

PHOENIX PLANET

by **James** Blish

(Author of “Callistan Cabal,” “Citadel of Thought,” etc.) Marshall went into space to seek extra-terrestrial life; he returned to find that what he had sought had paid his home planet a visit. And had come to stay!

CHAPTER I

GREGORY MARSHALL paced a five-foot circle around the metal floor. Five feet was the maximum diameter of the circle the tiny control cabin of the Icarus allowed for pacing, and for a man of Marshall's size and state of mind it was a very inadequate size indeed.

For Gregory Marshall, first human being ever to leave the prisoning air of Earth, was going back to Earth again. Going home after ten of Earth's too-long years, ten years of eating vitamin concentrates, egg powder, milk powder, and the incredibly-tough leaves of the Martian plants he called “spinage” or “cabbich” as the mood struck him. Ten years of gasping for air at the slightest exertion. Ten years of freezing almost solid at night, and being painfully sun-burned at forty degrees Fahrenheit by day. Ten years of searching, searching, searching.

Ten years it had taken him to assemble the metal for the device his landing had smashed. He caressed the crude thing, a cubical cage-work of wires placed just below the control window, and a little model of the Icarus which ran along the wires, and grinned ruefully to himself.

It was the nature of the man that he could grin at all, with any other feeling than that of cynicism, for that landing misfortune and its consequences would have killed any other man's sense of humor completely. How neatly everything had been figured out! The pressed-cast wood ship, held together with metal rings every few feet like barrel hoops, with its single protective layer of heat-resistant plastic coated with a resin-base reflectant paint, had been so much lighter than a metal ship would have been, and the new fuel was so powerful—nothing but a miscalculation of orbit could have prevented his making the trip safely, and the return as well. And he had been picked from all the rest of the Society because of his cool head and his mathematical skill. He had not miscalculated. He had made Mars. And then, then the twanging collapse of parachute shrouds, the wild plunge, the violent shock as the Icarus dropped twenty feet and buried its nose in soft sand—and he came to consciousness in the midst of the crumpled control cage. . .

The metal had been very hard steel, and the fine wires had shivered and broken, cutting him badly. He didn't care about the cuts—they healed quickly in the sterile air of Mars—but that shivered metal, with its high molybdenum content, could never be reworked by any means at his disposal. He had plenty of fuel, yes. But the little space-flyer was useless without that control cage. The nightmare was over now. The new cage was of gold, pure, soft gold, obtained from the ruined city which lay buried in the “spinage” of the Mare Icarium. How he had longed to explore that incredibly ancient metropolis with the eyes of a scientist, as the Society had intended he should! But he had no time for anything but hasty pictures filmed as he passed by in his endless search for malleable metal. That gold had come, ounce by precious ounce, from ornaments and jewelry found in deserted chambers, dug with gasping breath from red sand or found discarded carelessly in once-dark corridors. The Martians, dead untold centuries before his birth, had used no gold in architectural decoration. Only in those ornaments.

And he had passed great frescoes, still brightly colored in the unmoving air of Mars; and strange, chilling statues; and buildings which were taller in the slighter gravitation of the planet than any imaginable Earth building; and he had made hurried films and gone on in despairing duplication of man's endless search for gold, now a symbol of life rather than mere greed. And each month, if he was lucky, saw one more queerly wrought, alien gold ornament added to the tiny pile in the cabin of the Icarus. The search never ceased except from exhaustion. He had gasped, and lost precious perspiration in the arid air, and been burned black and peeled acres of skin (which he ate, as he ate his nail parings and anything else offering rare proteins), and grew a little mad; and the stars looked down coldly, even in the vicious weak light of the sun, and watched this human being, the only one on an entire world, grub for gold in the ground like his brothers on Earth, and doubtless they did not understand.

But that was all over now. Nine years' search for metal; one year drawing it into wire, making proper connections, and repairing the guilty parachute. And now behind him the roar of the rockets made the Icarus tremble, and Mars was a rusty ball dwindling behind it, illusory “canals” coming gradually into view, as it hurtled along Hohmann D toward the swelling blue star. He stopped his constant pacing and pressed his nose for the hundredth time against the green glass of the control window, polishing impatiently with his ragged sleeve as his breath misted the view of the blue star. What would it be like, being there again? There were so many things that might be different. What had the Society thought when he had failed to return? Had they sent another ship, later, one that had been lost somewhere in space, or burst in terrible glory like poor Klaus? He thought not. The Icarus had devoured the Society's last pitiful pennies, for Klaus' death had been expensive as well as tragic; the Daedalus had been a much bigger ship than Marshall's. Probably they had waited in dying hopefulness for a few years or so, and then, when the Earth and Mars had moved away from each other, had gone back to the other walks of life whence they had been summoned.

And Anne. Had she, perhaps, forgotten too, in those years when the gulf of space had stretched between them? As ever the thought was a bright pain to him, and he felt a momentary twinge of the old madness of Mars. Ten years was a long time for a human woman to remain faithful. Pelleas and Melicent, yes—but they were but fiction.

If she had waited, he was bringing her a better lover than she had known before. He had been an eager, idealistic kid when he spurned his planet in fire, a kid of twenty-two; he looked perhaps four years older now, thanks to the preservative influence of that embalmed rusty planet, but he was hardened physically to perfection; underweight, of course, but perfectly proportioned; and those ten years of hell had forged the irresponsible Greg Marshall into something finer than he had promised. He knew it without egotism, but with grim pride, and was glad of it for her.

Yes, much might have changed upon the blue star, yet it was home, and paradise; return there was resurrection from the tomb which was Mars. Those years had at least been busy, too busy for him to

develop the knack of solitaire or playing chess with himself, and now the inaction in the shining wooden box of the Icarus was tormenting. He could only pace in a five-foot circle, walk up and down the catwalk in a useless check of Kammerman's superb engines, make delicate adjustments of the little ship in the crude cage, and return again to smudge the port and lean on the walls as if to urge more speed. But the days went by, and Mars dwindled, and the blue star grew. And with it grew visions of forests, and oceans, and Anne, and an enormous steak, and thick, rich air....

ON THE two-hundred and fiftieth day the Icarus swept in close to the corpse-like moon, and shot by, while Marshall took the last foot of his film before turning on the forward engines. He had managed to fill four whole days taking these pictures, and the sun, which had been his enemy so long, had turned fair-weather friend and illuminated the "dark" side with slanting rays which brought out every detail in sharp contrast to its own shadow. With a sigh he unpacked the magazine and stored it with the rest. Then he moved the little ship on the gold wires back a bit and up, and white, intense flame blotted out his vision. He wrote hasty calculations on the walls (since the Society had considered paper wasted weight).

The Icarus, a comet with two opposed tails, fell gradually into the Oberth braking orbit, so carefully calculated for it by the Society ten years ago. No, over twelve, now, thanks to the time the two trips had added to the stay on Mars. Marshall fidgeted and paced his five-foot circle and could not sleep, though it would be ten hours before the first brush with the atmosphere. Instead he stood at the port every few minutes and looked down at the great planet of his home, the world of blue seas and green-brown continents and masses of white mist obscuring both. He longed to see a city, but he was too high up, and their lights at night he found also invisible.

He filled the ten hours making nice adjustments on the gyroscope, compensating for the constant, nauseating shift in the down direction which occurred if the ship went through the orbit changing its relative position to Earth as inertia would have it do. Then the high thin screaming of the atmosphere, almost beyond the range of audibility, penetrated the Icarus and he charged up the catwalk to strap himself in and fire another burst through the forward tubes. The wood would not burn under ordinary conditions, protected as it was by the outside coatings, but it was not wise to take chances. Even stone meteors burned if they fell free through such gloriously thick atmosphere. During the next two hours the scream crept gradually down to a siren-like howl as he edged the ship toward the Earth a few hundred feet at a time. Once his fingers slipped and perspiration started out all over him as he had to apply rocket power. It would be ironic to be burned in the last lap. Then at last the sound, without changing pitch, died away to a whisper and the Icarus was back in space, speed greatly reduced, making the wide loop for the return. Seven hours now decelerating all the time in a constant, sickening surge. . . . This time the sound started as a howl and went down from there. In an hour he was but two miles up from home. Another hour, another mile down, while the dark mass of Europe slid below him and then the beautiful turquoise desert of the Atlantic. In half an hour he was making only two hundred miles an hour, so that an airplane could have paced him, and he slid out the retractable wings.... Five thousand feet from home. ...

Evidently he was even more excited than he had imagined, for after finding a midge of a planet accurately in the eternal void, he missed New York and shot instead over an unfamiliar, heavily wooded section of the coast. Wooded. Real trees. But trees, for all their beauty and grateful familiarity, were not for now. He needed an airdrome. He swung north up the coast, shooting higher until he could see the Hudson; then, exultantly, he plunged the Icarus toward Manhattan.

He would land at LaGuardia Field, but first he would give the old town a thrill. Maybe they had rockets now, transatlantic rockets or something—but that was doubtful, because if they had they would also have space rockets. His own adventure the Society had kept secret, for fear of the laughter of the newspapers. Probably there were just much better air planes now. Certainly no glittering meteors like the Icarus. In his imagination he could see the white expanse of startled, upturned faces in the streets of

the city as he thundered deafeningly overhead. Conquering hero, returned from Mars. He chuckled. He had earned an ovation, by God. Also that steak and that soft bed and that air.... The old thought-chain brought him back to Anne again and he blinked a little. If she were there to meet him, his life would have reached its peak. And if she were not . . . well, old Earth was home, just the same.... He kicked himself for a sniveling schoolboy and concentrated on the gold cage. Good little space-vessel, but somewhat tricky in normal flight. He braked as Manhattan loomed nearer and the silver thread of the Hudson expanded to a metal ribbon, and for a moment the flames obscured his forward vision. What a display the rockets made in air! Not quite such comet-like expansion as in space, but unparalleled brilliancy and even some smoke. How Kammerman would sputter when he told him about that smoke; it meant wasted power, and waste in a rocket engine was to Kammerman as leprosy in a man is to the normal woman. The air-speed indicator registered eighty now. Any slower and the Icarus would fall of its own weight, despite the stubby wings. He shut off the ocean of fire and peered eagerly downward—

But on Manhattan Island and all the land visible to Gregory Marshall, there was nothing but the dense, wild forest.

CHAPTER II of PHOENIX PLANET

IN SICK TERROR he sent the Icarus in as tight spirals as he dared, scanning the ground below, almost skimming the tree-tops. What could have happened to a whole city in twelve years?

The forest was not as dense as it had looked from above; it was mostly scrub, and there were occasional thin spots and clearings. Nowhere, however did he see any sign of a building or even a ruin. New York—vanished! What could have been the cause? Some local epidemic, perhaps, which had caused the city to be abandoned? But the buildings would still be there, certainly—the great, familiar skyscrapers....

Abruptly he got a clear look at a larger clearing. The ground in it looked wrong, somehow—it seemed to glisten in spots, like lava—

It was lava. Whole areas had been fused as if with tremendous heat. He thought of the teeming millions in the city, and felt suddenly ill. Had the city been evacuated before the cataclysm, whatever it had been, had struck? Had there been adequate warning? Or—had the upheaval been even more widespread? Perhaps the war, crawling to an exhausted close when he left, had flared again. But what war weapon could wipe out a city so cleanly, melt it to glassy puddles like this? He thought for a moment of going on to Chicago, in what he strangely felt to be a hopeless quest for life, but his fuel meter warned him he could stay in the air only a few minutes longer. Desperately he swung the ship south and up, and moved the little metal oval almost halfway forward in the cage. The Icarus roared and he was forced into his seat.

Then the rear tubes began to cough. He searched the board for the valve of Keller's favorite and much-discussed emergency pump ("Only thirteen pounds," he could hear the little man pleading, "and so

handy for accidents.”), twisted it hard, and the reserve in the forward tubes was forced back. Again the Icarus bucked and bounded upward, but the coughing began again and black smoke began to pour from the Venturi orifices, wreathing the tail of the ship in a trailing dense pall. Oxygen gone. The fuel was useless now—might as well save it; without oxygen the tubes had no more thrust than a blowtorch. He cut the feed throttles.

The Icarus was falling now in a great arc, gliding on its truncated wings, losing speed rapidly. He searched the horizon, but if he were anywhere near Philadelphia, it must have been destroyed as well; there was nothing but the endless scrub forest. Bitterly he watched the speed, and when the ship could no longer stay in the air on momentum, he tripped the parachute lever. He could hear its opening boom through the hull, and the shock almost cut him in two on the safety belt. Swaying like a pendulum, the Icarus settled after twelve years on the surface of its home planet—from sterile desert to empty wilderness. Abruptly Gregory Marshall felt very tired. Dully he watched the green roof rise to meet him.

Then he was rocked violently and branches crashed outside—another dull shock—and the Icarus swayed gently back and forth on the end of the tangled shrouds, perhaps a yard from the ground.

“The Earth won’t have me,” he thought, smiling without humor. He unstrapped himself, and the entrance-port wheel squealed in his hands. For a moment he stood beside his suspended flyer, breathing deeply of the heady air, wine-like after Mars and the canned stuff in the ship. The strange, subtle odor of green things was everywhere, and when he stamped his feet on the rich black sod he knew again a long-forgotten natural weight. Home. Home changed very terribly, but still life after living death.

He sighed and gave the Icarus a short inspection. There was a tiny fraction of gritty red sand wedged in a crack where the tubes joined the fuselage, and the knowledge that it was Martian gave him a greater sensation of awe than all the films stored in the cabin. Nothing seemed to be damaged; the lightness of the steel-strong wood composition had protected it from coming to grief among the small trees. He whistled softly to himself and ran his fingers along a long, deep burn. The paint and protective plastic had been seared away and charred wood showed underneath. That must have happened during that accidental two-thousand-foot drop. Any more and—well, the Icarus wouldn’t be spaceworthy again until he could have that spot repaired.

Repaired. If he could find anybody or anyplace to repair it. The madness of the Martian loneliness touched him again, briefly. What had happened to the world, anyhow? Cities destroyed, vegetation running wild over miles of deserted territory—

His ears, subconsciously sensitive for the slightest human sound, and attuned more delicately by Mars’ thin air which made a boom into a squeak, caught a subdued whisper behind him.

He’s unarmed, looks like,” it said, and with an exclamation of delight he spun around on his heel.

HE SAW NOTHING but a miniature open space, domed by branches, and the forest itself. “Where are you?” he called eagerly, his voice unnaturally loud in his ears.

For a long moment there was silence. Then a gruff voice said, “No funny stuff, Turny. You’re surrounded.”

“I’ve no weapons,” he replied, puzzled. “I’m not a criminal. Come out where I can see you. I want to get some information.”

Again the silence, and then finally the undergrowth rustled and two men stepped cautiously into view.

They were dressed in tattered, faded clothing of no identifiable nature; they had heavy beards and carried crude, flint-tipped spears. One of them had a belt, into which was thrust a rusty hatchet; the other was beltless, and his clothing hung on him like sacking. “What is this, anyhow, a masquerade?” said Marshall. “What’s happened to everybody? I couldn’t even find New York.”

“Hedon’t talk like a turny,” said the beltless man doubtfully. “Shut up,” growled the other. “They’re full o’ tricks. Listen, mister, you picked a bad spot to have a forced landing in. We have special entertainments here regular for guys like you.” He whistled shrilly and the open space suddenly held some ten more men, similarly dressed and ominously silent, spears ready and narrow eyes watching Marshall with strange, vigilant hatred. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he snapped. “My name’s Gregory Marshall, and I’ve just come back from ten years on Mars. What the hell has happened? What’s a turny? Why is everybody gone?” The man with the belt, who seemed by that mark of distinction to be leader of the band, laughed shortly. “That’s one lousy story. You oughta be able to do better’n that. We know your kind. Every decent man died in the fight. Just rats like us, who ran when the others stayed, are left. But we’re better for all that than you guys that ran in the other direction.” An angry murmur of affirmation ran around the ragged group. “We got no use for bloodhounds, see,” the belted man went on in a low, deadly voice. “We don’t like guys that hunt us so they can wear good clothes and own planes like them and live in the cities—“ “Hey, boss,” another voice cut in from directly behind Marshall. One of the men had circled cautiously around and was examining the suspended Icarus. “This ain’t no invader’s ship. Look here. It’s made o’ wood.” The belted man snorted.

“No kidding, boss. The shiny stuff’s just paint. Look at this burnt spot. And here—this tube thing stickin’ out the back—it’s got ‘Bethlehem Steel Co.’ stamped on it.”

The leader frowned and strode past Marshall to look at the space-flyer himself. “It’s a trick,” he said suspiciously. “What about that there name?” He pointed to the legend on the bow. “Ick-er-uss. That ain’t no human name.” Marshall laughed. “That’s the name of an old Greek, my friend—the first man to ever fly.”

“Wright was the first man to fly,” snapped the belted man, but more doubtfully. “Naw, he wasn’t,” another one of the group said. “The guy’s right, boss. This Greek and some wop named Davinky both flew before Wright. I read about it somewhere. The Greek had wax wings.”

“That’s true,” Marshall smiled, nodding at the man. “I’m glad somebody here knows something.”

The tense group seemed to relax a little.

“Well, mebbe so,” the belted man said more graciously. “Let’s hear the story, bud.”

Marshall explained quickly the circumstances which had sent him to Mars and kept him there so long, taking the leader inside to show him the painfully-built gold cage, two ornaments left over, and the magazines of exposed film. When he finished there was awe on every face.

“So,” said the leader, spitting reflectively. “Before all this happened—“ he gestured at the wilderness and the ragged scarecrows of his men—“it would have been a great thing. Let’s see: you left in forty-two, huh? You was lucky. You missed the party.” He frowned and plucked a long piece of grass from the turf. “Well, startin’ from the beginning—this all happened early in February of forty-three. Invasion, from outside. We thought it was Martians, considering H. G. Wells and all, but I guess if you say Mars is dead, why then they musta been from somewhere else. They had big ships, like Zeppelins, only they moved as fast as planes, and they had some kind of a searchlight that killed people, zip, like that, without even leavin’ a mark on ‘em. Everybody on Earth was fightin’ with each other then, so we was what you

might call prepared. We held ‘em off for a month or so.

“They didn’t have no guns or anything that blew up when it hit, only these ray things, but they was bad enough. Finally, just when it looked like maybe we was goin’ to clean up on ‘em, they thought up a bomb o’ their own. It did what you saw in New York . Three of ‘em, they dropped there. No noise. Just puffs o’ fire, blue-white like flash powder, and nothin’ left but slag. The air was settlin’ fine white dust all over everything for days afterwards. They say they went all around the Earth like that. Didn’t miss a major city anywhere. We got a lot of ‘em, but not enough, and after that they mopped up.” The tragic recital had seemed to Gregory Marshall to become only a voice, a dead, empty voice threading dull pain through sightless night. The forest faded and the voice drifted as from far away across leagues of blackness deeper than space. Inside him the old bright agony was burning, and a meaningless word was going round and round in his brain; Anne, Anne, Anne, Anne . . . over and over again. Two sleepless, straining days flowed suddenly back over him. He passed a hand across his eyes and sat down on the cool, damp grass. “Nobody left but us,” he said All dead . . . Anne, Anne! “A few,” said the belted man “They’sothers. But none of ‘em’s worth a cent. The guys that live in the woods are the yellow-bellies like us, that ran and hid when the others was fighting.” He spat again and chewed viciously on the end of the grass-stem.

Wake up, Marshall . She’s dead, Marshall . You should have stayed on Mars, Marshall. She’s dead, Marshall .

“How about these people in the cities—the ‘turnies’?” “They ain’t fit to talk about,” said the belted man. “They’re the only things that lets us live with ourselves. We ran, but they went to the invaders and played stool-pigeon and bloodhound. These guys hunt us out, and get nice clothes and food and women for it.”

“Rubbing you out. Why?” “Doesn’t matter, Marshall. Dead, Marshall.

“I dunno . We put up a hell of a fight for a while. I think they’re afraid of us.

I don’t think they’re much good as fighters; we panicked ‘em half a dozen times.

With stuff like they had we coulda held ‘em off.” Gregory Marshall got up slowly. Anne was dead. Of course. He had come back to his home just in time for its final destruction. There were only two things to do, and suicide was not in Gregory Marshall’s nature. He had fought a whole planet once for his own. Little sparks of hatred flared in his eyes. “We aren’t licked yet,” he said.

CHAPTER III of PHOENIX PLANET

A RELUCTANT COUNCIL of war sat in the rickety shack of Brains Barret , the man with the belt. It was made up of Barret , Gregory Marshall, a shabby aide of Barret’s , and the leader of a neighboring community, Leland by name. Leland, despite his nondescript dress, reminded Marshall of that old story about the Britisher in the jungle; he had tried to battle his beard and keep as clean as possible. He had

been an engineer at one time.

“You don’t get the layout at all,” this visiting potentate told Marshall flatly. “What you suggest is impossible. The invaders, whoever they are, live entirely within their own cities, surrounded by batteries of those death-ray projectors. Any movement on our part will be spotted instantly by the turnies. It’s hard enough for us to keep alive as it is.”

“Exactly,” said Marshall. “As you are you’re scurrying from rat-hole to rat-hole, and being rubbed out one by one. If this setup of Barret’s is anything to go by, you’ve got about one woman for every six men; you’re eating bark and bird’s eggs; and eventually you’re picked off. You’re being exterminated. All right. The best defense, as somebody said long ago, is an offense.” “Have you seen the city to the west?” the aide asked softly. A swift vision passed through Marshall’s mind—the shining, dreamlike pyramid of metal and glass rising from the endless wilderness, moving in smooth lines from the spire in the center to the dome-like, squat pillboxes at the periphery. An amazing, alien thing, rising evilly from the green Earth. For an instant his plans seemed transparent, ghost-like, futile, before the civilization which had raised that astounding metropolis in so short a time. Then he thought of Anne, and the hate-lightning blazed in his eyes.

“Yes,” he said. “I’ve seen the city. And there are certain things about it that are very significant to me. According to your story, and from what I’ve seen it’s all too true, all effective resistance to the invaders has been destroyed. Yet that city, built after the battle was all over, is fortified like it was expecting Attila the Hun any minute.”

“I know what you mean,” Barret agreed. “They’re scared of us, sure. I told you our early counterattacks panicked ‘em every time. The little suicide ships toward the end did it, too. But that ain’t goin’ t’ help. Them forts just make it worse. They make bein’ scared a luxury, and a safe one.” “Besides,” Leland followed, “you don’t realize just how few of us there are. Barret’s eighteen men and three women make up the largest community in these parts. Mostly we think it too dangerous to collect together like that—too easy for the turnies to spot us. Most everybody pick their own spot and lives alone. There’s ten people in my bunch.”

“That’s good,” Marshall said instantly. “This is going to be guerilla warfare—striking at weaknesses and disappearing again.” “The invaders ain’t got no weaknesses,” Barret retorted. “On the contrary. That fear psychosis is one. It’s all out of proportion to our actual strength, and it was even when we were fully armed. That means one thing: the invaders are not a fighting race, as we are. A fighting race equipped with such weapons would have made short work of us, and cleanly and efficiently, without any panic. They came here of necessity—some plague on their world, perhaps, or another cataclysm approaching. They hoped to find this world unoccupied; they didn’t, and they were equipped to fight for it; but they didn’t want to. They didn’t know how. And now they’ve another weakness; having erected that ring of forts around their city, they think they’re safe, and we’re licked. Well, they aren’t, and we aren’t, and that they think to the contrary is a big factor in our favor.”

There was a moment’s silence.

“I ran once,” said Brains Barret slowly and carefully, “and I left a lot a people in the lurch I shoulda stayed by, to save my own skin. It prob’ly ain’t goin’ to do any good, but I won’t run agin. Pick your plans, Marshall; I’m right behind you.”

“Thanks,” said Marshall seriously. “And you, Leland?” Leland scratched his head. “I think it’s futile, but I thought nobody’d ever reach Mars, too. Count me in. What are you going to do?” “I want to find out first what equipment we have. On my side there’s the Icarus, which needs fuel and is consequently not

much good.” “Fuel?” asked Leland. “There’s a smashed tank half buried near my place. One of the forty-ton jobs. The ray got it and it ran into a wall when the crew died. There’s one tank of gas that didn’t get burst.”

“Gasoline isn’t very good, but it’s better than nothing. How much is there?”

“About twenty gallons.”

“That won’t keep me in the air much more than an hour,” said Marshall, shaking his head.

“How much can you carry, for God’s sake?”

“Not quite ten tons—my own fuel. I’ve got maybe two gallons of that left. Well, we’ll put the gas in; maybe we can use it, or find some more. How about weapons?”

All three men grinned mirthlessly.

“Twenty-one flint-tipped spears,” listed Barret. “One hatchet, rusty; one bread-knife, also rusty; one rifle, plus eight shells to fit and about thirty-five or forty that don’t; one bayonet for the rifle; one automatic with one clip of shells; one clip of shells for an auto-rifle, but no auto-rifle.” “We’ve got an auto-rifle,” Leland put in, astonished. “We used all the ammunition hunting. We’ve got a pile of nondescript stuff, too, some of which might fit your regular rifle. If it’s a U. S. rifle, no good.” “It isn’t,” said Barret. “I don’t know what it is, but the auto-rifle shells won’t fit it.”

“Any grenades?” said Marshall.

“Don’t be funny,” growled the aide.

“What else have you, Leland?”

“The usual spears and odd implements. Also an electro-magnetic machine gun, one that we salvaged from the tank; three belts of shells for it; and, grand anticlimax, no batteries to run it.”

“Good batteries in the Icarus. That’s good. What else?” “I’ve got an automatic with one unspoiled clip of shells, like Barret’s. Also another we filled partly from the scrap heap, and two that are empty, and probably rusted to the point of uselessness. Fetishes in the house of the chief.” He grimaced.

“It sounds funny,” said Marshall slowly, “but I think we have the nucleus of a very useful arsenal there. Now, one question; do the invaders fly the big ships any more?”

“Never for scouting. For communication with the other cities, yes, since they haven’t built any roads, but the turnies use ordinary planes. We never did develop the rocket to where it could be used for anything but a suicide torpedo, and the big ships don’t use rockets at all. We don’t know what makes them fly. But they never bother us. Just the planes.”

“That’s all I want to know,” said Marshall, and the hate-lightnings were hot in his eyes.

HE STOOD at the western edge of the forest, the cool morning breeze playing capriciously around him, rustling the leaves over him and the shining Icarus. The recently arisen sun sent molten gold across the tops of the trees and transformed the distant city into a thing of impossible splendor. In the tanks of the ship, resting hidden at the far end of a newly-made aisle reaching back from the forest’s edge, were

twenty-three gallons of gasoline, with two and one-half gallons of Marshall's fuel added. His compressor had been active for a week, charging the secondary tanks with liquid air—the closest he could come to liquid oxygen, since he had no equipment for fractional distillation. He remembered how long that compressor had had to strain to liquify enough of the thin Martian atmosphere, and how many times he'd had to charge the batteries to keep it going . . .

But the Icarus was no longer a space-vessel. The protective plastic had been knocked away in an irregular small patch just below the center of the forward port, and a hole burned through the wood with a white-hot metal bar (there were no drills available, and the composition could not be drilled by ordinary methods, anyhow). Protruding through the opening was the muzzle of Leland's auto-rifle, fully loaded, and on the control board two more clips collected from the scrap heaps of nearby communities lay ready. When asked why he chose the auto-rifle instead of the far more dangerous electro, he merely said "Noisier," and let his associates puzzle it out. Barret's women had repaired and repacked the ship's parachute.

Behind Marshall, hidden watchfully in the undergrowth, were the twenty-one individuals of Barret's tribe; Barret himself was in a tree-top directly above. "See anything?" Marshall called guardedly.

"Not yet," Barret's voice drifted back from the matted leaves. "They get breakfast in bed, the slobs. Wup—wait a minute—yeah, there's one. Coming this way, too." As if in confirmation, a dull droning became audible from the direction of the city.

Marshall jumped quickly into the ship, slammed the port; then his head bobbed out of the emergency at the top.

"Your men out of the way of my exhaust, Brains?" he asked. "Yup," said Barret cheerfully. "Here comes your lamb to the slaughter. He'll pass a little to the right, I think. He is the lousiest pilot I ever saw. Slipping and sliding all over the place."

"That helps," said Marshall. "Okay. You know what to do." There was a tightening of the tension among the men as the emergency port banged to. From the west the roar of the powerful scout plane grew momentarily. Then it was blotted out in a deeper thunder and a lightning-bolt launched itself from the cleared aisle and swooped up.

"Grab that!" Barret screamed from his tree-top, and his men scurried briefly with pails of dirt to put out the small blazes which the Icarus had started. Then they refilled the pails and slipped back into hiding, indistinguishable from the shadows.

But from what Barret could see, hiding was unnecessary, for the enemy scout was paying no attention to the ground. The Icarus had shot up past him so fast that the trim little plane was yawing and rolling madly in a cyclone of disrupted air. Abruptly its pilot made a hasty, sloppy turn and headed back for the city. There was an unaccustomed hand on that stick.

Barret grinned in exultant admiration as the Icarus plunged by again, screaming, and then zoomed in front of it. Again the plane struggled with the warped air currents, losing altitude, and making frantic efforts to keep out of Marshall's way. It was fast, but not fast enough. In a moment the silver meteor was cutting across its path again, and the auto-rifle fired a short warning burst. At the sound of the gun the pilot seemed to lose what little courage he had. He dived frantically under the Icarus as it passed and roared for home. With each attack, however, he had lost altitude, and now he was forced to climb to stay in the air. Instantly the auto-rifle barked and the silver ship plunged into what seemed to Barret to be collision. Then it was swooping up again, and the enemy was fluttering down out of a stall.

“Good boy!” Barret screamed, utterly unheard even by himself in the noise of the two fighters. “He’s headin’ this way! Gitready!” The warning was inaudible, but unnecessary; the men below were tense and rigid, waiting for the plane to ground. One more burst from the auto-rifle, one more terrible screaming swoop of the Icarus, and the turncoat’s plane did a ridiculous little flip-flop and lost flying speed. It struck nose first in the earth about two hundred feet from the edge of the forest and turned gently over. Something began to crackle, and Barret howled incoherent commands. The men pounded from concealment and out across the open, the tall grass reaching almost to their shoulders, their heavy pails slowing them. Before the first tongue of flame had gained much headway, however, the incipient fire had been stifled in sand and dirt, and they were stamping at the grass around the plane.

As Marshall’s parachute boomed behind them over the woods, something struggled free of the overturned fighter and arose into view: it was the pilot, holding up his hands. There was no question but that the defeated pilot wanted to surrender. He stood as high as he could on shrunken, bowed legs, and held up four hands. Barret heard a deadly growl from his men, and then two shots in quick succession. He shrugged his shoulders fatalistically at the waste of ammunition.

CHAPTER IV of PHOENIX PLANET

THE COUNCIL MET underground now, for Marshall’s army numbered three hundred, recruited from many miles around, and they had dug in under the site of Leland’s old community. With every new clan that arrived, Marshall scanned the faces of the women, and when he turned away the hate-lightnings raged more powerfully than ever in his eyes. Hidden in the earth also was the Icarus, fully fueled, four airplanes patched together from ten wrecks and also fully fueled and a cache containing perhaps thirty gallons of reserve gasoline. Each plane had its own electromagnetic machine gun, supplied by the enemy, and slung beneath the wings crude bombs made of gallon tins or bottles and the powder of misfit shells. The latest addition, a two-seater, bore a huge oil-drum similarly loaded. It also mounted a miniature of the death-ray projector, but nobody knew how to use it.

“We have an easy dozen pilots in the ‘army’ now,” Marshall told the assembled chieftains, “and we’ll use only those who have flown these particular types of planes before. It’s unfortunate that the one invader we caught trying to fly a plane was killed before we had a chance to get some information out of him; however, his behavior and the ear-pads he was wearing tell us something very important—another weakness—” “What’s that?” interrupted a brawny Pennsylvania miner. “They’re afraid of noise.”

“What!”

“That’s right. I imagined that might be the case when I noticed that their own weapons are all silent, even the atomic bombs. It’s my theory that they lived originally on a world where the air was thin, like Mars, and didn’t carry sound as well. I had a hard time getting used to the added volume of sounds when I came back, and I’ll bet that if you’ve lived on a world like that all your life, your ears would be abnormally sensitive, and any weapon that made an impressive roar would be terrifying beyond all

considerations of its actual military effect.”

There was a brief silence.

“I’ve got every confidence in you, seeing what you’ve done,” Leland said finally, “and I suppose that is as significant as every other little weakness you’ve spotted and used to advantage. But I don’t see now how it’s going to help us.”

“You will,” Marshall assured him.

“That’s beside the point anyhow,” the miner broke in again. “We got a trial on,” and he waved a filthy hand at the pale young man sitting on the platform between Barret and Leland, now Marshall’s chief advisors. “We don’t want no turnies here. What they did once they’ll do again. We got enough mouths t’ feed.” “I’ve heard his story,” said Marshall, “and it’s my opinion that he’s a welcome addition. We need every man we can get, especially those with intimate knowledge of the invaders. Suppose we let him speak for himself.” “Well,” the young man began uncertainly. He was unpleasantly aware of all the eyes upon him, and obviously expected to be eaten when he finished. “First off, Mr. Marshall, you’re right about that noise business. They hate it. They seldom fly the planes at all, and when they do they wear those ear pads for fear of the engines. What noisy machines they do have they make us run. Their own ships fly on a gravity mechanism; none of us understand it.” “Let’s hear what you got to say for yaself,” the miner growled. The young man looked even more frightened. “I’m a turny, right enough. But I was just married when the fight began, and I—my wife—“ he paused and swallowed. “When I found out that the invaders did want men for their—own uses, I took her and went. I didn’t want her to die for humanity when—when humanity was doomed anyhow.”

“I wish I’d done that,” Barret said very bitterly, and all eyes turned in astonishment to the key man. The turncoat gained confidence. “All of us know now that the invaders plan to kill us, too, when they’re finished with the—the outsiders,” he said. “There’s no safety inside or out of the cities. A lot of the turnies wanted to come over to you, but they’re afraid to. The invaders have a regular little propaganda machine—it’s entirely unconscious because they believe it as much as we do—a sort of legend about the ferocious cannibals that live outside the cities. I knew there was no more safety for my wife with the invaders, and I preferred to take my chances with you. When I was assigned to scouting, I took a small bomber instead—the one you shot down—and tried to get us both out—“ He paused a moment, lines of pain around his eyes. “I don’t know how they caught on, but they did. They killed her as we were trying to get off—with one of those little hand rays. I escaped. . . And by the way, they’re beginning to get worried about this constant disappearance of planes.”

Again there was a pregnant silence, then someone arose to ask a question. He never got it out of his mouth. There was a pounding on the wooden stairs and a scared lookout poked his head in.

“They’re coming!” he cried. “One of the big ships, the spaceships. Raying the forest to the northwest.”

What followed was apparently pandemonium, but there was system in it. “Ducloman the electro at point three,” Marshall directed crisply above the uproar. “Henderson, you too. Dennison, Anders, point five. No planes up this time—too easy targets for the ray. Brains, Paul, this way.” The room was miraculously empty except for the turncoat. He looked around, frightened, then went down the stairs at the back of the room. They led to the hangers.

Marshall and Barret, leaving Leland with a small force to guard against a possible surprise from the ground, ran a specified distance to the north from the entrance tunnel and clambered like sailors up a dangling rope-ladder to a platform in the tree-tops. An electro, with attendant battery and belts of

blown-steel ammunition, was bolted to a plank on a branch which ran in front of the platform. Cautiously Marshall pushed the leaves aside, Barret peering beside him.

IT WAS THE FIRST of the monstrous craft of the invaders that he had seen, and again he felt the old chill of helplessness. The Icarus, though cramped, was no baby for size and the Daedalus had been fully twice as large; but these things, as Barret had once suggested, reminded one of the long-lost airship von Hindenburg. The wingless metal cigar was flying low, and slowly, and there was a peculiar distortion about it which suggested that space itself was being warped to keep its huge bulk in the air. Before it two broad white beams, intense even in full sunlight, were methodically sweeping the forest, and where they touched, the green summer forest took on the withered brown of late autumn. "You can see they're no fighters," Barret whispered, as if afraid the aliens might hear him. "They ought to be about two thousand feet up, out of range, and they ought t' have attacked at night."

"Good for us that they didn't," Marshall answered in similarly low tones, attaching a belt to the breech of the gun. "I have a hunch that the range of those rays is limited. These damn cartridges are rusty." "Martin brought them," Barret said. "They must be eight years old. Prob'ly a lot of 'em dead. I oiled 'em."

"Never mind about the dead ones. The gun doesn't fire by percussion anyhow, and as long as the magnets hold out we're okay. The deaders just won't go off when they hit, that's all." He slipped a red-stained six-inch shell from the belt and examined it cursorily. "Just pray they don't stick in the barrel." There was a sudden muffled roar and then a crashing as a camouflage curtain rushed back, and a winged shape zoomed up from the forest. "I thought I said no planes," Marshall snapped. "Who is that fool?" "Dunno. But we'll have to get the big baby now. He's seen the location of the hide-out."

Sure enough, the metal monster had swung slowly and was moving with unnecessary caution in their direction. A long white beam lashed out at the frantically climbing ship, but was a little short. Another ray searched the ground deliberately before the advance of the ship, and the forest crackled and sighed and withered.

"Ready," whispered Marshall. Barret held the belt loosely in his hands, alert to start feeding it when the firing began. Already Duclo's gun was going, sending a little silver stream into the air toward the invader. A line of small explosions, about the size of hand grenade explosions, stitched its way redly along the metal hull. Suddenly it found a port and the explosions disappeared inside. The great thing jerked spasmodically, then righted, and the deadly white beam swept over toward point three. The stream of slugs swung directly upward and continued to flow, aimlessly, and a gaping hole was pounded among the trees to the north.

Marshall ground his teeth at the waste of precious shells, and thought also of cheerful Duclo and his keen gunner's eye. Then his own gun was also within range. It trembled silently and little whooshes came from it as the air rushed in at the back of the barrel. Barret fed the belt steadily into the breech. Marshall's eye was as good as anyone's in the "army," and in a moment he had found the broken port where Duclo's gun had been firing. Again the big ship floundered uncertainly.

"I don't think we're hurting anything," Marshall muttered over the roar of dinitron. "But they're scared, right enough."

The aliens did seem to be confused. Dennison's gun had begun firing from point five, directly below it, pounding unwaveringly at a trap-door which was blown away almost immediately. The long white beam jerked downward, but could not point at a small enough angle to reach the imperturbable gunner. He was protected by the backward curve of the ship itself. There was no smoke from the electros and the aliens seemed uncertain as to the source of Marshall's miniature barrage. He moved the gun a little, seeking a

port farther forward. A smaller ray leaped abruptly at him, falling slightly short, but he could feel a little of its effect. A wave of terrible nausea swept him. Then he swung the gun upon the white disc of the projector.

Nothing happened.

He moved the muzzle out of line and the explosions dotted the hull. Again he shifted to the ray orifice.

Nothing happened.

The giant craft was moving ever closer, and in the growing glare of the unwinking white eye the two men could barely continue firing. The sickness was unbearable . . . his brainwhirled . . .

Then he was gratefully conscious that the horrible light was no longer playing on him; there was a roaring in his ears, and someone's voice—

“Marshall! Are you okay? We got him! Wake up, man!” Barret. Yes. He opened his eyes and struggled to his feet, still weak from sickness.

“What—how—“

“The plane. The turny was flying it—it was the one with the ray-tube, and he knew how to use it. How do you feel?”

He shook his head to clear it. “I'm all right now. Come on, let's go down—I want to look it over. Is it all right?”

“Perfect condition, except for one part where Duclo andus were shootin' . Dennison was just blowin' out the bottom of the cargo-hold—didn't harm it otherwise. All the damn' monsters inside it are dead.” They clambered down the ladder.

CHAPTER V of PHOENIX PLANET

THEY EXPECTED ANOTHER attack from the city, but apparently the invaders were too impressed by the fall of their first battleship to risk sending another. A full four days later one plane was sent out, but by that time everything had been moved underground and painted dark green to boot against further contingencies. After the plane was out of sight of the city they sent two of their own up after it.

As soon as the attackers were within sight, the scout headed for a clearing and landed!

Suspiciously, the two pilots circled over the spot. There was but one man in the enemy ship, and he was standing, hands upraised, obviously surrendering. They remembered the roasting Marshall had given the

clan at the beginning of the career for shooting the invader when it had surrendered. One landed, the other circled watchfully overhead just in case.

Subsequently they brought the man to Marshall, flying his own ship under the vigilant guns of the others. Marshall was still a little sick from the after-effects of the ray, and he was puzzling out plans to send to another rebel group which had contacted him from Atlanta, and he was annoyed. "Turny, boss," said one of his men. "Landed his ship when we jumped him. Says he wants to come over."

The turncoat burst into rapid speech, as if afraid he would not be allowed to finish his story before being shot. "There's a revolt movement among the few of us in the city," he jerked out as if reading. "I was sent out to scout, and I'm supposed to bring back details of your position to the invaders. I'm also supposed to tell the rest of the humans whether or not you'll support the revolt from outside."

Marshall looked at him. He was confused and tired; he had been under a constant strain for 48 hours, and the message from Atlanta had forced him to reorganize his plans on a large scale; and he was still a little sick from the ray. What should he do?

Young Taylor was all right, but he agreed with the general blanket opinion concerning turnies. They were the scum of the earth, and not to be trusted. This one was typical: fat and soft, and crow's feet under his beady eyes, and all out of breath from unwonted action. But a few more planes as a gift wouldn't be at all harmful, and any confusion the turnies might cause inside the city would be all to the good.

He closed his eyes for a moment. Perhaps he could set a night for their uprising, and then stay right here while they arose. If they didn't, then he wouldn't have flown all his equipment into a trap. If they did he'd have plenty of time to mobilize and attack while there was still confusion. He opened his eyes again and looked at the turny. The man's own eyes were glittering with fright.

"How many planes can you get us?"

"Ten, maybe."

Marshall was conscious that Barret and Leland were watching him nervously.

"We need twenty-five at least, and no maybes. Tell your pilots not to worry. Every man that brings a plane here will be taken care of properly." By which he meant execution, although the turny thought otherwise. "We don't trust you bloodhounds, of course. We want the equipment before we believe anything. Now get. No, not in the plane. You can walk back to the city. Tell them you were shot down and escaped."

"But, boss," put in Barret without thinking.

"Shut up," snapped Marshall. Then, "I'm sorry, Brains. I'm tired, that's all.

Beat it, you."

The turny obviously did not like the prospect of walking such a distance, but every eye in the room was on him, and there was no sympathy in any of them, only hatred—hatred which seemed to find a focus in the eyes of this giant Marshall. He turned hastily and left at a comical half-trot.

There was a brief silence.

“I never saw you make a mistake before, boss,” Barret said slowly and carefully. “Don’t you know that swine’ll bring every big ship in the place back here, now that he knows where we are?”

Again silence, tense, everybody looking at Marshall. He closed his eyes, then opened them again and smiled tiredly.

“Yes. Yes, you’re right, Brains. I’ve forced my own hand.” He sat still for a moment, trying to think. He saw dimly what was to be done. “Never mind stopping him. Let him go. We have five planes in perfect condition; one rocket ship that smokes badly but otherwise is okay; and an invader’s ship nobody knows how to run. Did anybody ask Taylor about that?”

“He can’t, either,” said Leland. “But he showed us how to use the ray-tubes, and we’ve mounted three of the small ones on the other planes in the same way it was on the bomber.”

“Good. Are there any more?”

“Half a dozen, besides the big ones.”

“Have one put on this new buggy. Did you plant the big ones at the defense points?”

“All there were.”

“How many?”

“Three. There’s one more that’s busted. Taylor’s repairing it, but he says we’ve got just enough powder to run the three we have, and no more, so we’ll have to keep it for a reserve. We put ‘em all on the city side and the electros were transferred to the other spots.”

“Keep the electros scattered—we don’t want them all put out of action at once.”

“I thought of that, or rather, Martin did.”

“That’s what I like to hear. Well, we’re not going to wait for the turny to bring the big ships back here. It’ll be night in half an hour, and we’ll leave promptly at eight.”

There was another tense hush.

“We’re attacking the city?”

“We are.”

And by this move Gregory Marshall, saved his bacon as a leader of the battle for the Earth. There was no doubt of its wisdom, no thought of the insufficiency of their weapons, only a fierce exultation at the prospect of at last striking a direct blow at the invaders. Every one of these men had lost family and friends in the invasion, and the prospect of revenge reinforced the confidence in their leader two-fold. “Only God and Gregory Marshall know what’s flying, and God doesn’t know much,” Barret had said once, and everybody agreed with him. The underground retreat was once more a place of ordered, feverish preparation. THE CITY GLITTERED in the cool night air, demonstrating the invaders’ ignorance of blackout technique. But then, perhaps they thought darkening the city too extreme a measure for the danger. In the squat pillboxes looking east, men and monsters crouched vigilantly over

searchlight-like mechanisms, waiting as they had waited for many months for sudden attack they knew would never come. As soon as the sun had set three of the great spaceships had left for the hide-out of the annoying guerillas, the returned turncoat guiding them. As yet there was little sign of activity; only an occasional distant flash of array, and a dull droning as if planes were flying somewhere far off. Probably beating a hasty retreat. The invaders were nervous, but exultant. Those sounds meant the final destruction of this dangerous colony of men . . . From the darkness two miles above, two strange objects came twisting and tumbling. Had anybody seen them, they would have identified them as glass jugs which had probably contained cider in that remote era eleven years ago. Now they held a grey, granular substance, and they dropped silently toward the center of the city. A few seconds later two more followed, then an enormous oil drum, and finally a perfect hail of blown-steel cylinders about six inches long, a little rusty, but glistening with a thin film of oil. It was as if a junkman's truck had been overturned in the troposphere. Gravity clutched at the objects, and they fell faster through the dark, cold air.

They dropped abruptly out of the night into the center of a broad square, landing in an area of about three hundred yards. The glass jugs went off immediately, sending deadly splinters hurtling in all directions. The gasoline drum buried itself deep in the ground and then burst with an astonishing scarlet concussion. The racking blast of dinitron smashed windows throughout the city. A towering metal spire wavered unsteadily and began to topple like a vast ten-pin. It was brought up short by a smaller, sturdier building, and seemed to break over it in a rain of brittle shards. The smaller building buckled and a heavy decorative cornice plunged into the street below. A number of squat, four-armed forms ran for cover; a larger number ignored it and sat rocking or rolled on the ground, clutching their ears and screaming. The electro shells began to patter down in a metallic hail. They fragmented easily and did little damage, being originally designed for use on infantry alone, but they made fully as much noise as the glass jugs. In the pillboxes, arcs flared and buzzed, and intense white shafts of light flared skyward, but nothing was visible as a target but the mocking stars. One of the beams brushed a roof-top, and a glass jug landing there failed to go off when it hit; the beam swung, caught another missile, followed it down. That one did not go off either, but the beam wiped a shaft of death along a packed street of terrorized aliens, and did more damage than the rest of the attack put together before other aliens caught the frantic operator and swung his weapon up again. There were no further attempts at neutralizing the bombs.

Another oil drum buried itself and blew up thunderously at the very base of the smaller damaged building, and again fragments roared into the streets. The white rays crisscrossed futilely through the empty sky, while the roar of plane engines gave the defenders visions of an immense armada far above. The jugs and cans stopped falling, but the electro shells burst ceaselessly, and sticks of raw explosive began to follow them. In the distance one of the three spaceships lumbered hastily homeward; the other two had been felled mysteriously by beams like their own, which had leapt from the midst of the featureless dark woods. The survivor climbed, deadly beams sweeping the sky for the black-camouflaged attackers, but these rays had not the range of the projectors on the ground and served only to mark the position of the metal craft. A silver thunderbolt swept down out of the blackness on flaming wings and vanished again, and a heavy casting smashed through the nose and burst in the control room. The ship faltered, sank and was hidden by the trees, and men swarmed into it. There was a last ear-splitting barrage of explosive bullets and then the raid was over. The screams of the defenders in the abrupt silence made dissonant counterpoint over the dying dreadful pedaltone of the retreating planes. The attack had lasted barely fifteen minutes, and the actual military damage, except for the loss of the spaceships, had been slight. But nobody counted the damage. There was too much terror in the city. The blow had been too much bigger than had been expected; too quickly struck, and too mysteriously ended. This was nothing like mild guerilla warfare upon the planes of the turnies ; it seemed like a revival of the bloody battles of eleven years before, when the sky had been darkened by planes over the strongholds of the invaders. For none of them had seen the attacking force, and so they had no way of knowing that it consisted of four scout planes, one bomber, and a smoking one-man spaceship.

GREGORY MARSHALL stood in plain view on the eastern edge of the forest and watched the invaders' spaceship settle slowly and unsteadily to the ground. It lay quiescent for a moment, its green-painted sides seeming to blend with the surrounding grass; then there was a clash of metal in the sunlight as the entrance port moved on massive gimbels and young Taylor emerged. "I've got it," he cried exultantly. "Little slow on the controls, but I can run it."

"Good," Marshall's deceptively soft voice answered. "Train three more men as quickly as you can. I got a message today from Pittsburg; they have one there as well, and in Atlanta there's two more. Send out the instructions as quickly as you can." He looked west, toward where the terrorized city was hidden by the green, quiet trees, and the hate seemed to leap from his eyes. "Brains." The key man stepped out from behind him.

"Remember when you told me we could beat the invaders if we had their weapons?"

"Yeah," said Barret in quiet glee. "We got 'em now, eh, boss?" "We have. Send your own message with Taylor's. Tell the other groups to bring their ships here as soon as they can fly them well enough. We've four of the atomic bombs here, one on each ship, and they probably have one per ship as well. That seems to be a custom of the invaders' war office. One should be enough for this fancy collapsible city. I'll lead in the Icarus; I'll meet them all six miles above this spot on a date to be set by them. If they meet any enemy ships, tell them to keep away; the enemy knows the ships and right now can use them to better advantage than we can."

"Right, boss," said Barret. He stood for a moment, looking at his giant leader, something akin to worship in his eyes; then he grunted and melted into the forest.

Gregory Marshall remained where he was and looked at the captured vessel; and his thoughts were, strangely, on Mars. He was remembering those ten years, and those hopes of home, and he was pleased with the way he was winning his home back again. This was really but an extension of the Martian fight. He had come back across millions of miles of space to carry it on, but all in all it was still just the fight for home; and he was winning that home back, for himself and humanity . . .

But Gregory Marshall knew suddenly, with tired clarity, that humanity had not figured in this battle or in his considerations. It was only hatred. Revenge. And it seemed to Gregory Marshall an empty, sterile achievement, because there were certain things he could never win back . . . The forest was gone. The rocket jets of the battered Icarus roared behind him, and below in the packed streets of New York a sea of people turned startled faces upward. LaGuardia Field loomed with the swiftness of a dream, and the parachute boomed—the shock of striking the Earth—his feet on the green turf for the first time in twelve years and a woman's voice, crying "Greg, Greg! You're back! Darling, you came back!"—

The vision closed about him as a hand closes, and there was only the tall wild grass, and the whispering trees, and the alien bulk of a great spaceflier. All hatred was washed from him, and the Earth was empty, for humanity would be saved, but home as Gregory Marshall knew it was dead forever. Perhaps he would not even see the final triumph.

Still, man's chances were better now than they had been before Marshall's homecoming. How long would it be before the last monster was driven from the blue star? It did not matter, so long as they were all driven away; for, after all, in the midst of the greatest changes, old Earth was home.... He turned and disappeared among the trees.

