

Fargin sat hunched in the bar booth and wondered how he was going to get out of it. All his life he'd read stories about brave, inventive lads who found the one chink in the armored layers of a totalitarian government and brought it crashing down. In story after story the handsome hero met and fought the sluglike Mind-masters of faroff Cygni IX or the dread Martinets of Hydrae III and always emerged triumphant, free arm around the Golden Princess or the Lyre of Rainbow or the faithful slave girl, the other hand grasping a bloody sword or a nearly-depleted laser.

The scrawny Fargin gulped a mouthful of bitter Martian beer and arranged his face into a new set of wrinkles. *Dammit*, he thought, if he could just invent a new *something* or stumble on a new law of *nature—anything!* Hell, a lot of discoveries in history were made by accident. Why couldn't it happen to him?

The normal din of the low-ceilinged bar was suddenly lowered, then dwindled to silence as the Patrolman appeared in the doorway. Eyes shifted away from beer mug and low-cut neckline to the helmeted man in the black uniform. His visored face prevented them from seeing his expression, but a sudden nervous shifting rustled the barful of drinkers.

The appearance of a second Patrolman brought a quick new life to the patrons as they made elaborate efforts to resume the normal barlife, ignoring the officers of the United System Patrol.

The second blackcoat stood in the door, not particularly menacing, not particularly casual. The first officer surveyed the crowd with a single turn of his helmeted head, then began checking papers.

Fargin thrust the Patrolman from his mind with another long swallow of the strong Martian beer. His thoughts grew bitter. Rot their putrefying skulls, anyway, he grumbled to himself. Every time Raven Blacksword had trouble with bugs like that he outdrew, outfought, and outthought them!

I bet that writer works off all his hostilities, Fargin thought, just blasting Creblian Patrolmen, Vegan Monitors, and scrafy Ring Nebula Automep in every story! That last one, Fargin mused, "The Black Patrol," had the bad guys so much like the Patrol here that it was funny.

"Papers."

"Huh?"

"Papers, mudballer!" The visor of the Patrolman gleamed in the dim barlights, his face masked, his gloved hand held out. His other hand rested on the marwood stock of his Colt Laser.

"Yeah, sure . . ." Fargin fumbled at his jumper pocket, unsealing the document pocket with the ident ring on his right hand. He handed the thin passport to the Patrolman without fear. It was a good one this time, not like that frelking garbage Doyle had screwed him with.

The Patrolman pressed the faceplate of the passport against the identipad in his gunbelt, his body tense. If the passport was phony this was when the bastards tried to jump you.

The buzzalarm didn't sound and the Patrolman thumbed open the document.

"David Fargin?"

"Yeah." Why did they ask? The damned identipad alarm hadn't gone off.

"Says here you're a juice miner. Lots of mines here, why ain't you working?"

None of your business, you gorb! "I'm thinking of shipping home. Or maybe trying the Grandcanal Queen."

"Yeah? Well, don't hang around too long. Mars ain't the place for handouts and Ares Base ain't the spot for smart frelking ex-grubbers."

Fargin looked up at the black-filtered visor. A line from an old Raven Blacksword story came back to him and he spoke without thinking.

"Whatever happened to the famous Patrol manners, Captain?"

He should have remembered the trouble that got Blacksword in. The metalmesh glove covering the hard hand of the officer belted him into the corner of the booth. His beer splashed and some got in the black metalmesh of the uniform. The Patrolman's big hands pulled him out of the booth and threw him against the wall. Fargin watched with horrified fascination as the Patrolman's armored left hand slapped the magclip on his left hip, releasing the nervelash. He flipped it to his right hand and Fargin swore he

could sense the smile on the man's face as he brought the whip down across Fargin's body.

It was as if Fargin had been split in two. The nervelash was on full power and every cell screamed. Fargin heard someone screaming during the second and third lash, but he was unconscious during the third and fourth.

He came to in jail.

Everything hurt.

There wasn't a mark on him, except a bump where he had hit his head on the booth, but he ached as if a whole tribe of Rigellians had worked him over with bloodknives.

His *fingernails* hurt. His *hair* hurt.

Fargin groaned and tried to creep back to oblivion, but it was no good. He hurt too much. He tried to channel his energy into hatred, but it was just, too much work. So he lay there on the slag-melt floor and endured.

Time passed.

A Patrolman went by. Fargin supposed he looked at him. He didn't care. He heard a scream. Sounded like a woman's scream, but men in pain sometimes sounded that way.

Raven had been in a spot like this, in "Pirates of Canis Major," but he'd been smart enough to hide a magtool in his bootheel. No, that was in "Virgin Queen of the Stars." In "Pirates" he'd been thrown in with the pretender to the Canis throne, who was a latent esper.

Why the living hell hadn't he been born somewhere else?

Fargin groaned and got stiffly to his feet, staggered to the bare plasteel bunk and fell on its mesh.

Time passed.

Unchanging time. The glowballs didn't flicker. No sun appeared. No one went by. A scream now and again. A faint steady rumbling. A distant hum. Once a door clanged open and there was the sound of rough laughter and a woman's moans, then it banged closed again.

Time crawled.

What would Blacksword have done? thought Fargin. Used the mystique of the Mindmasters of Morg to go into time displacement? Picked the maglock? Feign sickness and clobber the guard? *God, he was hungry!*

He tried sleeping and was as unsuccessful at that as he had been at juice mining or cargo hauling or even assembly jockeying back on Earth. *God, those jobs had been boring!*

Fargin sighed. He didn't care *what* the psychcharts and the peepers said! There was something better waiting for him! There *had* to be! Life couldn't be the frelking bore that it was! It's *got* to be something more than grub, work and sweat!

Fargin twisted on the meshwork of the bunk. He stared up at the featureless ceiling. I just haven't found my niche, he thought. Somewhere there is just the job for me. I could handle those gorbs at the mine if they gave me the super's job! But I just couldn't take that frelk's lording it over me, just because he's got a pair of PhD's and I've only got one stinking Master's! So he could stick it all the way through the education mill. So I couldn't! He didn't have a set of snotty gorbs sneering at *him*, I bet!

The ex-miner's face twisted in anger. It had always been that way for him.

A-Number-One-First-Button *Loser!* All the way! Loser father, fat loser mother. Loser sister, letting that dumb frelk husband of hers stick her with the taxes on the third kid.

Loser Fargin.

Can't win for losing, Fargin. You're fired, Fargin.

buzz CLICK f-a-r-g-i-n, d-a v-i-d, W-M/NA 565-2925-9906, j-o-b
c-l-a-s-s-i-f-i-c-a-t-i-o-n-9-6-4-4-j-12-t-e-r-m-i-n-a-t-e-d *buzz CLICK*

Beat it, Fargin. We don't want your kind around here!

Listen, Fargin, stop that frelking dreaming! Get your nose out of those stupid stories and get your ass in mesh! What's that? Oh, yeah? Well, you're flied, buddyboy! Fired.

Terminated.

Not wanted.

Useless.

buzz unemployable at present classification *buzz* request re-classification procedures instigated per labor department manual seventeen dash six dash one hundred *buzz* *CLICK*

Fargin stared with sleepless eyes at the seamline where the rock walls met the ceiling. You're at the bottom, Fargin, he told himself. There ain't no more down.

He grinned wryly to himself, his face hurting. All up from heah, boss! Yeah . . . sure. There's always more *down*. There's always more pain, more humiliation, more frustration. There's a lot of *down* in the universe, Fargin thought wearily.

Death is down.

Down is death.

After death there could even be more down. Hellfire. Or nothing with the realization of nothing.

I don't feel so good, Fargin thought, and shifted his gaze to the slit of corridor he could see. Frelking Patrol! Who do they think they are? I didn't do anything. Raven Blacksword was in a spot like this in "The Black Patrol." Thrown into a Zorian prison after a beating. But the young princess that he had saved from the Dir tribesmen had slipped a stunner between the bars.

Fargin looked gloomily at the three unpierced stone walls and the bars across the face of the cell. No window. No stunner. No Zorian princess smelling of weirflowers and spice.

A door clanged open down the corridor and heavy footsteps approached. A bulky Patrolman in a jumper soiled with spots of food demagnetized the lock and motioned Fargin out.

Suddenly Fargin didn't want to go. "What's up?" he asked.

"Come on, mudballer," the guard said in a tired voice. Fargin slid from the bunk and preceded the guard down the corridor. A quick glance into the two occupied cells showed a snoring, shabby drunk with a bloodied face, and a sulking, ferretlike youth.

The guard pulled open the door and put his hand on Fargin's back. The miner expected to be catapulted through the door violently, the way they often treated Black-sword when they brought him before the Flame of Zomba or the king of the desert tribes. But the guard just grunted and shoved him slightly and Fargin stepped through into the guardroom.

Three Patrolmen, two without their black jackets, looked at him without interest, then went back to the holograph with the pretty blond dancer, jellying her way through a Viking production number.

"That way," the guard pointed and Fargin went down another rock corridor until he came to the Commandant's office. "In here," the guard grumbled.

A stern-faced woman sat behind the desk. Behind her was a huge Commandbank, the biggest control center Fargin had ever seen. Two grim-faced Patrolmen were mantling it, acknowledging spacer calls and referring them to the proper posts.

"This is Fargin, Sergeant," the guard said.

"Very well," she said crisply, her gray eyes sweeping over him impersonally and with faint hostility. "Leave it."

The guard shambled off and Fargin stood a long time, waiting for something to happen. The woman sergeant ignored him, her fingers busy with a monometer and a Patrol code computer built into her desk. Fargin looked past her at the massive bulk of the Commandbank and listened to the incoming calls and tried to make sense out of them.

An FL-2 needed a GR-6.

There was a five-o-six at Ice-mountain and a duster down near Bradbury.

Northaxe needed a power isotope at Station Twelve.

A juice miner dead at Grand-canal. Rock fall when a pocket oozed out.

Customer complaint at the Red-planet Inn. Fargin grinned inside. Probably some cleanboot trying to gyp one of the girls.

Jupiter Mining had a ship in parking orbit and was requesting a shuttle. UNINEWS was doing a

story on the crash at Wells and was asking for Patrol cooperation. The observatory on Phobos wanted a Patrol ship to vacate Sector 30. An Ares Center FD-2 needed a technician with knowledge of A-7 converters.

"The Commandant will see you now, Mr. Fargin."

Fargin stared at her. *Mister Fargin?* His hand felt for his tunic edge and he tugged it straight and ran a hand across his face. The stern-faced woman made a kind of wince that Fargin interpreted as a smile as she pointed at the door marked *Commandant, Ares Center Station One*.

Fargin stopped at the door and looked back. The woman just looked at him, then a dark frown crossed her face and she motioned with her fingers for him to enter. The rumpled miner knocked on the door and a voice inside said, "Come."

The plastic sign on the desk said, *Norton Marris, Lt. Col.* To Fargin he *looked* like a Patrol colonel. Tanned, gray at the temples, tough, lean, mean as a snake. He was looking at Fargin as he came in and Fargin wasn't too happy about that. This Patrolman had a look like an angry falcon, he thought.

"Fargin?"

"Yes, sir?" Fargin managed to make it into a question.

"Sit down." It was not a request.

"Yes, sir."

"You're a juice miner. Ever mine for anything else?"

"Uh, yes, sir. Gold in the American Rockies and uh, uranium and telite in Tycho and Copernicus. Selenium and tin on Farside. Uh, juice here, all over."

"Been out to Jupiter?"

"Uh, yes sir. Had a tour with the Hera Company on Ganymede, near Winecup."

"Want to go again?"

"Oh . . . I dunno. Why?" Fargin gulped. "Why, sir?"

"We could use a man like you out there."

"We? The . . . the Patrol, sir?"

The colonel looked at him in disgust. "Yes, *we*. The System Miners Union is suspected of subversion and of possible rebellion. We want you to infiltrate and find out what's going on."

Fargin's relief almost overcame his shock. They weren't going to beat him up again . . . but they wanted him to be a *spy*! A Patrol spy! A frelking ferret! A Judas!

"*Well?*" The colonel's voice was a knife cutting through a dust-tent.

"Uh . . ."

The Commandant looked down at some papers on his desk and his voice was softer as he said, "Did you know that the penalty for striking a Patrol officer is two years in a Federal prison?"

"But I didn't—"

"*Quiet!* The report from Patrolman O.M. Cragan states that you attempted bodily injury during a routine identification check. There are witnesses." The colonel waved a fax sheet languidly. "There's a Federal penitentiary out near Northaxe. Of course, that's a summer camp compared to St. Ives out on the red flats. Shipping you back to Luna for a stretch on the monorail tunnel digs might be worthwhile, but of course, your sentence would have to be longer to do that."

Blackmail. Fargin's heart sank and he felt wet inside. They wanted him to do a dirty job and he happened to do a stupid thing at just the wrong moment. They had him. His word against theirs and when in Hades had *that* ever worked?

"Gee, Colonel, I sure have missed that bloated old Jupe. Going back there might be just the thing to change my fortune."

The colonel's thin lips managed a faint smile. "You'll report to Major Corey at Winecup. He'll brief you. You'll do it as a part of your regular check-in. You will *not* make yourself conspicuous. You will *not* lose your frelking head. You will *not* talk of this to *anyone*. You will *not* fail."

"Yes . . . sir."

Colonel Marris fixed him with his falcon's eyes. "Find out what they're up to. Major Corey thinks the Commies have a cell working there. There's a certain Senator back home that thinks it's the Reds, too."

That Senator has a strong interest in keeping things just as they are. Do you follow me?"

"Yes, sir." The obscene end of the stick, Fargin. Between the Devil and the Deep Black. Damned if you do and damned if you don't.

"How do I get there?"

"Jupiter Mining and Metals has a ship in orbit. You'll sign on at their office here, make your agreement for passage and labor, and the *Alfred Krupp* will take you out."

"Uh, OK ... sir." Fargin turned to go.

"Fargin." The voice of steel. Did Raven Blacksword have that kind of voice, with the built-in command?

"Yes, sir?"

"Don't frelk it up, Fargin. You're a long time cold out at Northaxe."

"Yes, sir, I won't. I'll try."

"You won't *try*, Fargin, you'll *do*."

"Yes, sir. Can I go now?"

The colonel looked at him a moment and Fargin felt the ice in his gut. Then the lean strong hand hit a rocket button. "Sergeant, pass Fargin out."

It was a long trip out and they treated Fargin with callous contempt. *They* were elite spacers and *he* was a mudballer, only a little better than a groundlover or a cripple. He shared a cramped cabin with a grumpy bureaucrat named Palumbo, who was to replace a minor mining official. Palumbo didn't like space, miners, cramped quarters or the boredom. Fargin didn't like Palumbo, and a silent truce was achieved without bloodshed.

The next cabin had two burly miners returning to a third tour of Ganymede's mines who were contemptuous of a scrawny cleanboot like Fargin, so Fargin didn't have anyone to talk to except the ship's computer.

The long elliptical orbit took two months shy three days, and Fargin had a chance to catch up on the Raven Blacksword adventures he had missed. He especially liked "King of the Plunder Planets," but he kept his finger on the button and if Palumbo came into the cabin he'd flick to a pornography channel, which was more acceptable. He didn't want to give the plump official any chance to harass him.

Any dealings he had with Black-sword were private, Fargin figured.

But at last the long trip was over and the crescent of Ganymede showed up bright against the giant hulk of Jupiter. Fargin sighed and went to his cabin to strap in for orbit maneuvers.

Major Allen Corey looked up from his scanner and stared gloomily at Fargin, his eyes plainly showing his feelings. "*You're* the big spy they sent me?" he sneered.

Fargin grunted assent then moodily said, "I didn't ask for the job."

"They tell you about Bitney?"

"Who's he?"

"The last spy they tried to sneak in."

Fargin had a sick feeling. "What happened to him?"

"Accident. Air bottles ran out and the lock jammed so he couldn't get back in. A Richter lock, too. Good old unjammable Richters."

"Thanks for telling me. I feel really great about my big adventure out here in the glamorous out-worlds."

"These boys don't play sissy games. You been out here before?"

"Yeah, in—"

"Yes, *sir!*"

"Yes, siropened Hera One five years ago."

"Do any rock snagging? Any asteroid cutting?"

"Did five months for the Hera Company between here and Callisto. Enough to know my way around."

Major Corey smiled a vicious wolf's smile. "I hope for your sake you do. That stupid Bitney tried to fake it. You might last longer. But if they get on to you you've had it. They won't let you know until they can arrange a good accident, understand? Nothing for us to bust them on."

Fargin nodded gloomily. "That's all?"

"You've got it. See Bodrell at the Union hall. Check in normally. Check in with the Jupe Mining office for assignment. You might try for a room at Ortega's. I have reason to believe they have an active cell there."

"You got it bugged?"

Major Corey looked at him, his face like a rock, and then said, "Just do your job, mudballer, and leave the thinking to us. You might hit Nell's Place once in awhile. One of the girls might have heard something. If you get sent to Colony Two, talk to Fruehauf. He's one of us."

"Patrol agent?"

Another rockface stare. "Just say he's sympathetic to the right causes." Another see-through-Fargin-look and a brusque, "Get out of here."

"You Bodrell?"

The broad-shouldered miner turned away from the telestat and looked down at Fargin. One swift up-and-down and Fargin had been taped. "The *Krupp*, huh?" Fargin nodded. "Let me see your papers."

Fargin passed them over and watched as they were scanned, checked, recorded and validated. "You were with Layton at Hera One, right?"

"Yeah, then with Siegal and Nugent, rock snagging."

"I remember now. Got too gulpy for you, huh?" The big miner grinned nastily.

"Naw," protested Fargin, "I got a raw deal and decided to get out. I could never prove those guys shorted me, but I got my suspicions."

Bodrell's mouth twisted in a nasty smile. Fargin got another contemptuous up-and-down. "Uh huh . . ." Bodrell said. He handed Fargin back his papers and told him where the Jupiter Mining and Metals office was.

Winecup is, and maybe always will be, a frontier town. There are posts farther out, on Triton, but they are basically very similar. A complex of big plasteel pressure domes bubbled with observation and light ports, covering a semi-orderly shambles of huts, topless structures, workshops, storage domes, pleasure palaces, "hotels," bars, office buildings and the like. In the smaller outposts everything is in two or three domes, or even one, but in a place as big as Wine-cup they can segregate functions roughly into various domes.

Dome One has the repair shops, storage sheds, and a few offices. Dome Two has Nell's Place, Farmer's Provisions, Victor's, the Winecup Hotel and Ortega's, a rabbit warren of a "hotel" which is part warehouse and part hotel. Plus a few miscellaneous bars and homes, and Union Hall.

Dome Three has the Jupiter Mining and Metals office, the Patrol Headquarters, a Patrol bar racks, several ship's chandlers and a number of warehouses. Dome Four is small and holds mostly private homes and official personnel quarters. Dome Five is farther out and is really a cluster housing the main processing plants for Jupe Mining's outworld empire. Dome Six has a hospital, more offices, warehouses and other structures.

Winecup. The biggest "city" in the Outworlds. Rough, bawdy and real. The tridee back on Earth kept running shows about it likening it to the Old American West, complete with laser shootouts, dome collapses, alien race invasions and power-mad paranoids. But to Fargin it was more like a mousetrap.

The Patrol and the unseen forces that pressured the Patrol wanted him in. If the miners found out he was a spy, however reluctant, he'd not get out. Fargin didn't see how he could win. Something was bound to go wrong. It always had.

On the way to the mining office Fargin passed Ortega's and went in to see about a room. A crippled

ex-miner gave him a small, second-floor room with discolored pink plastic walls and stained blue plastofurniture. Some previous tenant or tenants had left a worn collection of photoplastics taped to the walls. The collection leaned heavily toward naked bosomy blonds in lush greenery or in cool waters.

The man in charge at the office of the Jupiter Mining and Metals Company looked over Fargin's papers, stamped them grumpily and told him everything was fine. He started work in twenty hours when the *Melafalana* was ready to go on a ten-day scoop of Band Twelve, out near the eighth moon, a tiny little forty-mile-diameter rock recently named Vishnu.

"Logan Jampel's the captain. Bunks at the Winecup. Look him up."

On the way to the Winecup Hotel Fargin saw Major Corey on the opposite side of the narrow street. The trim figure of the black-clad spaceman made Fargin shiver and when the eagle eyes pinned him Fargin shook.

The first thing Fargin thought was, *I haven't been asking any questions. They'll get on my back about that. I better ask questions.* The hard eyes of the Patrolman had pushed buttons in the head of David Fargin and he reacted automatically.

At Nell's Place he asked casual questions.

"Uh, what's happening around here lately?"

"Same old thing. Dome leak in Three last week. New holofilm coming in. Bettyjo over at Victor's turned up pregnant."

"No, uh, I mean, I heard about trouble . . . uh, trouble with the Patrol?"

"Those bastards. They're nothing more than glorified company police with the Terran guvamint behind them. Muscle for the company and taking it on the side from the miners to keep the heat from getting *too* hot."

"Um, I heard stories about, uh, well, independence for the Outer Worlds."

The big miner's scarred face turned like a turret. Fargin saw his fingers whiten around his mug of imported Martian beer. "Where'd you hear stories like that, clean-boot?"

"Ah, hey, I've been around. I was with Hera and over at, uh—"

The miner had a big paw crunching up Fargin's tunic. "You keep your mouth shut about things that don't concern you, boot!"

"Hey, uh, they concern me, they concern me. I'm a miner, too, fella, remember?"

The husky miner released Fargin, looked at him suspiciously, grunted and turned his attention toward the small stage where a girl had just entered. Fargin breathed a sigh of relief, but his enthusiasm for questions had dimmed.

The last thing on his mind then was sex, but his attention was caught by the girl on the stage. She was young and pretty and not at all like the tired girls back at the Red-planet Inn or Chris's place, on Mars. She was an obvious favorite of the gathering of rough and lusty miners and she flirted with them as she danced around the stage to the sensuous music from a synthesizer. Fargin recognized the tape as a favorite on Mars many months before.

Fargin heard her name called out gleefully several times: Camille, Camille Grant. Despite his many problems, Fargin was drawn to her. She was a Raven Blacksword type of woman: lusty, wild, long-haired and full-breasted, with a golden apricot skin and large dark eyes.

Blacksword would know how to handle her. A touch of bigmouth from her and he'd belt her into a corner of the control room. And she'd love it. She'd smolder and then come on like a Venusian tigercat. They all loved the touch of rape. Knights in silver armor. Adventurers in crystal ships. Laughing pirates with bloodied swords. Bronzed, strong men with hard hands and the eyes of eagles. She wouldn't stand a chance with Raven Blacksword, boy. She'd get tossed on some bed of sham fur and watch with wide eyes as Raven Blacksword took off his harness and came toward her.

"You Fargin?"

"Huh?" A tall, lean miner stood next to Fargin, partially blocking his view of the golden-skinned Martian princess on the stage.

"I'm Logan Jampel. You're going out with me, right?"

"Oh, uh, sure, Captain ... uh, do you mind?"

Captain Jampel grunted and moved aside to give Fargin a better look. "You like Camille, huh?"

Fargin pulled his gaze away from the girl, who was now nearly nude, to say in a tough voice, "She'll do . . . for awhile."

Jampel swung his eyes from the writhing body of the dancer, now bathed in changing prismatic lights, to look down at Fargin. "Oh?" he said softly.

"Yeah," Fargin said, his thoughts far away. In this light she looked a little like the Queen of Malenkor in "Blacksword's Revenge." If she were just a faint blue she'd also look like a zinzir wench or a slave-girl out of "The Slavers from the Crab Nebula."

Yup, she was a Blacksword woman, all right.

Which made her Fargin's type of woman.

I'll come back and get you after this is all over, wench.

Captain Jampel poked Fargin in the side and said, "Pad Four at 1300."

"Right, spacer," Fargin answered. The captain gave him a puzzled look, shrugged and left. Fargin's gaze never left the woman on the stage. She looked very good under the changing lights, her body gleaming and moving sinuously.

Fargin's head hurt. He looked with red eyes at the console before him, trying to monitor the doings of the ground crew. Man can get to the outer planets, he thought, but can't cure hangovers and the common cold.

Raven Blacksword never caught cold or had a hangover worthy of the name, he thought. He wished he had been born big and bronzed.

"*Fargin!*" Jampel's voice boomed up the hatch well. "Dammit, Fargin, the crew chief wants a verification!"

"Right!" Fargin cleared his console, forcing his attention to the screens. They were ready for takeoff. There was a final clearance, some blinking lights, then a jolt that made Fargin groan. Ganymede curved and fell away to the left and the big globe of Jupiter swung into the screen. They were in space.

A week went by. They tagged two rocks about the size of the ship for pickup on the way back, as they worked their way around the giant multimillion-mile Belt Twelve. They worked close in to the myriad chunks of flotsam and jetsam of the largely unexplored space between and around the many moons of the biggest planet. Their scanners gave them a certain rough grading and a priority, and then they climbed into suits to set samples which gave them their final grading.

The ship's computer kept track of every rock and moonlet they scanned, for future use and for general information. Eventually, years from now, all the space debris would have been tagged, coded and logged and a ship could speed swiftly through the orbits of the moons without much attention given to the orbiting rocks. The computers would keep watch.

But right now, at this stage of development of the twelve-moon system, it was all rough and rugged and mostly unexplored. Thor, the outermost moon, was nearly fifteen million miles from the surface of Jupiter and was only twenty miles in diameter. There was a lot of unknown between it and Jupiter's surface.

It was in the second week that Fargin discovered that a lot was going to remain unknown if the System Miners Union had anything to say about it.

A hint came in from the routine messages he overheard sent from ship to ship. It was his watch and he sat in the control room as the computers took them past the fifteen-mile chunk of Hathor. He was listening with half an ear to ship traffic and wouldn't even have been listening to that except that any sort of information at all he could pass on to the United System Patrol would keep them off his back.

One ship told another it was going to land on it. Only the *it* had quotes around it. We're going to land on "it" they said. Fargin got interested.

An hour later another message said cryptically, "Target sighted, Ganymede Four-Twelve out."

Fargin ran a scan and checked where the messages were coming from. They converged on Band Fifteen, near the forty-mile-diameter rock of Vishnu. Curious, Fargin brought up the magnification on the radar and saw one of the ship-dots merge with a tiny blob of flotsam not much bigger than itself. A few

minutes later the second ship matched velocities and seemed to land on the tiny moonlet.

"That's a mess of ships for one tiny piece of Jovian real estate," he said quietly to himself. He grew very thoughtful and when the watch change came he casually asked Jampel about the ore to be found in the outer bands.

"I heard that Gilgamesh was pretty rich, it being a captive moon from out there some place."

"Yeah," Jampel muttered, sliding into the molded control chair. "It's OK."

"Heard Vishnu was even better. Heard there was some rich chunks just floating around out there. Gold-in-the-streets sort of thing."

"Yeah?" Jampel said absently.

"Yeah . . . why don't we take a crack at it out there?"

The captain gave Fargin a sudden quick look, then his eyes masked over and he said very casually. "Good idea. We'll have to clear it with the Union, of course. These belts are pretty well organized. Seniority, equipment, that kind of thing. Listen, did you get us a good fix on Hercules and Hathor?"

It was obvious that the captain wanted to change the subject, so Fargin let it drop. He was convinced that something was going on out around Vishnu and that he'd never find out from Jampel.

Fargin did his work quietly, just waiting, keeping his eyes open and his mouth shut, a virtue he was learning late. He thought about Camille Grant, the girl at Nell's Place, and built elaborate sexual fantasies about her and how it would be when he was tall, dark and handsome, standing on his wealth. He imagined taking her back to Earth, where she would be crowned Queen of the Outer Planets at the Spacemen's Ball. The fact that the Ball was a grossly commercial venture never deterred him.

He dreamed of stroking her satin curves and of all the wildly erotic things she would ask him to do, begging humbly for his attention.

Fargin had many variations on this theme.

Three more weeks went by before Fargin picked up another clue. Another communication relayed from ship to ship around the big bulge of Jupiter passed through Fargin's ship, *Melafalana*, on the way to something coded "Intruder One":

REGRET CALLISTO COMPUTCOMPLEX UNABLE SOLVE NINTH PUZZLE INFO
SUGGEST DOMINIC TRY HOFFMAN SERIES 78-6-sQ OUT WINE-CUP CENTRAL.

Fargin passed on the message, but he kept a copy secretly and mulled over it for several days until he finally gave up. He decided to wait until their return to Ganymede to continue his investigation, and went back to wrestling rocks.

Their tour ended finally and a quick sweep around the orbit scooped in all the tagged rocks. They were one pebble from finishing when they got a call.

"*Melafalana*, this is *Commercial Ranger*, Ganymede Four-Twelve. Ganymede Control says you are nearest, soonest, for Condition Yellow."

Jampel shouldered into the control room, droplets of depilatory on his cheeks. "*Commercial Ranger*, this is Jampel, Ganymede Five-Six. Advise on Condition Yellow." "Dominic here, Logan. We have a problem with our main drive reactor. It's overloading intermittently and we can't seem to locate the trouble."

"Oh, that's a bitch," Jampel grumbled. "You want me to troubleshoot by ear or come over?" "You're the one with the top reactor rating between here and Winecup. If you can think of something we haven't tried we'll buy you a case."

"Where are you?"

There was a hesitation and Far-gin grew more alert. Ganymede Four-Twelve was one of those that had landed on the speck of planetary dust weeks before.

"Intruder One."

Jampel shot a quick glance to Fargin, who was pretending to pore over a secondary priority chart of Band Eight rocks. "OK, understand. Are you worried about blowup?"

"Not now, but if we try takeoff Blauweiss says he'd like to be on the other side of the rock."

"Did you replace the Michaelson dampers?" asked Jampel.

"First thing we tried."

"Have you checked the automatic ratio controls for ground loops, Jim?"

"Nothing shows in the scopes." "Dammit," swore Jampel, "I guess I've got to go over there. Will you inform Ganymede Control we are pulling out of Band Eight?" "Right. I hope you can help us.

We've got a ... uh, core sampling we'd like to have Haydock check out."

Jampel's face was calm as he said, "We'll give you an ETA as soon as I punch it out of the computer. It will give us a chance to have my low man clean the converter linings."

There was a pause, then Jim Dominic said, "OK, right. You better land a quarter-round from the *Ranger*, Logan. There's a flattish spot there. I'll activate the marker when you get close, OK?"

"Right. Ganymede Five-Six out." "Sorry to trouble you. Ganymede Four-Twelve out."

Fargin was definitely interested. *Something* was going on. A big strike? A core sampling for Hay-dock? He was the computer control chief, not a geologist. Something was up.

It was over seven million miles out from Band Eight to Twelve, but with Ganymede and Callisto both on the farside the *Melafalana* was the obvious choice and Jampel had to go. It took time, but this sort of help was common among the fiercely independent and interdependent miners.

The rock that the *Ranger* sat on was only a couple of hundred yards long, dead black, and roughly cylindrical. Fargin ran a scanner over the rock but picked up virtually no metal readings aside from the ship. But the proximity of the mining vessel could easily confuse the scanners.

They landed. Jampel suited up and went out with Cliffords, the third man in the team. Fargin was told to clean the converter linings. As soon as Jampel left the ship, Fargin put down the sonic brushes and went up to the control room.

The *Commercial Ranger* was too far around the near horizon of the star rock to be seen. Maybe that's good, Fargin thought. Maybe I can slip out, sneak over and take a look. *Something* must be going on. Fargin suited up quickly and slipped out the cargo control air lock on the opposite side of the ship from the unseen *Ranger*. He estimated the gravity at about a fifteenth and practically floated toward the stubby end of the rock, hoping to come around toward the crippled *Ranger* from a different direction.

The *Ranger* was a Class IV made by Lockheed Spaceframes, Inc. and a touch bigger than the Class III-A *Melafalana* built on Mars by Universal Ford. Fargin's experienced eye checked the ship over from blunt nose to rocket tubes as he hid behind a rock outcropping. He could see light through several thick ports and occasionally a figure would pass by.

Fargin looked around for some evidence of corings or any sort of mining activity but saw nothing except a tripod laser sitting outside the ship. Maybe they planned to tow the whole rock back and cut it up in the Breakdown Orbit over Ganymede.

But what was in this rock that would be worth anything? Fargin asked himself. Not metals, surely. Something that didn't show on the scanners, presumably. Nonmetallics?

Fargin waited, impatient and bored. He thought of going back to the ship and starting the converter lining job but he kept procrastinating. *Something* was going to happen, he just *felt* it!

Suddenly, the hatch was opening and Jampel and Cliffords were coming out, with another figure in tow. *They were going back to the ship!* They'd go straight there and he'd have to circle around so as not to be seen!

Fargin felt a quick panic. He turned and started away, bending low and yanking himself along from sharp rockedge to black obelisk, skimming the surface, his heart pounding.

They'll find out I'm a spy! They kill spies!

Fargin's eyes were blurred with sweat and his hands faltered with fear. He reached for a smooth ledge surrounding a small crater and started to skim himself across when his attention was diverted by

something at the bottom of the crater. He faltered, missed his timing, and plunged into the crater.

He struck the lower crater wall but not with any damage, except to increase the adrenaline in his blood as he panicked about the delay. He attempted to scramble to his feet and stopped, his eyes wide on the bottom of the crater.

It was round and black, almost as black as the basaltic rock surrounding it. A hairline bisected it and it was faintly convex.

A hatch! Fargin stared, all thoughts of flight gone. *It's an air lock hatch,* he thought. "It's hollow," he said aloud. The rock was hollow: this is what they were hiding!

Fargin looked quickly around. There was nothing beyond or around the low crater, only the blackness of the sky and the big ball of Jupiter throwing a little light into this pocket of rock.

The frightened miner moved closer to the round hatch, saw that it was slightly oval and then saw the three depressions in the rim, near the hairline. He stepped to the edge and touched the smooth surface.

It didn't look man-made, but that didn't make it alien. Fargin thought. Raven Blacksword found that ancient underground world in "Crimson Pits of Starhell," but this was nothing like that. Fargin looked around again, then touched the depressions with his gloved fingertips.

Nothing happened.

Fargin reasoned that these depressions, as the only markings on the oval, had to be the lock release.

He tried pushing each in turn. Nothing happened. The depressions formed a small triangle and Fargin tried another combination. Nothing. He glanced fearfully around.

He was sure they were at the ship by now and knew he was gone. They'll be looking for me, he thought, his mind whirling. *I've got to hide!*

Fargin tried desperately to work a new combination but nothing happened. Then he pushed all three depressions three times in a row.

The hairline split and the halves of the oval dropped down, then slid sideways and stopped. A dim red light came on and there were wide, shallow steps going down.

Without thinking, Fargin skipped down the steps into a round, low room. Below the red light there was a second trio of depressions. Fargin touched them and the hatch closed over his head.

A second light came on and Fargin saw a hatchway that presumably led on into the interior of the "rock." He pressed another trio of depressions and the hatch slid back.

He closed it behind him and stood looking down an oval-topped corridor with several more pressure doors and a larger one at the end. He checked the air pressure. It was up to eighteen pounds. Since he had no analyzer he didn't know what the air might consist of, so he retained his helmet.

This *must* be alien, he told himself. It can't be anything else! Please, don't let it be a miner's secret-whatever! It's *got* to be alien! It's my only chance at doing anything, being anything!

Do the miners know about this, Fargin wondered. They have to, he reasoned. They've been on this rock—or whatever it is—for weeks that I know of. It isn't so big they wouldn't find that air lock.

They'll be looking for me here! When they don't find me in the ship or on the surface they'll look here! I gotta hide!

Fargin jumped to the nearest door and slid, it open. Wide, low shelves lined the walls. A curious, bulbous shape was extruded smoothly from the floor and another, with a shiny plate on one grayish extrusion, hung from the low, curved ceiling. There were curious dot and triangle patterns on various things.

There was no dust and only dim red lights.

They could be here anywhere, Fargin thought. *Aliens!* This might not be some captured derelict, but a brand-new ship! That's what the miners were hiding—First Contact!

Fargin turned and crossed the corridor to another door, suddenly realizing that there was gravity here, only slightly less than normal for an Earthman.

For an Earthman! The concept of the phrase struck him. Aliens, here, now, *now!* Or at least an alien ship.

He opened the hatch and looked into an oval room with a large sphere floating in the center. The sphere was light blue and below it, radiating outward, were wide, low pads. Dots, triangles and weaving,

wiggling lines coded several objects.

Another room was a laboratory. Or at least that was what Fargin suspected it was. There were some low tables but only a few small, knobby devices lying on them. Fargin touched nothing, for he was looking for a hiding place. Treasure hunting could come later.

Another room held a second floating sphere, only this one was purple and there were no pads. The next room was empty, except for hundreds of tiny string-like tubes hanging from the ceiling to a few inches from the floor.

Fargin stood indecisively in the corridor. He looked at the larger hatch at the end and broke into a stumbling run for it. He pressed his fingers into the depressions at the edge and the hatch split and slid back. Dim red lights came on as the hatch opened.

The room was huge, perhaps a quarter of the volume of the rock, and it contained a small park; dusty-purple, grasslike vegetation lay in ovals and distorted ovals over gently rolling hillocks. Blue trees like weeping willows grew in clusters, but they had pale yellow fruit. There was a fountain to one side, a pale gold ball floating over a shallow oval. As Fargin looked, the ball began to twirl and from the edges of the oval yellow fluid shot up in slow, lazy arcs to touch the ball.

Nearby was a sculpture, or at least it seemed that way to Fargin, who was staring in wonder. The construction was seemingly a pile of crystals, all round but irregular, like river stones, with tiny interior lights that blinked and moved in an intricate pattern.

There were tiny flowers here and there, feathery things in several colors. Pathways slithered through the purple grass and there were low, wide pads at various spots. Near each pad was a small floating sphere or a graceful slender column topped with a cluster of very small spheres.

Fargin moved into the garden, and as he neared the center he saw a perfectly ordinary video camera lying on a pad. This shocked him more than the purple grass and floating spheres. He picked it up and looked at it.

It was a Kodak Spacematic with half-hour holograph shot. He ran it back a few millimeters and checked the image in the tiny viewer. A simple pan of the room he was in revealed itself.

"They know about this all right," Fargin said, then looked around quickly. There was no one there, so Fargin reasoned that they must have left the camera by accident.

They found this whatever-it-is, Fargin thought, and are hiding it from the Patrol and the Inner Worlds. *What a find!* He wondered what the floating spheres did. What were the strange rooms for? How long had this been here? Were there aliens here, or was this a derelict? It didn't *look* like a derelict, yet things often stayed unchanged in space for a very long time.

Fargin moved through the oval central space and on through a grove of blue trees and yellow flowers and past a sheet of rainbow plastic standing by itself. He went into the corridor on the opposite side and made quick looks into each room.

One room held a collection of oddly-shaped objects that were seven or eight feet long and perhaps weapons. They had bulges and sacs and shiny spots and Fargin was afraid to touch them. Another room was stacked with cubes, each with rounded edges and a coded series of colored dots on one facet.

One room did not open and another had six depressions and a white marking on the door. The last room was either a control room or a sundeck.

Fargin looked around in wonder. It was as if he had stepped into a shallow crater on the surface. There was the effect of complete openness. There was the huge round globe of Jupiter and the moons and stars.

The startled miner looked down, around his feet, where the effect was of standing in a low-profile crater. Two wide low pads and between them a floating sphere, the only bright red one he had seen. Nothing else.

Fargin stepped into the bubble—for it must have been a bubble, he knew he couldn't have stepped out onto the surface—to look around. The *Commercial Ranger* was, or seemed to be, sitting a couple of hundred feet away. Fargin automatically ducked, then grinned and straightened.

This must be an image projected from hidden surface projectors, he thought. It gave perfect vision. Fargin stepped up onto one of the low pads to get a better look. I wish I could see it better, he thought.

Suddenly the ship rushed at him, sweeping sideways until it seemed to be about to crash into the "bubble" around him. Fargin threw himself to the floor and rolled toward the corner, cowering shamefully.

Nothing happened.

He peeked out. The ship was back where it had been before!

Fargin got up warily and moved to where he could get a better look. All he had done was to step up on the pad and . . .

Wish for a better look!

Quickly, Fargin turned to look up at Jupiter.

"I want a closer look," he said aloud. Nothing happened. Fargin stepped up on the pad and looked at the great striped planet. "I want a better look," he said again.

Suddenly the entire rock rushed toward the surface of the planet at fantastic speed. They passed Gilgamesh and Hathor in a few seconds and went past the orbits of Hercules and Minerva quickly. Callisto and Ganymede were on the opposite side but in seconds he was plunging toward the surface of Jupiter.

"Stop!"

The flying rock stopped instantly. There was no deceleration whatever. They simply stopped. It left Fargin shaken and nervous.

"My God!" Very cautiously he said, "G-go ba-back to where we were before."

Blink.

They were back.

Fargin breathed a sigh of relief. It was all a sort of zoom, like with a camera. Fargin turned to look at the *Ranger* and froze.

Men were coming this way! They were coming from the *Ranger* and from where the *Melafalana* had landed. *I've got to hide! I've got to get away!*

Fargin looked around frantically. There was no door out but the one he had entered by, so he ran out and stopped. All the rooms he had looked at had been dead-ends. All but the two he couldn't open.

He ran to the door with the six *depressions and stuck gloved fingers into all the spots. Nothing happened.

I WANT TO HIDE! I WANT IN! he thought frantically.

The door slid open and he plunged into the corridor beyond as the dim red lights came up. He came to a junction of the passage cut into the rock and looked at the oval of shining paleness on the way.

Was it a direction guide? A warning? Dots and, triangles and the weaving lines were intertwined in a sort of rippling design. With irritation Fargin stalked past the sign and arbitrarily took the right-hand tunnel.

He came upon a niche a few yards along and briefly thought of hiding behind the cubes stacked there, but he imagined he heard a noise behind him and he raced on. The tunnel was low and he often dinged his helmet on the rock surface which careened him from side to side.

The gravity seemed to be less as he ran along the passage until at last he was almost floating.

I must be near the surface, he thought, or whoever built this thing had something in mind.

He passed another niche, this one filled with globes and small cubes. And then abruptly he was at a hatch. A ripple of dots and markings crossed the door in brilliant white.

Fearfully Fargin looked over his shoulder and then hit all six depressions. *Let me in*, he thought excitedly. Nothing happened. Fargin pressed again and said aloud, "Let me in!"

Nothing happened.

Fargin almost cried. *They'll kill me! They're certain to kill me. Oh, God, maybe they'll torture me!*

He sagged against the hatch, his fingers still pressing at the depressions. *Let me out, please, please, let me out!*

The hatch slid silently open and Fargin almost fell through. Quickly he pressed the depressions on the

inside and the hatch closed behind him. He turned to the opposite door and opened it.

Another corridor, wide and low. Fargin turned left and passed several doors. Inside were rooms similar to those he had seen farther back, but these were smaller, each with only one pad and one floating sphere. He came at last to another hatch with more bright white markings that he could not open.

Fargin turned and trotted back the way he had come.

I've got to get away!

He passed the place where he had entered and found another hatch, which did open. He stepped into another bubble-like room. Two pads, one bright red floating globe, and a view of the *Melafalana*. Fargin stepped onto one of the pads and took a look around.

Almost at once he cringed and huddled down on the pad. *Captain Jampel was looking at him from twenty feet!*

It took Fargin a moment to remember what he *hoped* was the condition of the bubble room, that it was a projected illusion and that Jampel was not seeing him at all. Cautiously, Fargin looked up again.

Jampel stood on a rock outcropping a few feet away, his hard eyes sweeping the surface of the rocks around him for hiding places. His eyes passed right over Fargin without seeing him.

Fargin felt relief flood through him. *He can't see me!* Then Jampel moved and the frightened miner saw in his hand the stubby fat shape of a Colt laser.

They're going to kill me, he shrieked in his head. Fargin cowered down on the pad and thought furiously, *I want away from here!*

The bubble went black for a second, then the rock was falling away from him. Fargin caught a quick glimpse of Jampel's figure diving behind a rock outcropping.

Then Fargin was in space and the mysterious hollowed-out rock' was away and behind. For seconds Fargin was too startled to speak or move. *Was this another illusion? Was he still in the rock?*

"Stop," he said, "Please, stop!"

The moving stopped. The stars were there, and Jupiter and far away, the tiny hot spot of the Sun.

Where am I? Fargin asked.

You are fourteen million, two hundred thousand, nine hundred and two kilometers from the surface of the primary, a voice said inside his head, which is presently four hundred and eighty-three point three million kilometers from its sun. Do you desire further information?

"Awk!" Fargin gasped. "Who's talking in my head?"

I am the ship. My type is Crevlar-morama. My classification is Minor Vessel, Star Class. My designation is Quell/blar-klamom/two thousand six. I was activated in four million and—

"Stop it!" The voice in his head stopped and Fargin looked around cautiously. "What the hell is going on?"

You desire information on religious classifications or upon tactical situations? Please designate.

There was no one there. Smooth walls with cryptic code markings. Two pads. Floating red ball. Space out beyond the bubble. Stars. Planets. Dots.

"Uh ... what are you? I mean, uh, are you really speaking in my head?"

I am the ship. I speak directly as I am programmed. I perceive that you are not of the race or phylum that evolved me. I have adjusted my symbology and response time accordingly.

"Are . . . are you alive?"

Not in the sense you mean, that of biological self-awareness. But I live. I have lived for pause pause pause nine million, three hundred and eight of the rotations of your home planet. I am self-aware and I function properly.

"You're . . . you're reading my mind!" Fargin felt fear rising in him. He . . . *it* would know he was afraid and if they found out he was afraid they'd take him!

You suspect serious nonfunctioning perind or terminal dispersal. "Huh? Oh, yes—yes!"

Does it have any significance to approaching spacecraft?

"Where?" Fargin twirled and stared wildly into the stars. Suddenly the ship seemed to leap forward; a

Patrol cruiser jumped into view and raced toward Fargin's alien ship. Fargin was too terrified to speak, even to croak out a com mand to stop. But abruptly the Patrol vessel stopped a few feet away and then Fargin realized it was another zoom effect used by the mysterious ship that had him.

This is a spacecraft used by your planetary police, is it not?

"Yeah, those blackskins! Those sneakin' dirty blankheads!"

You are afraid of them. Shall I destroy them?

"No!" Oh, God, thought Fargin. "No, don't destroy them! If I knocked off one of their ships they'd be after me forever!"

I have capacity to immobilize ship, including or excluding life-support functions. Shall I activate?

"No, uh, wait, huh? How far away are they?"

One million, four hundred thousand point one kilometers approaching this ship at estimated acceleration of—

"Hold it. They're still 'a ways off. What's happening back on that rock?"

Do you refer to the Dubrian Station which we just left?

"Yes! That asteroid or whatever it was."

Space seemed to whirl and then the zoom went swiftly to the black rock, stopping a hundred feet or so away. Fargin could see a long smooth slot in the side of the rock and a hatch in the center. Several spacesuited figures stood around the edges, looking in.

"Is . . . is that where we came from?"

That is the Dubrian Station and the humans are examining the pod depression.

"Do they know I am gone?"

Pause pause conversation monitoring suggests that is a reasonable assumption.

"Then I am safe!" Fargin smiled and sprawled back on the pad to look out at the simulated closeup of the rock base.

The vessel of the United System Patrol is no longer of danger?

"Oh, I forgot! Where is it?" *Approaching as before at a distance of*

"Never mind. It's still coming. Does it know where I am or where I came from?"

Pause pause pause tracking devices have scanned flight path since beginning of flight. -

"Is it as fast as we are?"

Pause pause no.

"Then let's get out of here!"

What designation? Primary? Home planet? Would you like to see home system of Dubri?

"Later, later."

Home system of Dubri very beautiful. Pause pause will require adjustment in your biological sequences but home system of great beauty.

Fargin laughed. "You sound homesick."

On station eight million point six rotation periods of your home planet. I am long past Toi checks and Borvans.

"You mean you are busted?"

Fargin was frightened again.

Minor calibrations would be wise for optimum functioning. Power levels are only at Artala levels. Dubri home system very efficient as well as beautiful.

"How bad is the power?"

Artala level obtainable by direct contact with primary of system. Rull-skile level obtainable within two periods.

"That's good? I mean, is that what is level?"

Rull-skile level optimum for Crevlar-morama with boyar modifications.

"In other words you'll be OK within a short time?"

Yes. But Dubri system unique in Dubro Galaxy.

"Never mind that. Take me to Ganymede."

Barl.

"Huh?"

Pause pause aye-aye, sir. The ship started to move swiftly toward Jupiter.

Fargin sat back on the pad and put his arms awkwardly under his head. For the first time he felt relaxed. A fast ship, no navigation to do, just watch the way you told it to behave. Even Raven Blacksword had never had a ship like this!

Fargin watched the swiftly-approaching planet as the ship curved around toward Ganymede. Boy, what Raven could do with a ship like this, Fargin thought. *Immobilize* a Patrol ship! Already, Fargin realized, he was unconsciously doing what Blacksword would have done. Go back and get the girl! With her under one arm he could laugh at the Patrol, sneer at the miners, and just have one hell of a time!

Fargin sat up abruptly. *Why not?*

What had he to lose? The Patrol would probably dump him anyway, as soon as they found out what they wanted to know. The miners would kill him just for knowing about the Station.

But with this ship!

"Uh, ship . . . can I breathe the air in this ship?"

Negative. Would you like it changed to something suitable for your, metabolism?

"Can you do that?"

Yes. All Crevlar-morama vessels are equipped with Scee-klamorma duplicators.

"You mean you *duplicate* the air, or, uh, make it, or what?"

I have several recordings of air taken from your home planet five point six million years ago. I have capacity to duplicate as needed.

"Good God, is there anything you can't do?"

Virtually an infinity of acts are beyond my capabilities. Three hundred nine are forbidden to me and I am incapable of acting in those areas. But the maintenance of life-support levels for a wide variety of intelligent life is my Priority-One instruction. As we have conversed I have drained Dubrian air and replaced it with a suitable atmosphere. If you desire, you may remove your spacesuit.

The new air was fresh, with an exhilarating tang. Fargin breathed deeply. For years he had been breathing the slightly oily, *used* and *re-used* air of pressure domes and spaceships, and the thin, cold, flat Martian air.

This was fresh and fine and Fargin felt a glow of well-being. Then he laughed. He was getting drunk on fresh air?

May I ask the purpose of the Ganymede landing? If I am properly informed I function at optimum. In no way do I mean this query to be critical of your command functions, but since you are not of the race that evolved me you might need guidelines in maximum effective use of me.

"You certainly sound human. Stuffy, but human."

Thank you. A full grasp of your speech and thought patterns still eludes me, for I was not trained to function for another race. I have had to extrapolate. If I am in error at any time, please correct me.

"Oh, no, you're doing fine. Hey, listen, we humans have nothing like you at all. Were the miners aware of you? I mean, did they know about you or go into you?"

Negative. They attempted entry to passage leading to me, but their minds were not sufficiently motivated to open the hatch. I monitored their conversations since first arrival and they are puzzled by various equipment. A member of their first exploration team removed a limb by thrusting it into a disposal device and since then they have moved cautiously. I believe they are attempting to translate the Dubrian symbols in hope of understanding the function and direction of the Station.

"So that's what all that was about? Say, listen, where are the people that built you—uh—brought you here?"

Contact with home system is maintained by periodic checks. The personnel of the Station all went to surface of the planet you call Jupiter pause pause one hundred and ninety-six years ago.

They did not return and I went into Arata mode as programmed. A replacement team will arrive in pause pause forty-one rotations.

There was a brief moment as Fargin thought about the ship trying to con him into a forty-one-year space trip, but the ship broke into his thoughts.

We are hovering above the usual landing site of the major city of Ganymede. Do you wish to land?

"Yes! At, uh, 'Dome Two. Can you hover just over the prime airlock?"

Affirmative. I presume at a height that permits easy access.

"Yeah ... and ... listen . . . if I leave, will you let me back in? I mean, suppose someone else gets in here? Would they command you?"

Yes, unless you give me a Null-Alimon command that you are in command until further notice or until an Arata mode is activated.

Fargin started back into his, spacesuit. "Consider yourself with a Null-Alimon command. I'm going into the dome and get my woman!"

Aye-aye, sir.

As Fargin swung out of the hatch and dropped to the rockmelt of the area around Dome Two he ignored the stares of two startled miners working on an atmosphere pump. What would Raven Black-sword do now? he asked himself.

He'd sweep her off her feet, that's what he'd do!

Fargin went into the Dome and down the short street and into Nell's Place. "Where's Camille?" he barked at the bartender. The man looked at him curiously, then pantomimed opening a faceplate. Fargin grimaced and flipped open the helmet's faceplate. "Where's Camille?" he demanded.

"In her room, where else this time of day?"

Fargin demanded the number of the room and then stumped up the stairs. The bartender laughed. "She won't be too happy being waked up this time of morning. But you won't get any points on originality! She's done it with a guy in a suit!"

Fargin found the door, a painted plastic panel with doves and hearts all over it. He kicked at it with his heavy boots. It took kicks, but the door gave. Camille was struggling up in bed, clutching the sheets around her lush body. A miner with a sunburned face lay next to her, his mouth open and dribbling saliva, and his snores threatened to drown out everything.

"Who the hell are you?" Camille snapped. "Listen, I conduct business during business hours. Now shove off, you zongo!" She fell back on the pillow, then immediately sat up. "And I'll get the Union to take the cost of that door out of your shares!"

"Camille, it's me! I've come to get you!"

"What? Listen, you dumb clean-boot, have you scrambled your main program or did you just get uncoupled? I said out!"

"But I've got the system by the tail, honey! I can do anything. Uh, my ship and I can do anything!" Fargin stood tall. "Anything!" he repeated.

Camille opened one eye and looked at him quite calmly. "Out. Out now. Don't wait for a dotted line to appear on the floor. Out."

Fargin stepped closer. "Camille, you're my kind of woman—"

"I'm a lot of kinds of woman, especially way out here. Right now I'm a sleepy, angry, *mad* woman! You've tumbled your gyro if you think I'm all ready for mad, passionate romance at—awk!—this time of morning!"

"Camille, I can give you anything, anything at all. I have power, Camille, real power!"

The girl uncovered both eyes and looked at him. "You strike it rich?"

"Uh, well, not like that. Now don't groan! I didn't find any rich asteroid or anything—I found something better!"

"There's nothing better," came Camille's muffled reply.

"But I've got a ship that can do anything, anything at all!"

Camille groaned. "I've heard of guys liking their ships before but this one is new! I think you were hulled in the control room, fella. Now beat it!"

Fargin moved to the side of the bed and touched her gently. "Camille, Camille? Listen, I'm very important now. The Patrol is after me and the miners are out to—"

"WHAT!" She sat up, disregarding the bosom she bared. "The Patrol is after you and you came in here? Out! *OUT!*" She pointed imperiously.

"Camille, you've got to come with me! A man is nothing without a woman, his kind of woman!"

"Not with the Patrol after you! *OUT*, you damned tank thief!" She jumped from the bed, stark naked, and Fargin gulped. She started pushing him and Fargin was frantic.

She was Blacksword's kind of woman. Wild, strong, beautiful, brazen. That made her his kind of woman, but how do you handle that kind of woman? What would Raven Blacksword do?

"Listen, you stupid mudballer, you've split your binders! You get out of—"

Fargin slapped her. She fell on the bed, bounced right back with a snarl and bit Fargin's nose through the open faceplate. Fargin howled with pain and lashed out blindly.

Camille fell unconscious to the floor, a naked and voluptuous pile of meat.

Rubbing his nose carefully Fargin gathered up the limp figure and carried her downstairs. The bartender started to come around the bar at him, then stopped and looked thoughtful.

"I guess if Camille couldn't handle you I ain't gonna try."

"Keep it that way, mudballer," snapped Fargin. He walked to the door and stopped. He turned back. "Uh, listen, would you open the door? I've got her and, uh, in these suits you can't ... uh, thanks."

Several early risers stared at Fargin as he carried the nude girl down the street and one went running off toward the Patrol office. Fargin dumped her on a bench in the air lock and managed to pull a suit on her. He was just cycling the air when he saw Major Corey through the port, his face livid and a Colt Laser in his fist.

Fargin slammed the outer hatch open and left it open as he half-dragged, half-carried Camille to the hovering alien, ship. It would take them precious seconds to override and close the outer hatch and recycle. Fargin shoved the limp girl into the air lock and climbed in after her.

"Let's go!" he shouted.

Nothing happened.

Fargin looked back. The Patrol was in the air lock. Fargin shouted again, "Get going! Get us off of here! Go!" Nothing happened.

Frantically Fargin pulled the after hatch shut just as the Dome port was opening, decanting angry Patrolmen. Fargin stuck his fingers in the inner lock door and burst through. He burst into the control room and shouted. "Get us out of here!"

Nothing happened.

"Are you dead? Move!" Fargin jumped onto the low pad and looked up at the sky, the white dome curving off to the left. "*Take off!*" he shouted.

The dome dropped away and the stars raced toward them. With relief Fargin dropped to the pad. "What happened? I was shouting!"

Control function necessary from control pads, otherwise vagrant thought might activate random reaction.

"Why didn't you tell me I had to be in here on these pads?"

Commander did not request specific information.

"Oh, thanks. Very funny."

It was not intended as comic remark. I am programmed to deliver entertainment of Dubrian nature but analysis of human comedy shows no comparison.

"Never mind, never mind. Listen, ship, I'm going back and get Camille out of the lock and into one of the rooms. Can you keep her there for a while? I don't think she's too happy with me right now. Don't hurt her or anything, just keep her entertained and give her whatever she wants, OK?"

If desires of human Camille are within capability of my functions, it is possible.

"Fine. Now what's happening back there?"

Pause pause a Patrol ship is being activated. I postulate pursuit. Shall I destroy?

"No! Not now, anyway. God, you give me a feeling of power! OK, so what's going on back on that rock, on the Dubrian Station thing?"

The Patrol vessel has arrived and both ships of the miners have been deactivated. The humans have taken refuge within the Station and the Patrol humans are attempting forced entry.

"Oh, God! Can they do it?"

Eventually. A Station is not a Barimaida-crust or even an Amla fortress.

"Whatever they are. No, don't tell me now. Um ... um ..." Fargin thought furiously. "Ummm ... hell ... take us back there!"

Space swirled and the ship started its swing around Jupiter at a breathless speed.

"Why am I doing this?" Fargin asked.

Unable to discern reasons for—

"Never mind! Boy! Listen, ship, I'm going back there because ... because that bunch of tank-thieving Patrolmen are going to foul everything up! With the power of this ship and that Station they can hold off the Patrol and get independence. Can you really duplicate anything?"

Yes, providing a prior scan has been made in sufficient depth.

"And you really have the power to destroy or immobilize a Patrol ship?"

Affirmative.

"Then we are in business, ship! Take us in to that rock!"

Fargin settled back into the pad. Power! He had power at last! With Camille, he—oops.

Fargin jumped up and raced into the air lock and dragged Camille into one of the rooms with a floating sphere in the center and stripped off her spacesuit. He looked longingly at the nude girl and then, as she started to regain consciousness, he fled.

Back in the control room he said, "Ship, you remember to keep her there, right?"

Aye-aye, sir.

"I don't know why that sounds silly, but what the hell. How are we doing? How soon will we be back at the Station?"

Anticipated arrival in four minutes, captain.

What am I going to do when I get there? Fargin thought. Blast the Patrol? Rescue the miners? Become a hero? What do I want to do? What would Raven Blacksword do? In "The Queen's Sword" he had shot his way right through the mercenaries in the citadel. In "Emperor of Scoraba" he blasted his way in with flameswords. In "Star-magician" he had used trickery.

Hell, thought Fargin, I'm not Blacksword. I can't fight like he can fight. He's big and strong and brawny and fast.

But he doesn't have a ship like this, Fargin told himself. *Nobody* has a ship like this! With a ship like this I can beat 'em all! There's nothing I can't do!

Dubrian Station dead ahead, sir.

"Immobilize their cruiser. Activate audio channel only to the miners inside. Hold it steady. Activate the force screen. Uh, we do have a force screen, don't we?"

Semantics being what they are, even in telepathic communication, I answer that we have a force screen, sir.

"Thank you. Is their cruiser deactivated?"

Cruiser immobilized. Do you wish me to immobilize the individual Patrolmen on the surface?

"Yes!" Power!

Audio channel to Station ready for activation.

"Activate!" By God, this was fine, thought Fargin. Power ennobles and absolute power ennobles absolutely. "Men of Earth!" he called out.

The voice of Logan Jampel came through clearly. "Who is that? What happened to the Patrol? If

you're asking for our surrender you can go to hell. We're holding out to the last and if we have to we'll blow this rock up!"

"Hold it, Jampel!" Fargin snapped.

"Who's that? How do you know my name?"

"I'm . . ." Fargin hesitated. David Fargin was a loser, a nobody, as far as the System was concerned. But he commanded this ship, this beautiful supership. He needed a new name, something to go with his new status.

Fargin could hear a whispered conference on the other end of the transmission. "Is this some kind of trick?" Jampel asked. "Who are you?"

"I'm ... Hawk Hardcase." *Oh, if Blacksword could see me now he'd die!*

"Who?"

"My name is Hawk Hardcase, mudballer. I'm the one that fixed the Patrol for you. I'm the one that can tell you how to control that whole station down there."

"How, for God's sake? We've been trying to figure out these dot and triangle squiggles for months! We've run it through the computers every way including inside-out."

"Did you know there was a matter duplicator on board?"

"I'd believe anything of this rock—it's weird!"

"A duplicator solves your problem of independence," Fargin said. "It can dupe air, water, chemicals, whatever you need." In his mind Fargin asked, *You can, can't you?*

Affirmative. Steak and eggs, star-fire rubies, material for bone transplants, radioactive isotopes, lyscrgic acid diethylamide, fresh flowers or new shoes—I only require a sample to scan.

"You can tell us how it works? Great! Do it, man!"

"Hold up there. First, a deal."

"What do you mean, a deal?" snarled Jampel. "We found this whatever-it-is . . . we've worked for months trying to figure it out and not trigger off something hairy. The Patrol is on our tail and you are talking *deal*? What kind of guy are you, anyway?"

"I'm Hawk Hardcase, mudballer, and I do things *my way*! I can get the Patrol off your tail—and incidentally there's another ship on the way—and tell you how to open that treasure chest."

"Listen, we'd make a deal with the Devil to get this system liberated from those corrupt bastards!"

"Then I'm your man." *Is my voice getting deeper?*

"So what's your way, uh, Hardcase?"

It came to Fargin. He knew what he wanted. It stunned him for a moment. He not only knew what he wanted, but for once he thought he really had the ability to get it!

"I'll take care of the Patrol and I'll show you how to operate that Station. It's a Dubrian Station, by the way. About nine million years old. You'll get your independence . . . but I want a privateer's license from the Outer World Republic or whatever-you-call-it."

"A what?"

"A privateer's license. The Patrol will always be after me anyway so I might as well make money on it." Fargin hardened his voice even more. "Hawk Hardcase doesn't fight for nothing, fella."

"Who?"

"Me, Hawk Hardcase."

"Oh, yeah . . . uh . . . well . . ." There was some whispered conversation and the ship spoke quietly to Fargin.

Two Patrol spacecraft have come in sight around Jupiter, sir.

"Thank you."

"What was that, uh, Mr. Hardcase?"

"Never mind. Have you decided?"

"Yeah ... uh, listen, wouldn't you rather place your ship in our fleet. I mean with appropriate rank and all?"

"I don't take orders easily, Jampel. I'm a loner."

"Sure, uh, sorry . . ."

"Hurry up, mudballer, there are two Patrol ships on the way."

"Uh . . . yeah ... OK, you've got a deal. How do we operate this thing, anyway?"

"You know that room with the bubble?"

"Affirmative."

"Go in there and lie down on one of those pads and say, 'Explain this station to me.'"

"That's all?" Jampel's voice was incredulous. "What else?"

"That's all. You'll pardon me, gentlemen, but I must engage the enemy."

"Hardcase! Hey!"

"Cut contact!" Fargin ordered. *Aye-aye, sir.*

"Head for those Patrol ships!" Fargin watched the ship turn and start its race toward the still invisible Patrol craft. He grinned and stretched. "Send me the wench," he told the ship.

Aye-aye, sir. May I inquire if you are considering coital union with this female at this time?

"Uh, maybe, why?"

It would be appropriate to have music and various scents, I believe.

"Where did you get that idea?"

I have been conducting a dialogue with Miss Grant, sir. She has led me to understand this might be appropriate.

"What's been going on back there?"

A very instructive exchange of information, sir. Miss Grant is most interesting. She is the first human female I have had an opportunity to commune with.

"And I'm the first human male. Don't forget I am boss here, ship."

Aye-aye-sir.

"Hello, David." There was a soft, warm voice coming from behind him. Fargin turned. Camille leaned languidly against the edge of the door, her golden body hung with an intricate lacework of diamonds, starfire rubies and great emerald droplets. She shimmered and glistened as she moved toward Fargin.

"Where did you get that stuff?" Fargin asked.

"The ship made it for me, honey," she smiled. "This nice ship." She patted the floating globe as she moved next to Fargin. "The nicest ship a girl ever had . . . and just think, you're in complete charge."

Fargin watched her as she slid next to him on the wide, low pad. "Uh, you've changed," he said.

"Changed? Me? Don't be silly, but a girl has to be gentled down firmly now and again, doesn't she? Anyone named Hawk Hardcase knows that."

"Look, uh, I've got to take care of these two Patrol ships and—"

"Oh, honey, just tell the ship to do it."

"Oh . . . yeah ... uh, ship will you immobilize those two ships?"

Gladly, sir. Sir, would it violate any privacy taboos if I watched?

"What? Why?"

Humans fascinate me, sir. You are much more complex and interesting than the Dubri. I hope you will not construe that as criticism of those who evolved me, but they were, if you'll pardon me, sir, they were without the juices of life. I find every facet of human endeavor of great interest. I hope this will not offend you. Humans are very complex and largely unpredictable and it is sometimes difficult for me to function properly on inadequate information.

"Oh, hell, yes. Watch all you want. You're only a machine."

Sir, I have been programmed for a sense of pride of accomplishment. Being a machine that must, under all circumstances, function at optimum is not an easy task.

"I'm sorry, ship. I didn't mean to offend. It's just that I never thought that a machine would or could be insulted."

Sir, I perceive an awareness in you of my stature and I appreciate that.

"You're welcome."

If you will forgive me for saying so, sir, I think you and I shall pause pause pause get along very well.

"Honey," said Camille, "can the ship *really* make me a whole big necklace of Martian firestones if I just give him a good look at one?"

"Yes," said Hawk Hardcase.

EPILOGUE

The *Thunderbolt* lay motionless in reference to the 240-mile globe of Vesta. The man the whole system knew as Hawk Hardcase lay on the command couch.

The swords clashed and sparks flew as Hawk Hardcase fought shoulder to shoulder with a giant warrior. Hawk smashed through the guard of a four-armed Skull soldier, deflecting one sword and slicing off a descending swordhand. He and Raven Blacksword exchanged fierce grins and the giant beside him gave a great cry and cut through the cuirass of another soldier.

The Skulls climbed over the bodies of their own dead to get at the two swordsmen in the narrow passage, and the stone halls rang with their fearsome cries.

"Get the Princess and Melani!" Hawk Hardcase shouted to Black-sword, slashing at another scarlet-clad warrior and jumping back to avoid the spill of gray guts. "Get out the back! I'll hold them off!"

"No, by the gods of Morga!" Raven Blacksword swung his blade with both hands, cutting off two heads and scratching the stone wall. "I'll not desert the best friend I ever had!"

"Go! I command you!"

"Kill! Kill! Kill for the love of killing!" screeched the Overlord from the tower.

"No!" Blacksword snarled savagely as a spear stabbed through from the melee of metal and dark flesh and sliced into his side. He cut off the haft with one blow and the two of them together made a hideous windmill of their famous blades, beating back the Skull warriors for a moment.

"Now! Together!" Blacksword cried. They turned and ran. Hawk "picked up the Princess under one arm. She had not recovered consciousness and the foul costume of the Highest Sacrifice was still on her golden body. With a snarl he ripped away the symbols of her oppression and flung them into a corner.

"Ready?" he snapped at Raven Blacksword, who had Melani clinging to him adoringly.

"Ready, brother!"

They lunged at the doorway, two muscled giants in leather sword belts and tattered loincloths, leather pouches full of the Jewels of Mira swinging from their belts. Raven cut down the first Skull soldier and Hawk cut the legs from the pair that followed.

"This way!" Raven cried and then thundered toward the light. They ran squinting into the sun and above them the Overlord screamed his anger. The eerie chant of Thomba began and the very clouds seemed to thicken and swirl faster. A lightning bolt lightened the horizon and the Overlord screamed out his chant to the dark gods buried deep within the planet. The ground began to rumble and there were screams.

Hawk seized a bow from a newly dead soldier and pulled an arrow from one of the dying Amla, who screamed anew. Notching the arrow he sent it flying toward the black robed figure on the tower.

There was a faint thud and a pause in time. The black figure stiffened and a lightning bolt struck a short distance away, on the rocky headland.

Sir . . .

The black robe fluttered and fell and there was a great sigh as the land subsided. The smoke from the burning temple drifted across the tower as Raven said, "Come! My men wait in the hills!"

Hawk Hardcase picked up the Princess where he had dropped her. *Pardon me, sir . . .*

"Let's go!" He grinned, his mouth a ruthless slash.

You wanted to know when the ship was within attack range, sir.

Raven Blacksword threw the beautiful slavegirl over his shoulder and climbed into the archer's slot. "Come on, the moat's only a spear's throw down!" He let go and leapt into space.

It's time, sir . . .

Hawk Hardcase saw the last of the warriors boiling from the bloody mouth of the passage and he put

the Princess down. He met the first onslaught of the demented Skull warriors and killed two in a single slash. He backed toward the door, felt back for the smooth metal edge, took a light cut on the upper arm as he beheaded the infamous Captain Morto, then slid the metal panel shut and staggered to the couch and collapsed.

The target ship is within attack range, sir.

"Uh? Oh, good, good." Hawk Hardcase took a deep breath and sighed. He'd pick it up again when he and Raven were in the nomad's tent, enjoying the lush wenches. Then maybe they'd go visit the Kingdom of Scor, on Molanu.

"What's her name?"

Guillaume Apollinaire. French Consortium registry.

"Do they have any aboard?"

Unable to determine, sir. Shall we proceed as usual?

"Yes. What is Camille doing?"

Redecorating the cabin, sir. I provided her with sheet jade carved in imitation of Barimaida. Shall I inform her of the attack? Do you wish her to be present?

"No. The last time she went with me we kept them waiting a half-hour while she had you whip her up a new costume. Let's go."

Aye-aye, sir.

The *Thunderbolt* erupted into action. Hawk Hardcase watched the big sphere of the *Apollinaire* come closer until he could see details of the domes and masts and other exterior equipment.

Ready to transmit, sir.

"*Apollinaire*, this is Hawk Hard-case! You are helpless! You will not try evasive action! My ship will match velocity and I will board! Any resistance will be harshly dealt with! I will see the ship's captain and the ship's librarian at the main air lock."

The massive globe of the passenger ship dwarfed the sleek, swift *Thunderbolt* but there was no defensive reaction. The whole System knew of the power that lay behind the small gray Dubrian vessel.

Hawk Hardcase said, "Keep in touch with me at all times and prepare to immobilize upon mental command."

Aye, sir.

Hawk went to his cabin and changed into the dread black of the famous Hardcase image. He slung a Dubrian multilaser from his hip and checked himself in the mirror, approvingly.

The captain and several officers awaiting him in the inner air lock were smiling broadly. "Ah, the famous Hawk Hardcase!" the captain said and saluted with a flair.

"Never mind that!" Hawk snapped. "Where's the librarian?" A young woman stepped forward, the puce jumper of the spaceline hiding not at all the lines of her figure.

"Pardon, monsieur ..."

"You! You know what I want! What do you have?"

The girl grinned shyly and offered a small stack of book tapes. Hawk seized them and shuffled them through his hands quickly.

"'Pirates of Canis Major'! This is an ancient one!" He tossed it to the floor and followed it with "Blacksword's Revenge." Then his eyes lit up. A new one! Two!

"Blacksword and the Time Magicians."

"The Gods of Xolotl."

Hawk Hardcase grinned wolfishly at the librarian, who fluttered her eyes and blushed slightly. "Good, good," he grunted.

"The Return of the Queen's Sword." Fantastic! That Queen Suli had been a great character. Maybe she had a sister, or maybe a captive princess that she was holding as a slave.

Hawk Hardcase looked around with a scowl. "All right, I've got what I've come for! Now don't try anything!" He backed toward the lock and frowned at the circle of officers.

The librarian cleared her throat and said, "We left before it was out, Mr. Hardcase, but next trip

we're sure to have the newest one. I think it's called 'The Pirate Kings of the Stars.' "

Hawk Hardcase smiled at her. "I'll think about it. You'll see me when you least expect it."

"Maybe you could give a talk to the passengers?" suggested the captain. "I'm certain they'd enjoy it."

"No, I don't—"

"Oh, please?"

"Well, maybe next time." She did look good in that jumper, thought Hawk Hardcase. I wonder if she'd like a dress made of linked diamonds?

The hatch hissed shut and the most famous pirate in space history jumped back into his own adopted world.

"Away!" he shouted and the *Thunderbolt* dropped away from the big ship, heading for the secret base on a nameless rock in the forward Trojan position from Mars.

As he dropped into the command couch, happily fingering the book tapes, David Fargin wondered about the librarian. Was it a trap? Had they set her up just to capture the elusive Hardcase?

David Fargin watched the stars pass as the ship took a standard evasive route to Home Base, his fingers fondling the book tapes.

That librarian was really very cute. I wonder if she could ever be interested in me, he thought.

He sighed. She might be interested in Hawk Hardcase, though, he thought. The next time I see her ... if there is a next time . . . maybe I can get a few moments alone with her.

Unless Camille goes along.

Maybe the ship can come up with a whole new jewel for her, Fargin thought, something like those idol's eyes Raven had in "Blacksword and the Temple of the Dragon God." Something to keep her busy .

..

He sighed again and took a deep breath.

Hawk Hardcase dropped the book tape into the slot and settled back for the first reading. Later, the ship would help him and he'd fight right alongside Raven against the Time Magicians or the Queen's enemies.

But this first time Raven would have to go it alone.

As the screen lighted and as the first words appeared Hawk Hardcase had only time for one quick thought: will there come a time for the Ultimate Adventure? And which of them would win?

On the screen it said, "The icy wind shrilled through the eroded spires of ancient rock like banshees gone mad. Raven Blacksword lifted his shaggy dark head and tasted the scent of the alien air .. ."