
ROUND ABOUT RIGEL

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Raiders Meet

Grim

Starlight Justice in the

Interstellar

Void

Author of "Relativity to the Rescue," "Human Machines," etc.

"BLAZING Novas!" exclaimed Lieutenant Hermer, looking down cautiously into the funnel-shaped declivity. "They're hatching. It must be an incubator here on Vaporia."

High overhead shone the pinkish-hued Rigel, tiny as a child's marble, yet so intensely luminous as to give scarcely less light than the solar sun on Earth, even through the diffusing atmosphere of Vaporia, a cold husk of a former star, which just now was acting as Lieutenant Hermer's prison.

He had been marooned here a few hours before by two of his erstwhile prisoners, the Mason brothers, whose elusive trail of savagery and crime had led across space from planet to planet. Now he was startled at what was taking place in the funnel-shaped cleft.

Lemon-yellow bodies writhed from torn yard-long cocoons; tiny yellow arms, legs and antennae developed as the sun dried agglutinous coverings. Since hatching the figures had expanded incredibly.

"What a childhood!" murmured Lieutenant Hermer, noting the shafts of sea-weed consistency that composed the outer walls of the incubator, while it was obviously covered by a transparent conical roof that sheltered the fledgling bodies. "What kind of creatures are there on Vaporia! Ouch!"

He had leaned over a huge empty shell, and his hand was cut on a horny projection. The slope below was covered with empty shells, some reminding him of gigantic icicles, of crooked tubes of a pipe organ, but all of them recalling to mind that an aqueous world had come and gone on cooling Vaporia. Back on Earth, people would have scoffed at the lavender of Vaporia's horizon, the pink flower blossom zenith.

A sulphurous wind souged mysteriously through crumbling shells, carrying crackles and rustlings that hinted of unseen things moving, and a difference in air pressure benumbed the flesh. An unusual scene; a terrible one when the outer flesh was crying for nourishment.

Two possibilities. One to die here and end the career of an officer of the Space Guard. Another to learn to eke sustenance from this bizarre environment. And a third-

Eon Hermer would give a good slice of his life to get his hands around the necks of the Mason brothers. A short while before, he had been their captor, with the ovoid space patrol vessel as their prison, but the two criminals had loosed a stupefying gas that had overcome the Space Guard officer.

Yet before they marooned him, he had secretly managed to destroy the element tanks wherein lay the precious source for water. Before they left Vaporia for a flight across space, they would have to make another landing to restore the missing elements.

LIEUTENANT HERMER had a slim chance of stumbling on them as they did so. He had his bare fists, a compact, space-hardened body, and a small dissembler revolver that had been concealed in his clothing. Three precious charges reposed in the diminutive chambers of the gun, each of which would sweep all matter aside in a foot-wide swath before the projector.

The gun was blue metal glyzite, blue like the glittering insignia over his left breast. The rocket and shooting star of the Space Guard. He unfastened the emblem, pocketed it. Its polished gleam might catch an inimical eye here in this world of unknown terrors. Only a fool courts danger.

An ear-splitting scream of greed and triumph halted, froze him to the spot. There, scrambling down the opposite side of the funnel-shaped cleft, raced a green monster that defied his sense of comparison. A mastodonic myriapod, each cylindrical leg a foot in diameter. A head that terminated in a monstrous bifurcated beak swung on a flexible neck. Huge boulders and shells sprayed from groveling splay-toed feet.

Eon Hermer knew a moment of unparalleled fear, even though he became aware that the globular eyes, protruding high in the beak, were focused on the incubator of little yellow men. Avalanching down, the beak crushed the transparent conical roof, and began to snap up the xanthic men, rearing its head viciously to gobble them down. Their frantic cries sounded pitiable and infantile.

It was a soldier of space that responded almost instinctively. The terrestrial knelt and discharged the dissembler weapon.

For one instant, striated lines of violet barreled out. A foot-wide swath of nothingness emptied out of the deradiated atoms of air and green flesh. Outside atmosphere, rushing into the dead vacuum, clapped together and resounded like thunder. Sand rustled up with the air-suck, revealing his strategy in kneeling.

Three giant legs of the myriapod had been destroyed. The beaked head dropped a nymphlike troll in mid-air. It wobbled hesitantly, sighted the officer abruptly and charged across the badly crushed incubator.

He fired again, but felt his finger tremble on the focus, and it was a clean miss. He couldn't have missed that last shot. The myriapod occupied most of the horizon. The striated convolutions appeared, followed by the whipcrack of thunder, and quieted to reveal a collapsed bundle of greenish flesh, sliding down the declination.

Eon Hermer flung the dissembler weapon aside disgustedly. Its three blasts were gone, leaving but a useless chunk of metal as protection against a strange world of such ferocious denizens. Out of the strange horizon came startled cries and eerie squeaks, revealing that other beings had been aroused. Turning swiftly, he ran along a rude gravelly runway, his curiosity sated utterly concerning the malformed inhabitants of this dead star.

HE stumbled over what looked like a low shrub. Something clung, his ankle twisted. He went down, glimpsing a crustaceous valve opening from the rocky surface, a sluglike being that stirred ponderously and spat forth a few drops of oily liquid that struck his bare hand and burned hotly up the nerves. He tried to move his arm, and his opposite leg moved. His body jiggled erratically as though afflicted with St. Vitus dance. The few drops of poisonous liquid had short-circuited his nerves in such a fashion that his thought commands became hopelessly sidetracked along the nerve chains.

Helpless horror overcame him as a row of gaping mouths opened like raw wounds for his traitorous flesh. His last memory was of a ribbon of orange light bathing his attacker fluorescently. Then ecstatic envisionment. Yellow wings, beating against a pinkish background. Memories of long months, following the elusive Masons across interplanetary space. A more brilliant dream persisted.

That of a woman seated on the ruins of a wrecked space ship, half buried in sand. Broken bits of metal stuck up into the sky. Twisted girders like metallic entrails. More terrible, though, was the respectful esteem of the strange yellow men who formed a large circle about the space ship, with jagged vitreous pikes on guard. Yet she was quite terrestrial when she smiled. Dark eyes. Hair with the lustrous yellow of sodium flames.

“You're coming around, Captain,” she said. “I'm glad you came for me at last.” Her tones shattered unreality.

“Came for you!” exclaimed Eon Hermer dazed. “Who are you?”

Her lips became a small impatient “o”. “I'm Jewel Collahan,” she said. “And you're of the Space Guard. I knew I'd be missed sooner or later.”

Then it wasn't a dream! The girl stiffened a bit haughtily.

“You spoke your thoughts aloud. May I take that as a compliment?”

On his feet, Eon Hermer rubbed his head wonderingly.

“You can, at that,” he said after a second look. “But don't get me wrong. I've never heard of you, and I'd never have been on Vaporia if I hadn't been shoved off, very much against my will.”

“Shoved off!” She seemed about to cry. “You were marooned! And I've been waiting for two years to get off this biological madhouse.”

Hermer chuckled. “That is a bit odd,” he asserted, “waiting two years for rescue and then receiving another derelict for a companion.”

“There's nothing funny about it!” snapped Jewel Collahan decisively. “And if you'd use your eyes you'd see you were still on Vaporia, Captain.” Lieutenant Hermer looked up. Rigel, pink as ever, glared unmovingly from its diminutive marble size overhead.

“Oh, well,” he ventured. “Perhaps I should have picked some other planet of Rigel to get marooned on!”

SHE was quick to catch him up. “There are none,” she proclaimed scornfully. “Vapororia is a dead star, out of its gravity range. Have you forgotten that Rigel gives off light so intensely that its light pressure is two hundred and fifty-six times that of the sun, which counteracts its gravity pull.”

“Pardon my astronomy,” agreed Lieutenant Hermer. “I don't get around this way often.” He told her of his exact predicament.

“Vapororia is a virtual prison!” exclaimed Jewel Collahan. “These yellow insect people are very amiable and tractable, although they can fight viciously with what science they have when aroused. They're grateful to you. A detachment of them had set out to examine the incubator, placed in a high region to get the full rays of Rigel, and witnessed your brave attempt to save their incubator; they arrived in time to rescue you from the spitting cowl, and brought you here. Your nerve-shortening paralysis has worn off by this time. They will do anything in their power to aid you in finding the Mason brothers, if they have indeed landed for restocking.”

“That's an idea!” ejaculated Eon. “Could they locate the space ship?”

“I'm sure they could! They might bring the fugitives sooner than you think. They have an extraordinary of telepathic communication,” answered Jewel. Lieutenant Hermer ran his hand over his aching muscles; his expression gave the girl momentary misgivings, not knowing he was thinking of the Mason brothers.

“In that case, I'll get you back to Earth, and be glad to,” he promised. Jewel Collahan shouted a command in an odd tone, at which the attentive bodyguard of Vaporians answered in short, crisp syllables. Presently they began to depart in flying system groups, fading into the lavender distance. Perhaps the loss of his triple-charge weapon had not been at too dear a price, after all.

“I came to Vapororia on an ill-fated expedition,” said Jewel ruefully. “There is what remains of the *Void Plover IV*! Rocket tubes blown away at the take-off.”

It had been an unwieldy rocket vessel, quite unlike the trim gravito-propulsion patrol craft of the Space Guard. “Overloaded?”

“I suppose so,” she admitted. “I came to trade gaudy trinkets for curious pebbles they use as a medium of exchange here, that are almost priceless on Earth. It was easy. Before I knew it I held the controlling share of their money exchange system, had tied up the economic balance and almost started a depression.”

“They're more human than I thought,” admitted Hermer.

“After the rocket-tubes smashed,” continued Jewel Collahan, “I couldn't see the Vaporians suffer, and returned the coruscants.”

“Coruscants!” ejaculated Eon. “That's queer. They're worthless. They're mining them out of the moon.”

She led him toward the adjacent side of the ruined *Void Plover IV*. From a pile of rocks a leather-winged bird soared, plunging down into the tortuous chasm that opened before them. The Vaporian City was composed of crude mud structures, stuck on the precipitous walls of the chasm like wasps' nests. From various apertures he perceived chitinous lemon-yellow features, staring in a manner

not unlike inquisitive humans.

AS they moved along the gorge's floor, small flying creatures were aroused. Insectlike things. Leathery bull birds. Others had no earthly simile, but floated around on fragile wing-spumes. Tiny seed-pod parasols soared by, hurling themselves like twirled pie pans but never hitting anything, since they seemed to possess an animalistic instinct. Jewel called them Spaerella. Flying plants, akin to microscopic unicellular plants on Earth, the Protophyta, with dilating flagella to propel them through water. Vaporian science was unique.

"It's mostly natural science," she explained. "The yellow Vaporians utilize few implements. The orange emanation you saw destroy the spitting crowl was a natural electric emanation that comes from them when aroused."

Without warning the light of Rigel was suddenly extinguished. Stygian night descended.

"I forgot!" she exclaimed, "It's the night period. You see there is a swarm of meteorites circling Vaporia, and ever so often it eclipses Rigel. These periods don't last long."

Lieutenant Hermer was learning something every minute. He was suddenly aware of the soft warmth of her nearness. She must have stumbled in the dark, for their lips came together quite by accident. He was so amazed that he held her thus for a thrilling moment. Then blinked.

"That was a fast ten minutes," he remarked in confusion, for a beam of light was cutting a white cylinder down out of Tartarian gloom.

"I-I don't understand," stammered Jewel Collahan. "That's not Rigel."

"I do!" whooped Hermer. "It's the search beam of the Space Guard patrol vessel. I'd know her anywhere." The beam swept over, wavered, became motionless over a high shelf where lay the ruins of the Void Plover. "They're descending. Can you take me up there on the run? It may mean-" For answer her hand fitted snugly in his own and they headed out pell-mell through the blackness.

The cylinder of light was a mere slanted hyphen, glaring across at the ruins and reflecting dimly back to the sleek ovoid lines of the moored Space Guard vessel. Two grotesque figures, clad in transparent bell-like helmets with shoulder tanks, came cautiously out of a low airlock, each with dissembler at hip. The Mason brothers distrusted the air of Vaporia. They took no chances. Like divers on an ocean floor, they ventured through the wreckage. Hermer writhed inwardly with disgust. Avarice had brought the Mason brothers down, a hope that treasures might be gutted from the derelict, and need of water.

All at once something was happening. Brackish shadows were moving into the light, a circle of yellow figures. A closing cordon.

"Make for the patrol ship," gasped Lieutenant Hermer. "If I get to those controls they'll think a comet backfired." He carried with him water element tanks.

Halfway across the intervening distance the pinkish light of Rigel reappeared with a vivid

glare; the meteorite swarm had passed. Swerving around a huge boulder, they leaped into the open airlock, as an alarmed shout sounded behind.

EXCLAIMING exultantly, Lieutenant Hermer sprang to the guiding mechanisms. Jewel was gasping like

a fish out of water, but she moaned at what she saw beyond the glassite. The Mason brothers were retreating slowly toward the patrol ship, unharmed. After all, the yellow Vaporians had been told merely to find the brothers, not to destroy them.

The ovoid patrol ship rose as softly as a feather, gained momentum. Vaporica fell away rapidly. A hideous, bulbous face, as scarred and pocked as a full moon, passed a circular spaceport. Alf Mason! Jewel Collahan screamed. After all they had passed through, the Mason brothers had not been eluded. They had clung to the outer degravite shutters like flies. Soon the mass gravity of the space ship would carry them along as satellites.

An insistent tapping came from the glassite prow. Alf Mason hung there, eyes shot through with fear and desperation. In his hand he held destruction-the dissembler-not only for those within, but for himself as well. If he shattered the glassite, the inner air would escape, leaving them in a vacuum. So he hesitated.

Over his helmet the pinkish rays of Rigel had ballooned to white hot intensity. Vaporica's atmosphere was left behind. Lieutenant Hermer looked sternly ahead, set the controls at full acceleration. Alf Mason grinned, knowing his body would be accelerated along with the space ship.

Darting across vacuum now. Alf's lips were moving. At a sideport, Mope cringed, his fat sweating face a terror mask. Demanding. Pleading. Screaming that they be let in. And Rigel's blinding flames expanded, became more intense. Suddenly it seemed as if a gigantic hand clutched at the men on the outer hull. They were scraped away and back into space. Alf's incredulous face gyrated away as his space-togged body was ripped back.

Out around Rigel. Out where the intense light pressure exceeded the gravity of a giant sun. Even old Sol had light pressure, as was evinced by tails forming on near comets, but this was two hundred and fifty-six times as great. Yet the gravitational thrust of astral bodies to the rear had shot the patrol vessel into that "no man's land" of space, and the Mason brothers had been plucked away by an invisible repelling force.

He turned to explain what had happened to Jewel, but found her staring back at a black dead world outlined vaguely against Rigel's rays. "I'm glad to get away," she said, "but somehow it makes me feel a little blue to leave the Vaporians."

Off to one side of the stern, two bright flashes appeared against space, so close together as to look like eclipsing binaries, or double suns. They twinkled momentarily, and were gone, like instantaneous novae. Only Hermer knew what they signified.

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