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Have your own extra-terrestrial adventure

Douglas Hill



Galactic Search

A Sparrow Book

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I had spent a quiet morning fiddling with my new miniature therm-grenade. It had cost more than I could afford, but it was worth it. Though it could turn an ordinary room into a charred ruin, it was small enough to be set into a ring, like a jewel. And that's where I carried it - along with several other rings-which were only a few of the mini-weapons scattered about my person.

It's not that I'm a violent man. I'm more of a **careful** man. In my line of work, I find that it's usually other people who get violent. So I like to be ready for anything, any time.

But I wasn't expecting any trouble that morning, when I slipped the grenade-ring on my finger and went to keep my appointment. I was heading for the vast buildings that housed the government of the Federated Human Worlds. And there I was seeing a commander of the Federation Police (Earth Division). Nothing. I thought to myself comfortably, could happen to me there.

How wrong can a man be?

Commander Verre was a tall, stiff man with sharp grey eyes that matched the grey of his FedPol uniform. And those eyes widened a little when I entered his office.

'Del Curb?' he said, as if doubting it. 'The interplanetary investigator?'

I assured him that that was me.

'The man who killed the spymaster of Aldebaran, and trapped the kidnappers of the Callitee princess?'

I nodded, as modestly as I could.

He frowned. 'I thought you would be bigger. And less . . . overdressed.'

Now some people might have felt annoyed, but I just smiled. I'm not big, but I'm not really small - in fact I'm about average and ordinary looking. Even my clothes are ordinary, for this city, though they might have looked bright next to a FedPol uniform.

That day I was wearing a canary yellow, one-piece suit, trimmed in terra cotta and sky blue at the collar, shoulders and wrists. My belt and boots, made of the multi-coloured hide of a Frygian sand-dragon, were almost conservative. As for the rings on my fingers, the jewelled pendant round my neck and the jewelled headband that held back my hair, they were modest compared to the decorations of most city folk.

And anyway, in my case, not one of them was merely decoration.

So I smiled at Verre. 'If you're looking for an underdressed giant, you've got the wrong man.'

'No, no,' he said, waving a long hand. 'If you are Del Curb, you are the man I want. The Federation Police need your help, Mr Curb, to find an extra-terrestrial.'

'Fine,' I said brightly. Looking for people - or extra-terrestrials - is one of the things I do best. It seemed odd that the FedPol needed my help, but I was willing to listen.

'The being in question,' Verre went on, 'is named Rimeq, Rimeq the Renegade. Remember?'

Suddenly I was no longer willing to listen. And I turned extremely pale. Because I did remember-better than I wanted to.,

Rimeq the Renegade. A name to call up memories that are like the nightmares you put out of your mind when morning comes. Except that this was morning, and the nightmares were real.

There are a lot of extra-terrestrial races in the galaxy. We call them 'exters'. Most of the time humans from the

Federation get along with them, and to me exters mostly seem to be fairly nice folk.

Rimeq the Renegade was not nice.

He came originally from a distant planet, Kalgor. There he had joined a vicious terrorist gang and begun to prey upon his own world, which gave him his nickname, the Renegade. Later he moved on, to look for new prey on other exter worlds and in the Human Federation. Interplanetary criminal, terrorist, mass murderer - that was Rimeq. He was probably insane, and was certainly the most savage, bloodthirsty killer the galaxy had ever known, who had left a trail of slaughter and destruction across hundreds of planets.

Rimeq was a humanoid exter - that is, he had the same number of arms and legs and heads and so on as humans have. But really he was a monster, and was said to be a mutant. He was big and powerful, with a scaly, mottled, purplish hide as thick as armour. He had claws like steel hooks, fangs like daggers, and red eyes set deep in dark sockets that glowed like torches in haunted caverns. He looked like the demons that ancient Earth people used to believe in. And maybe he was, not just because of his bloodthirsty ways, but because of his other powers. For Rimeq had an eerie **mental** ability, like dark magic. He could grasp and move physical objects with his mind.

Sitting in Commander Verre's office, I remembered all that. And I also remembered that I had met Rimeq, once, face to face.

It was years ago. I had gathered a team of hand-picked combat veterans, and had set out in the rash belief that we could capture him. And we had done quite well. We tracked him and located him, we surrounded him and moved in for the capture. There were seventeen of us, and he was alone.

But he simply whisked our weapons away with his spooky mind-power, and then went through us like a clawed, fanged, red-eyed whirlwind of horror.

I was the only survivor of that foolhardy mission and I lived simply because I was bleeding so badly it looked like I was dead. Rimeq got away, of course, and no one ever got that close to him again.

Time had healed most of my scars, body and mind. And so had the fact that Rimeq had not been heard from for a while now, and some said he was dead.

So I tried to stay calm as I sat looking at Commander Verre. 'I thought he wasn't around any more.'

'I wish he wasn't,' Verre said stiffly, 'but he is. And we want you to go after him.'

Then I turned even paler. 'Not a chance,' I croaked.

Verre seemed not to have heard me. 'He has sent the Federation a message - quite insane. He demands that we give him an entire planet to rule. And that we stop all pursuit of him. Or else, he says, he will destroy Earth.'

'Forget it,' I said, more loudly.

Still he ignored me. 'The FedPol have some vague ideas about where he is now. But we cannot follow up those ideas, officially. We need unofficial help. Your help.'

'No,' I moaned.

'Rimeq says he has a nullity bomb,' Verre went on, 'and will use it on Earth.'

At that an arctic wind seemed to blow down my spine. A nullity bomb was able to destroy every living thing on a planet's surface. It had existed till then only as a theory - because to **make** one, you would have to be the worst kind of murderous, criminal maniac.

Like Rimeq the Renegade.

'You've got the wrong man,' I said, hoarsely.

The Commander scowled. 'Mr Curb, you faced Rimeq before, and lived. If you do not try to face him again, the Earth may die. Where is your public spirit, your pride?'

'I traded them in on a survival kit,' I said sourly.

'You may also,' Verre added, 'name your own fee.'

'Ten million,' I said. It was the first absurdly impossible sum that came to mind.

He looked pained but then, astonishingly, he nodded. 'We will pay it. If you go after Rimeq.'

The icy chill on my spine suddenly seemed warmer. Ten million . . . !

'How long would I have?' I asked warily.

'Rimeq wants his answer,' he replied, 'two days from now.'

'Two days?' I goggled. 'And a galaxy to search?'

Verre shook his head. 'The FedPol are searching the galaxy but so far have found nothing. We need you merely to investigate two special worlds. One is the planet Xyry, where FedPol officers are not allowed.'

I nodded thoughtfully. Xyry was a 'free' planet, which meant that it was a haven for drifters, outcasts and crooks of every kind - especially in its central city, known as the Labyrinth. It was just Rimeq's kind of place.

'The other is the planet Hallipor,' Verre went on, 'which has no intelligent life. A FedPol officer was assigned to that world, but we have lost contact with him.'

I nodded again. A wild planet would also make sense, as a base for Rimeq. I tried not to think about what might have happened to the FedPol officer.

'Mr Curb,' Verre said firmly, 'you are said to be the best in your field. Rimeq the Renegade must be stopped, and you may be the man to stop him. I do not think it is too much to ask, not for the fee you have been offered, and not when the survival of Earth is at stake. I expect you to begin at once.'

Soon afterwards, a FedPol space-cruiser delivered me to my spaceship. I leave my ship in a parking orbit around Earth, not in a space-port. My ship is like home to me,

and, being a careful man, I don't like people knowing exactly where it is.

There I sat, quivering. Was I really going to go after a monstrous extra-terrestrial who was the most feared killer in the galaxy? I'd be out of my mind. And yet, every time I reached for the communicator to call Verre and tell him I'd remembered urgent business elsewhere, into my mind's eye came the image of the numeral '10', followed by a string of zeros. . . .

So in the end I set my ship's controls, and moved away into deep space. I told myself soothingly that Rimeq might not be on either of the two planets. Or that I might be able to spot him and deal with him from a nice safe distance, without risk. And I also reminded myself that Commander Verre could make life very unpleasant for me if I didn't at least try.

At last, trying to keep my hands from shaking, I set the controls that would send the ship into faster-than-light (FTL) drive.

The FTL drive can take a ship halfway across the galaxy in a matter of minutes. But that was enough time for me to decide where to start—the 'free' world of Xyry, or the wild planet Hallipor.

If you were Del Curb, where would you start? On Xyry? Turn to page 11.

Or on Hallipor? Turn to page 16.

Terror in the Sky

Before I had finished putting my ship into FTL drive, I had made up my mind to head for Xyry. A criminal like Rimeq would feel most at home on a nearly lawless world. And Xyry's main city, the Labyrinth, specialized in hiding dangerous folk like him.

But then I was a specialist, too, at ***finding*** dangerous folk. I'd been in the Labyrinth many times. So I set my course and in a short while was putting my ship into a parking orbit, and taking one of my shuttle-pods down to the Xyry space-port. From there I plunged into the Labyrinth.

'Plunge' was the right word. The Labyrinth is a huge, tangled, mazy sprawl that looks like it was designed by architects who were either absentminded or crazy, because they ignored the need for space between buildings. There is nothing that deserves to be called a street or an avenue. There are narrow alleys and passages, corridors and lanes, stairways and ramps, tunnels and arcades. All of them twisting, winding, interconnecting and overlapping.

It was a place to get lost in, totally and sometimes permanently, as thousands of people did every year. Which is what made it so popular with the criminal classes, when they didn't want to be found.

But I wasn't interested then in those mazes. I spent a while looking for a sky-cab, and let it take me to visit my old friend Fif in his Bar in the Sky.

Fif is a nickname, because no one can pronounce his real name. He's an exter, who looks like a large ball of

orange fluff, from which tentacles stick out now and then, acting as eyes, hands and so on. His bar is a large glassy sphere, floating on magno-hover, about two kilometres above the Labyrinth. It's a good place to learn things, for Fif is one of the most devoted gossips in the galaxy.

It was still early evening, and the sky-bar was nearly empty. Just a group of tourists in one corner and at the bar, where Fif was serving, only a dwarfish humanoid exter with a sour expression. Maybe he looked that way because his pale skin was covered in bristly, sharp-pointed spines, like a thorn tree, which couldn't have won him many friends.

Fif seemed happy enough to see me, until I mentioned the name of Rimeq the Renegade. Then a great many tentacles popped out of his orange fluff and waved wildly around.

'You trying to get me killed, Curb?' he squeaked.

'Whatever you tell me,' I promised him, 'no one will ever know it came from you.'

Some of the tentacles calmed down, and one of them beckoned me to the far end of the bar, well away from the dwarfish spiny exter. That seemed to offend him, because he gave us a dark look and stalked out. He probably had a flyer parked outside the sky-bar, but I didn't pay attention. By then Fif was gossiping away in full flow.

I listened patiently, but for a while I heard nothing but his usual flood of rumours, hints, guesses and wild ideas. But then there was an item that interested me. Fif mentioned a human, named Grees, who ran a gambling den in the heart of the Labyrinth. And Fif knew, for certain, that Grees had been acting as an agent for someone big and had been bringing a lot of complex technology into the city.

The kind of stuff, perhaps, that you'd need to build a nullity bomb.

I wanted to know more about Grees and, when I could get a word in edgeways, Fif seemed willing enough to tell me. At first.

But then he looked past me, and gasped. Every one of his tentacles snapped back into the orange fluff like rubber bands. And the fluff itself started fluttering wildly, as if blown about by a high wind.

I whirled - and looked into the eyes of death.

Everyone else had left the bar. There were only Fif and me - and a newcomer, in the doorway. He was tall, and looked bulky, but his body was hidden in a heavy cloak, and its hood kept his head and face in shadow. Mostly in shadow.

But within that darkness I could see the twin gleams of crimson. They were like small, fierce torches in a haunted cave. . . .

I fought the fear that nearly paralysed me, expecting the savage attack at any instant. But it did not come. Instead, the cloaked stranger set a small package down, and turned away, out of the bar to where he had a vehicle waiting.

I could hardly believe it. But then I looked more closely at the package. A small metal box, with a dial or two showing. . . .

A part of my mind had the idea that the hooded figure hadn't attacked because he liked to destroy as well as kill. And that metal box would do both jobs very well. In only a few seconds.

Then I was no longer dumb and frozen. I was tucking Fif under one arm, ignoring his shrill squeak, and diving for the door.

There were no vehicles, but I hadn't expected any. I didn't pause. As Fif's squeaking rose to a soprano shriek, I simply leaped off the edge of the sky-bar into the two kilometres of night air that lay between the bar and the rooftops of the city.

We fell fast enough in the first seconds to escape the

blast, when the metal box exploded. But I hardly saw the eruption of flame that turned the bar into a million melting shards of glass and metal. With a finger pressed firmly on a control switch in my belt, I was scanning the sky, wondering if my spaceship would be quicker than our fall.

I've used that method of boarding my ship many times, though it's illegal on most worlds. The switch in my belt calls my ship, which blasts down into atmosphere, homes in on me and throws down a tractor beam, to scoop me up.

My ship is guided by a computer brain that is about forty million times cleverer than me, but very obedient. Yet that wouldn't help me, I knew, for if the ship was in a distant part of its parking orbit, it would never reach us in time.

Luckily it wasn't. We were still about a hundred metres from the ground when the beam caught us. It was like diving into glue, as the beam fought the speed of our fall, slowed it, and finally stopped it.

Then I guided it with my belt controls to move the tractor beam and deposit us on a nearby roof. And finally I sent the ship back up into its patient parking orbit.

Fif and I did very little except breathe hard, for several moments afterwards. Then tentacles began waving again.

'My bar's wrecked!' he squeaked. 'And Rimeq'll kill me now, for sure! Look what you've done to me!'

'He thinks he *has* killed you,' I pointed out. 'And what I just did to you was save your life.'

That silenced him for a moment.

'You might take a holiday,' I added. 'On the other side of the galaxy. Until something is done about Rimeq.'

Something like a snort came from the orange fluff. 'Who can do anything about *him*?'

'We'll have to see,' I said. 'But if anyone does, I'll let you know.'

If I'm still around, I thought. But I didn't say it, because I'd gone looking for a way down from the roof. And on the way I thought about what to do next, aside from joining Fif on holiday, which I wanted to do, but couldn't.

I could go and see the human that Fif had mentioned - Grees, the gambling-den owner.

Or I could scour the Labyrinth for someone else. A dwarfish, spine-covered exter, who had almost certainly warned Rimeq that there was an Earthman in Fif's bar asking questions. And so the hooded, red-eyed figure had paid his murderous visit. . . .

***Where would you go? To see Grees, in his gambling den?
Turn to page 19.***

***Or would you search for the spine-covered exter? Turn to
page 29.***

Swamp Monsters

Before 'my ship came out of FTL drive, I had decided in favour of Hallipor. A planet without intelligent life would be easier to check, since if Rimeq or anyone was there, I'd find signs of technology. And my ship's sensors would be able to spot it from a safe distance.

Which they did. When I got into orbit around Hallipor, the sensors picked up signs of technology in two separate places, only a few kilometres apart. That would make it easier, I told myself, as I worked up the nerve to go down there.

I left my ship in orbit and took one of my one-person shuttle-pods down to the planet, landing on a good-sized stretch of solid ground. And that was lucky, since nearly all of the rest of the planet seemed to be mucky, soggy and treacherous swamp.

At least it was an oxygen planet, so I didn't need a spacesuit. But when I stepped out of the pod, I wished I was wearing one. Hallipor's idea of a swamp was a lot of filthy water and ooze of an evil dark-brown colour, and a lot of tangled plant life coloured a livid red. And it all stank with a stomach-twisting sick-sweetness, as if the whole planet was a giant, rotting fruit.

Breathing mostly through my mouth, I reached up and twisted one of the jewels in the front of my headband. That jewel was a short-range sensor, and the slight tingle I felt on my forehead pointed me in the direction of the nearest bit of the technology. I started walking, staying on firm ground where possible, and found it quite easily.

That was because there was still a thin column of smoke drifting up from it. From the smashed and crumpled wreckage of a FedPol cruiser. So much for Commander Verre's officer, I thought sourly.

But a quick search showed no sign of a dead cop, so I began to feel more hopeful. And I thought that maybe the other spot where my sensors had spotted technology might give me a clue to where the FedPol cop had gone. That other spot was a few kilometres away, in the depths of the swamp. But I had no choice. I gritted my teeth, and started walking.

It was not a pleasant journey. Hallipor may not have had intelligent life, but it had plenty of other life forms - all of them ugly, and hungry. The least nasty were the things like leeches, as big as my fist. Then there was a thing that seemed to be no more than a large, bulbous stomach, with a mouth attached, a mouth full of teeth, which took a fancy to my leg. And a gigantic worm with seven heads, and seven mouths full of teeth, that rose high out of the water and took a fancy to all of me.

But I have two little positron guns in my wristbands, and I was never in serious danger. And at least all the tangled plant life gave me plenty of cover, as I trudged through the stink and the murk. Until I found out what lived in the trees.

I found out when a broad, flat, squelchy thing - like a slug, three metres across - flopped out of a pool and slithered across a patch of mud towards another pool. And something else, which had looked like a large ugly fungus growing on the trees, simply dropped on to it.

The fungus-thing wasn't as broad or as thick as the giant slug. But it was big enough to wrap itself around me, like a slimy blanket. And I'd glimpsed its underside, and had seen a wide gaping slash of mouth with more than a hundred little barbed hooks all along its edges. When the fungus-thing dropped on the slug, the slug thrashed frantically - but those hooks had sunk in, and

were there to stay. In seconds the slug had gone still, and I heard a ghastly, slobbery, sucking sound.

Shuddering, I moved away, now watching the trees even more carefully than I watched the mucky water. If ever there was a place where Rimeq the Renegade ought to feel at home, I thought, it was in this swamp with all these murderous monsters.

It was not a cheering thought, but I kept on until I came to a hillock of solid ground, where nothing lurked that wanted to take bites out of me. There I paused for a rest. And of course I turned my head now and then as I had been doing from the start. Though the technology lay ahead of me, I was careful also to keep an eye - or a sensor - on what might be behind me.

Each previous sweep, the sensor's tingle told me that there was nothing back there but animal life. But this time the tingle changed. It told me that a different kind of life form was moving through the swamp on exactly the route I had taken.

An *intelligent* life form.

The swamp was sweaty-hot, but I was suddenly cold. I told myself that the unknown being behind me could be anybody. Maybe the FedPol cop from the crashed ship. Maybe a tourist, who liked going for walks in swamps. . . . But I didn't convince myself.

Still, whoever it was, the being was some distance away. Perhaps it wasn't even aware of me, but was simply going the same way, towards the technology. Should I keep going, and get there first? Or should I hide where I was, and see who was trailing me?

Would you go on and find the technology? Turn to page 24.

Or would you hide, and inspect the pursuer? Turn to page 32.

Rescue by Robot

It seemed to me that a well-known gambling den would be easier to find, in the Labyrinth, than one small, spiny exter. So I set off in search of Grees. And after about an hour of twisting and turning through the narrow, crowded, garishly-lit passages, I pushed open a heavy door and joined the hordes of gamblers, human and exter, who were having a wonderful time losing their money.

The gambling den was a huge area, swirling with noise and colour and strange smells. For a while I wandered slowly through it, acting like a tourist, placing a few small bets - one on a fight between two toad-like Mytorean tree-killers, another on a race among tiny, hundred-legged crustaceans from Korbel III.

And all the time I was being watched. A vast, sturdy bar ran the full length of the room, where drinks were dispensed by the silent metal shapes of servo-robots. But also behind that bar was a short, enormously fat human, who seemed to be in charge. He had to be the owner, Grees, and it was his small piggy eyes that had been tracking me, ever since I'd entered.

That was odd. Only a very watchful person would have singled me out in a crowd like that. But I just kept drifting, wearing the silly smile of a tourist having a great night out, and waited. I didn't think I'd have to wait long for Grees to make some kind of move, and I was right.

My wandering came to an end when my way was barred by a tall exter covered in brown fur, with long hands that held the ugly shapes of photon guns.

'Boss wants a talk,' the exter said, jerking his narrow head towards the back of the room.

He ushered me along with sharp jabs from his gun-barrels, through a door behind the bar and up a spiral ramp to the next floor. There, in a richly furnished but none too clean office, Grees sat behind a heavy table, with a large human thug on either side of him.

'What do you want in my place?' Grees demanded. His voice was high-pitched, an odd sound coming from that mass of blubber.

I shrugged. 'Just passing the time, like everyone else.'

His laugh was shrill, with no humour in it. 'All the bars in all the galaxy, and you come into mine,' he sneered. 'You think I don't know the smell of cop?'

'I'm no cop,' I said easily. 'And I'm surprised you noticed my smell, in this place.'

A fat lip curled. 'You don't say. Just a tourist, right? Except this tourist goes around asking questions.' He leaned forward fatly. 'How did you get out of the sky-bar, cop?'

My heart sank into my boots. The word had already gone out, to all of Rimeq's contacts, about what had happened in Fif's bar - probably with a description of me. So Grees had recognized me the instant I'd come through his door.

'What sky-bar?' I asked innocently, but I knew it wouldn't work.

Grees snorted, and glanced at the furry exter whose guns were still fixed on me. 'Search him,' he ordered. 'Then make him talk - any way you need to.'

'Do we bring him upstairs after?' asked one of the human thugs.

Grees turned on him, glowering. 'How many times do I tell you, upstairs is off limits! Nobody but me goes up there, till I say different!'

All three of his men nodded quickly, then turned to me. By then the two human thugs had drawn guns, too,

and I was starting to sweat.

But before any of us could move, an odd thing happened, an impossible thing. Another door to the office slid quietly open, and in it stood one of the servo-robots from the bar downstairs. Grees and his men had their backs to it, and didn't see it. But I had a hard time keeping my eyes from popping with surprise when the robot did the impossible thing.

It jerked one hand, and rolled a small plastic sphere into the middle of the room.

I recognized the object, just in time to take a huge breath and hold it. But Grees and his thugs were unaware of the sphere until it had burst, with a muffled pop, and filled the room with a greenish vapour.

All four of my captors crumpled quietly to the floor. And I just stood there, turning red from holding my breath, gaping at the robot that had, impossibly, attacked four living beings.

Then the robot grabbed my arm, as if impatiently, and hustled me out of the room. Away from the gas I could breathe again, but I was still gaping as it led me down another ramp, through some corridors, and into an unoccupied area at the back of the building.

And there it did another impossible thing. It spoke to me in a voice that was filled with very human emotion, mostly anger.

'You're a fool, Del Curb,' it said. 'Were you trying to get yourself killed?'

My jaw fell further open. And it dropped nearly to my knees when I saw almost invisible seams open in the robot's metal body. And from within that body, as if it was a suit of armour, stepped a small, slim and angry-eyed young woman.

She was dark-haired, and nicely shaped within a tight coverall. And I could only stare as she adjusted the belt around her waist that held a long-range communicator and other items.

'Stop gaping,' she snapped at me. 'I'm Mala Yorder, undercover FedPol, and you've just ruined a month of my work, trying to get close to this gang. Now let's move, before they wake up.'

I shook my head, to wake **myself** up. 'I thought the FedPol weren't allowed on this planet?'

'Not officially,' she snapped. 'But we've always had agents here, undercover.'

'Then why did Commander Verre send **me** here?' I asked.

'That's what I'd like to know,' Mala said curtly. 'I was told the great Del Curb was coming, because no one knew the Labyrinth so well. But I don't know what use you'll be, after tonight.'

I was stung. 'I don't have a lot of time to do things the slow and sneaky way. Anyway, how close have you got to finding Rimeq, after a month?'

'Close enough,' she said, with a glare. 'I know that Grees gets regular visits from some mysterious character, in his private apartment upstairs. And I know he has been bringing in loads of special equipment, which has gone to a warehouse at the space-port.' She reddened a little. 'But I haven't been able to look at either place, yet.'

'That's the trouble with being too careful,' I said smugly. 'I've been on Xyry only a few hours, and I've already had a run-in with Rimeq.'

Her eyes widened. 'You met Rimeq - and you're still alive?'

I nodded. 'That's twice now.' Maybe third time unlucky, I thought, but didn't say it. 'So we know he's around. Why don't we work together? One of us could look at the warehouse, and the other could check out the apartment upstairs.'

She shook her head firmly. 'This is still my assignment, and you're **just** a civilian meddler. We'll stick together - especially if you're going to go on blundering into danger.'

'Suit yourself,' I said, in an injured tone. 'But where do we go first?'

If you would first go to look at Grees' upstairs apartment, turn to page 43.

If you would go to the warehouse, turn to page 77.

Bound to the Bomb

It was an attack of nerves that drove me on. I wasn't sure I'd be able to sit still, in that grisly swamp, waiting for the mysterious pursuer to creep up on me.

So I squelched onwards, still warily watching the trees for signs of fungus-things, until at last I came to the edge of a small clearing, another patch of firm ground. It held a dense growth of low, scarlet plants like ferns and, in the midst of them, the second piece of technology that my sensor had spotted.

I crouched in the brush at the edge of the clearing and studied it. It was a building of some sort, about forty metres high and nearly twice as broad. It looked more like a storage tank than anything else - or a giant barrel. And its shiny metal surface was smooth and blank, with no openings of any sort that I could see. With a sinking feeling, I realized that I would have to go closer.

My headband sensor told me that the unknown pursuer was still far enough away to give me time. So I went flat among the scarlet ferns, and slid forward to the building. And my heartbeat was the loudest thing in the swamp.

But no one shot at me, no one shouted, no one even stepped out and said hello. So I leaned against the smooth side of the building for a moment, because I found I'd forgotten to breathe while I crossed the clearing.

And as I leaned against the metal, my elbow touched an almost invisible panel, and a portion of the shiny wall slid smoothly aside, providing a wide, high door

to the inside.

I wasn't sure I wanted a door. But I was like a mouse who knows about traps but can't resist cheese. And I stepped into the building.

The door didn't close behind me, so again I could let myself breathe. And there was no one inside. Just an enormous jumble of equipment - computer systems, data banks, consoles, cabinets, cases and much more. It was a laboratory of some sort, which seemed to be centred on one object: a long metal cylinder, vaguely the shape of a missile, as sleek and deadly as a basking shark.

The nullity bomb. It had to be. I was within touching distance of the galaxy's most frightful weapon, while the galaxy's most deadly killer was probably getting near to within touching distance of me.

My mind had nearly gone blank. I thought of trying to disarm the bomb, but I wasn't sure I'd know how. I thought of hiding among the equipment, trying for a clear shot at Rimeq from ambush, but I didn't like the idea of being trapped in that building. I thought. . . .

And then my time for thinking ran out.

I was paralysed. I could breathe and move my eyes and mouth, but nothing else. As if a giant but invisible hand had closed tightly round me. And then I was lifted into the air, turning slowly, dangling as helplessly as a puppet on unseen strings.

There he stood, in the doorway. Huge, powerful, clothed only in his own scaly, armoured hide. Yellow fangs gleaming, claws unsheathing like a cat's, red flames of eyes flaring.

Rimeq the Renegade. Alone, and carrying no weapon, but needing none. He was gripping me with the awful strength of his mind-power, as a man might hold a butterfly in a net.

'I commend your courage, Earthman.' Rimeq's voice was harsh, with an edge of manic glee. 'Not many would

have entered my lair, even if they had been clever enough to find it.' He stepped closer, and the red eyes flickered. 'But I know you. You are Curb, the investigator, whom I thought I had killed, years ago. No matter, I shall put that right, today.'

There wasn't much to say to that, so I kept silent.

'How shall I kill you, Earthman?' the gloating voice went on. 'Simply increase the pressure?' A crushing pain around my ribs gave me a sample of what he meant. 'Or shall I release you, and tear you with my bare hands?'

'Choose that one,' I said through gritted teeth. My hands were itching for the feel of my positron guns.

He gave a barking laugh. 'You are of course armed. But you would have to be very quick, Curb, or I would reach you first, and then no weapon would help you.' He paused for a moment, his red eyes flaming like torches in a wind. 'But no. I have had an amusing idea.'

I felt myself lifted higher, and then Rimeq's mind-power sent me drifting down towards the metal cylinder of the nullity bomb. From somewhere two lengths of stout metal cable sailed snakily towards me. I felt my arms jerked high above my head, felt the cables twist around my wrists and ankles, knotting themselves into rigid bonds.

Then I was lowered, full-length, on to the smooth metal of the bomb. Another length of cable wrapped itself around both me and that deadly cylinder, binding us immovably together.

At that moment I knew I could move again, for Rimeq had withdrawn his mind-power. But the cables held firmly against my struggles.

'Now you will accompany the bomb on its last journey, to Earth,' Rimeq said, his 'eyes glowing like windows on to an inferno. 'For I intend to destroy Earth whether they accept my demands or not. Are you afraid, Earthman?'

'Terrified.' There was some truth in that, but I said it

as flatly as I could. 'And how are you getting the bomb there? Is your mind-power that strong?'

'My mind can reach great distances into space,' Rimeq said boastfully. 'But no, you will go in a ship. You are in that ship at the moment. And it will lift off . . . now.'

That shook me. The whole building was a spaceship? But that explained the barrel-like shape, and the invisible seal of the door. . . .

Rimeq had moved away towards the door, but then he turned, with that barking laugh. 'I should tell you, Earthman, that the bomb's mechanism is tuned to the Earth's gravitational field. Only being near Earth will detonate it - nothing else.'

And he laughed again, and strode out. Almost as soon as the door slid shut behind him, I felt the building around me begin to tremble. Then I was being pressed down against the length of the bomb, as the building that was a spaceship began its lift-off.

I didn't know how it was powered, or how long it would take to get to Earth. But I wasn't waiting around to find out. It was time to get moving.

With my arms stretched above me, and wrists tightly bound, I couldn't reach any of the weapons in my clothing or jewellery. But then a man can't always count on being fully dressed when somebody might try to hurt him. So I have other weapons, in other places.

And one of them was the tiny vibroknife, disguised as the nail on my left index finger. I don't like using it much, since it leaves my finger sore for a week. But the blade vibrates about a thousand times a second, and cuts most things that I know of.

Including metal cable. The little blade slid out of my fingernail, humming like a faraway gnat. It took some stretching and twisting of my wrist, but at last I got the blade where I wanted it, without slicing through any bits of me. The cable binding my arms fell away, shortly followed by the others that bound me.

But then I was merely free inside a spaceship, with a nullity bomb, on its way to destroy Earth.

I made a high-speed search of the ship's interior. But there were no openings except the one door. And the ship's controls and drive were sealed off, and I couldn't tell just where they were - nor was I about to start blasting experimental holes in the hull to find them.

But that gave me an idea. In fact, it gave me two ideas - both wildly desperate and risky, full of things that could go wrong. One might save Earth, if it worked, but would probably leave Rimeq free. The other idea was even crazier, but if it worked it would save Earth and finish Rimeq.

How would you decide? Simply to save Earth? Turn to page 34.

Or would you try to save Earth and put an end to Rimeq? Turn to page 51.

Killer's Hide-out

My decision to go looking for the spiny dwarf seemed just common sense to me. Grees' gambling den would probably be full of crooks and thugs, while the dwarf was only one thug, and smaller than me. So I plunged again into the tangled ways of the Labyrinth and began the search.

Looking for one person, or exter, in that place is like the old saying about a needle in a haystack - which seemed suitable, when I remembered the dwarf's spiny covering. But needles can be found more easily when you can ask questions of the hay. And while my fluffy orange friend, Fif, was probably not speaking to me, there were other folk in the Labyrinth who were. After an hour or two of wandering and careful conversation, I was directed to a seedy building that claimed to be a hotel.

I got into the place without trouble, and made my way to an upper floor to find the room I was seeking. Muffled noises inside the room told me someone was at home, but it was no time for good manners. I picked the lock silently, slid a scrambler disc from a seam in my suit - then opened the door, tossed the disc in, and slammed the door shut.

Any being with a brain and a nervous system has tiny but vital **electrical** connections in its nerves. A scrambler disc, as you might guess, scrambles them. I could feel a tingling from it even through the door. When I opened the door, the occupant of the room was lying on the floor, twitching now and then.

It was the spiny dwarf, I was glad to see. And as he started to come round, I noticed that he had four eyes, which were all staring wildly at me. Because I had drawn a heat-knife from my boot, and the bright orange glow of its blade was only a few centimetres from the dwarf's face.

'I want you to tell me,' I said in a menacing tone, 'where to find Rimeq.'

The dwarf blinked all four eyes several times. 'Don't know no Rimeq,' he mumbled.

I lowered the knife, to touch one of the thorny spikes jutting from his chin. The tip of it smouldered and withered like a burnt match. 'I haven't got a lot of time,' I snarled. 'I could just cut you up, and go and ask someone else.'

I wouldn't have, of course, but he didn't know that. His four eyes nearly crossed as they stared at the searing blade. 'He'd kill me if I told you!'

'He might,' I agreed. 'But I definitely *will*, if you don't. So, do you want to take a chance, or go for a sure thing?'

Again I lowered the blade a few millimetres, and it did the trick. 'An old mine!' the dwarf babbled. 'North-west - ten kilometres! He goes there a lot!'

'Thanks,' I said. And I was on my way before he realized I'd moved. And certainly before he noticed the gas pellet that I'd left behind, which would keep him asleep and unable to talk to anyone for a day or two.

I was soon in another sky-cab, telling it to drop me nine kilometres north-west of the city. I intended to walk the rest of the way, preferring to arrive silently. It wasn't a pleasant walk, because I didn't risk making too much use of the light-beam from one of my headband jewels. So I picked up a few bruises from stumbling around in darkness, in a landscape that seemed to be mostly sharp-edged rock.

But at last I found the mine. Whatever had been

mined there had clearly all been dug up some time before, since there was nothing much left but a few rusty, crumbling, metal buildings. They stood near to the gaping blackness of a tunnel-mouth, carved into the side of a rocky cliff. The tunnel seemed to lead into the dark heart of the cliff, and did not look like a place where I wanted to go at all.

Even so, I started forward, slowly. And then I went backwards, much more quickly. I had heard the low rumble of a motor, and the sound of muffled voices.

Into sight, dimly lit by its own small sidelights, came a flat, open ground-car, with several shadowy figures riding on it. But only one held my attention. A tall, wide-shouldered humanoid figure wearing a long, heavy cloak.

The cloaked figure stepped down, and a sharp voice came from it that carried clearly to me. 'Get back to the ship now, and stay watchful. I will be ready by first light.'

The others obediently turned the ground-car around, while the cloaked figure stalked towards the tunnel mouth. And I sat among the rocks, wishing the spiny dwarf hadn't been so easy to frighten.

It had to be Rimeq the Renegade himself, still in his cloak, who had entered the tunnel. And he had a ship, and some henchmen to guard it.

I wanted nothing to do with any of them. But I knew I had to move, one way or another.

Would you go into the tunnel? Turn to page 72.

Or would you investigate the ship? Turn to page 83.

Law and Order

I slid away from the hillock, looking for a dense thicket of undergrowth - preferably without any of the hook-mouthed fungus-things. The technology, I'd decided, could wait. I'd come to Hallipor to look for a living being, not a machine. And whoever was coming along on my trail, it was certainly a living being.

So I skulked, and hid. The thicket that I found was gloomy and dank and foul, smearing me with reeking mud and ooze, and containing some long wriggling things with stingers who thought I was a walking snack bar. But some swift kicks dealt with them, while I lurked - almost angrily wishing that it would turn out to be Rimeq who was following me, so I could merrily blow his head off for forcing me to be in that swamp.

But it wasn't Rimeq.

It was a tall, broad-shouldered young man in a grey uniform, the uniform of the Federation Police. He was plodding with steady determination through the muck, with his jaw set firmly and his eyes shining with zeal.

Just what I need, I thought sourly. He had to be the FedPol cop from the crashed ship, apparently unhurt. And he looked like one of those young, strong, keen, confident cops who were earnestly sure that the forces of law and order would triumph as long as their eyes were clear and their hearts were pure.

That attitude can be fine when you're sorting out some kids racing spaceships too close to a planet. But it's not what's needed when you're within reach of a crazed monster who is capable of killing an entire world.

I stayed in hiding, watching the young cop stride manfully past. Clearly he had no idea that anyone else was around. He had probably also detected that technology, and he was marching out to have a look at it, with all the caution and tactical sense of a charging bull.

For one thing, he wasn't paying attention to the swamp around him. Twice, as I watched him, he passed directly under one of the deadly fungus-things. Each time the thing shifted and unfolded itself a little, but stayed on its branch. There must be a guardian angel who takes care of fools and innocents - and this cop looked like he needed a brigade of them.

And also, he never thought to check behind him, as I had. So I did it for him. And the new tingle from my sensor nearly made me jump out of my skin.

There was **someone** else on my back trail.

Another intelligent life form, coming into sensor range on exactly the same path that both I and the young cop had taken.

This swamp is getting a traffic problem, I thought wryly. But the joke didn't make me feel any better. The cop was now nearly out of sight, still marching in a straight line towards the place where the technology was. The other, unknown, being on the trail was also still out of sight, and didn't seem to be hurrying. And I was in my thicket, wishing that I was two people.

I felt that I should go after the cop, to keep him from blundering into trouble when he found that mysterious technology. But I also wanted to keep myself out of trouble, by staying, hidden till I'd had a look at the unknown newcomer.

What would you do? Follow the FedPol officer? Turn to page 38.

Or would you wait in hiding for the second pursuer? Turn to page 46.

Into Nothingness

I decided to play safe, and go for the slightly less crazy plan. It gave Earth a little more of a chance, even if Rimeq got away - this time.

So I lifted my jewelled pendant to my mouth. It's a special communicator, and among other things I can use it to programme my spaceship's automatic systems, by voice. Which I did, with a series of instructions that must have seemed like child's play to my clever ship computer.

Clever, and also quick. In only a few minutes I felt the huge barrel-ship jolt and shudder. But I'd braced myself, because I'd ordered my own ship to come and grab the barrel-ship with a powerful tractor beam.

Then everything around me was jolted again, by a heavier impact. As instructed, my ship had come closer - still keeping itself attached to this ship with the tractor beam, but now nudging its own hull tightly up against the hull of the barrel-ship.

Here comes the tricky part, I thought. I stepped back, well out of the way, and watched a spot of white-gold brilliance form on the inner wall of the barrel-ship. In seconds the spot grew and expanded, becoming a small hole, and then larger and larger. . . .

If it had just been a hole in the barrel-ship's hull, I would have died at once in the vacuum of space. But where that hole appeared was where my own ship was jammed against the barrel-ship, hull to hull. And from *inside* my ship, computer-guided, a positronic cutting beam was boring a hole through *both* hulls, at the same

time.

And it was sealing the edges, with the molten metal, to protect the interiors of both ships against the vacuum.

The hole grew into a neatly carved circle, a doorway between the two ships, which were now literally welded together. I dived through that doorway, into my own ship, and scrambled to get myself into one of my one-person shuttle-pods. There was no time to waste, because I had programmed my ship for a further action.

The shuttle-pod spurted out of the ship, and away - just in time. As I watched through the view-port, the two linked ships seemed to blur and shimmer. Then both of them winked out of sight, as if they had never existed.

I had programmed my ship to go into FTL drive, once I was out. And when a ship does that, it goes into *nothingness*. It goes out of the r&universe, into another space and time, where it can take its short-cuts across the unimaginable distances among the stars.

So my ship had gone FTL, taking the barrel-ship, *and* the nullity bomb, along with it.

And I had not programmed its exit from FTL.

The two linked ships would drift in that nothingness forever, never able to re-enter the real universe. The nullity bomb would never reach Earth.

I was sorry to see my ship go. But I knew I could replace it, out of that enormous fee that the Federation had promised me. . . .

And then I felt really stupid.

I had been paid to go after Rimeq, who was still on Hallipor. Of course, saving Earth should count for something. But only if the Federation people believed my story. And my only proof was drifting in the FTL nothingness.

Part of my mind was telling me that even ten million wasn't worth it, but I still aimed the shuttle-pod back down to the swampy surface of Hallipor.

The pod's sensors and my own headband did their job,

and soon I was once again lurking in the midst of muck and stink. I had tracked Rimeq, and got ahead of him, and was waiting, trying to keep the cold sweat out of my eyes.

And then he appeared, striding through the mud and ooze as if he owned it, which in a way he did. All the swamp's fanged horrors were staying out of his way, knowing a worse horror when they saw one. And Rimeq was grinning with red-eyed glee, as any insane killer would, who thought that he was going to wipe out an entire world.

So I stepped out of a thicket of tall ferns, and wiped the grin off his face.

To give him credit, he was quick. The terrible unseen grip of his mind-power clamped round me at once, like a reflex. But otherwise he was thunderstruck. His eye sockets seemed to have caught fire, and the yellow fangs clashed.

'How did you . . .?' he spluttered. 'Where did you . . .?'

He stared at me wildly, then at the swamp around us. But there was nothing there to explain my escape. He didn't even notice that my pendant was no longer hanging down on my chest, but was tied back tight so that it pressed against my throat.

I had expected him to grip me with the mind-power, but to leave me able to speak, as before. And the pendant could easily act as a throat-mike.

'Your ship is gone, and your bomb with it,' I said coldly, 'to a place where it won't harm anyone. And neither will you, monster, ever again!'

My words had the effect I wanted. The red eyes focused on me, like the tops of twin volcanoes. The claws curved, the fanged mouth opened wide, and the roar that came out was the sound of a maddened beast.

'You think you have defeated me, Earthman?' he raged.

He began the leap that would have ended with me being turned into mincemeat. The swamp creatures would have enjoyed that, but they had to do without. Because at the moment that Rimeq had roared his maniacal roar, I had muttered a few coded words into the pendant-communicator at my throat.

And, almost silently, my shuttle-pod floated into view above us, from behind the stand of trees where I had hidden it.

Rimeq had just begun that final, murderous leap when the positron beam stabbed downwards from the shuttle-pod.

I had positioned it just right. Rimeq the Renegade vanished, in a towering burst of white flame.

Then I got up from the pool of ooze where the blast had flung me, kicked at a few toothy things that thought I'd dropped in for dinner, and called the shuttle-pod down to me. Back out in space, I would switch on the SOS beacon, and when the FedPol finally came, I could tell them where they could find Rimeq. In a pile of grey ash in the middle of a swamp.

They'd find it, all right. It would be just about the only dry spot on the whole of Hallipor.

The End

Ship of Mystery

Muttering to myself, I crept out of the thicket, shaking off some sticky vines that were making advances towards me. Second pursuer or not, I had to go after the young cop, to keep an eye on him.

I set off in his wake, moving as quietly as before. But I might have gone after him with a brass band. I was nearly in his back pocket before he realized that not all the splashing and squelching noises were being made by his own oversized boots.

He whirled, saw me, turned white, and reached for his photon gun. I could have shot him about eleven times, with a lunch break in between, while he was fumbling the gun from its holster. But I just stood still, empty-handed, and grinned at him.

'Who're you?' he demanded. 'What're you doing here?'

Still grinning, I told him. At the mention of Commander Verre's name, he automatically snapped to attention, back straight, chin tucked in. He even tried to click his heels together, but the effect was spoiled by the fact that he was standing ankle-deep in mud.

Then he stood even straighter, and introduced himself. 'Second Class FedPol Officer Boole, sir!' he bellowed.

I winced. 'Fine,' I said, 'but I'm not an officer, this isn't a parade ground, so let's keep our voices down.' He blinked with surprise, as if the idea of caution was a startling new invention.

'And why,' I asked, 'are you walking through this

swamp?'

He blushed a little. He had accidentally crashed his ship on landing, he explained, just after he had detected technology in an area nearby. Unable to contact the FedPol he had decided to check it out on his own. And the technology, he told me excitedly, was just up ahead.

'I know,' I said tiredly. 'What were you planning to do, Boole - march in and arrest it?'

He frowned. 'No, sir. I was going to investigate it and see if there was any sign of the criminal, Rimeq.'

'Good thinking,' I said. 'But did it occur to you that if Rimeq was in or around this technology, the first you'd know of it would be when he tore your head off?'

His chin juttled. 'I would approach carefully, sir.'

'I'm sure,' I nodded. 'With the same care you've shown so far. I almost had to tap you on the shoulder before you noticed me.'

That deepened his blush. 'I may not be much good at creeping round swamps,' he mumbled. 'But I'm not afraid of Rimeq, sir, you can be sure of that.'

'Wonderful,' I said. 'He ought to be very impressed.' I glanced around, aware that the unknown pursuer was still coming steadily along. But young Boole didn't need to know that, yet. 'Let's go,' I went on, 'and look at this technology together. Try to be as quiet as possible, and stay in cover.'

He nodded eagerly. And I suppose from then he moved through the swamp a little more quietly than a brontosaurus, but not much. He made me think of a big, foolish, excited dog. Heel, Rover, I said silently.

But he wasn't at heel, and right then his guardian angel took some time off. I saw the movement just in time for a diving tackle that took us both forward, face down in the muck, as the ghastly fungus-thing dropped exactly where Boole had been.

We got up together, pawing at the slime that smeared our faces. 'Why did you. . .?' he began. But then he saw

the fungus-thing heaving and flopping on the ground, and his eyes widened. They nearly popped from his head when I flipped the thing over with the toe of my boot, exposing that wide mouth with its hundreds of barbed hooks.

'In this place,' I said sharply, 'you move with care. You stay alert, or you don't stay alive.'

'Yessir,' he gulped. 'I'll try.'

And he did try. We moved more quietly from then, though also more slowly, since Boole could not bring himself to go anywhere near another tree. But at least we moved and kept going until we came to a patch of firm ground with only a few clumps of crimson, fern-like plants growing on it.

There was the technology we were seeking - a huge spaceship, shaped like half of a sphere, with the flat side down, supported about a metre from the ground on a magnetic hover-cushion. It was silent, unmoving, and had its main airlock wide open, a patch of darkness against the hull's curve. I had never seen a machine that gave out such an air of ominous, threatening menace.

Even Boole must have felt it, for he shivered. 'What now, sir?' he muttered.

'I'll get closer,' I told him. 'You stay put, and keep alert.'

'Shouldn't I come too, sir?' he asked. 'I *am* officially the law officer here. .'

'Right,' I said, through clenched teeth. 'And you should try to remain a *five* law officer. *Stay!*'

I half-expected him to bark as I slipped away. I began to circle round a little, intending to go in towards that open airlock at an angle. I was hurrying, because that unknown pursuer on our trail could be catching up with us in minutes.

Perhaps Boole had picked up some of my sense of urgency. Because I was just getting myself into a good position when he decided that he should shift *his*

position. And, naturally, that was the moment when some big-mouthed swamp wriggler came to find out what Boole tasted like.

The next few moments were not much less noisy than a parade. I heard Boole yelp, then a series of frantic splashings, and finally the hissing fizz of a photon gun. And then I saw Boole, moving backwards, out in the open, his gun trained on something in the ooze where he'd been.

Grinding my teeth, I was about to shout at him to get back and shut up. But I said nothing, for Boole then did a very peculiar thing.

He seemed to make a huge leap, back towards the swamp. But it wasn't really a leap, because his arms and legs were sticking out at odd angles, and he didn't seem to be coming back down. He looked like he was being *curried* along, above the ground, by some invisible force.

And then I saw the other figure. Just a dim, shadowy shape, in the depths of a cluster of tall plants. I could see that it was human-shaped, though huge and broad of shoulder. But I knew it wasn't a human. The hair on my neck lifted, and my stomach seemed to fall into my boots.

Where the head of the shadowy figure was, I could see two small but fierce red gleams, like rubies catching the light of a fire.

Rimeq the Renegade was on Hallipor. He was the second, unknown pursuer on my trail. And it was his incredible mind-power that had grasped poor Boole, and dragged him back through mid-air into the swamp.

For a moment I was unable to make my muscles work. And in that moment Boole's soaring flight carried him out of sight. Then the shadowy shape that had to be Rimeq moved silently away, in the same direction, and was lost to view.

So when I finally forced myself to move, I had to work out which way. That great hemisphere of a ship surely

belonged to Rimeq - and I had a chill feeling that I knew what I'd find inside it. So I wanted desperately to get in. But I also wanted to help young Boole, in the grip of the monster.

Would you go into the ship? Turn to page 54.

Or would you go to the aid of Boole? Turn to page 62.

Into Captivity

Since we were already in the building, and Grees and his henchmen would probably sleep for a while yet, Mala and I decided to start with a look at the fat man's private quarters upstairs.

Mala led the way, quick and silent as a cat, which impressed me. The door had as many security locks as the Interplanetary Bank, so it took me nearly two minutes to open it, which did *not* impress Mala. Then we were inside, and both of us were impressed.

What had probably been Grees' idea of a rich and luxurious semi-palace had been remade for someone else. And you could tell, from the extra-long bed and the heavy furniture, who that someone was. But the furniture was less interesting than the large opening in one wall - a window that was about the size, I thought, of the cargo bay of a sky-freighter. That would have allowed the furniture, and other things, to be brought directly in by air, and probably at night, for extra secrecy.

The other things included stacks of technical equipment and machinery, along the lines of advanced computers and data storage systems. While Mala looked around the rest of the place, I tapped a few keys to see if any computers were feeling chatty. But none of them were speaking to me. They were all locked tight by their own secret coding systems.

Annoyed, I was about to suggest that we get out while we still could. But then my eye was caught by a glint of plastic on the floor. It was a card-shaped plastic wafer containing printout material from one of the computers.

Then I looked again, shivered, and called Mala over.

She knew what it was, too. The piece of plastic told us that the owner of the computers had been working out routes through the spaceways to a human world known as Earth.

'The nullity bomb,' Mala said darkly. 'It must be all set up.'

'And he's crazy enough to use it anyway,' I said, 'even if Earth gives in to his demands.'

'But where is it?' Mala hissed. 'And where's Rimeq?'

'Not far away.'

Mala glanced at me curiously, wondering why my voice had changed. But it hadn't. It wasn't my voice that had answered.

We had been too caught up with that piece of plastic, and hadn't been watching our backs. And there in the doorway stood the furry exter who worked for Grees. Clearly the effects of the gas had worn off faster for him than for the humans. He looked annoyed (the gas leaves a terrible headache) but his guns were aimed at us as steadily as ever.

'In fact, Mister Rimeq is real close,' he went on. 'Close enough to make you wish I'd shoot you here, the way I'd like to.'

Mala and I said nothing. We didn't even look at each other. Yet as if we had arranged it beforehand, we began, slowly and carefully, to sidle away from one another. A centimetre at a time, we widened the gap between us, so that the exter would have to switch his gaze back and forth from one of us to the other.

He caught on, eventually. 'Hold it!' he snarled. 'Rimeq may want you alive, but he didn't say you couldn't be hurt!'

We stopped. And then I saw that Mala was readying herself, like a cat crouching to leap.

'Don't do it,' I muttered quickly. 'You don't stand a chance.'

'Good advice,' the extei snickered, as Mala wheeled and glared at me. But she had relaxed, as I'd wanted.

Because I felt that if anyone was going to tackle this furry exter, it had better be me. I had the weapons, which he wouldn't know about. And I felt a childish urge to do something that might win Mala's approval.

But then another thought struck me. Would it be wise to deal with the exter and escape? Where would that get us, except perhaps to keep us alive a while longer? Both Mala and I were after Rimeq. And the exter was going to *take* us to Rimeq, right then.

So should I risk both our lives, I asked myself, by staying there and being taken to Rimeq? Or should I play safe, flatten the exter and get us away?

If you would stay to confront Kimeq, turn to page 57.

If you would make your escape, turn to page 67.

Deadly Bluff

As the FedPol officer splashed noisily past. I staved where I was. It was no time to rush out and say hello. My concern was with who, or what, was also coming along that well-travelled route through the swamp. So I drew back carefully into the brush, while fear created an unpleasant rippling effect up and down my backbone.

In a few minutes, he was there, silent as a shadow. One moment I was looking at a patch of tall, damp ferns, and the next I was staring at Rimeq the Renegade.-

He hadn't changed over the years. He was still massive, still wearing that mottled, purplish hide and not much else. The yellow fangs and glinting claws, and those terrible red eyes flashing like danger signals in the dark sockets. Even the meat-eating monsters of the swamp stayed clear of him, recognizing a real monster when they saw one.

He moved forward, light-footed for all his bulk. My positron guns leaped into my hands, and I could have blown him away right then. But I did one of the stupidest things I have ever done. I hesitated.

It was partly because my hands were shaking, but also partly because I couldn't, even with a horror like Rimeq, kill in cold blood, from ambush.

And then it was too late.

They say that wild beasts know, with some sixth sense, when they are being watched. And Rimeq, though he was an intelligent extra-terrestrial, was also his own kind of wild beast. He whirled, his red flaring eyes fixed on the thicket where I hid. And suddenly the thicket no

longer existed.

The evil, mutant power of his mind had simply flattened the brush, and I was left as exposed as if I'd been on bare rock. Then I would have shot him, except that his mind-power had jerked the guns from my hands. Frantically I snatched at other weapons, but those too were torn from my grasp. My belt, rings and headband were ripped off me. My suit and even my boots were torn away. And in the end I was left standing there in my underwear, near to panic, as the awesome grip of his mind-power closed round me.

Rimeq grinned with all the friendliness of a hungry crocodile. 'The swamp is full of surprises,' he said. 'Earthmen lurk in bushes, believing they can capture Rimeq.'

I said nothing, being too busy wondering how long I had to live.

Rimeq took a step forward, those demonic red eyes flickering. 'I have seen you before,' he said. 'You are Curb, the investigator, who should have died at my hands years ago.' Again he grinned, with a spread of yellow fangs. 'And now you stupidly are trying again. Perhaps with another pack of fools, as before?'

He glanced in the direction that the FedPol cop had taken, but I shook my head quickly. 'He's nothing to do with me. I'm on my own.'

His ugly laughter rang out. 'What depths of foolishness! And what do you propose to do, Earthworm, when you are alone, unarmed, unclothed, and unable to move?'

'I'll let you know,' I said, through gritted teeth.

'I think,' Rimeq said, in a cruel gloating tone, 'you will not have the time.'

His mind-power shifted its grip on me, and it was as if an invisible metal band had fastened round my throat. My breath was cut off as the pressure grew. There was a roaring in my ears, and a reddened blackness grew and

swelled at the edges of my vision. . . .

'Hey!'

For a moment I thought I was imagining it. A clear, strong, *human* voice, sounding puzzled and a little annoyed.

'Did you throw this?' the voice demanded.

The darkness drew back, and I found I could take a long, ragged breath. I also found that I was looking at the young FedPol cop, who was staring at me accusingly, and holding out one of my own positron guns. When Rimeq had wrenched it from my hand with his mind-power, he must have flung it away carelessly. It had landed near the young cop, who had come back to investigate.

Which was too bad for him.

'No, fool,' Rimeq snarled, 'I did.'

Heavy brush had screened the monster from the cop's view. But now Rimeq stepped out and the cop barely had time to turn pale before that fearsome mind-power grasped him as well. It lifted him, and hurled him away like a discarded doll. I winced at the sickening crunch his head made when it hit the solid trunk of a tree.

Rimeq turned indifferently away, eyeing me again. 'Are all humans so entirely brainless?' he asked.

'No,' I said, happy to keep talking if it meant I could put off being strangled. 'For instance, I called the FedPol several minutes ago. So killing me won't do you much good.'

'Nor you, I think,' he said with an evil grin. 'When your police come, you will be a corpse and I will be elsewhere.'

Desperately, I tried a wild bluff. 'Not with your nullity bomb!' I said quickly. 'I've already found that, and removed it to somewhere even your mind-power can't reach.'

Something in my voice must have sounded convincing, for the red eyes went a brighter scarlet. 'If that is so,'

Rimeq growled, 'you will learn how many agonizing ways I know to make you tell me where it is!'

I would have shrugged, if I could have moved. 'The worst you can do is kill me. And that's better than letting you kill a whole world.'

He paused for a moment, studying me. 'Perhaps you are fool enough to be heroic,' he said at last. 'And I cannot spare the time to question you properly.'

He glanced around, and saw that the young cop, whose skull must have been solid rock, was stirring. 'Instead,' Rimeq went on viciously, 'I shall tear the limbs from your friend, one at a time, until you tell me where the bomb is.'

'You probably tear the wings off flies, too,' I muttered. But when I saw the young cop's right arm suddenly stretched straight out from his body, and heard his cry of shock and pain, I put a desperate urgency into my voice. 'All right!' I yelled. 'Leave him alone! I'll tell you!'

'Such soft-hearted weaklings, these Earthmen,' Rimeq sneered. 'Tell me, then.'

'In my shuttle-pod,' I said, trying now to sound miserable and defeated. 'A couple of kilometres back in the swamp.'

His fang-filled grin widened further with his victory. 'I shall seek it,' he announced. 'But my powers can reach over a great distance and they will hold you here till I return. If you are lying, I will tear you apart - slowly.'

He turned and vanished into the swamp, leaving me and the young cop staring dolefully at each other, both held fast by the monstrous mind-power.

'Who are you, anyway?' he asked.

I told him, and explained why I was there, which made him look respectful.

'Do you think,' he said hopefully, 'one of us might break free, before he gets back?'

'I doubt it,' I said. 'But we may not have to.'

He stared, as if he thought that fear had unhinged my mind. But right then I was more hopeful than fearful. I hoped that Rimeq, when he reached the shuttle-pod, wouldn't reach in with his mind-power and drag everything out. I wanted him, personally, to go into the pod, to look for the bomb that wasn't there.

Perhaps some of the young cop's foolish luck rubbed off on me. I don't know. But soon I saw a pillar of flame, rising high over the swamp, followed by a distant, thunderous crash.

The cop stared, pop-eyed, first at the flame and then at me. 'That was an explosion' he breathed.

I nodded. 'My shuttle-pod.'

Naturally, being a careful man, when I'd set out on my ramble through the swamp, I'd switched on all the security safeguards on the pod. This meant that if anyone but me found his way into the pod, it did the noble thing and **self-destructed**.

So Rimeq and the pod were now just so much hot ash, scattered over a kilometre or so of swamp.

And the proof was that the cop and I were free from the grip of that evil mind-power. But the cop was still gaping at me, unable to believe that it was over.

'When you're ready,' I said, with a half-smile, 'you might help me look for my clothes and things. If I don't find my communicator, I'll never be able to call my ship to come and get us out of this miserable swamp.'

The End

Baited Trap

It may seem criminally foolish, since I was gambling with the life of a world, **my** world, but I wanted to try the plan that would put an end to the threat of the nullity bomb **and** to Rimeq as well. I couldn't bear the idea of that monster getting away and maybe making another bomb, and starting all over again.

So I lifted the jewelled pendant around my neck, which was a powerful little communicator, and yelled for help. More precisely, I called the amazingly clever computer system that runs my own spaceship.

It responded at speed, as always. A few moments later, something hit the barrel-ship that I was in, with a thunderous, explosive crash. The ship juddered and twisted, and when it settled down, it was no longer accelerating forward.

I was grinning. I knew that my ship's delicate instruments would be able to locate the barrel-ship's engines, from the **outside**, more easily than I could. And I had told my ship to find them, and to blast them.

Now the barrel-ship was drifting, without power. My ship then thrust out a sturdy tractor beam that took hold of the barrel-ship like a magnet grips a pin, and began to drag it downwards, back into the atmosphere of the planet.

In that time, I busied myself with a few things inside the barrel-ship. Then, when we were far enough down, I opened the door of the barrel-ship, brought my own ship close, and leapt across the narrow gap.

For a while then I sat and quivered quietly, while my

ship did the next thing I'd told it to do. It reversed direction, and with the tractor beam, dragged the barrel-ship back out into space. Just far enough to be out of sensor range. Then it switched off the tractor beam, and let the barrel-ship drift away, aimlessly, until it was little more than a silvery speck in the black vastness.

So far so good, I thought. Now for the tricky bit.

I switched on the ship's communicator, on a wide beam that would cover half of the surface of Hallipor. And then I began calling.

I was sure that Rimeq would have a ship of his own nearby, with a communicator. And I was right. In a very short while I had a response from a startled and furious Rimeq .

'I've got away, killer,' I said blithely. 'I've disabled your ship, so the bomb will never reach Earth. And you can't reach me with your mind-power, because you don't know exactly where I am. You can't even trace this signal, because it's wide-beam.'

There was a pause, during which I could almost hear him thinking. 'You are clever, Earthman,' he snarled at last. 'But not as clever as you think. What do I care if you get away? You are nothing.'

'Maybe,' I said, trying to sound gleeful. 'But your bomb is drifting in space, useless. Your plan is ruined!'

'Not at all,' he said, and there was now a cruel glee in his voice. 'Whatever you have done to my ship can be repaired - when I have brought it back, with the power of my mind.'

'But . . . but you can't do that!' I gabbled, sounding horrified. 'You don't know where *it* is, either!'

'You have made a mistake, Earthman,' he replied, gloatingly. 'It is my ship, and the equipment on board is computer-linked to equipment I have here. I can trace it and pinpoint the ship in seconds. So I will bring it down, repair it, and send it and the bomb on their way again. And will you come and try to stop me, as before?'

His mad laughter was cut off as he broke the connection. And I waited, in the emptiness of space, and watched.

Sure enough, in less than a minute I saw the distant silvery speck that was the barrel-ship begin to move, slowly but steadily, on its way back down to the planet's surface under the control of Rimeq's mind-power.

Happy landings, I thought, grinning.

There's an old tradition on Earth, known as the booby-trap. Rimeq wouldn't suspect, because he believed that I hadn't known he could reach his ship with his mind. But I had been fairly sure that he'd have some way of doing so. And he had taken the bait perfectly.

Before I'd left the barrel-ship, I'd been busy. Every therm-grenade from my rings was now wired into its systems. And in my hand was a little box with a button, also linked with those systems.

I waited, grinning, humming to myself. And in a few minutes my ship's sensors informed me that the barrel-ship had landed on Hallipor. I said thank you, waited half a minute more, and then jammed my thumb on the button.

At that distance, of course, I saw nothing. But when I took my ship down low over the swamp, I saw what I wanted to see.

The therm-grenades had detonated, on cue. Their furious fire had incinerated the entire barrel-ship and everything in it - including the evil cylinder of the nullity bomb - and had also blasted a square kilometre of swamp all around it. One way or another, Rimeq the Renegade was now just some of the cloud of ash and vapour rising from the surface of Hallipor.

And I grinned some more, and hummed some more, and set my ship's controls for home.

The End

Terror Bomb

It may seem cold-blooded, but I decided in favour of the ship. I hoped I would find the nullity bomb inside, or at least some clue to where it was. But I also hoped to find a long-range communicator. I knew there was a good chance that I wouldn't survive, if Rimeq found me, and I needed to call the FedPol and tell them where he was.

So I went into that ship in a headlong dash, every nerve jumping.

Most of the equipment was familiar, and I soon found the communicator. I put out an interplanetary call, using Commander Verre's name to be sure of being listened to. While I was doing that, I spotted a sensor unit on the control panel that was signalling the presence of intelligent life forms nearby. So that was why Rimeq had been wandering in the swamp looking for unwelcome visitors. And if it hadn't been Boole that he'd found, it might have been me.

Then I went into a central area that was fitted out like an advanced laboratory. And there was a large, oblong metal object that made my heart thump just to look at it. I didn't need a guidebook to tell me that it was the nullity bomb. Nor did I need a diagram to tell me how the ghastly thing would be activated.

And then the ghost of a crazy idea tiptoed into my mind. If I could make it work, Rimeq could be stopped. Even though it was likely that I wouldn't be around at the time to know it.

Quickly, before I could think about that too much, I jugged the evil mechanism out of the laboratory. In a

narrow storeroom nearby I tucked it away behind some heavy crates. Then I went back to the control room and switched on the ship's main drive.

The bellow of the mighty engines would surely be heard for many kilometres. But I didn't run and hide. I left the ship, moving well away from its down-blast, and watched it begin its slow, majestic lift-off. Then I simply stood there and waited.

He didn't keep me waiting long. Suddenly he was standing at the edge of the clearing. A vast bulk of muscle within that armour of scaly hide, bright claws and yellow fangs gleaming, and the mad red coals of his eyes fixed on me. His monstrous mind-power reached out and gripped me, as if a giant invisible strait-jacket had wrapped itself around my body. But he had left me able to speak, which was all I needed.

'Another Earthman,' Rimeq rasped. 'And as big a fool as the other one.'

'Have you killed him?' I asked coldly.

'Not yet,' the monster said. 'He remains in the swamp, awaiting my return.'

I was glad of that. I'd felt guilty about poor Boole - as well as grateful. If he hadn't occupied Rimeq's attention, I could never have done what I'd done.

'You seem familiar, Earthman,' Rimeq was saying. 'Like someone I thought I had killed years ago. But no matter. You can die now, after you've told me what you think you are doing.'

'What I'm doing,' I said, 'is putting an end to your merry little plot of destroying Earth.'

He laughed, a crazed titter, and glanced up at his spaceship, now no more than a distant glimmer in the sky.

'I've taken the nullity bomb off your ship,' I went on calmly, 'and hidden it. You can't reach it with your mind-power, because you don't know where it is. And I've activated it. In about a minute it is going to kill this

planet. Every living thing on Hallipor, including you and I, will die. And you can't get away.'

The terrible red eyes were flaring like welding torches as Rimeq laughed again. 'You have no idea of the power of my mind, fool. Of course I can get away. See!'

The power that gripped me tilted my head up, and I saw. Rimeq's ship was returning, hurtling downwards at frightening speed. But then it slowed, and settled back where it had been, as lightly as a leaf.

Rimeq leaped to its airlock. 'The bomb may explode,' he shouted to me, 'but I will build another. I will leave you alive to enjoy these last seconds. And I will watch from space, as my bomb spreads its death over you and all this planet!'

Then he was gone, and the ship howled upwards, vanishing in seconds into the clouds.

I found that I could move again. The mind-power had been withdrawn. And only then did I heave a giant sigh of relief.

So much could have gone wrong. Rimeq might not have been able to recall his ship, the bomb might have been badly timed, Rimeq might have taken me with him But it had all gone as I'd hoped. Rimeq had gone into the safety of deep space, to watch and gloat, not knowing that he had taken the bomb with him, hidden in that storeroom on his ship.

And I **had** activated it, as I'd said. When it went off, it would kill every living thing within a planet's radius. But out there in space, there were no living things within such an area. Just Rimeq.

I wondered for an moment if the FedPol would be able to find that ship later, and what was left of Rimeq. Then I trudged off into the swamp, to look for poor Boole. He probably still didn't know what had hit him. But I would tell the FedPol how heroic and useful he'd been, and they'd probably make him a **First** Class Officer on the spot.

The End

Desperate Challenge

Normally, since I'm a careful man, I would have got out of there at speed, even though I would then have had to start looking for Rimeq all over again. But somehow I couldn't face the acid remarks that I knew Mala would make, if I did. So I stayed still and so did Mala, looking furious. And the exter stepped back, and gestured with his guns for us to come out of the door.

Once again I was marched along with gun-barrels jabbing into my back. Another corridor, another ramp leading upwards, to the only place left to go, in that direction. The roof of the building.

Up there, above the tangled passages of the Labyrinth, the darkness was complete. I was just going to suggest that somebody put a light on, when somebody did.

The light came from the suddenly opened door of a large, sleek sky-cruiser that had been set down on the roof. And framed in the light was a sight that made my scalp prickle, and made Mala stifle a gasp.

A tall, hulking, human-shaped figure, as far as I could tell, under the folds of a long cloak. But the hood of the cloak had been thrown back, and the face could be seen clearly. More clearly than anyone would care for.

The mottled, purplish skin, the grinning yellow fangs and, above all, the lurid crimson flare of the eyes, deep in their shadowed sockets.

The nightmare monster that was Rimeq the Renegade stepped down from the cruiser and came towards us. And as he came, he laughed, a sound like someone filing

rock.

'Spies,' he snarled. 'A little police agent and the fool who asked questions in the sky-bar, but who will not escape me a second time.'

I thought of informing him that I had already escaped him twice, but decided against it. Anyway, Mala was doing the talking.

'Where is the nullity bomb, you, you monster?' she demanded.

Rimeq snorted. 'The female of the species, braver than the male as always. The bomb is in space, Earthling, on its way to kill every living thing on your home world.'

I shivered at that, but Mala didn't blink. 'When will it get there?' she asked sharply.

Rimeq's evil grin widened. 'It will emerge from its faster-than-light stage at a precise point in space. And then, after the Earth has suffered terror and panic for long enough, I will reach out and seize the bomb with the power of my mind, and fling it towards the Earth. Perhaps in a day or so.'

I raised my eyebrows. 'Your mental power can reach that far?'

'My power is almost without limit,' Rimeq said boastfully.

'Really?' I let my lip curl. 'And I'll bet you're totally useless without it.'

It's fairly easy to annoy most insane, boastful master criminals, and Rimeq was no different. His red eyes seemed to burst into flame. 'I need none of my mind-power to crush you, Earthworm,' he roared, 'or a hundred like you!'

'I'm glad you said that,' I said coldly. 'Because I'm **challenging** you, here and now, to fight me, bare-handed - no weapons, no mind-power.'

Mad laughter rang into the night. 'You - challenge me? Are you seeking to impress the female, or merely

hoping for a quick death?'

I shrugged, saying nothing.

The monster laughed again. 'Very well, we will fight. No weapons, no mind-power.' He glanced past me. 'Search him!'

Then I noticed that Grees and the two big human thugs had joined us on the roof. And they did as Rimeq ordered, while the furry exter held his guns on me.

They muttered and grunted with some surprise as they started finding my weapons - the guns on the wrists and in the pockets, the knives in the boots and so on. That's when they decided to peel me out of my clothes to be sure, and of course found more little items in my belt, in the seams of my suit and elsewhere. They even took my rings and headband, until at last I was standing there in my underwear, shivering slightly in the breeze that was blowing my hair around my face.

By then Rimeq had doffed his cloak, and his men had started laughing. I suppose I never was a Mr Universe, and beside the towering bulk of purple muscle that was Rimeq, I might have looked a trifle spindly. Even Mala, who was supposed to be on my side, muttered something about 'Sir Galahad in his underpants'. But I ignored them all, having other things to think about.

Rimeq's fangs gleamed. 'You thought I would be useless without my mind-power, Earthman. What use are you without your arsenal of weapons?'

Then he laughed his mad laugh once more, and charged.

But he didn't come at me blindly. I soon found that despite the mind-power and the fangs and claws, Rimeq knew a good deal about combat. He came fast and hard and deadly, and if the first blows of his fists had struck home, the fight would have been over.

But they struck night air, for I had got moving too. Not being huge and powerful, I had learned my own share of the unarmed-combat arts. I hit him three times

while I was dodging that first charge, and went on dodging, and hitting, as fast and hard as I could.

But I soon knew that it wasn't enough. Even my hardest blow - a nicely timed sweep-kick into his muscular purple belly - only staggered him for a second or two. And I couldn't go on dodging and hitting forever, because I would soon tire. Whereas Rimeq hadn't even started breathing hard.

He also knew that it was only a matter of time before one of his rushes caught me. He knew it, and laughed. And that made me angry, more so than usual perhaps, because if I lost this fight it would be the whole Earth that would die.

So there was only thing to do. I cheated.

First, I flung myself into a drop-kick that slammed one foot against Rimeq's head. It rocked him back, off balance for an instant, and my risky follow-up chop to his neck nearly sent him tumbling. But as he staggered, I didn't pursue him.

Instead, I stiffened, as if suddenly unable to move, my arms sticking out rigidly at weird angles. And I yelled at him, in a half-choking voice.

'Coward!' I yelled. 'The mind-power. . . !'

Rimeq, regaining his balance, looked startled. And at the cry of outrage from Mala, and a faint growl of disapproval from his men, he glanced their way, still startled and puzzled.

It was just what I wanted. Because I was faking - he wasn't using the mind-power. And while he was looking away, I ripped my hair off, and threw it at him.

Well, not really my hair. But it's an expensive wig, and *looks* like my hair. Underneath, my own hair is dull and brown and, I admit it, getting a little thin. But that's not the only reason I wear the wig.

Since Rimeq was looking away, he didn't quite have time to fling the wig away, with his mind-power or otherwise. And the mini-grenade in the wig exploded in

his face.

By then I was nearly all the way across the roof, in a desperate leaping lunge. Rimeq's men had hardly begun to move, in their dazed shock, but even so I might not have made it, if Mala hadn't disarmed the furry exter with a scything kick, flattened him with a straight right, and then twisted to sink a fist elbow-deep into Grees' enormous paunch. As she did so I slammed into the two **big human thugs** like a missile. And when I got up, they **stayed down**.

I grinned at Mala. 'You wouldn't be interested in becoming a partner in an investigation agency?' I asked her.

She didn't even hear me. She was staring grimly at the huge purple body of Rimeq the Renegade, stretched out on the roof. The huge, purple, headless body.

'The nullity bomb . . .' Mala said, half to herself.

'It'll come out of FTL like a good little bomb,' I told her, 'and will wait to be redirected by Rimeq's mind-power. Only Rimeq doesn't have a mind any more, and the bomb will wait forever.'

She turned, glaring. 'Did you think I couldn't work that out for myself?' she snapped. 'Why don't **you get dressed?** You look silly.'

Silly? I had just saved the Earth and put an end to the deadliest killer in the galaxy, and I looked *silly*? 'Just for that,' I said stiffly, 'I withdraw my offer of a partnership.'

'You'd better hope I don't start up an agency of my own,' Mala said. 'You couldn't handle the competition.'

The End

The Swamp Strikes Back

Cursing Boole for being an idiot, cursing myself for being a sentimental fool, I turned my back on the ship that probably held a planet-killing bomb, and plunged back into the swamp. I couldn't just walk away and leave that blundering kid in Rimeq's grip.

It didn't take me long to catch up with them. Rimeq had found the hillock of dry ground where I had rested before, and was standing there in full view. It was not a pleasant view. Seen clearly, he seemed even bigger, with a giant torso and legs like pillars. The glinting claws curled, ready to tear and rend, the yellow fangs gleamed hungrily, and those deep-set red eyes flared like fires to roast poor Boole alive.

But at least the poor idiot was alive. He was also still hanging in mid-air, held there by Rimeq's fearsome mind-power. And Rimeq was having a talk with him, in his own cruel way.

'I know there are two of you,' the monster was saying. 'And I will continue to hurt you until you tell me where the other Earthman is.'

Boole, to give him credit, looked more furious than frightened. 'I'll never tell you!' he shouted defiantly. 'Even if you kill me!'

'That I will certainly do,' Rimeq rasped. 'But if you do not tell me, you will suffer horribly for a long time before you die.'

I heard Boole grunt, saw his face twist and grow suddenly shiny with sweat. Rimeq's mind-power was torturing him foully and I had to stop it.

It could have been simple. Boole was keeping the monster occupied, my positron guns were in my hands, so all I had to do was blast Rimeq where he stood. But I didn't quite do so in time, and then it was too late.

Boole soared upwards, with a choking, pain-filled cry, high into the sky. And Rimeq watched him, grinning cruelly.

'I could take you further, Earthman,' he shouted. 'Up into space, where your blood would boil and your lungs would burst !'

I lowered my guns, cursing. If I shot Rimeq now, Boole would fall, which would kill him as surely as anything else.

And then I could hardly believe my ears. Boole was shouting too, as brave and defiant as ever. And as clumsy as ever. What he said was probably his idea of a clever bluff. But he couldn't have said a worse thing.

'All right, I'll tell you where the other man is!' Boole yelled. 'He's right behind you, that's where!'

Which of course was perfectly true, though the poor idiot couldn't have known it. So I had to duck further back into hiding, as quickly as possible, because Rimeq's terrible red eyes had swung round to search the swampy brush for me.

As I slid back I caught sight of Boole soaring back down, which was a relief. Rimeq then swung him around to use his body as a shield. But that didn't matter, because I was in no position then to shoot at him anyway.

Crouching within a dank, dark thicket, my flesh crawled, expecting at any second to feel the impact of that mind-power. But nothing happened. And then I knew that Rimeq couldn't use his power on something unless he knew exactly where it was. He had to see something, or get a fix on it in some way, before he could grasp it and control it.

That gave me an idea. And though I would have been

happy to give it back, it seemed to be the only idea available. As silently as I could, I drifted away through the swamp.

'Earthman!' Rimeq's hoarse voice made me jump. 'There is no escape! Show yourself, or I will kill your friend!'

'No friend of mine!' I yelled back, hoping that Rimeq couldn't pinpoint my position from sound alone.

And apparently he couldn't, because it was lung power he used, not mind-power. 'What do you hope to do, fool?' he shouted. 'If you were an army you could not overcome me!'

'Is that so?' I yelled, still keeping out of sight. 'Then why are you afraid to come and face me?'

The growl that replied to those words sounded as savage as an entire zoo. But I had expected it. Being an over-confident, murderous maniac, Rimeq was always likely to respond to a direct challenge. And I wanted him to - though I also wanted to stay out of his way long enough to make the rest of my crazy plan work.

At least I had Rimeq's full attention, because I'd heard the splash and the yell which meant that he had released young Boole from his mind-grip, dropping him a metre or so into the muck. Now I had to **keep** Rimeq's attention, and lead him to where I wanted him.

I nearly lost that nerve-wracking game of hide-and-seek three times in the first minute. For all his size, Rimeq was quick, and was wasting no time on stealth. He plunged straight through the swamp towards the sound of my voice, and a stone wall wouldn't have slowed him down.

But I managed, barely, to keep ahead of him and out of sight. And finally I reached the sort of dense stand of swamp plants that I was looking for. There I pulled the bright pendant from my neck, hooked it on a twig so it looked as if it had been torn away by accident, and then slid silently into a murky pool so that only my eyes and

nose were above water, screened by undergrowth.

I didn't have to wait too long, not even long enough for some of the pool's flesh-eaters to move in on me. Rimeq charged furiously into the midst of the trees, skidded to a halt by my pendant, and stared round, red eyes flaming with blood-lust. He was just where I wanted him to be.

But nothing happened.

I swore silently, but I was helpless. If I stood up and tried to **make** something happen, the monster would have me in that lethal mind-grip in the first second. And if I didn't, Rimeq would move away, and it would be goodbye to my plan.

But then I had some unexpected help. In another burst of flailing and splashing, young Boole crashed on to the scene. His face was red with fury, and in one hand he was hefting a heavy stick, as a makeshift club.

I marvelled at the blind courage that had brought the boy into the swamp with only a club, to face the galaxy's most deadly killer. But I was glad of it. Because Boole angrily hurled the club just as Rimeq saw him.

The club missed Rimeq, of course, and Boole went hurtling backwards as Rimeq's mind-power swept him away as carelessly as I might brush at a fly. But the club had struck a tree, the very tree on which I'd hooked my pendant, and under which Rimeq was standing. And my crazy plan became a reality.

On the branch above Rimeq, the fungus-thing that had been too lazy to move before, as I'd wanted it to, was finally stirred by the impact of the club on its tree. It spread itself, and dropped, directly on to Rimeq, wrapping itself around his head.

I surged up out of the pool just as the fungus-thing was flung away - whether by Rimeq's hands or his mind-power I never knew. But it was too late. All those barbed hooks had sunk into Rimeq's purple hide at the instant of impact. And when Rimeq ripped the thing

away from his head, those hooks took a lot of Rimeq with them.

The bubbling, choking screams were the worst, even worse than the sight of the crimson horror that had been Rimeq's face. He jerked and staggered, pawing desperately at that mask of blood, frantic in his blindness and agony.

And I had no choice. Shaken and sickened by the gruesome result of my plan, I raised my guns and put an end to the screaming.

Then I turned my back firmly on what was left of Rimeq the Renegade, and trudged away to find Boole, trying to work out how my one-person shuttle-pod could get both of us back up to my ship, in the clean and silent depths of space.

The End

Self-sacrifice

I may have mentioned before that I'm a careful man, with no great desire to die young. So I decided that if I had to come face to face with Rimeq the Renegade, I'd like it to be on **my** terms, not with a fur-covered exter holding a gun on me.

That meant that it was time to go. The exter was still shifting his eyes back and forth between Mala and me, and didn't notice the small movement when I turned one of my rings round on my finger. Nor did he notice the flick of my thumb that sent the jewel from that ring flying out of its setting.

I don't think the exter even saw the tiny object sailing towards him. But he **did** see my sudden movement, and was a millisecond away from firing when my ring-jewel exploded.

The room was filled with the nerve-twisting vibrations of infra-sonics. They hurt, but they didn't knock me out - because my sudden movement had been to clap my hands over my ears, and it's through the ears that sonics deliver their knock-out punch. The furry exter went down as if someone had kicked his feet from under him.

And so, of course, did Mala. I scooped her up and slung her over my shoulder, knowing that she was going to feel even less friendly towards me when she woke up. But that was the least of my worries then. I got the huge window open, slid out on to a ledge, and managed a neat bit of scrambling that got me on to a neighbouring rooftop despite Mala's weight. Then it was easy, since Labyrinth buildings are jammed close together, to hop

from roof to roof until I was far enough away to feel safe.

Then I paused, and thought. They weren't pleasant thoughts, but I couldn't escape them.

I reminded myself that Rimeq the Renegade was back there somewhere - not far away, the furry exter had said. And if I was going to do the job I'd come to do, I'd have to go back there.

So I sighed, placed Mala's limp form gently on the roof and started back.

Soon I was lying flat on the roof of the building where Grees' apartment was. From the large open window of the apartment, below me, I could hear raised voices - mainly the high voice of Grees, who was giving several pieces of his mind to his men for letting us get away. But then the shouting died away and the group left the apartment-probably to search for us in the mazes of the Labyrinth. And good luck to them, I thought with a grin.

Then I slid over the edge of the roof and climbed down into the apartment, planning to finish the search that had been so rudely interrupted. But a moment after I had gone back in through the big window, I realized that it had not been a good idea.

The window became a bright oblong of light, and the room was filled with a menacing rumble. I didn't even need to look to know what was happening. I barely had time to dive into the welcome shadows behind a bank of computer consoles when the bulky sky-freighter floated smoothly up beside the window, and locked itself into position.

But it wasn't bringing cargo - just terror and the promise of death. Through the window, from the freighter, stepped Rimeq the Renegade, glaring around the room with the mad fire of his crimson eyes.

That was bad enough. Worse, the monster was carrying Mala, like a child in those mighty arms. He must have spotted her on the roof where I'd left her, as the freighter passed over. And now she was only

centimetres from the cruel yellow fangs of the galaxy's most vicious killer.

She was also awake, and I was impressed to see that she looked more angry than afraid.

'I don't know where he is,' she was saying. Clearly Rimeq had been asking after me, not in a friendly fashion.

'Very well,' the monster growled. 'Tell me instead how many more FedPol are on this planet.'

Mala struggled, uselessly, in the powerful clawed grip. 'I don't know that either,' she spat- 'And I wouldn't tell you if I did.'

'But you will,' Rimeq said with a fanged grin. 'Or I shall hurt you very badly.'

Mala's face was stark white, but her chin was set firmly, and I knew that she would fight Rimeq through every torture he could invent, until she died. It was time I did something.

But from where I was hiding, I couldn't risk a pot shot at Rimeq. The angle was too awkward, and Mala was 'too close to him. That left only one thing to do.

Raising my hands unhappily above my head, I stepped out from my hiding-place.

'Put her down, Rimeq,' I said. 'I'm the one you want.'

The red eyes flamed as he whirled - and, as his mind-power surged out, it felt as if a thousand strong but unseen hands had clutched me.

'You are not the one I want, fool,' he said evilly. 'Your heroics are wasted. She has information I need. You have nothing.'

That stung me. But before I could think of a reply. Rimeq shifted part of his mind-power and Mala sailed across the room, to be held against the wall as firmly as I was still held. Then all those fangs glittered in another vicious grin.

'I remember you now,' he snarled. 'You are the investigator, Curb, who escaped me years ago and again

today at the sky-bar. You will escape no more.'

Growling deep in his throat, he came at me in a rush.

I had thought he would do so, just as he had done all those years before. Rimeq likes to kill in any way, but he especially likes the personal touch, up close with fang and claw. But I had also remembered something else from the first time I'd faced him. At the moment of the kill, Rimeq slides a little further towards being a blood-maddened beast. When he strikes at a victim, his mind shuts off - and with it, his mind-power.

I was counting on that. Which is why, before raising my hands in the air, I had given a slight twist to one of my rings.

Then he was upon me, like a starved tiger. I felt those steely claws sink deep into my flesh . . . I saw the yellow daggers of his fangs gape wide, flashing down at my throat. . . .

But I also felt the invisible grip of the mind-power fade away, so that I could move again.

I couldn't have freed myself from those lethal claws, even if I'd tried. But I didn't try. In that last desperate fraction of a second, I simply slammed my hand, open-palmed, down on the top of Rimeq's great purple head.

It wasn't a therm-grenade, just a plain concussion bomb, mini-size. Even so, the blast flung me away like a broken doll. My eyes seemed filled with fire and then the fire gave way to blackness, and I never did feel myself hit the floor

Nor did I ever expect to feel anything again. But to my intense surprise, I woke up and found that only a few minutes had passed, and that Mala was working on my injuries with a speed and competence that suggested I might live a while longer.

Maybe there's a kind of dumb luck that goes along with taking crazy, suicidal risks. But I worked out, later, that the explosion from my ring had been oddly focused.

Instead of spreading out in all directions, most of the blast had been directed downwards, and had blown the top half of Rimeq the Renegade to small purple bits. I merely caught the side effects, which did me a lot of painful damage but didn't kill me.

Even the damage wasn't permanent. Mala gave me first aid, then called the FedPol and the medics. Surgeons did their thing with transplants, and now I have new eyes and a new right hand just as good as the old ones. The only unhappy thing is that I have never seen Mala since, because she showed no interest in seeing me.

When I tried to contact her, she told me curtly that she had no time for the kind of man who took crazy risks that nearly got themselves killed. The kind of man she respected, she said, was the careful sort, who didn't take foolish chances.

The End

The Creature in the Cage

A dozen times I started to move away from the dark and menacing mouth of that tunnel, and a dozen times some leftover sense of duty dragged me back. I had come here after Rimeq, so I had to enter that tunnel.

I would rather have entered the lair of an Incollian fire-worm. But finally I forced myself forward, and edged into the chill blackness.

A brief flash of my headband light did not cheer me. The tunnel was in fact many branching tunnels, each as dark and ominous as the others. I had visions of myself creeping around in there forever, like a lost tourist in the Labyrinth city.

But I kept going. A man can only go one road at a time, I thought -which sounded good but wasn't much help. I went one way, then backtracked and went another, then another By then, the branching tunnels had themselves started to divide into new branches, and I was no longer sure of the way out. So I kept going in.

Maybe people stupid enough to go into a maze of tunnels after the most insane killer in the galaxy deserve some luck. Anyway, I had some. A faint and distant clink came to my ears and when I crept nervously in that direction awhile, I saw a dim glimmer of light.

I slid forward, silent as a ghost. And as jumpy as someone who has just seen a ghost.

The tunnel curved slightly and opened out a little wider. It then came to an end, at a wide cave-like chamber, carved into the rock. It needed to be wide, for

it held a good many things.

My eyes swept over a display of high-tech equipment - the kind of thing you'd expect to find in the laboratory of a mad scientist. Which is what this chamber was, in a way. If Rimeq had made himself a nullity bomb, he would have needed a laboratory just like this. . . .

But then my gaze was caught and held by something else, at one side of the chamber. And though the thought of the nullity bomb had a freezing effect on my bloodstream, this object made me feel even colder. It was a large, heavy cage, with sturdy bars and a sturdier lock. But I couldn't clearly see what was in the cage, because the spaces between the bars seemed oddly *hazy*, filled with a flickering, shimmering glow.

All I could make out through the haze was a shapeless form, huddled on the floor. And it seemed to be moaning softly.

The sight of this wretched, caged creature - no doubt waiting for Rimeq to return and begin one of his slow, savage murders - filled me with rage. And the fact that there was no sign of a tall, red-eyed monster in a long cloak filled me with courage. I was across the chamber in a flash.

'I'm a friend,' I whispered reassuringly to the huddled form in the cage. 'He's not here. I'll have you out in a second.'

In fact it took a little longer. But eventually I found the hidden switch that made the glowing haze in the cage fade and vanish. Then it was simple to pick-the lock, and swing the cage door open. And I stood there smiling proudly, as the shapeless figure slowly rose from the cage floor.

At which point the smile froze on my face. I was looking at someone wearing a heavy cloak. Someone with a huge, mottled, purplish head, from which yellow fangs glittered, and red eyes glowed like furnaces.

'I am glad you escaped the sky-bar, Earthling,' hissed

Rimeq the Renegade, 'so you could come and rescue me.'

'But you . . . !' I spluttered. 'But I . . . ! But . . . !'

In my total shock, I could find no words. And that was too bad, because words were about all I had left. The rest of me had become paralysed, as if I'd been dipped into molten plastic and left to harden. Rimeq's eerie mind-power had enclosed me in its grip, and I was sure that I would never come out of it alive.

The monster laughed, a sound like an alligator's belch. 'Did you think the cage held some innocent victim? So you rushed to the rescue, switching off the force-field that protected the lock from my mind-power. . . .'

That really made me feel sick. A force-field, the only possible barrier to Rimeq's mind. I might even have figured out myself what that shimmering haze was, if I hadn't been so eager to play hero. Whoever had put Rimeq in that cage, I thought, was not going to be pleased with me.

But I didn't think that would bother me much. Because death was only half a minute away. Rimeq was moving towards me, fingers curled into clawed hooks, fangs gleaming. And, held by the mind-power, I could only stand still, watching those dripping fangs come closer, smelling the sickly, penetrating stink of the monster. . . .

The last thought I had was that the stink seemed familiar.

And the next thought I had was that I shouldn't be able to have any thoughts at all.

But I was alive, coming awake with my face on a cold stone floor. And I was held in some kind of grip, but it was the grip of metal shackles, not the all-embracing clasp of Rimeq's mind-power.

I didn't know what had happened, but I wasn't complaining. I can handle metal shackles. The little

molecular knife slid out from my belt buckle and sheared through the metal as if it had been paper.

But I was only just getting to my feet when there was a kind of rustle behind me, and a rasping voice snapped, 'Do not move!'

I froze - in more ways than one. Because a tall, cloaked figure moved into view, holding a weapon that looked like a gas-gun, pointed at my face.

I closed my eyes, despairingly, waiting for the grip of the mind-power, the approach of yellow fangs. But when nothing happened, I opened my eyes and looked up.

It wasn't Rimeq.

Tall and cloaked, yes. An extra-terrestrial, yes, with a thick purplish skin. But in his case it was a light lilac, not at all mottled. And he had no claws, and only ordinary teeth, if a little yellowish. And the eyes set deep in the bony sockets were not a mad, murderous crimson, but a warm gold.

'The monster lies in the cage once more,' the stranger said sternly, 'and you shall not free him again, even if you have freed yourself.'

'I didn't want to free him in the first place,' I said humbly. And I told him who I was, and explained as briefly as possible.

When he had looked at a credential or two, the lilac-skinned stranger actually smiled, quite pleasantly, and lowered his gas-gun. Which made me realize that the stink I had smelled had been the gas, putting both Rimeq and me to sleep before he could kill me.

'So you thought I was the Renegade, and he the victim,' the stranger said. 'Of course you could not have known. But I am Moquar, known as The Wanderer, from the planet Kalgor. I have pursued Rimeq these many years, since the terrible day when he turned against his own people, my people.'

'And the others, at the ship?' I asked.

'Also of Kalgor. And, thanks to you, we now at last have the monster, and the evil weapon he has made. We will return him to Kalgor, to face execution.'

That was good news, but I was puzzled. 'Thanks to me?' I repeated. 'I nearly let him get away. . . .'

'True,' Moquar said. 'But earlier, when he-knew we were on this world, Rimeq went into hiding. And we might never have found him if he had not exposed himself by trying to kill you at the sky-bar. Just as I might not have recaptured him, here, had he not stayed to kill you, so allowing me to use the gas-gun. You see, you have done us great service.'

'Oh, fine,' I said faintly. 'Glad to help.'

But all I could think of at that moment was that I could never go fishing again. Because I'd always know just how the bait felt. . . .

The End

Grip of the Mind-power

Once we had decided on the warehouse, it took Mala and me only a short while to find it. But it looked like taking me rather longer to find a way into it, through the solid seal of the heavy metal doors. Mala grew impatient, and I grew annoyed.

In the end I drew a long filament from my belt, which looked like a length of string, and began jamming it into the narrow crack between the doors.

'What do you think you're doing?' Mala asked in a sharp whisper.

'Getting into the warehouse,' I said coldly. 'The quick way.'

She saw the filament and recognized it. 'Don't be stupid,' she hissed. 'What if Rimeq is in there?'

'I thought,' I said through clenched teeth, 'that finding Rimeq was the whole idea.'

She snorted delicately. 'Just come away, and wait. I've put in a call to the FedPol. There'll be a full raiding party here in a little while.'

I stared. 'The FedPol aren't allowed on Xyry, remember?'

'For Rimeq,' she said acidly, 'they'll stretch the rules. They can be in and out before anyone on Xyry knows.'

It was my turn for a sarcastic snort. 'If Rimeq is in this warehouse,' I said, 'they might never get out.'

'Don't be stupid,' she said again. And that was once too often. Angrily, I stepped away from the door, dragging her back with me, and touched a stud on my belt.

The crack between the doors became a line of livid fire, as the filament of shaped explosive ignited. Dark metal bubbled and melted, and in seconds the doors were hanging open like limp wings.

'You coming?' I snapped. And without waiting for Mala's answer, I strode through the opening.

Or at least I began to stride through it. But it felt as if I had walked into an invisible spider-web that had wrapped itself stickily around me. I found that I was still moving through the doors, but not under my own power. And beside me Mala too was sailing gracefully forward, carried by the same invisible force that was gripping me.

And within, waiting for us, stood Rimeq the Renegade .

His monstrous mind-power, that held Mala and me like a mesh of steel, slammed us back against the wall, our feet a metre from the floor. And he grinned at us, yellow-fanged, his eyes a lurid red in the gloomy interior of the warehouse.

'The snooper from Earth, who should have died in the sky-bar,' he gloated. 'With a female. How convenient that you should come to me to be killed.'

I didn't reply, because I was staring at the clutter of machinery on a bench behind the monster. At its centre was a large, plain cube of grey metal, which might have been anything. But something about it made the coldness within me turn to solid ice. I knew I was looking at the nullity bomb.

Mala, for her part, was not silenced. 'It doesn't matter what you do to us, you maniac. There's a FedPol team on its way right now!'

If I could have moved, I would have given her a very dirty look. First, it *did* matter -to me, anyway-what the monster did to us. Second, she had said too much, since the only slim chance the FedPol had lay in a surprise attack.

Rimeq's fanged grin widened. 'Thank you for warning

me,' he said silkily. 'They will find nothing here but your corpses.'

I braced myself, believing that he would kill us at once. But instead he turned to the large grey cube on the bench behind him. It rose into the air and floated out of the warehouse, carried along by the power of Rimeq's mind. And I realized that he was getting the nullity bomb to safety before he dealt with us.

In the same instant I also realized - or guessed - something else, which filled me with a wild hope.

At the moment that Rimeq had lifted the bomb with his mind-power, his hold on Mala and me had slipped. Just a little, and for only a microsecond, but I had felt myself drop, a centimetre or so, before Rimeq's mind recovered its firm grip.

And during that instant the killer's mad red eyes had flickered, like candles in a wind.

So there are limits to the mind-power, I thought. Maybe it's fading with age, for Rimeq had been around a long time. And if something could push the power past its limits, or break his concentration. . . .

'Wouldn't it be funny,' I said chattily to Mala, 'if he accidentally dropped the bomb and wiped out this whole planet, including himself?'

Mala's glare showed that she didn't think it would be at all funny. And Rimeq glared too, but his eyes were still flickering. 'The bomb cannot explode until it reaches your home world, fool.'

I made myself go on sounding jaunty. 'It won't even get near,' I said. 'This entire planet is ringed with FedPol monitor ships. No space vehicle of any sort can leave the surface of Xyry without being checked.'

It wasn't true, but it made the red eyes flicker more rapidly. Again I felt myself jerk and drop a little, as he lost concentration. But he regained it at once.

'They will not stop me,' he growled. 'The bomb is smaller than any spacecraft - it will escape the monitors.

I am lifting it to a nearby asteroid where I have a robot ship that will carry it to Earth. Nothing can prevent it.'

'Really powerful, that mind of yours,' I said easily. 'But it won't do the trick. The FedPol spotted your robot ship two days ago and took control of it. You're finished, killer.'

I was taking quite a chance. Rimeq could simply have finished *me*, and Mala, right then. But I was hoping that he'd be more concerned about the nullity bomb, and his robot ship. And I believed that his natural cruelty would make him wait, so that he could turn his full attention to killing us, slowly, later.

And I was right. As Mala stared at me, clearly thinking I'd gone out of my mind, Rimeq gave a strained growl. He might have suspected that I was bluffing, but he couldn't take the chance. The flickering of his eyes worsened, and the tendons and muscles of his great neck tightened and bulged with tension. And I knew that he was reaching into space with his mind-power, to grasp his robot ship and tear it, as he thought, out of the control of the FedPol.

The strain must have been terrible. Not only reaching that distance, and moving a mass that large, but at the same time keeping his mental grip on the nullity bomb and on us. Something, I hoped, would have to give.

But I was wrong. Rimeq's power might have been fading, but it was still enormous. Mala and I were still held off the ground, unable to move.

I racked my brain to think of some other strain I could put on to his power. But even if I had thought of something to say, Rimeq might not have heard me. He was concentrating furiously, and his grunting, laboured growls seemed to fill the warehouse. . . .

And then I realized that some of those sounds were coming from outside. Not growling, but the throbbing rumble of sky-cruisers. The FedPol squad had arrived, just when it was needed.

Rimeq heard them, too, and his growling became a defiant roar. His entire body tensed, trembling slightly, and his eyes seemed almost to spin in their sockets. And, outside, I heard the FedPol cruisers stutter, whine and then go silent.

Rimeq had found the strength to reach them with his mind-power. But it was nearly too much for him - and this time something *did* give. I felt myself drifting to the ground, and saw Mala doing the same. And I could move, as if I was neck-deep in thick oil, but enough.

I might then have drawn my guns and shot him down. But I never was cold-blooded enough for that kind of execution, not even of a monster like Rimeq.

Instead, I pulled all my rings off my fingers. And I flung them high in the air, towards the straining, agonized monster.

'They're *grenades*, Rimeq!' I yelled. 'Catch them, or you're dead!'

Once again he couldn't take the chance that I was bluffing. His face twisted in a terrible grimace, his body twitched and quivered, his growls became a low, tormented moan. And the rings halted, suspended in mid-air.

But they weren't still - they trembled, and bobbed up and down. And then they proved to be, as the old Earth saying has it, the last straw. They were small and light, but on top of the bomb, the robot ship, the cruisers, and the loosening grip on Mala and myself, they were too much.

Rimeq opened his fanged mouth and screamed a high, ragged scream that was the worst sound I had ever heard. And then he toppled backwards like a felled tree.

Released, all my rings dropped to the floor. But harmlessly, since I hadn't primed any of them to explode.

And the FedPol cruisers, their engines restored, roared in for a landing.

Later I learned that Rimeq had succeeded in getting the robot ship into space, and placing the nullity bomb in it. The FedPol's search found the ship, drifting harmlessly, and they were able to disarm the bomb. But they didn't need to disarm Rimeq.

That last terrible effort had burned out his mind. His body remained in excellent health, but it was an empty, mindless shell, able to do nothing but huddle, blank-eyed, in a prison hospital bed.

Mala said at the time that she almost felt sorry for him. And I laughed. I haven't seen her since. . . .

The End

Flight to Destruction

With the good sense of a careful man, I decided to take the easy route first. I turned away from the chill black gape of the tunnel mouth and went to have a look at Rimeq's ship.

After a few more sharp rocks cracked my shins in the darkness, I got close enough to study it. It was a bulky craft, but looked powerful. I was sure it was Rimeq's personal ship, which made me badly want to get in. But there were problems.

Five problems, in fact - five exter guards, ranging from a squat, metal-skinned Brygonian to a spidery, ten-limbed thing from Dree. They were armed to the teeth, those that had teeth, and were alert and watchful.

I was too far away to throw one of my mini-weapons into their midst. And I couldn't get closer without being spotted. For a heart-sinking moment I thought I might have to go back to the tunnel. But then the idea came to me. If I couldn't get a weapon to them, why not bring them to a weapon?

The jewelled pendant around my neck is a powerful short-range communicator and receiver. I fiddled with it a moment, and then tuned it to the Xyrean media and picked up a broadcast of soothing music, which was just the thing my nerves needed. Then I set the pendant down on a rock, and slid silently back into the darkness.

Music carries a long way in a rocky wilderness, and it is not a threatening sound. 90 the five guards were more curious than nervous when they came out looking for the source of the sound. They moved skilfully, in a sweeping

search, but gathered round quickly when the spidery exter spotted the pendant. And puzzlement, plus some greed at the sight of the jewels, made them examine it closely.

Until it exploded in their faces.

I had replaced one of the pendant's jewels with a gas grenade from one of my rings. It burst with a gentle puff, which was followed by five meaty thuds, as the released gas sent the five exter into dreamland. They would stay there all night, but I was still hurrying as I sprang through the airlock of Rimeq's ship.

Inside, it was comfortably fitted out for someone quite large. So it was his personal craft. But that was less important than the control panel, which showed that the guidance system had already been programmed. And the course was set for Earth. It was this ship that would take Rimeq the Renegade and his nullity bomb on that journey towards mass murder.

The bomb was probably in the tunnel with Rimeq right then. And I knew I would have to go in after them. But before I left the ship, I wanted to make some changes.

My idea was what is called a fail-safe. Even if I failed to get Rimeq before he got me, I wanted to leave something in the ship that would defeat his plan to kill a world.

I pulled away the covering of the control panel and went to work.

I'm no genius at electronics or galactronics, but I knew enough, and I had the tools I needed in my belt. Even so, it was slow, careful, concentrated work. Too much so, because I ran out of time.

I finished what I was doing, replaced the covering, and was hurrying out through the ship's airlock when I felt as if I had run into a solid, invisible wall, which then wrapped around me and held me as if I was embedded in ice.

Only then did I notice that the first light of dawn was showing on the horizon. But I wasn't looking at it. I was staring at the blazing crimson eyes of Rimeq the Renegade, standing outside the ship, his awesome mind-power holding me trapped like a fly in amber.

'Curb, the Earthling fool,' he hissed. 'I should have known you would be too stupid to stay away from me, though I have nearly killed you twice. This time, I will make sure.'

He stalked forward and I saw something floating in the air behind him. A heavy cylinder of smooth dull metal, being carried along by part of that mind-power. And I knew that inside the cylinder was a mechanism that could wipe out all life on Earth.

As Rimeq entered the ship, both the bomb and I sailed along after him. He placed the bomb in a sturdy cradle of netting to protect it during lift-off. Then he placed me in a narrow storage compartment, filled with spare parts, repair equipment and other materials.

'You may live a while yet, Earthman,' he snarled, through an evil, fanged grin. 'We will go together to see the final destruction of your world. And then when you are the last Earthling alive, I will hurl you out of my ship - and let you make your own way home!'

He laughed, an insane and savage giggle, and turned away. The door of the compartment slammed shut and locked and then the mind-power released me. I could move, even though there was nowhere to go.

And yet, as the ship lifted off, I was laughing too. If my fail-safe worked, Rimeq and his bomb would never get to Earth. Nor would I, of course, but having just been that close to so much mad and murderous evil, it didn't seem too great a price to pay.

But shortly afterwards the compartment door was wrenched open, and I was dragged out by another burst of that mind-power to face Rimeq's yellow-fanged, gloating grin.

'You tampered with my ship,' he said viciously. 'You reprogrammed the guidance system, so the ship would dive into the sun. **And you are stupid enough to think I would not notice? Observe!'**

One huge clawed hand moved swiftly over the control panel, and I watched as the guidance settings flickered, blurred and then settled. Once again the ship was on course for **Earth**.

I looked as wretched and miserable as a man will look when his plans collapse round him - fatally. And **Rimeq's mad laughter followed me, as his mind-power flung me back into the prison of the storage compartment.**

There I sat, trapped. But I remained calm, waiting. And counting.

I was calm because I had half-expected that Rimeq would check his controls, and spot the changed settings, before we got too close to the sun. **But I may have mentioned that I'm the careful sort. And Rimeq was not. He was gloating so much over having found my fail-safe trick that he never stopped to think there might be more than one.**

So I waited, and counted.

And when the count got to a certain number - the front of the ship erupted in a titanic explosion of searing flame.

The junk in the compartment flew through the air, and I felt something crash into the back of my head, and then I no longer felt anything.

And to be honest, it was a huge surprise to me that I woke up, and found myself still alive, and free of the mind-power.

My second fail-safe had been intended to finish Rimeq -and I'd been quite willing to go with him if I had to. But I hadn't. And I sat there for a moment doing a little gloating of my own.

The nice thing about computers, in ship guidance

systems or anywhere, is that they do what they're told - whoever tells them, or whatever it is. And when I had re-set Rimeq's guidance system to the new course that would have taken us into the sun, I had given the guidance computer another instruction.

I had told it that if anyone reprogrammed it back to the original course - which led to Earth - it should self-destruct. And I had wired all my most powerful weapons into it, to help it to do so.

Obediently, when Rimeq had restored the course for Earth, the computer had triggered the explosion.

Since I was still alive, it was only the front half of the ship that had been wrecked. But I knew my weapons well enough to know that it would not just be damaged. It would be **incinerated**. And Rimeq with it. And the nullity bomb.

I didn't know how long my half of the ship would last, but I was humming quietly as I began sorting through the clutter of the storage room. With those spare parts and other equipment, I was confident that I could patch together some kind of survival pod, and maybe even an SOS beacon.

It's amazing how finishing off the most deadly killer in the galaxy can boost a man's confidence.

The End