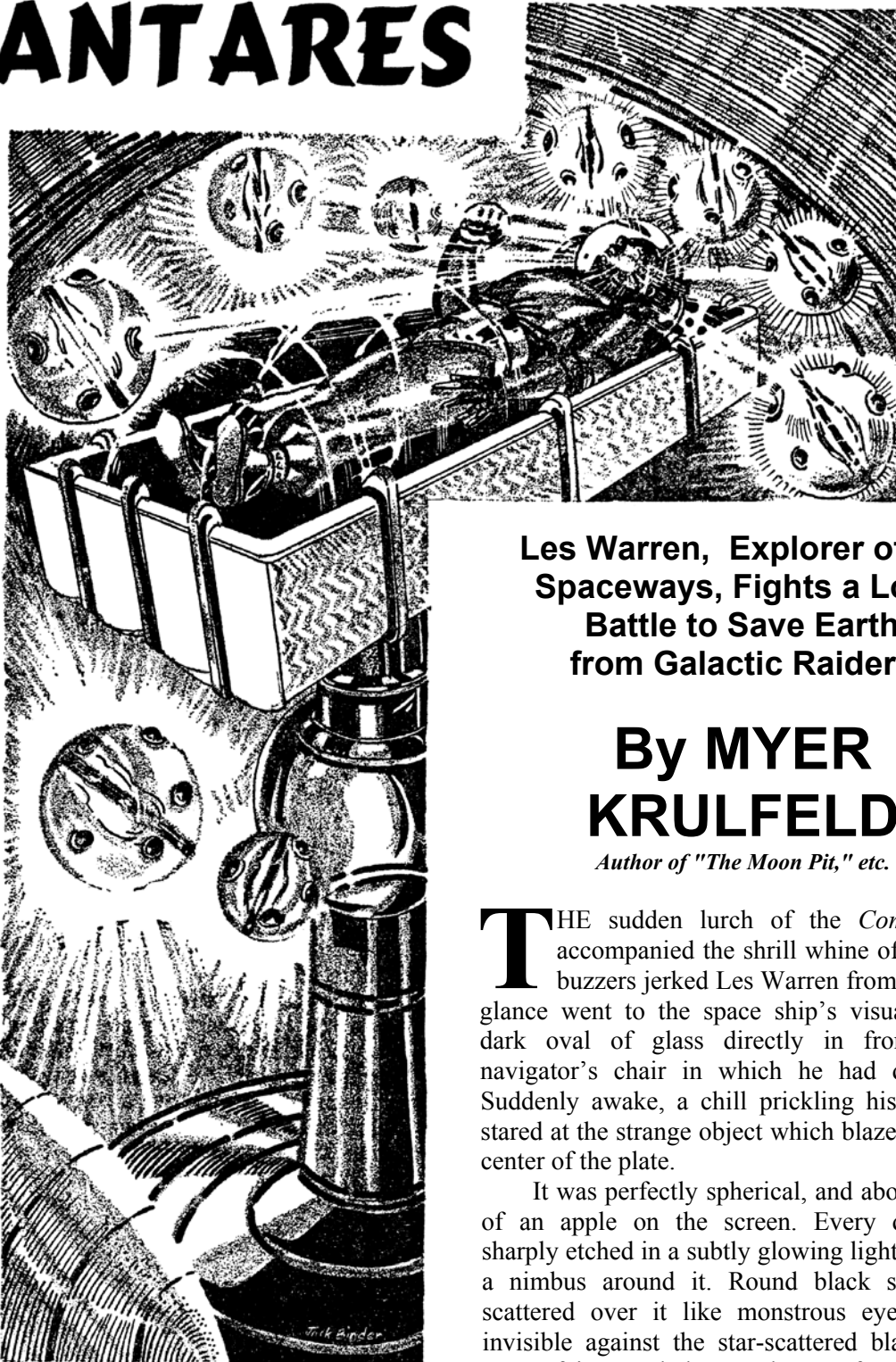


THE THING FROM ANTARES



Warren came to on a raised dais, his body held down by a mesh of glittering lines

**Les Warren, Explorer of the
Spaceways, Fights a Lone
Battle to Save Earth
from Galactic Raiders**

**By MYER
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THE sudden lurch of the *Comet* which accompanied the shrill whine of the alarm buzzers jerked Les Warren from sleep. His glance went to the space ship's visual plate, a dark oval of glass directly in front of the navigator's chair in which he had dozed off. Suddenly awake, a chill prickling his spine, he stared at the strange object which blazed from the center of the plate.

It was perfectly spherical, and about the size of an apple on the screen. Every detail was sharply etched in a subtly glowing light that made a nimbus around it. Round black spots were scattered over it like monstrous eyes. Almost invisible against the star-scattered blackness of space, faint purple beams shot out from the black spots, merging with the empty blackness as they

went away from the glowing sphere.

It was like no known human vessel. No ship built by men had ever had that shape or that strange method of propulsion, apparently independent of rocket blasts. It was one of two things—an outlaw ship built unknown to the space authorities and powered by new methods, or an alien vessel come from the cold far depths of space outside the solar system!

Even as he watched it seemed to grow larger on the visual plate, glowing more brightly, the purple beams more intense. His fingers flew to the controls, manipulated the levers and switches which controlled the blast jets. With a thunderous roar, energy crashed from the side rocket and the *Comet* veered sharply from her course.

Like a startled fish, flanks silvery in the distant light from the sun, the Earthly space ship turned and fled. Blast after blast burst from her rear rockets. She shook and quivered under the strain of it, while Warren sat tensely staring at the round, glowing image on the visual plate, erratically shifting with the ship's changing direction. It steadied as the *Comet* settled into her new course.

The rhythmic shudder of the ship became greater as the blasts became more and more rapid under Warren's guiding fingers. A low metallic whine quavered through the metal of the hull, though the ship rose rapidly to a sustained note under the high vibration. Hard blue eyes intent on the image of the pursuer, Warren paid no heed. Was the *Comet* fast enough to escape?

Minute melted imperceptibly into minute. Slowly the image on the visual plate changed, swelled larger. The alien vessel from space was fast overtaking him.

There was nothing more he could do. He could not even fight effectively if they were unfriendly. The *Comet* was an exploring vessel headed for the uninhabited planet Saturn, and he carried only a few hand blast-guns, more for emergency propulsion than for fighting.

NOW that it was decided, he was suddenly cool. He pulled out the log of the *Comet* and wrote a detailed account of what had happened, glancing at the rapidly swelling image on the visual plate from time to time as he described the strange vessel and his position in space.

"I am changing my course so that the aliens, if they are dangerous, will have no clue to the position of my home planet," he finished.

He put the ship's log away and then bent over the visual plate. The glowing alien vessel had swollen to vast proportions, filling one-fourth the area of the plate. In fifteen or twenty minutes it would reach the *Comet*.

There was still time for a few preparations. He went to the emergency lock, a small cell of metal directly off the outer air lock. A hurried inspection showed that the space suit which hung there was in good shape, loaded with emergency rations and a synthetic air supply sufficient for a week's stay in space. There was also a small compass, two blast guns for propulsion, and a few odds and ends of tools fastened to a belt around the space suit's middle.

By the time he got into the space suit the alien ship filled the visual plate completely. Even as he watched, several of the black holes in the glowing sphere flared yellow with golden light. A split second later he was hurled violently to the floor as the *Comet* came to a shuddering, quaking stop.

When he got to his feet the aliens had arrived.

One of the gray metallic walls of the navigating chamber glowed suddenly with yellow light, a round patch of it, a patch that grew! Suddenly it was no longer merely round, but a convex and solid thing, like the strangely misty outline of a great golden lens set in the flatness of the wall. The lens pushed forward, grew into a bulbous spherical thing of misty gold.

Another minute and it dropped, hovered near the floor, a sphere about a yard across, hazy and subtly blurred about the edges. In the center of it was a thick purple line which shimmered and sparkled with silent, rhythmic emissions of energy. It began to drift across the floor toward him. The walls of the chamber were leprous with other splotches of yellow, splotches that grew and pushed forward and became other spheres. They were around him, silent, all drifting closer in an intent and ominous circle.

His heart hammered thunderously. A cold prickling thrilled through his nerves. Heat came from the things, heat in little dry waves that touched his body like the aching caress of fever.

And there was a more subtle radiation, something he could not quite define at first.

Now they were less than a foot away. They were a solid circle around him, the blurred and hazy golden auras inter-penetrating one another until they seemed like a single solid mass. Only the purple bars in the centers remained the same, flickering, fading and growing sharper to a definite rhythm.

He stirred. The golden circle stirred with him. He was still in the center. One arm, clumsy and slow within the casing of the space suit, poked out at them. Effortlessly the whole circle swayed and evaded it.

His throat went dry. His tongue seemed swollen, stuck to the roof of his mouth. It was hard to breath. Strange, alien sensations thrilled through the cells of his brain, through the delicate network of his nerves. Something alien was within him, trying to take possession of his brain.

FOR a moment he remained like that, frozen. A sudden curse ripped through his lips. Red anger took possession of him. He exploded into action despite the hampering effect of the space suit he wore. He plowed into the circle, a human animal gone berserk with flailing arms and kicking legs. His hands and feet passed through the golden auras again and again with movements too swift for the massed aliens to escape. Hot prickling passed through the flesh within the aura, followed by a queer numbness that did not seem to impair movement.

Apparently his blows at the golden haze did not harm the spheres. Yet quite obviously his sudden attack disconcerted them. The circle broke and scattered swiftly into its component spheres. They darted upward over his head, hung there like a flock of great golden toy balloons safe out of his reach.

Eyes glaring, breath hissing through his open mouth and distended nostrils, fingers within the fabric of the space suit twitching, Warren slowly subsided. On his body was a cold sweat. His flesh ached dully where it had passed through the auras of the aliens.

A moment the spheres hung above his head, the purple centers flickering excitedly. Then, suddenly, utterly without warning, one of them flashed down. The aura of it enveloped part of one

arm and shoulder. As it touched him the color of it altered, became for an instant the deep red of blood.

A moan of agony bubbled from his lips. His eyes closed and a wave of weakness quivered through his body. It was pure pain, as if every nerve within the red haze had turned suddenly to liquid flame. The sphere darted upward again. His arm hung beside him as useless as a limp, inanimate rag.

Another sphere darted downward to cover his other arm. Another dropped to one foot. Another and still another.... Until he became a huddled heap on the floor, moaning and helpless. The red haze around him seemed to turn black. Everything faded from sight and feeling.

Slowly the blackness lifted from his senses. When full clarity came to his mind and eyes he knew that he was not in the *Comet*. The aliens had moved him to their own vessel.

He was on a raised dais, his body held down by an interlaced mesh of glittering and inflexible lines. He was held as fast as a petrified bug in amber. Around and above him were the hazy golden outlines of the spheres.

Their vessel was a vast hollow globe. Shining girders, whether of matter or of energy he could not tell, ran from the inside of the vast curving hull toward the center, where they braced up and held a complicated globular nest of machinery.

From the nest came a constant humming with a faint, regular rhythm to it. It seemed to him, in the few seconds of clear thought that were granted him, that purple pulsations ran through the girders in time with the humming. Probably it was the source of the purple rays which propelled the strange space ship through the cold reaches of interstellar emptiness.

BEFORE he could notice more he was plunged again into purgatory. Ten times intensified, it came again, this time a searching, ruthless dissection of his mental processes which almost drove him mad. And this time he could not fight.

He felt he was insane. The purple pulsations within the yellow globes came faster and faster, emitting surges of energy, pulsating in concert. And with each strong surge from them, it was as if a vast hand plucked resistlessly at his brain.

Without rhyme or reason thoughts and emotions which had been thrust beneath the level of consciousness came forth, horrible and foul in their nakedness.

Each changing, reasonless emotion and image that came up from the depths of his being he experienced for that moment in which it was uppermost to full intensity. One second he was shrieking with laughter over some obscene picture. The next his face was awed at the breathtaking beauty of space, made of flame and absolute blackness. Again he repeated senseless words whose meaning he had almost forgotten, tags from his long forgotten school days.

At first his will was passive, overwhelmed by the flood of madness, by the potent power of the pulsing purple spots which were the aliens. Then, in revulsion, it began to struggle with the saturnalia raging within him.

Sweat stood out on his face in big drops that rolled down and mingled. His eyes glared. Every muscle in him twitched futilely. His insane laughter would choke in the middle as his will gained the upper hand for a moment, then break out again.

But in the end he was silent, rigid, strained to the breaking point. Nevertheless he was immune to the pulsing energy which tore at the secret places of his mind. The pulsing of the purple spots became swifter, more intense. Filled with triumph, his will held.

At last the violent throbbing of the purple centers within the hazy globes stopped. For a moment Warren lay there, rigid, before he realized that his mind was free. He lay still, panting and relaxed, but still on the alert for another attack.

It did not come. He was conscious of something trying to reach his mind, striving to impress a thought. For an instant he froze into hostility. Then he realized that they were trying to communicate, not to attack. Warily he allowed himself to relax a little more, to try to understand.

Slowly, as the minutes passed, a halting flow of thoughts went between him and the strange monsters. Little by little, periods of clarity broken by exasperating blurs, he learned a few facts.

THEY were alive, but not made of matter. They were composed of electrical energies,

meshed together in a complex, frail harmony which was their life, and permitted of sensation, thought, and action. They, proper, were the purple centers of energy that throbbed rhythmically, like the beating of a heart.

The hazy golden globe of energy which surrounded each of them had all the functions which animal life gave over to hands, skin, and the organs of sensation. Through it they acted, felt, heard, saw, tasted, smelled. At will they could alter it so that it could be attracted or repulsed by various forms of energy, one of the forms being that of matter.

Through it they also analyzed the different types of energy, so that they could understand their nature, and how to deal with them. They caught his thoughts by analyzing the faint electrical emanations of his nervous system and brain cells. They made themselves understood by impressing similar electrical impulses upon his brain.

They fed, if the bizarre process could be called feeding, upon minute quantities of a substance which Warren recognized as radium. The slight loss of energy which accompanied their life process was compensated for by the raw energy poured from the disintegrating radium atoms.

For a long time he tried unsuccessfully to learn the region of space from which they came. At last he received vague descriptions of a star which he recognized as probably being Antares, and was told that it was from a planet of that star that they came.

When he asked why they had left he received no answer. Instead his brain was flooded by insistent questions. He persisted, repeated his question again and again.

They refused to answer, continually bombarded him with questions concerning himself, his kind, his planet. At his refusal to answer a threatening note crept into the electrical emanations. But it was not until they asked if there were large quantities of radium on his home planet that the truth flashed suddenly upon him.

He cursed himself for a fool for not guessing more quickly. What other reason could there be for the perilous journey of the globes through space except desperate necessity? All the available radium on their own stellar system had

been used by the Antareans. If they wished to live they had to find another planet containing the strange food upon which their life depended. Among his instruments were a few containing cheap radium salts, which the golden globes had doubtless found.

They sensed his thoughts, tried clumsily to coax him into giving them the location of the Earth. They told him they would find it sooner or later anyway. He realized they were lying. They were too urgent in getting the secret from him. Probably their supply of radium or propulsive power was running low. Time must be an essential factor in their search. The thought stiffened his resolve.

Suddenly and savagely the attack came again, without warning. Fiercely the pulsations from the purple centers of the golden globes darted energy at him. Again he went through all the stages of violent madness. His features twitched convulsively, contorted between laughter and tears. His mouth opened, poured out a mad babble of nonsense. His limbs twitched, the muscles knotting and loosening as they tried vainly to throw his body about under the restraining bright mesh which held him to the dais.

HIS will struggled titanically. His brain was an inferno of conflicting emotions, a stage where his own will and the fierce compulsion of the Antareans battled for dominance over himself. Finally he was once more in a rigid trance, his strained will triumphantly holding in check the careening mad emotions which the invisible pulsations of the Antareans strove to build in him.

But this time the onslaught of the things within the golden globes did not stop. Minutes passed. Hours passed. It seemed to Warren that days and months and years passed, eons, infinite weary stretches of time.

His will began to crack under the strain. Flesh and blood could not withstand the unrelenting emanations. Cold panic came on him as he realized he was beginning to give way. Desperately he strove against the torpor which beckoned so sweetly to his tortured mind.

He conquered for a time, but it came back, more and more insistently. He knew that soon his will would sink back, defeated, would give way to

the focused compulsions radiated into his brain by the golden globes.

Sweat cold on his body, heart pounding like a vast drum which threatened to burst, he sought for some way out. Torpor numbed his intelligence, threatened to swamp all feeling in delicious submission. He rallied, fought above the engulfing tide of mental and physical weariness for a last desperate endeavor.

It came to him then, what he must do. His mind stopped its struggling, its vain resistance to the will of the Antareans. It concentrated on a planet and the facts about it—but the planet was not Earth. It was Saturn!

Before his own exploring expedition to that sterile planet he had learned all that human science and the investigations of previous explorers could tell him about it. So he readily told the Antareans its position, its volume, its mass, the distance between its ring and the planet. He added only one thing. The core of the planet, he said, was a vast mass of the heavy metals, including radium. As that falsehood filtered from his brain into the intelligence of the Antareans, the attack upon his brain ceased. The sudden release was too much for his mind, tense to the breaking point. A whirlpool of blackness sucked him into unconsciousness and rest.

When he came to himself he felt weak and helpless. He had been sunk in torpor a long time, how long he could not tell. With his first moment of consciousness he sensed the fact that the globes had turned hostile.

They were about him, as before. But the purple centers no longer pulsated energy into his brain. They were ominously still, as if they had been waiting for him to wake. A little quiver of apprehension went through him. He was too weak now, too weary. What were they going to do?

Coldly words formed themselves in his brain: "You have lied to us. We reached the planet you described. There is no radium. It is only an emptiness of centers of energy of the type you call matter, useless gases. Therefore we have decided to leave you here, within the Ring of Saturn, upon a large mass among the circling dust and rubble which makes up the Ring. We will find your planet by voyaging toward your sun."

THAT was all. Two of the globes dipped low over the dais. There was a flickering of the golden garments of energy they wore, and the bright mesh which held him fast disappeared. He rose to his feet. Obediently he followed one of the globes to a port in the vast curving wall of the alien space ship. It slid open, revealing an expanse of rugged rock which faded away into blackness a short distance from the glowing vessel.

To the Antareans, creatures of pure energy, the emptiness of space had no terrors save for the drain upon them of radiated energy. But if Warren had not been wearing his space suit he would have died, exploding like a distended balloon from internal pressure, to say nothing of the lack of air.

Weakly a thought from the Antarean globes above him impressed itself upon his brain:

“We have hurled your space ship into Saturn. It is deep under the gaseous surface now, where you cannot conceivably find it. You cannot escape. You must wait for us.”

He leaped out onto the naked mass of rock. The port slithered back into place. Silently a purple beam thrust out from the vast globe which loomed above him. He could feel the rock under him tremble. Then the globe was gone and he was alone.

How long he remained like that, a hopeless dark huddle on the sterile bareness of rock, he never knew. At intervals he slept, ate, and drank. The darkness was absolute.

It was not until it became suddenly difficult for him to breathe that he came to a real awareness of his situation. A thrill of pure terror shook him when he realized that one of the two cylinders which contained his store of air was empty. The one that remained would last about three days longer. And then? Warren had once seen a man who died for lack of air in space. It had not been a pretty sight.

Feverishly he sought for a way out. For hours, while a trembling nervousness shook his body, he considered every loophole of escape. One by one he discarded them as impossible. Suddenly a thought came to him.

In the space suit, his specific gravity was almost the same as that of the *Comet*. The metal hull of the latter had inevitably been magnetized, partially at least, by the electrical rays used upon it by the Antareans. Warren knew that Saturn had

no magnetism, but that fine particles of solids were scattered in suspension all through the swirling gases of the planet, among them particles of iron. Inevitably then, the *Comet* would leave behind her a magnetized trail wherever she went. And among the things in the belt around the space suit's middle was a small compass!

That meant he could follow the trail. And then he realized that in addition to that the planet's rotation would tend to throw him in a line, together with the *Comet*, around the equator. If he could only once get to the planet—

His heart constricted at the thought. He knew the inner edge of the Ring of Saturn was about six thousand miles from Saturn's surface. He might even be able to leap so short a distance! The rock was only a small mass, and the great gravitational pull of the planet itself would help him get away. If he crashed into anything on the way, or was too far from the surface—well, he would smash to a smear or be burned to a crisp by friction, and that would end it.

HE set his teeth. Blindly he walked straight ahead, until he came to a point where his weight grew suddenly lighter. He had passed the shoulder of the mass of rock, and the pull of Saturn, instead of holding him more firmly to the rock, was now trying to pull him away from it.

He drew a great breath and leaped upward.

Blackness, absolute and blinding. He hung in space. Now that the rock had disappeared in the black murk made by the countless particles of fine matter which composed the Ring of Saturn, he had nothing by which to judge his progress. Time passed on leaden feet. He could feel the space suit grow slowly warmer, the result of friction against the stuff of the Ring.

Suddenly it was behind him. He was in blackness still, but now it was blackness spattered with pin points of flame that were stars, the intolerably flaming ball of the sun at one side, ahead of him a vast gray mass which seemed to swallow the space around it, growing vaster and vaster with each passing second. It was Saturn.

Nearer it came. Faster and faster he plunged. It became terrible in its vastness, blotting out the sky and the sun. Closer, still closer, until gray murk was about him. He had reached Saturn, was hurtling down into the gaseous, swirling mass.

Rapidly, as he felt himself beginning to slow up with the increasing pressure of the gas opposing him, it became warmer. Slowly, terribly, heat began to creep in on him. His flesh was almost burnt where it touched the hot metal of the space suit. The air he gulped into his nostrils might have come from a furnace. He fought for each breath, and when it entered his lungs it was agony!

But his mad plunge ended at last, and the swirling gases of Saturn rapidly conducted off the excess heat until he was comfortable again, though his skin felt raw and tender. For a little while he remained still, gulping in deep breaths of air,

Then he shook his head, turned the light of a tiny, battery-operated bulb on the compass, and set grimly to work.

Made thick by great pressure, the gas had almost the texture of liquid. He could paddle through it with the same ease as he could swim through water. But until he touched the magnetic trail, his swimming had to be at random.

With the ferocity of despair he struck to his task, plowing through the thick gas, a world of black mist in which the only light came from the tiny bulb. Hours passed, hours during which the dull ache of fatigue piled up in his muscles until they became numb, hours during which his eyes, fixed intently on the compass, ached and smarted like raw flesh stung by needles of pain.

Suddenly he stopped, the beat of his heart thunderous in his own ears, his breath coming thickly. Almost imperceptibly the tiny black needle of the compass had moved. He turned back, eyes intent. Again it moved. He had found the magnetic trail of the lost space ship!

He disdained weariness after that, disdained rest and sleep. He was an automaton, arms and legs working like machinery, pain and fatigue buried beneath a numbness which could not keep his muscles from moving. On and on, following the fluctuating needle of the compass, the fluctuations getting stronger and stronger. Hour after hour. Still he moved, a purposeful black mote plowing through blackness.

A SUDDEN crash. A stunning blow which vibrated through the metal of the space suit. He could not realize at first that he had reached

his goal at last, that he had found the *Comet*.

Slowly the thought penetrated. Slowly he began to creep around the ship until he reached the outer door of the air lock. He fumbled and fumbled before he could open it. It seemed hours before he was in the navigating chamber, before he was rid of the space suit. It was done at last.

With a great sigh he stretched out on the floor and went blissfully to sleep.

Whether it was hours or days later that he woke, he could not tell. He felt like a man reborn. Shed was the fear of the Antareans, shed the numb stupor in which weariness had held him, gone the dullness that had weighed down his brain until he could scarcely think one clear thought.

He put away the space suit, restocked it with air and food, then went back into the navigating chamber and sat down in the chair before the control panel and the visual plate, which now showed only a black murk, the stuff of Saturn.

He must get back to Earth. Even unguided the Antareans might find the planet. If men were forewarned they might not be destroyed. Once established, and with an ample supply of energy, the energy things would soon rule the world.

He bent over the control board, his fingers swift and sure. A blasting explosion and the *Comet* surged upward. Again and again, until finally the ship shot into clearness and the sky showed black, spangled with the bright flames of stars. He took his bearings, checked and rechecked every figure.

Then another flare of energy rocked the ship of space as she veered and teetered, jockeying for direction. Then, trailing long plumes of incandescence behind her, the *Comet* flashed away from Saturn for the second time and headed once more for her home planet.

On through black emptiness she blasted, while time and distance melted behind. She hurtled past gigantic Jupiter and on toward Mars. Warren's eyes ached from constant watchfulness on the subdued light of the visual plate.

He reached Mars, looped past the newly colonized planet, and slanted down on the course followed by the Earth-Mars liners. Only a scant week more and they would hiss through the atmosphere of Earth again.

And it was then that the tiny point of light showed suddenly on the visual plate. Warren

stared at it, face whitening. It was no star, no comet. It was the Antareans' globe again! *On their way to Earth!*

A fierce hot hate consumed him then, a hate such as he had not known even while they tortured him. His pulsing blood hammered in his veins. His eyes were like the eyes of a wounded, snarling animal. His teeth showed.

It was *his* Earth they were going to destroy and render sterile of life! Little inconsequential things popped up in his mind again—the fat chortling laughter of his sister's youngest boy, the hissing white curl of a wave racing through green water, the smiling warm lips of a girl he had once kissed.

If the Antareans reached the Earth these things might never be again, soft lips for kissing, white waves through which to dive into clean greenness, the laughter of children.... The planet would become a bizarre place where energy floated alive in an inhuman, destroying wave. It would feast on the world until the planet was barren of radium, and then leave it behind, sterile and naked of all life.

THE wave of anger passed, gave place to a cold insistent ferocity in which his mind was crystal clear. He pondered plan after plan of attack, discarding one after another. Patiently he probed the nature of the aliens, sought for some weapon to which they were not immune.

And at last he found it. It was absurdly simple. The glowing golden mantle of energy which surrounded the living energy centers of the Antareans was their buffer. With it they analyzed and filtered out alien forms of energy, absorbing only those that were not harmful, neutralizing others. Matter, all kinds of matter, were forms of energy to them. If he could shoot at them matter and energy of sufficient variety to all of which they could not adjust at the same time, it would blast past the halo and kill.

Methodically he got ready. He rigged up electrical apparatus which would add mixtures of conglomerate matter to the rocket blasts of the *Comet*. He did the same with his blast guns. Then, tight-lipped, hard-eyed, dressed once more in the space suit, blast guns ready, he returned to the controls. The *Comet* shook and shivered with the recurrent rocket blasts as he flashed through space

toward the vast, glowing globe of the aliens.

When he was sure that his aim for the Antarean space ship was good, he cut off acceleration. The globes might detect the flare of his rocket exhausts if he persisted in using them at too close a range. But his momentum hurled him on at terrific speed. The globe of the aliens grew larger and larger on the visual plate, looming directly ahead.

He was braced for the crash, but the sudden impact hurled him from the chair, smashed him agonizingly against one wall. He could feel bone crack, feel the searing stab of pain in a rib and one leg. The next instant he hurtled to the wall again. Blackness plucked at his senses. His teeth set, he fought stubbornly to retain consciousness, crawled agonizingly back toward the controls. He could tell by the sudden clinking as loose pieces of metal flew to the walls and clung there, that an alien energy ray had brought him to a halt. He had crashed through into the vessel of the energy things—and now they were holding him there, a prisoner!

The thick face-plate of the space suit had been smashed to splinters and glass dust, had raked his face into a bleeding smear. Agony pierced through his rib and leg with each movement. But he went on.

He reached the control board, pulled himself into the chair in sweating agony. Just as he reached it a yellow spot showed on the wall and began to grow. The Antareans were attacking in person!

In the visual plate he could see the *Comet* within the vast alien space ship, yellow globes forming a fuzz over her as the aliens burrowed in. At one side of the Antarean vessel was a gaping hole where the *Comet* had crashed through. The great girders which held the central mysterious mechanism in place were snapped and broken in places, and the nest of machinery sagged.

He set his teeth, pressed buttons and moved switches. Blasts of energy and miscellaneous scrap matter spewed from the rocket exhausts. They swept into the aliens. The golden halos flared through the spectrum in the effort to protect the vital energy centers within. Some turned black, and a moment later disappeared in a blinding white flash of energy.

HIS body was aflame with a thousand points of pain as the *Comet* rocked and reared and plunged. Dazedly, determinedly, he fingered the controls again.

More of the aliens died, but their death flares were blasted out of sight by the sudden release of energy which followed when one of the exhausts spewed energy and junk matter directly into the sagging central mechanism of the alien ship. The visual plate flared white, blinded him. When he looked again, it was black.

The aliens themselves were still to be reckoned with. Most of them had died. But five had almost penetrated the *Comet*, and two others were just starting through. The first were already sending out waves of energy, heat waves that shot through the metal of the space suit and concentrated viciously on his flesh. It was as if living flame rioted through him. His eyeballs ached in the bright beams.

Dimly he could still make them out. With hands that seemed heavy as platinum he pulled out one of his blast guns. It held three shots. A dazzling flare of energy leaped out at the wall where the last two globes were struggling through. The adjustments of the halos in going through the wall handicapped them, and this new burden of variegated energy was too much.

They flared, left behind two round black spots. Again and yet again came the flares. Two of the globes within the chamber were caught, flared into death. He hurled the heavy blast gun toward the three remaining, followed it up with three more searing shots from his remaining blast gun. Hazily he could see two more blasts of dying light. But one golden globe, dimmed, ravaged, was still floating on. Slowly, haltingly, it was coming for him, emitting intermittent beams of heat at him.

He flung things at it: a screw driver among the tools; a heavy space sextant; even rolled-up charts. The dimmed yellow halo around the faintly pulsing purple center caught them, deflected them

all. And it came on.

There was nothing left to throw. He tottered to his unhurt foot, hands spread forward. He hopped, once, twice. The globe was nearer, nearer, inches away. Its heat beam blinded him, flicked his raw optic nerves like knives. He closed his eyes and leaped forward.

He was in it, within the halo. Heat wrenched his muscles, sent agony thrilling through his nerves. The numb paralysis which had come upon him before when within the halos of the Antareans was not effective now—the Antarean was almost as weakened as himself. Blindly, mechanically, instinctively, his clawed hands threshed feebly within the hot agony of the halo. His muscles jerked like dead things through which electricity sent shocks of life.

Came a sudden shock worse than all the rest, agony unspeakable. Blackness engulfed him.

He came to, prone on the floor. Dully he realized that in his mechanical pawing he must have touched the pulsing center of the Antarean and killed him.

Slowly, an inch at a time, he crept across the floor. He reached the controls, pulled himself into the seat. Weakly his fingers fumbled with the buttons and levers and switches.

The *Comet* crashed through the dead bubble which had been the space ship from Antares. The course of the Earthly ship wobbled a bit, but straightened at last into a direct course for its home planet.

Days passed.

The sun lit the Earth's flank into a bright, curling sliver of silver on the visual plate. Slowly it grew larger, nearer, a serene world filled with light and warmth. Soon he would be there.

Warren looked back, but could see nothing. The alien globe which had glowed so brightly and flashed so swiftly through space was still now and shrouded in somber black. Within the vast and empty maw of space it was hidden from human eyes. No man would ever see it again.