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# **BLACK WORLD**

**By**

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### BOOK I PIRACY PREFERRED

#### CHAPTER I THE MYSTERY PLANET

Absolutely perfect!" breathed John Carver to himself. "What a girl!" Lolling luxuriously in the filtered sunshine of the observation deck of the luxury liner *Josephine*, he glanced covertly out of the corner of his eye at the slim, auburn-haired girl relaxing in the deck chair beside him. Her eyes were closed and soft lashes clung to her rounded cheeks. Noting this fact, he swung his head around and stared at her features in undisguised admiration, as he had done so many times during the eight days of the voyage already.

The face tilted toward him was clear-cut, determined. Not ravishing or doll-like in beauty, but distinctly good looking, and possessing an amazing amount of personality. There was something more than just appeal there; she had character, purpose. There was even a tinge of bold recklessness in the tilt of her nose, the obliqueness of her chin.

For a moment his eyes roved over her trim figure, clothed now in a very mannish suit, as far as cut and style were concerned. But there the likeness ended. She combined a figure full of charm with a healthy, athletic build. Instinctively Carver knew she could keep up with any man in anything that demanded physical endurance and strength, were it to climb the steep mountains of the moon, or trek across the deserts of Mars, or even stroke oar on an Earth college shell. And yet, she possessed soft femininity.

Carver's eyes returned to her face, dwelt for a moment on the freckles on her determined

nose. He grinned a bit inwardly as he contemplated them. Somehow he liked something about those freckles. They seemed such an important part of the aura of self-reliance and character surrounding her. He was still smiling slightly when her lids shot up, revealing warm amber eyes looking straight into his.

“Caught you again,” she remarked calmly. “And if I remember rightly, curiosity once killed a certain cat...”

He grinned openly now that he had been caught in the act.

“But I’m not a cat,” he corrected her.

“Then what are you?”

“Would you really like to know?”

Her lips broke into an answering smile. “You might as well talk with your lips as with your eyes,” she suggested.

He started and flushed. “My eyes? What have they been saying?”

She eyed his trim uniform deliberately for a moment. “A lot of things quite out of keeping with that uniform of yours.”

“I never say anything I don’t mean,” he put in slyly.

It was her turn to show confusion, but only for an instant. “Start talking,” she commanded. “Let me be the cat for awhile.”

Grinning, he leaned back in his chair and stared out into the starry blackness of space.

“Well,” he began, “since you’ve already noticed the uniform, you know I’m a member of the Stellar Patrol...”

“I thought Stellar Patrolmen stuck to their own ships?” she interrupted.

“They do.”

“But...”

“Special assignment,” he informed her briefly. “But to get on, my name’s John Carver ... say, what’s yours?”

“An-Ina Malden.”

He glanced at her. “That isn’t what you started to say.”

She looked at him levelly. “One of my faults,” she informed him coolly. “My tongue is out of step with my brain, and very often transposes words. Instead of saying Ina, it started to say Ini.”

“Oh. Well, in addition to having a simple name, I’m tall, handsome, twenty-six years old, and I’ve never been in love. That about sums it up.”

“Braggart,” she said. “The way you stare at me, what would you do if a really beautiful woman came along?”

"Nothing. I'm looking for a bit more than beauty."

"And...?"

"You've got a lot of it," he admitted.

She laughed heartily. "Is this a proposal?"

He sat erect. "Might be a good idea at that."

"Too bad," she observed. "Stellar Patrolmen can't get married."

"I'm through my term in seventeen months."

"Still too bad. In seventeen months I won't be accepting proposals..." her voice took on a strange sombre note, "...or ever," she finished. Her amber eyes, moody now, stared out into space.

"Why?" He studied her face.

"Curiosity once killed..." The sudden sharpness of her tone sent him back in his seat.

"Okay," he sighed, relaxing once more. "But now that we've broken the ice, how about going to the mid-voyage dance with me tonight? I might as well make the most of the opportunities offered by this assignment."

She nodded with sudden interest. "Why not?" she returned his question with her own. "Your suggestion fits me too, maybe better than it does you..." she halted abruptly and extended her hand. "Come on," she cried with sudden, reckless, enforced gaiety, "let's take a little stroll toward the bar, and celebrate our little vacation with a cocktail. And then, let's make the rest of the voyage interesting."

For a moment Carver stared at her, wondering, then he grinned. "You're on," he said enthusiastically, leaping to his feet to grab her hand, "And how!"

The mid-voyage dance had been a huge success, as far as Carver was concerned, and he had no reason to believe it had proven otherwise for Ina Malden. Just a moment ago, at her stateroom door, she'd been smiling, and had promised she'd see him again.

But if he'd been curious before, now he was positively itching with puzzlement. For all his adroit questioning, she'd remained a mystery. She was Ina Malden, sportswoman, who spent most of her time hunting and adventuring on other worlds, or crossing the void between them. More than that he'd been unable to worm from her.

Frowning in concentrated thought, Carver stepped into his own stateroom and closed the door behind him.

An elderly, but vigorous-looking man peered from behind the table where he had been intent on a spread-out map.

His seamed, space-tanned face broke into a smile.

"Well, how did you enjoy the dance?"

Carver grunted. "Great! But that girl—she's got me wondering. There's something behind her that isn't all it seems."

"There's something mysterious about any girl, as good looking as she, tramping the void alone," ventured the older man. "But I'd advise you to quit worrying about it. Remember, you are now part of the secret Peter Caldwell expedition to Pluto..."

Carver wheeled in startled surprise from the chair on which he'd just hung his uniform coat with meticulous care. "*Pluto!*" he shot out. "Is *that* where we're bound, Professor?"

Caldwell smiled. "Yes. I've decided I might as well let you in on the secret now, because certain developments have turned up which alter our plans a bit, and I'll need your cooperation to carry them out."

Carver drew up a chair and sat down, straddling it, with arms and chin resting on its carved back. "Spill it," he said interestedly, "I'm all ears."

For a moment Caldwell studied the map beneath his fingers, then looked up at Carver with a quizzical expression.

"When I asked the Mellon Institute for the backing to make this trip, they were doubtful of its value. But when I told them what could come of success—well, it put a new aspect on the whole thing. It meant absolute secrecy, secrecy that made a large, publicized expedition impossible. In short, it became imperative that no hint of any expedition at all should leak out. Any word of the exact nature of what I expect to find on Pluto would mean a concerted rush on the part of every planet government, every adventurer, and certainly every scoundrel, in the solar system, to get possession of ... of *it*."

"And so, I was commissioned to go alone, to return only when my work is completed and safeguarded. Therefore, we devised this plan, with one experienced and trustworthy Stellar Patrolman as the balance of my 'expedition'. I'll do the research, you'll do the work—and if any, the fighting. Simple, isn't it?"

Carver's eyes shone. "*Pluto!*" he breathed. "The Black World! The only planet with no port of call. I've heard tales of that world—stories of the Stellar Patrol's exploration parties..."

"They haven't been exaggerated," put in the scientist. "There's plenty of danger—from things science has been very careful about examining. The results of these examinations and explorations have been a firm decision to proceed very carefully in exploitation. In fact, Pluto is a forbidden world, except to advanced scientific study, and rigid exploration by the Stellar Patrol."

"However, recently no ships have turned outward toward Pluto. In a hundred years she will be beyond reach, and will remain so for long centuries, which perhaps is best. She is an alien world. Still, there is something on Pluto which we *must* have, and Earth is the 'we' in question."

"It isn't any secret," Caldwell went on grimly, "to a Stellar Patrolman at least—that Earth hasn't as many friendly interstellar neighbors as is generally thought. Power is hers, yes, and therefore respect; but no love is lost, for instance by Mars and Venus."

"Especially Venus," Carver agreed.

Caldwell went on. "Therefore, ostensibly, I am a Mellon scientist, on a sabbatical trip, and you are a guardsman on a diplomatic mission. In reality, we are on an urgent mission for the Earth government."

"And what are those important developments that make you tell me all this in advance of your initial plans?" questioned Carver curiously.

"There are several," admitted Caldwell. "First, trouble on Callisto. We'll have to change our original plans of proceeding to that world, and then dropping off into nowhere in our own ship. Instead, we'll do it in midspace, between Titan and Callisto. There's revolt on Callisto, and there is every chance we might be detained, even held prisoner, our ship interned for the duration of the revolt. Therefore, we pick up our cruiser at Titan, carry it aboard *the Josephine* to a point midway between Titan and Callisto, then take off on our own.

"Second, the *Josephine* carries bullion; platinum to bolster the government of Callisto, and there is the chance of being held up in space by rebel warships.

"Third, there may have been a leak somewhere, and Professor Peter Caldwell and Stellar Patrolman John Carver will have to literally drop from existence to prevent all chance of pursuit. Not even our own secret service knows where we are going. In fact, only two men besides ourselves know—the president of the United States, and the head of the Mellon Institute."

"Phew!" breathed Carver. "Whatever we're after, it *must* be important!"

"It is," agreed Caldwell seriously. "More than you can possibly realize."

He rose to his feet and folded his map. "And now, let's get to bed."

Carver nodded, loosed a little laugh. "Okay, but with all these mysteries, I don't think my mind will let me get much sleep."

He stared at Caldwell's back as the older man passed through the door joining their two compartments, and his smile faded. "Yeah," he muttered to himself, sitting down on the bed and beginning to unlace his uniform boots. Before his eyes grew the vision of a strange black world, but superimposed over it was a pair of glowing, enigmatic amber eyes.

"Yeah," he repeated. "Pluto's a strange world, but it's got nothing on her, for mystery!"

## CHAPTER II

### THE MYSTERY PIRATE

« ^ »

JOHN CARVER'S face was thoughtful as he stared across the table in the small café in the native quarter of New Denver, on Titan. Ina Malden sipped her cocktail with a preoccupied air, and she seemed listening idly to the roistering arguments of two rather bedraggled spacemen at the bar. But Carver paid no attention to them. His thoughts were fixed on her. For a moment he rolled the bottom edge of his glass on the tablecloth, making a small ringed indentation,

then he spoke.

"You know, Ina," he said. "I've been with you eight days, in space, and now one here on Titan—and I don't know more than your name. If women are supposed to be unable to keep secrets, they certainly got that reputation without the aid of *your* kind." His tone became suggestful. "We've still the trip to Callisto; maybe you'll relent and tell..."

Her amber eyes suddenly focused on his, and she set her glass down.

"I'm not going to Callisto," she announced calmly. "Today, now, is goodbye."

His glass tipped abruptly, a bit of liquid still remaining in it staining the tablecloth. Her slim, strongly tanned fingers reached out to right it.

"Not going!" he exclaimed. "Why? You've reserved passage straight through."

Her eyelids lifted a bit. "Oh, so you've been checking up on me..."

He grinned a bit shamefacedly, then sobered instantly. "Why not? I like to know how much fun I have in store for me ... and now you're cutting it short. Why?"

"Are guardsmen always so full of curiosity?" she asked.

"No. But this is ... different."

Her hand lifted from the tablecloth and she placed her fingers across his.

"It mustn't be," she said swiftly. "You've got to realize it. Because I really mean it when I say this is goodbye. Maybe you do deserve an explanation. You've been nice—given me a last good time. But now it's over, and I can't explain. There just isn't..."

His own hand turned under hers; his fingers held hers tightly.

"Why?" he insisted, "You talk as if you were going to your own funeral."

For a moment she deliberated. Then, "Well, there's a revolt on Callisto. It's dangerous to go there. So I'm not going. I'll do my hunting on Titan."

"You're a liar," he said frankly. "The Ina Malden of the past nine days is the kind who would make it a special point to go to Callisto now..."

"All right," she admitted readily. "I'm a liar. But I'm not going, and you are, and we'll never meet again. It's just closed—finished."

"No," he denied. "It isn't finished. In seventeen months I'm looking you up again. And I want to know where; I won't let you go until you tell me."

She started to withdraw her hand, but he prevented it. She continued to pull insistently, her amber eyes burning into his. There was no anger in them, just a steadiness of purpose that baffled him. At a loss, he loosed his grip and permitted the fingers to slip away from him.

"In seventeen months," she said, "I don't know where I'll be."

A sudden loudness in the voice of one of the arguing spacemen at the bar halted her words. She turned to listen. Puzzled, Carver listened also.

"I tell you, Rand," one of the men said in angry tones. "I seen her. Just as plain as the rings of Saturn. A silverwhite ship, faster'n any you ever saw, just a million miles off'n Titan. It was the mystery pirate. I'll gamble my own ore tub on it!"

"Yer screwy, Hanson," snorted the other. "It couldn't be possible. The latest radio from Venus, way to hellangone 'round the other side of the sun, reported the mystery pirate holding up the Mercury-Venus express only eleven days ago. To get here, that ship'd have to travel twice as fast as the fastest Patrol ship in the solar system. It just can't be done. You been drinkin' too much of that danged Callisto rot-gut."

"An' how do you know that mystery pirate ain't twice as fast as a Patrol?" challenged Hanson. "How'n blazes is it she gets away so easy every time?"

"She is fast," admitted Rand, "but not that fast. Why you poor fool, don't you know yerself no rocket tube lining'll stand up under the blasts it'd take to build that kind'y speed? Hey, bartender, set 'em up again, will yuh? I might as well get drunk too!"

Carver was aware of Ina's cool voice. "They say the mystery pirate is a girl," she observed.

He shook his head. "Just a fairy story," he said. "The ship is also supposed to be the invention of someone by the name of Mitchell, who used to be something of a scientist on Earth, maybe twenty years ago. He was convicted of something or other, I never did bother to find out what, and sent to the Lunar Penal colony. But he escaped. Ever since, he's been among the Missing. When the mystery pirate appeared three years ago, the rumor grew that it was Mitchell. But I doubt that very much. The records of the Stellar Patrol say he died during his escape."

She nodded a moment, lifted her glass to drain it, then rose to her feet.

"The *Josephine* leaves in an hour," she said. "We'd better be going."

He rose also, paid the waiter who approached, then followed her from the café. Outside he was silent as they walked through the streets toward the spaceport. He was baffled.

It was night time on Titan, as much as it ever darkens there, and they walked in darkness to the spaceport. At the field, she halted.

"Well," she said calmly. "Goodbye, and good luck."

For an instant he faced her, then abruptly he seized her in his arms and kissed her on the lips. She didn't struggle, but when he released her, her hand came up sharply and smacked against his cheek with stinging force.

Her eyes blazed an angry amber through the darkness, and her voice became chilled steel.

"You're just like all the rest," she said in tones dripping contempt. "You take what you want by force. There are no *honest* men!" Abruptly she was gone, melting into the darkness.

"Ina!" he called once, stepping forward. Then he halted, bewildered.

"Don't be a fool," he addressed himself, "you've got a job to do. And that girl's a mystery it'll take time to solve—seventeen months from now, if you can find her!"



\* \* \*

Titan was a dull orange ball behind the *Josephine*, plunging once more through space. John Carver lolled in his chair on the sun-deck, staring out at the stars. Beside him Professor Caldwell calmly read a book, turning pages with a methodical regularity. Attracted by the flip of pages, Carver leaned over to stare at the contents. Then he grunted.

"Mathematics! How can you *read* that stuff?"

Suddenly he felt his chair tip and slide beneath him. Awkwardly he tumbled from it, slid along the floor. Attempting to regain his footing he became aware that he was not the only one in difficulty. The ship had swerved without warning, an almost unprecedented thing in space.

"What in blazes!" exclaimed Carver, regaining his footing to stare out into space in surprise. Half the heavens were obscured by the flare of rocket flames, and the balance was empty as before. Then the flames vanished, and simultaneously the alarm bell began ringing through the ship.

Off in space, nearing rapidly, was a shining silver object, long, streamlined, graceful. And no rocket flames belched from its rear.

"The mystery pirate!" swore Carver in amazement. "That drunken spaceman was right. The ship *is* here!"

Caldwell was at his side now, still holding his book. "What's here?" he gasped.

"Pirates!" returned Carver grimly. "They're after the *Josephine*. And we'll never shake them. That ship is something new; it can fly circles around us."

"Bad!" muttered the scientist. "What'll we do?"

Carver shrugged. "Fight," he said.

"No!" Caldwell shot at him sharply. "We do nothing of the kind! We keep quiet and hope we get out of this. Your job is fighting, but for only one purpose. We have nothing to do with the *Josephine*, or with pirates."

"But," protested Carver, "I'm a Stellar Patrolman, and my oath..."

"...is to protect Earth interests to the fullest of your ability," finished Caldwell. "And that leaves you no alternative. Our mission is vastly more important than any pirates in space."

Carver nodded. "Okay, but it's going to be tough to stand by and let a crook get away with it."

He turned once more to watch the gleaming ship, now abreast of them and drawing in closer.

"What's the matter with our rockets?" Carver muttered. "Is the captain just going to let him come alongside and help him make contact?"

An officer with the bars of a lieutenant on his shoulder came rapidly toward them and addressed Carver. "Commander Taylor would like to see you in the main control room, sir," he

said.

Caldwell placed an arm on Carver's wrist, then withdrew it slowly.

"I'll come," nodded Carver.

"Right," said the lieutenant, wheeling away.

"We'll have to do it," Carver acknowledged the expression in Caldwell's eyes. "We can explain our stand and it's best to get him straight right now. Besides, I'm curious about those rockets; this ship ought to be running, at least."

"Let's go," said Caldwell nervously. "We'll be conspicuous here. You, a patrolman, doing nothing, would be hard to explain."

He led the way forward, and in a few moments they were in the control room. Several white-faced, determined looking officers were grouped around the Commander. That individual came forward as Carver appeared.

"What chances are there of contacting a Patrol ship?" he asked anxiously. "We're helpless. Some sort of electrical interference has shorted everything aboard. We can't fire a rocket..."

Carver looked speculatively at the instrument board. "If that's so, your radio is useless. What else...?"

"Your own ship, in the escape chamber—" suggested Commander Taylor swiftly. "I don't know what your mission is, and it's none of my business; but you could get away on the lee side and maneuver down our shadow. Once clear of the electrical beam, you could radio for help, then attack. You've got a regulation pursuit ship there, fully armed—"

"Can't do it, Commander," said Carver. "My mission is too important to risk its failure. My ship is armed, yes, but we still don't know what the mystery pirate has, and if this electric interference beam is any indication, our only chance is to lie quiet and raise the alarm after they've gone!"

"After..." blurted the commander. "Great gods of Mars, man, this isn't ordinary piracy. We've got twelve million in platinum aboard. It means the difference between victory and defeat for the Callisto government. I've *got* to get it through!"

"Commander Taylor," Caldwell broke in abruptly, "in reality, I am in command so far as Patrolman Carver is concerned. It is absolutely impossible for us to interfere. Our mission is vastly more important than the platinum for Callisto. We *must* adhere to our plans. It is by order of the President of America, who is acting under the World Pact, to which England is a party. This is an English ship. Therefore, the authority also applies to you."

Taylor stared a moment, then turned away with a sigh. "That is sufficient," he said quietly. "I will do my best to protect your mission's secrecy and fulfillment. But I warn you, we intend to if we get the least opening. I have my duty too."

"Accepted," said Caldwell. "But in the light of that, I'm afraid we'll have to make our escape instantly. I assure you we'll radio the alarm immediately we clear the electrical beam. Come on, Carver, we'll have to get out..."

A sudden gentle jar shook the *Josephine* and Taylor turned to the observation port.

"Too late for that," he pointed at the white bulk looming just outside. "They are in full sight of the escape chamber. You'll just have to keep in the background and wait your chance. So far as past performance warrants the belief, this pirate is not given to open violence, and you'll be reasonably safe."

A hollow, metallic voice boomed dully through the ship. "Open the locks," came a muffled order. "We are coming aboard."

"Contact phones!" marveled Carver. "That ship is equipped. And a much better type contact speaker than even the best Patrol boats have."

"Open the locks," said Taylor heavily. "But be ready with the machine guns and gas bombs. Close the seaports leading to the passenger decks and the engine rooms. We'll make no attempts unless we get a chance to, grab a bunch of them for hostages..."

"Here, Carver, get into this pair of overalls. Your uniform is too conspicuous. You can be an engineer, up here to report the failure of the rocket motors.

"Thanks, Commander," said Carver. "Your government will hear of this!"

For an instant the *Josephine's* commander grinned. "If I lose the platinum, I'll hear about it, all right! So maybe I'm lucky you're aboard to furnish me with something of an alibi in the way of duty. And now, you'd both better get back out of the way and remain quiet."

Caldwell stepped back against a wall and stood silently while Carver struggled into the overalls beside him.

"Lock's open," said a lieutenant. "Boarding party coming through."

Taylor strode to the control room door and flung it wide. For an instant he stared down the corridor outside, then walked slowly forward, stopping only as a space-suited figure came into view at the other end.

A half dozen other figures followed rapidly, armed with efficient looking machine guns.

"Don't put up a fight," came the hollow-booming voice from the contact speaker. "We'll break contact if you do, and let your air escape. Our men are suited and we hold all the cards. Behave yourselves and nobody will be hurt."

Taylor turned back to the control room, shrugging his shoulders. "Make no resistance," he ordered. "They've got us helpless."

He faced the first of the advancing space-suited figures.

"Greetings, Commander Taylor," came a tiny microphonic voice from the leader. "You've got a shipment aboard we'd appreciate appropriating. Please be kind enough to have one of your men lead mine to the store room. It won't take long to move it to my ship, and then you can be on your way."

The voice was high pitched, sounding shrilly in the silence of the control room.

"The brass of the fellow!" muttered an officer who subsided immediately as one of the

pirates turned toward him.

Carver stood silently in the background, watching with Caldwell as the pirates went coolly about the task of transferring the platinum from the *Josephine* to their own ship. He peered intently through the face plate of the leader, but could discern no details of the features, except that the man wore a mask, a strip of black cloth across the eyes, perforated for vision.

In less than fifteen minutes the transfer of the platinum had been effected. The leader ordered several of the pirates to withdraw, then pushed past Taylor into the control room.

"Professor Caldwell," came the tinny microphonic voice, "will you please come with me?"

Carver stiffened in utter surprise, stood for a moment gazing at Caldwell and the pirate.

Taylor stepped forward. "What's the meaning of this?" he demanded angrily. "Professor Caldwell is a passenger aboard this ship."

A metal-clad arm leveled a gun on the commander's chest.

"One side, Commander," said the leader smoothly. "Professor Caldwell will continue his voyage aboard the *Starlight*."

Taylor backed away, his face white with anger and futility.

Imperiously the pirate's gun waved. Caldwell advanced reluctantly. He glanced helplessly at Carver.

The patrolman tensed his muscles, preparing for a desperate leap. Instantly the gun roved around toward him. He stiffened rigidly.

"I wouldn't if I were you," came the voice.

Then, without warning, a roar filled the control room as a machine gun chattered. Down the corridor a scream came from one of the guards, who toppled instantly.

"Close the lock!" roared Taylor, swinging the gun he had snatched from its concealment behind an instrument bank in an arc toward the pirate leader.

Crack!

The gun in the pirate's hand spoke sharply. Taylor slumped to the floor, oddly limp. The machine gun ceased its roar. A man leaped toward the controls to close the lock. The gun swung toward him.

At the same instant Carver's plunging body launched forward. But the pirate was unbelievably quick, and in the instant his form hurtled through the air in a flying tackle, the man reversed his gun and the butt of it crashed down on Carver's skull with stunning force.

With the blow he saw a pair of blazing amber eyes inside the darkness of the helmet, and even before he lapsed into blackness, he knew the truth.

"Y ... you..." he strove to say, his tongue thick with pain, then everything went blank.

## CHAPTER III

### THE BLACK WORLD

« ^ »

COME on! Snap out of it, Mister!”

Carver heard the words penetrating a haze of pain shooting through his head. Then with the shock of cold water in his face, he sputtered and struggled to a sitting position. He found himself on the floor of the control room of the *Josephine*. Bending over him was the form of a junior officer, his face grim.

“Pull yourself together, man,” urged the officer. “You’ve got work to do.”

Realization flooded over Carver. He leaped to his feet, reeling a bit unsteadily as his head whirled with a beating throb of agony.

“Professor Caldwell!” he exclaimed. “Is he...?”

The junior officer nodded. “Yes. The pirates took him aboard their ship. I guess now your duty is clear. Your man, and our platinum shipment, both, are aboard the pirate.”

Carver’s eyes fell on the body of Commander Taylor, lying in a huddled heap on the floor. “Dead!” he exclaimed. “So the mystery pirate has killed at last!” For a moment he was silent, collecting his whirling senses. Then:

“My ship!” he commanded, suddenly calm and purposeful. “Lead me to the lock.” He clenched his fists. “I’m going after them. When I’m gone, radio Patrol Headquarters about this attack. Tell them what’s happened, but whatever you do, don’t mention that I am in pursuit—headquarters will know that, and we don’t want the pirate to suspect.”

The junior officer shook his head. “No go,” he said curtly. “The pirate smashed the radio. You’ll have to do your own radioing.”

Carver, already wheeling to the doorway, halted, in his tracks, vexation flooding his face. “Damn!” he muttered.

“What’s the matter? Don’t tell me a patrol ship has no radio?”

“Certainly it has,” snapped Carver. “But I can’t signal. The pirate will get the message, realize we have a pursuit ship aboard. Once she knows that, I’ll have no chance to keep her in range of my detectors. She’s got twice the speed of any ship in space—got here from the other side of the sun in a week. She could lose me with ease. My only chance now is to play a lone hand.”

The junior officer looked serious, then abruptly he extended a hand. “Go to it, Mister,” he said earnestly. “I don’t envy you your job. I’ll do my part by taking the *Josephine* at full speed back to Titan, and send in the alarm from there. We can’t go to Callisto, now. If they know the platinum is gone, hell will break loose.”

Carver grinned his thanks. “Okay. And now, let’s get out of here.”

The tremendous crushing force of five gravities acceleration pressed Carver back in his cushioned seat, as he drove the tiny patrol pursuit ship across the void in the direction indicated by the detector needle on the control panel. It was hours later. The space before him was empty of any sign of a ship, were it possible to detect it visually against the powdered net of stars that made the heavens a glowing glory. Straight into the myriad stars of the Milky Way the trail led, outward from the sun.

But inexorably the indicator needle clung to the nearest metallic body, which could only be the pirate ship, since the *Josephine* was too far behind now to register her presence.

Hour after hour he drove on. As time passed, he saw with a sinking heart that his detector needle was beginning to waver. It was losing contact by reason of the increasing distance of the pirate ship. He dropped his eyes anxiously to the course chart he'd been carefully working out, and noted the short arc formed by a tiny ink line on the paper. A glance at the declination compass showed only a slight deviation from the mean.

"Another two hours," he muttered anxiously. "Just two more hours—and I'll be able to chart that curve ahead, and find out where it lands."

Ignoring the terrific strain on the tiny pursuit ship, he depressed the firing levers slowly down to their limit. Then, with the whole vessel thrumming like a violin string to the pounding of the rockets, he held on grimly. These pursuit ships were built both like a safe and like a watch. They'd take a pounding like this for an hour or two, before there was any great danger of collapse. She'd *have* to take it!

But, ninety minutes later, the detector needle veered slowly to the right, then suddenly spun erratically. He watched it anxiously, but it refused again to halt its wild gyrations. The pirate ship was out of detector range!

Carver released the pressure on the rocket levers and the pursuit ship suddenly ceased its vibration. Silence fell on the control room as she coasted, no longer accelerating. For fifteen minutes he worked over the almost hopelessly inadequate ink line on the chart, computing its arc and its declination. As he neared a result in his calculations, he began to frown in puzzlement. There was no destination at the end of that course—no destination, except—

"Pluto!" he yelled suddenly, the echoes of his shout deafening him in the tiny control room, "Pluto, by Heaven! It's the only place they could be going unless they change their course. And there's no reason to do that. They can't dream they are being followed. Without a detector, they couldn't..."

"Without a detector?" mocked a quiet, questioning voice from behind him. "Are you inferring patrol ships are the only ships with detectors?"

Stunned by the unexpectedness of the sound of a human voice, Carver turned from the control chart to stare helplessly at the figure of a man, tall, dark, saturnine, standing in the doorway to the control room. He was distinctly handsome, in a typical Martian way, and Carver recognized him instantly for what he was. His Earth blood accounted for his devilish handsomeness and his athletic build. His Martian precedents accounted for his height and his complexion. And in his eyes shone the characteristic intelligence of the Martian. In his hand, he

held a gun aimed directly at Carver's heart.

"Who are you?" Carver exploded finally, overcoming the shock of surprise. "How'd you get aboard this ship?"

The Martian grinned. "Very simple. First, to keep your questions straight, my name is Magra. Franco Magra. I am attached to the company of individuals aboard the ship known to you as the 'mystery pirate.' But before I go further, I want to correct that last designation. We are not pirates. We are only taking a small portion of what really belongs to us, or rather, to one of our company."

"If it belongs to you, why do you have to take it?" asked Carver levelly.

The Martian's eyes flamed. "Because, my dear fellow, justice does not always function for the just!"

"And so, in the name of justice, you steal, and kill?"

"Perhaps we should kill more—I would find my task much simpler. But we are agreed not to kill, and we respect the wishes of our leader, although personally my scruples are—well, less considerate shall we say?—and perhaps now I will agree less to agree. It is unfortunate that he was forced to kill the captain of the *Josephine*, but there was no other way. The captain invited certain death by his action, and besides, killed one of our men."

"He?" questioned Carver shrewdly. The Martian looked blank for an instant, then suddenly he comprehended, and snarled.

"You know too much, Mr. Carver! Yes, I know your name; know all about you and Caldwell, and your mission—more than you do. But you'll never get back to reveal what you've discovered. If I've got anything to say, there'll be a few more—ah—executions in the future.

"And now, just unbuckle that belt and toss those guns over here."

Carver complied slowly. "You haven't answered my second question," he reminded as he dropped the belt and guns at Magra's feet.

"Simple," boasted the Martian. "Our detectors—the detectors you thought only patrol ships had—showed you were following us. So I just dropped off to the side in a one man boat and let you catch up to me. Then I cut in behind, anchored to your airlock, and came aboard."

"I see," said Carver. "That must have been when my detector needle got doubtful and wavered a bit."

"Yes, I suppose that must have happened," agreed Magra. "Getting aboard was easy. You had the ship humming so much you couldn't hear the lock. I even had time to take off my space suit."

Carver nodded. "A very neat job," he commented. "But what now?"

Magra grinned again. "You've got the course all plotted out. Just keep right on to Pluto. I'll enjoy relaxing while you chauffeur me there. As to what then, I don't know. The rest is in 'her' hands."

He made himself comfortable at the rear of the control room, keeping his gun in ready reach.

\* \* \*

Far behind, the sun was a tiny gleaming disc, barely discernible as being any more than just another star in the black canopy of space. Ahead loomed the now close planet of mystery—Pluto, the wandering world of the solar system. Carver thought about what little was known of this strange, barely explored world.

For, of all the worlds of the solar system, perhaps the strangest was Pluto. The outermost world of the system, the ninth planet, and last to be discovered, very little was really known of her that could be definitely put down on paper as fact. Some of the observations that had been made reveal the following:

Her distance from the earth was now forty-one astronomical units. Add that all up and the figure was 3,813,000,000 miles, which, although in interstellar space a puny distance, was a lot of miles for a planet to be from its parent.

Pluto's mass was now known to be smaller than at first believed, and scientists had tentatively placed it at about that of Earth. In many respects, the planet was like Earth. But only in mass, size, diameter, etc. Her distance from the sun made her an utterly different world otherwise. Her orbit was elliptical, its plane inclined to that of the major planets at about 31 degrees, 21 minutes. The size of her orbit, was roughly, 133 astronomical units, or 133 times 93 million miles. The time required to travel around this tremendous orbit was staggering to imagine. It takes 3,200 years. Imagine a year 32 centuries long!

Carver began to brake the tiny ship as the globe, now distinctly below rather than ahead, came within landing range.

During the long voyage, Franco Magra had not relaxed his vigilance, and Carver had no desire to do other than exactly what he was doing, since Pluto was his goal anyway. Caldwell would be there, and for the moment, the fact that he was Magra's prisoner didn't matter.

While Magra slept, he heard the faint broadcast from Titan, telling of the abduction of Caldwell. That would stir up a hornet's nest, back on Earth, but nothing would come of it. None would dream that the incredibly remote Pluto would be the destination of the mystery pirate.

Magra was beside him now, staring at the instruments, inspecting the world looming like a great black globe below them. Far to the north rose a vague white range of mountains, looking like a row of serrated teeth on a black face.

"Those are the Ice Mountains," said Magra, pointing. "And the large plain just this side of them is the Dust Desert. Nice place, that. Dust as fine as powder, and soft. Hell to walk in. Man can't make more than five or ten miles at one stretch."

Carver grunted. "Where are we headed for?"

"Just across the desert, to the base of the Ice Mountains. We've got some nice caves there, all fully equipped, and impossible to locate unless you know where you are going."



“Caves? In ice?” questioned Carver. “Not quite practical, is it?”

Magra smiled. “That shows how much is known of Pluto. Those mountains aren’t ice. They were misnamed from their appearance. They are white granite, and tougher granite you never saw. I know, because I had to blast out a few of those caves for a hangar.”

Magra lurched suddenly, and clung to a stanchion. “We’re close enough now,” he said. “That new gravity is Pluto’s; about Earth normal. You can land this ship on Earth calculations. Allow for the same conditions as Earth, except there’s no atmosphere.”

Carver nodded, added another question. “That mountain range is a long one; where do I head?”

Once again Magra pointed. “See that giant crater—where even the granite is smashed? Well, that’s where a meteorite hit the planet, not so long ago, as time is measured by human beings. Immediately below that crater our caves are located. That crater, by the way, is the most interesting thing on this black planet. It’s what Caldwell intended to investigate,” he grinned in self-satisfaction, “he’ll get to investigate it all right!” he went on hastily. “There’s stuff there that we need, but it’s tough to handle, and tougher to understand. The system that meteorite came from was different.”

“What do you mean?”

Magra grinned again. “Never mind, you’ll find out soon enough!”

Carver gunned the ship down toward the base of the white mountains looming eerily in the darkness now as the black bulk of the planet blotted out more and more of the starry heavens. Ahead, the colossal crater began to amply demonstrate the tremendous force with which the meteorite had plowed into the granite range. White fragments littered the plain for hundreds of miles around; great pieces miles in diameter, and smaller debris that gleamed like white jewels in the dim sunlight.

The dust desert itself was a dull gray-black expanse, seemingly perfectly smooth, and as level as a tabletop.

“No air?” questioned Carver suddenly. “How do you manage?”

Franco Magra tossed his head in obvious pride of achievement. It was odd the way the man gloried in his mechanical and engineering ability. Almost an insufferable egotism. “I’m an engineer,” he said. “And old man Mi ... the boss,” hastily Magra amended his near slip, “...was pretty good at science and engineering himself. Those caves are protected by airlocks that are better than those on spaceships themselves. The caves are supplied with air from a simple, but marvelously effective electrolysis unit, connected with a water supply reached by a well. Pluto isn’t a dead world, by any means, even though it is an airless and frozen one.”

Magra peered down at the surface of the desert below, which was suddenly rushing past with express speed as the ship zoomed down toward its surface. “Level out.” he exclaimed hastily. “Make a slide landing. The ship will travel over that dust like snow.”

Unobtrusively Carver snapped the safety catch on his seat, while he edged the ship down. Level with the surface at last, he stole a covert glance at Magra, whom he saw was intent on the mountains before them. Then, nearing the surface, he depressed a top-hull guiding rocket.

The patrol ship dipped down sickeningly. It struck the dust and bounced dizzily, nearly rolling end over end as it caromed from the surface.

Carver grunted as the straps cut into his body. He clung to the controls grimly. Beside him, Magra had uttered a startled curse, grabbed out wildly as the ship bounced, then crashed heavily against the bulkhead. He went limp and slumped down.

Like a bob-sled, the ship slipped along the dust, completely buried in a flying cloud of the impalpable stuff. Then slowly it came to a halt. Carver released his straps, rose to his feet, and stood over the unconscious pirate, a grin on his face.

"Well, Mr. Franco Magra," he said aloud. "How do you like that? And just as soon as you come to, we are going to go to those caves of yours and have a little talk with ... *her!*"

With his face suddenly sober, he bit his lip.

"...which isn't going to be easy!" he muttered, aware all at once that he had a miserable feeling somewhere inside him.

## CHAPTER IV AN ACE IN THE HOLE

« ^ »

THE big body of Franco Magra, encased in a space suit that made him seem even bigger than he was, loomed in the dusk before Carver as both men halted to catch their breath.

Carver spoke into his radio transmitter, mounted in his helmet. "You weren't wrong about this dust being hell to walk through," he commented. "I don't mind resting a minute or two myself. How much further is it to the caves?"

Magra's voice broke from the microphone sullenly. "About a mile, Carver. But it isn't going to do you any good to hold a gun in my back when we get there. You can't escape, and you can't rescue Caldwell."

"That's what you think," grunted Carver, easing his metal-clad body to the soft dust and relaxing. "But I don't intend to hold a gun in your back."

The visor of Magra's helmet swung toward him from where the pirate sat, and their eyes met. "You don't think you are going to walk blithely in and get a hearty welcome?" Magra queried scornfully.

"Exactly," returned Carver complacently.

"You're a fool!"

Carver grinned. "How would *you* do it?" he asked.

Magra laughed caustically. "There isn't any way to do what you think you can do! If I were in your shoes, I'd take this opportunity to get the hell back to my ship and scoot for Earth as

fast as I could. You'll never rescue Caldwell, and you'll never get out of those caves alive, once you get inside."

"But I know too much to be allowed to return to Earth," Carver pointed out subtly.

The other was silent, and Carver resumed. "Don't you think I see through your suggestion? I wouldn't get a hundred thousand miles away from Pluto before your mystery ship caught up with me and blew me out of space. So, you see, Mr. Magra, the way I figure that angle, there isn't any way to do what *you'd* do. Which makes my plan just as good as yours, and personally speaking, a little bit better, with my slight improvement..."

"What improvement?" asked Magra in puzzlement.

Carver grinned and heaved himself erect. "You'll find out," he promised. "And, now, get on your feet and lead the way to those caves. I'm tired of slogging through this dust, and the sooner I get out of it the better I'll like it."

"And I!" exclaimed Magra. "Because when we get to the caves, you'll find out a few things—and they won't be exactly what you expect, Mr. Super-policeman!"

He led the way once more through the shifting, powdery dust.

Half a mile away loomed the white mass of the granite Ice Mountains, their sheer cliffs and jagged spires presenting a weirdly beautiful appearance. They seemed as raw and freshly upthrust from the bowels of the planet as though they had been flung into the starlight only yesterday. What vast cataclysm must have torn them from their normal place at the planet's core? And how many uncounted ages had they existed, remaining without decomposition in airlessness, where no action of wind or rain could erode their peaks and spires?

Carver admired the awesome beauty and grandeur of the scene as he walked heavily along. And speculatively he eyed the nearing jagged slope for something he hoped to find conveniently nearby their apparent destination.

"There's the passage, leading to the caves," came Magra's voice in his phones. "Right behind that big boulder, where it can't be seen from the desert, or from above." He halted and pointed with one space-suited arm.

Carver peered ahead, noting the position of the huge boulder, evidently one of the many fragments flung down from the peaks by the impact of the giant meteorite that had caused the crater he'd seen from space. There was no hint of the location of the passage behind it.

"Certainly is well hidden," he commented. "And now, we'll take care of that little improvement on my plan. Start walking directly toward that crevice over to the side." He indicated a crack in the slope of the mountain.

Hesitating a moment, Magra complied. Carver followed after, his weapon at the ready for any overt move on the part of the Martian.

Reaching the gloom of the crevice, Carver motioned Magra into its depths, leading perhaps fifty feet into the mountain.

"And now, Mr. Magra, please lie down on your belly and put your arms behind you," he ordered.

Magra whirled. "You dirty skunk," he spat out. "So that's what you're going to do—leave me here to die! My air will last only seven hours!"

"That's plenty," returned Carver, his voice suddenly hard. "And if you don't get the idea by now, here it is. If I don't get Caldwell, and a free pass to the desert and my ship, you'll never leave this crevice alive. But I think your companions will listen to reason and trade even with me."

Magra glared at him, and Carver waved an arm impatiently.

"Lie down, before I decide to shoot you down and bluff about having you hidden someplace."

"They'll think you're bluffing anyway," said Magra hoarsely.

Carver shrugged. "That'll be too bad—for you! Lie down."

Slowly, awkwardly, Magra lowered his body to the dusty floor of the crevice and lay face down, his arms behind him. "I'll get you for this, Carver," he grated, "if it's the last thing I do!"

"You're welcome to try," Carver grunted, securely fastening the metal arms of the suit with strands of wire from the kit at his belt. "I'll radio your location from the ship when we're far enough away to prevent your detectors locating me." Finishing with the arms, he bound Magra's legs tightly together. Then he stood erect.

"Turn over," he commanded.

Magra's body heaved, and with vast effort he managed to turn half around. "Damn you," he grunted breathlessly. "How do you expect me to move in this confounded dust? I couldn't move a dozen feet in an hour!"

"That's what I wanted to find out," Carver grinned. "And just to make sure you don't roll out of this crevice, I'll take the trouble to pile a few fragments around you and make sure you can't do any rolling. I think you'll find it even tougher to roll over a couple chunks of granite."

Suiting the words to the action, he piled a bulwark of granite fragments across the crevice, effectively sealing Magra in his prison.

Then, surveying his work in satisfaction, he wheeled toward the entrance. "Thanks for the help, Mr. Magra. And don't get impatient. I'll radio your location just as soon as possible. Any delay you can lay to the door of your comrades—if they fail to listen to reason!"

He made his way from the crevice with Magra's curses ringing in his ears. With a wry grin he raised a hand and spun the receiver to another wavelength. Magra's voice was stilled.

Outside the crevice, he turned toward the tunnel, visible now as he slogged through the dust at the base of the huge boulder. A thought struck him. He turned to inspect the tracks he left behind him. A smile creased his face. The impalpable dust sucked right back into place as his foot emerged; left only a tiny depression no different from hundreds of others all around, obviously from the impact of meteorites through the ages. No apparent tell-tale trail was visible in the dusty plain to reveal the whereabouts of the helpless Franco Magra. He went on.

Reaching the tunnel, he proceeded down its length until he came to the airlock Magra had

described. A moment he stood silently, then he advanced with determination, and operated the controls. There was a momentary puff of dissipating air as the lock swung outward, then Carver stepped inside and closed the outer valve behind him. A light sprang into being as the catches engaged, illuminating the interior of the lock, which was revealed as a twenty-foot section of tunnel.

At the far end was the inner valve, and Carver eyed it a moment. Decisively he opened it, let it swing ajar, and then calmly divested himself of his space suit. Hanging it in a rack obviously for that purpose, he strode through the inner lock into a warm, muggy atmosphere beyond. He was in a long tunnel, on which opened various other entrances, some provided with doors. He advanced easily, inspecting every detail of the place as he moved forward.

Abruptly the figure of a man appeared in one of the branching tunnels ahead and halted. An exclamation came to Carver's ears. Before he could move, the pirate whipped a gun from his holster and leaped forward.

"Up with 'em, copper!" grated the man. "And don't make a move!"

Carver elevated his arms calmly.

"Take me to Miss Malden," he requested.

The man stared. "Miss Malden!" His face creased into a sarcastic grin. "Well, of all the damn fools—sure, buddy, I'll take you to her. But am I right in assuming you just walked in here single-handed, and expect to pay a social call?"

Carver shrugged. "Social or business," he stated flatly, "it's no concern of yours. Do I see Miss Malden, or don't I?"

The pirate flushed. "Mister Carver, I don't like your tone at all. And when you've finished your call, I'm going to make it a point to take it up with you. I'll show you whether anything that goes on here is any concern of George Buree or not!"

Carver eyed the man quizzically. Somehow he didn't seem the type who would be attached to a band of pirates. He was rather youthful, and not unhandsome. He was blond and blue-eyed, and his chin protruded aggressively. Carver decided he wasn't a bad sort of fellow and grinned.

"Okay, George. I'll be glad to take you on for a couple rounds any time we both find it convenient. But right now, I've got a terrific yen to see your boss on a matter of vital importance to all of us.

"Pretty slick, aren't you?" questioned Buree a bit admiringly. "But you've done an awful dumb thing coming here like this. I don't think you'll leave for awhile, and we'll find that convenient moment easy enough. Come on, I'll take you to the boss—to Miss Malden," he added with an amused grin.

He motioned ahead, down a branching tunnel, and Carver strode forward, Buree keeping close behind, with his weapon at the ready.

"You don't strike me as a pirate," Carver remarked over his shoulder.

"We're *not* pirates," Buree said flatly. "We aren't doing anything that isn't sheer justice.

What we take, we've got coming, and someday—" he broke off and was silent.

"You fellows all seem to have the same conviction," observed Carver.

"What do you mean?"

"Skip it," said Carver.

They came now to a door, and Buree motioned to it.

"Knock on it," he commanded.

Carver rapped his knuckles sharply against the panel, and a feminine voice from beyond called out.

"Come in."

Suddenly through Carver's frame went a strange thrill, and a cold shudder. The tones were the familiar ones of Ina Malden, and all at once he was trembling at the prospect of facing her.

"What's the matter with you?" rasped Buree. "Didn't you hear her say to come in? Open the door."

As Carver placed a hand on the knob, a picture of the Commander of the *Josephine* pitching to the floor under the blazing gun of the amber-eyed girl rose before him, and gritting his teeth, he flung the door open.

Facing him was Ina Malden. As she recognized him, she swayed back, and an astonished exclamation came to her lips. "You!" she gasped.

He looked at her coldly, although his blood raced at sight of her. "Yes," he said. "I found you quicker and easier than I thought. And now, Miss Mystery Pirate, I think we understand each other a little better, and since we do, let's not waste time getting down to cases."

He advanced into the room and Buree followed, closing the door behind him. The action revealed the figure of another girl, slim, blond, exotic, standing to one side.

"Hello, Sis," said Buree aside to her.

Ina turned to Buree. "How'd he get here?" she asked.

Buree shrugged. "Just walked in through the air lock as though he was paying a social call and asked to be taken to you. A damn fool stunt! but he sure don't lack for guts!"

Ina faced Carver. "You came here—alone!" She seemed incredulous.

Carver nodded. "Had to. It was the only way I could keep you from losing me in space, and—" he grinned a bit triumphantly, "—if you're wondering about Mr. Franco Magra, your engineer, that's what I came to talk about..."

The blond girl gasped suddenly, and a hand flew to her mouth. "Franco!" she exclaimed in distress. "What have you done to him?"

Carver eyed her speculatively, then grunted. "Nothing—yet!"

"What do you mean—yet?" asked Buree suddenly, stepping forward and jamming his

weapon into Carver's ribs. "Spill it, copper, or I'll let air through you!"

Carver ignored him and faced Ina Malden, who was frowning in perplexity.

"Just this, Miss Malden," he said levelly. "I've come for Professor Caldwell, and the sooner you trot him out here, and escort us to my ship, the better."

The amber eyes staring into his widened. Then they flamed in sudden animosity and irritation. "Why?" she snapped. "Are you insane? Did that tap on the head affect your...?"

"No," he interrupted, lips' tight. "Let's not waste time. Your Mr. Franco Magra is at the present moment waiting for his air supply to give out. When it does, he'll die. Now, if I'm not out in space beyond detector range, when his air is gone, he'll stay right where he is. Is that perfectly clear?"

The blonde girl went white, and she staggered a bit. Buree leaped to her. "Take it easy, Mary," he said, eyeing Carver dangerously. "I'll take care of this guy. He'll take me to where Franco is, or I'll feed him to the disrupters."

Carver smiled tightly, "I don't scare, Buree. Whatever disrupters are, they aren't going to hold a show over my cards. I hold all the trumps. Either I get Professor Caldwell, and get beyond detector range, where I can radio instructions on where to find Magra before his air is gone, or..."

"George," came Ina's cold voice, "go get Professor Caldwell. And hurry!"

For an instant Buree stared at her, a queer expression on his face, then he glanced once at his sister's tragic eyes, staring now at Ina. Without further word, he wheeled and strode out.

Ina turned to Mary. "You may go now, Mary," she said commandingly.

For an instant the blonde girl seemed about to say something, then she turned and walked into the tunnel outside.

"I gather that Mary is in love with Magra," said Carver drily.

"You gather too much!" flared Ina.

Baffled, and unable to suppress a sudden choking surge of jealousy that rose in him, Carver subsided, his eyes fixed on the lovely amber ones eyeing him so coldly.

A few moments later the sound of footsteps came from the tunnel, and into the room came the forms of Professor Caldwell and George Buree.

"John!" exclaimed Caldwell in amazement. "What ... how...?"

"I'll explain later," said Carver. "Right now, we're going to get back to the ship and get away from here."

"Get away? But—"

"I've got one of the band hidden away with only seven hours of air, and I'm not telling where he is, until we're safely out of range," said Carver. "So let's get going. That seven hours is slowly being cut down, and we want to get out of detector range before we radio his location..."

There was a peculiar look in Caldwell's eyes and Carver halted abruptly.

"What's wrong?" he asked, glancing about in puzzlement.

"Nothing's wrong," said Caldwell slowly. "But—I can't go. I don't want to escape."

Carver was thunderstruck. "Don't want to escape!" he choked on the words. "What—" He stopped, unable to go on under the shock of this unexpected development. His gaze roved dazedly to Ina Malden's now gleaming amber eyes.

Caldwell spoke gravely. "I can't explain, John, but I'm not going to leave here. And it is my order, by the authority vested in me by the President, that you return without me."

"Return without you—!" Carver failed to comprehend the import of the scientist's words.

"Yes. Report me—kidnapped by pirates, and all trace lost," said Caldwell.

Carver snapped erect. "You are asking me to betray my oath to the Service," he said. "I'm afraid I can't do it."

Caldwell faced him squarely. "Your oath demands that you obey my commands, Carver, and you will carry them out. Absolute secrecy must be maintained. We came on a mission. That mission still holds."

"Does that mean that my part in the mission, beyond making this report, and maintaining secrecy, is over?" asked Carver.

Caldwell considered. "Yes, John," he said kindly. "I'm sorry I can't explain, but there are things—"

Carver drew himself erect. "Personally, sir," he said stiffly, "I believe you either planned this all along, or you've turned traitor. However, I'm only a Patrolman, and not a judge, and I'll carry out my orders, as I see them. However, I still have my oath, and it still holds me to duty. That duty is clear. I'll go back to Earth, all right, but Ina Malden goes back with me."

"Ina Malden," Carver turned to her. "I arrest you for the murder of Commander Taylor, and for piracy on the space lanes!"

Caldwell leaped forward. "No, lad," he said sternly. "You return alone, and forget this idea of duty. I'm still your superior."

"I'll be the judge of how far your superiority goes," snapped Carver. "Let me remind you, my duty was made clear to me by the President and yourself. It is my duty to protect you, and apprehending your kidnapper is part of that job. Also, there is a man who will die in a matter of hours, if I don't tell where he is."

Baffled, Caldwell stared at him. Ina Malden stepped contemptuously forward.

"You win, John Carver," she said coldly, her amber eyes blazing. "Let's go."

"No!" came a sardonic voice from the doorway. "He doesn't win!"

Startled, Carver whirled to face the saturnine figure of Franco Magra standing in the doorway, a gun leveled full upon Carver's breast.



“How—?” he gasped.

Magra laughed. “Your improvements,” he explained in derision. “Your plan was perfect. Your one mistake was adding those fragments of granite to keep me from rolling out of the crevice. But for that improvement, I wouldn’t have been able to find a jagged edge to cut through the wires you used to tie me up!”

## CHAPTER V

### “MY NAME IS NOT INA MALDEN”

« ^ »

CARVER stared bitterly at the heavy door barring the entrance to the tiny cave that was now his prison. He’d been thinking deeply for an hour, and his mind reeled with the numberless conjectures that coursed through his brain. Was Caldwell a traitor? Had he planned this secret expedition for his own ends, simply to join up with this pirate band? And if so, why?

Again, if that were so, how had he duped so important a pair of men as the President, and the head of the Mellon Institute?

On the other hand, was he sincere? Did the mission really demand that he apparently throw in with the pirate band? What was the mission?

Carver groaned. Was he doing his duty, or was he being a fool?

His thoughts went to Ina Malden. A pirate! How could she be a criminal, a killer, an outlaw! The very thought stung him. How had he so badly judged her, those weeks in space, and back on Titan when she’d slapped his face and vanished into the darkness. That girl hadn’t been bad. She’d been the girl he—

“Yes, damn you,” he said suddenly, harshly aloud. “You love her!”

The exclamation was an accusation. And as he realized the accusation was directed at himself, he sat on the edge of his bunk dejectedly.

“You poor, miserable fool,” he whispered. “You’re sticking up for her—a murderess! You aren’t worth the uniform you wear. It’s *you* who are the traitor!”

He became suddenly aware of a rustling sound, and looked up. Under the door a square of white paper was being slid. He leaped forward and snatched it up, hearing the sound of retreating footsteps outside. Opening it hastily, he read its contents.

*John:*

*I will aid you to escape at the first opportunity. You must return to earth and report my complete disappearance.*

No one must know where I am, until I return (if I ever do). I swear it is your duty. I know now what I face here, and I must find some way to combat it, or the earth will see such horror

as it has never seen before. I must appear to join the pirate band—and I admit I have some reason and justification for doing so beyond my own duty, as you will no doubt learn from other sources, so I tell you first. That is the only way I can gain the time to do what I must find a way to do. Believe me. Destroy this note.

*Caldwell!*

For a long moment Carver toyed with the paper in his fingers, then he groaned again.

“That makes it worse. I know, now, less what to believe is right than I did before—but after all, Caldwell has given me a means to destroy all his plans by giving Ina this paper, which would seem to indicate he trusts me—or else is taking me for a bigger sucker than I think he is—”

With a bitter laugh he drew a match from his pocket and carefully burned the tiny bit of paper. He knew why he’d burned it; and it wasn’t because he believed Caldwell.

“We’ll see about that escape!” he muttered.

\* \* \*

An hour later his cell door swung open and George Buree stood in the opening.

“Come on, Carver,” he said. “Miss Malden—” he grinned “—wants to see you.”

Wordlessly Carver preceded him. Buree directed him to the doorway leading to the cave where he’d first seen her. They entered, and the appetizing aroma of food came strongly to Carver’s nostrils. He realized suddenly that he was hungry.

Before him sat Ina Malden, at a tiny table set for two.

“Will you dine with me, Mr. Carver?” she asked sweetly.

He was astounded. For an instant he stood, unable to find words to say. She nodded at Buree. “You can go, George. I’ll take care of Mr. Carver.”

“You’re sure,” began Buree hesitantly.

“Yes.”

Buree turned at the finality in her tone and left the cave.

Ina looked up at Carver. “I’ve never known you to be so reserved,” she said calmly. “Why not sit down and enjoy this meal? I’m hungry, and if I judge rightly, you are too.”

Baffled, Carver seated himself in the chair opposite her.

“What’s the gag?” he asked abruptly.

She looked at him. Then: “Remember the last time we sat at a table together? In a little tavern on Titan?”

He nodded stonily.

“Remember what you asked me?”

He started. “I asked you to let your hair down...” he said at length.

She glanced down at the tablecloth and toyed with her knife. “That wasn’t exactly all you asked,” she said. Her eyes came up swiftly, and their amber depths were filled with an inexplicable light. “Well, I’m going to do what you asked. I’ll tell you the whole story of ... of why I couldn’t go to Callisto.”

“Isn’t it obvious?” he asked grimly.

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

“You don’t need to tell me,” he went on harshly. “You had a date with that mystery ship of yours, to hold up the *Josephine*! You had a date with your pirate crew—to murder a man!”

Her eyes flamed at him. “I shot him in self-defense. None of us has ever killed before. You know that. It was either kill him or die myself.”

“The courts wouldn’t see it that way,” he said mercilessly. “The justification doesn’t lie in the self-defense angle, but in your purpose on that ship, and that certainly was not self-defense. Therefore, neither was your killing.”

“You talk of justice!” she shot at him bitterly. “Was it just that an innocent man was sent to life imprisonment on the moon? Was it justice that his greatest invention was pirated from him, by an unscrupulous corporation? Was it justice that my mother died of a broken heart when my father’s death was reported?”

He stared at her wide-eyed. “What do you mean...?” he began.

“I mean my name is not Ina Malden,” she snapped. “It’s...”

He leaped to his feet, realization flooding through him. “Mitchell!” he gasped. “You-you’re Arnold Mitchell’s daughter!”

“Yes,” she said quietly. “My name is Ann Mitchell.”

He sat down heavily. “Go on,” he said wearily. “You might as well tell me the whole story.”

She waved a hand at the table. “You might as well eat while I tell you.”

He nodded, and began to consume the excellent food before him, glancing occasionally at her as she talked.

“When Dad escaped from the Lunar Penal colony, one of the men who helped him was killed. It was his crushed body that was found, and it was thought to be Dad. But he escaped, with the help of some of his old laboratory friends, and a few others who knew the truth.

“Spacelines stole the principles of the space liners, like the *Josephine*, from Dad, and had him sent up for life on a trumped up spy charge. Forty years he’d worked on that principle, and then it was pirated from him and he found himself thrown, no longer a young man, into the horror of the penal colony on the moon. Justice...?” She paused bitterly a moment, then went on.

“For twenty years he worked here, to complete his plans for revenge on Spacelines. Twenty

years, and then ... he found a disrupter he hadn't dreamed the meteorite could contain—"

Carver stopped her. "I don't understand this disrupter stuff," he said. "What are they?"

"Magra showed you the crater where the meteorite struck ages ago?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Well, that meteorite is a stranger to the solar system, maybe even to this universe. Its elemental make-up is entirely foreign to the elemental make-up of all substances as we know them. Not all the elements seem to be present, but there are at least twenty, and although they seem to be identical to our elements, they have a—constitutional animosity to them. Essentially they are the same element, but Daddy said something about the possibility of their having a reverse atomic construction, which makes them violently disruptive. Whenever a component element from the meteorite comes in contact with its opposite twin in our elemental scheme, it causes our element to burst into energy largely dispersed as heat, leaving an ash which looks like inert crystal. And through some weird catalysis, the meteoric element remains unchanged, unreduced, capable of continuing its destructive action on its affinity element until that elemental supply is exhausted."

"You mean, that if some copper from this meteorite came in contact with copper in our elemental form, it would disrupt that copper into ... heat, ashes, and crystal?"

"Yes. Except that copper is the one element we are sure the meteorite does not contain. In fact, we use copper as the only safe container for it."

"And your Dad—what was the element he found?" Carver asked hesitantly.

"Carbon."

"Carbon?" repeated Carver uncomprehendingly.

"Yes. And carbon is one of the major constituents of the human body..."

"Great God," Carver exclaimed. "You mean...?"

"It killed him ... horribly," she said, her face white. "He burned to death, before us all, bursting into horrible flames that left nothing but ashes—and crystals; and we could do nothing to stop it..."

"You poor kid," said Carver gently.

Her amber eyes fixed on him. "But before it happened, he made me promise that whatever happened to him, I would carry out the plan he had made to ruin Spacelines, and get back what rightfully belonged to him—and to me."

Carver stiffened. "Yes," he said, his eyes on hers.

She leaned forward suddenly. "John, why don't you take that uniform off and stay here with me, just as Professor Caldwell is doing?"

Slowly he pulled himself to his feet and stared down at her.

"On Earth they will think you dead. No one will ever find us. And in a few more months, our plans will be finished, and we can go back, and put Spacelines out of business. Their ships,

any ships, will be so obsolete beside ships like our new one, that they'll be ruined overnight. And we have the money, the capital, now, to back us up. Professor Caldwell was an old friend of Dad's."

"So he *is* a traitor!" Carver grated harshly.

She eyed him, her body tense. "Never mind him. None of us are traitors—or pirates! I've asked you a question. Do you realize what it means—that I am offering you—" her voice became soft "—myself!"

"I don't want you that way," he began angrily.

She rose to her feet. "*That way!*" she breathed. "Do you mean...?"

For an instant he stared at her. Then he nodded, slowly. "Yes," he admitted directly. "I love you. But I'd rather kill you than have you at the cost of my self-respect—and my duty!"

For a long moment her eyes met his, the glow in their amber depths slowly dying. Then they dropped and she said lowly:

"I knew you would say that—but I had to ask. Of course, you will have to remain here, a prisoner. But you have the freedom of the caves. There is no way to escape."

Abruptly she turned and almost ran from the room.

## CHAPTER VI THE DISRUPTERS

« ^ »

GEORGE BUREE dropped the space suit unceremoniously on the floor and jerked a head at Carver.

"Get into it, Carver," he said. "We're going places."

"By whose orders?" asked Carver.

"Never mind who," snapped Buree. "It just happens we're going on a little job of work, and you might as well earn your keep. And besides, you've been asking a million questions about the disrupters. Now's your chance to see 'em, and get a little exercise into the bargain."

"You mean we're going to the crater?" asked Carver suddenly snapping erect.

Buree grinned. "Don't get excited, copper. You won't get a chance to get away. We're only giving you one tank of air, and that ain't enough to get you out to your ship on the desert. So if you're anxious to die, go ahead and make a break for it."

Carver grunted and proceeded to climb into the space suit.

"Tune your radio to minus 91 band," said Buree as he pulled on his own helmet.

Carver nodded and snapped his own helmet into place, adjusting the oxygen before he switched the radio on and tuned to the band.

“Ready?” questioned the tinny voice of the pirate.

“Yes. Let’s go.”

At the airlock, Carver halted. Two other figures were waiting, clad in space suits. One was Franco Magra, and the other was turned away from them, so that Carver couldn’t see the face. But the voice that suddenly rang in his ears was that of Ann Mitchell.

“Lead on, Franco,” she commanded. “George, you carry the ropes and the copper nets. I’ll bring up the rear.”

Buree eyed the pile of ropes and nets and grunted. “I’ll be hanged if I carry everything,” he said. “Here, copper, you grab an armful, too.”

Carver’s face burned in his helmet as he realized Ann Mitchell was deliberately ignoring him. Was it to torment him? If not, why had she included him in this mysterious trip to the crater?

Tight-lipped, he gathered a load of equipment and strode after Magra toward the airlock.

Outside, the party turned through the dust toward the south, and after a half hour of steady going, Carver began to sweat in his suit. He cursed the surge of resentment that had caused him to shoulder the greater part of the equipment, and then grinned wryly as he realized the reason for it. But the grin died, and the dull ache in his breast became accentuated as he thought of the look that had been in Ann Mitchell’s amber eyes as she fled from the room after his refusal to join the party.

She was behind him now, and he could almost feel her eyes staring at his back. Abruptly he whirled and stared directly into the face-plate of George Buree, who was grinning.

“What’s the matter, copper?” said Buree derisively. “Pick up too big a load, smart guy? Turn around and get going. I’m enjoying this more than I thought I would.”

Wordlessly, Carver turned and resumed his slogging through the difficult footing of the dust. She hadn’t been behind him anyway, staring at him. He, John Carver, space patrolman, was acting like a love-sick fool.

“You damned fool!” he whispered to himself.

“What’s that?” came Buree’s voice in his phones. “Who’s a damned fool?”

“Shut up, George,” came Ann’s voice in the phones. “You aren’t going so hot yourself, with a lighter load.”

Momentarily Carver grinned, but up ahead, he saw Franco Magra stop dead in his stride, then abruptly forge ahead again.

All at once Carver realized there was some deeper significance to this trip to the crater than was evident on the surface. He tensed, and the rest of the trip forgot the load he carried. He was thinking deeply.

\* \* \*

An hour later, after a strenuous climb up a gradual slope of slippery white granite, they stood on the lip of the giant crater and stared down into the debris of this cosmic collision.

Carver dumped his equipment to the ground and looked with interest into the deeply shadowed depression. Huge, fantastically shattered masses of granite lay scattered about as though broken on the anvil of Thor. Down in the depths, darker masses lay, almost buried in soft, powdery ash, mingled here and there with crystal formations that gleamed in the starlight.

"Professor Caldwell wants some carbon disrupters," Ann's voice came. "They're located at the base of this slope, at the bottom of a twenty foot cliff. If we drop a net from that cliff, we should be able to get a few."

Franco's voice came. "George, drop the lines down that slope and over the cliff edge. You and Ann stay up here and be ready to pull up the nets. Carver and I will go down to that ledge down there and throw the nets out."

Carver eyed the ropes. Then he surveyed the scene below. He grinned tightly. "Better make those ropes pretty tight up on this end," he said. "That slope is slippery."

"What's the matter?" jibed Buree. "Afraid I'll let go this end?"

"No. But I'll feel a lot safer if we tie those ropes around a couple of boulders," returned Carver levelly. "I'm anxious to see some of these disrupters, but I'm not anxious to find myself dumped in among 'em." He eyed Magra for a long instant.

The Martian returned his gaze imperturbably. "Nor I," he returned calmly. "But I guess Ann and George can tie knots good enough for me, Mr. Carver, and that should be good enough for you."

He turned and dragged the copper nets from the pile of equipment and began fastening the clips to ropes.

George Buree and Ann began looping the other ropes about boulders and securing them. When all was ready, Magra let the nets slide down to the cliff edge and over.

"There's a ledge directly over the lip," he said. "We'll do our fishing from there."

Following the nets, he grasped one of the descending ropes and slid almost recklessly down. Carver followed. A moment later, both men stood on the tiny ledge, out of sight of the pair up above. Below lay the crater floor, and the gleaming crystal masses almost buried in choking ash.

"Everything okay down there?" came Buree's voice.

"Yes," replied Magra. "We're getting ready to throw out the nets now."

Suiting the action to the word, he heaved a net far out. A cloud of ash spurted up momentarily, then subsided. Carver followed suit with his net, and then turned to Magra. The man was motioning silently to him, and scratching something in the dust of the ledge with his metal-encased foot. Puzzled, Carver eyed him, then glanced down. There in the dust were the

symbols -76.

"What...?" he began.

"Okay, George," Magra said loudly. "Pull up the nets after I count ten to give us time to get off to one side."

But he made no move, and his hand lifted, to hold a finger across his faceplate for silence. Then he pointed to the -76 in the dust, and began counting.

"One, two, three..."

He reached out and turned Carver's radio control. His voice ceased, but Carver could still see he was speaking. Puzzled, he finished turning the dial to -76, then waited.

Magra twirled his own dial and suddenly his voice broke in.

"Carver," he said swiftly. "I want to say a few words for your ears alone. That's why I had you shift bands."

Carver grunted. "Go ahead. What's on your mind?"

Abruptly Magra drew his gun. "Just this," he snarled. "I know your game, and you're not going to get away with it, see! Ann belongs to me, and I'm keeping her. So, Mr. Carver, you aren't coming out of this crater alive!"

Carver eyed him coldly. But he made no move. Magra went on.

"I know why Ann had you come along on this trip," he said. "She's in love with you, and she's got plans of taking you into the party..."

"I wouldn't join with pirates and murderers," interrupted Carver coldly. "But you wouldn't understand that. As for Ann being in love with me, that's none of your business."

"No? Well, you aren't fooling me a bit. That act goes over big with Ann, but it don't with me. Caldwell was pretty high and mighty too, until he convinced Ann he was an old friend of her father. Then he decided very generously, and out of respect for his old pal, to throw in with us. Well, the old coot won't get anything out of it but a lot of experimenting—on things that don't mean anything. I'll take care of these carbon disrupters myself! As for you, this is the end of the trail. I'm going to take charge of that."

"No you won't," said Carver contemptuously. "Because your boot is dissolving. You must be standing on a chrome disrupt—"

He hurled his body forward with all his strength as Magra glanced hastily downward, and his fist knocked the weapon from the pirate's hand. Then they both went down with a crash. All at once his radio phone went dead, and he realized the crash had knocked it out of commission. He could no longer hear Magra's voice, though he could see his lips moving through his face plate.

Hastily he rolled away. Hand-to-hand fighting was impossible. The risk of breaking a face plate was too great, and meant instant suffocation. The only chance to gain the upper hand before Magra could signal to his companions was to get that gun.



Magra was already on his feet, his fingers twisting at his radio dial when Carver saw the weapon. He snatched it up. Leaping forward where Magra could see him, he brandished it menacingly. Abruptly the pirate's hand dropped from the radio dial. Carver walked slowly forward, reached out, and knocked the dial off with an armored hand. Magra's face was white with rage, but he dared not risk a move. Carver backed away again, grinning.

"That makes us even," he said to himself.

Picking up a rope, he motioned to Magra to lie down. "Never thought I'd be doing this again," he remarked aloud. "My but you look mad, Mr. Magra. I'm glad I can't hear what you are saying. I don't believe it's very complimentary."

Hastily he secured the pirate, then faced the crater edge above him. Grasping the rope, he climbed laboriously over the edge of the ledge, then on up the slope. Above him the copper nets were just disappearing over the top of the slope. Visible was one spacesuited figure. He held his head low down and continued his climb. Coming over the edge, he leveled his gun menacingly. In the face plate he recognized the startled face of Ann Mitchell. But her lips were not moving. She wasn't calling Buree. Why? Carver finished climbing the slope, and as Buree's form loomed up in the dim light, he covered him too.

He waved at the weapons in Buree's belt, and motioned toward the crater. Scowling, Buree lifted them gingerly with one hand and tossed them over the edge. Ann did the same at Carver's motion. Then Carver motioned Buree to the edge of the slope.

"Down," he said aloud.

Buree, watching his lips, could not mistake the order. But he hesitated.

"Afraid?" Carver mouthed the word carefully, then grinned.

Buree lurched forward, his lips tight, but he halted as Carver leveled the gun directly on his face plate. For an instant he stared, then he turned and slid slowly down the slope, guiding himself with the rope.

Carver turned to Ann, removed one of the extra air cylinders at her belt and transferred it to his own suit. Then he motioned her forward. At her questioning look, he pointed out over the desert.

"My ship," he mouthed.

She glanced once at the crater, then shrugged and turned to descend to the desert floor.

\* \* \*

Two hours later he slammed the inner port of the patrol ship behind him and removed his helmet with an explosive sigh of relief. Ann did likewise, and faced him, her auburn hair damp with sweat, her face grimy.

"What do you expect to gain by this?" she asked.

He looked at her. "My resignation from the service," he said harshly.

"Your resignation?"

"Yes. When I turn you in, and give the Stellar Patrol the location of your pirate hideout, I'm through. I'll never wear a uniform again."

He stepped out of his suit and waved the gun at her. "Take off your suit," he directed.

She obeyed in silence, her face tense. "What did you do to Franco?" she asked lowly.

Once again the surge of jealousy went through him, and he thrust it down with an effort.

"Tied him up again," he said briefly.

"Then he'll be after us in the *Starlight*," she said. "You can't get away."

"Oh yes I can. With you aboard, they won't dare touch me. I can ride right on through to Earth and nobody'll stop me."

"That's what you think. Even at the cost of my life, they'll go through with our plan. That has been our watchword for twenty years. They'll kill me first, rather than let you spoil their plans."

"No they won't. Because Franco Magra is in love with you, and he won't chance it."

She stared. "You're crazy!"

He tightened his lips and strode forward to the controls.

She went on. "He's in love with Mary, and she with him..."

"We'll see," he said grimly. "Get into an acceleration seat. I'm blasting off!"

She slid into a seat and fixed the straps. He blasted off. For a half hour they were silent as he launched the speedy patrol ship out into the void. Behind them Pluto became a giant black globe with a white gash across its face like gleaming white teeth.

"Here comes the *Starlight*," Ann broke the silence.

Carver glanced to the stern and picked out the silver speck rapidly growing larger behind them. He shrugged. "Won't do them any good," he said. "They won't kill you. Not while Magra is commanding."

The radio broke into action, and Carver switched on the receiver.

"John," came a voice. "Are you listening?"

Carver started. It was Caldwell's voice. He stepped to the speaker.

"I'm listening, Caldwell," he said tersely. "And I'm sorry, but nothing you can say will mean anything."

"Listen, lad," came Caldwell's voice with a note of urgent plea in it. "You've got to believe me. It's certain death for you if you go on. If you will release Ann, I'll guarantee you we won't molest you. You can continue on to Earth and..." the voice hesitated momentarily, then went on, "...and report me kidnaped, location unknown."

"You're asking me to be a traitor to duty," rasped Carver. "And you're wasting your time."

"Your orders were to obey my commands regardless of their nature," said Caldwell.

"And I'll do that," returned Carver bitterly. "I'll report you kidnaped, all right, and I won't give your location. But I can't guarantee what Ann Mitchell will say. However, that's none of my concern. My orders when I was placed on this mission didn't include releasing pirates after I've captured them, and I'm taking Ann Mitchell back to Earth with me."

There was a momentary silence.

Then Caldwell's voice came again. "You'll take the girl you love back to—execution?" he asked.

Carver stiffened. "Yes," he said harshly.

"Then I shall have to blast you out of space," said Caldwell heavily. "I cannot let you ruin my plans."

"You talk as though you were in command," Carver said.

"I am."

"What about Magra? He's in love with Ann, and he won't dare blast this ship.

"Magra is not aboard," came Caldwell's voice calmly.

Carver gasped. "Not aboard..."

"No. Mary saw you escaping, and I followed. I don't know where Magra or Buree are. I trust you haven't killed them. For Mary's sake."

"I haven't. They should be safely in the caves by now."

"Good," returned Caldwell in evident relief. "And now, lad, please listen to reason, and drop Ann out of the airlock, where I can pick her up. I guarantee I'll see that you aren't pursued."

"No," said Carver. "I can't do it. I told you I'd turn her in and I'll do it. As long as I wear this uniform, I'll do my duty. And after this job is done, I'll take it off. Goodbye, Professor." He snapped off the receiver switch and stepped back to his controls.

Abruptly he heard the switch snapped on again, and Ann's voice.

"Professor Caldwell," she said swiftly. "Turn back, and carry out our plans. Forget me. I won't talk. I love John. Goodbye." She turned, her back to the receiver and faced Carver, who rose slowly to his feet and advanced.

"John," she whispered. "Do your duty ... because I admire you for it ... but please kiss me now. We can have two weeks of happiness before we get to ... Earth—" her voice broke and her eyes filled with tears.

With an exclamation Carver leaped forward and swept her into his arms. "Ann!" he uttered brokenly. "Why do you make it so hard for me?"

He pressed his lips against hers, and for a long moment she clung to him. Then abruptly she pushed him away and he felt something hard pressing into his stomach.

“Back!” she cried triumphantly, the tears in her eyes still glistening as she laughed harshly. “Step back. Or I’ll shoot!”

“My own gun!” he choked. “You tricked me! You faked all that—that kiss!”

She stopped laughing, and her chin trembled momentarily. “No,” she said with sudden pallor creeping over her cheeks. “I didn’t fake it. I meant it. I do love you, John, but my duty is as great as yours. And I will no more be a traitor than you—even for love. And now, if you don’t want to force me to kill you, you’ll sit down at those controls and stay there without moving for ten minutes.” She switched on the transmitter.

“I’m coming, Professor,” she said. “Pick me up.” She turned back to Carver.

“Quick!” she said. “I’d rather you didn’t see me crying, and I’m going to.” Abruptly she turned and ran from the control room. Carver stood where he was, his mind in a turmoil. He was still standing there when he saw her space-suited figure float away from the airlock into space.

Then, when the gleaming silver shape of the *Starlight* had drawn up and swallowed the mote that was Ann Mitchell, his fingers crept up to his shoulder and grasped the stripes of the Stellar Patrol. Grimly, tight-lipped, he ripped them off and allowed them to drop to the floor of the control room.

## BOOK II TWO YEARS AFTER

### CHAPTER I WAR CLOUDS

« ^ »

THE magnificent jaggedness of New York’s skyline mirrored itself in miniature in John Carver’s clear gray eyes, narrowed now with a frowning concern as they swept slowly over the panorama of the city.

Before him, spreading out from his position on the broad sweep of steps which formed a gleaming marble approach to the Federal Building, lay the sprawling yet contradictorily towering ramparts of the solar system’s largest metropolis.

New York’s colossal towers etched themselves sharply against the turquoise blue of the clear noonday sky on the nearer horizon, the whole panorama wavering to indistinctness with the mist of distance on the rim of vision.

*War!* With Venus. What would it mean?

He pictured the towers crumbling, the sprawling of the city no longer contradictory; visioned the lovely blue of the sky veiled in smoke, clouded by poison gas; imagined the metropolis ripped by bursting rocket shells, livid with violet electrical flames.

Carver shook his head worriedly and descended the steps. Two years had passed since the shock of that hour when he realized that Ann Mitchell had gone, leaving behind her a heartbroken "goodbye."

Time and again a ship had fallen prey to the girl pirate, mute evidence that Ann Mitchell was determined to carry out to its forefated conclusion her threat of vengeance on the United Spacelines for the great wrong the many-tentacled corporation had done her father.

Always fate seemed to thwart John Carver's search for the girl. For two years he'd been taking passage on space-freighters, hoping to be aboard one time when the girl raider struck. But on every occasion their paths had failed to cross.

Carver swung his hard, space-browned body powerfully from the last step and turned into the crowd. Then abruptly he halted, frozen, while his eyes widened incredulously.

*"Ann!"*

Urging his momentarily paralyzed form into motion, he leaped after the unmistakable flame of auburn-red hair that topped the head of the slim, curved feminine form, tripping lithely with amazing nonchalance into the throng of people.

*"Ann!"*

He reached her and gripped her curving arm in his fingers, turning her about. The girl pirate's warm amber eyes widened in spontaneous, glistening joy as they centered on his face.

"John!" she choked happily; then slowly her face clouded and the joy faded from her misting eyes.

He held her tightly, as if fearing she would vanish, wraithlike.

"Ann," he breathed. "If you knew how I've searched for you!"

"I know," she said. "I heard you quit your job with Stellar Patrol, and I knew why you must have done it."

He eyed her reproachfully. "You knew, and yet—"

Tears sprang into her lovely eyes.

"How could I?" she answered. "Oh, John, let's not bring that up again. I'm wanted for piracy—"

Carver's tensed fingers on her arm in tight pressure suddenly halted her words, and he glanced about, startled.

"Ann! What are you doing here? They'll catch you!"

"I am Ina Malden, on Earth, and she has every right to walk the streets of New York. And yet," her voice took on a double tone, "I think this will be the last time for me here."

"Why?" His voice was tense.

"Spacelines' agents are on my trail. They suspect, I am sure. Tonight I leave, to return to Pluto."

John Carver retained his grip on her arm and swung her back into the crowd.

“Come with me,” he said, “to my office, where we can talk without fear of interruption. I have something I want to talk about seriously.”

In his office, Carver faced the girl, scanning her lovely features closely while he marshalled his thoughts for the persuasive argument he was about to launch. She regarded him quizzically, her slim fingers toying with one another as she sat, her beauty seeming to increase the sharp contrast with the grim plainness of the office furnishings.

Abruptly Carver advanced, caught her erect and drew her to him, his eyes close to hers.

“Ann, I love you! I want you. You must listen to me.”

She tried to push him away, a strange fear in the amber depths of her eyes, a fear that he instinctively felt was fear of herself. He pressed his advantage.

“Ann, kiss me!”

She sobbed. “I do so want to—”

He lowered his head and pressed his lips against hers. For a moment they remained immobile, then all at once they melted, and she clung to him. When they parted, he smiled down at her. It seemed a victory.

“Ann,” Carver began softly. “Why can’t Ina Malden become Mrs. John Carver? Even if Spacelines suspects, they can’t prove anything. We can be married and live out our lives as they should be lived, and no one will ever know—”

Ann’s face hardened, and a hopeless look came into her eyes.

“No, John, it can never be. We wouldn’t be happy, as you picture. Always over our heads would hang the fear of discovery, the fear of being torn apart. Piracy is punishable under maritime and space law by death.

“Even if we could evade the law by making full restitution, and by taking advantage of the leniency of American courts, there remain the English courts, extradition, and trial for murder—and there’d be but one outcome to such a trial.”

“Yes,” Carver admitted, “that would all be true, *if they had Ann Mitchell on trial!* But it will be impossible to prove that *you* are the girl pirate. Married to me, you would be perfectly safe.”

She smiled sadly at him and shook her head.

“If you only realized how wrong you are. You forget the most important thing.”

“And that?”

“None of Arnold Mitchell’s band has ever turned traitor—ever broken their vow to avenge my father, to break Spacelines. They’re a jealous band, especially—” her face darkened, “—especially Franco. I’d always be afraid of him. No, we could never keep our secret. Too many know.”

“But why does that mean they’d reveal your identity? They could continue their plans without you.”

Ann shook her head. “No. I’m the only one who knows the vital secrets of all the inventions of my father—inventions that are absolutely necessary to the completion of the plan. Even the secret of the mystery ship would be hard for them to understand. It would be impossible to build more ships without these vital secrets.

“So, when they had garnered wealth enough to start the competing line that would ruin Spacelines, they could build no ships without my help. And I could not help, and at the same time remain true to you. Your conscience would bind you to your sworn duty.”

“Duty!” Carver exploded. “I’m not in the Stellar Patrol any longer!”

“You talk much differently now than you did out there on Pluto two years ago,” Ann said.

“I was in service then!”

“And now too,” she pointed out. “War is brewing—”

“Has come!” he interrupted.

“Yes, and it will surely affect you, will affect all trained men. You could not be a traitor. Later, you will realize it. And the war is another reason why I must continue my plans—why I must go back to Pluto immediately—”

A knock on the outer door startled the girl into frozen silence. Her face paled and she crossed the room to the inspection panel, which admitted of a clear view without revealing to persons outside the fact that they were under scrutiny.

“Oh!” she gasped.

“Who is it?” Carver questioned anxiously.

“A Spacelines agent!”

The blood drained from John Carver’s face and his chin grew rocky firm, tight-muscled.

“Quick, into this room!” He shoved the girl hastily through a door and closed it. Next he strode purposefully to his desk, opened a drawer and made sure his gun was within instant reach. Then he answered the door.

“Mr. John Carver?” questioned the man who faced him.

Carver nodded. “Yes.”

“I’m Arthur Wiegand, representing Spacelines. I’ve come to see you on a very important matter.”

Carver hesitated, then his face got stony.

“Come in,” he said shortly. Wiegand entered and seated himself in the cushioned chair from which Ann had just fled to her concealment in the next room. Carver glanced once at the door to make sure it was closed, and frowned a bit as he saw that it was slightly ajar. He had no doubt that the girl had opened it thus, so that she could hear. He seated himself across the desk

from Wiegand, his hand on the drawer where reposed his weapon.

"Go ahead," he said, "you can get down to business."

Wiegand hesitated, while he scrutinized Carver's bronzed features closely. Abruptly he spoke.

"*You are the only man who has ever seen the girl pirate!*"

Carver started, and his knuckles whitened with his grip on the handle of the drawer.

"And—" he questioned menacingly, tautly.

Wiegand shrugged. "We of Spacelines know only what you made public when you returned without Professor Caldwell from that secret research voyage for Mellon. Professor Caldwell has never been heard from. We know you mustered out of the Stellar Patrol to conduct a search for someone, something; a search which has never been successful. Was it for Caldwell?"

"But whatever it is, we have no desire to pry into your private affairs. My errand here is of a different nature. I merely mention these facts so that you will understand why I come to you.

"I still don't get what you're driving at," said Carver shortly.

"But you will when I tell you what we want."

"And that is—"

"We want the secret of the mystery ship!"

Carver leaped to his feet. "Man, you're crazy!" he exclaimed.

Wiegand rose also, his lean features tense, and his face hard.

"Carver, you *know* where the girl pirate's hideout is! The story you gave of the abduction of Professor Caldwell was fictitious, made up for some good reason of your own! Our investigators made sure of that. What other marvels beside the ship you observed that caused you to keep the real truth obscured, I do not know.

"I don't blame you for trying to get these secrets for yourself. It is not that about which I'm concerned. My errand is of much more serious nature. It has to do with you, with me, with all of Earth people."

"What in hell *are* you driving at?" Carver demanded suspiciously, again seating himself.

Wiegand sank back also. "War!" he uttered succinctly.

"You mean—"

"I mean that Earth, all of us, are in dire danger of defeat, which will mean virtual slavery under the vice-lords of Venus, unless we can secure some armament, some weapon, that will strengthen our defense and our *attack!* With ships like the mystery ship, we would be invisible. We could crush the enemy!"

Carver stared at Spacelines' agent, the beginnings of an idea starting to surge through his



mind.

Wiegand continued: "We know you are aware of the pirate's hideout, and we are willing to provide you with the most modern and efficient ship at our disposal, so that you may make an attempt to secure the secret we *must* have. It is not a matter of being in our employ. It is a duty to your country, to your planet; an obligation that no true citizen can disavow."

Carver's lips curled a bit at the man's words. Spacelines was ever wont to prate about duty and patriotism when their own hides were endangered by war. But he dismissed this thought for the idea that had now developed fully in his brain.

"I understand that," he said, "and if it were only for the company, I'd refuse. But I realize perhaps as much as you do the seriousness of the war—in fact, I have just come from the Federal Building."

"Then you'll do it?" asked Wiegand eagerly.

"Yes," Carver nodded, "I'll do it."

Wiegand leaped to his feet and extended his hand across the desk.

"Great, man! And if you succeed, Spacelines will see that you are well rewarded."

"I was just getting to that," said Carver dryly. "But the fact is, I'm not looking for monetary reward for duty."

"What then?" asked Wiegand. "Position, an appointment—"

Carver shook his head. "No. My request is simply this. I want the grant of one small favor, a favor that Spacelines can easily give, and which will cost them nothing."

Wiegand smiled. "Mr. Carver, you can depend on Spacelines to grant any request you make—if you succeed."

Carver rose to his feet. "Then you can count on me. I'll not guarantee results, but I'll do my best. And I'll call at your office to arrange details later."

When the door had closed behind the Spacelines agent, Carver strode to the other door and flung it open,

"Ann!" he exclaimed. "Ann! This is our chance!" He halted in startled amazement, then leaped forward and swept his gaze about the whole interior of the room. It was empty.

"Gone!" he gasped. "She's gone!"

On the desk in the center of the room he saw a small square of white. A note, hastily scribbled. He snatched it up and scanned its few short sentences:

*John:*

*More than ever I realize now that conflicting duty is the barrier between us—my sworn oath to avenge my father, yours to justice and your country. Our love is impossible and it is best that I go. You will never see me again, but I want you to always remember that I loved you more than life itself. And because I do, I cannot remain to tempt you to renunciation of your duty.*

*Please forgive me*

—Ann.

Carver stared down at the paper.

“God in Heaven, she thought I meant to betray her!”

## CHAPTER II A MIDNIGHT VISITOR

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THE terms of the agreement were clear enough.

“—attempt to procure and deliver to United Spacelines, Incorporated, the secret and specifications of the mystery ship—”

Carver stopped reading.

“Change this to read: ‘—and deliver to the Government of Federated Earth Nations—’ ” he directed.

The official hesitated, looked long at him, then smiled and nodded.

“Of course, Mr. Carver. You realize, surely, that we are not attempting to gain this secret for our own personal use, but merely for the good of Earth people in this dire emergency. I’ll have it changed at once.”

He took the papers, noted the desired change in ink, and called the secretary.

“Have this corrected immediately.”

The secretary nodded and made a hasty exit.

Carver got up and strode to the window of the office and stared down from the enormous height of the Spacelines Building. One hundred stories below him lay the streets of Lower Manhattan, seething with life and blazing with millions of brilliant lights which made the night’s blanket of darkness seem futile, except in the heavens above, which were inky by comparison.

The official joined him and spoke with precisely selected words.

“We have prepared a ship, the *Falcon*, our newest and most scientifically designed, for your needs, and it is ready right now at the Trenton Spaceport. We would desire that you leave at once. This ship is capable of a speed almost twice that of our regular cruisers. Also she is fueled and provisioned for a five-year voyage, so that in case of an accident—”

“There will be no accident,” interrupted Carver. “If I don’t return, I won’t be alive either. As for leaving, I’ll embark exactly at midnight.”

“That will be quite satisfactory. With such speed at your disposal, it would be possible to reach the very edge of the solar system in, say, two months.”

Carver glanced sharply at the man, but kept silent. This was clever probing, he knew, to determine the distance to his goal, which would make it possible to approximately guess the location—and in the case of Pluto, there would be little difficulty in guessing correctly.

The secretary returned now and handed the typed agreement to the official.

Carver returned to the desk and seated himself, carefully scanning the paper as it was placed before him. The correction had been made, and the balance was simply a retainer, with the stipulation that recompense would come in the form of a granted request, to be made upon return, and not stipulated as to exact nature.

Finally nodding his head in satisfaction he picked up the pen and scribbled his name at the bottom, whereupon the official affixed his own signature with a flourish. Carver retained a duplicate and handed the original to the other.

“There,” he said shortly. “At best, it is a gamble for both of us. I will do my best in the line of duty.”

“Which is all anyone can expect,” said the official smugly, smiling peculiarly as he took up the paper and blew on it to dry the ink.

Carver jammed on his hat and strode from the room without further comment.

Outside he directed his steps back toward his office. The building was mostly in darkness as he neared its entrance. Just beyond, standing in the shadows, he observed a slouching masculine form. He stared intently at the fellow a moment, but could discern nothing of his features.

Then shrugging his shoulders, he entered, took the elevator to his floor. The hallway was dimly lit, and his footsteps echoed hollowly as he strode toward the door of his office, fumbling in his pocket for his keys.

Abruptly he halted and stared down at the chrome-steel lock. The frame of the doorway gaped, the lock almost completely burned away as if by some acid. Carver stooped to inspect it in amazement. The jagged edges of it were encrusted with grayish ash, and even as he watched, a fragment of chrome-steel tinkled to the floor to shatter into a whitish powder.

“Disrupters!” Carver gasped. “That was done by disrupters!” He stood transfixed for a moment, the significance of it all bursting into his brain like a bombshell. Nowhere in the solar system, except on Pluto, existed anything like these strange metals.

“Ann!” he exclaimed.

Abruptly he laid a hand on the knob and flung open the door.

“Ann—”

“Come in,” said a cold feminine voice, “and close the door behind you. I’ve got you covered, and at the first move—”

Jaw agape, he stared at the pale, flaxen-haired girl standing before him, a weapon held in

slim white fingers trained directly upon his chest.

“Mary Buree!” he uttered dumbfoundedly.

“Come in!” snapped the Martian girl. “And close that door!”

There was anxiety in the tones of the girl pirate from the Arnold Mitchell band, and it was with relief that she saw Carver comply.

“But Ann has gone!” he exclaimed. “She’s gone back to Pluto.”

“I know,” said Mary shortly.

“But—what about you?”

“She doesn’t know we are here,” Mary explained, the peculiar hardness still in her voice.

“We?”

She waved the weapon in the direction of the inner office.

“Go in there and sit down. I’ll explain everything.”

Carver went through the door leading to the other office and sat down. Mary closed that door also, then stood for a moment, contemplating him.

His eyes dropped to an oblong copper box, small, not more than three inches by two, and an inch in height. It was firmly clasped, and its seams fused, so that it was absolutely tight.

“What’s this?” he asked sharply, picking it up and examining it. Faintly, it seemed, he could hear a rustling noise from within.

She stared at him. “That box,” she uttered seriously, “contains something of extreme menace to Earth. It contains perhaps a half-dozen carbon disrupters.”

“Carbon dis—” Carver leaped to his feet, his features gone white with consternation. “Great heavens, girl, do you know what you are saying?”

She nodded. “Yes. If they were to be loosed—”

“Loosed!” he gasped. “It’d be havoc! Everywhere on Earth is carbon—in the earth—in plants—in humans! Why if those disrupters were to be liberated in this room, New York would be destroyed within twenty-four hours, and after that—”

He halted as the full significance became apparent to both of them.

“Yes,” she shuddered. “It would be awful. I tried to make Franco see it. I love him too much to allow him to do such a thing. And that’s why I came here.”

Carver looked at her, his brain whirling. The weapon was no longer trained on him, but hung in limp fingers. The girl’s face was pale and imploring.

“What do you mean?” Carver asked hoarsely.

“It’s, the war,” she began. “I’ll explain it all. Franco has been contacting the Venus people. It is because of this that war has been declared. He has promised to help them conquer Earth—”

"You mean he's turned traitor!"

Mary stood erect, stung to the quick by his blurted out exclamation.

"No!" she blazed at him. "Franco is no traitor—he just believes that Ann is wrong—and she is! He thinks the only way to smash Spacelines is through this war. And he is right. It will be quicker, more effective, and more complete. Then there will be no need to start a competing line—if that were ever possible!"

Carver's eyes narrowed. "And so, he betrayed Ann, in her absence, and took control of the pirate band."

"He has taken over the control that has grown lax in her hands!" flashed Mary. "For the past two years, she has made little progress toward our final plans. It is *she* who has betrayed the cause!"

Down in his heart Carver felt a little thrill at this revelation. Deep within her, though she wouldn't admit it, Ann knew she was wrong.

"But what have the disrupters to do with it?" he asked. "Why did you bring them to Earth?"

"I didn't bring them. The Venus people persuaded Franco that it would end the war quickly, and—"

"So he brought them!"

Mary shook her head. "No, he sent them with my brother, George. I came along. I tried to make Franco see that it was wrong, that it would be a mistake. But he is ambitious, eager, his judgment is clouded—so I stole the box. And when I had, I didn't know what to do with it. Nowhere on Earth is it safe. Somehow the disrupters will eventually be loosed, even though I buried the box, or threw it in the sea, or anywhere I can think of.

"I found out where you were, and came here. I used a chrome-disrupter on the door; then I waited, but you didn't come, and I decided to spend the night here."

Carver was dazed by her story. "What do you think I can do about it?"

She shrugged, and smiled a bit maliciously. "You have the box now. It is your Earth. The rest is up to you. My problem is to *keep* the man I love!"

Carver gripped her shoulders and shook her. "How do you mean that?"

A jealous look shot into her eyes. "Franco's been fascinated by Ann. She's a witch! When she returns—"

Mary halted suddenly, wrenched herself away from his grasp and again leveled her weapon.

"Don't try to stop me!" she cried, her voice cat-like now, filled with jealousy and fear. "Back! I've done my part, now you do yours. If you do not, I swear Ann will never live to take Franco from me! I will kill her first!"

Carver stood dazed as the full significance of her words broke over him. Ann, going back to

Pluto—and Franco Magra, having turned the band against her, waiting for her!

“God!” he muttered. “Now I’ve got to go. She would die first, rather than be possessed by him!”

Mary stood hesitantly, eyeing him, her weapon wavering in doubt.

“You mean you were going?”

Abruptly an idea sprang into Carver’s mind. He couldn’t tell her, of course, what his real errand was. But—“Yes,” he replied shrewdly. “I’ve been commissioned by Spacelines to capture her, and bring her back.”

Mary’s eyes expressed instant disbelief. “You’re lying! I know you love her! You wouldn’t bring her back to—”

“But that’s why I want to find her. I know the American courts will pardon her. It’s the only way.”

Intently the Martian girl peered into his eyes and he held them level with hers.

“American courts—” she began, then halted and a peculiar smile spread over her features. “Yes, I think you’re right. But you don’t know where to find her—”

“You tell me,” said Carver, calculatingly, boldly.

Mary looked long at him. “I’ll take a chance,” she decided suddenly. “The caverns in the Ice Mountains, south of the great crater.”

Her voice went hard. “But—remember, if you don’t succeed, I’ll do *anything* to keep Franco. He’s mine, do you hear? Mine!”

“My ship, the *Falcon*, is ready at the Trenton Spaceport now,” Carver informed her. “I leave at midnight. And when I get to Pluto, you won’t betray me to Franco?”

“I won’t tell,” she promised and shrugged. “Why should I? If you succeed, it will make my task easy. And now, I’m going.”

John Carver stared after the girl thoughtfully as she disappeared through the door.

“I don’t believe you will,” he muttered when she had gone. “And you think I don’t consider the *English* courts! Mary, you are still only a child! And who am I to judge a child in love? But jealousy is a terrible thing!”

He shrugged worriedly and turned to his desk. Thoughtfully, he held the little copper box in his hand and his eyes stared unseeingly.

Pluto—that was the only safe place in all the solar system for this potent little casket of death. Even though he failed in his mission to secure the secret of the Mitchell ship, this box *must* go back there. Carver had three reasons now to go to Pluto: the war and his duty, this box of deadly disrupters and most urgent of all, Ann was in dire danger. When Franco Magra got her in his power—

Almost John Carver crushed the tiny box in his hand as his fingers clenched grimly.

## CHAPTER III OUTWARD BOUND

« ^ »

A STREAK of light," said James Daley, master mechanic of Trenton Spaceport, glancing appreciatively through the office window at the sleek, gleaming ship reposing in the ways out on the field. "You've got the best ship in the solar system out there."

Carver smiled. "She's a darling, all right," he admitted, "but you're wrong about being the best. There's one better than she."

"You mean—"

"The mystery ship."

Daley nodded. "Yeah, I guess you're right there. I've never seen her myself, but I've talked to many who have, and they say she's appropriately named. Too bad such a brilliant discovery had to be made by an outlaw."

Carver glanced at his watch, then at the white-uniformed men swarming about on the field outside.

"Pretty near time for the take-off," he observed. "Eight minutes more."

He rose to his feet and extended a hand.

"Thanks for the service you've given me on this ship," he said. "With Jim Daley bossing the job, it's a cinch there'll be nothing going wrong because of bum mechanics."

" 'Please omit flowers,' " laughed Daley. "That's only my job, and if I didn't do it, I wouldn't be here long. But I don't envy you your job, whatever it is. No telling what you'll have to run through now, with the spacelanes full of battleships."

"But your chances are good. No ship can catch you on a stern chase, I'll bank on that, and you can run circles around anything except that pirate ship, and the chances are slim of meeting her."

Carver strode to the door. "I hope not," he uttered enigmatically.

"Say!" exclaimed Daley. "You aren't—" He stopped and grinned. "None of my business, eh? But anyway, I wish you success. The *Falcon* won't fail you in an emergency, and I suspect this is a real one."

They were walking across the field now, and the white-uniformed mechanics stood about, their work completed, curiously watching the sleek ship waiting to bellow out into space.

Carver halted at the swelling side of the ship for a final handshake, then entered. Sealing the door, he went to the control room, swiftly noting every detail of mechanical perfection and readiness for operation. He glanced again at his watch, noted that there were fifty-two seconds

to go, placed his hand on the starting lever and glanced from the port for a last glimpse of the ground at close range.

It might be the last time he'd ever view it from this angle...

Outside he saw Daley and his men had backed away to a safe distance and were standing with eyes intent on the ship. Behind them, from a hangar, Carver noted a half-nude figure running with a staggering trot.

At the same instant, Daley whirled to face the fellow, astonishment evident on his features even from Carver's position. The man gestured wildly at the ship, talking rapidly, though Carver could hear no sound of his voice within the vacuum-insulated ship. Carver saw Daley's jaw drop, saw him take a few undecided steps toward the ship, then begin recklessly to run.

Carver removed his hand from the starting lever. Very evidently something was seriously wrong, to cause the master mechanic to brave the rocket blasts in order to halt him.

"Can't afford to ignore Daley and go," Carver muttered to himself.

"As you were!" grated a masculine voice behind him. "And get going. Pull that lever down!"

Carver spun himself from the cushioned seat in astonishment.

Standing tensely in the center of the room, his fingers clutching an automatic trained steadily at Carver's heart, was a white-uniformed figure, hair disheveled, eyes glaring.

"George Buree—Mary's brother!" Carver exclaimed in dismay.

"Pull that lever!" repeated Buree hoarsely. "Pull it—or I'll put a bullet through your heart!"

Carver hesitated a moment, debating the advisability of launching himself at the man's legs; then glancing from the window at Daley's running form, he swung back to his seat. If he failed to get Buree, the pirate himself would take the ship off and burn Daley to a crisp. Even now, Carver realized he'd have to get the *Falcon* off quickly. Hastily he pulled the lever down.

The *Falcon* slid slowly along on her skids, rockets roaring, nose pointed upward at a slight angle, gathering speed with a rapidity that caused Buree to grasp desperately for the wall, then find himself pinned helplessly against its hardness. Carver's broad shoulders pressed back into the cushions as he sat, eyes intent on his dials. In the technicalities of the take-off, he could spare no glance to discover what had happened to Buree.

Beyond the atmosphere, he cut the speed to a steady increase, realizing the pressure made movement difficult. Then, slowly, he rose to his feet.

"Now," Carver said, fixing a wary eye on Buree, "what do you want aboard this ship?"

Buree grunted. "You know what I want! I'm after those atomic disrupters."

"I'm afraid you've made a mistake."

"Oh, no, I haven't! You've got that little copper box right there in your jacket pocket. Come on, hand it over!"

Buree straightened up and advanced a few steps threateningly.



"How did, you know I had it—how did you know to come here?" questioned Carver.

Buree grinned. "Mary told me."

Carver frowned. "Told you?"

"Yeah. She didn't want to, but I grabbed her as she came out of your office."

"So you were the man standing outside the building!"

"Right the first time. But I was only standing there because Mary'd gone inside, and I didn't know where. That's a big building, you know. So when she came out, I made her tell me what she did with the box."

"Then you know where I'm going?"

"I know where you think you're headed," retorted Buree. "But you're going to take me back to Earth first."

"First?"

"Sure. I haven't got anything against you and Ann. And maybe it'll save me a lot of trouble," returned Buree meaningly. "I'm going to see that Mary gets a break too. But quit the chatter. I want that box!"

He advanced until his weapon jabbed into Carver's short ribs.

*"Come on, give it to me!"*

Carver shrugged, his eyes, veiled by narrowed lashes, fixed analytically on the pirate. Then he fished the box from his pocket, juggled it and nearly dropped it.

"Look out!" exclaimed Buree, reaching for it. "Those things are dangerous—"

Carver moved like lightning, taking a quick step aside. His arm swept Buree's hand holding the gun aside with one smash, while his other hand tossed the copper box lightly to a cushioned seat. Then his fist swung upward from the waist—

*Crack!* A bullet from Buree's gun slammed into the chrome-steel wall, flattened, and dropped to the floor.

Startled and confused by the attack, Buree attempted to swing his weapon back into line. Carver blocked him once more. At the same time his fist slammed against Buree's jaw, snapping his head back.

Another shot thundered in the close confines of the ship, and Carver grappled for the weapon. Twisting the wrist that held it, he exerted pressure until the fingers slowly released their grip, dropping the gun to the floor. Carver kicked it spinning across the floor.

In retaliation, Buree's knee came up into his groin, doubling him over in agony. Carver released his hold and staggered back. Buree followed swiftly, lashing out with both fists. One caught Carver on the temple and rocked him to his toes. Dazed, he retreated, covering up. Buree followed his advantage, lashing out blow after blow, which in the main bounced harmlessly off Carver's brawny forearms and shoulders.

Abruptly Carver lowered his head and charged. Both men went to the floor, rolling and writhing in furious combat. With a strenuous struggle, Carver got astride his opponent and pinned his shoulders to the floor, but Buree drove a fist straight up with horrible force into Carver's midriff. Carver collapsed with a gasp, rolling away to avoid a stranglehold.

Fighting for air, he staggered to his feet in time to meet the onrush of the enraged pirate. Stiff body blows crashed through Carver's guard against his chest, and for a moment he gave way. A policy of covered retreat sufficed to give him back his breath, and he braced himself. They exchanged blows, then Carver feinted with his left, opening Buree's guard.

Smack!

His right fist caught Buree squarely under the jaw and the Martian collapsed in a heap. He rolled and moaned, tried to get up, then fell back.

"There," gasped Carver, panting. "I guess that'll hold you for a while! And now, I'll put these disrupters in a safe place."

He retrieved the copper box, crossed the room and opened a locked metal cubby in the wall. Placing the box inside, he closed the cubby, the catch snapping loudly in the silence.

Behind him came a rush of footsteps. Startled and chagrined to realize Buree had been shamming his helplessness, Carver whirled about. For one flashing instant he saw the pirate's triumphant face as Buree charged toward him. Then the butt of a gun crashed against his forehead and darkness rushed in upon him as he tumbled to the floor.

\* \* \*

Interminable eons of fathomless time seemed to have elapsed when John Carver struggled slowly and painfully up from the abyss of darkness.

His subconscious brain seemed urging him to an effort of waking, against which his whole body revolted, because it meant returning to an all encompassing, throbbing pain that beat against his temples like the pound of a great drop forge. His skull seemed bursting with agony, and he became more aware of details, only to wince at the least facial movement.

He forced his eyelids upward, gritting his teeth in protest against the torture of the attempt. With light, his brain closed off the fogging pain, and although he still suffered, he found that he could think clearly. The reason for his pain flooded back into his memory.

"Buree!" he groaned. "The disrupters!"

He rose staggeringly and stared around. His gaze fell upon the wall, and he exclaimed aloud. The cubby door hung awry on its hinges. Carver needed no second glance to realize the disrupters were gone.

His gaze shot to the porthole and the blackness of space beyond it. Two hasty strides brought him across the tiny room and he stared out.

Like a vast green-and-white bubble he saw Earth floating beside the ship, apparently only a few hundred yards away, deceptively small with the illusion of space.

A rapid search of the ship revealed that George Buree was no longer aboard *the Falcon*.

"But how—" Carver paused, struck by the only possible answer to his question, and made his way toward the bow, to the recess wherein snuggled the tiny life-rocket. The compartment was mockingly empty.

"Gone!" Carver gasped. "Back to Earth, with the disrupters!"

He returned to the control room and stared through the port. Plainly visible on the surface of the green sphere so deceptively close, though he knew it was several million miles away, were the configurations of Asia, Europe and Africa.

"No use going back there," he said aloud. "It'd be impossible to find him. And a warning is worthless. Once the disrupters are released, havoc is inevitable!"

He shuddered as he pictured the weirdly intense flames creeping, spreading, growing vastly as they infected the carbon content of the Earth, of every plant, of every living being. Horrible flaming death, much worse than any plague—it would sweep irresistibly across the entire face of the planet.

"No," Carver decided dully. "There's no use in going back."

His mind swept to Ann Mitchell and the dire peril awaiting her on the dark planet. A mental reproduction of Franco Magra's piercing black eyes, the rapacious cast of his aquiline features, flashed across his memory. Therein lay the more immediate danger—danger that chilled him to the core. Ann in those ruthless, lusting hands!

With sudden determination on his grim features, Carver turned to the control board and scanned the meters. Several computations and a consultation with a chart revealed that the *Falcon* was still on a course not greatly deviating from the correct one.

Sliding into the seat Carver began compensating with directional rocketbursts; then, the course corrected, he applied full power until the whole ship reeled and shuddered under the impetus of its flaming rocket tubes. Terrific acceleration pressed him back into his seat, but he withstood it grimly.

The needle on the speed indicator swept slowly around in a steady increase, building up to a tremendous speed before Carver finally shut the rockets off.

## CHAPTER IV THE BLACK WORLD AGAIN

« ^ »

PLUTO rolled like a great gray ball in the blackness of space, only dimly lit by the tiny disc of the sun, far back in the void. But for all its dimness, each surface detail stood out with startling clarity, unblurred by the presence of an atmosphere.

Ages ago, the planet must have had an atmosphere, but something had happened to it.

And its vanishment seemed destined forever to remain one of the unsolvable mysteries of space.

But now, staring down upon its surface, John Carver gave no thought to mysteries. He sought the range of peaks known as the Ice Mountains. Somewhere at their foot, fronting the great Dust Desert, were the caves he was seeking.

He gave a grunt of satisfaction as he finally picked out the dim, jagged white line that indicated the mountain range. From space, they gave the illusion of being formed of ice, but they were not. They were great masses of tortured granite, marble-white granite, torn somehow in some unnameable catastrophe from the bowels of the planet.

Carver turned to his levers. As he did so, his eye caught a fleeting glimpse of a hurtling mass, rushing down upon him from the blackness of space with express-train speed. It was a great, jagged fragment of rock, hurtling straight for the *Falcon*. Instinctively he jammed the rocket lever down to its full limit and crashed back into his seat, pinned there by the sudden tremendous acceleration.

For three long seconds that seemed centuries, his body pressed rigidly against the seat. His eyes remained glued on the approaching menace. It seemed slowly veering, the result of his flight from its path, and almost it seemed that it would miss him. Then, revolving as it came, a jutting prominence of shattered rock protruded, and with a terrific crash the ugly serrations tore at the tail of the *Falcon*. Half the rockets ceased firing. The *Falcon* veered dizzily, whirling like a top.

Carver's hand pushed back the lever, stopping the rockets' blasts. But the heavens still revolved dizzily, presenting first the star-ridden reaches of outer space, then the vast gray ball of the nearby planet, and finally the receding bulk of the tiny Plutonian satellite.

Senses whirling, Carver studied the spin of the ship; then carefully he fired several bow rockets. Slowly the rotation stopped. Once more the planet loomed before him, much closer now. He discovered the ship was dropping at terrific speed.

Instinctively he reached forth a hand to slow his momentum with a burst from the forward rockets, then desisted. No use wasting fuel necessary for landing. With half his stern rockets gone, he'd never be able to produce much more than a crazy whirl. As it was, he was headed almost straight for his destination, into the heart of the Dust Desert.

Carver relaxed, allowing the ship to plunge down, a grin growing on his tense face. His jaw relaxed, and he discovered his teeth hurt, so hard had he been clenching them.

"Whew!" he breathed. "I never hope to come any closer than that!"

Fifteen minutes later he moved into action, began braking the ship with the forward rockets. Flame belched out to the fore at timed intervals. Between blasts, he could see the now near surface rushing up at him with lessening speed.

The planet was still convex below him, but several rocket bursts later, it suddenly seemed to collapse and become saucerlike, concave. Carver shoved the lever down hard, and the surface vanished in flame. The ship shuddered warningly—a crash came from something giving way in the stern.

Locking the braking rockets, Carver swung himself laboriously into his space suit, then returned to his position. The rockets ceased flaring as he released the lever, revealing the surface alarmingly near.

Quickly he leveled the ship off, pointing it toward the distant mountains, until it hurtled along almost parallel with the surface. Once more he fired the bow rockets, his speed dropping rapidly. Then abruptly they went dead. Out of fuel.

Carver clutched the seat hard, and clung.

Then the ship hit. Like a spent shell it plowed into dust-thin, powdery, almost impalpable dust, never disturbed except by the impact of meteorites, completely hiding vision. For several miles the ship slid along, exactly like a giant bob-sled, braking for a halt at the end of its run. Then shudderingly it came to rest with a sickening crash. The bow struck something solid, caved in like an eggshell. Carver lost his hold and plunged into the instrument board.

For a moment he was dazed; then he recovered, to stagger to his feet. Outside the dust was settling swiftly, in free fall unsupported by atmosphere. It dropped like a giant curtain with startling rapidity. Then, amazingly, the scene became once more one of extreme clarity and distinctness.

Carver grinned. "Made it!" he exulted. "A sweet landing—thanks to this dust. And I'm only a few miles from the mountains. Couldn't have done much better if I'd actually picked the spot."

He turned to the port. Opening it, he clung while the air rushed out of the ship; then he stood and stared into the desert for a moment. He turned back.

"I'll need air," he said aloud.

Hung beside the rack that had supported his space suit were five cylinders. Search for more revealed that the storage compartment had been torn from the ship, along with the rockets, in the collision. Only the automatic lock had prevented the air from rushing from the forepart of the ship out there in space. Carver shrugged. The five cylinders would have to do.

He threw them out the port, then climbed down to the surface of the desert. A moment he stared at the wrecked ship, then shrugged once more.

He glanced down at the cylinders. Forty hours of life, plus the seven remaining in the container on his back! In forty-seven hours he would have to find the caves, or—

Facing the gray-white hills to the north, Carver shrugged, then struck out with steady, slogging steps.

For about four miles he continued on, beginning to sweat inside his suit at the steady effort and the weight of the cylinders he carried. He halted there to scrutinize his surroundings, grunted exultantly as he recognized the plain before the cavern entrance. It was deserted. No ship was visible on its flat expanse. He clamped his jaw firmly and went on.

Reaching the black opening of the cave he halted, removed his flash from his belt and sent its beam into the darkness. It revealed blank, rocky walls, gaping, doorless tunnel entrances. Nothing else.

The cavern was empty, deserted!

The discovery was a shock. Mary Buree had lied to him!

What chance had he, single-handed and confined to a radius of not more than fifty miles, to find Ann Mitchell now? And without a single clue of what direction to take, even if she were nearby. Clearly he was at the end of the trail.

All thought of the danger to Earth—the release of the disrupters—the invading hordes of Venus—of his own impending death, fled from Carver's mind. His one great concern, searing its torture into his brain, was Ann Mitchell and the danger that awaited her at the hands of Franco Magra. Ann—his Ann—the plaything of the unscrupulous Martian!

Carver groaned. Perhaps even now she was helplessly in the Martian's clutches.

Carver's very soul revolted against the girl's fate, and unconsciously he braced his shoulders, forcing his feet to carry him forward into the blackness of the tunnel. To his last breath he would press his search. Perhaps in the cavern he might find some clue.

Another thought spurred him on to quicker steps. The *Falcon* had been fast; certainly faster than the Earth ship Ann was undoubtedly using. Therefore it might be several days before she arrived on Pluto. And considering the fact that he'd used top speed all the way, it was almost a certainty she hadn't arrived yet.

Hope sprang up again, although his reason told him it was an even more unfounded hope than that which had spurred him on toward the cavern. Facing him there had been doubt, and here nothing but certain death—a death that might become a horrible one of thirst.

But in a space suit, with its air-tight check on rapid evaporation of the body fluids, Carver felt certain he could stand a lack of water for the remaining forty-four hours of his air supply. Already three hours were gone in covering the four miles to this spot.

He flashed his light about every corner of the cavern as he advanced. Before him, on the dusty floor, he saw faint, almost obliterated tracks. They were unidentifiable, except that they seemed to lead inward, judging from the direction the loose dust had been kicked by whomever or whatever had passed this way.

*Inward!*

Galvanized into action, Carver plunged down the corridor leading into the black depths of the cave. As rapidly as possible he followed the telltale marks along the tunnel, which led slightly downgrade. The marks continued on without interruption, and he found no difficulty in keeping to the trail for some minutes. But suddenly they vanished!

Gazing around, Carver realized all at once that the rocky walls were no longer visible. He had emerged into a gigantic cavern, whose walls were beyond range of his flash.

Suddenly he began to gasp, and his nostrils clung together on every inward surge of his breath. He halted, fumbling with his free hand for one of the burdensome oxygen tanks at his belt. His tank was becoming exhausted of its oxygen content, and it would be necessary to replace it, a comparatively simple operation. He realized with amazement that he must have progressed through the tunnel for a matter of some four hours.

Awkwardly he shut the valve that led to his helmet, took off the empty tank and dropped it into the dust, forced meanwhile to hold his breath until the new tank was snapped into place.

Breathing naturally once more, Carver took stock of the huge cavern. It stretched on into darkness, its walls white granite that caught the light of his flash, making the whole interior glow. Abruptly he snapped it off and stood still, his heart beating madly. There, in the rocky wall, was an unmistakable metal airlock. That meant there was air beyond.

"I've found it!" he breathed.

In the darkness, Carver became aware of two dim sources of radiation. Above, the twinkle of several stars, evidently from a great hole in the cavern roof—and off to one side, behind a series of sand dunes, a wavering artificial light, which slowly advanced.

It came now over the crest and Carver saw that it was a man, carrying a flash, and dressed in a space suit, as he was.

Carver fingered the weapon at his belt and his jaw set grimly. That was undoubtedly one of the pirates. Slowly the man walked forward, apparently headed for the airlock. Carver slumped down behind a sand pile. The man must pass very close to his position.

When, he had approached within ten yards, Carver leaped out, leveled his weapon and shouted.

"Don't make a move!" he yelled. "Or I'll burn you!"

There seemed utter surprise in the other's bearing, and Carver advanced slowly, wondering at the man's apparent lack of resistance.

"John!" came a muffled, incredulous exclamation.

Carver halted, stunned, peering through the gloom.

"Professor Caldwell!" he gasped.

Jamming his weapon into his belt, he advanced as quickly as possible, his arm outstretched. In a moment the two men grasped each other's metal-clad fingers, staring into each other's amazed eyes.

"John!" exclaimed Caldwell again. "How in Heaven's name did you get here?"

Carver jerked an explanatory arm upward.

"I was wrecked in the Dust Desert, he said. "When I reached the cavern, I found it empty, but luckily I stumbled on the trail and followed it."

"I don't know how you did it!" gasped the scientist. "I had thought no one could possibly have discovered this place."

Carver grinned. "I *had* to discover it, or die! I was marooned with only five oxygen cylinders and no water. In fact, I'm almost dead on my feet—" He halted abruptly, clutching Caldwell's arm. "Franco Magra!" he burst out. "Where is he?"

"Inside," said Caldwell. "But why—"

“Venus has declared war on Earth, and he is helping them.”

“Magra helping Venus—but how?”

“Disrupters! This very minute, George Buree is on Earth, with a box of carbon disrupters, waiting orders to release them—if they haven’t been loosed already.”

“Great God!

“And to cap it all, Magra has proved a traitor to Ann Mitchell, and plans to overthrow her and take her for his plaything.”

“What are you saying?” Caldwell gripped Carver’s arm. “John! She’s here! Just arrived some hours ago.”

Carver stared. “We’ve got to rescue her, before it’s too late,” he said desperately, “and then we’ve got to capture the mystery ship, get the secret from Ann, and take both the ship and Ann back to Earth.”

“Both?” Caldwell’s gaze penetrated deep into Carver’s eyes.

“Yes. I’ve *got* to do it!

“I see,” replied Caldwell slowly. “John, do you think—”

“Never mind that,” said Carver hoarsely. “Too much hangs in the balance to stand here arguing. Will you help me?”

“Certainly,” replied Caldwell simply. “I have an oath to protect the Earth from enemies, of course, and I can do nothing else, even if it means...”

“Then come on. We’ve got to find Franco Magra and Ann.”

Leading the way, Caldwell passed them through the airlock, and once inside, removed his helmet.

“Take off your suit,” he directed. “We’ll have to move carefully from now on. And have your weapons ready. We shall certainly meet with opposition. However, the element of surprise will be on our side.”

Carver complied, surprised at the pleasing warmth of the air about him.

Caldwell led the way down the corridor to a door in the rocky wall.

“Beyond that you will find Magra,” he whispered, halting. “If we can capture him, the rest should be easy.”

Carver gripped his arm, “You stay back,” he ordered. “It might be a good thing to keep them unaware that you know of my presence. If I succeed, I can do it single-handedly just as easily; and if I fail, you may be able to turn the tables.”

Caldwell nodded and fell back. “I’ll keep watch,” he agreed. “And you can count on me. They’ve given me the freedom of the place ever since I’ve been here. I’ve seen many marvelous things; and in return, I’ve done several things in research that have aided them. If you fail, I will do what I can.”



Carver gripped the old man's fingers once more, and as Caldwell slipped back into the gloom, he stepped to the closed door, weapon in hand. From behind it came the sound of voices. Carver recognized one of them instantly. It was Franco Magra, the saturnine Martian engineer.

Carver flung the door open.

"Don't make a move, Magra," he warned quietly, stepping inside, "or I'll shoot to kill!"

Magra and the other pirate whirled at the sound of Carver's voice to goggle at him incredulously.

"You!" the engineer exclaimed.

"Drop your belts on the floor," directed Carver with a wave of his automatic, ignoring their amazement.

Glaring at him, Magra complied slowly, but he did not offer to make an overt move. Carver watched him intently.

"Now back up," he ordered.

The pair took several slow steps backward. Carver advancing until he could pick up their belts. He carried them in one hand, and covered his captives with the gun in his other.

"What do you want?" asked Magra hoarsely.

"I want the mystery ship, and Ann," said Carver grimly, "and I'm going to take both. Come on, lead me to her!"

"He won't need too," came a clear feminine voice behind him. "Drop that gun!"

"Ann!"

Carver retained his weapon, stepping sideward until he could see the girl and yet keep control over his two captives.

Ann Mitchell stood in the doorway, an automatic held in her ready hand.

"Drop that gun," she repeated quietly. Her face was pale, but determined.

"And if I don't?" he questioned tensely, pleadingly.

A hurt expression came into her eyes, but she covered it instantly.

"Don't force me, John," she said. "If you threaten the failure of all my plans, even my love for you can't prevent me from pulling this trigger. Oh, don't you see what you're trying to do!"

"Yes," he returned steadily. "I want to save the Earth, and I want to save you.

"Save me?" She shook her head sadly. "No, that is a dream. They hang murderers in England."

"No!" began Carver.

A hopeless, determined look spread over Ann's face and she leveled her weapon directly at

his heart.

“Drop your gun, John, or I’ll shoot.”

She spoke in low, deadly sure tones, and Carver could not doubt that she meant it. Shrugging helplessly, he dropped the gun.

Instantly Magra leaped forward, lifting a wooden chair from the floor. Carver tried to duck, but he was too late. The chair crashed against his skull and he went down, Ann’s startled scream becoming a ringing echo in his unconsciousness as blackness surged overwhelmingly in upon him.

## CHAPTER V

### “TAKE ME BACK—TO DIE!”

« ^ »

JOHN!” The sibilant whisper penetrated Carver’s dulled senses as he struggled up from the depths of unconsciousness. “John, where are you?”

Carver opened his eyes, staring into darkness no less dense than the oblivion from which he had just come. He struggled to sit up but found himself tightly bound.

“Who’s there?” he called uncertainly.

“Not so loud,” came the anxious whisper again, this time nearer, and Carver recognized the tones of old Professor Caldwell. “The guard will hear you.

“This way,” Carver whispered back. “I’m tied to a post or something.”

Abruptly he felt Caldwell’s hands on his shoulder, then they fumbled down to his hands and squeezed reassuringly. Carver felt the cold steel of a knife on his flesh. A few seconds, then his tightly bound wrists came free. He shook the strands from him and sat erect in the darkness as Caldwell freed his legs.

“Where is this place?” whispered Carver.

“One of the storerooms. There’s a rear door. Magra forgot about it, or else doesn’t suspect that I know of your presence.”

“Good!” returned Carver. “How long have I been in here?”

“Not more than two hours. I had to wait until the furor died down before I tried to free you. But come on. We haven’t any time to waste. Ann knows now that Magra has turned traitor, and I fear for her safety.”

Carver gripped the old scientist’s arm.

“Lead the way,” he whispered tensely. “I’ve a score to settle with that fellow, and this time—”

He followed the groping figure of the scientist through the gloom and finally discerned the gray dimness of an opening into a tunnel beyond. Once there, he loosed his grasp of the old man's shoulder and faced him.

"Where is Magra now?"

Caldwell pressed the knife into his hand.

"This is the only weapon I could get," he said. "But maybe we can sneak up on the guard around the corner at the other storeroom door. He has a heat gun—"

Carver took the knife and pressed Caldwell's arm.

"You stay here," he whispered hoarsely. "I'll get that gun!"

He advanced quietly down the tunnel till he came to the bend. He peered around the corner. Ten feet away the guard leaned against the wall beside a barred door. He seemed lost in thought, or just dozing.

Carver grinned thinly. He edged around the wall, keeping his body as much in the shadow as possible. Five feet he slid along. A fragment of stone grated beneath his foot. The guard whirled, reaching for his belt.

Still crouching, Carver hurled his body forward, the point of the knife held upward in his clenched fist. He brought his arm up, and with a sickening *thuck!* the knife drove home under the chin, sending the point up into the skull. Almost soundlessly the guard toppled over backward, tearing the knife from Carver's grasp.

Breath rasping, Carver bent over the corpse and took the heat gun from the clenched fingers. In a holster at the belt, he found an automatic. This, he also stuffed into his own belt. Then, soundlessly, he retraced his steps to Caldwell.

"Lead on," he rasped grimly. "I've got the gun."

Wordlessly, Caldwell led the way down the tunnel to a more lighted section, halting before a doorway.

"Ready?" he asked.

Carver jerked the automatic from his belt and pressed it into the older man's hands.

"Yeah," he grunted. "Go ahead and open it."

Caldwell released the catch, flung the door open. The room beyond was deserted.

"Nobody in here," began Carver, then halted abruptly. From another doorway came an angry voice. It was Franco Magra's! Almost instantly there came a response in Ann Mitchell's cool tone.

"Keep back, Franco," she was saying. "Or I'll shoot! No matter if the rest of the band have turned against me too, I'll take my chances."

Carver shouldered his way through the doorway and faced the scene before him. Franco Magra stood crouched before Ann, facing her leveled weapon with an angry snarl on his face. The girl was standing her ground bravely, although her face was pale and troubled.

"Yes, Magra," grated Carver in low tones. "One move and I'll break every bone in your rotten body."

In startled surprise, Ann turned toward him, her eyes wide.

"John!" she gasped. "And—Professor Caldwell!"

For an instant her gun did not cover Magra, and in that moment he leaped forward. His hand batted the weapon from her fingers, and the other arm clutched her to him. He whirled her body between him and the doorway in which Carver stood.

Carver's hand streaked up with his weapon.

"Don't shoot," Magra warned. "You'll kill her first!"

For answer, Carver tossed his own weapon to Caldwell, then leaped forward. Magra pushed Ann full into his advancing form, himself plunging for the gun on the floor. Carver caught Ann's body, pushed her aside, then left his feet in a flying tackle that caught Magra at the knees.

Both men went down with a crash, Magra's fingers falling short of their intended goal. In the doorway behind, Caldwell stood in indecision, his own automatic held limply at his side. With a quick glance, Ann rose and ran forward, snatching her own gun from the floor. Then she backed against the wall, holding the weapon clutched in her fingers as she watched the battle before her.

Magra heaved mightily, Carver catapulting off the Martian's big body to crash against the opposite wall. He lunged forward again almost immediately, but not in time to prevent Magra from regaining his footing. Both men met with fists lashing out, and both landed thuddingly against the other's body. Carver winced as his breath went from his lungs with a gasp. The big Martian engineer was far the better in this sort of rough and tumble.

Carver danced warily back on his toes, sparring. Magra followed, becoming annoyed at his inability to penetrate the haze of stinging blows and trained guard that Carver employed. With an angry snort, he rushed forward suddenly with the full effect of his two hundred and sixty pounds. Carver saw him coming, drove his fist straight out from the shoulder.

Crack!

His arm went limp from the force of the blow, dropping to his side. His whole fist numb, Carver watched Magra sag slowly to the rocky floor, jaw slack and eyes growing hazy.

Ann also stared down at the limp body, her gun held in untensed fingers for a moment, then coming up to cover Carver once more.

He paid no attention, but leaped instead with a warning shout to Caldwell's side.

In the outer room several pirates were charging forward, and out in the corridor came the rest. Carver snatched the heat gun from the astonished Caldwell's hand and with his one good arm leveled it on the attacking men.

"Stop!" he yelled. "Or I'll burn you all down!"

Frustrated, they reeled back, glaring at him, but dominated by the menace of the heat gun.

"Drop your guns!" he directed. "Quick!"

They complied, scowling. Over his shoulder Carver spoke in low tones to the girl.

"Now's your chance, Ann," he said quietly. "If you're going to shoot me, go ahead and get it over with. But I wish you'd see what I'm trying to do. Once back on Earth, we can get things fixed up—"

He backed until he could see both her face and that of Caldwell, in addition to the pirates he was holding at bay.

For an instant Ann stared at him, then her arm dropped to her side.

"No, John," she whispered. "I can't see it your way, but I can't shoot you, either."

Carver nodded and advanced once more.

"Down the corridor, all of you men," he snapped. "To the storeroom."

Sullenly they obeyed. At the prison room from which he himself had just escaped, Caldwell opened the door and the pirates filed in. Then Carver kicked the door shut and barred it.

"The front door with the dead guard is still barred," he said. "I guess they're safe enough in there for awhile."

They returned to the room where Ann still stood. Carver advanced to Magra's limp form, which was beginning to stir, and yanked the Martian to his feet. He slapped the man into a conscious state, then pushed him toward the door.

"Take him away," he directed Caldwell, "and lock him up separately. We're going to leave for Earth immediately, and we'll take him along to help us find Buree and those disrupters."

Caldwell nodded, a gleam in his old eyes, and prodding Magra with his automatic he disappeared down the corridor.

Carver turned then to Ann. Her eyes were misty and her arms hung limply at her sides. Slowly her right hand came up and she extended the gun, butt foremost, to him.

"What's that for?" he asked.

"I'm your prisoner," she said dully. "I'm surrendering, so you can take me back to be punished."

For an instant Carver stared at her, then gathered her in his arms. She did not offer to respond.

"Please, Ann," he begged. "Don't take it that way. Don't you see, I am acting for your own good? It's the only way. I've a plan—"

Suddenly she flung her arms about his neck and kissed him fervently, several times; then with a sob in her voice:

"Even if they hang me, I will do as you want," she said brokenly. "I love you. That is all that counts. My work here has failed. My band has gone against me—"

“Ann,” he urged. “Don’t take it that way. I swear they will not hang you. Please trust me. I am sure of what I am doing.”

She kissed him again, sobbing, then tore herself away and ran in the direction Caldwell had gone.

With an ache in his heart, Carver followed.

An hour later, after having donned space suits, the trio and their single prisoner, Franco Magra, emerged from the airlock into the great outer cavern. Caldwell led the way to the sleek mystery ship, destined to be a mystery no longer, and in a few moments they stood in the control room of the ship ready for the take-off. Magra was securely confined in a cabin.

Carver depressed the starting lever and the ship lifted slowly at first, then with gathering speed.

“What a ship!” he breathed, marveling at the steadiness of its control under the lightest pressure of his finger.

Shooting up with increasing momentum, they surged through the great hole in the cavern roof and out into space. Once free of the planet, Carver pointed the mystery ship toward the brilliant dot that marked the sun—toward its third child, Earth.

Behind him a glistening tear rolled down Ann Mitchell’s cheek and splashed on the chrome floor. Old Professor Caldwell saw it and turned away, biting his lip.

## CHAPTER VI DUPED!

« ^ »

It seems,” said Secretary of War Corliss, “that you’ve been duped.” Carver’s forehead grew dull red with anger.

“You mean that when I delivered those drawings and formulas to the patent office, I completed Spacelines’ patent application for the mystery ship?”

“That seems to be the unfortunate fact,” admitted Corliss. “And I don’t see where you have any redress. You agreed to procure and deliver to the Government of Federated Earth Nations, the secret of the pirate ship, for use against the Venusians in the war. That agreement has nothing to do with the patent filed by Spacelines.”

“Then that means Spacelines has full control of the new ship, its manufacture and its use?”

“Well, not exactly. Being in a state of war, they can’t do otherwise than turn the ship and its manufacture over to the Government. But legally, they own it completely, and pending the outcome of the war, it will eventually become their sole property.”

Carver rose to his feet, his face grim.

"So this is my reward for service in the line of duty!"

"You still have your reward to claim, according to your agreement," reminded Corliss. "I imagine you can make Spacelines pay heavily there. They've left themselves wide open."

"No monetary reward could possibly offset the value of the patent rights on the mystery ship!" snapped Carver. "But my request has nothing to do with money. In fact, it is yourself who will have to fulfill it—yourself and the Federated Government."

Corliss' brow wrinkled in a frown.

"What do you mean?"

"My request is complete pardon for Ann Mitchell!"

Corliss regarded him a moment, then shook his head.

"I'm afraid you're asking something that can't be granted," he stated heavily. "You have no such agreement with the Federated Government. I'm afraid the Supreme Court would rule that an agreement entered into by private parties can't be held as binding on the Government."

"According to the laws of the planet, Ann Mitchell is guilty of piracy on the spacelanes, and as such, must be brought to trial. However," he hastened to assure, "I am certain that she will get off with a very light suspended sentence, on that charge—"

"—only to be hanged by the English State courts for murder!" finished Carver bitterly.

Corliss nodded his head sadly. "I'm afraid so, Carver. We are up against an impasse there."

"Does it mean nothing to the English that she has given them the means to save themselves from slavery under Venusian masters?" said Carver angrily. "I—"

"Undoubtedly it does," interrupted Corliss. "I'm afraid such a decision is a matter of time, however, and it will do us no good to discuss it here. In fact—"

The telephone at Corliss' elbow interrupted further speech and he lifted the receiver to his ear. A moment he listened, a baffled expression crossing his features. Then, his brows knitting in a frown, he slowly replaced the instrument and turned to Carver with a peculiar glitter in his eyes.

"It seems," he said levelly, "that you've been duped from both sides. The Patent Office has refused the patent on the grounds that the invention is impracticable. It will not work. Even the ship you captured does not function. The ship is utterly valueless to us!"

"*What!*" gasped Carver incredulously.

"And not only that, but Ann Mitchell and Franco Magra have escaped with the assistance of persons unknown, using a strange type of metal melter, and are now at large, whereabouts unknown!"

Dazed, Carver stared at the Secretary of War for a long moment; then, the realization of what the official's words meant seeping into his brain, he went chalky white.

"Great God!" he groaned. "She *tricked me!*"

Slowly Carver turned and stumbled from the office to the street outside.

Descending the steps, he stood undecided for a moment.

"John! John!" came a call from across the street.

Startled, he swung his gaze to the cab parked there. Professor Caldwell was gesticulating from a side window.

"Come," he called, "it's very important!"

Leaping forward, Carver evaded traffic and reached the cab. Opening the door, he flung himself into the seat. The cab roared from the curb immediately, and as he sank back, Carver found himself staring into the white face of Mary Buree.

"Mary!" he exclaimed. "What—"

"She has come to take us to Magra and Ann," interposed Caldwell quickly. "They plan to loose the carbon disrupters. George Buree rescued them both from prison—"

"I know," offered Carver. "Corliss just told me of it. He also said that the patent on the mystery ship had been 'denied as impracticable'."

"Impracticable?" Caldwell's voice was curiously level and unmoved.

"Yes," returned Carver grimly. "Ann gave me a worthless formula."

Caldwell considered the younger man closely, speculatively.

"And her pardon—what did you learn about that?"

Carver glanced at the scientist with a frown.

"My request was refused, as being a private agreement and not binding on the Federated Government."

"Exactly," said Caldwell. "Federated law is such that justice isn't held up even out of gratitude. And that's why I advised Ann to give you a false formula."

Carver jerked about, startled. "You—"

"Yes. However, I have the correct formula, and I'll file a new patent immediately we rescue Ann. Then, we shall be in a position to dicker. I won't reveal the secret without assurance that full pardon will be given. In a way, all this wasn't necessary, but I suspected Spacelines would trick you, and I wanted to have their application refused. It'll be much easier for us now that Spacelines has no further claims."

Carver sank back in his seat, looking at the old scientist with a baffled stare. Then suddenly he jerked erect again and whirled on Mary.

"Where are they?" he questioned tensely.

"In a warehouse on Long Island," said Mary, white-faced and anxious. "I heard Franco Magra say that he and George were going to release the disrupters on the mainland, and I



slipped away to find you. But Mr. Caldwell intercepted me, and told me he knew where you were.”

“We’ll have to rescue her ourselves, and get those disrupters,” interrupted Caldwell. “An attack by police would only make matters worse.”

“Yes,” agreed Carver hoarsely, “that we’ve got to do, above all!”

In twenty minutes the cab drew to a halt in the warehouse district and Carver leaped out, followed by Caldwell and Mary. He paid the cab driver, who departed. The street was dim with approaching night, and as Mary led the way swiftly down between two warehouses, Carver gripped his gun savagely in his pocket. They stepped into a small boat, Mary taking the oars.

“Let me—” began Carver.

“No,” said Mary hastily. “I know exactly where to go, and we mustn’t lose time.”

Carver seated himself tensely, his gaze bent ahead as the girl stroked with amazing power on the oars, sending the tiny boat slipping rapidly through the water. In a moment he picked out the building toward which they were headed. It was a massive thing, old, rotting, crumbling, unused.

Mary guided the boat under its massive piles and brought it to a drifting halt beside a rickety ladder.

“Up there,” she whispered. “Don’t make any noise. They’re still here.”

“How do you know?” whispered Caldwell.

“Their boat,” indicated Mary, motioning to another craft tied to a pile.

Carver clambered quickly up to the floor of the warehouse, paused to lift the other two up beside him. Then Mary led the way sure-footedly along the rough planks. They came to a door beneath which streamed a thin bar of light.

Mary halted. “In there,” she said in a low voice, her face white and frightened in the gloom.

Drawing his weapon, Carver stepped to the door, then flung it open.

“Don’t move!” he snapped in brittle tones.

Franco Magra and George Buree whirled around to confront the trio at the door, Magra in infuriated rage, Buree in wide-eyed astonishment. In Magra’s hand was the copper box containing the disrupters. And helplessly bound in a chair beside the rough table, on which flickered a kerosene lamp, was Ann Mitchell, a glad light in her eyes.

“John,” she cried, “you’ve come!” Carver held the two pirates at bay. “Untie Ann,” he directed Caldwell, and the older man hastened to comply.

Then, when Ann was safely behind him, next to Mary, he spoke.

“Hand me that box, Magra.”

Glowing, Franco Magra hesitated. Suddenly Buree, who had been regarding Mary with an accusing look in his eyes, leaped forward and snatched the box from Magra.

"*You, a traitor!*" he said brokenly to Mary. Whirling, he turned to the wall, his arm raised to fling the box shatteringly against the planks.

Mary screamed. "*George, don't!*"

Paralyzed, Carver and Caldwell stood unmoving. But not so Mary. Her slim form darted from behind them and ran toward Buree. She flung her arms about him in a desperate attempt to prevent his action.

The copper box escaped his clutching fingers, tumbled to the floor, Buree whirled, thrusting Mary roughly from him. She screamed and stepped back, the high heel of her shoe crunching down on the box. She fell heavily to the floor.

Almost instantly she screamed again, in pain, and Carver became aware of a crackling sound. In horror, he stared at a wisp of hissing black smoke bursting out in rapid growth, spreading with terrible quickness from the girl's small foot.

"Great God!" he choked out in soul-searing horror. "*The box has broken!*"

## CHAPTER VII DISASTER!



MARY screamed again and again, and Buree shrank away in utter terror.

"Mary!" he croaked in stricken, agonized tones. "Oh, God, what have I done?"

Carver leaped forward, but Caldwell's detaining hand on his arm stopped him.

"Don't," he warned in shaken tones. "It's too late!"

Smoke filled the room and red, lurid flames burst forth. With a final despairing scream, Mary sank to the floor, writhing horribly. Almost instantly her body became a mass of crawling, livid red flames, mercifully concealed from vision by a billowing cloud of inky, oily smoke.

Buree turned on Magra insanely. "You devil!" he screamed. "This is your fault. *You* did this!" He hurled himself upon the pirate and bore him back against the wall. Jerking himself from his dazed horror, Carver leaped forward to separate the two, but a roaring line of flame interposed its impassable menace between him and the battling men. The fiery barricade ran along a crack in the floor planks, evidently filled with carbon dust, possibly charcoal.

Baffled, Carver halted. Caldwell's fingers gripped his arm again.

"Come on," he shouted in an imperative tone. "We've got to get out of here before we're trapped!"

Beyond the flames came a hoarse scream of fear from Magra's lips. For Buree had lifted him on high and was hurling him directly into the mass of ravening red that covered the place where Mary's body had disappeared. Almost instantly Magra was a flaming corpse.

Staring wildly about him, Buree turned and plunged for the window, only to run squarely into another advancing line of fire. Writhing crimson sprouted from his body.

Whirling, Carver dashed to the doorway, where Ann stood, white as death.

"Oh, please come!" she begged. "We've got to get away from here!"

They raced in the darkness toward the ladder and the boat. Carver clambered down first, lifted Ann after him, then assisted the aged scientist down. There came the crash of rending wood, and one of the walls of the room they had just left collapsed.

"Get out from under, quick!" gasped Caldwell, glancing back. "This warehouse will collapse in a few minutes."

Hastily Carver shoved the hole pins into the oarlocks and pulled heavily toward open water. He sent the little boat literally plowing forward as the din in the warehouse increased. Crashing walls announced further attacks by the flames, and Carver had barely hurled the boat from beneath the structure before the entire land end collapsed, sending a wave of water rushing out at them.

The boat whirled crazily, then settled again. Powerfully Carver pulled away, watching with horror the growing destruction behind them. Within five minutes the entire warehouse collapsed, its bulk replaced by a lowering mass of ravening flames and rolling smoke.

Coming toward them now was a launch and Carver stopped rowing, standing up in the boat to wave.

"It's a police launch," said Caldwell. "Hail it."

Carver loosed a bellow, and the launch swerved.

"What's going on over there—a thermite explosion?" yelled the man who leaned forward in the bow.

"Never mind," gasped Caldwell, also standing up now as the launch swung in. "Take me back to the mainland with all possible speed. That growing pile of smoke and flame back there is the worst menace Earth has ever faced! I've got to reach shore at once."

"Who are you?" asked the man, a police lieutenant, suspiciously.

"Professor Caldwell."

The lieutenant stared. "Not the scientist just rescued from the pirates?"

"Yes. But never mind that. Get us aboard quickly! It's terribly important. We've got to stop those flames back there. Look! You can see for yourself what is happening now!"

Carver glanced back and paled as he saw immense flames rushing like a wave over the warehouses on both sides of the one already destroyed. They crumbled even as he watched, making the night a lurid hell.

"That fire's caused by carbon atom disrupters," said Caldwell swiftly, "and there's carbon *everywhere!* Does that mean anything to you?"

The lieutenant paled, and sprang into action. Carver lifted Ann aboard the launch, then assisted Caldwell to clamber up its side.

"Isn't this Ann Mitchell, the pirate?" began the lieutenant. "I'll have to arrest—"

"I'll be personally responsible for her," said Caldwell quickly. "I give my word."

"That's good enough for me," returned the lieutenant.

Carver swung himself up and stood watching the havoc behind as the launch swept about in a close circle and sped for the opposite shore.

Caldwell gripped his arm and pointed to the water.

"That'll stop it for awhile," he said grimly, then pointed to the bridges. "But those bridges will have to be dynamited before the flames reach them. Once they get to the mainland—"

"What's the difference?" asked Carver. "They'll get there anyway. There's nothing we can do to stop them."

"Maybe there isn't," said Caldwell, "but I must get to my laboratory immediately. On second thought, I'll go there direct—the authorities will find out soon enough that they must dynamite the bridges to slow the progress of the flames. Look back there. Our warning will be unnecessary!"

Carver stared back at the lurid horizon, shuddered as he saw the entire warehouse district a mass of roaring, leaping fire, the billowing black smoke hiding the lights of Earth's greatest city under an oily pall.

"Yes," he agreed. "You get to your laboratory. I'll see that the authorities understand what must be done."

Behind, an ominous roar drowned out even the noise of the nearing shore of busy New York itself.

Carver tightened his grip about Ann's shoulders as they watched from the high window in the New York University laboratory in New York.

*Boom!*

"There goes the first bridge!"

Ann nodded. "Oh, I wonder if it'll do any good! What can Professor Caldwell have in mind?"

Carver's eyes mirrored the white and red brilliance of the night outside, made thus by thousands of powerful searchlights illuminating the upper end of the island, where nothing now remained but a huge mass of dully glowing red coals. Further south destruction raged, and the water was black with boats hurriedly taking off people marooned in the path of the roaring menace.

"I don't know," Carver admitted, "but if he didn't have something up his sleeve, he'd say so."

The sound of a door opening behind them caused them both to turn from their horror-stricken watching of the destruction across the water. Professor Caldwell, clad in a white laboratory gown, and with a haggard look on his worn features, stood in the doorway, beckoning.

"Come here," he said. "I want you to see something."

Together, they entered the inner sanctum of Caldwell's laboratory. On a workbench in the center of the room was a variety of scientific instruments, a gallon jug half filled with a colorless, water-like fluid; and, strangest of all, a tiny woman's perfume atomizer with a small lump of hard coal beside it.

"I'm about to make a test," said Caldwell. "I'm rather afraid to witness its outcome by myself. If it doesn't work—" He halted significantly.

"What are you going to do, and what's that stuff in the jug?" questioned Carver.

"A chemical I have just formulated, derived from my research work on Pluto. It causes a heavy, extremely inert form of carbonic gas, when heated."

"And the lump of coal?"

"Pure carbon," returned Caldwell. "If the liquid, when sprayed on that lump of coal, causes some change, we'll be sure that I'm on the right track. And if it doesn't we'll have to, try the liquid on the disrupters themselves, and trust to luck.

"However, if it reacts, it will save time, and the chemical can be easily and quickly manufactured in large quantities. If we act swiftly enough to meet the emergency before the flames progress too far, we may be able to blanket them out and extinguish them, besides destroying the disrupters."

"It's *got* to work!" exclaimed Carver.

Caldwell picked up the atomizer. "We'll see in a moment," he said.

With trembling hands he placed the nozzle above the tiny piece of coal and pressed the bulb vigorously. With a hissing noise the liquid sprayed forth, making the coal gleaming wet. Caldwell continued this operation until the coal was thoroughly wetted, then desisted and stepped back, his eyes fixed intently on the wet coal.

"Nothing is happening," breathed Ann in an anxious whisper.

"Wait," said Caldwell hoarsely. "Wait!"

Slowly the black surface of the coal began to grow dim, and gradually it became crystalline, transparent, except for a cloudy black at its core.

"Look!" gasped Carver. "The coal is turning transparent, like—like diamond!"

"Not diamond," corrected Caldwell in a whisper. "The specific gravity is too little. Merely a brittle crystal. But whatever it is, that doesn't matter. The important thing is that it reacts! And

now, we must make the final, most important test. And this one involves danger.”

“I’ll do it,” said Carver grimly. “Just tell me what you want done.”

Caldwell considered. “Yes, you are best fitted to carry it through, being familiar with the actions of the disrupters. I have a delivery coming from the fire department within a few minutes; an asbestos fire-suit. With it, you must cross to Long Island and spray the flames themselves with the solution.

“I have a large paint spray machine which we can install in a boat, and by the time you are ready, I’ll have several gallons of the chemical prepared. That should be enough to make the test. Meanwhile I’ll be having great quantities made. I hope it extinguishes the flames.”

“I have a feeling that it will,” Carver breathed.

“Don’t be too sure,” Caldwell returned cautiously.

“All ready?” questioned Caldwell, anxiously staring out over the water at the burning island, almost hidden in smoke.

Carver, moving cumbersomely in his awkward asbestos suit, nodded and clambered down into the waiting boat.

“All set,” came his muffled voice.

Ann stood palely beside the old scientist on the dock.

“Be careful, John,” she pleaded.

He grinned reassuringly up at her through the mica visor, then settled himself heavily on the seat and started the motor. Slowly the craft moved off toward Long Island. Experimentally Carver operated—the chemical gun and a heavy spray shot from the nozzle.

Nearing the shore, he slowed down, turning parallel and edging in closer. Right down to the water’s edge crowded the ominous flames.

He brought the boat in close, picked up the spray gun and leveled it. A moment he hesitated, a vision of a lovely, screaming girl enveloped in horrid atomic flames rising before him. Then he pressed the trigger viciously.

Hissing loudly under the air pressure, a fine spray shot toward the flames at the water’s edge. For many moments nothing happened, but Carver kept the gun grimly on one spot, until it became saturated. Nothing occurred beyond a slight hesitancy in the moiling movement of the flames.

Anxiously Carver peered at them; then he stood stock still. All at once a loud shout, almost deafening him in his helmet, broke from his lips.

*“It works!”*

It was true. The fire, in an area of perhaps a square yard, had vanished. Even as Carver watched, the flames were replaced by beautiful gleaming diamond-like crystals that reflected the lights of the menaced city beyond in sparkling flash lets. Nor did the fire encroach further.

Then suddenly with a weird crackling noise the fire-jewels crystallized and shattered, becoming a blaze of reflecting glory as their surfaces became many-faceted.

John Carver, hardened space traveler, found himself sobbing unashamedly.

\* \* \*

Professor Caldwell gazed at the happy pair before him, holding their hands in each of his.

"I am an old man," he said softly, "but I've never been as happy as at this moment. I can't tell you how much your happiness affects me. This morning when Ann was pardoned for all her 'crimes' by the Federated Government, in exchange for the secret of the mystery ship and in recognition of your work against the disrupters, I'm afraid I acted as wild as an excited child."

"In recognition of *your* work, you mean," Carver grinned. "Any painter could have done more artistically."

"But not more beautifully," said Ann Mitchell glancing from the window to where the afternoon sun shone on Long Island, now a vast expanse of blinding crystal: a perpetual, gloriously colored monument, a new wonder of the world.

"An army of 'painters' did that," pointed out Carver. "But it is beautiful, and somehow innocent, even considering its evil beginning. As a lovely flower grows from an ugly stalk."

"It reminds me of Mary," said Ann wistfully. "So delicate, so beautiful, and so brave. It will always be a monument to her tragic sacrifice."

"'Greater love hath no man,' " quoted Carver softly.

"Look!" Caldwell pointed south.

Rising into the air was a sleek ship, its graceful lines gleaming brilliantly in the sun.

"No longer a mystery ship," said Professor Caldwell. "There will soon be a great fleet of them, and the war will shortly be over. Such ships can't lose. And after the war, they'll mean the end of that corporate monster, Spacelines!"

He turned back to the pair beside him, opening his mouth as if to speak, and then thinking better of it. Smiling, he made his way to the door, closing it gently behind him.

**THE END**

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