ride rough-shod over them.

The change-over did not occupy more a quarter of a minute, nevertheless it was long enough for the man on the *E.22* to show impatience. Even as I fixed earphones over my head the crackle of his signalled questions sounded in my ears.

"Don't be impatient," I signalled back as fast as I could work the button with my finger. Then without giving the *E.22's* people time to think up something snappy in return I changed over to the Guard-ship code. The vision screen beside me was now showing up their control- room, just as ours must have becoming visible to them.

A man was standing near the operator watching the screen that reflected the interior of our control room. It was Glenn Vance, my relief. Recognition came to him almost at the moment it came to me.

I gave Vance an outline of the situation, told him why I was here and waited for the suggestion I hoped he would make. It came without hesitation.

"Pity to interrupt your holiday," the reply clicked in my ear. "I'll take over if you wish."

I signalled delighted agreement.

"Coming over at once," he signalled back. "Will clamp on to your vacant opposite side to the *Cosmos*." The screen went blank and the crackle died in my ears. I turned to Bensen. "The *E. Twenty-two* is coming over," I told him. "She'll probably escort you to the atmosphere's edge, if you wish."

Bensen nodded. "Anything that will get us safely and quickly to our destination sounds good to me now. But you?"

"I'm going back to the *Cosmos* as soon as I've handed over," I said. "I'm no more anxious for delay than you are. Also I have Captain Hume's feelings to consider. I've upset his schedule enough as it is."

"Oh, don't worry about me," said Hume. "We're all in the hands of the Guard nowadays."

I scented an undertone of smouldering sarcasm that might yet burst into flame. I was saved from saying something that might have led to an exchange of remarks for which we would all be sorry later by the glow of the warning bulbs advising us the E.22 was connecting and would want the port opened on signal. It came a second later, a dull buzzing that filled the room.

Bensen gave the order to open the starboard port. Came first the clump of feet up the ladder, then the smiling face of Glenn Vance appeared.

"So it's really you, Jack, in trouble as usual," was his greeting as he gained level flooring and came towards me.

"The only trouble I'm in is that of delay," I said a little sharply. I was not in the mood for banter. "The sooner you can take over and let us be off the better we'll be pleased."

"So?" he said agreeably. "Well, tell me what it's all about and you can hand over at once."

He had already had my resume over the power beam and it only needed filling in. He seemed to find the matter vastly interesting and did not appear altogether surprised. As I learnt presently Harran had sent him a flash, an all-ships call, setting out the situation in outline.

Thereafter we speeded things up as much as possible, and in a little less than ten minutes from the time Vance had arrived Hume and I and our people were making our way back to the *Cosmos*. As I turned to go I put my hand in my pocket and drew out the compact little packet of film and disks.

"You'd better take these," I said to my colleague. "Mrs. Galon's statement."

"Good. They'll do as a check. Well, good-bye and a good journey. I wouldn't change with you anyway. I'm in the thick of it here, trying to unravel this mystery, while you—"

"While I," I said, "am out of it, leading a calm and placid existence."

"Vegetating for the duration," he laughed. "Well, you'll hear all about it when you get back to duty—and will probably want to kick yourself for being out of the climax of the most interesting investigation in years."

"Probably," I agreed.

We got back to the *Cosmos*, closed our port, and signalled our imminent departure to the others.

Chapter 7

A Martian Girl Seeking Knowledge

I SLEPT until the steward at the door filled my cabin with the grotesque wail of the sounder. I came to with a start, dimly realizing what had happened.

After our adventure in mid-space and our return to the *Cosmos* I had tumbled into bed dog-tired. I had locked my door against intrusion, but had forgotten everything beyond that. Since I had slept beyond the normal, and not answered the breakfast call and there was no indication in my message grid beside the door of the time I wished to be called my steward had not unnaturally concluded that something was wrong.

I sprang out of bed the moment the wailing started and made shift to open my door. My steward's face showed relief when I appeared.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Sanders," he said, awkwardly apologetic, "but when you didn't appear for breakfast and there was no message in your grid I thought… "

"Quite right," I told him. "My fault entirely. I'll be more careful next time. What's the hour now?"

"Ten A.M. Earth Western time," he told me. "We change to Martian time at midnight tonight. We're working up to velocity now."

That was news to me, good news in a way, for it showed our trip would be over sooner than I thought. I might have guessed it for the vessel quivered slightly to the steady pulse of the rolgar engines. Not often are they used in free space, save to take off or slow down. Evidently Hume had decided we had wasted enough time over the unscheduled stop last night.

The steward lingered. "If you want something to eat now I think I can manage it," he said hesitantly.

Looking out for an extra tip no doubt, the rascal. Well, it didn't matter much. He'd looked after me well to date and I could do with something to eat and drink.

I made ready while he was away. A certain giddiness that I did not like attacked me from time to time as I moved about. It was nothing much when all was said and done. Nevertheless it worried me. In some ways it was akin to space vertigo, an affliction I dread, for it would mean the end of my career in the Service. In all my eleven years in the Interplanetary Guard-ships I had not been troubled by it and so concluded I was immune.

The trouble passed away, however, by the time my tray arrived. Probably it was no more than momentary weakness engendered by the exertion and the tenseness of the night. The fact that it left me completely, once I had made my meal, seemed to satisfy me on that point.

A knock came on the door just as I was putting the finishing touches to my toilet before venturing out. I called, "Come in."

It was another steward, a man whose face I had not seen before. He had a message from Hume. The skipper was inquiring after me. If I was up he would like a word with me.

"I'll see him," I said. "Where is he? In the control-room?"

In bed, the steward told me. That was rather a surprise. It set me wondering, wondering if there were any connect between my recent giddiness and Hume's indisposition.

Hume was sitting propped up in bed when I entered. He looked a little grey. He did not speak until I had closed the door and we were alone.

"Glad to see you about, Jack," he said then. "I was beginning to wonder."

"Wonder what?" I asked. "What's wrong with you, anyway?"

HE made a wry face. "I thought it was space vertigo when it came on," he said. "I was up before the breakfast call, not much sleep naturally, seeing what we were at during the night. But when I tried to move about, the cabin started spinning round me."

"That's bad. And then?"

"I won't bore you with my symptoms. I got a scare, however, began to imagine space vertigo was seizing me, saw my career snapping off short and all helped to make me worse, I suppose. However, the long and

short of it is that Dr. Spence came down, tested my reflexes, and decided it wasn't space vertigo after all."

"I had a somewhat similar experience this morning myself." I gave him details. "What do you make of that?"

"What Dr. Spence thinks is that we got out of our emergency suits too soon last night There must have been something in the air of M-E 75, something other than the cold, an ingredient with a slightly anesthetizing property. We're feeling the after-kick of it now."

"What's Spence ordered you to do?"

"Stay in till I'm better," Hume smiled.

"I'm feeling that way already and—if you don't mind—we'll have the complete cure in a moment or two."

"Oxcta," he went on. "You'll find the box in that drawer. The lock's a simple switch one. The white button breaks the circuit, the red one opens it."

I did as he told me, drew out the little box I had seen my first evening on board and handed it to him.

"Now the water," Hume said.

When I handed him the glass, "I'm glad you were able to come," he said.

"I wouldn't risk getting out for things myself and I've no mind to let others into my secrets."

"I needed that," he said as he swallowed the last of the draught. Then he eyed me. "I've been thinking of myself solely. You need a taste of it too. Draw yourself a glass."

I did and felt immeasurably the better for it. I said so. He did not answer, merely nodded and still eyed me, a trifle more thoughtfully now.

"Jack," he said, "I've been thinking. Last night put a fancy or two into my head. Yours isn't altogether a pleasant job though no doubt it has its romantic side. Still you may get into tighter corners than I'm ever likely to. Corners of the sort we were both in last night.

"A few of these on hand"—he held out a dozen of the Oxcta pellets to me—"might be valuable. Only I must ask you never to say that you have them in your possession, never indeed acknowledge that you know of their existence."

"In that case," I said, not taking the pellets, "perhaps you shouldn't offer them."

"A time may come when you'll be glad I did. You've seen their effect on me. You've felt it twice on yourself. Here, take them. Call it humoring me if you like."

"All right, since you're so pressing."

"Keep them in a metal box, steel for preference. You've got one you can use? No? Well, you'll find an empty one in the same drawer. It's Earth-made so there's nothing to connect it up with them."

I found the box, and transferred to it the dozen pellets he had given me. A lot of fuss to make about them. After all, if his assurances were to be believed, as I felt they were, they were no more than a remarkable tonic whose constituents were kept a close secret by the Martian manufacturers. The box slid into my pocket.

"As far as we are concerned," said Hume a trifle anxiously, "I take it last night's affair is over and done with."

We still kept to the old Earth style of dividing the day into periods of darkness and light though here there was neither. We saw only the blackness of space with the stars and the planets doubly bright, doubly brilliant with the absence of air.

"The Guard-ship's taken over," I pointed out. "That should end it as far as this voyage goes. But there may be enquiries at Tlanan when we reach there. It depends on what the Martian authorities think."

"At any rate we won't have our schedule upset," Hume remarked.

"I shouldn't think so. In a day or so we'll pass the beat of the last of the Earth Guard-ships, and the Martian ones, I'd imagine, would be more interested in speeding us towards Tlanan for an inquiry than in hanging us up in mid-space."

"I hope so." He did not seem so sure of that. Perhaps he knew the Martians better than I.

A MOMENT'S silence, then, "Well, Jack, if you don't mind clearing out I'd like to get up," he said. "I'm feeling fit to face things again, now that I know it isn't space vertigo coming on. Also the Oxcta has made a new man of me. By the way, use the stuff sparingly. It will lose its effect if you take it too often."

"Never fear. I don't like forming habits, good, bad or indifferent," I told him. With that and a nod I left him.

There were many things to think about. Free though I was of the necessity of probing further the particular mystery of the *M-E 75* I was still

interested deeply. Here was a mystery doubly intriguing. It seemed to defy solution, yet ever and again I had a queer feeling that I was very close to a revelation.

It was not unlikely that contact with my fellow beings might not only clear my befogged brain but perhaps set it working along new lines. For some reason or other there were few about at that hour. My chair had already been marked out for me though so far I had made no use of it. Now I found it without difficulty, dropped into it and began to fill my pipe. That alone of Earth's vices was left me for comfort.

I felt drowsy. I must have dozed, for the next I remember was a voice musical in my ear. I opened my eyes with a start. Jansca Dirka was standing beside me, smiling. I jerked upright in my chair and began some remark about having dropped off to sleep.

"I'm sorry," she said in a voice that held just the faintest trace of accent. "I wouldn't have disturbed had I known."

I drew up a vacant chair beside me. "Sit here," I invited her. I did not believe her statement that she did not know I was dozing. Patently she wanted to talk with me.

She seated herself and half-turned towards me. "You do not mind?" she said.

"Go ahead," I said, amused. "I can see you want to ask questions. What is it now?"

Her eyebrows lifted archly. "Nothing of any importance. I am merely a Martian girl seeking knowledge."

"In that case I'll be happy to tell anything I can."

"I have been reading," she went on gently, "delving into the ship's library of your Earth books. Somehow I prefer them to the book-machines. They are not noisy. One can read them and at the same time maintain privacy without the need of sound insulators."

"I'm glad you like them," I said simply. "I, too, have a leaning toward-sold print. In many ways I like the old ideas. The book-machines seem to lack something. Yet we took them from you."

She frowned. "From Mars," she said thoughtfully, using the Earth title for her planet. "Well, not all that comes from us is good." She stopped abruptly, thinking perhaps of that disastrous War of the Planets that came near wrecking the civilizations of the Inner Planets.

Abruptly she pulled herself back to the conversation. "I found amongst those books an old one by a man named Wells—'The War of the Worlds,'" she said slowly. "I thought at first it was an actual history, then discovered as I read that it is what you call… " She hesitated, looking to me to supply the elusive word.

"A romance?" said I.

"An imaginative romance," she qualified. "I read on and on. Tell me, was Earth really like that? Did men at one time drive animals about?"

"As a picture of those times, I fancy it is pretty accurate," I said. "That is, course, if you leave out the invasion part of it."

SHE shuddered. "To think that Earthmen once imagined we might assume those shapes—the things that came in the cylinders. Octopus shapes. Loathsome things." Then quickly before I could comment, she ran on. "Yet it was you Earth-people who first voyaged to the distant planets."

"I've often wondered about that," I said. "Time and time again it has puzzled me why neither your people nor the Venusians branched out in that way."

"There were many reasons," she told me. "You are a predatory folk, an exploring, restless race. Also you had certain things we lacked. We could fly but we had not that urge to reach out for stars that is your heritage."

In this she was not quite accurate. Interplanetary travel would never have become the accomplished fact it is today had it not been for the discovery of rolgar. True, we found it on the Moon, in our own territory so to speak, though we did not immediately realize its significance.

Even with the improvements Leyton Browne introduced in 1975, which enabled our space explorers to extend the radius of their travels, interplanetary voyages could not have become a commercial proposition. It was only when we made contact with the Venusians and learnt from them the true value of rolgar that we began to make any progress at all.

It is odd to recall that to the Venusians rolgar was practically a theoretical substance, one as rare, if not rarer, to them than radium is on Earth. The Earth, ignorant of its value and its almost incalculable powers, possessed on our moon a practically unlimited supply. Sad to think that it was over rolgar that the first, and we hope, the last of the dreadful interplanetary wars was fought…

"Do you think then"—I switched back to the immediate subject—"that there would never have been communication between us had it not been for Earth-folk?"

"Do you?" she said and for the moment I failed to realize that the question was merely rhetorical. "Do you ever pause to think, Mr. Sanders, whether somewhere in the Universe there may not be others, intelligent beings, like us in form, immeasurably our superiors in intellect, who may even now be reaching out to contact with us? One hears strange stories."

I stared at her. What she was saying ran so close to the ideas in my own mind, paralleled so nearly my own recent experiences that I asked myself if she weren't throwing out feelers. A Martian girl seeking knowledge…

"You *know* it!" I said. I might have phrased it otherwise, have said, "You've guessed!" But I used instinctively the one word that accurately summed up the situation. She knew.

"I know," she said, this Martian maiden seeking knowledge, and her hand dropped comfortingly on mine. "Indeed I am more aware of you than perhaps you think. You see, you have interested me—us. My father and I."

She did not take her hand away. A moment later I had prisoned it in mine. "You know," I said challengingly. "But how much do you know?"

"Enough to startle you," she told me. "That you are no private tourist, that you hold a high position in Earth's Guard-ship Fleet."

"I am not unknown. It is quite possible that many travellers on the space-liners should have seen me in an official capacity, and have remembered."

"That is so," she agreed. "But do not worry. If you wish to preserve your secret, it is safe with us. But as you say that is a little thing, no sure test of the knowledge I boasted I possessed."

She leaned a little closer to me, so close that I could have taken her in my arms without effort had I wished. "Suppose"—her voice dropped to a whisper—-"suppose I were to tell you what else I know, of the things that have worried you and threatened to upset your holiday, of the events of last night, of the ship adrift in space, and the sleeping, half-frozen men you found there."

"There must have been a leak somewhere," I said. "Someone has talked."

"You could explain it so," she agreed. "But what you could not explain by that or any other form of reason is this, a thing known only to you and Captain Hume that in this pocket"—she tapped it lightly—"you have a little steel box containing twelve pellets of Martian Oxcta."

Chapter 8

A Friend, or Perhaps a Little More

I STARED at her stupefied—while the unrecoverable seconds ticked remorselessly away. I scarcely knew what to say or with what counter to meet this frank revelation. The fact that she knew something and no doubt guessed more of the mystery in which I had played my little part did not matter so much. It was the uncanny knowledge she displayed of something trifling in itself, yet about which no one but myself and the captain should know anything, that was so disconcerting.

"Tell me," I demanded, still in the same soft whisper she herself had used. "Tell me how you know all this. It's… " In my turn I halted for a word and this time it was she who supplied the needed one.

"Uncanny," she suggested and when I nodded, "No, Mr. Sanders, it isn't. It's anything but that. To show you what I mean I'll tell you something more. Wait a moment, please."

She thrust her hand through the V opening at the bosom of her dress, kept her hand there under the shadow of the material almost as though she held something in her palm, something at which she looked and frowned a little, with a drawing together of those fine eyebrows of hers.

"Face me squarely," she commanded. "Ah, that's it. Now—under the left lapel of your coat, where you can show it in a moment if necessary, is your interplanetary badge, a silver badge in the shape of a space-ship with the letters—I. P. G. spread along its length."

"Go on," I said with interest. So much she could have told me from memory if she had ever—as no doubt she had—seen a Guard's badge before.

"You're still a little doubtful," she whispered. "We-ell—on the back of the Badge is a number—seven-twenty-five. Beneath the number are the two letters S. C."

She could not have known without having seen my badge—which I swear she had never done—could not possibly have known that I was

number 725 of the Interplanetary Guard and that my rank was Space Captain.

She went on calmly, "In your right-hand coat pocket you have an envelope, buff in color. It contains a space radio form. The message on the form is written in an Earth-language I do not know. It is not one in use, that is all I can say. But I can spell out the words to you." She spelled it through until I thought it time to call a halt.

"Please!" I said almost breathlessly. "I'm convinced."

She looked up mischievously at me. Her hand came out of the bosom of her dress, empty, as it had gone in. Yet I could swear that the moment she raised her eyes to meet mine I heard a slight click as of a spring being released.

"And of what are you convinced?" she whispered.

"Of the reality of what you're saying—or doing," I told her. "But it's magic, witchcraft."

"No. Applied science, that's all. A little toy it is, yet how it shakes you, saps your confidence and makes you talk of magic, of witchcraft, of things no sane planetarian really believes in."

"Tell me," I said quickly, "why do you do this thing? I am sure it is not merely to puzzle me."

"It is," she said, "because I want to help you, if only in my small way."

"With that little toy? What is it? May I see it?"

She took my questions in order. "Yes, with that little toy, as you call it. It is worked on the principle of your X-rays, something analogous, at any rate. But I cannot show it to you here. There may be prying eyes about."

She flung a swift glance about the deck. No one seemed in the least interested in our talk but then that was nothing to go by. Men—women too—can watch and listen without showing the slightest outward sign of interest. "Mr. Sanders, you are Earth-born. You have conventions that are not ours. We have conventions that possibly you do not understand. Would you therefore think it a thing that should not have been said if I were to ask you to come down to the seclusion of my cabin where we can talk undisturbed?"

MY hesitation was but for the moment. "No, of course not," I said readily.

"Leave me now," she said. "My cabin is C-eight. In ten minutes you will find me there. We had better not go together."

There was wisdom in her suggestion. With a brightly-flung word and a cheery nod for the benefit of anyone who might chance to be watching, I rose to my feet, sauntered off along the deck, stopped to relight my pipe, strolled through the saloon.

So casually I made my way to the accommodation deck, and presently located C-eight. The glow of a light tube streaming through the grille over the door told me it was in occupancy. I glanced at the name grid. Jansca Dirka, that was all. She then had the whole cabin to herself.

She closed the door behind me, snapped the switch and shut the sound insulators. Then she turned to me with a smile.

"Why," I said, "are you doing all this?"

"Because," she said, "I would be your friend."

"A friend or perhaps a little more," I said softly, overwhelmed by that other-world intoxication of her presence, that lure that was not Earth's. I had her hands in mine as I spoke. She said nothing but I felt them drawn softly away.

"We can," she said with meaning, "speak of such matters after. There are more important things to talk of now."

She turned swiftly away from me for a moment. What she did or where it came from I could not say, but when she faced me the next second in the palm of her outstretched hand there lay glittering a watch-like thing with a tiny thread-thin chain attached.

"Take it," she said. "It is yours. It will help you."

It was shaped like a watch, save that back and front were made of some vitreous substance, neither glass nor quartzite. As I looked into one crystal face I could see nothing till the girl leaned over, touched a spring I had not noticed. I nearly let it drop, for the floor of the cabin under the crystal face seemed to vanish and I found myself looking into the deck below, seeing everything beneath me as clearly as though the floor were made of glass.

"It is rather startling when one sees it for the first time," she said, "but as I've told you the principle underlying it is quite simple. It is merely a matter of penetrative rays."

"It is rather astounding," I said as soon as I recovered my composure. "You don't know then how the principle is applied?"

Slowly, seriously she shook her head. "I do not know," she said deliberately, "and if I did I would not tell. I am giving you this little

instrument because I know it will help you but not even for you would I betray the secrets of my people."

I turned on her, suddenly contrite. "Of course!" I said. "You are doing a wonderful thing even in giving me this. I should not have asked you any such question."

She waved that aside, came a little closer and, as though afraid that even in that soundproof cabin she might be overheard, dropped her voice to the merest thread of a whisper.

"Keep it there," she said, pointing. "On the inside of your buttoned jacket. Make a pocket for it there to keep it hidden out of sight. You have only to put your hand down—you need never pull it out more than is necessary—to see the dial face on one side or the other."

"Your father?" I suggested.

"He does not know," she said quickly. "I do not want him to know. He is well-disposed towards you, as who would not be? But even he, if he knew that I was even to this extent betraying a Martian secret to one not of our race by blood or by adoption, would be harsh with me."

Her voice trailed into silence.

"Tell me," I said quickly, "if this were known—what would happen to you? Anything dire?"

She did not answer but the droop of her head told me all I wished to know. This Martian maiden, in so many ways like an Earth-girl, in so many other ways unlike, was for me taking the stars knew what risks.

"Tell me," I begged. "Is it merely that I am an alien, because I have no Sonjho blood in me that you would be punished?" In my eagerness, anxiety, call I what you will, I had stumbled into using the Martian word itself.

"Yes," she said slowly, thoughtfully "yes, it is because you have no Sonjho blood in you that I must fear for myself."

For a space she paused. I saw the glitter of the little knife in her hand and sprang forward but she thrust me back with one hand, and for once I was not minded to use force.

"Stay," she said fiercely. "I mean harm to you or anyone else. But I see a way."

Something in her eyes compelled me to wait. She took the little knife, made a tiny scratch in the fleshy part of her left arm, waited until the red blood came.

Suddenly she thrust the arm towards me, and spoke commandingly. "See," she said, "I have drawn blood. With your lips remove it."

She came of a long line of those born to rule, this girl. There was something of their concentrated magnetism in her, something too that was all her own. Scarcely knowing what I did, I obeyed her. My lips touched her warm flesh.

SHE drew her arm away and as I straightened, looked at me with a new light in her eyes.

"You are one of us," she said with a strange dignity and a stranger softness in her manner. "Now you can always say with truth that you are of the Sonjho blood for you have that blood, my blood, in you."

It was no barbaric rite, no ancient survival of blood brotherhood such as once existed amongst certain peoples on Earth. It was her way, the only way she knew, of giving me power to claim if necessary the rights by blood of a citizen of Mars.

The deed, as much as the thought behind it, amazed me. I knew enough of her planet's customs to realize that it would hold as binding in any Martian community but whether it had any deeper implication I could not say.

Our eyes met. She stepped back a pace, drew a long breath, and slid the tiny knife into a sheath at her girdle.

"I had better explain," she said in studied calm tones, "the working of the—" She used a word I did not catch, a Martian phrase new to me. She smiled at my puzzled expression. "That little instrument I gave you," she explained.

I took the thing from my pocket—for lack of a better name I called it in my own mind "The Crystal Eye" and as such it will be referred to hereafter—and handed it to her. She showed me that the spring at the top was in reality a sort of screw. It could be adjusted to suit the distance in much the same way that one adjusts binoculars.

"Tell me one thing before I go," I said, for it was a thought that worried me. "Do all Martians carry these?"

"No," she said slowly, "no. Only those of—only a favored few carry them."

I read in her eyes the meaning of that hesitation, could almost hear the word she had left unsaid. I knew without a doubt that she had meant to say "Only those of the blood," and had pulled herself up just in time.

Well, it seemed—if suppressions and hesitations went for anything—that now it was a matter not to be referred to between us again.

Blindly I made a step forward, fumbled, caught her in my arms, I kissed the lips that for the moment feigned resistance, then clung passionately to mine.

Chapter 9

I Take Over

THROUGHOUT most of that day the ether must have been super-heated with the messages between worlds. In the administrative centers of the three confederated planets, men must have been working feverishly, preparing to deal with a menace whose actual purpose, whose identity even, had not yet become manifest.

To us sealed up in our space-ship hurtling through the void to our destination, nothing of this was known. It was not until the dinner hour that night that the first repercussions of the trouble became apparent.

Supremely happy in my new-found love I had taken my seat at the table to meet the ardent glance from Jansca's glowing eyes and the approving look from her father, whom I had already seen and talked with. I noticed as a thing of little moment that Hume's place was unoccupied.

Jansca leaned across the table and said something to me. I was about to make some light answer to Jansca's remark, when a finger touched me on the shoulder and I heard my name spoken. It was one of the officers.

"Captain Hume would like to see you at once, Mr. Sanders," he said.

"Oh, well." I shrugged my shoulders.

"I suppose I'll have to go."

I faced Jansca and she leaned across to catch my words. "My dear," I said, "I'm afraid I'm wanted. Apparently urgently."

"Go," she said swiftly. "Don't wait. I think I understand." Her hand, reaching across the table, caught mine and gave it a gentle pressure.

I met her eyes. There was something in them that startled me. Agony, fear, anxiety—all somehow mixed together. Then I rose to my feet and swung off behind the man who had summoned me.

Hume sat before a desk littered with papers. He raised a grave face as I was ushered in. "Sit down there, Jack," was his greeting. Then to the

officer who had conducted me, "Insulate us against all outside interference."

"Man, what is it?" I cried.

His brow furrowed into lines. "Jack," he said earnestly, "I'd give a lot to be able to answer that question. But perhaps this may tell you something."

He pushed a message form to me. It was written in plain English and it had been sent out from New York headquarters of the Earth division of the Interplanetary Board of Control not two hours before.

I stared at it, for it began with the triple call of urgency, that call we seldom get more than once in a generation. The gist of it can be given in a sentence. It was a general call to all space-ships to rendezvous at the nearest Guard-ship base as quickly as possible and wait for escort before proceeding to their destinations.

"Well, what do you make of it?" I asked.

For answer he passed me another wad of sheets. The top one was a similar message, sent from London. It was timed a few minutes later. I turned to the others. One was from Shangun, the Venusian capital, in that planet's international language. The third message also indecipherable, was, I guessed from the office of dispatch in Tlananian, the language of two-thirds of the Martian peoples.

"There's no doubt about the urgency of the matter," I said slowly. "The fact that the Venusian and Martian messages have been broadcast in their own tongue shows that to my mind. They couldn't afford to waste the time to translate them into international code."

"Or meant them solely for their own ships, knowing Earth messages would reach liners like us," Hume said with a puckering of the forehead. "But what's behind it all?"

"The space-visitors—the things—people—that were responsible for the trouble on M-E 75. Perhaps I'm wrong. I hope I am—it looks as though something has happened, some new development that menaces the safety of every space liner from the three planets en route at the moment. Such a thing has never been heard of since space-travelling became an accomplished fact."

"But what are you going to do? Is this the crisis your instructions cover?"

"It's hard to say. Looks to me like a matter for individual judgment. But at present, providing there are no further developments, I can make

no move in any direction. You have already got your orders. I think in the circumstances you will be wise to abide by them."

"I've changed course already." He pointed to the dial chart, where the quivering pointer showed us edging off at an angle from the red line that had hitherto marked our route to intercept the orbit of Mars. "Also, our locators are sounding space to pick up the nearest Guard-ship. It will probably be a Martian one now, we're so far advanced on our way."

"Whatever it is does not matter as long as it is a Guard-ship," I said wearily. A heaviness had come over me, a weight on my heart.

HUME shot a glance at me from under his tired drooping lids. "Sick of it, already," he said. "Ah, well, you've no responsibilities, no—"

"You're wrong," I cut in before he could go further. "I have responsibilities, one big one at least aboard this ship."

"Aboard the *Cosmos*!" he exclaimed. "What… who is it?"

"Jansca," I said. "Jansca Dirka."

"You mean that, Jack? Is it fact or merely a hope?"

"A fact accomplished. We agreed only this morning that our paths lay together. Her father knows and has approved."

For one long second he looked at me, then across the table his hand reached out and gripped mine heartily.

"I understand," he said at last. "Of course our safety means more to you perhaps even than it does to me." Then, almost under his breath. "But a *Dirka*!"

I caught the word. "Why a Dirka?" I demanded. "What is strange in that?"

"Your luck. Call it that. The Dirkas are the nearest to a race of kings Mars has had in a thousand years. But, Jack, coming back to immediate urgencies, what are we to do?"

"Follow instructions. We can't make any other preparations, for we don't know what we may have to face."

"Our armament—" he suggested tentatively.

"What have you in that way?"

"The two rays—heat and the repeller rays. The former won't function too well free space, I should imagine."

"Why not? It doesn't need an atmosphere. It will go where light goes. We'll—rather I hope we won't have the need to see. We—"

There came a warning crackle, thrice repeated, from the sounder at his elbow.

"More messages," he said wearily. "Manners, take them."

My conductor made the sundry adjustments that allowed the door to be opened. It was a messenger from the transmitting room—the *Cosmos* was big enough to have a separate one of her own—with a sealed envelope in his hand. "For Mr. Sanders," he said. "I was told he was here."

Manners passed it to me, the messenger sped away and the insulating barrage went up again. As I thought, it was from Harran.

Have reason to suppose that concerted attack is to be made on all space-ships. Possible invasion of three planets projected. Confirm general rendezvous order. All Guards are to hold in readiness for immediate duty. All emergency regulations to be put into operation forthwith. No private messages to be transmitted from space-ships or if received aboard to be delivered to addressees, except under direction and at discretion of Guard until further orders. Emergency regulations in force from moment of receipt of this message. (Signed) Harran—Tellus, Tambard—Mars, Clinigo—Venus.

I thrust the translation over to Hume. "You had better read this," I said.

Slowly he read it through and as he read his face blanched. At the end he handed it back to me. "It means," he said, "that you are now in command."

"It means that," I agreed. "But it means more—that you and I and all the rest of us must work together for the safety of our ship and passengers."

"Yet," he said heavily, "there is so little we can do."

I nodded. "Arm your men," I said. "Serve out your ray tubes at once. Are all your officers trustworthy?"

"Every one of them."

"I want them paraded at once—here. Would you care to advise them or shall I?"

"Better you, Jack. I won't cavil at what you say or do in a time like this. About the operators. Had they better come too?"

"Yes—all except the men on duty."

He called Manners and gave his orders and soon the emergency signals were sounding in each man's quarters.

ONE by one they came to the room—the three officers—the apprentices who were actually junior officers in training—the purser, Parey—the doctor and others. All told there was a round dozen of them.

Hume wasted no time in preliminaries. "You've been called here," he said, "because of certain matters of importance with which you should be acquainted at the earliest opportunity. What they are Mr. Sanders will explain."

I saw curious eyes turn wonderingly towards me. Even Parey, who knew who I was, knitted his brows. I pinned my Guard's badge in the lapel of my coat where it was plain for all to see. Even then I could see most of them were still frankly puzzled.

I gave a brief sketch of the condition in which we had found M-E 75—there was no need to enlarge on that as it was already more or less common property amongst the after-guard—and added that similar things had happened to other space-ships.

I insisted that as yet we did not know anything about the motive behind these visitations—one could hardly call them attacks—and certainly had no idea from which planet the vandals had come. Then to round everything off I read out the message signed by The Three. I finished, and glanced round the little company.

"Any questions?" I asked. "We may not have the opportunity to ask or answer them later."

Parey caught my eye. "Does this mean, Mr. Sanders," he said, "that you are in absolute command here?"

"It means," I said deliberately, "that I am responsible to the Interplanetary Board of Control for the safety of this ship and her complement. If anything goes wrong it is I who will be to blame. But let us have no talk of absolute or any other kind of command."

"Captain Hume and I have discussed the matter thoroughly between us and are agreed, as I want you all to be agreed, that unless each man does his utmost we may fail to pull through. It may hearten you to realize that in a thousand ships all up and down the void this message is being repeated and similar scenes enacted."

The first officer, Gond, took a step forward. "I think I can speak for the others. What you say goes with us, the more so as Captain Hume is backing you up. That's a mouthful, I think."

I smiled at the quaint archaisms in his little speech but I could not smile at his sincerity. It was too affecting for that. A murmur that rose

from the little group showed how well he had expressed the sentiments of all of them.

"That's that then," I said. "Captain Hume, will you take over, please?"

Chapter 10

The Inexplicable Incident

MY further duties took me half an hour or so. Then I was free to go about my own small concerns.

Dinner had long since been ended and the saloon was bare and empty. Knowing the long hours the kitchen staff put in, I did not feel like giving them extra trouble in serving me a late meal.

I slipped down to my cabin, drew a glass of water from the faucet and dropped an Oxcta pellet in it. I drank the resultant mixture and felt all the better for it. But, I warned myself, it would not do to make a regular practice of this. Despite what Hume had told me—that it was not habit-forming—I had no wish to put the matter to the test.

It was too early to go to bed yet. I wanted time to think things out and if possible formulate some plan of campaign. Since I can always think better with a pipe in my mouth I filled and lit one.

The result of half-an-hour's intensive thought was zero. When all was said and done the initiative did not lie with us but with those invaders out of space; and until we learnt a little more about them and their objects, I could see no use in speculating.

Was it possible, to borrow a phrase from one writer who one hundred and fifty years ago forecast something of the sort, that we were being examined in much the same impersonal fashion as man will examine infusoria under a microscope?

A soft yet penetrating rap sound on my cabin door and brought me out my reverie. Jansca was standing there, mild perplexity and alarm in her eyes.

"Oh, Jack," she said almost breathlessly. "I've been looking for you and wondering. Then I saw your light and knocked."

"Come in," I said. "Come in, dear. I've been here some time."

I shut the door and threw the insulaswitch. I was getting jumpy, taking precautions that a week before I would have laughed at.

"When you left the table and did not return, I feared something was wrong," she said, looking up earnestly into my face.

"Nothing was wrong with me."

"No?" Her fair brow wrinkled. "But there have been comings and goings, an amount of activity amongst the officers that made me think—" She stopped abruptly and looked to me to supply the end of that truncated thought.

"Made you think what, Jansca?" I said encouragingly.

She put her two hands on my shoulders and looked me straight in the eyes. "Dear," she said, "tell me what is wrong, if not with you, at least with things in which you are implicated."

"Jansca," I said gravely, "sit down." She obeyed but flung me one quick glance of interest as though already she glimpsed something of what I had to tell her.

"This," I said, "is between ourselves. It must go no further than you, not even to your father. Will you promise me that?"

Her face glowed. "Where you and I are concerned, Jack, there is no need of promises, given or taken."

That was good hearing, and I said so. "But, Jansca, what I wish to impress on you is that I am revealing to you secret matter, messages that have passed and will be passing between myself and the Council of Three."

Briefly I told her, omitting nothing, stressing nothing. She did not look as grave at the end as I had expected.

"It follows on what we already knew," she said simply. "It may mean trouble for our worlds or it may be something that can be dealt with very easily once we understand the reason behind it. But, dear one, does this mean that when we reach Tlanan, if we do in safety, you and I will be separated for a time?"

"I hope not," I said with truth. "If things were left to me I would marry you out of hand and make the rest of my space-voyage a honeymoon."

"A honeymoon?" For the moment she seemed puzzled, then the meaning of it dawned on her. "Of course," she said brightly, "that is your Earth-term for the period of adjustment. It is a sweet phrase. Sometimes I wish we Martians were a little less practical in sentimental matters and a

little more sentimental in practical affairs. Strange that we should so reverse things."

"We can all teach each other something," I told her. "We all have much to learn. Perhaps, by mixing as we do, we planetarians may yet evolve a race as noble as it is good."

She smiled at that. "Too much to hope for, prophet mine. Men and women are much the same the planets over."

"Well, we needn't worry about it, as long as we're happy in ourselves," I remarked. My thoughts leaped off at a tangent. "Jansca, beyond that little knife you carry in your girdle have you any weapon of defense?"

"Do I need one?" she queried.

"I don't know," I said frankly, "but it's just as well to be prepared. Can you use a ray tube?"

"I can use anything," she said, "once you have shown me how."

WITHOUT more words I took down the case containing the charges and the duplicate tube. She had seen such before—the ship's guards carried them on every space boat—but she had never held one in her hands and had no idea of its mechanism. But within a very few minutes she had acquired as complete a command over the weapon as though she had been handling it for years.

I loaded the tube, gave her an extra clip or two of the charges, advised her to conceal it in her dress somewhere.

"Now," I said, as she slid it out of sight, "my mind's at rest. At the worst you have the means at hand to defend yourself if necessary."

"I wonder if it will ever be necessary," she said softly. "I hope not. Are you coming up on deck for awhile, Jack? It wants an hour or two yet of retiring time. We can sit and talk and perhaps find pleasure in each other's company, if not forgetfulness of what hangs over us."

"Jansca, my dear," I said chuckling, "you seem to be taking rather a pessimistic view of the situation."

"And you," she countered, "who should be that way inclined are almost cheerful. Missing a meal seems to do you good." As though her own words had brought back recollection, she dropped her bantering tone. "Oh, you must be starving and here I have been keeping you from getting anything to eat."

"I don't need food," I told her and pointed to the empty glass standing on the ledge beneath the faucet.

For a moment she looked puzzled, took up the glass—some of the dregs were still in it—and held it close to her nose.

"Ah," she said, "I understand." Then came a little pause, just the merest hesitation. Then, "Jack, it is years since I last tasted Oxcta. Do you think tonight seeing this is a special occasion, that a little, one sip even would be allowed me?"

"Of course," I said without thinking.

Five minutes later we made our way up deck. Heads turned and eyes followed us for I think the news of our impending mating had somehow got about on board, and interested people in us.

I do not know what Jansca and I talked about. We chatted idly as lovers will. We deliberately avoided all talk of the future that was likely to impinge on that dubious thing that menaced the Universe if we were to believe the warning of the Council.

A man came mincing down the deck, one seemingly wrapped in his own thoughts. It was the carefully selected steps that made me think it was Nomo Kell, though for the moment I did recognize the man. He wore some quaint kind of headgear, rather like a cap with a visor and earflaps, that I do not member having seen before. Though the ship's heaters kept the temperature normal he was muffled to the chin in a coat of light shiny material.

"Nomo Kell must be feeling cold," I remarked to Jansca. "See how he is wrapped up."

She did not answer in words, but her hand—we were very close together tightened warningly on mine. Of course it was no more than coincidence that he should glance up at that exact moment and shoot a deliberately searching look towards us. Yet Jansca's warning grip coming at the same instant, sent a stir of uneasiness through me. I waited till he was out of sight.

"Jansca," I said, "do you think he could have heard me?"

She gave the tiniest shrug of her shoulders. "Who knows?" she said absently. "At least I thought it wise to stop you before you said more."

I objected, "There is no way he could have heard."

"Audiphones," she reminded me. "That cap he wore could easily have concealed a pair."

I did not quite agree with her. The audiphones, after all, were attuned to special receivers. I was on the point of explaining this when of a

sudden it struck me that the heater must have developed a defect, that some of the cold of space was trickling through our shell. Perhaps Nomo Kell with a greater sensitiveness had become aware of this before we had.

"I think," I said softly, "that our friend knew what he was about. Jansca, it strikes me it is getting cold."

She did not answer, and I turned my head to see why. Her hand had suddenly gone chill in mine. I gasped. Her head had slumped down on her breast, fallen in a way that it would have seemed the natural outcome of her nestling near me had it not been for the iciness of her hand.

A great horror crept over me, a feeling of utter lassitude. Through split fractions of a second—too small to measure by any accepted standard of time, though they felt like hours—the advancing tide of chill torpor crept over me, numbing all my faculties.

With horror I realized that we were grip of that mysterious force that had set more than one space liner floundering, a derelict, about the void. And at that all things seemed to go before me. It was as though a veil of mist had been drawn down between us and the rest of the ship, shutting me out from sound and sight and consciousness of all other life.

Chapter 11

The Space-Raiders

BUT this phase must have been merely momentary. For a reason that became apparent later, I did not entirely lose consciousness. I must have trembled on the brink of coma for an instant, then the rising tide of life came flooding back through my veins.

I felt the slight stir of movement beside me, tried to turn my head, discovered to my great surprise that I could. I found myself looking into Jansca's wide expressive eyes.

"Darling, are you all right?" I exclaimed.

"Yes," she said quickly. "But what has happened?"

"Can't you guess?" I said.

"Oh!" There was an odd catch in her breath. Her face hardened as she flung a glance about here, saw all the others on that deck slumped down in their chairs.

"The space-raiders," she breathed. "We are in their hands. But I thought the cold… "

"So did I, Jansca, but for some reason we've managed to fight it off apparently. It's a puzzle."

I made a movement as though to rise but she caught me by the arm, dragged me back.

"We must remain as we are, pretending to be asleep—unconscious—like the others. If we move we may blunder into something, gain nothing, lose everything."

There was wisdom in her suggestion even though the forced inaction irked me. She caught my arm again, so tightly that I gasped.

"What?" I said. "What is it?"

"Can't you see it?" She pointed to the quartzite windows that gave us a view of empty space and the stars beyond. Only now it was not empty.

Something that might have been a wisp of smoke or the drift of thin rain seemed to be blocking the windows. Then I saw that it had blotted out the stars. It was the ship of the space-raiders!

More correctly we did not see it. We had no means of knowing that it was there save that it had interposed itself between us and the stars and hid them from our vision.

An idea came to me. I closed one eye. Dimly then I began to see a form, a cigar-shaped thing, the space-ship of these strange entities, resting in mid-ether, so to speak, side by side with our own vessel. No doubt its connecting port was already clamped against our port, which could be opened on the outside by the emergency manual machinery.

I opened my eye, and stared at the shape beyond the quartzite windows with the sight of both eyes. The shape was no longer visible. It had become absorbed in the blackness of space. But I knew it was there.

"You see?" I said. "You understand what it is?"

Jansca nodded. "I can guess at the principle by which they make themselves invisible. But what I can't yet understand—"

She did not complete the sentence. Instead she slumped down in her chair, releasing my hand as she did so. I took the cue from her. I could not see what it was that had alarmed her and I dared not raise myself in the chair to find out.

I did not have to wait long. But what I saw seemed for the moment so monstrous and incredible that I could hardly believe my eyes. A procession of bodies was advancing along the deck, the bodies of those officers who should at this time of night have been in the control room.

The eerie thing about it all was that the bodies were seemingly floating in the air, at a distance of three or four feet above the deck. While the head and legs were more or less on a level in each case the middle part of the body sagged, dipped or drooped.

For a split second I stared, forgetting that I was supposed to be unconscious. Then quickly the meaning of it all came flooding back to me, and with it the memory of that queer tale—which I had half-disbelieved at the time—told to us by Mrs. Galon on board the M-E 75.

The unconscious figures of the officers were being carried! Carried by those invisible entities, whom, for want of a better phrase, we called the space-raiders.

The procession came closer, drew level. At the head and shoulders of each of our men I could see now a vague misty outline, a thing that

flickered uncannily in the glare from the stored-sunlight tubes that lit the deck.

Neither Jansca nor I made a movement. We saw the unconscious men deposited in vacant chairs, there was a moment's wait, then came the passing in front of our eyes of those fluid misty things. There were eight of them.

Jansca made a slight movement. She had a tiny handbag in her lap, a thing of light and glittering metal and as she stirred it slipped to the floor with a tinkling clatter. Foolishly she bent to pick it up before I could stop her.

IT was as though several columns of mists opposite us stood still for an instant, then began to advance towards us. A chair was in the way of the oncoming entities. I know that because I saw it pushed to one side.

I think I must have lost my head, I sprang to my feet, drawing my ray tube as I did so, and levelled it at the nearest mist-like figure. In my agitation I loosed the full charge.

There came a spurt of light and I staggered back, half-blinded. But where the mist had been a moment before there was a tumbled heap on deck, something whose outlines were rapidly thickening and taking shape. As though a body were being molded there under our eyes.

Jansca must have sprung to her feet a moment after me, for almost on the heels of my discharge came another spurt of light from beside me an almost inaudible click of the ray-tube mechanism. I did not look to see what damage she had done, but tried to keep my eyes on the other mist-wraiths, the very vagueness of their outline endowed them with a kind of will-o'-the-wisp quality that was in itself disquieting.

A moment I waited—expecting I knew not what diabolical force loosed on us in reprisal. But nothing happened—and then abruptly the swirls of mist were vanishing up the deck in the direction of the control room quarters.

Ray tube in hand I started in pursuit, Jansca panting along beside me. And as I ran I flicked the button of my weapon. We did not wait to see what became of the things that fell at our feet, but kept on, for I did not know what damage the others might do if we did not keep them in sight.

The door of the control-room opened and closed uncannily as we came abreast of it. It opened again the very next instant and something came hissing out. What it was I could not see—either because it too was invisible or else it moved too swiftly—but it passed between us and crashed

against the opposite wall of the deck. A huge wet splash appeared on the Marsonite surface, as though someone had cast a bucket of water there and the air seemed of a sudden to have turned icy.

I breathed. "Jansca, stay here! You mustn't take the risk."

"That's for me to say," she gasped with a sob in her voice.

There was no time to argue with her. Feeling that we were taking our lives in our hands I dashed in through the open door of the control-room, expecting every second to find another icy missile, better aimed this time, hurled at us. But nothing happened.

To make doubly certain we followed the descent down to the port against which they had linked their ship. For some reason the light here had failed but we blundered on. Then, with the most surprising luck in the Universe, I blundered into something. It felt, soft, and cold and repellent to the touch, like a dead body, save that there was a jelly-like flow of it away from under my hand.

In my horror I flickered the button of ray tube. The catch must have slipped somehow, for I don't think it have given a full discharge. I heard an odd sound like a thin wail, there was a rush of cold air past me. Then as something creaked under my feet, I realized that we were on the edge of the passageway our visitors had clamped against the port of the *Cosmos*. I drew back abruptly, pulling Jansca with me.

The planets know what would have happened had I not done so. It was purely an instinctive movement, for I hadn't time to stop and think that the stranger ship would probably cast off at once. Yet this is much what must have happened and had I not pulled back then another few seconds might have seen us hurled out to our deaths in space.

I heard a creaking almost at my feet and blindly flashed my ray tube in the direction from which the sound came. I know now, what I did not realize at the time, that it was the preliminary movement of casting off. But what I did realize the very next instant was that the air of the *Cosmos* was beginning to whistle off into space. I got the port closed just in time.

Panting I leaned against the port through which we and the whole ship's company had nearly come to our deaths, striving to get my breathing back to normal. Jansca, who had been further back than I, had not fared so badly. Her cry of horror roused me.

"What is it?" I gasped.

A quartzite window had been let into the port and the slide had been drawn back, giving us an outlook on empty space. At the moment it framed a picture that I shall remember to my dying day.

A huge space-ship, larger than anything I had ever seen, was slowly taking form before my eyes. It was a glistening monster that would have made six of the *Cosmos*, latest product of the interplanetary genius though she was. But the most appalling part of what we saw was that the stranger vessel seemed to be breaking in halves.

A great gap showed in the quarter nearest to us, a red-rimmed outline, that spread as we watched. To this day I am not quite sure just exactly what had occurred, though I feel that that last flicker of my ray tube must have set my opponent afire instead of killing him outright.

How or why the blaze spread, I cannot say; the only thing of which I really can be certain is that they must have had a store of explosives of unknown potency on board. For even as we watched The huge ship stretched out like an overfilled balloon and burst into a myriad fragments that whirled and glowed, that faded and passed at last in flickering extinction out into the uncharted depths of space.

THE *Cosmos* bounced like a kicked football and the vibrations of the explosion, soundless though they were, reached out and buffeted us a thousand miles or more out of our course. Jansca and I were thrown against each other and dropped, battered, bruised and breathless, on the dark floor of the passage.

Fumbling for her hand I found it, and helped her upright. For the moment we both gasped in the rarefied air. It was that which reminded me how narrowly we had escaped a terrible death.

The little air left in the passage where we were was thin enough in all conscience and its effect on us was momentarily becoming more pronounced. I felt dizzy and something was wrong apparently with both my lungs and heart. Jansca, used to a thinner atmosphere, was not so distressed. Nevertheless the sooner we got back to a normal pressure the better for us both.

I did not waste words and air in telling her what I wanted but drew her back to the center of the ship. She came staggering, as I most certainly did myself, until a few yards brought us up against the valved door that had fallen into place behind our backs.

After some ineffectual fumbling I found a switch and a tube overhead glowed brightly enough to show me the mechanism that opened the door. I turned the graduated scale, letting the air fill in by degrees.

Jansca still clung to me. Now that the worst was over the reaction had come and it was hard to recognize her as the daring Amazon who had taken a stand beside me and driven the strange invaders from our ship.

I made at once for the control room for I had no idea how the vessel was drifting. It took a few minutes' intricate calculation before I learned what I wished to know. That done it was a simple matter to correct the error bring and the *Cosmos* back to the space-lane she had been following.

Locking the gears so that we could not slew off again, I turned away to find Jansca regarding me. "Well, my dear," she said, "is it all right now?"

"I think everything's right as far as this end of it is concerned," I told her, "but there's still quite a lot for us to do."

I took her in my arms and kissed her. "That," I said, "is for the help you've given me. Come on now, my dear, better not waste any more time. I'm not sure, you see, whether we killed or merely paralyzed those folk we dropped, so keep your ray tube handy in case of trouble."

Our fears were groundless, however. None of the raiders was left alive. Jansca and I, by some species of lucky accident, had killed all those we struck. There were seven of them, scattered at intervals along the route from the control floor to the spot on the promenade deck where we had first encountered them. Whatever the invisible process, its effects evidently were neutralized by the discharge from our ray tubes.

We did not linger to examine them, however. Either we had not been treated to as big a dose of the anesthetic as the *M-E75* or else something had happened to neutralize it very quickly for there were signs as we made our way down to the deck that some of the company were already stirring. Hume had slid down from the chair on they had placed him and was lolling on the deck in a sitting position.

I caught him by the shoulder and shook him. He opened his eyes, blinking stupidly, then lurched sideways as though he were going off into a faint. I caught him.

"Steady on," I said. "Wake up!" As I shook him again.

This time he opened his eyes to the full, stared from Jansca to me in a puzzled fashion. "Ah, Sanders," he said slowly.

He held out his hand to me and with an effort I hauled him to his feet. He stood there an instant swaying, then with what must have been a powerful exercising of will he got himself under control.

"Go on, Jack," he said urgently. "I think I'm all right now. The last I can remember is doing something in the control-room and now I come to and find myself out here. It's not—"

A FLICKER of alarm passed across his face. I guessed what he had left unsaid.

"These space-visitors we were warned against," I said. "Yes, we had a raid from them, though this time there've been casualties."

"Casualties? *Gods?* Any of us killed?"

"No, the raiders. Jansca and I—"

"But how"—his brow wrinkled—"how in the stars did you escape?"

"I've my own ideas, but they can wait for explanation until later. Meanwhile—do you feel better now?"

"Much." He brushed a hand across his brow and involuntarily squared his shoulders. "This stuff seems to wear off quickly, once one opens one's eyes. But, the ship!"

"I've set her on her course. The automatic control will carry on. I would suggest, however, that we wake up the rest of your fellows."

He made a movement as though to go off and do it at once. I caught his sleeve. "Stay," I said. "Jansca will attend to that. You and I have other things to do. We've killed some of the space-raiders. Their bodies—"

"Yes?" he said quickly.

"—had better be taken from here. Perhaps you and I between us can get them on to the controldeck. Then we may have the worst of it over before the bulk of the passengers are awake enough to realize what we're doing."

The details of our task can well be spared but it was over and done with and our space-visitors removed to the controldeck in less time than we had anticipated. Jansca too had done her work well. When at last we paused for breath and looked about us, it was to find that the officers had trickled back to their places, looking sick and bewildered.

The passengers too were stirring, all aware that something bizarre had occurred while they were unconscious. The guard-bar at the entrance to the control-deck was set, however, and a junior officer stationed there to prevent any invasion of our privacy.

I gave Hume an outline of what had transpired. I could see that he was not quite sure whether to be most impressed by our luck—he called it daring—in clearing the ship between us, or puzzled because the general coma seemed to have passed us by. It was pretty plain to me now why we had been less unaffected but I did not want to advertise it unduly. I fancied he would agree with me when he knew.

"And now," I said, "perhaps it would be as well to have a look at our bag."

Jansca moved forward with us. I would rather she kept away but she was insistent and for once I did not gainsay her.

An odd sense of familiarity struck me the moment I had leisure to look the dead beings over carefully. Each was clad from neck to knee in a coat of some light shiny material, the head of each was covered by a cap of the same stuff with a mica-like transparency in front for the eyes.

I gasped as I realized where I had seen such garments before. Jansca too recalled for her eyes met mine meaningfully.

I bent down swiftly, fumbled with the visor of the helmet. Inadvertently I must have pressed some spring, for the visor shot back, revealing the face of the dead being.

A cry from Hume brought me round to him. He had been examining the next being and had managed to get the helmet clean off the head. As I turned he was standing with it in his hand, an expression of utter amazement stamped on his face.

"Look!" he said huskily, pointing.

We looked. The wide staring eyes, vacant of life now, were an odd shade of purple, the pupils queerly flecked.

The skin of the face was blotchy red and starting at the forehead and running back to the occiput was a horn-like ridge.

I nodded. "They're all like that," I said.

"Yes, yes," Hume said quickly, "but this particular one—he's not a stranger. I've seen his face before—on this ship."

"I know," I said deliberately. "And his name, in case you have forgotten, is Nomo Kell."

Chapter 12

Rendezvous

HUME nodded. "Nomo Kell, the man you were suspicious of from the first time you saw him. I only wish now," he added bitterly, "that I'd taken notice of your suspicions."

"I couldn't give a name to my suspicion. I felt he was odd, that's all. And all the taking notice in the Universe wouldn't have made matters one whit better. As it is now we know something. We've made a point of contact and we have some sort of a clue to guide us when we want it."

Others of the officers were gathering round now, staring curiously. Gond came out of the control room, and stopped with a little gasp of surprise. I could see from the man's face that he was itching to know all that had happened and I could hardly blame him.

He was passing by when Hume called him. "Just a moment, Mr. Gond," he said. "We may need you."

Hume himself turned back to me. "Jack," he said, "what should we do with these bodies? It's for you to say."

"Keep one, dressed and all," I said promptly. "It may be wanted for purposes of study. The others we'd better bury in space. Strip their cloaks and helmets first. They'll certainly be wanted for examination."

"Good," he said. He gave the first officer instructions, satisfied his curiosity in part and came back to us. On his arm were the cloak and helmet he had stripped from Nomo Kell.

"Jack," he said, "you and Miss Dirka may wish to have a talk with me. I know I want to talk with you. My cabin's the most private place on this ship."

I looked at Jansca and she nodded. "All right," I said to Hume. "Lead the way."

It wasn't until we were comfortably seated in Hume's cabin and all precautions taken against outside interference that any of us spoke again.

"What I'd most like to know," Hume said deliberately, "is why you two alone out of all the ship's company, were not overcome."

"It's quite simple," I said smiling. "We did it unwittingly."

"Well, then, by accident you've discovered some way of combatting what it is Nomo Kell's people use, so I think it's up to you to make your discovery public property."

"You and Jansca would be the first to protest against doing anything of the sort."

Jansca made an odd movement of impatience. "Don't mystify us merely to amuse yourself, Jack," she said softly. "I don't know anything more than Captain Hume does of this matter. What is it, my dear? Can't you see we're impatient?"

For answer I put my hand in my pocket, drew out the little steel box and placed it on the table between us.

"That," I said.

Hume half started to his feet. *"Oxcta!"* he exclaimed.

Jansca nodded. "I arrived at the conclusion by a process of elimination. Jack missed his dinner. With his forethought for others he wouldn't trouble the kitchen staff getting a late meal so he decided to carry on on Oxcta. I came down to see him, saw the signs of the stuff and asked for some myself. It kept me awake, energized me, gave me a chance to be of help."

"And it seems you were of considerable help, Miss Dirka," he said. "If the Council don't make you an honorary Member of the Guard, they don't know merit when they hear of it. If Jack won't report you I shall."

"You'd better do it," I hinted. "Mightn't look well coming from me since we're going to marry soon."

"Never mind me, what I do or don't deserve," said Jansca calmly. "Let us get to business."

"What can we do?" I queried.

"We've discovered certain facts," she said. "I suggest we make them public, save lives. It will certainly save trouble."

Hume leaned forward across the table, his dark face suddenly grave. "Up to a point you're right, Jansca," he said with the easy freedom of an

old friend. "But the main fact, the one that is going the most important factor in fighting this menace, is one we can't make public. You and Jack retained your consciousness and were able to make a sweep of this ship's invaders simply because of Oxcta."

"And," I put in quickly as he paused, "that we can't broadcast."

"No, I'm with you there," Jansca agreed. "I hadn't had that in mind myself anyway. But before we leave that particular item let me tell you there is a method of getting over that difficulty. I'm Martian born, Captain Hume is Martian by adoption and Jack here is"—for the moment I thought, shuddering, that she was going to say of Sonjho blood—but she ran on—"going to marry a Martian. It's a bond of a sort. When we reach Tlanan, if you'll allow it, I'll see the council, tell them what Oxcta did for us and suggest a plan. Tambard will listen to me, that I know. We can make a solution of it—no need to divulge the secret of its preparation—and supply it to the fighting forces of all the planets."

"Not a bad idea at all," said Hume. "But we've yet to reach Tlanan. Go on, I think you've more to say."

She flung us a glance of scorn. "You with your superior intellects. Didn't your experience on the *M-E 75* show you anything, the two of you?"

"The emergency suits!" I cried.

"That's it," she agreed. "It means wearing them day and night but they're built to stand the absolute zero of space at a pinch. And the one thing we know about this anesthetizing cold is that no matter how it is produced it doesn't remain constant."

"Perhaps it could be kept constant. Point one then is the constant wearing of space suits. I'm taking this, of course, as applying only to the fighting forces. Probably all passenger and freight vessels will be laid up if this menace develops to any extent."

"Have you any point two?" I asked.

"And three and perhaps four too," she said. "Taking them down, Jack? Good. Well, log it this way. The space visitors can be killed. We—you and I—have killed them with the ray tubes. Death, accident or injury renders them visible again. Their ships can be made visible by the same means."

"One moment," I interrupted her. "Hume, that helmet and cloak. Hand them over, please."

He did so. There was absolute silence in the cabin while I examined first the cloak, and then the helmet. I had begun by thinking that invisibility was induced by the substance with which the two articles were painted but consideration showed me that in one case at least this could not be so.

I had seen Nomo Kell walking the deck with this self-same cloak on him and the queer headgear that had then attracted my attention had been the helmet with the visor and earflaps drawn up. Obviously then this invisibility was not a permanent feature.

In view of that the problem narrowed down to a question of vibrations and this presupposed a battery of some sort. Presently I found one, a tremendously light battery of the new Dirac type, small enough to be concealed under the left armpit of the cloak.

Then by accident I discovered that one of the buttons on the cloak acted as a switch by which the current inducing the vibrations could be turned on and off. I found this out by the simple process of turning it idly. To my astonishment the button pivoted round in a half-turn and the cloak incontinently vanished. I could still feel its weight and substance in my hand.

"You see!" I cried.

Jansca appeared to take the discovery for granted—and as for Hume—well, I fully believe that by then he was past being astonished by anything.

"I've never seen the principle applied before," he remarked, "but it's been more or less common knowledge for years. Curved light, that's what it is, curved so that it flows round the object instead of being reflected back from it. Once you've found a mechanical method of bending a light ray out of its path, you've achieved practical invisibility."

"I won't say you're entirely wrong," I remarked as I twisted back the button and once more rendered the cloak visible. "In fact I think you're right—up to a point. But apparently the properties aren't constant. They have to be activated by the vibrations set up by this battery."

"I'm afraid I don't quite grasp that," Jansca said with a puzzled air.

"It's simple enough," I told her. "You know that human ears, whether they are Martian, Tellurian or Venusian, have a limited range of audibility."

She nodded.

I went on. "Birds and animals can hear sounds that are too high or too low in the scale to make any impression on our eardrums. The same thing applies to sight. Our eyes are attuned to respond merely to a limited range of vibration. Get above or below that limited range and a thing becomes invisible. It is a result that can be obtained mechanically by speeding up the rate of light vibrations."

"Or by slowing them down," said Hume. "Either would answer, I take it."

"I should imagine so," I said a trifle dubiously. "At any rate this little gadget in the cloak apparently works the miracle so I don't see that the rest matters."

"Doesn't it?" Jansca interrupted. "I should think it rather important."

"Why?" I queried, interested. I knew she had a singularly clear sense of perception in most matters and when she made a suggestion it was usually worth listening to.

"Because," she said slowly, "if we wish to combat this invisible menace must know something about the method they use to produce it."

I FLUNG out my hands and nodded towards the cloak and helmet on table.

"We do," I said. "There's the evidence."

"And your last words," she retorted scathingly, "are evidence that you don't quite realize the nature of one at least of your discoveries."

"Go ahead." I smiled.

"In the first place we found that when we attacked these people with our tubes their visibility returned slowly and gradually. Therefore the ray has power to neutralize the vibrations that induce visibility. Most probably breaks the circuit somehow. Is that plain enough?"

"Of course," I said, springing to my feet. "I see what you're driving at. Our ray becomes effective by using a high scale vibration. It is so high in fact it can also speed up the vital processes of a human being to the very point of dissolution."

"Exactly," said Jansca. "So the vibrations we are seeking must be below, not above, the range of human perception."

"And now," I said, "the sooner we make our discoveries known in the proper quarters the better for the three worlds. None of us are scientists and our deductions may have to be checked for errors but the main point is our ray not only renders our antagonists visible but will also kill them.

It is not necessary to kill them. I think they can be deprived of their invisibility by a non-lethal ray of the same vibratory pitch. How's that?"

"An epoch-making discovery, I should imagine," said Jansca with a slightly sarcastic note in her voice. "Jack, suppose you code this information—you Guards have a code of your own, I believe—and beam it to the representatives of the Council."

I drew my pad towards me, scribbled quickly for some minutes while the other sat silent, awaiting my pleasure. At last I flung down my pencil and looked up.

"I've made it as clear as I possibly can," I said, "though I've had to put some words in English since there is no equivalent in the code I use."

"Want to send it yourself?" said Hume in reference to the message. "I'll have the transmitting room cleared if you wish."

"Doesn't matter," I assured him. "The operator on duty can send it providing he sends it as it stands."

"Right." Hume pushed the button, and waited for the answer to come from the transmitting room. Almost immediately the surface of his vision-plate glowed and the voice of the operator sounded in the room. Hume had left his communicator open so that we could hear every word that was said.

"Operator? Captain Hume here. Message to be sent at once. Yes, general call to Guard-ships. Is your vision-plate clear? Good. Here's the message then."

He took the first sheet on which I had written my report—special sheets prepared for the purpose and cut to size—and placed it in a clamp that held it steady against the vision-plate. A few seconds passed, then came the operator's voice through the communicator, "Next sheet, please, Captain."

The process was repeated until the sheets were exhausted, then again came the calm, unhurried voice of the operator, "Message completed, Captain. I'll call through when I get an answer."

The light in the vision-plate surface died, and Hume handed me back the sheets. "You know how best to deal with these," he said meaningly.

I wadded them up, dropped them in a basin under the water-faucet, and allowed a trickle to play on them. The sheets spread out, dissolved into liquid and passed down the flush pipe into the depths of space.

I was turning back from my work of destruction when the communicator sounded again.

"Message for Interplanetary Guard Officer Sanders, aboard Space-Liner *Cosmos*," came in the operator's metallic tones. "Message begins. 'Space-Liner *Cosmos* required to report immediately at Martian rendezvous base. Signature Tambard.' Message ends."

I whistled softly. I had met Tambard once or twice in the course of my work. A singularly dynamic personality when roused to action, yet one whom it took much to stir. That he should be directing investigations in person away from his own planet suggested that matters might already have reached a stage of greater seriousness than we had imagined possible.

Chapter 13

The Gaudien Base

EXACTLY twenty-three and a half hours after receiving the message we arrived at Gaudien. On board the *Cosmos* things had already reached the stage where it was manifestly impossible to keep the real state of affairs hidden any longer from the passengers.

Rather than have wild rumors racing round the ship I prepared a digest of the situation and had it posted on the various notice boards. There was no sense in pretending there was no occasion for alarm. Instead I called on all to give every possible help to the staff to enable them to maintain smooth running.

My appeal, I fancy, justified the terms in which it was cast by the result it achieved. There was no panic, no sign of alarm anywhere. A touch of anxiety and apprehension I did notice and Jansca reported that she had literally been besieged by questioners. She handled them all with her good-humored Martian tactfulness.

Feeling from the first that we required someone who, while still one of the passengers, could speak with a certain authority, I had appointed her to the position. Her work was simply to keep the social activities moving, and deprecate any alarmist tendencies.

The Council, I was sure, would have no hesitation in appointing her an honorary Guard once my report went in and they had time to study it. Both she and her father would certainly value the silver comet's tail that is the symbol of that honor far more than they would the Interplanetary Guardsman's own badge. After all not one civilian in a million ever qualifies for that honorary award.

To come to Gaudien. Long before we made contact, that huge structure of glittering metal, a veritable city in the void, was visible against the background of interstellar space.

In the early days of interplanetary travel it became increasingly obvious that the Guard-ships must have some base in the void to obviate the

necessity of having to run for their home planets for repairs and fuel. We Earthlings were fortunate in that in our own Moon we had a ready-made base a quarter of a million miles away. So on the side of our satellite that is invisible from Earth our refuelling and repair depot was established.

Mars, less, fortunate, had to construct such a base in space. The result is a lasting monument to the friendship between three worlds, that banished the last of the ill-feeling which lingered for years after the disastrous business of the War of the Planets.

The plans for the Gaudien base were actually based on designs drawn up so long ago as the year 1929 by Captain Hermann Noordung, a German engineer and authority on mechanics, who was perhaps the first of all Earth-men to deal with the problems of space navigation seriously.

The final result is all the more remarkable when one considers that the greater part of the work was done in free space, that only the nucleus was built on Mars and the rest of the floating base built up bit by bit by working in space suits of metal, which again we owe to Captain Noordung's fertile invention.

These space suits were necessary the beginning, since the men had work in an airless, heatless void under remarkably trying conditions. But once Gaudien—for so the base was named after the Martian engineer who played the greatest part in its construction was completed, the scientists immediately set to work to provide it with an atmosphere of its own.

The huge city in space, for such it was, was alive with lights, lights so confusing that only the Guards' captains actually know the meaning of them all. Ordinary space liners usually are content to give the place a wide berth, and when they do not it is because either they are in trouble or in charge of a Guard.

As the clamps closed over our hull and drew it down softly into the nest prepared for it, a gangway was run up against our main entrance port, and the moment it was opened half a dozen Martian officials strode through.

I was there at the entrance to meet them and I recognized the foremost as the redoubtable Tambard himself. To my surprise I saw just behind the dapper birdlike figure of little Clinigo, the Venusian member of Council. I had not expected him and the latest news had been that he was on his home planet.

Tambard was tall even for a Martian but he was built so perfectly in proportion that only when one saw him sitting beside an Earth-man did his height become apparent. He towered over me and there was a frown on his face that I liked but ill. However, his first words set me at my ease.

"Ah, Clinigo," he said to his confrere with that easy disregard of all titles that marked the Council as men apart, "here is Sanders himself. Clinigo, your good fortune to meet in the one of the smartest space-captains in the Interplanetary Service. Tellus has the honor of producing him."

LONG before I had become acquainted properly with Tambard, I always fancied there was an undercurrent of sarcasm in words such as these but now I knew him well enough to realize he meant exactly what he said. He was pleased with me, pleased with my poor way of handling things and he said so in the Martian fashion, extravagantly.

Clinigo stepped forward at the introduction with his right hand on his heart in the formal fashion of the Venusian and I brought my hand up smartly to the salute. I was no longer in mufti but had donned my uniform, the skyblue of the Guards with the silver Guard-ship on each wing of the collar and the silver lace design of the planetary system—the badge of my rank—on my left sleeve.

The two stood a little apart after that, ignoring me for the moment as was the custom, while the port chief or his deputy examined Hume's papers. The port authority moved back. Hume handed the initialed papers to the purser. There was a pause, then Tambard crooked his little finger at me.

"Sanders," he said, "we must talk things over. No, not here on the ship, but on Gaudien. I think you have much to tell us that was hinted at in your report. You mentioned others whose words would support your conclusions. Is Hume one?"

"He is one," I agreed.

"And the other? She?" He made the slightest motion of his head in Jansca's direction and I could swear that a smile curved the corners of his mouth.

"She," I said, striving to hold my voice so that it would not betray me. "She, sir, is the other."

"Who is she?" The question was rapped out.

"One Jansca Dirka, the daughter of a director of the Canal Company of Mars," I answered. "She also," I added, "and this, sir, is the more important in my eyes, is my affianced and my invaluable assistant."

His eyes twinkling Tambard turned to Clinigo. "There seems some magic in these Earth-men, Clinigo," he said, "that in a few short days one of them can not only win a Martian maiden but can fire her with his own spirit, so that she can qualify for an honorary membership of the Guard." Clinigo smiled a little. I think he was not very interested in us save in so far as the information we had to give concerned him and his office.

"An apt helpmeet, I should think," he said.

Tambard shrugged. I often wondered in the days that followed if there was any possibility of friction between the pair but luckily for the planets it never came to that.

"Ah, well," said Tambard. "This conference now… " He touched me lightly on the arm, beckoned Hume and Jansca to come with us.

Tambard apparently was using with Clinigo the room of an officer in command as an office. At least I saw there, when we came to it, many gadgets that were not usual, some of which bore traces of having been hurriedly affixed and quite recently.

The Martian motioned us to seats but surprisingly it was Hume who first broke the silence. "My ship and the passengers, sir?" he queried.

"Are safe," said Tambard. "The passengers will not get into mischief, for they will not be allowed to land. It is scarcely worth while. All of you will be on your way to Tlanan again before thirty of your Earth minutes have passed."

Good news, I thought. Then a sudden doubt assailed me. Was Tambard including me in what he said? I would dearly have liked to have asked him and cleared the matter up at once, but I did not dare. He addressed himself first to me.

"Start from the moment of sailing," he said, "and tell us all that has the slightest bearing on the case."

I told him everything, suppressing only those matters of purely private concern which had transpired between Jansca and myself. And, of course, seeing Clinigo was present, I mentioned nothing of that purely Martian secret, the Oxcta pellets.

Both members of the Council listened attentively to the end, when Clinigo spoke for the first time. "An admirable exposition," he remarked.

"Even more admirable is the fact that despite its condensation you have been able to add little of material value to your message."

TAMBARD sat silent and thoughtfully his fingers drumming noiselessly on the table-top in front of him.

"An odd situation," he said at last. "Frankly—we can all be outspoken here and know that nothing goes beyond the walls of this room—we don't quite know what to make of it. If an attack had been made on any of our ships, we would know what to expect. But so far nothing of the kind has occurred. The only bloodshed, the only destruction achieved rests at our door. Or yours rather."

"One moment," I spoke. "That explosion, when the stranger ship flew to pieces, to my mind throws a sidelight on things. I reason it was the ignition of high explosives that caused her end. And, I'd say, those high explosives, their nature whatever it was, were intended for a purpose."

"I agree," said Tambard coolly. "But these explosives were not used against our ships. Your space-visitors—we must call them that for want of a better name—boarded each ship they came to and seemingly left it in the state they found it. The obvious conclusion is that they boarded it for purposes of examination."

"Infusoria under the microscope." For the life of me I could not help using that century-and-a-half-old phrase of Wells. Tambard looked puzzled, so I explained the allusion delicately, of course, for *The War of the Worlds* as a book ever was a sore point with Martians.

"Quite so," said Tambard when he had grasped what I meant. "I would agree without reservation if we seemed to be dealing with vastly higher intelligences than our own. They are using forces whose existence and of many of whose methods of application we are already aware. Given time our scientists can puzzle them out."

"The point," said Clinigo, "is that we be given time. Tambard, why are we being studied?"

"Our ships? It may merely be in a spirit of scientific curiosity though I doubt that. Most probably we are dealing with spies."

"In the message I received," I interrupted "there was a phrase referring to a menace to the Universe."

Tambard's face went grave. "That is so," he agreed. "I was responsible for that. It was my suggestion, but Clinigo here agreed with me and Harran is already of the same opinion."

"May I ask a question?" Jansca spoke and Tambard nodded.

"I'm not sure that any can tell me," she said daringly, "but I should imagine that we might arrive at some more definite conclusion about the menace we have to face if we knew with whom we are to deal. Can you suggest from where the space-visitors are likely to have come?"

"They do not come from Tlanan, Venus or Tellus, of that we can be certain," the Martian returned. "The major planets—such as are inhabited—possess no peoples so far advanced in space-navigation. There remain to be considered then but two possible planets, the outermost and the innermost."

"Pluto and Mercury!" I exclaimed.

"Exactly," said Tambard. "Of Pluto we know little, of Mercury even less. One far from the Sun, the other too near it to allow observations to be made with any degree of accuracy."

"Of the two I would favor Mercury," I told him. And when he looked questioningly I explained what I had learned of Nomo Kell. Apparently he had not paid much attention to that part of the story. Now I stressed the point, particularly what Parey had told me about the argument over the condition of Mercury in which Nomo Kell had flatly declared the others did not know what they were talking about.

"There is always the possibility," he said thoughtfully. "I wonder if we could learn anything from the body."

"The dead space-visitor we kept on the *Cosmos*?" Hume queried.

"Yes," said Tambard. "Only he's not on the *Cosmos* now but down in the laboratories. Our scientists—"

He stopped abruptly. "Excuse me," he said, and turned and whispered something to Clinigo. I saw Clinigo nod and rise to his feet. He sauntered to the door and passed through. Tambard turned to me.

"Clinigo and I agreed," he said with a curious half-smile, "that it would be well if he went down to the laboratories and had a look about himself. He can use his eyes—he is trained to observation of that sort. Now—someone here has something to say that had better be said before Clinigo returns." Tambard looked meaningfully towards Jansca.

Chapter 14

The New Command

"I have," Jansca said simply. I stared at her, then turned to Tambard. Somehow, during the course of conversation, a word, a sign must have passed between them, something that a Martian alone could understand.

"Speak on," Tambard advised her. "Time is short."

"It's only this," she said hurriedly, "though it's rather important. The reason why Jack"—she nodded towards me—"and I were not stupefied when those people boarded the *Cosmos* is that we'd each had some Oxcta not long before."

"So that's it," said Tambard gravely. "I thought from the mention of emergency suits as a temporary measure"—he was referring to a line in my message—"that there was something more to come. But—Oxcta!"

He looked from me to Hume and the latter colored. "I'm afraid," he said apologetically, "that the fault was mine. I gave it to Sanders."

Tambard stared at him a space, then his stern face relaxed. "You have the right to carry it, of course," he said.

"You've acquired that right because of your wife… a Tlananian lady. You also have the right to exercise your discretion as to whom you should offer it."

He turned easily to Jansca. "You had your own supply, I suppose?" he said.

Jansca shook her head. "I got mine from Jack."

"Ah." Tambard's eyes came round to me. "And you got it from—?"

Hume pulled himself upright in his seat. "From me," he said. "I used my discretion."

For a long second Tambard brooded over us. But again Jansca saved the situation.

"I don't think there's any question about the rights or wrongs of the case," she said with a touch of indignation. "Jack is perfectly entitled to Oxcta, even more so than Captain Hume."

"He has not yet married a Martian wife," Tambard reminded her.

"But"—Jansca's voice quivered a little—"but he is of the blood—a Sonjhon!"

Hume uttered a wordless exclamation, Tambard stared at her long and thoughtfully.

"You did that?" he said with a note of perfect amazement in his voice. "You thought enough of him for that?"

"I would do it again. But"—her voice faltered—"I did not expect so soon to have to make it known."

Tambard sighed. "Perhaps it is just as well," he said softly. "It may simplify matters considerably. However, dismiss the matter of the Oxcta from your minds for the present. I'll attend to all that it implies. Will you take over a new command, Sanders?"

I hesitated. A command of a Martian Guard-ship fleet, temporary though it might be, was not a thing lightly to be undertaken. Even had I been a free agent I would have debated before accepting. As it was even though on vacation I was still attached to the Earth service.

"There's nothing I'd like better," I said at last, "but I can't decide of myself without Harran's permission."

"Harran has already given it," said Tambard patiently.

I think I must have looked some of the chagrin I felt. Duty tugged me one way. The thoughts of my interrupted holiday and of Jansca drew me the other.

Tambard looked up at me thoughtfully. "Still," he said, "unless the unexpected happens you will not be required immediately. I would suggest you resume your interrupted voyage to Tlanan in the *Cosmos*— it might not be wise follow your original intention and proceed to Venus—and wait there for orders or developments, whichever comes first."

"I shall do that," I said stiffly. A holiday of this sort with the hourly prospect of having to part from Jansca at a moment's notice was not so inviting as it seemed at first glance.

"A pity," he said musingly, "that you are not mated. It would solve many difficulties."

"And if we were mated," Jansca asked interestedly, "what difference would it make?"

"I could give you place with your lord on his ship as second in command," Tamard said steadily. "It is no new thing! You are too young yourself to remember the old custom, but I—"

HE stopped abruptly and his eye clouded. It was then I realized how old Tambard must be. If truth be told he was well into his second century. Then he would remember, might even have participated in those wars that twenty or thirty years before the coming of the Earth-men to the Red Planet had welded the Martians into one nation. Wasn't there some story—dimly recalled—of his having lost his wife in that conflict?

"I will take that place then," Jansca announced with decision. "That is"—abruptly she remembered that I had not been consulted and she dropped her eyes—"if my lord is willing."

"Jansca," I said, "I'm an Earth-man and not so conversant with your ways as I might be, so that must be my excuse if I say anything you think I should not say. You're a dear to make such a suggestion and I'd jump at it if it wasn't for the risk."

"What risk?" she asked.

"The risk you would run if you came with me."

"The risk you would run yourself?"

"That is different."

"The difference," she said slowly, "is that with you I would be sharing in your danger. But if I did not come I should have to remain—no, not at home, for it not be home without you—at Tlanan and eat out my heart with anxiety."

I placed my hand on her shoulder and gently pressed her back into her seat. "Tambard Mitaka," I said formally, "Jansca Dirka will, as my mate, take command."

Tambard inclined his head in assent. "It is carved in stone," using the phrase that to a Martian is a decree that is unalterable.

Jansca gave me one look, caught my hand pressed it in her own.

"Sensible man," came in a rumble from Hume.

Accident or chance, call it what you will, had timed it all nicely. Another second or so and the door opened and Clingo entered. I took it from his expression that he had not been as successful as he had hoped.

"I went—I looked—I saw," he said, "and I confess that I am baffled. He is like no man of any of the planets I have ever seen. A ridge of horny substance across the head, and purple eyes. No one has ever seen such a being alive."

"Nomo Kell," I said quickly. "I told you of him."

Clinigo nodded. "So you did," said Tambard. "Yet Nomo Kell was posing as a Martian."

"Of twenty years residence," I reminded him.

"About the time we were getting used to you Earth-men and your strange divergences of racial types," Tambard said thoughtfully. "We were astounded at the types that were coming from Earth to visit us."

"It would have been comparatively easy then for such a man as Nomo Kell to have taken up residence and qualified for citizenship. But perhaps if we get his prints and see where they were issued we may be able to trace back. Someone must have sponsored him. If we can trace that person we may get at some solution."

He stood up. "Clinigo," he said, "I think we may be needed more on our respective planets than here. I, for my part, will repair to Mars by the *Cosmos*. I do not want to detail a Guard-ship to take me back. It may be wanted here yet. And you?"

Clinigo smiled, a little sadly I thought. "Your suggestion is good," he said. "I, too, will come on the *Cosmos*. It is to make Shangun on its return trip and should get me home without undue delay. But one thing I would suggest. While the *Cosmos* is stopping over at Tlanan it should take on extra armament purely as a precautionary measure."

"I thought," I said, perhaps unwisely, "that it was intended to call in all space-ships."

"It was," Tambard answered. "But we have reconsidered that since receiving your report. You have shown us a method of combatting them, where before we had none. Also we have decided that there is nothing to be gained by calling all ships in and starting a panic. Still it is for every captain to say for himself whether he will take the risk."

He turned to Hume. The latter smiled wryly. "You needn't worry about me," he answered.

Chapter 15

The Red Planet

MARS glowed ahead in the void, and grew rapidly. Those of us to whom it meant the end of the voyage sighed with relief. What those others who had yet to make Shangun in Venus thought of matters, I cannot say. Hume himself assured me he was not worrying.

I fancy he had a hope that perhaps, before it was time for him to resume his voyage, things would have advanced so far that all commercial vessels would be warned out of space and only the fighting machines allowed to take off.

Meanwhile the *Cosmos* had become to all intents and purposes a Guard-ship. Tambard and Clinigo with my assistance had taken over control and one or another of us three was constantly in the transmission room. Messages were coming over thick and fast, and Harran was beginning to warm up the ether with his suggestions. If Mercury were the abode of these intelligences we had encountered, Venus and Earth, being nearer the Sun, were likely to be attacked in that order. Mars would come last of the three.

The main Martian space observatory on Chimes, one of the many asteroids or minor planets in the belt between Mars and Jupiter, had received orders to concentrate all observations on Pluto, the outermost of the planets. No reports had yet come in but somehow we all felt that nothing would be discovered in that direction.

It was the business of the Venusian astronomers to keep Mercury under observation. Not that we hoped for anything startling or even decisive. Mercury has always been an elusive planet as far as observation is concerned; its nearness to the Sun has rendered study of its surface by telescope a matter of considerable difficulty and no space-ship captain has yet been found venturesome enough to conduct an expedition in person.

Our landing at Tlanan took place early in the morning, though already the heat in the thin Martian atmosphere, thin compared with Earth, was beginning to be almost overpowering. Yet when all is said and done it is a dry enough heat, easier to stand than the humidity of Venus.

To prevent regrettable accidents we were all passed through airlocks and gradually accustomed to the differences in atmospheric pressure and it was quite an hour from the time of our landing before we set foot on Martian soil. Tlanan I had seen many times before and always there is something new about the city to charm the eye.

Built beside one of the main canals of the planet's system it has been constructed and toned that it seems part of the landscape, a landscape that in many ways is reminiscent of Earth scenery in Egypt. All these Martian cities are what one might call dual-purpose constructions, for they are built to be comfortable both by night and by day, very necessary when one consider the great variation of temperature one encounters there in the Martian equivalent of our twenty-four-hour Earth day.

Ordinarily I would either have remained on the *Cosmos* during her stay in port or else have taken quarters at one of the various hostels run by the Interplanetary Tourist Bureau. I think it was with some idea of doing the latter that I gathered up my meager baggage, and was casting about for transport when Jansca detached herself from the crowd and came towards me.

"I've been looking for you," she said. "I was afraid you might have strayed off or done something foolish."

"Foolish?" I echoed with a laugh.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Where are you going to stay?" she queried.

"At one of the hostels," I told her. "My purse won't run to anything more opulent."

"You utterly irresponsible Earth-man!" she cried. "Don't you know there is only one place in all of Mars where you can stop?"

"No," I said with a faint touch of alarm. Was this some new regulation of which I had not heard? "Where, Jansca?"

SHE slipped her arm through mine. "Where but with us?"

"I don't think I should. The trouble"—Her face clouded. "Our conventions are not yours, I know, Jack," she said slowly, "but if you wish to give a Sonjhon a deadly insult refuse his offer of hospitality."

"My dear, I did not mean it that way. But I did not wish to be a source of trouble and inconvenience to you."

She bent swiftly and brushed my lips with hers. "Your habit of kissing," she said softly, "is the sweetest thing that Earth has taught to Mars." She dropped her voice to a whisper and drew closer to me. "Jack," she said tremulously, "time may be short for us. The sooner we are mated the longer we will have to ourselves. Father and I have talked the matter over."

I nodded, my heart too full for words. It was what I wanted most in life and the one thing I was dubious of suggesting. "That's settled then," she said firmly and turning, beckoned. For the first time I noticed that her father had been standing back well out of earshot, obediently waiting, great man though he was, until his masterful daughter had said her say and brought me to her way of thinking.

His and Jansca's baggage made a formidable heap beside my puny lot. I was wondering how we would set about removing it when a robot—or to give him his Martian name a Toro—appeared. Much of the menial labor on the planet was done by these mechanical men, though to give them their due the average Martian was not backward in putting his shoulder to the wheel when the necessity arose. Dirka spoke into the televox apparatus situated in the Toro's metal diaphragm, giving him orders that were picked up by an exceedingly sensitive cell which in some very ingenious fashion operated the mechanism. The Toro picked up as much of the baggage as he could conveniently carry in his metal hands, and unerringly led the party through the exit doors of the building to the duralmac road outside. A small battery car just large enough to hold the three of us and our luggage was standing outside.

Dirka took the wheel while Jansca nestled in between us and soon we were speeding along the duralmac track at a pace that well-nigh took my breath away. In the void, curiously enough, speeds approaching that of light do not seem to matter. But on the planet's surface a hundred miles or so an hour seemed perfectly appalling.

The ride lasted only a matter of twenty minutes. We pulled up outside a pleasant little house, beautifully shaded by dilium trees with a slope at the rear to the sparkling waters of the Great Canal. A few launches floated on the canal's smooth surface, pleasure boats, the only form of water travel that the Martian knows on his own oceanless world.

Dirka's wife, of course, was no longer living. I would have guessed that from the first even if I had not been told so by Jansca, for no Martian

of the upper classes ever travels without his family if it can possibly be avoided. There were only servants in the house, who did the light work, while the rougher jobs were attended to by the Toros. It was a Toro who met us at the entrance and brought in our luggage, and another Toro, of a more highly specialized type, took the car round to some sort of garage.

JANSCA disappeared as soon as we entered the house with the intimation that she would see me at nondal, the local equivalent of our lunch, leaving it to her father to conduct me to my rooms. My apartments were three in all, a bedroom, a sort of study and sitting room combined with the walls lined with shelves containing book-machines, and a private bathroom.

"You may want to bathe after your journey," Dirka remarked as he showed me the bathroom. "You may use it as much as you wish, you understand, providing you do not draw the water from the canal. That is kept solely for culinary purposes."

"Where then," I said, "do you get enough to be so lavish in your bathrooms?"

"Here," he said, pointing to two cylinders which stood side by side over the bath. "You will find there all the water you need."

They looked curiously like gas cylinders to me and I bent forward to look at the wording on the plate of each. It was in Martian characters, however, which I have never learned to read.

"You do not know our language?" Dirka asked. "No? Well this"—he pointed to one cylinder—"is hydrogen and that is oxygen. They are recombined to form water and the process is automatically regulated."

I enjoyed the bath, the first that I had been able to have since leaving Earth. The artificial water, however, seemed to lack something I was used to. Say what we will no synthetic product, no matter how chemically correct in its method of manufacture, can quite equal the work of nature.

Nevertheless there was a freshening quality in the bath that made me feel rest was out of the question. For want of something to do I strolled into the study and sitting room and began to examine the book-machines.

In reality they were reels of fine wire which when run through a machine specially made for the purpose told the story with voices suitable to the characters. One could too if one wished, by pressing a button on

one side of the machine, set a series of synchronized pictures moving that added to the verisimilitude of the story.

I may be a little old-fashioned in some ways but I have never taken altogether to the book-machines. A story, after all, is not all dialogue nor is it all acting and one misses that literary touch that flares up so often in the old print books.

I was feeling more or less at a loose end and wondering whether I should light my pipe, when someone knocked on the door. I opened it to find Jansca waiting there for me.

Chapter 16

The Calm Before the Storm

FOR the moment I fancied she was the bearer of evil tidings but one look at her smiling face drove the idea from my mind.

"I hope," she said, almost breathlessly, "that you don't mind my coming see you? You weren't resting?"

"I wasn't," I declared. "I was wondering how I was going to pass the time."

She entered, shut the door behind her and ran her eye round the room. "So you've been looking at the book-machines," she said. "You won't find much there. What a pity you don't know our language."

"I do in a way," I told her. "I can understand what's being said to me, but read it I cannot. The characters puzzle me."

"Of course." She nodded. "All communications are made in a sort of common language, aren't they?"

"That's so," I agreed smiling. I had an idea what was coming.

"What is it? What is it called?" asked.

"That, Jansca mine, is a secret I cannot tell even you. Some day soon when you receive your appointment I can make it plain to you—but not till then."

She looked at me with grave eyes. "I'd be the last to try and persuade you be false to your bond," she said soberly. "Yet it was not mere idle curiosity that prompted me. It was the wish to share in all your knowledge in the hope that I might be able to take some of the work off your shoulders."

"I know," I said gently. A thought struck me. "Has further word of any sort come through on the news-machines?"

"None as yet," she said in a strained voice. "But I fear that this is merely calm before the storm. Our time grows short. We must make the most of it."

"When… ?" I was beginning, then stopped, for I was not quite sure how phrase my question.

She must have read my thoughts. "When can we be mated?" she said.

"Yes, Jansca. The sooner the sweeter to my way of thinking though I have no wish to rush you."

"Rush me?" She looked prettily puzzled for the moment, then the meaning of it dawned on her. "You mean hurry me? You could never do that in this matter—I am too unmaidenly anxious."

I caught her in my arms and drew to me. "I think you are adorable," I said. "But you have not answered the question."

"A day then, perhaps two," she said. "My father must be judge of that and I would not run counter to his wishes. But no day can be too soon. Who knows but that the destiny of the Universe may be knit up with the course of our love? You and I together can work miracles."

"It is questionable," I said grimly, "whether they are the sort of miracles that might stem the tide of invasion."

"You do not know," she said softly with a light in her eyes. "My father… there are things you will be told… I should not tell you now." She spoke hurriedly, ending incoherently, as though she were afraid her tongue might betray her into breaking confidences.

Somewhere in the distance a bell tinkled softly, a faint silvery note that brought us back to the immediate present with a jerk.

"Nondal hour," she exclaimed. "So soon. How time has passed."

She glanced in the mirror, passed herself as presentable, then took my arm. She drew me down the spacious hall to the room where the meal was served. Dirka was waiting for us, and his face lit up with smiles as he saw us coming, our arms linked, our faces afire with happiness.

The Martian meal lingers in my memory, will linger perhaps long after most other things have faded. It was the setting and the company that made it memorable, though the course of it for the greater part followed the prescribed ritual. Our conversation came round by insensible degrees to the matter uppermost in the minds of us all, the possibility of invasion. A little to my surprise Dirka was not inclined to accept the idea. He merely remarked that it had happened and would doubtless happen again but that he knew of no recorded case where the invaders, even with superior science at their disposal, had managed to establish themselves for any length of time in the conquered country.

"What planet are you talking about?" I queried.

"All of them, I suppose I had better say," he answered with a smile, "but of Venus I cannot be sure. Both Mars and Earth have had their visitations."

"From what planets?" I asked with interest.

HE shrugged his shoulders. "Who knows?" he said. "The very fact of these invasions is buried under the litter of history."

"But," I persisted, "if you know so little of that side of it how can you be sure that actually there have been invasions?"

"Legend, folk-lore, even fairy tales." He met my eyes with a smile in his. "Your own Earth legends are full of such things. That has been my hobby these many years, the interpretations of many of your various races' so-called myths in the light of this theory. I can give you two instances at least."

"What are they?" I begged.

"You have a country on your Earth in the continent called Asia, a land sometimes referred to as the Celestial Empire though it has been a republic for over a hundred of your years."

"China," I said. "Go on."

"Did not their old Emperors call themselves the Sons of Heaven? That may or may not be of value in the last analysis. But the legends of that land are full of tales of dragons, monstrous flying things, breathing fire and smoke and pouring destruction on the country."

"The myths of all our countries have references to them," I pointed out.

"I should be surprised if they had not," he answered. "What could they be but space-ships?"

"Admitting that, what became of the invaders?"

"Any of a hundred things. Some of them may even have survived, have married into an alien tribe and carried on some of their culture and attainments. Your histories are full of stories of races that have little in common with their neighbors, that still preserve strange rites and ancient customs, that seem at times to have lost a culture that was once theirs."

I thought of the Basques, of the pre-Christian civilization in Ireland, of isolated cultures scattered throughout ancient America. I had to admit that what he said was quite feasible.

"Again," he went on, "scarcely a nation, scarcely a race in your planet but has mixed up in its folk-lore strange tales of bright lights in the sky,

of visitations impossible to explain by the ordinary laws of Nature as known to these peoples."

"So much for Earth," I said. "And Mars?"

"Our recorded history goes further back than yours but we have only legends. But it is odd that so many of our legends should agree with yours as though they had a common origin."

It was a fascinating subject. As a matter of pure speculation we could have talked about it all day. But there was another matter, one closer to our hearts, that Jansca and I wished her father to discuss with us.

"We would with your permission be mated before we go," said Jansca demurely. "And, father mine, it is well to bear in mind that the call may come any day at any hour of the day."

"I have thought of that," he said. "I see no ground for delay, since delay would bring happiness to no one. The hour is yours to choose."

She rose from her seat, came to her father, put her arm about his neck and kissed him passionately. He looked startled for the moment, then smiled.

"An Earth custom," he said softly, "but a pleasing one."

We might have said more but almost at that moment, while we were still feeling our way through a rather awkward pause, the communicator wailed. Dirka took up the audiphones and clapped them to his ears, for this was a private set, where conversation and reply could both be kept secret if need be. He listened in silence for a moment before turned to us with consternation on his face. "It is Tambard," he said oddly. "He wishes to come right over as he has a matter of extreme urgency to discuss."

"We are at his absolute disposal," I said with a queer tightening of the heart.

Chapter 17

The Storm Breaks

FIVE minutes later Tambard arrived. I was surprised at the change in him. He had seemed sprightly when I parted from him some hours before. Now he looked as though he had spent a sleepless night and a day of care and worry to follow. He took the seat to which Dirka invited him, but declined all offer of food or drink.

"All communication with Venus ceased two hours ago," he said deliberately. Out of courtesy to me, it may be recorded, he used Earth-terms whenever possible right throughout our conversation. "We have been unable to get a message through, and none of the regular calls from there have reached us. I have been in touch with Harran. Some of the Earth stations report having received weak signals— something about 'attack' and 'invasion' and that was all."

We looked at each other as he ended, seeing the thing we had dreaded coming to pass.

"But that," Tambard went on, "is not all. I wish it were. Harran and I from our respective planets called up our outermost Guard-ships, where they junction with the Venusian lines. They were not acknowledged. There was a silence lasting half an hour. Then came a reply, not from the flagship but from a smaller scout on the edge of the fleet. It ran, 'Can transmit but cannot receive messages. Receiving apparently hopelessly damaged in fight. Invisible foe suddenly descending, wiped out combined Guard-ship fleets before attack could be resisted. *M. Ten*, sole survivor, transmitting and heading for Gaudien at velocity.'"

Tambard paused and again his eyes swept our little circle. "No further details have come through. If *M. Ten* does not reach Gaudien soon we can only conclude that there has been no survivor at all."

"Then," said Dirka, "what is there to be done?"

"Dirka, it is you, through your daughter and her mate here, who may yet save us. We want water, canal water, as much as we can get even if all Mars has go on thirst rations."

"We'll have to live on the synthetic product if it is necessary to save the planets," Dirka said oddly. "What is it? Atomic power, that what you want?"

Tambard nodded. I was frankly puzzled.

"Am I supposed to know?" I asked. "Because if I am to handle this matter I think I should know."

Tambard told me. "We have perfected an atomic weapon—a disintegrating ray obtained by breaking up the atomic structure of water. We hoped we would never have to use it and we kept the knowledge secret. Now we find we have made little preparation. Dirka, write me an order to pump your canals dry if need be."

Without hesitation the other drew a pad from the pocket of his tunic and in crabbed Martian characters wrote the necessary permission. He handed it to Tambard with a wry face. "It may well be Mars' death warrant," he said queerly.

"Without it we face certain annihilation," Tambard pointed out. "Now"—he turned to me—"I would discuss the rest with you."

Dirka made an abrupt movement. "I shall leave you," he suggested.

"Do nothing of the sort," Tambard insisted. "What we have to say concerns you. I want this young man's help—Mars needs him badly—and a man with divided mind is of no use to anyone. He cannot leave Jansca behind since his thoughts would be on her, not on what he had to face, and he cannot take her even as his second in command unless they are mated."

"I see. So the sooner they are mated the better then," Dirka remarked. He spoke quite easily, calmly, without the slightest trace of hesitation.

BUT I think Dirka realized the need was desperate. No doubt, too, he knew his daughter well enough to rely on her judgment.

"Good," said Tambard. "We will attend to the details of that in a little moment then. Meanwhile other matters await our attention."

"Before we get to the point of making suggestions," I answered, "I'd like to have some idea of what I am to command."

"The newest, swiftest space-ship we can find for you," he said with a twinkle in his eye.

"If it narrows down to a question of speed and novelty," I remarked, "there's nothing in the known Universe to beat the *Cosmos*. Unfortunately she's a liner."

"Embodying all the latest improvements and built with a purpose," said Tambard. "As you doubtless know this is her trial trip and later she was to be put on an outer planetary schedule. She is the last word in space-ships. If you're satisfied with her, we'll commandeer her."

"Then the *Cosmos* let it be," I agreed. "Now, what surprises have we in store?"

"In the way of armament? Beyond this atomic weapon none—and even with that I should imagine you'll find it rather difficult fighting an invisible enemy."

"Not altogether invisible," I corrected. "The locators will enable us to spot them and then, of course, the ray tubes… "

Tambard brought his hand down on the table with a thump.

"The ray, of course!" he exclaimed.

"It was that which made them visible. We can rig up projectors—no need to make them lethal—that will nullify the greatest advantage they so far possess over us."

"Can they be rigged in time?"

"Yes, in ample time. Anything more you'd like to suggest?"

"Several things," I said. "Can these projectors be rigged to give higher vibratory rate than is necessary to counteract these invisibility waves?"

"It should not be impossible," said Tambard. He made a note on a pad beside him. "What else?"

"A question of diplomacy," I said smiling. "I'll have to have a crew of Martians because Oxcta will play an important part in the campaign. I wonder if there will be any friction due to an Earth-man's being in command."

"No, there will be no difficulty over that, particularly since you will have a Martian mate. Your crew will all be picked men."

"Can I make one suggestion then? There's one man of the present complement I'd sooner have with me as navigator than any other. That's Hume, her present commander."

Tambard nodded. "It can be arranged," he said affably.

He rose to go. "Dirka," he said, "walk a little way with me to the door. I would discuss these young people and how best to help them in the short time at their disposal."

Together they went out, leaving us to ourselves and our troubled thoughts. I looked moodily across the table to my love. "Jansca," I said, "there is yet time if you wish to change your mind."

A look of blank horror showed in her eyes, then she got up and came round to me. "Is it," she asked with a quaver in her voice, "that you no longer love me?"

"I say it, Jansca," I said unsteadily, "however much it hurts me, because I love you now more than ever."

"That," she said softly, "is all the answer I require."

I made the only reply possible in such circumstances.

Chapter 18

The Extra Passengers

OUR mating took place in the late afternoon of that same day. The ceremony was a quiet one, attended only by Dirka, Tambard himself and two official witnesses—one of each sex—though it followed the strict Martian ritual which had not been varied by word or phrase for centuries. We were then free to go about our own affairs until the *Cosmos* was ready for us.

The call came the next day. We loaded what little baggage we were taking into the back of the car and, with Dirka accompanying us, set out along the duralmac road to headquarters.

Tambard, Clinigo and a man I did not know were standing by the entrance to the covered gangway that led to *Cosmos*' main deck. As they saw us the Martian chief started forward. Clinigo, I noticed, hung back.

Hume was waiting for us on the control deck, his face a trifle paler than usual. "So it has come to this, Jack?" he murmured as we met. "Well, in a way I'm not sorry. I'll do what you want."

He stepped back as Tambard wished to speak to me.

"I've nothing much to add," the Martian said slowly. "You'll head for Gaudien first. They haven't all the necessary apparatus there but you may find a few ships ready to accompany you. Take good care of your passengers."

"Passengers?" I echoed in surprise. "This is no pleasure trip."

"So I told them," said Tambard, "they do not agree. Clinigo—"

I interrupted him, swinging on the Venusian. "You mean you're coming with us, sir?" I said.

He nodded. "What else is left for me to do? My planet is in greater danger than either Earth or Mars. You understand"—his eyes met mine levelly—"I sail with you under your orders."

"I understand," I said, "and it is well. But the other passenger?"

Tambard motioned the other man forward. "This," he said to me, "is Arenack. Perhaps you may find a use for him."

I looked Arenack over with interest. Of course I had heard of him—who had not? A scientist of no mean attainments, I had heard his name in connection with the atomic structure.

I took a liking to Arenack from the first. His mother, born on Mars, had been the child of a Martian man and a Venusian woman. His father had been a native of Earth. An odd mixture of races, yet one that gave him a peculiar genius. Tambard had little more to say. The Martian shook hands all round, leaving me to the last.

"Go," he said, as he bade me farewell, "go, and the good wishes of the planet go with you. Jansca, bring him back safe and sound."

"Or I do not come myself," she said with dignity. "That, you know, Tambard."

ANOTHER moment and the shore party took its leave, and went off down the gangway.

Once out in space and heading for Gaudien, I could take things easier and hand over to Hume. The first thing I did, however, was to call Jansca down from her observation post and in her company make a complete tour of the ship, for I wished to familiarize myself with all the alterations that had been made overnight.

Arenack, however, knew all there was to be known about them and he would see that his helpers were well enough acquainted with the use of each piece of machinery to be able to give a good account of themselves. He showed me an intricate piece of mechanism that he told me was the disintegrating ray. It consisted of a long tube with a smaller tube on top of it. The small tube was made of some iridescent substance that led down to a generating apparatus underneath the gun, for such the whole thing actually was.

The larger tube ran back to a huge box-shaped arrangement that was connected to pipes leading from the water tanks. As I understood his explanation of the process a fine stream of water was shot out from the larger tube and at the same time the ray was projected from the smaller tube.

The angles had been so calculated that ray and water jet gradually converged, meeting at a spot twenty-five yards ahead of the point of issue. The ray, acting on the stream of water, broke up its atomic structure and formed another ray of incalculable power that hurled itself with

irresistible force against anything in its path. The radius beyond which the ray ceased to be effective had never actually been defined.

I talked loosely about our prospective opponents' production of a temperature of absolute zero until Arenack corrected me. The production of absolute zero, he informed me gravely, would have resulted in some sort of transmutation of metals. In other words every scrap of iron and steel that encountered the source of this temperature—or lack of it—would be turned into neutronium, an element with the astounding weight of sixty million tons to the cubic inch.

"But after all," I said, "that's only a theoretical condition. There's no such element known in the whole of the Universe."

"Isn't there?" said Arenack sharply. "If you get in the neighborhood of Sirius you'll probably learn far more about neutronium than you care to know."

I LEFT it at that. As we went out Jansca dropped a swift remark to the man that I did not catch. He nodded and smiled.

"What was it you said to Arenack," I said as we went along, "that made him of a sudden so human?"

Jansca glanced at me roguishly. "Merely making a suggestion that was after his own heart," she said. And not all the coaxing in the worlds could induce her to say more.

Messages kept coming and going all the time but no further development seemingly had taken place. Venus was still isolated from its companion-worlds as far as communication was concerned and the missing Guard-fleet had been given up as a total loss.

Jansca made a curious request of me during a lull in the messages that up till then had been streaming ceaselessly through the void.

"My dear," she said, "do you mind if I send a private code message to Tambard?"

I hesitated. "You should have no secrets from your husband," I said reprovingly.

"It is no secret," she smiled. "I have an idea that may or may not work. Until I am sure it functions I would rather say nothing about it."

"Ah, well," I said, "I suppose I'll have to let you have your way."

She sent the message herself. Within ten minutes an answer came back. She took that herself too and, judging from her smiling face, it was evidently the answer for which she wished.

"Can you tell me yet?" I asked.

She handed me the reply form on which she had scribbled the answer. It ran, You have my permission to proceed. Tambard.

"That," I said with chagrin, "tells me precisely nothing."

"You shall know by the time we reach Gaudien."

Chapter 19

Between Worlds

BUT I did not learn the details of Jansca's plan before we reached the Gaudien base. Something must have gone wrong with it for whenever I twitted her about the matter she became very glum and avoided giving me a direct answer.

The glare of the artificial suns from the base picked us up a thousand miles out. We clicked onto the directional beam and headed for the Earthward side. This, we learned on contact, was where the Guard-ship fleet was being gathered. Work there had been speeded up and I was agreeably surprised to find that half a dozen ships were ready to proceed with us. Others would follow later. Harran had not been idle either. London and New York were mustering a fleet, which was planned to make junction with us somewhere in mid-space.

The Gaudien people had fixed up a fast flyer with the latest thing in locators, put in special power communicator apparatus and sent it off into the void in the direction from which our last warning had come.

Her commander had orders not to attempt to engage in combat even though it were forced on him—but to turn tail and run away. It was his job to make contact of some sort with the invading vessels and to give the position on a general call.

In space it is difficult to plot an exact position—but the Martian officials at Gaudien had seen this and provided for it. The flyer was to accelerate to peak at progressive rates of speed and her course would be plotted hourly as her reports came in.

The moment she made contact and transmitted the news the Gaudien officials would be able to plot reliably the exact spot in the void where she had encountered the invaders.

Had I known before that such a ship was being hurled into space as a bait and possibly as a sacrifice I do not think I would have countenanced

the proceeding. However, when I heard of it, it was too late to do anything.

I got her angle of flight, took a copy of the chart that showed her calculated position and, seeing half a dozen supporting ships already awaiting my orders, decided to take off after her.

The third day out a faint message trickled through to us. The *M. 2* had run into a nest of the invaders. So terrific was her speed that she had shot past them before they could recover from the surprise of her advent. Apparently they had been lounging along with their invisibility apparatus at rest but the moment they mutually located each other the enemy ships disappeared. They immediately put up a power barrage that gradually overcame the strength of our craft's signals. I was stretching out my hand with the idea of operating the call once more when Jansca caught me by the wrist.

"You mustn't," she said fiercely. "Do you want them to get our position?"

"They'll locate us quickly enough," I said wearily.

"I think not," she said steadily.

Something in her eyes made me look at her a second time.

"Is this the secret then?" I asked.

"Part of it, lover, part of it."

"Tell me," I said quickly.

"Instead of utilizing the projectors neutralizing rays we have turned their strength to making the *Cosmos* invisible."

"Very nice," I commented, "but if they are invisible too how much better are we?"

"None," she said, "if they should be invisible. But they won't be. We have provided for that but I think I should prefer to keep that a secret a little longer."

"They'll surely have locators," I objected.

"Certainly. But you are forgetting repeller rays. We are strengthening them to make the locator vibrations ineffective."

"Can it be done?" I said dubiously.

"Arenack says so. A better answer is he has done it."

"A rather marvelous man, this Arenack," I said with a touch of bitterness.

A gong clanged in the control-room, an urgent signal from Arenack that something was afoot.

"Hume," I said, "you'll have to take over here. We're wanted in the projection room. I don't know what it is but you'd better be prepared to take orders from there."

"Is there any possibility of an engagement?" he queried anxiously.

Jansca caught me by the arm and smiled at me. Perhaps after all this was the chance for which she and Arenack had been waiting.

The scientist looked up alertly as we entered the room. He and his assistants were surrounded by all sorts of spinning and humming apparatus, machines whose very purpose was beyond me.

"We have something in sight," he snapped. "I don't know what it is but I'd suggest space suits be kept in readiness to don at a moment's notice."

"They're kept in readiness night and day," I told him. "What is it you've sighted?"

He pointed to an ordinary view tube connected with the ship's eye. I bent down and looked at the vision-plate on which the picture was reflected. At first I thought I could see nothing but the blackness of space with the constellations gleaming brightly against it.

Then abruptly one constellation was momentarily obscured as though something opaque had passed between it and me. Had I not been on the alert for some such thing I would most certainly have missed it. Jansca was staring over my shoulder. She gave an exclamation as the opacity moved across the stars, blotted out their light, passed and merged into the obscurity of space.

"You saw it?" said Arenack. "Or rather you saw its effect. An artificial eclipse, so to speak."

"But how could that happen?" I queried. "I thought the thing—spaceship, I suppose it is—was invisible."

"Invisible, not transparent. Also you're not seeing the actual thing itself with your own two eyes. In other words you lose the stereoscopic effect."

I NODDED. There was one big objection however and I voiced it. "It's rather risky relying on anything like that," I said. "Only sheer luck enabled us to pick up that object the way we did. Double luck, yours and mine."

"No, I picked it up with a more reliable apparatus. Come here."

He moved from his seat, motioning me to take his place. In front of where he had been sitting, at eye level, was something like a pair of elongated binoculars. They had a hood arrangement that fitted like a mask to one's face.

Arenack leaned over me and adjusted it. Some automatic mechanism, I learned later, on the lines of the clockwork that moves telescopes in the observatories, kept it constantly on the object to be viewed.

I stared ahead, blinked and then I saw. It was a space-ship modeled on the lines of the craft Jansca and I had been instrumental in destroying not so long before. Only it did not seem so large.

"You saw it then?" said Arenack at my gasp of surprise. "One moment, please."

He made some minor adjustments. The space-ship seemed to leap towards me; its walls shimmered and vanished, and it was as though I were looking through glass into its interior. Everything, however, was on a reduced scale, and I could see nothing with any clearness of detail. Machinery, men—pigmy figures—dressed oddly. That was about all I could make out.

I slipped the hood from my face. "That's it then, is it?" I said with amazement at the miracle I had witnessed.

"It's too far away yet for us to see details, of course," Arenack said, "but you see we've a means to overcome their invisibility."

"But how?" I queried.

"The—" He said something that sounded like "dalifon"—but before I could ask him what that meant Jansca interposed.

"What you call the Crystal Eye," she explained. "We may be able to make further improvements."

"If we have the time and opportunity," Arenak said softly. "That fellow is cutting across our line now but at any moment he may change direction and veer towards us. Perhaps they have some mechanism for detecting our presence, even though we happen to be invisible."

I realized that. But I fancied I saw one defect in the apparatus of detection.

"This is good," I said, "excellent in fact, but does it not mean that you must keep someone with eyes constantly glued to the peepholes here?"

Smilingly Arenack shook his head. "Not necessary," he told me. He gestured towards a white plaque on the wall in a direct line with the

Crystal Eye. He touched a button on the desk beside him and as I watched the milky surface of the plaque changed. It went black—the stars came out on it and the tiny silver ship showed up quite clearly.

As we stared its appearance changed. From a cigar shape it altered to a disk, then abruptly with a great leap the disk increased in size. Arenack exclaimed. Jansca caught at my arm.

"It's changed direction," she cried. "It's coming towards us now and it's moving at a terrific rate."

"Do you think they've managed to locate us somehow?" I asked Arenack quickly.

"Impossible to say," he answered. "Try altering our course."

I got Hume on the open communicator. "Three points west of our present direction." I told him. "Hold her there for fifteen minutes."

Again we turned our eyes towards the plaques. The angle of the spaceship seemed to have altered slightly. It was no longer a disk, rather an ellipse. But even as we watched with bated breath it slowly swung back again into its former position.

There was no doubt of it now. She was aware of our presence in space.

"Action stations," I ordered. "Space-suit rig and Oxcta solution for every man."

Chapter 20

At Grips

OUR own space-suits were kept readiness in the projecting room and beside them a ready solution of Oxcta put up in tiny phials. We broke ours, drank the highly concentrated contents and proceeded to don the suits.

On the belt of each suit hung a reaction pistol, a thing with a vast mouth like an old blunderbuss. Should the worst, the ship be destroyed and ourselves projected into the void, we possessed at least a fighting chance for life. The reaction pistols furnished a means of propulsion through space. A man might live in such a suit, moving about space, for a matter of two or three days. The suits had originally been designed to preserve the lives of passengers wrecked in space. No one had ever thought of the possibility of their being used to save survivors from a ship stricken in war far off the beaten track, war we fancied had long been banished from the planets.

The remaining ships of the fleet were a couple of thousand miles to the rear and so safe for the time being. Their locators would no doubt have warned them of our altered course and in due time the same means would give them notice of the presence of a stranger ship.

But since we had been discovered I did not think it wise to communicate with them. Their rate of progress would soon bring them close enough to distinguish the stranger, as she would become visible as soon as our neutralizing rays played on her.

I swung over the little lever that set the power going. For a space nothing happened. Then suddenly against the background of the void there leaped to life a lovely golden shape, the space-ship sheering around to veer in at us.

It looked as though her intentions were purely exploratory. An idea struck me. It was not altogether impossible they might have mistaken us for one of their own craft.

I was just about to put the idea to when a call came through from the transmitting room. It was the duty operator speaking.

"A series of strange signals coming through for some minutes," he informed me.

"How's the recorder transcribing them?" I asked.

"As a series of impulses," the operator told me. "They're coming over with irregular frequency and the recorder is putting them down as lines and dots. If it wasn't that it's never been used nowadays I'd think it was someone trying to transmit in archaic Morse code."

"Morse?" I ejaculated. "Do you happen to know anything about that?"

The operator chuckled. "Not much. But enough to say that this isn't Morse. Here, sir, something's coming through again. I've got a group combination that came several times before. It looks like a *message begins* sign. It's clattering."

"Throw your communicator open so I can hear what's going on," I commanded.

The screen immediately lit up, showing me the interior of the transmitting room and the sounds of the instruments working came plainly to my ears.

I listened to the clack of the machine as it worked. It was going at a fearful rate, a sort of urgent click-click-click, then a long click and so on. Something in the pace at which the signals came over made me think that the operator at the other end was fast losing patience.

"Now he's getting angry," I commented.

THE clicks came with a sharp rattle, a perfect hailstorm of them. There was a pause, possibly while the operator waited for a reply. Then when none came our machine began to clatter again over an octave and ended on a final note that expanded into one sharp explosion. Anger, irritation, finally utter disgust. Though I waited a full minute nothing more came through.

"Good," I said to the operator, "you can cut out the general circuit now. But keep those records. We may try our hands at deciphering them."

I cut out and spoke to Jansca. "How's that stranger ship been behaving while I've been at the communicator?" I asked her.

"Maintaining distance," she said. I told her something of what I had seen and heard.

"Ah," she said, "doubtful of us then. Perhaps that's a good sign. I wonder what Arenack thinks of it."

"Thinks of what?" he said, looking up from his work on the projector. I told him.

"That's it then," he said. "They're trying to speak us and have lost patience because we haven't answered. That means they don't know our ships have discovered an invisibility process. When they find out… " He finished the sentence with a soft whistle.

I looked towards the plaque where he had pointed. The golden shape was moving again. The distance between us was lessening rapidly.

"It's coming," said Arenack, stretching his hands towards the nearest tube.

"No—not yet!" I cried. "The ray projector. You've taken the kick out of it and are merely using its vibratory scale?"

"I'm not," he said calmly. "What I'm doing is using a wave with a lesser number of vibrations. If I quicken up the vibrations I can send the ray over again."

I nodded. "I don't want to destroy that craft utterly. But something has to be done. Heat him up a bit, will you?"

"I'll try. Stand aside, all of you. There may be a flashback when I change over."

Over the flexible metal fingers that covered his own flesh and blood ones he drew thick yet pliable rubber gloves, flung a glance at the plaque before him, adjusted a vernier scale screw on the edge of the tube and pulled a lever. We watched the growing bulk of the space-ship as it showed in the plaque. For a minute or so nothing happened. Then the golden shape seemed to dull a little. It shone out again, gleaming rather brighter than before.

A little later it began to glow. From gold it passed to a deeper orange and gradually a faint tinge of red crept over it.

"Better hold it at that, Arenack," I said warningly. "You've got the outer shell red-hot. I don't want to roast them. I'd rather get them to surrender if I can."

"I'll notch it a shade higher," he said. "That heat will radiate off quickly in space. Unless, of course," he added, "they've got something to counteract it."

I didn't think they had. I could have sworn we had them helpless, we held them so long. I was even beginning to think there was a chance of capturing the ship intact when the thing itself happened.

The red-hot shell of a sudden began to lose its color. It wavered fitfully back to orange but somehow Arenack managed to hold it at that, though I saw out of the corner of my eye that he had to apply an extra notch or so to do it. One force, it seemed, was struggling again the other, neither strong enough to win. They were locking in neutral.

I have never made a bigger mistake.

Of a sudden the orange dimmed down. I don't quite know what happened next. To this day I am not quite sure. Jansca, however—perhaps fancifully—says it looked as though someone had rolled up the edges of space and hurled it like a ball into nothingness between us.

BUT what I do know was what happened in the projection room. There came a vivid sheet of blue light. The room seemed to grow chokingly cold as though one were breathing—or trying to breathe—liquid air. I can give no better description of it than that. Arenack made an abrupt movement an a startled oath fell from his lips. With his gloved hand he dragged over the lever that cut off the power.

The air of the room cleared on the instant. The blue light vanished and I became aware of Arenack crouching over the machine as though he had been struck and thrown there. I caught him by the shoulder and at my touch he slipped to his knees.

"Jansca," I called and between the two of us we raised him to his feet. His assistants came to our aid. He opened his eyes, blinked, pushed the visor of helmet farther back from his face.

"I'm all right now," he said. "That was a near thing, though. If I hadn't cut off power when I did… I thought for the moment we were gone."

"So did I," I said grimly. "Have you any idea what happened?"

"A glimmer," he said. "They've got something to beat our heat ray—some repelling force. But the nerve of it! They used our ray as a path for it, hurled it back on itself and into the machine. If I hadn't been wearing insulating gloves I wouldn't have been able to pull the lever over and if I hadn't pulled the lever over—the stars confound them!—we'd have gone out in a blue flare."

Arenack jerked himself to his feet. "Can't afford to take our senses off the job for a moment," he said warningly. "That craft's notched the first

score. Thinking he's taught us a lesson he may try to push it home. If he has any more samples of that sort, we'll be lucky to get out of it with our lives."

"If it's a case of lives, ours mustn't be lost," Jansca declared. "If we go the barriers are down and there'll be none to hold them." She turned to Arenack. "That's your work, my friend," she said steadily. "Keep us alive no matter who is destroyed. The *Cosmos* must come through."

"I'll do my best, Jansca," he said. "If the chief gives me a free hand, I'll clean up the void."

"You can have that free hand," I said. "Ah, he's swinging again."

The gleaming space-ship had indeed swing around. It was rising at an angle too. I caught a glimpse of the underside of the ship and at once the meaning of the maneuver came to me.

"He's trying to get above us," I cried. "We mustn't let that happen."

I sprang to the control communicator, and snapped quick orders. We could hardly rise on the course we were taking. The only thing left to do with any hope of success was to make the nearest thing possible to a right-angle turn and rise from that.

The abrupt veering of the ship threw us off balance and flung us against each other, the contact of our space-suits filling the room with clatter.

The instant we recovered ourselves, I swung my eyes to the plaque on the wall. We seemed to be now at much the same altitude, circling like two hawks, each watching the chance to strike.

Then abruptly the stranger veered. A dazzling white glow flickered about her nose and I waited for what terrible thing I knew not. But nothing happened to us. Why, I saw in the very next instant.

One of our half dozen supporting ships must have blundered somehow into our orbit and been located by the stranger. The white glow flickered about her nose. It spread, taking on her outlines. Then the ship dissolved into a myriad of fragments that went floating and drifting away.

"The atomic gun, Arenack," I said grimly.

I do not think the stranger ship's people could have known what struck them. One instant they were there, the next they had been exploded into ultimate nothingness.

Chapter 21

The Vandals of the Void

MY next act was to call the transmission room to get in touch with the fleet and presently the heartening news came back that only the ship we had seen destroyed had met with disaster.

From now on, however, it behooved us to go warily. The most irritating feature of our two encounters was their utter conclusiveness. Because of that we were no nearer to learning the things we wished to know.

After the strenuous time of the last hour or so we were all more or less exhausted—so I sent Arenack off to rest and told Jansca I thought she had better turn in.

She asked me what I intended doing and when she found I meant to relieve Hume at control she said, "I think it's you who need a rest more than any of us."

"Don't be foolish, Jansca," I said wearily for I had no mind to argue. "Actually I've done no more than stand by and watch while you and Arenack and his assistants did the work."

"Yours was the harder part then," she said. "We had our work to keep us occupied. You, with your responsibilities—"

"Enough," I said sharply. "Jansca, you've just reminded me that I'm in command. Carry out orders, please."

She made a wry face but she went.

I took over from Hume. Though he said nothing I thought from the look of him that he was glad to be relieved. He had got the *Cosmos* back on her original course, so I gave the control into the hands of the Martian second officer with orders to hold her and turned to the work of plotting our further direction.

The chart on which our evolutions had been automatically recorded was a mass of amazingly intricate geometrical figures, the mere sight of

which set my brain in a whirl, but the work had to be done and I set to it at once.

All the same it was some time before I managed to orient myself. Then with the planet chart in front of me I ruled the course I wished to take, plotted the figures and gave the altered direction to the Martian second.

"That will take us direct to Venus," he said. "You're heading for Shangun?"

"I'm asking the company to take no risks that I don't take myself," I said steadily for I understood only too well what was passing through his mind. "If we have to make a sacrifice of ourselves it can't be helped."

"I know that," he said. He turned to put my instructions into operation but he left me thoughtful.

Clinigo came in a moment later, an angry little man. He had been resting when the trouble began and had awakened to find himself virtually a prisoner in his own part of the ship, one where I believed he was least likely to come to harm.

He stood and eyed me for a moment, his whole body quivering.

"It was you," he said with a harsh note in his voice, "who ordered that I be kept to the rear of the ship."

And when I nodded. "Why was that?”

"Because," I said steadily, "you were in what was the safest place. Even if we were blown up you would have had a fighting chance in your space-suit."

"By what right did you give such order?" he said bluntly.

"The right I acquired when you and Tambard sent me on this expedition You may remember you came as a passenger."

He smiled at that, the first faint flicker of a smile I had seen on his face that day. "Do you think that for one moment I question the authority delegated to you? I deprecate the policy that considers my life of such value that special precautions should be taken to preserve it."

HE looked then at the space chart with the red line of our intended course pointing like a lance at the heart of Venus. "Man!" he said with a note incredulity in his voice. "Are you actually making for Venus?"

"Yes," I informed him. "Why not?"

"But it's cut off from the rest of the worlds. The entire planet may be in the hands of these vandals of the void," he pointed out.

"The more reason for going there," I assured him. "The sooner we tear the veil away the better."

He looked doubtful. "I suppose you know best," he said at length. "We're in your hands now. You've pulled through one encounter successfully, you may do so to the end."

"That's rather optimistic," I smiled. "You heard what happened? It was science that won the victory, not generalship."

"So I believe. What's your acceleration?"

"I'm increasing velocity up to peak," I told him.

We were already far out in space, far beyond the farthest point our scouting ships had penetrated when they were silenced, perhaps forever, by the strange spacecraft.

ONCE again, with Venus far closer, our locators warned us of alien bodies and I ordered "action stations" at once. The stranger was coming right for us. He was not traveling invisibly. He was still too far off for us to see him save as a silver streak, moving athwart the blackness of space. But even I sensed a certain familiarity.

"Operator," I called through the communicator, "stand by to transmit."

I heard his startled gasp, gave him a plain call in the international code. "Leave the general communicator on," I said when he took it. "I want to see and hear what transpires."

He did so. Back in a very few seconds came a startled, "Who the planets are you? Where are you anyway?"

"Give them our call signal," I told the operator. "Not our name. Get his name however."

It was slow work, this questioning and answering in the code. It always is.

"Got yours," came the answer. "*M. 10* here. But where are you?"

"Throw off the vibrations," I said over my shoulder to Jansca. "It won't hurt to be visible for a while now."

I could imagine their vision man on the *M. 10* blinking as we suddenly appeared out of nothingness, perhaps gasping with amazement at the apparent miracle of it. But they wasted no time once they were sure of us.

"We've escaped," ran their next message. "But we think we're being pursued."

"Tell them to link up and send a man across," I said to the operator. "Their commander, if he can rely on anyone in his absence. Get action. We haven't time to spare."

"Coming across at once," I read on the screen two seconds later. "Stand by to connect."

It was ticklish business, making that connection but it was done in record time. I went down to the port myself to meet the commander. Everything went like clockwork. We closed our port, disconnected, and *M. 10* sped off, heading for the Gaudien base and Mars beyond. The moment she began to move our vibratory apparatus was put to work and we vanished once more.

"Now," I said to the commander of the *M. 10*, Balena by name, "come to the projection room with me and you can tell your tale there while we watch. I have an idea our time will be short."

"Why are you making for Venus?" he asked curiously.

"Because," I said, "we want to go there. But let us make the projection room. There are others who may wish to hear your story and to whom the knowledge of what you've discovered may be helpful."

I ushered him to the room and made him known to Jansca, Clinigo and Arenack. He saluted them, then turned to me as his conductor.

"Now," I said. "What has happened to Venus? Why has the planet been cut out of communication?"

"Because they've got one if not more bases there," he answered, "and it's only a matter of time—short at that—till they subjugate the whole planet. Then they'll turn their attention to our worlds."

"You think there is no hope?" said Clinigo brokenly.

The other hesitated. "For Venus?" he asked. Clinigo nodded.

"I'm sorry," said the other, "but I don't see how there can be."

Clinigo turned away. He seemed to be studying the growing image of Venus reflected on the wall but I think in reality he had turned to hide his tears. I caught the words, "My poor planet."

He came around suddenly, another Clinigo from the one I had got to know.

"Will you please tell us," he said in a voice from which all emotion had been wrung, "as completely as possible everything of importance that has occurred to you since we lost touch with you?"

Clinigo had forgotten that he was a passenger and remembered only that he was one of The Three.

Chapter 22

The Evening Star

IN precise dry formal tones Balena told his story. When the fleet sent out from Gaudien had been attacked by the invisible force, the *M. 10* had been saved by the fact that, due to the necessity of repairing a temporary defect in her propulsive machinery, she had lagged behind.

Her observers had witnessed the disposal, practically en masse, of the whole Martian fleet. Realizing that there was nothing to be gained by lingering near the scene of the disaster, the *M. 10* turned tail, transmitting to Gaudien as she went.

Something had gone wrong with the locators and they had no means of knowing whether the foe was following or not. The receiver apparatus was damaged and failed to function.

In the midst of transmitting, the whole of the ship's company began to feel a paralyzing cold creeping over them and one by one they dropped at their posts.

"Why wasn't Oxcta served out to the men?" I broke in to ask. "That would have saved you all."

But it seemed that when the fleet was being fitted out at Gaudien Oxcta supplies ran short. The bulk of it was concentrated on the flagship. But even then, Balena stated, Oxcta hadn't helped. Oxcta might neutralize the paralyzing cold but it had no effect where the other weapons of the strangers were concerned.

They came back to consciousness to find themselves prisoners and their ship in charge of strange beings, taller even than the Martians, whose most distinctive features were their deep purple eyes and the ridge of horn on each man's head. They spoke a marvelously simple language for Balena himself managed to pick it up under instruction in five days.

My original guess, or rather Parey's information, had been correct. The strangers came from the planet Mercury and were part of an expedition

partly exploratory and partly predatory sent out with the view of finding a congenial home somewhere among other habitable planets.

They seemed of a rather high order of intelligence, ruthless in their ways, yet their civilization had moved in lines different from ours. Apparently they had made a number of discoveries we knew nothing about while in ways we had the advantage of them. However—they had established a base on Venus in one of the uninhabited districts and there they had gradually accumulated a space navy. Venus, it seemed, suited them as a base but they wanted a world not so cloudy as a place of permanent settlement.

Apparently they would have been content to keep their presence on Venus a strict secret had they not somehow discovered that Venus was one of the constituent bodies in the confederation of three worlds.

How they made this discovery is not quite clear, nor is it clear what they hoped to gain by holding up and examining the ships of the interstellar traffic. Once they discovered the worlds were beginning to wake up to the menace they embodied, the Mercurians threw a communication barrage around Venus and set to work to trawl space.

Balena and his men identified the place to which they were taken as being somewhere on the southern edge of the Venusian tropics, one of the wastelands of that planet. The heat, from the Martians' point of view, was very trying. It gave Balena an idea which he gradually communicated to the crew.

They began dropping one by one as though overcome by the excessive humidity. The Mercurians became really alarmed. They took Balena aside and their leader questioned him closely to the cause of this condition and any possible method of alleviating it. Balena after some hesitation admitted they had a preparation on his space-ship that would help to counteract the trouble.

THE Mercurians sent for it. It was a semi-liquid preparation, bromine, used extensively to form bromides and bromates and as such the two cylinders containing it were labeled in Martian characters. Some of the Mercurians, who had made good progress in Tlananian from the various textbooks they had take from space-liners they had raided, were able to read the labels and satisfy themselves that the stuff was quite safe from their point of view.

Bromine, however, was an entirely new substance to them and naturally they were unaware that in its raw state it is capable, if liberated in sufficient quantities, of causing considerable distress, probably

pneumonia, possibly death to any who comes in contact without taking reasonable precautions.

Balena, instead of releasing the bromine by means of the graduated scale of the cylinder, turned it suddenly full on with the nozzle pointed towards the Mercurian group, who were standing idly watching them.

The Mercurians staggered, gulped and were seized with paroxysms of coughing that rendered them absolutely helpless. At the first sign that the stuff was taking effect, the Martians began to run back to their space-ship. Balena threw the hissing cylinder into the midst of the squirming Mercurians, releasing the pressure in the second cylinder and threw it after its mate.

They reached the space-ship, piled inside, closed the door and started to ascend just as the first of the Mercurians came running after them and began to shoot with their rays. It would have gone hard with the Martians, no doubt, had they had to contend with a guard on the ship. But although one was kept over it during the night, none was considered necessary in the day.

Even as it was, however, the first was of the ray tubes came dangerously close to *M. 10*. Also, for some unaccountable reason, the engines refused to function properly. But by frantic manipulation of the screens Balena and his men prevented the worst from happening. "And then, of course, our locators picked us up," I said as he ended. "Well done, Balena, I'll see you're recommended for this."

"If I might ask, sir," he said, "just what are you proposing to do?"

"We're running for Venus," I told him. "Rather hard lines on you since you've just managed to escape from there. But duty is duty."

"I wasn't thinking of that aspect of it altogether," he said with a wry face. "But they must have lifted the barrage temporarily at any rate. Not so long after we got into free space we heard signals, not from any of our ships. I think they must have been recalling their fleet."

There was one other possibility that struck me, though now was not the time to make it public. It was quite as likely that the Mercurians, besides signaling their ships back to the Venusian base, had also sent out a call for help to their own planet.

I got Balena to give us the location of the base and altered our course to strike Venus in the tropics. I had in mind the desperate throw of striking at the heart of their power-plant in the hope of putting it out of

action before a fleet that hopelessly outnumbered us swept down to wipe us out of existence.

All that day the ether was thick with strange signals in a code none of us knew. Even Balena, with the knowledge he had acquired of the Mercurian language, was unable to decipher them for us.

The one thing we could do was to locate their point of origin, and on that I kept the assistant operators working overtime. Some of the signals were streaming in from Venus and presently we began to catch other signals in the interplanetary code. The Mercurians had had to lift the barrage to send their own messages through and the Venusian authorities were trying frantically to get in touch with the rest of the Universe.

All the while the blue disk of Venus grew and grew, became silver, filled out and out until it covered almost the entire vision surface of the white plaque in the projection room.

As the planet swung nearer, Clinigo became more restless than ever. That calm which should have characterized one of The Three utterly deserted him.

When we were a hundred and fifty thousand miles above the planet, I called a halt. The time had come to drop down through the floor of cloud into the atmospheric envelope.

I called Jansca to my side. "Dear," I said, "keep with me. It is only right to let you know that we may never live to see another dawn."

Her face paled. I think for the first time she envisioned the possibility of our being disrupted into our original atoms as one breaks up a mound of dust with a jet from a hose. But worse than the fear of dissolution in that fashion was the dread of parting. She came a little closer, caught me by both arms—we were alone for the moment in the room—and drew me to her.

"If I have to die I shall at least die like one of Sonjhon blood," she said tremulously. "But even in death I would not be parted from you."

I caught her to my heart and kissed her dear lips, then gently thrust her from me.

My finger wavered over a button on the button-studded plate before me, then with a sudden resolution I pressed it. I had given the signal that was to send us dropping through the floor of cloud to whatever fate awaited us below.

Chapter 23

Armageddon of the Void

SLOWLY the cloud murk parted, slowly the mist lifted and the land below stood plainly revealed in the light of the hothouse day. A land of strange things, strange colors and strange plants—Venus, the planet I had planned to reach as the last point of a pleasure trip.

We were flying invisible, keeping level by rapid and tricky modulation of our gravity-plates—some call them screens—for I dared not use the engines. In atmosphere they made a drone that carries a surprising distance.

Balena touched my arm. "That," he said, "should be the place but I don't see any lights, any reflections of any sort."

"I shouldn't think we could," I told him. "Probably they've masked the camp now. They mightn't even care to run the risk of a Venusian coastwise craft sighting them. They want to be undisturbed until their armada arrives. However, we've the means to uncover them.

"Arenack"—I turned to him—"any results yet?"

He was trying to focus on the instrument I have called the Crystal Eye and was finding it difficult, perhaps because of some subtle difference in the atmosphere of Venus. But as I addressed him he jerked his finger back over his shoulder, gave an exclamation and went on twisting screws.

I glanced at the plaque towards which he had pointed. Something misty showed where a moment before had been nothingness. I fancied I saw buildings. I looked again and was sure.

Then abruptly, as Arenack hit the right vibration in the scale, the scene sprang into light and became plain. I saw buildings—I saw men, the odd figures of the Mercurians—and, rising gigantic over men and buildings both, a mast of some sort that was a spiderweb of metal traceries. At the very apex something that I would have called mirror had it not been egg-

shaped wobbled and spun, throwing gleams of light from it as it moved. That it was power-station of some sort I had no doubt.

I think they must have had some device that warned them of our presence, invisible though we were, for I saw some of the figures abruptly look skyward, and I almost swear—to such a pitch was my imagination keyed—that I heard them cry out. One look from each of them, the abrupt white patch of an upturned face, then the figures disappeared inside the building and the egg-shaped mirror on the mast began to wobble more furiously than ever.

"Arenack, let them have the heat ray and stand by for the atomic jet for use at a moment's notice," I ordered.

The words had hardly left my mouth before the long yellow ray jetted from our bow projector. Some of the buildings glowed in outline for an instant, then collapsed into their own ashes. But that infernal mirror still wobbled. The mast itself seemed intact and even as I looked a pale blue light glowed in its center then suddenly shot out towards us. Remembering our invisibility I think they must have aimed at random, for no doubt their locators had been destroyed by our heat ray. Nevertheless they shot amazingly straight.

The *Cosmos* staggered, buffeted by a force titanic beyond all conception, and for an instant I thought she was going to keel over.

Then I saw through our vision-plate one of the supporting ships glowing like a blue sun. The vision lasted no longer than one would take to count five. The ship seemed to lose shape, passed into a molten stream, a metallic rain that dropped upon the humid soil beneath.

"Give them the atomic gun, Arenack," I snarled.

A HISSING sound as the water leaped out, a trembling as the disintegrating vibrations rushed to join it in mid-air, then a rushing stream of fury like the dust molecules in a beam of sunlight. The kick of the explosion flung us back, and when we looked again there was no longer any mast or mirror or anything that we could identify, only a scorched and disrupted wilderness, torn, scarred and ripped open by the heel of the atomic jet.

At the cost of one of our ships we had destroyed the one known base but now the question arose—were there any others of which we had not known?

Since we could not scour a planet ourselves, I decided the best thing to do was to head for Shangun and warn the authorities of what to expect. I

gathered that they might not be altogether defenseless and since I wished to run no unnecessary risks I decided after talking the matter over with Clinigo and Jansca that we had better start transmitting so they would know we were coming.

After being so long isolated from the rest of the Universe, Shangun went mad when the communication was restored and the infection no doubt spread right round the planet. They could not but believe that the menace had been removed forever. Even the guarded warnings that came through did little to dampen their wild enthusiasm.

In extenuation it must be remembered that though their planet was the only one so far invaded. None of the Venusians had had any encounters with the Mercurians. They possessed no firsthand knowledge of the powers wielded by the aggressors. And the only base so far located had been established at a point remote from civilization.

Indeed, until the advent of the *Cosmos* the Venusians themselves did not know such a base existed.

Yet when we began transmitting, telling in detail the story of our efforts and how they had culminated, even that was taken as proof that we had conquered finally.

Otherwise, they reasoned, how was it that we were sailing calmly towards the capital of the confederation, victorious and unharmed?

Shangun, a city of soft twilight tones, of lights subdued and eye-entrancing after the glare of the Martian redlands, had for once outdone itself. It was alive with lights and flags. It was shouting joyously the incarnate voice of a planet snatched from worse than death.

The very loveliness of it, the wild abandon of its people, cut me to the quick. How could we convince them that this was no conclusive victory, merely a skirmish by the way, with the red, riper scenes of carnage yet to come?

Clinigo was our last hope. If he could not bring his people to a realization of what still lay ahead of them no one could. But as I looked at his face I seemed to read there and in his eyes doubt of his own ability to do any such thing.

A troubled man was Clinigo that day, torn between love of his planet and anger at the folly of the people. A pleasant birdlike people, sweet and charming to know, but broken reeds on which to lean in a crisis.

We dropped the *Cosmos* until she floated a hundred feet above the ground and let her drift gently to the landing slips. I would not let them

close the grips over her hull, however, for I had an ugly foreboding that the worst had still to come and we might yet have to rise at a moment's notice.

Clinigo descended, leaving the rest of us in the ship. We refused all invitations to land, although the Venusians clustered round the departure platforms—they could not come nearer for I would not have any gangways run out—and cheered us, called to us, chattered, laughed, threw us flowers and congratulations.

It was as if Fate had thrown the gage and taken up the challenge without delay. While Clinigo was still wrangling with the local authorities, trying to convince them of the danger hanging over them and finding it no easy task—while the laughing, loving people about us were singing their delight of our presence—things were going on which were presently to become manifest.

The first intimation came in startling fashion. We had been transmitting—to where I am not sure—and the televox machines on the landing stage were shouting some news of the hour when all of a sudden everything went still and dead. All communication stopped in mid-note as though temporarily paralyzed. Alarmed, we swung our eyes skywards.

For a time we could see nothing save our four remaining colleagues maneuvering against the ceiling of cloud.—-as though someone had ripped the sky open with a bright steel blade—the cloud rack parted and through the opening, one by one, brazenly disdaining concealment, came the eighty ships or so of the Mercurian armada. They had been closer than we thought.

Glistening golden shapes, the smallest of the size of the *Cosmos*, they slowly settled down, secure in their own overwhelming power. Had we remain inactive it is hard to say what might or might not have happened—but as always nervousness precipitated the conflict.

ONE of our four ships, the closest to the descending host, suddenly whirled, flashing its heat ray as it moved. The ray landed on the nose of the foremost space-ship. There came a red glow, and almost instantly an explosion set the air rocking. Perhaps the Mercurian was carrying explosive material. At any rate for the second time our puny heat ray, almost by accident it seemed, was the spark to touch off the powder and blow the ship to fragments.

It touched off more than that vengeance! The air-blast that set fleet rocking had hardly died away—the fragments of the broken craft were

still falling even when its fellows, like hawks suddenly disturbed, wheeled and in the twinkling of an eye had formed a circle in the center of which floated our supporting Guard-ships.

One moment we were dazzled by that whirling circle of gold. The next the whole visible round of the cloud-wrapped sky had turned that unearthly electric blue—and the very heavens seemed to be raining molten metal on us.

The instant of the first blue ray I had swung over the levers that sealed our hull. Almost in the same motion I pushed the button that rang the room to activity. We rose so quickly that we were nearly swung off our feet and Jansca was thrown against me heavily. I caught her from plunging to the floor.

I have often wondered since if that was the means of our salvation. The roof above us seemed to split asunder, a searing blue ray passed so close that we could feel the thrill and shock of it and then somehow we seemed to be tipped out into free air, and to be dropping, dropping. Jansca I still held close to me and it was that that saved her life, I really believe.

Coming out of the void we had laid aside our space-suits, but I had donned instead my service uniform—put it down to that same uneasy feeling that would not permit the *Cosmos* to be moored fast. Tucked in a roll at the back of the collar was the tiny light, yet strong parachute every Guard wears as a matter of course when maneuvering in the air. Its weight does not incommode one, for it weighs little more than a silk pocket handkerchief. But it is built of a material that will take the strain of a normal man without ripping.

As we dropped I felt the tug about my waist as the light cords tightened, and we floated instead of falling. We landed in a tumbled heap, the breath shaken out of our bodies, and for a space we did not move. At last I struggled to my feet, found my knife in its sheath and cut the cords away. Jansca lay very still on the ground and a wild fear that she was dead seized me.

But she moved, took a deep breath, and "Thank God, you're safe!" she gasped.

"But you—are you hurt?"

She shook her head. "Only the breath knocked out of me. But what happened?"

I could not say. I could only look about me. The *Cosmos* lay some distance away from us, all that was left of her. Her rear half had been fused so that it must have run like molten butter—her forward part pitched down nose first and now lay half buried in the soft soil. Fumes and smoke rose from her.

We had fallen some distance outside the city but our fall had been marked and people came running to our assistance. With their help we searched, sick at heart, knowing from the beginning that we would find no living soul amongst the wreckage.

By some unaccountable working of the law of chance we had been standing in the one spot in the ship that spelt safety. A foot one way and the ray would have fused us, a foot the other and we would have been tumbled into the shattered forward part and incinerated with the others.

As it was, when the two halves separated, we were tumbled out into the air in the same way that a housewife will crack an egg-shell and tumble its contents into the pan. What miracle, what blind working of Fate it was that threw us clear of the blazing forward end I cannot say even to this day.

Sick and weary, we stood and looked at each other, our faces wan and ghastly in the light of destruction. High above us the golden fleet of the Mercurian invaders still wheeled and dipped, but now the blue rays were sweeping over Shangun and that city of wonder and beauty was dissolving like ice in the sunlight.

Soon, if this went on, there would be nowhere in the whole round of the planet where a man could lie with his roof above his head and know the night would bring him rest and peace, the dawn the pleasures of a new day.

Chapter 24

Ad Astra

THE little group of people—ourselves and the Venusians who had run to our aid—remained staring like men frozen. The stupendous malignity of it all had temporarily paralyzed us, and left us without power of speech or movement. We could only stand gazing in awe-struck horror, eyes round with apprehension, at each other's blue-lit faces and the scene of stormy devastation beyond.

How long we stood thus I cannot say. It was probably no more than a matter of seconds, though it seemed ages. The ruin of the *Cosmos* close by us was still glowing and the vegetation it had crushed in its fall smoked fitfully. A red-hot girder from the shell rested across the trunk of one of those enormous tree ferns that are such a prominent feature of the Venusian landscape.

The soggy mass of the bole resisted for a time the passage of the girder as the bursts of steam eloquently witnessed. But presently the heat of the metal forced it through the trunk and it fell with a clang on another girder, already prone on the ground.

The clatter roused me. It seemed too to have released the shackles from the others. A babble of voices came to me. Most of what was said, being in Venusian, was unintelligible, but presently I found a man who could speak Earth English—he had made one or two trips to our planet—and through him I was able to communicate.

The salvation of the little group was for the moment the thought uppermost in my mind. Cosmic destinies could wait until later. For a time we were out of the arena and in the meanwhile it remained to be seen how we could best keep life in us.

How extensive the damage done in Shangun was we could not say but Jansca and I and our Venusian friend—Gallivog, he said his name was—all agreed that we would only diminish our chances by making for there.

The populous centers were almost certain to be dealt with first by the Mercurians.

But back of the city was a fern jungle with trees as thick as six Earth feet and in its depths we might find food and shelter of a sort. I learnt from our guide that vegetable life was prolific on the planet and only the constant vigilance of the Venusians kept it from inundating their towns and cities.

Well, there was nothing for it but to take refuge in the jungle and trust to the fates to find a way out for us. The Venusians themselves were more or less at home here, but Jansca and I found the climate terribly trying.

She was used to the dry air and warm plains of Mars and this dank, dripping heat sapped her vitality to an incredible extent. Fortunately we carried our own private supply of Oxcta, else I don't think we would have made it. Most of the vegetable growths were edible and we did not want for water but what we missed most was flesh meats. True, most of the pools and lakes we came across were swarming with fish but they were of a kind alien to us. The Venusians seemed to relish them but somehow we could never adjust our palates to them.

The days crawled by. We managed to build a shelter of sorts in the jungle and once that was erected Jansca showed signs of improvement, though she never quite became her old self. And all the time, day and night the Mercurian fliers passed to and fro overhead, the sky dripping with the light of that blue ray of theirs.

From the moment we first decided what we were to do I had put the group under discipline. Jansca, Gallivog and I had organized the camp apportioned to each one the work he or she must do. I think it was partly due to this strictness of mine and partly to the way we camouflaged the camp that we were left so long undisturbed. One day Gallivog went on a scouting expedition to Shangun.

When he returned he reported many of the buildings were still intact, but the Mercurians had landed and were beginning to occupy the place. Such Venusians as remained in the city and escaped with their lives were being mustered and put to slave tasks.

His report, however, gave me an idea. I did not think it likely that the invaders had yet found it possible to conduct a house-to-house search, and acting on that assumption I believed there might be weapons or food or other useful articles there that we would do well to acquire.

I would have gone myself but I knew nothing of the layout of the city. Gallivog and a couple of his friends, however, volunteered for the job as soon as I mentioned the matter to them. I was glad afterwards that I did.

They brought back quite a number of useful articles, ray tubes and charges for them, compressed foods and tinned liquids that could be warmed up mechanically. Gallivog, in a moment of acquisitiveness, had taken possession of a portable communicator set.

On the face of it that was least useful. It had only a local range. Its impulses would not penetrate beyond the planet's atmospheric envelope and even if they would we dared not take the risk of broadcasting signals through space. The Mercurians would certainly locate their source and, through them, us.

For some days we had seen nothing of the Mercurian ships, though we knew parties had landed and were even now in Shangun. The ships themselves, I had no doubt, had drawn off to a base somewhere on the planet and were probably refitting. I was beginning to wonder just how much longer we could hold out before sickness and, sooner or later, the lack of proper food and comfort began to thin out our little party when the thing itself happened.

A THIN thread of a whisper brought me out of my sleep, a voice close to my ear. For the moment I thought it was Jansca speaking to me, the next instant I changed my mind. It was her without a doubt but it was not me she addressed. "Ship of Earth," she was murmuring. "We are here in the jungle, Jansca Sanders, who is speaking, and her mate, the sole survivors of the Earth ship *Cosmos*, brought down by Mercurian invaders."

The wild thought hit me like a blow between the eyes. The jungle fever I dreaded had got its hold on my mate.

She was dreaming… delirious… the first stage in that awful Venusian jungle fever to which we Outlanders—Martians and Earthmen— seem peculiarly susceptible and for which we have not found any cure!

I reached out my hand. Jansca should have been beside me, within reach, but I struck only empty air. She had moved, was wandering not only in mind but in body. The second dangerous stage.

Her voice went on. "Do not answer. You will only betray your presence. But our directional beam shows you exactly overhead, high in the clouds. I caught a glimpse of you, steel ship of Earth, so different from the golden ones of the invaders. Can you rescue us? I shall cut out now

and presently flash a light from our position, so that you may know exactly where we are."

I saw her now, a dim shape kneeling before something in the far corner of our rude shelter. I strode across to her and caught her by the shoulder. She gave a little cry that choked off as she realized it was only I.

"Jansca," I said in a quick whisper, "what are you doing?"

Her answer was a woman's, yes, this girl of another world differed little from the rest of her sex, whatever planet they come from. She dropped her head on my shoulder and began to cry softly.

"I—I can't believe it even now," she sobbed.

"Can't believe what?" I demanded.

"That I looked out the door—stared up at the sky, and saw a ship, an Earth-ship just showing through a break in the cloud ceiling."

"An Earth-ship? If you saw such a thing, what makes you so sure it wasn't a Mercurian craft?"

"The color—the polish of cobalt steel—the lines of an Earth Guardship."

"You're mad, dreaming—the fever!"

"No, dear one, it may have been a dream that woke me, that prompted me to creep from your side and look out the door—but what I saw was no vision though it lasted only the tenth part of a second perhaps."

There was that in her manner which convinced me, galvanized me into action. "You took a fearful risk," I said. "But never mind that now. Wake the others—quickly. I'll signal."

"But the light, Jack?"

"My ray tube. If I discharge it into the ground it will give flash enough for them to see—if they are watching."

"God pray they are, that my message reached them. I trained the communicator beam overhead, just where I imagined the ship to be. I made it selective. It might have missed them.

"We'll know that soon. Hurry now."

She turned into the next shelter, which was really a separate compartment of ours. I took the ray tube from my torn and muddy jacket, turned it into the ground at such an angle that the discharge would splash a safe distance away. I pressed the button.

There came a blinding flash of light and I heard the hiss of steam as the ray struck and volatilized the water content of some soggy Venusian plant.

For the space of a heart-beat nothing happened. Then abruptly it seemed to me that the clouds overhead were a little thicker than they were a minute ago. A second later and I knew it was not a cloud I saw, but the dim bulk of a spaceship dropping towards us.

She came to rest on an even keel a stone's throw away. Lights suddenly flooded from her and a port was thrown hastily open. A voice called, "Quick whoever you are! We must make altitude at once."

I bundled Jansca and the others in unceremoniously. The port closed behind me with a clang and I was nearly thrown off my feet by the rapid acceleration of the ship's rise. For a space I could not speak, could do nothing but gasp and blink in the unaccustomed light. Out of the dazzling glare came a hand seeking mine, a voice that cried, "Wonder of wonders, so it's you I've pulled off, Jack, old man."

MIRACLE of miracles! The voice that of Glenn Vance, my relief! The ship, my own Guard-ship, the old *E. 22!*

"But how did you get here?" I asked.

"Harran's orders, Jack. That man must have worked like crazy. He called in every available Guard-ship, made us junction just beyond the Moon and sent out a supply fleet to intercept us there. We fitted out and mounted our weapons as we came along.

"There's not an Earth Guard-ship left between Earth and Mars and half the Martian fleet is only a day behind us. The rest are following with Tambard. We've orders to clean up this mess, no matter what the cost. But you're the man we want, the one who can tell us everything. The one person in the worlds I'm glad to have on board."

"There's a better one with me," I said.

"Jansca, a Dirka once, a Sanders now."

He bowed.

"You'll have to look for the Mercurians," I said and told him of the weapons he'd have to face.

"I didn't think it was as bad as that," he said. "Eighty ships you say they have? We've nearer two hundred, counting the Martians."

"You may swamp them by weight of numbers," I said, "providing you keep out of range of their rays. You've the atomic ray rigged? Good. What's its range?"

"We haven't tried yet," he told me. "We… " What more he meant to say I do not know. The alarm bell from the locators cut him short and on the heels of that came a call from the observer.

"They're awake to us," Vance cried. "We can't see them, however." He was peering at the vision plate in front him. "We'll simply have to trust to luck and the locators."

"Good," I said. "They can't use the ray while they have the invisibility force turned on. You've got that much. What about your other ships?"

"They're all right. They'll follow lead."

Something flashed in the vision-plate, a gout of blue flame. The ship reeled and for a moment I thought we were done for. But it must have been merely a blind shot unless, of course, one of our ships had incautiously ventured too low.

The men in the power room must have had their orders for I saw one them glance swiftly down his sights then jerk the lever of his gun back.

The blue flame in the vision-plate vanished abruptly in an explosion of red-hot cosmic dust. That seemed to be the general signal to join battle. The Mercurians, confident in their superior science, came on, disdaining all concealment. One could no longer look at the vision- plate to see how things were going. It was a wild riot of hot colors that seared the eyeballs, light that crackled like a living thing and that filled the sky with terror and death.

For a time I thought the tide was turning in our favor but gradually I began to realize with a sinking of the heart that our fleet was being forced and higher until we were struggling out in free space. Ever and anon one of the Guard-ships went dripping down in a torrent of blue rain, gleaming and molten, and the Mercurians grew more and more venturesome until it became evident that we were fighting a losing fight.

Jansca, close to me, looked into my eyes and I saw my fears mirrored in hers. Once again we were facing the prospect of dissolution together.

Abruptly I became aware that the vortex of the battle seemed to have receded. It was dropping below us, nearer to the planet's surface. Then too there were more Guard-ships. Space was filled them. They were dropping like hawks out of the void.

"The Martians, the Martians are coming!" Jansca cried with a note of joy.

It was true. The Martian fleet Vance had mentioned as being a few hours in our rear had overtaken us. We were saved and the Mercurian fleet, by sheer weight of numbers, was being beaten back into the mud from which we could wish it had never arisen.

There is little more to tell.

Crippled and broken, the Mercurian fleet was chased and destroyed to the last ship and the bruised and battered planet left to recover from its wounds.

But for my own part I am not so sure. It may be that we have merely postponed the evil day, for after all, they seem our superiors in many branches of science. The secret of their blue ray or rather the manner in which they generate it still eludes us.

Neither have we learnt how men like Nomo Kell—for it is certain that he was not the only spy moving about in interplanetary circles— managed to reach our worlds and establish their citizenship there.

Myself, I do not think that we shall ever be free from the possibility of invasion or solve these other mysteries until the day when we feel we are enough advanced to send our own expeditions out against this world which has once threatened the security of the Inner Planets.

Meanwhile I have Jansca to occupy my thoughts and fill my heart to the exclusion of all else. She is the best of wives and mates, as proud of me as I am of her, though perhaps the proudest moment of our lives was when she was given her badge and made a member of the Interplanetary Guard with the same rank as I hold myself.

She values that little silver emblem more than anything else the planets can give her. In an idle mood I sometimes tell her she cares more for it than she does for me. But that I know she does not, for has she not again and again given me ample proof of her love?

And I? Well, I have told my story and I would rather not repeat here what the Council said to me. It was flattering, all too flattering, and totally undeserved. I had little or nothing to do with bringing about that crushing defeat of the Mercurians.

I shall always maintain, and Jansca agrees with me, that the real saviors of our planets were the men who died the night the blue ray of the Mercurians sliced the *Cosmos* as a hot knife will slice through butter.

Arenack, Hume and my wonderful crew of gallant Martians, I salute your shades. May the God of the Planets balance the manner of your passing against whatever faults you had in life and bring you to that ultimate Elysium—by whatever style we care to call it—where weary heroes find rest and peace at last.

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