

TIME WANTS A SKELETON

by

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Six people thrown back in Time knew that one of them had to supply a skeleton to lie a million years on an asteroid—

Asteroid No. 1007 came spinning relentlessly up.

Lieutenant Tony Crow's eyes bulged. He released the choked U-bar frantically, and pounded on the auxiliary underjet controls. Up went the nose of the ship, and stars, weirdly splashed across the heavens, showed briefly.

Then the ship fell, hurtling itself against the base of the mountain. Tony was thrown from the control chair. He smacked against the wall, grinning twistedly. He pushed against it with a heavily shod foot as the ship teetered over, rolled a bit, and then was still—still, save for the hiss of escaping air.

He dived for a locker, broke out a pressure suit, perspiration pearly on his forehead. He was into the suit, buckling the helmet down, before the last of the air escaped. He stood there, pained dismay in his eyes. His roving glance rested on the wall calendar.

"Happy December!" he snarled.

Then he remembered. Johnny Braker was out there, with his two fellow outlaws. By now, they'd be running this way. All the more reason why Tony should capture them now. He'd need their ship.

He acted quickly, buckling on his helmet, working over the air lock. He expelled his breath in relief as it opened. Nerves humming, he went through, came to his feet, inclosed by the bleak soundlessness of a twenty-mile planetoid more than a hundred million miles removed from Earth.

To his left the mountain rose sharply. Good. Tony had wanted to put the ship

down there anyway. He took one reluctant look at the ship. His face fell mournfully. The stern section was caved in and twisted so much it looked ridiculous. Well, that was *that*.

He quickly drew his Hampton and moved soundlessly around the mountain's shoulder. He fell into a crouch as he saw the gleam of the outlaw ship, three hundred yards distant across a plain, hovering in the shadow thrown by an overhanging ledge.

Then he saw the three figures leaping toward him across the plain. His Hampton came viciously up. There was a puff of rock to the front left of the little group. They froze.

Tony left his place of concealment, snapping his headset on.

"Stay where you are!" he bawled.

The reaction was unexpected. Braker's voice came blasting back.

"The hell you say!"

A tiny crater came miraculously into being to Tony's left. He swore, jumped behind his protection, came out a second later to send another projectile winging its way. One of the figures pitched forward, to move no more, the balloon rotundity of its suit suddenly lost. The other two turned tail, only to halt and hole up behind a boulder gracing the middle of the plain. They proceeded to pepper Tony's retreat.

Tony shrank back against the mountainside, exasperated beyond measure. His glance, roving around, came to rest on a cave, a fault in the mountain that tapered out a hundred feet up.

He stared at the floor of the cave unbelievably.

"I'll be double-damned," he muttered.

What he saw was a human skeleton.

He paled. His stomach suddenly heaved. Outrageous, haunting thoughts flicked through his consciousness. The skeleton was—horror!

And it had existed in the dim, unutterably distant past, before the asteroids, before the human race had come into existence!

The thoughts were gone, abruptly. Consciousness shuddered back. For a while, his face pasty white, his fingers trembling, he thought he was going to be sick. But he wasn't. He stood there, staring. Memories! If he knew where they came from—His very mind revolted suddenly from probing deeper into a mystery that tore at the very roots of his sanity!

"It existed before the human race," he whispered. "Then where did the skeleton come from? "

His lips curled. Illusion! Conquering his maddening revulsion, he approached the skeleton, knelt near it. It lay inside the cave. Colorless starlight did not allow him to see it as well as he might. Yet, he saw the gleam of gold on the long, tapering finger.

Old yellow gold, untarnished by atmosphere; and inset with an emerald, with a flaw, a distinctive, ovular air bubble, showing through its murky transparency.

He moved backward, away from it, face set stubbornly. "Illusion," he repeated.

Chips of rock, flaked off the mountainside by the exploding bullets of a Hampton, completed the transformation. He risked stepping out, fired.

The shot struck the boulder, split it down the middle. The two halves parted. The outlaws ran, firing back to cover their hasty retreat. Tony waited until the fire lessened, then stepped out and sent a shot over their heads.

Sudden dismay showed in his eyes. The ledge overhanging the outlaw ship cracked—where the bullet had struck it.

"What the hell—" came Braker's gasp. The two outlaws stopped stock-still.

The ledge came down, its ponderousness doubled by the absence of sound. Tony stumbled panting across the plain as the scene turned into a churning hell. The ship crumbled like clay. Another section of the ledge descended to bury the ship inextricably under a small mountain.

Tony Crow swore blisteringly. But ship or no ship, he still had a job to do. When the outlaws finally turned, they were looking into the menacing barrel of his Hampton.

"Get 'em up," he said impassively.

With studied insolence, Harry Jawbone Yates, the smaller of the two, raised his hands. A contemptuous sneer merely played over Braker's unshaved face and went upward to his smoky eyes.

"Why should I put my hands up? We're all pals, now—theoretically." His natural hate for any form of the law showed in his eyes. "You sure pulled a prize play, copper. Chase us clear across space, and end up getting us in a jam it's a hundred-to-one shot we'll get out of."

Tony held them transfixed with the Hampton, knowing what Braker meant. No ship would have reason to stop off on the twenty-mile mote in the sky that was Asteroid 1007.

He sighed, made a gesture. "Hamptons over here, boys. And be careful." The weapons arched groundward. "Sorry. I was intending to use your ship to take us back. I won't make another error like that one, though. Giving up this early in the game for instance. Come here, Jawbone."

Yates shrugged. He was blond, had pale, wide-set eyes. By nature, he was conscienceless. A broken jawbone, protruding at a sharp angle from his jawline, gave him his nickname.

He held out his wrists. "Put 'em on." His voice was an effortless affair which did not go as low as it could; rather womanish, therefore. Braker was different. Strength, nerve, and audacity showed in every line of his heavy, compact body. If there was

one thing that characterized him it was his violent desire to live. These were men with elastic codes of ethics. A few of their more unscrupulous activities had caught up with them.

Tony put cuffs over Yates' wrist.

"Now you, Braker."

"Damned if I do," said Braker.

"Damned if you don't," said Tony. He wagged the Hampton, his normally genial eyes hardening slightly. "I mean it, Braker," he said slowly.

Braker sneered and tossed his head. Then, as if resistance was below his present mood, he submitted.

He watched the cuffs click silently. "There isn't a hundred-to-one chance, anyway," he growled.

Tony jerked slightly, his eyes turned skyward. He chuckled.

"Well, what's so funny?" Braker demanded.

"What you just said." Tony pointed. "The hundred-to-one shot—there she is! "

Braker turned.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah. Damnation!"

A ship, glowing faintly in the starlight, hung above an escarpment that dropped to the valley floor. It had no visible support, and, indeed, there was no trace of the usual jets.

"Well, that's an item!" Yates muttered.

"It is at that," Tony agreed.

The ship moved. Rather, it simply disappeared, and next showed up a hundred feet away on the valley floor. A valve in the side of the cylindrical affair opened and a figure dropped out, stood looking at them.

A metallic voice said, "Are you the inhabitants or just people?"

The voice was agreeably flippant, and more agreeably feminine. Tony's senses quickened.

"We're people," he explained. "See?" He flapped his arms like wings. He grinned. "However, before you showed up, we had made up our minds to be—inhabitants."

"Oh. Stranded." The voice was slightly chilly. "Well, that's too bad. Come on inside. We'll talk the whole thing over. Say, are those handcuffs?"

"Right."

"Hm-m-m. Two outlaws—and a copper. Well, come on inside and meet the rest of us."

An hour later, Tony, agreeably relaxed in a small lounge, was smoking his third

cigarette, pressure suit off. Across the room were Braker and Yates. The girl, whose name, it developed, was Laurette, leaned against the door jamb, clad in jodhpurs and white silk blouse. She was blond and had clear, deep-blue eyes. Her lips were pursed a little and she looked angry. Tony couldn't keep his eyes off her.

Another man stood beside her. He was dark in complexion and looked as if he had a short temper. He was snapping the fingernails of two hands in a manner that showed characteristic impatience and nervousness. His name was Erle Masters.

An older man came into the room, fitting glasses over his eyes. He took a quick look around the room. Tony came to his feet.

Laurette said tonelessly, "Lieutenant, this is my father. Daddy, Lieutenant Tony Crow of the IPF. Those two are the outlaws I was telling you about."

"Outlaws, eh?" said Professor Overland. His voice seemed deep enough to count the separate vibrations. He rubbed at a stubbled jaw. "Well, that's too bad. Just when we had the DeTosque strata 1007 fitting onto 70. And there were ample signs to show a definite dovetailing of apex 1007 into Morrell's fourth crater on Ceres, which would have put 1007 near the surface, if not on it. If we could have followed those up without an interruption—"

"Don't let this interrupt you," Masters broke in. His nails clicked. "We'll let these three sleep in the lounge. We can finish up the set of indications we're working on now, and then get rid of them."

Overland shook his graying head doubtfully. "It would be unthinkable to subject those two to cuffs for a full month."

Masters said irritably, "We'll give them a parole. Give them their temporary freedom if they agree to submit to handcuffs again when we land on Mars."

Tony laughed softly. "Sorry. You can't trust those two for five minutes, let alone a month." He paused. "Under the circumstances, professor, I guess you realize I've got full power to enforce my request that you take us back to Mars. The primary concern of the government in a case like this would be placing these two in custody. I suggest if we get under way now, you can devote more time to your project."

Overland said helplessly, "Of course. But it cuts off my chances of getting to the Christmas banquet at the university." Disappointment showed in his weak eyes. "There's a good chance they'll give me Amos, I guess, but it's already December third. Well, anyway, we'll miss the snow."

Laurette Overland said bitterly, "I wish we hadn't landed on 1007. You'd have got along without us then, all right."

Tony held her eyes gravely. "Perfectly, Miss Overland. Except that we would have been inhabitants. And, shortly, very, very dead ones."

"So?" She glared.

Erle Masters grabbed the girl's arm with a muttered word and led her out of the room.

Overland grasped Tony's arm in a friendly squeeze, eyes twinkling. "Don't mind them, son. If you or your charges need anything, you can use my cabin. But we'll make Mars in forty-eight hours, seven or eight of it skimming through the Belt."

Tony shook his head dazedly. "Forty-eight hours?"

Overland grinned. His teeth were slightly tobacco-stained. "That's it. This is one of the new ships—the H-H drive. They zip along."

"Oh! The Fitz-Gerald Contraction?"

Overland nodded absently and left. Tony stared after him. He was remembering something now—the skeleton.

Braker said indulgently, "What a laugh."

Tony turned.

"What," he asked patiently, "is a laugh?"

Braker thrust out long, heavy legs. He was playing idly with a gold ring on the third finger of his right hand.

"Oh," he said carelessly, "a theory goes the rounds the asteroids used to be a planet. They're not sure the theory is right, so they send a few bearded long faces out to trace down faults and strata and striations on one asteroid and link them up with others. The girl's old man was just about to nail down 1007 and 70 and Ceres. Good for him. But what the hell! They prove the theory and the asteroids still play ring around the rosy and what have they got for their money? "

He absently played with his ring.

Tony as absently watched him turning it round and round on his finger. Something peculiar about—He jumped. His eyes bulged.

That ring! He leaped to his feet, away from it.

Braker and Yates looked at him strangely.

Braker came to his feet, brows contracting. "Say, copper, what ails you? You gone crazy? You look like a ghost."

Tony's heart began a fast, insistent pounding. Blood drummed against his temples. So he looked like a ghost? He laughed hoarsely. Was it imagination that suddenly stripped the flesh from Braker's head and left nothing but—a skull?

"I'm not a ghost," he chattered senselessly, still staring at the ring.

He closed his eyes tight, clenched his fists.

"He's gone bats?" said Yates, incredulously.

"Bats! Absolutely bats!"

Tony opened his eyes, looked carefully at Braker, at Yates, at the tapestried walls of the lounge. Slowly, the tensivity left him. Now, no matter what developed he would

have to keep a hold on himself.

"I'm all right, Braker. Let me see that ring." His voice was low, controlled, ominous.

"You take a fit?" Braker snapped suspiciously.

"I'm all right." Tony deliberately took Braker's cuffed hands into his own, looked at the gold band inset with the flawed emerald. Revulsion crawled in his stomach, yet he kept his eyes on the ring.

"Where'd you get the ring, Braker?" He kept his glance down.

"Why—'29, I think it was; or '28." Braker's tone was suddenly angry, resentful. He drew away. "What is this, anyway? I got it legal, and so what?"

"What I really wanted to know," said Tony, "was if there was another ring like this one—ever. I hope not... I don't know if I do. Damn it!"

"And I don't know what you're talking about," snarled Braker. "I still think you're bats. Hell, flawed emeralds are like fingerprints, never two alike. You know that yourself."

Tony slowly nodded and stepped back. Then he lighted a cigarette, and let the smoke inclose him.

"You fellows stay here," he said, and backed out and bolted the door behind him. He went heavily down the corridor, down a short flight of stairs, then down another short corridor.

He chose one of two doors, jerked it open. A half dozen packages slid from the shelves of what was evidently a closet. Then the other door opened. Tony staggered backward, losing his balance under the flood of packages. He bumped into Laurette Overland. She gasped and started to fall. Tony managed to twist around in time to grab her. They both fell anyway. Tony drew her to him on impulse and kissed her.

She twisted away from him, her face scarlet. Her palm came around, smashed into his face with all her considerable strength. She jumped to her feet, then the fury in her eyes died. Tony came erect, smarting under the blow.

"Sportsmanlike," he snapped angrily.

"You've got a lot of nerve," she said unsteadily. Her eyes went past him. "You clumsy fool. Help me get these packages back on the shelves before daddy or Erle come along. They're Christmas presents, and if you broke any of the wrappings—Come on, can't you help? "

Tony slowly hoisted a large carton labeled with a "Do Not Open Before Christmas" sticker, and shoved it onto the lower rickety shelf, where it stuck out, practically ready to fall again. She put the smaller packages on top to balance it.

She turned, seeming to meet his eyes with difficulty.

Finally she got out, "I'm sorry I hit you like that, lieutenant. I guess it was natural—your kissing me I mean." She smiled faintly at Tony, who was ruefully

rubbing his cheek. Then her composure abruptly returned. She straightened.

"If you're looking for the door to the control room, that's it."

"I wanted to see your father," Tony explained.

"You can't see him now. He's plotting our course. In fifteen minutes—" She let the sentence dangle. "Erle Masters can help you in a few minutes. He's edging the ship out of the way of a polyhedron."

"Polyhedron?"

"Many-sided asteroid. That's the way we designate them." She was being patronizing now.

"Well, of course. But I stick to plain triangles and spheres and cubes. A polyhedron is a sphere to me. I didn't know we were on the way. Since when? I didn't feel the acceleration."

"Since ten minutes ago. And naturally there wouldn't be any acceleration with an H-H drive. Well, if you want anything, you can talk to Erle." She edged past him, went swinging up the corridor. Tony caught up with her.

"You can help me," he said, voice edged. "Will you answer a few questions? "

She stopped, her penciled brows drawn together. She shrugged. "Fire away, lieutenant."

She leaned against the wall, tapping it patiently with one manicured fingernail.

Tony said, "All I know about the Hoderay-Hammond drive, Miss Overland, is that it reverses the Fitz-Gerald Contraction principle. It makes use of a new type of mechanical advantage. A moving object contracts in the direction of motion. Therefore a stationary object, such as a ship, can be made to move if you contract it in the direction you want it to move. How that's accomplished, though, I don't know."

"By gravitons—Where have you been all your life? "

"Learning," said Tony, "good manners."

She flushed. Her fingers stopped drumming. "If you realized you were interrupting important work, you'd know why I forget my manners. We were trying to finish this up so daddy could get back to his farewell dinner at the university. I guess the professors guessed right when they sent his—Well, why should I explain to you?"

"I'm sure," said Tony, "I don't know."

"Well, go on," she said coldly.

Tony lighted a cigarette, offered her one with an apology. She shook her head impatiently.

Tony eyed her through the haze of smoke. "Back there on 1007 I saw a skeleton with a ring on its finger."

She seemed nonplussed. "Well. Was it a pretty ring?"

Tony said grimly, "The point is, Braker never got near that skeleton after I saw it, but that same ring is now on his finger."

Startlement showed in her eyes. "That doesn't sound very plausible, lieutenant!"

"No, of course it doesn't. Because then the same ring is in two different places at the same time."

"And of course," she nodded, "that would be impossible. Go on. I don't know what you're getting at, but it certainly is interesting."

"Impossible?" said Tony. "Except that it happens to be the truth. I'm not explaining it away, Miss Overland, if that's your idea. Here's something else. The skeleton is a human skeleton, but it existed before the human race existed."

She shoved herself away from her indolent position. "You must be crazy."

Tony said nothing.

"How did you know?" she said sharply.

"I *know*. Now *you* explain the H-H drive, if you will."

"I will!" She said: "Gravitons are the ultimate particle of matter. There are 1846 in a proton, one in an electron, which is the reason why a proton is 1846 times as heavy as an electron.

"Now you can give me a cigarette, lieutenant. I'm curious about this thing, and if I can't get to the bottom of it, my father certainly will."

After a while, she blew out smoke nervously.

She continued, speaking rapidly: "A Wittenberg disrupter tears atoms apart. The free electrons are shunted off into accumulators, where we get power for lighting, cooking, heating and so forth. The protons go into the proton analyzer, where the gravitons are ripped out of them and stored in a special type of spherical field. When we want to move the ship, the gravitons are released. They spread through the ship and everything in the ship.

"The natural place for a graviton is in a proton. The gravitons rush for the protons—which are already saturated with 1846 gravitons. Gravitons are unable to remain free in three-dimensional space. They escape along the time line, into the past. The reaction contracts the atoms of the ship and everything in the ship, and shoves it forward along the opposite space-time line—forward into the future and forward in space. In the apparent space of a second, therefore, the ship can travel thousands of miles, with no acceleration effects.

"Now, there you have it, lieutenant. Do what you can with it."

Tony said, "What would happen if the gravitons were forced into the future rather than the past?"

"Lieutenant, I would have been surprised if you hadn't said that! Theoretically, it's an impossibility. Anybody who knows gravitons would say so. But if Braker is

wearing a ring that a skeleton older than the human race is also wearing—*Ugh!*"

She put her hands to her temples in genuine distaste. "We'll have to see my father," she said wearily. "He'll be the one to find out whether or not you make this up as you go along."

Erle Masters looked from Tony to Laurette.

"You believe this bilge he's been handing you?"

"I'm not interested in what you think, Erle. But I am in what you do, daddy."

Overland looked uneasy, his stubbled jaws barely moving over a wad of rough-cut.

"It does sound like... er... bilge," he muttered. "If you weren't an IPF man, I'd think you were slightly off-center. But—one thing, young man. How did you know the skeleton was older than the human race?"

"I said it existed *before* the human race."

"Is there any difference?"

"I think there is—somehow."

"Well," said Overland patiently, "how do you know it?"

Tony hesitated. "I don't really know. I was standing at the mouth of the cave, and something—or someone—told me."

"*Someone!*" Masters blasted the word out incredulously.

"I don't know!" said Tony. "All I know is what I'm telling you. It couldn't have been supernatural—could it?"

Overland said quickly, "Don't let it upset you, son. Of course it wasn't supernatural. There's a rational explanation somewhere, I guess. But it's going to be hard to come by."

He nodded his head abstractedly, and kept on nodding it like a marionette. Then he smiled peculiarly.

"I'm old now, son—you know? And I've seen a lot. I don't disbelieve anything. There's only one logical step for a scientist to take now, and that's to go back and take a look at that skeleton."

Masters' breath sounded. "You can't do that! "

"But we're going to. And remember that I employ *you*, because Laurette asked me to. Now turn this ship back to 1007. This might be more important than patching up a torn-up world at that." He chuckled.

Laurette shook her blond head. "You know," she said musingly, "this might be the very thing we *shouldn't* do, going back like this. On the other hand, if we went on our way, *that* might be the thing we shouldn't do."

Masters muttered, "You're talking nonsense, Laurette."

He ostentatiously grabbed her bare arm, and led her from the room after her father, throwing Tony a significant glance as he passed.

Tony expelled a long breath. Then, smiling twistedly, he went back to the lounge, to wait—for what? His stomach contracted again with revulsion—or was it a premonition?

Braker came sharply to his feet. "What's up, Crow?"

"Let me see that ring again," Tony said. After a minute he raised his eyes absently. "It's the same ring," he muttered.

"I wish to hell," Braker exploded, "I knew what you were talking about!"

Tony looked at him obliquely, and said under his breath, "Maybe it's better you don't."

He sat down and lighted a cigarette. Braker swore, and finally wandered to the window. Tony knew what he was thinking: of Earth; of the cities that teemed; of the vast stretches of open space between the planets. Such would be his thoughts. Braker, who loved life and freedom.

Braker, who wore a ring—

Then the constellations showing through the port abruptly changed pattern.

Braker leaped back, eyes bulging. "What the—"

Yates, sitting sullenly in the corner, came alertly to his feet. Braker mutely pointed at the stars.

"I could have sworn," he said thickly.

Tony came to his feet. He had seen the change. But his thoughts flowed evenly, coldly, a smile frozen on his lips.

"You saw right, Braker," he said coldly, then managed to grab the guide rail as the ship bucked. Braker and Yates sailed across the room, faces ludicrous with surprise. The ship turned the other way. The heavens spun, the stars blurring. Something else Tony saw beside blurred stars: a dull-gray, monstrous landscape, a horizon cut with mountains, a bright, small Sun fringing tumbled clouds with reddish, ominous silver. Then stars again, rushing past the port, simmering through an atmosphere—

Blackness crushed its way through Tony Crow's consciousness, occluding it until, finally, his last coherent thought had gone. Yet he seemed to know what had happened. There was a skeleton in a cave on an asteroid—millions of years from now. And the ship had struck.

Tony moved, opened his eyes. The lights were out, but a pale shaft of radiance was streaming through the still-intact port. Sounds insinuated themselves into his consciousness. The wet drip of rain, the low murmur of a spasmodic wind, a guttural *kutakikchkut* that drifted eerily, insistently, down the wind.

Tony slowly levered himself to his feet. He was lying atop Braker. The man was breathing heavily, a shallow gash on his forehead. Involuntarily, Tony's eyes dropped to the ring. It gleamed—a wicked eye staring up at him. He wrenched his eyes away.

Yates was stirring, mumbling to himself. His eyes snapped open, stared at Tony.

"What happened?" he said thickly. He reeled to his feet, "*Phew!*"

Tony smiled through the gloom. "Take care of Braker," he said, and turned to the door, which was warped off its hinges. He loped down the corridor to the control room, slowing down on the lightless lower deck ramp. He felt his way into the control room. He stumbled around until his foot touched a body. He stooped, felt a soft, bare arm. In sudden, stifling panic, he scooped Laurette's feebly breathing body into his arms. She might have been lead, as his feet seemed made of lead. He forced himself up to the upper corridor, kicked open the door of her father's room, placed her gently on the bed. There was light here, probably that of a moon. He scanned her pale face anxiously, rubbing her arms toward the heart. Blood came to her cheeks. She gasped, rolled over. Her eyes opened. "Lieutenant," she muttered.

"You all right?"

Tony helped her to her feet.

"Thanks, lieutenant. I'll do." She tensed. "What about my father?"

"I'll bring him up," said Tony. Five minutes later, Overland was stretched on the bed, pain in his open eyes. Three ribs were broken. Erle Masters hovered at the foot of the bed, dabbing at one side of his face, with a reddened handkerchief, a dazed, scared look in his eyes. Tony knew what he was scared of, but even Tony wasn't playing with that thought now.

He found a large roll of adhesive in the ship's medicine closet. He taped Overland's chest. The breaks were simple fractures. In time, they would do a fair job of knitting. But Overland would have to stay on his back. Masters met Tony's eyes reluctantly. "We'll have to get pressure suits and take a look outside."

Tony shrugged. "We won't need pressure suits. We're already breathing outside air, and living under this planet's atmospheric pressure. The bulkheads must be stowed in some place."

Overland's deep voice sounded, slowly. "I think we've got an idea where we are, Erle. You can feel the drag of this planet—a full-size planet, too. Maybe one and a half gravities. I can feel it pulling on my ribs." A bleak expression settled on his stubbled face. He looked at Tony humorlessly. "Maybe I'm that skeleton, son."

Tony caught his breath. "Nonsense. Johnny Braker's wearing the ring. If anybody's that skeleton, he is. *Not* that I wish him any bad luck, of course." He nodded once, significantly, then turned toward the door with a gesture at Masters. Masters, plainly resenting the soundless command, hesitated, until Laurette made an impatient motion at him.

They prowled through the gloomy corridor toward the small engine room, pushed

the door open. The overpowering odor of ozone and burning rubber flung itself at them.

Masters uttered an expressive curse as Tony played a beam over what was left of the reversed Fitz-Gerald Contraction machinery. His nails clicked startlingly loud in the heavy silence.

"Well, that's that," he muttered.

"What d'you mean—that's that?" Tony's eyes bored at him through the darkness.

"I mean that we're stuck here, millions of years ago." He laughed harshly, unsteadily.

Tony said without emotion, "Cut it out. Hasn't this ship got auxiliary rocket blasts?"

"Naturally. But this is a one and a half gravity planet. Anyway, the auxiliary jets won't be in such good condition after a fifty-foot drop."

"Then we'll fix 'em," said Tony sharply. He added, "What makes you so sure it's millions of years ago, Masters?"

Masters leaned back against the door jamb, face as cold and hard as stone.

"Don't make me bow to you any more than I have to, lieutenant," he said ominously. "I didn't believe your story before, but I do now. You predicted this crack-up—it had to happen. So I'm ready to concede it's millions of years ago; mainly because there wasn't any one and a half gravity planet within hundreds of millions of miles of the asteroid belt. But there *used* to be one."

Tony said, lips barely moving, "Yes?"

"There used to be one—*before the asteroids.*"

Tony smiled twistedly. "I'm glad you realize that."

He turned and went for the air lock, but, since the entire system of electric transmission had gone wrong somewhere, he abandoned it and followed a draft of wet air. He jerked open the door of a small storage bin, and crawled through. There was a hole here, that had thrust boxes of canned goods haphazardly to one side. Beyond was the open night.

Tony crawled out, stood in the lee of the ship, occasional stinging drops of rain lashing at their faces. Wind soughed across a rocky plain. A low roar heralded a near-by, swollen stream. A low *kutakikchkut* monotonously beat against the night, night-brooding bird, Tony guessed, nested in the heavy growth flanking a cliff that cut a triangular section from a heavily clouded sky. Light from a probable moon broke dimly through clouds on the leftward horizon.

Masters' teeth chattered in the cold.

Tony edged his way around the ship, looking the damage over. He was gratified to, discover that although the auxiliary rocket jets were twisted and broken, the only hole was in the storage bin bulkheads. That could be repaired, and so, in time, could

the jets.

They started to enter the ship when Masters grasped his arm. He pointed up into the sky, where a rift in the clouds showed.

Tony nodded slowly. Offsetting murkily twinkling stars, there was another celestial body, visible as a tiny crescent.

"A planet?" muttered Tony.

"Must be." Masters' voice was low.

They stared at it for a moment, caught up in the ominous, baleful glow. Then Tony shook himself out of it, went for the storage bin.

Walking down the corridor with Masters, Tony came upon Braker and Yates.

Braker grinned at him, but his eyes were ominous.

"What's this I hear about a skeleton? "

Tony bit his lip. "Where'd you hear it?"

"From the girl and her old man. We stopped outside their room a bit. Well, it didn't make sense, the things they were saying. Something about an emerald ring and a skeleton and a cave." He took one step forward, an ugly light in his smoky eyes. "Come clean, Crow. How does this ring I've got on my finger tie up with a skeleton?"

Tony said coldly, "You're out of your head. Get back to the lounge."

Braker sneered. "Why? You can't make us stay there with the door broken down."

Masters made an impatient sound. "Oh, let them go, lieutenant. We can't bother ourselves about something as unimportant as this. Anyway, we're going to need these men for fixing up the ship."

Tony said to Yates, "You know anything about electricity? Seems to me you had an E.E. once."

Yates' thin face lighted, before he remembered his sullen pose. "O.K., you're right," he muttered. He looked at Braker interrogatively.

Braker said: "Sorry. We're not obligated to work for you. As prisoners, you're responsible for us and our welfare. We'll help you or whoever's bossing the job *if* we're not prisoners."

Tony nodded. "Fair enough. But tonight, you stay prisoners. Tomorrow, maybe not," and he herded them back into the lounge. He cuffed them to the guide rail, and so left them, frowning a little. Braker had been too acquiescent.

The reason for that struck Tony hard. Walking back along the corridor, he saw something gleaming on the floor. He froze. Revulsion gripping him, he slowly picked up the ring.

Masters turned, said sharply, "What's up?"

Tony smiled lopsidedly, threw the ring into the air twice, speculatively, catching it in his palm. He extended it to Masters.

"Want a ring?"

Masters' face went white as death. He jumped back.

"Damn you!" he said violently. "Take that thing away!"

"Braker slipped it off his finger," said Tony, his voice edging into the aching silence. Then he turned on his heel, and walked back to the lounge. He caught Braker's attention.

He held the ring out.

"You must have dropped it," he said.

Braker's lips opened in a mirthful, raucous laugh.

"You can have it, copper," he gasped. "*I don't want to be any damned skeleton!*"

Tony slipped the ring into his pocket and walked back down the corridor with a reckless swing to his body.

He knocked on the door to Overland's room, opened it when Laurette's voice sounded.

Masters and Laurette looked at him strangely.

Overland looked up from the bed.

"Lieutenant," he said, an almost ashamed look on his face, "sometimes I wonder about the human mind. Masters seems to think that now *you've* got the ring, *you're* going to be the skeleton."

Masters' nails clicked. "It's true, isn't it? The outlaws know about the ring. We know about it. But Crow *has* the ring, and it's certain none of us is going to take it."

Overland made an exasperated clicking sound.

"It's infantile," he snapped. "Masters, you're acting like a child, not like a scientist. There's only one certainty, that one of us is going to be the skeleton. But there's no certainty which one. And there's even a possibility that all of us will die." His face clouded angrily. "And the most infantile viewpoint possible seems to be shared by all of you. You've grown superstitious about the ring. Now it's—a ring of death! Death to him who wears the ring! *Pah!*"

He stretched forth an imperative hand.

"Give it to me, lieutenant! I'll tell you right now that no subterfuge in the universe will change the fact of my being a skeleton if I am a skeleton; and vice versa."

Tony shook his head. "I'll be keeping it—for a while. And you might as well know that no scientific argument will convince anybody the ring is not a ring of death. For, you see, it is."

Overland sank back, lips pursed. "What are you going to do with it?" he charged. When Tony didn't answer, he said pettishly, "Oh, what's the use! On the face of it,

the whole situation's impossible." Then his face lighted. "What did you find out?"

Tony briefly sketched his conclusions. It would be two or three weeks before they could repair the rocket jets, get the electric transmission system working properly.

Overland nodded absently. "Strange, isn't it!" he mused. "All that work DeTosque, Bodley, Morrell, Haley, the Farr brothers and myself have done goes for nothing. Our being here proves the theory they were working on."

Laurette smiled lopsidedly at Tony.

"Lieutenant," she said, "maybe the skeleton was a woman."

"A woman!" Masters' head snapped around, horror on his face. "Not you, Laurette! "

"Why not? Women have skeletons, too—or didn't you know?" She kept her eyes on Tony. "Well, lieutenant? I put a question up to you."

Tony kept his face impassive. "The skeleton," he said, without a tremor, "was that of a man."

"Then," said Laurette Overland, stretching out her palm, cup-shaped, "give me the ring."

Tony froze, staring. That his lie should have this repercussion was unbelievable. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Overland's slowly blanching face. On Masters, Laurette's statement had the most effect.

"Damn you, Crow!" he said thickly. "This is just a scheme of yours to get rid of the ring!" He lunged forward.

The action was unexpected. Tony fell backward under the impact of the man's fist. He sprawled, on his bade. Masters threw himself at him,

"Erle, you utter fool!" That was Laurette's wail.

Disgust settled on Tony's face. He heaved, by sheer muscular effort, and threw Masters over on his back. His fist came down with a brief but pungent *crack*. Masters slumped, abruptly lifeless.

Tony drew himself to his feet, panting. Laurette was on her knees beside Masters, but her dismayed eyes were turned upward to Tony.

"I'm sorry, lieutenant!" she blurted.

"What have you got to be sorry about?" he snapped. "Except for being in love with a fool like that one."

He was sorry for it the second he said it. He didn't try to read Laurette's expression, but turned sullen eyes to Overland.

"It's night," he said abruptly, "and it's raining. Tomorrow, when the Sun comes up, it'll probably be different. We can figure out the situation then, and start our plans for—" He let the sentence dangle. Plans for what? He concluded, "I suggest we all get some sleep," and left.

He arranged some blankets on the floor of the control room, and instantly went to sleep, though there were times when he stirred violently. The skeleton was in his dreams—

There were five of them at the breakfast table. Laurette serving; Masters beside her, keeping his eyes sullenly on the food; Braker, eating as heartily as his cuffed hands would allow; Yates, picking at his food with disinterest.

Tony finished his second cup of coffee, and scraped his chair back.

"I'll be taking a look around," he told Laurette in explanation. He turned to the door.

Braker leaned back in his chair until it was balanced on two legs, and grinned widely.

"Where you going, Mr. Skeleton?"

Tony froze.

"After a while. Braker," he said, eyes frigid, "the ring will be taken care of."

Yates' fork came down. "If you mean you're going to try to get rid of it, you know you can't do it. It'll come back." His eyes were challenging.

Masters looked up, a strange; miffing series of thoughts in his sullen eyes. Then he returned to his food.

Tony, wondering what that expression had meant, shrugged and left the room; and shortly, the ship, by way of the cavity in the storage bin.

He wandered away from the ship, walking slowly, abstractedly, allowing impressions to slip into his mind without conscious resistance. There was a haunting familiarity in this tumbled plain, though life had no place in the remembrance. There was some animal life, creatures stirring in the dank humus, in long, thick grass, in gnarled tree tops. This was mountain country and off there was a tumbling mountain stream.

He impelled himself toward it, the tiny, yet phenomenally bright Sun throwing a shadow that was only a few inches long. It was high "noon."

He stood on the brink of the rocky gorge, spray prismatically alive with color, dashing up into his face. His eyes followed the stream up to the mountain fault where water poured downward to crush at the rocks with the steady, pummeling blow of a giant. He stood there, lost in abstraction, other sounds drowned out.

All except the grate of a shoe behind him. He tried to whirl; too late! Hands pushed against his back—in the next second, he had tumbled off the brink of the chasm, clutching wildly, vainly, at thick spray. Then, an awful moment of freezing cold, and the waters had enclosed him. He was borne away, choking for air, frantically flailing with his arms.

He was swept to the surface, caught a chaotic glimpse of Sun and clouded sky and rock, and then went under again, with a half lungful of air. He tensed, striving to sweep away engulfing panic. A measure of reason came back. Hands and feet began

to work in purposeful unison. The surface broke around him. He stayed on top.

But that was only because the stream was flowing darkly, swiftly, evenly. He was powerless to force himself against this current.

He twisted, savagely looking for some sign of release. A scaly, oily tree limb came at him with a rush. One wild grab, and the limb was bending downstream, straining against the pressure his body was exerting. He dashed hair from his eyes with one trembling hand, winced as he saw the needle-bed of rapids a hundred feet downstream. If that limb hadn't been there—His mind shuddered away from the thought.

Weakly, he drew himself hand over hand upward, until the tree trunk was solidly below him. He dropped to the ground, and lay there, panting. Then he remembered the hands on his back. With a vicious motion, he jerked out his key ring. That was the answer—the key to the cuffs was gone, taken during the night, of course! Erle Masters, then, had pulled this prize play, or perhaps one of the outlaws, after Masters released him.

After a while, he came to his feet, took stock of his surroundings. Off to his left, a cliff side, and scarcely a half mile distant, the pathetically awry hulk of the ship, on the top of the slope that stretched away.

The cliff side came into his vision again. A fault in the escarpment touched a hidden spot in his memory. He involuntarily started toward it. But he slowed up before he got to the fault—which was really a cave that tapered out to nothingness as its sides rose.

The cave!

And this sloping plain, these mountains, composed the surface of Asteroid 1007, millions of years from now.

Tony dropped emotionlessly to his knees at the mouth of the cave. Not so long ago, he had done the same thing. Then there had been a complete, undisjointed skeleton lying there. Somehow, then, he had known the skeleton existed before the human race—as if it were someone—the skeleton?—that had spoken to him across the unutterable years. The skeleton? That could not be! Yet, whence had come the memory?

He took the ring from his pocket and put it on his finger. It gleamed.

He knelt there for minutes, like a man who worships at his own grave, and he was not dead. Not dead! He took the ring from his finger, then, a cold, bleak smile growing on his face.

He came to his feet, a rising wind whipping at his hair. He took a half dozen running steps toward the river, brought his arm over his shoulder in a throwing gesture. Somehow the ring slipped from his fingers and fell.

He stooped, picked it up. This time, he made it leave his hand. It spun away,

twinkling in the faint sunlight. But the gravity had hold of it, and it fell on the brink of the river, plainly visible.

A dry, all-gone feeling rose in Tony's throat. Grimly, he went forward, picked it up again. Keeping his eyes on it, he advanced to the brink of the river gorge. He held the ring over the darkly swirling waters, slowly released it.

It struck the river like a plummet. The waters enclosed it and it was gone. He looked at the spot where it had disappeared, half expecting it to spring back up into his hand. But it was gone. Gone for good!

He started dazedly back to the ship, moving in an unreal dream. Paradoxical that he had been able to get rid of it. It had dropped from his hand once, fallen short of the river once. The third time it had given up trying!

When he came up to the ship, Masters was standing at the stern, looking at the broken rocket jets. He turned, and saw Tony, water still dripping from his uniform. He fell back a step, face turned pallid.

Tony's lips curled. "Who did it?"

"D-did what?"

"You know what I mean," Tony bit out. He took three quick steps forward.

Masters saw that, and went reckless. Tony side-stepped him, brought his left arm around in a short arc. Masters went down cursing. Tony knelt, holding Masters down by the throat. He felt through his pockets, unearthed the key to the cuffs. Then he hauled Masters to his feet and shook him. Masters' teeth clicked.

"Murderer!" Tony snapped, white with rage.

Masters broke loose. "I'd do it again," he said wildly, and swung. He missed. Tony lashed out with the full power of his open palm, caught Masters on the side of the head. Masters went reeling back, slammed against the side of the ship. Tony glared at him, and then turned on his heel.

He met Laurette Overland coming down the stairs to the upper corridor.

"Lieutenant!" Her eyes danced with excitement. "I've been looking for you. Where in the world have you been?"

"Ask Masters." He urged himself down the corridor, jaw set. She fell into step beside him, running to keep up with his long strides.

"You're all wet!" she exclaimed. "Can't you tell me what happened? Did you go swimming?"

"Involuntarily." He kept on walking.

She grabbed his arm, and slowed him to a stop. An ominous glint replaced her excitement.

"What," she said, "did you mean when you said I should ask Erle about it? Did he push you in? If he did, I'll—" She was unable to speak.

Tony laughed humorlessly. "He admitted it. He stole my key to the handcuffs with

the idea that it would be easier to free Braker and Yates that way after I was... uh... properly prepared to be a skeleton."

Her head moved back and forth. "That's horrible," she said lowly. "Horrible."

He held her eyes. "Perhaps I shouldn't have told you about it," he said, voice faintly acid. "He's your fiancé isn't he?"

She nodded, imperceptibly, studying him through the half gloom. "Yes. But maybe I'll change my mind, lieutenant. Maybe I will. But in the meantime, come along with me. Daddy's discovered something wonderful."

Professor Overland's head was propped up. He had a pencil and paper on his pyramided legs.

"Oh. Lieutenant! Come in." His face lighted. "Look here! Gravitons *can* thrust their way through to the future, giving the ship a thrust into the past. But only if it happened to enter the spherical type of etheric vacuum. This vacuum would be minus everything—electrons, photons, cosmic rays and so forth, except under unusual circumstances. At some one time, in either the past or future, there might be a stream of photons bridging the vacuum. Now, when gravitons are ejected into the past, they grab hold of light photons, and become ordinary negative electrons. Now say the photons are farther away in the past than they are in the future. The gravitons therefore follow the line of least resistance and hook up with photons of the future. The photons in this case were perhaps hundreds of millions of years away in the vacuum. In traveling that time-distance, the gravitons kicked the ship back for a proportionate number of years, burned up our machinery, and wrecked us on this suddenly appearing before-the-asteroid world."

Laurette said brightly, "But that isn't the important part, daddy."

"I can find another of those etheric vacuums," Overland went on, preoccupiedly, pointing out a series of equations. "Same type, same structure. But we have to go to the planet Earth in order to rebuild the reversed contraction machinery. We'll find the materials we need there." He glanced up. "But we have to get off this world before it cracks up, lieutenant."

Tony started. "Before this world cracks up?"

"Certainly. Naturally. You can—" His heavy brows came down abruptly. "You didn't know about that, did you? Hm-m-m." He stroked his jaw, frowning. "You recall the crescent planet you and Masters saw? Well, he took some readings on that. It's wonderful, son!" His eyes lighted. "It's an ill wind that blows nobody good. Not only do we know now that the asteroid evolved from a broken-up planet, but we also know the manner in which that planet broke up. Collision with a heavy, smaller body."

Tony paled. "You mean—" he said huskily. "Good heavens!" Sweat stood out on his forehead. "How soon will that happen?" he said ominously.

"Well, Erle has the figures. Something over eighteen or nineteen days. It'll be a

crack-up that'll shake the Sun. And we'll be here to witness it." He smiled wryly. "I'm more scientist than man, I guess. I never stop to think we might die in the crack-up, and furnish six skeletons instead of one."

"There'll be no skeletons," Tony said, eyes narrowed. "For one thing, we can repair the ship, though we'll have to work like mad. For another—I threw the ring into the river. It's gone."

Laurette seemed to pale. "I... I don't see how that could be done," she stammered. "You couldn't get rid of it, not really—could you?"

"It's gone," Tony said stubbornly. "For good. And don't forget it. There'll be no skeleton. And you might try to impress that on Masters, so he doesn't try to produce one," he added significantly.

He left the room with a nod, a few seconds later stepped into the lounge. Braker and Yates turned around. Both were cuffed.

Tony took the key from his pocket and the cuffs fell away. In brief, pungent tones, then, he explained the situation, the main theme being that the ship had to be well away from the planet before the crack-up. Yates would go over the wiring system. Braker, Masters and Tony would work with oxyacetylene torches and hammers over the hole in the hull and the rocket jets. Then he explained about the ring.

Yates ran a thin hand through his yellow hair. "You don't do it that easy," he said in his soft, effortless voice. "There's a skeleton up there, and it's got Braker's ring on its finger. It's got to be accounted for, don't it? It's either me or you or Braker or the girl or her old man or Masters. There ain't any use trying to avoid it, either." His voice turned sullen. He looked at Braker, then at Tony. "Anyway, *I'm keeping my back turned the right way so there won't be any dirty work.*"

Braker's breath sounded. "Why, you dirty rat," he stated. He took a step toward Yates. "You would think of that. And probably you'd try it on somebody else, too. Well, don't go pulling it on me, understand." He scowled. "And you better watch him, too, Crow. He's pure poison—in case you got the idea we were friends."

"Oh, cut it out," Tony said wearily. He added, "If we get the ship in working order, there's no reason why all six of us shouldn't get off—alive." He turned to the door, waved Braker and Yates after him. Yet he was sickeningly aware that *his* back was turned to men who admittedly had no conscience to speak of.

A week passed. The plain rang with sledge-hammer strokes directed against the twisted tubes. Three were irreplaceable.

Tony, haggard, tired, unbelievably grimed from his last trip up the twisted, hopeless-looking main blast tube, was suddenly shocked into alertness by sounds of men's voices raised in fury outside the ship. He ran for the open air lock, and urged himself toward the ship's stern. Braker and Yates were tangling it.

"I'll kill him!" Braker raged. He had a rock the size of his fist in his hand. He was

attempting, apparently, to knock Jawbone Yates' brains out. Erle Masters stood near, chewing nervously at his upper lip.

With an oath, Tony wrenched the rock from Braker's hand, and hauled the man to his feet. Yates scrambled erect, whimpering, mouth bleeding.

Braker surged wildly toward him. "The dirty—!" he snarled. "Comes up behind me with an oxy torch!"

Yates shrilled, backing up, "That's a lie!" He pointed a trembling hand at Braker. "It was *him* that was going to use the torch on *me*!"

"Shut up!" Tony bawled. He whirled on Masters. "You've got a nerve to stand there," he snarled. "But then you *want* a skeleton! Damned if you're going to get one! Which one did it?"

Masters stammered, "I didn't see it! I... I was just—"

"The hell you say!" Tony whirled on the other two, *transfixing them with cold eyes*.

"Cut it out," he said, lips barely moving. "Either you're *letting* your nerves override you, or either one or both of you is blaming the other for a move he made himself. You might as well know the skeleton I saw was intact. What do you think a blow torch would do to a skeleton?" His lips curled.

Braker slowly picked up his torch with a poisonous glance at Yates. Yates as slowly picked his sledge hammer. He turned on Tony.

"You said the skeleton was intact?" Eagerness, not evident from his carefully sullen voice, was alive in his eyes.

Tony's glance passed over the man's broken, protruding jaw.

"The skull," he replied, "was in shadow." He winced. The passing of hope was a hard thing to watch, even in a man like Jawbone Yates.

He turned, releasing his breath in a long, tired sigh. What a man-sized job this was. Outwitting fate—negating what *had* happened!

Tony worked longer than he expected that day, tracing down the web of asbestos-covered rocket fuel conduits, marking breaks down on the chart. The Sun sank slowly. Darkness swept over the plain, along with a rising wind. He turned on the lights, worked steadily on, haggard, nerves worn. Too much work to allow a slowing up. The invading planet rose each night a degree or more larger. Increasing, tidal winds and rainstorms attested to a growing gravitational attraction.

He put an x-mark on the check—and then froze. A scream had gone blasting through the night.

Tony dropped pencil and chart, went flying up the ramp to the upper corridor. He receives the full impact of Master's second scream. Masters had left his room, was running up the corridor, clad in pajamas. There was a knife sticking out of his

shoulder.

Tony, gripped with horror, impelled himself after the man, caught up with him as he plunged face downward. He dropped to one knee, staring at a heavy meat knife that had been plunged clear through the neck muscles on Masters' left shoulder, clearly a bid for a heart stroke.

Masters turned on his side. He babbled, face alive with horror. Tony rose, went with the full power of his legs toward the lounge.

A figure showed, running ahead of him. He caught up with it, whipped his arm around the man's neck.

"You!"

Yates squirmed tigerishly. He turned, broke loose, face alive with fury. Tony's open palm lashed out, caught Yates full on the face. Yates staggered and fell. He raised himself to one elbow.

"Why'd you do it?" Tony rasped, standing over him.

Yates' face was livid. "Because I'd rather live than anything else I can think of!" His booted foot lashed out. Tony leaped back. Yates rose. Tony brought his bunched fist up from his knees with all the ferocity he felt. Yates literally rose an inch off the floor, sagged, and sopped to the floor.

Tony picked him up in one arm, and flung him bodily into the lounge.

Braker rose from his sleeping position on a cushioned bench, blinking.

Tony said cuttingly, "Your pal ran a knife through Masters' shoulder."

"Huh?" Braker was on his feet. "Kill him?" In the half-light his eyes glowed.

"You'd be glad if he did! "

Braker looked at Yates. Then, slowly, "Listen, copper. Don't make the mistake of putting me in the same class with a rat like Yates. I don't knife people in the back. But if Masters was dead, I'd be glad of it. It might solve a problem that's bothering the rest of us. What you going to do with him?"

"I already did it. But tell Yates he better watch out for Masters, now."

Braker grunted scornfully. "Huh. Masters'll crack up and down his yellow back.

Tony left.

Laurette and Overland were taking care of Masters in his room. The wound was clean, hardly bleeding.

Overland, somewhat pale, was hanging onto the door. "It's not serious, honey," he said, as her fingers nimbly wound bandages.

"Not serious?" She turned stricken eyes up to Tony. "Look at him. And daddy says it's not serious! "

Tony winced. Masters lay face down on the bed, babbling hysterically to himself, his eyes preternaturally wide. His skin was a pasty white, and horror had etched flabby lines around his lips.

"Knifed me," he gasped. "Knifed me. I was sleeping, that was the trouble. But I heard him—" He heaved convulsively, and buried his face in his pillow.

Laurette finished her job, face pale.

"I'll stay here the rest of the night," Tony told her.

Overland gnawed painfully at his lower lip.

"Who did it?"

Tony told him.

"Can't we do something about it?"

"What?" Tony laughed scornfully. "Masters had the same trick pulled on him that he pulled on me. He isn't any angel himself."

Overland nodded wearily. His daughter helped him out of the room.

During the night, Masters tossed and babbled. Finally he fell into a deep sleep. Tony leaned back in a chair, moodily listening to the sough of wind, later on watching the Sun come up, staining the massed clouds with running, changing streaks of color.

Masters awoke. He rolled over. He saw Tony, and went rigid. He came to his feet, and huddled back against the wall.

"Get out." he gasped, making a violent motion with his hand.

"You're out of your head," said Tony angrily. "It was Yates."

Masters panted, "I know it was. What difference does it make? You're all in the same class. I'm going to watch myself after this. I'm going to keep my back turned the right way. I'm going to be sure that none of you—"

Tony put his hands on his hips, eyes narrowed.

"If you've got any sense, you'll try to forget this and act like a human being. Better to be dead than the kind of man you'll turn into."

"Get out. Get out!" Masters waved his hand again, shuddering.

Tony left, shaking his head slowly.

Tony stood outside the ship, smoking a cigarette. It was night. He heard a footstep behind him. He fell back a step, whirling.

"Nerves getting you, too?" Laurette Overland laughed shakily, a wool scarf blowing back in the heavy, unnatural wind.

Tony relaxed. "After two weeks of watching everybody watching everybody else, I guess so."

She shivered. He sensed it was not from the bite of the wind. "I suppose you

mean Erle."

"Partly. Your father's up and around today, isn't he? He shouldn't have gotten up that night."

"He can get around all right."

"Maybe he better lock himself in his room." He smiled with little amusement. "The others are certain the ring will come back."

She was silent. Through the ominous gloom, lit now by a crescent planet that was visible as a small moon, and growing steadily larger, he saw a rueful, lopsided smile form on her face. Then it was gone.

She said, "Erle was telling me the jets are in bad condition. A trial blast blew out three more."

"That's what happened."

She went on: "He also told me there was a definite maximum weight the jets could lift in order to get us free of the gravity. We'll have to throw out everything we don't need. Books, rugs, clothing, beds." She drew a deep breath. "And in the end, maybe a human being."

Tony's smile was frozen. "Then the prophecy would come true."

"Yes. It is a prophecy, isn't it?" She seemed childishly puzzled. She added, "And it looks like it has to come true. Because—Excuse me, lieutenant," she said hurriedly, and vanished toward the air lock.

Tony stared after her, his mind crawling with unpleasant thoughts. It was unbelievable, fantastic. So you couldn't outwit fate. The ship would have to be lightened. Guesswork might easily turn into conviction. There might be one human being too many—

Professor Overland came slowly from the air lock, wincing from the cold after his two weeks of confinement. His haggard eyes turned on Tony. He came forward, looking up at the growing planet of destruction.

"Erle has calculated three days, eight hours and a few minutes. But it's ample time, isn't it, lieutenant?"

"One jet will straighten out with some man-size labor. Then we can start unloading extra tonnage. Lots, of it."

"Yes. Yes. I know." He cleared his throat. His eyes turned on Tony, filled with a peculiar kind of desperation. "Lieutenant," he said huskily, "there's something I have to tell you. The ring came back."

Tony's head jerked. "It came back?" he blurted.

"In a fish."

"Fish?"

Overland ran a trembling hand across his brow. "Yesterday a week ago, Laurette served fried fish. She used an old dress for a net. I found the ring in what she

brought to my room. Well, I'm not superstitious about the ring. One of us *is* the skeleton—up there. We can't avoid it. I put the ring on—more bravado than anything else. But this morning"—his voice sank to a whisper—"the ring was gone. Now I'm becoming superstitious, unscientifically so. Laurette is the only one who could—or would—have taken it. The others would have been glad it was on my finger rather than theirs. Even Erle."

Tony stared through him. He was remembering Laurette's peculiar smile. Abruptly, he strode toward the ship, calling back hurriedly:

"Better go inside, sir."

In the ship, he knocked sharply on Laurette's door.

She answered nervously, "Yes."

"May I come in?"

"No. No. Do you have to?"

He thought a moment, then opened the door and stepped inside. She was standing near her bed, her eyes haunted.

Tony extended a hand imperatively. "Give me the ring."

She said, her voice low, controlled, "Lieutenant, I'll keep the ring. You tell that to the others. Then there won't be any of this nervous tension and this murder plotting."

He said ominously, "You may wind up a skeleton."

"You said the skeleton was not a woman."

"I was lying."

"You mean," she said, "it *was* a woman?"

Tony said patiently, "I mean that I don't know. I couldn't tell. Do I get the ring, or don't I? "

She drew a deep breath. "Not in the slightest can it decide who will eventually die."

Tony advanced a step. "Even your father doesn't believe that now," he grated.

She winced. "I'll keep the ring and stay in my room except when I cook. You can keep everybody out of the ship. Then there won't be anybody to harm me."

Footsteps sounded in the corridor. Masters entered the room. Tension had drawn hollow circles under eyes that refused to stay still.

"You," he said to Tony, his voice thin, wavering. He stood with his back to the wall. He wet his lips. "I was talking with your father."

"All right, all right," she said irritably. "I've got the ring, and I'm keeping it."

"No, you can't, Laurette. We're going to get rid of it, this time. The six of us are going to watch."

"You can't get rid of it!" Then, abruptly, she snatched it off her finger. "Here!"

Imperceptibly, he shrank back against the wall.

"There's no use transferring it now. You've got it, you might as well carry it." His eyes swiveled, lighted with a sudden burst of inspiration. "Better yet, let Crow carry it. He represents the law. That would make it proper."

She seemed speechless.

"Can you imagine it? Can you imagine a sniveling creature like him—I'll keep the ring. First my father gets weak in the knees, and then—" She cast a disdainful look at Masters. "I wish you'd both leave me alone, please."

Tony shrugged, left the room, Masters edging out after him.

Tony stopped him.

"How much time have we got left?"

Masters said jerkily, "We've been here fourteen days. It happens on the twenty-fifth. That's eleven days from now, a few hours either way."

"How reliable are your figures?"

Masters muttered, "Reliable" enough. We'll have to throw out practically everything. Doors, furniture, clothes. And then—"

"Yes?"

"I don't know," Masters muttered, and slunk away.

It was the twenty-fourth of December.

Tidal winds increased in savagery in direct proportion to the growing angular diameter of the invading planet. Heavy, dully colored birds fought their way overhead. On the flanks of abruptly rising cliff edges, gnarled trees lashed. Rain fell spasmodically. Clouds moved in thoroughly indiscriminate directions. Tentacular leaves whirl-pooled. Spray, under the wind's impact, cleared the river gorge. The waterfall was muted.

Rushing voluminous air columns caught at the growing pile emerging from the ship's interior, whisked away clothing, magazines, once a mattress. It did not matter. Two worlds were to crash in that momentous, before-history forming of the asteroids. There was but one certainty. This plain, these mountains—and a cave—were to stay intact through the millions of years.

Inside the air lock, Masters stood beside a heavy weight scale. Light bulbs, dishes, silverware, crashed into baskets indiscriminately, the results weighed, noted, discarded. Doors were torn off their hinges, floors ripped up. Food they would keep, and water, for though they eventually reached Earth, they could not know whether it yet supported life.

The ship, devoid of furnishings, had been a standard eleven tons for an H-H drive. Furnishings, food, et cetera, brought her to over thirteen tons. Under a one

and a half gravity, it was twenty tons. Masters' figures, using the firing area the ship now had, with more than half the jets beyond use, were exact enough. The maximum lift the jets would or could afford was plus or minus a hundred pounds of ten and three quarter tons.

Masters looked up from his last notation, eyes red-rimmed, lips twitching. Braker and Yates and Tony were standing in the air lock, watching him.

Fear flurried in Master's eyes. "What are you looking at me like that for?" he snarled. Involuntarily, he fell back a step.

Yates giggled.

"You sure do take the fits. We was just waiting to see how near we was to the mark. There ain't anything else to bring out."

"Oh, there isn't?" Masters glared. "We're still eight hundred pounds on the plus side. How about the contraction machinery?"

Tony said: "It's our only hope of getting back to the present. Overland needs it to rebuild the drive."

"Pressure suits!"

"We're keeping six of them, in case the ship leaks."

"Doors!" said Masters wildly. "Rugs!"

"All," said Tony, "gone."

Masters' nails clicked. "Eight hundred pounds more," he said hoarsely. He looked at his watch, said, "Eleven hours plus or minus," took off his watch and threw it out. He made a notation on his pad, grinning crookedly. "Another ounce gone."

"I'll get Overland," Tony decided.

"Wait!" Masters thrust up a pointing finger. "Don't leave me alone with those two wolves. They're waiting to pounce on us. Four times one hundred and fifty is six hundred."

"You're bats," said Braker coldly.

"Besides," said Yates, "where would we get the other two hundred pounds? "

Masters panted at Tony, "You hear that? He wants to know where they'd get the other two hundred pounds!"

"I was joking," said Yates.

"Joking! *Joking!* When he tried to knife me once!"

"Because," concluded Yates, "the cards call for only one skeleton. *I'll* get him."

He came back shortly with Laurette and her father.

Overland fitted his glasses over his weak eyes while he listened, glancing from face to face.

"It would be suicidal to get rid of the machinery, what's left of it. I have another

suggestion. We'll take out all the direct-vision ports. They might add up to eight hundred pounds."

"Not a bad idea," said Braker slowly, "We can wear pressure suits. The ship might leak anyway."

Masters waved a hand. "Then get at it! Laurette, come here. You've got the ring. *You* don't want to be the skeleton, do you? Put your backup this wall with me."

"Oh, Erle," she said in disgust, and followed her father out.

Tony brought three hack saws from the pile of discarded tools. Working individual rooms, the three of them went through the ship, sawing the ports off at the hinges, pulling out the port packing material. The ship was now a truly denuded spectacle, the floors a mere grating of steel.

The ports and packing were placed on the scale.

"Five hundred—five twenty-five—five sixty-one. That's all!" Masters sounded as if he were going to pieces.

Tony shoved him aside. "Five sixty-one it is. There may be a margin of error, though," he added casually. "Braker, Yates—out with this scale."

The two stooped, heaved. The scale, its computed weight already noted, went out—

Tony said, "Come on, Masters."

Masters trotted behind, doglike, as if he had lost the power of thought. Tony got the six pressure suits out of the corner of the control room, and gestured toward them. Everybody got into the suits.

Tony buckled his helmet down. "Now give her the gun."

Masters stood at the auxiliary rocket control board, face pale, eyes unnaturally wide.

He made numerous minor adjustments. He slowly depressed a plunger. A heavy, vibrating roar split the night. The ship leaped. There was a sensation of teetering motion. In the vision plates, the plain moved one step nearer, as if a new slide had been inserted in a projector. The roar swept against them voluminously. The picture remained the same.

Masters wrenched up the plunger, whirled.

"You see?" he panted. "I could have told you!"

Professor Overland silenced him with a wave of the hand, pain showing in his eyes.

"I make this admission almost at the expense of my sanity," he said slowly. "Events have shaped themselves—incredibly. Backward. In the future, far away, in a time none of us may ever see again, lies a skeleton with a ring on its finger.

"Now which causes which—the result or its cause?"

He took off his glasses, blinked, fitted them back on.

"You see," he said carefully, "some of the things that have happened to us are a little bit incredible. There is Lieutenant Crow's—*memory* of these events. He saw the skeleton and it brought back memories. From where? From the vast storehouse of the past? That does not seem possible. Thus far it is the major mystery, how he *knew* that the skeleton existed before the human race.

"Other things are perhaps more incredible. Three shipwrecks! Incredible coincidence! Then there is the incident of the ring. It is—a ring of death. I say it who thought I would never say it. Lieutenant Crow even had some difficulty throwing it into the river. A fish swallowed it and it came back to me. Then my daughter stole it from me. And she refused to give it up, or let us know what her plans for disposition of it are.

"I do not know whether we are shaping a future that is, or whether a future that is shaping us.

"And finally we come to the most momentous occurrence of this whole madness. An utterly ridiculous thing like two hundred or two hundred and fifty pounds.

"So we must provide a skeleton. The future that is says so."

Silence held. The roar of the river, and the growing violence of the tidal wind rushed in at them. Braker's breath broke loose.

"He's right. Somebody has to get off—and stay off! And it isn't going to be the old man, him being the only one knows how to get us back."

"That's right," said Yates. "It ain't going to be the old man."

Masters shrank back. "Well, don't look at me!" he snarled.

"I wasn't looking at you," Yates said mildly.

Tony's stomach turned rigid. This was what you had to go through to choose a skeleton to die on an asteroid, its skin and flesh to wear and evaporate away and finally wind up millions of years later as a skeleton in a cave with a ring on its finger. These were some of the things you had to go through before you became that skeleton yourself—

"Laurette," he said, "isn't in this lottery."

Braker turned on him. "The hell she isn't! "

Laurette said, voice edged, "I'm in. I might be the straw that broke the camel's back."

Overland said painfully, "Minus a hundred and five might take us over the escarpment. Gentlemen, I'll arrange this lottery, being the only non-participant."

Masters snarled, eyes glittering, "You're prejudiced in favor of your daughter!"

Overland looked at him mildly, curiously, as he would some insect. He made a clicking sound with his lips.

Masters pursued his accusation.

"We'll cut for high man and low card to take the rap!"

"Yah!" jeered Yates. "With your deck, I suppose."

"Anybody's deck!" said Masters.

"All the cards were thrown out. Why weren't yours? "

"Because I knew it would come to this."

"Gentlemen," said Overland wearily. "It won't be a deck. Laurette, the ring."

She started, paled. She said, "I haven't got it."

"Then," said her father, without surprise, "we'll wait around until it shows up."

Braker whirled on him. "You're crazy! We'll draw lots anyway. Better still, we'll find where she put the ring."

"I buried it," said the girl, and her eyes fluttered faintly. "You better leave it buried. You're just proving—"

"Buried it!" blasted Masters. "When she could have used a hammer on it. When she could have melted it in an oxyacetylene torch. When she could—"

"When she could have thrown it in the river and have a fish bring it back? Shut up, Masters." Braker's jawline turned ominous. "Where's the ring? The skeleton's got to have a ring and it's going to have one."

"I'm not going to tell you." She made a violent motion with her hand. "This whole thing is driving me crazy. We don't need the ring for the lottery. Leave it there, can't you?" Her eyes were suddenly pleading. "If you dig it up again, you'll just complete a chain of coincidence that couldn't possibly—"

Overland said, "We won't use the ring in the lottery. It'll turn up later and the skeleton will wear it. We don't have to worry about it, Braker."

Yates said, "Now we're *worrying* about it!"

"Well, it has to be there, doesn't it?" Braker charged.

Tony interrupted by striking a match. He applied flame to a cigarette, sucked in the nerve-soothing smoke.

His eyes were hard, watchful. "Ten hours to get out of range of the collision," his lips said.

"Then we'll hold the lottery now," said Overland. He turned and left the room. Tony heard his heavy steps dragging up the ramp.

The five stood statuesque until he came back. He had a book in one hand. Five straws stuck out from between the pages, their ends making an even line parallel with

the book.

Overland's extended hand trembled slightly.

"Draw," he said. "My daughter may draw last, so you may be sure I am not tricking anybody. Lieutenant? Braker? Anybody. And the short straw loses."

Tony pulled a straw.

"Put it down on the floor at your feet," said Overland, "since someone may have previously concealed a straw."

Tony put it down, face stony.

The straw was as long as the book was wide.

Braker said, in an ugly tone, "Well, I'll be damned!"

Braker drew a shorter one. He put it down.

Yates drew a still shorter one. His smile of bravado vanished. Sweat stood suddenly on his pale forehead.

"Go ahead, Masters!" he grated. "The law of averages says you'll draw a long one."

"I don't believe in the law of averages," said Masters sulkily. "Not on this planet, anyway—I'll relinquish the chance to Laurette."

"That," said Laurette, "is sweet of you."

She took a straw without hesitation.

Masters said nervously, "It's short, isn't it?"

"Shorter than mine." Yates' breath came out in a long sigh. "Go ahead, Masters. Only one straw left, so you don't have to make a decision."

Masters jerked it out.

He put it on the floor. It was long.

A cry burst from Overland's lips. "Laurette!"

She faced their silent stares with curled lips.

"That's that. I hope my hundred and five helps."

Tony dropped his cigarette. "It won't," he snapped. "We were fools for including you."

Suddenly he was watching Braker out of the corner of his eye, his nerves tense.

Overland said in a whisper, "How could I suggest leaving my daughter out? I said a hundred pounds *might* be the margin. If I'd have suggested leaving her out, you'd have accused me of favoritism."

Braker said casually, "There's only going to be one lottery held here."

Yates looked dumfounded. "Why, you blasted fool," he said. "What if we're stuck back here before the human race and there ain't any women? "

"That's what I mean. I thought we'd include the girl. If she was drawn, then we could ask some gentleman to volunteer in her place."

He made a sudden motion. Tony made a faster one. His Hampton came out and up.

"Drop it!" he rasped. "I said—*drop it!*"

Braker's eyes bulged. He looked at the Hampton as if he were unable to comprehend it. He cursed rackingly and dropped the automatic as if it were infested with a radioactive element. It clattered on the metal grating of the denuded floor.

A smile froze on Tony's lips. "Now you can explain where you got that automatic."

Braker, eyes fuming like those of a trapped animal, involuntarily shot a glance at Masters.

Tony turned his head slightly toward Masters. "It would be you," he said bitterly.

He whirled—too late. Yates hurtled toward him, struck him in a flying tackle. Tony fell audibly. He tangled furiously with Yates. No good! Braker, face contorted with glee, leaped on top of him, struggled mightily, and then with the main force of his two gloved hands wrenched the Hampton away, rolled from Tony's reach, then snapped himself to his feet, panting.

"Thanks, Yates!" he exclaimed. "Now get up, Crow. Get up. What a man. What a big hulking man. Weighs two hundred if he weighs an ounce." His lips curled vengefully. "Now get up and get out! "

Overland made a step forward, falteringly.

Braker waved the weapon air-inclusively.

"Back, you," he snarled. "This is my party, and it's a bad-taste party, too. Yates, corner the girl. Masters, stand still—you're my friend if you want to be. All right, lieutenant, get going—and dig! For the ring!" His face screwed up sadistically. "Can't disappoint that skeleton, can we?"

Tony came to his feet slowly, heart pounding with what seemed like long-spaced blows against his ribs. Painfully, his eyes ran from face to face, finally centered on Laurette's.

She surged forward against Yates's retaining grip.

"Don't let them do it, lieutenant," she cried. "It's a dirty trick. You're the one person out of the four who doesn't deserve it. I'll—" She slumped back, her voice fading, her eyes burning. She laughed jerkily. "I was just remembering what you did when all the Christmas packages came tumbling down on us. You kissed me, and I slapped you, but I really wanted you to kiss me again."

Yates laughed nastily. "Well, would you listen to that. Masters, you going to stand there and watch them two making love? "

Masters shuddered, his face graying. He whispered, "It's all right. I wish—"

"Cut out the talk!" Braker broke in irritably.

Tony said, as if the other conversation had not intervened, "I wanted to kiss you again, too." He held her wide, unbelieving eyes for a long moment, then dropped his head and bit at his shuddering lower lip. It seemed impossible to stand here and realize that this was defeat and that there was no defense against it! He shivered with an unnatural jerk of the shoulders.

"All right," Braker said caustically, "get going."

Tony stood where he was. Braker and everybody else except Laurette Overland faded. Her face came out of the mist, wild, tense, lovely and lovable. Tears were coming from her eyes, and her racking sobs were muted. For a long moment, he hungrily drank in that last glimpse of her.

"Lieutenant!"

He said dully, his eyes adding what his lips did not, "Goodby, Laurette."

He turned, went toward the air lock with dragging feet, like a man who leaves the death house only to walk toward a worse fate. He stopped at the air lock. Braker's gun prodded him.

He stood faintly in the air lock until Braker said, "Out, copper! Get moving."

And then he stepped through, the night and the wild wind enclosing him, the baleful light of the invading planet washing at him.

Faintly he heard Braker's jeering voice, "So long, copper." Then, with grim, ponderous, finality, came the wheeze of the closing air lock.

He wandered into the night for a hundred feet, somehow toward the vast pile that had been extracted from the ship's interior. He seemed lost in unreality. This was the pain that went beyond all pains, and therefore numbed.

He turned. A blast of livid flame burst from the ship's main tube. Smaller parallels of fire suddenly ringed it. The ship moved. It slid along the plain on its runners, hugged the ground for two hundred feet, plummeting down the slope, Tony found himself tense, praying staccato curses. Another hundred feet. The escarpment loomed.

He thrust his arms forcefully upward.

"Lift!" he screamed. "*Lift!*"

The ship's nose turned up, as her short wings caught the force of the wind. Then it roared up from the plain, cleared the escarpment by a scant dozen feet. The echoes of the blast muted the very howl of the wind. The echoes died. Then there was nothing but a bright jewel of light receding. Then there was—nothing.

Tony looked after it, conscious that the skin was stretched dry and tight across his cheekbones. His upflung arms dropped. A little laugh escaped his lips. He turned

on his heels. The wind was so furious he could lean against it. It was night, and though the small moon this before-the-asteroids world boasted was invisible, the heavens overflowed with the baleful, pale-white glow of the invading planet.

It was still crescent. He could clearly see the ponderous immensity the lighted horns embraced. The leftward sky was occluded a full two fifths by the falling monster, and down in the seas, the shores would be overborne by tidal waves.

He stood motionless. He was at a loss in which direction to turn. An infinity of directions, and there could be no purpose in any. What type of mind could choose a direction?

That thought was lost. He moved toward the last link he had with humanity—with Laurette. He stood near the trembling pile. There was a cardboard carton, addressed to Professor Henry Overland, a short chain of canceled stamps staring up at him, pointing to the non-existence of everything that would be. America and Christmas and the post office.

He grinned lopsidedly. The grin was lost. It was even hard to know what to do with one's face. He was the last man on a lost world. And even though he was doomed to death in this unimaginably furious crack-up, he should have some goal, something to live for up to the very moment of death!

He uttered a soft, trapped cry, dashed his gloves to his helmeted face. Then a thought simmered. Of course! The ring! He had to find the ring, and he would. The ring went with the skeleton. And the skeleton went with the ring. Lieutenant Tony Crow—and there could be no doubt of this whatsoever—was to be that skeleton which had grinned up at him so many years ago—no, not ago, a come.

A useless task, of course. The hours went past, and he wandered across the tumbled, howling plain, traversing each square foot, hunting for a telltale, freshly turned mound of earth. He went to the very brink of the river gorge, was immersed in leaping spumes of water. Of the ring that he must have there was no trace.

Where would she have buried it? How would her mind work? Surely, she could not have heartlessly buried the ring, hiding it forever, when Tony Crow needed it for the skeleton he was to turn into!

He knew the hours were flying. Yet, better to go mad with this tangible, positive purpose, than with the intangible, negative one of waiting spinelessly for death from the lowering monster who now owned the heavens.

How convenient this was. One time-traveled. One witness to the origin of the asteroids. Similarly, one might time-travel and understand at last the unimaginable, utterly baffling process by which the solar system came into being. Nothing as simple as a collision. Or a binary sweeping past a single. Or a whirling nebula. It would be connected with the expanding universe, in some outrageously simple manner. But everything was simple once one knew the answer. For instance—

The ring! Yes, it was as simple as that. Even Laurette Overland would be forced to yield to the result that was influencing its own cause!

Tenseness gave way to relief. One could not baffle the future. Naturally, she'd buried the ring in the cave. Unless she wanted to be perverse. But she would *not* be perverse in a matter like this. Future and present demanded cooperation, if there was to be a logical future!

Forcing himself against a wind that blew indiscriminately, he reached the funnel in the mountainside. The skeleton was not here, naturally. But it would be—with the necessary ring on its finger. Unbelievable how the future shaped its own past! It was as if his own skeleton, which existed millions of years *acome*, on which his own healthy flesh rode *now*, were plainly telling him what he should do.

He dug with a cold methodicity, starting from the rear of the cave. No sign of the ring, and no sign of recently turned earth. He discarded his gloves, placed them carefully to one side, and dug with a sharp rock.

No sign of the ring! The hours passed. What was he to do? His thoughts sharpened with desperation. An hour, little more, remained. Then would come the smash—and death.

He was in the cave! He, the skeleton!

He lay on his back, head propped up in locked hands. Trees and limbs and leaves hurtled by in a tempestuous wind. Soon, out in the sky, would float the remnants of this very substantial world. The millions of years would pass. A Lieutenant Tony Crow, on the trail of three criminals, would land here, look into this cave, and see his own skeleton—only he would not know it.

He lay there, tense, waiting. The wind would dig up the ring, whip it through the air. He would hear a tinkling sound. That would be the ring, striking against the wall of the cave. He would pick it up and put it on his finger. In a few moments after that would come the sound—the heavy vibration—the ear-splitting concussion—the cosmic clash—the... the... *bang* of a world breaking up. *Bang!*

He listened, waiting for the ring.

He listened, and heard a voice, screaming down the wind.

He impelled himself to his feet, in one surge of motion. He stood there, blood pounding against his temples, his lips parted and trembling. There could be no sound like that. Not when he was the last human being on this world. Not when the scream could be that of Laurette Overland, calling to him.

Of course, it was not she. Of course, it could not be. This was merely one of those things previewing the preparation of a skeleton with a ring in a—*Stop!*

He moved from the cave, out into the wind, and stood there. He heard nothing—did he? A pound of feet—such as death running might make.

A scream!

He ran around the shoulder of the mountain, stood there, panting, clasping his helmeted head between his trembling, cold hands.

"Lieutenant!"

A voice, whipped into his imagination by the ungodly wind!

He would not believe it.

A form, stumbling out of the pale night! Running toward him, its lips moving, saying words that the wind took away. And it was Laurette Overland, forming in his imagination now that he had gone completely mad.

He waited there, in cold amusement. There was small use in allowing himself to be fooled. And yet—and yet—the ring had to come back; to him. This was Laurette Overland, and she was bringing it—for him to wear. That was selfish of her. If *she* had the ring, if *she* had dug it up, why didn't *she* wear it?

Then she would be the skeleton.

Then there would be two skeletons!

His mind froze, then surged forward into life and sanity. A cold cry of agony escaped him. He stumbled forward and caught the girl up in his arms. He could feel the supple firmness of her body even through the folds of her undistended pressure suit.

Laurette's lips, red and full against the ghastly induced paleness of her face, parted and words came out. Yet he could make no sense of it, for the unimaginable wind, and the cold horror lancing through his mind occluded words and sentences.

"—had to... out. A hundred pounds." He felt her hysterical laugh. So the ship had started to fall. She had bailed. out, had swept to solid ground on streams of flames shooting from the rocket jets in the shoulders of her suit. This much he knew. Hours and hours she had fought her way—toward the plain. Because, she remembered something. The ship was gone. Safe. She remembered something that was important and it had to do with the skeleton and the ring. She had to get out. It was her part in the ghastly across-the-millions-of-years stage play. She had to dig up the ring.

He held her out at arm's length and looked down at her gloved hands. Yes, there was mud on them. So the ring had not been in the cave.

His eyes shuddered upward to hers.

"Give me the ring." His lips formed the words slowly.

"No, no, lieutenant," she blurted out. "It's not going to be *that* way. Don't you see? It's Amos! Amos! "

"You must be crazy to have come back!" he panted. He shook in sudden overwhelming, maddening fury. "You're crazy anyway!"

He suddenly wrenched at her hands, forced them open. But there was no ring. He shook her madly.

"Where's the ring? Give it to me, you damned little fool! If you're wearing it—if

you think for one moment—you can't do this—"

The wind whipped the words away from her, she knew, even as that which she was saying was lost to him.

He stopped talking, and with a cold ferocity wrapped one arm around her, and with the other started to unbuckle her gloves with his own bare hands. She struggled suddenly, tigerishly. She wrenched herself away from him. She ran backward three steps. She looked up into the sky for one brief second, at the growing monster. He could see the cold, frantic horror settling on her face. Collision! And it was a matter of moments! And he, the true skeleton, did not have the ring!

He moved toward her, one slow step at a time, his eyes wild, his jaw set with purpose.

She darted past him. He whirled, panting, went frantically after her. And every step he took grew more leaden, for the moment was here. The collision was about to occur. And the girl was running toward the cave.

Laurette vanished around the shoulder of the mountain, The cave swallowed her. His steps slowed down. He stood there, drew a deep, tremulous breath. Then he entered the cave, and stood facing her, the wind's howl diminishing.

She said, coldly, "We haven't much time to talk or fight, lieutenant. You're acting like a madman. Here." She stopped and picked up his gloves. She held them out. "Put these on."

He said, "Give me the ring."

She stared at him through the gloom, at his preternaturally wide eyes.

"All right," she said. She unbuckled the glove of her right hand. She moved close to him, holding his eyes with her own. "If you want to be the skeleton, you may."

He felt her fingers touch his right hand. He felt something cold traveling up his fingers. He felt the ring enclosing his finger. Yes, the ring was on there, where it should be. He felt it—coldly. It could not very well be his imagination—could it? Of course not. She would not try to fool him. Yet her eyes were hypnotic, and he was in a daze. Feebly, he knew he should resist. But she forced his glove over his right hand, and he heard the buckles click. Then the left hand glove went on, and was buckled.

Her arms crept up around his neck. Tears glinted unashamedly in her eyes.

"Hold me tight, lieutenant," she whispered huskily. "You know... you know, there may be a chance."

"No, there isn't, Laurette. There can't be. I've got the ring on my finger."

He could feel her drawing a deep breath. "Of course—you've got the ring on your finger! I think it can't be very far away, lieutenant. Hold me." Her voice was a whimper. "Maybe we'll live."

"Not I. Perhaps you."

"This cave, this very mountain, lived through the holocaust. And perhaps we will, too. Both of us."

She was being illogical, he knew. But he had sunk into a dull, apathetic state of mind. Let her try to believe what was impossible. He had the ring on his finger. He *did*.

Did he?

He jerked. He had felt the cold of its metal encircling his finger. He had *thought* he had felt it! His fingers moved. A dull, sickening sense of utter defeat engulfed him. This was defeat. *She* had the ring! *She* was the skeleton!

And there was no time to change it. There would be no time. The blood rushed in his head, giddily. He caught her eyes, and held them, and tried to let her know in that last moment that he knew what she had done. She bit her lip and smiled. Then—her face clouded. Clouded as his thoughts clouded. It was like that.

He heard no monstrous sound, for here was sound that was no sound. It was simply the ponderous headlong meeting of two planets. They had struck? They were flattening out against each other, in the immeasurable second when consciousness was whipped away, and fragments of rock, some large, some small, were dribbling out in a fine frothy motion from underneath the circle of collision. The planet was yawning mightily. A jigsaw of pieces, a Humpty Dumpty that all the king's horses and all the king's men could never put together again. This was the mighty prelude to the forming of an asteroid belt, and of a girl skeleton on Asteroid No. 1007.

He was alive.

Alive and thinking.

It did not seem possible.

He was wedged into the back of the cave. A boulder shut off light, and a projecting spur of it reached out and pinioned him with gentle touch against the wall at his back. He was breathing. His suit was inflated with ten pounds of pressure. Electric coils were keeping his body warm. He was alive and the thoughts were beginning in his brain. Slow, senseless thoughts. Thoughts that were illogical. He could not even bring himself to feel emotion. He was pinioned here in the darkness, and out there was an asteroid of no air small gravity, and a twenty-mile altitude.

Laurette Overland would be dead, and she would be wearing the ring. Tears, unashamed, burned at his eyes.

How long had he been here, wedged in like this: minutes, hours, days? Where were Overland, Masters, Braker and Yates? Would they land and move this boulder away?

Something suddenly seemed to shake the mountain. He felt the vibration rolling through his body. What had caused that? Some internal explosion, an aftermath of the collision? That did not seem likely, for the vibration had been brief, barely

perceptible.

He stood there, wedged, his thoughts refusing to work except with a monotonous regularity. Mostly he thought of the skeleton; so that skeleton *had* existed before the human race!

After a while, it might have been five minutes or an hour or more, he became aware of arms and legs and a sluggishly beating heart. He raised his arms slowly, like an automaton that has come to life after ages of motionlessness, and pushed against the boulder that hemmed him in. It seemed to move away from him easily. He stepped to one side and imparted a ponderous, rocking motion to the boulder. It fell forward and stopped. Light, palely emanating from the starry, black night that overhung Asteroid No. 1007, burst through over the top of the boulder. Good. There was plenty of room to crawl through—after a while. He leaned against the boulder, blood surging weakly in his veins.

He felt a vibration so small that it might have been imagination. Then again, it might have been the ship, landing on the asteroid. At least, there was enough likelihood of that to warrant turning his headset receiver on.

He listened, and heard the dull undertone of a carrier wave; or was that the dull throb of blood against his temples? No, it couldn't be. He strained to listen, coherent thoughts at last making headway in his mind.

Then:

"Go on, professor—Masters." That was Braker's voice! "We'll all go crazy if we don't find out who the skeleton is."

Then Braker had landed the ship, after escaping the holocaust that had shattered that before-the-asteroids world! Tony almost let loose a hoarse breath, then withheld it, savagely. If Braker heard that, he might suspect something. Whatever other purpose Tony had in life now, the first and most important was to get the Hampton away from Braker.

Overland muttered, his voice lifeless, "If it's my daughter, I'd rather you'd go first, Braker."

Masters spoke. "I'll go ahead, professor. I'd do anything to—" His voice broke.

Overland muttered, "Don't take it so hard, son. We all have our bad moments. It couldn't be a skeleton, anyway."

"Why not?" That was Yates. Then, "Oh, hell, yes! It couldn't be, could it, professor? You know, this is just about the flukiest thing that has ever happened I guess. Sometimes it makes me laugh! On again, off again! "

"Finnegan," finished Braker absently. "Say, I don't get it. This time business. You say the gravity of that planet was holding us back in time like a rubber band stretched tight. When the planet went, the rubber band broke—there wasn't that gravity any more. And then we snapped back to our real time. But what if Crow and your daughter weren't released like that? Then we ought to find the skeleton—maybe two of 'em."

"The gravity of the asteroid would not be enough to hold them back," Overland said wearily.

"Then I don't get it," Braker snapped with exasperation. "This is the present, our real present. Back there is the ledge that cracked our ship up, so it has to be the present. Then how come Crow said he saw a skeleton? Say," he added, in a burst of anger, "do you think that copper was pulling the wool over our eyes? Well, I'll be—"

Yates said, "Grow up! Crow was telling the truth."

Overland said, "The skeleton will be there. The lieutenant saw it."

Masters: "Maybe he saw his own skeleton." Yates: "Say, that's right! "

Braker: "Well, why not? The same ring was in two different places at the same time, so I guess the same skeleton could be in Crow at the same time as in the cave. It's a fact, and you don't talk yourself out of it."

Tony's head was whirling. What in heaven were they talking about? Were they intimating that the release of gravity, when the planet broke up, released everything back to the real present, as if some sort of bond had been broken? His hands started to tremble. Of course. It was possible. The escape of gravitons had thrust them back into the past. Gravitons, the very stuff of gravity, had held them there. And when that one and a half gravity had dispersed, when the gravitons were so far distant that they no longer exerted that tension, everything had snapped back—to the present!

Everything! His thoughts turned cold. Somewhere, somehow, something was terribly wrong. His head ached. He clenched his hands, and listened again. For a full minute, there was no voice. Tony could envisage them walking along, Masters and Overland in front, Braker and Yates behind, making their slow way to the cave, Overland dreading what he was to find there.

Then: "Hurry it up, professor. Should be right around here."

Overland whispered, throatily, "There it is, Braker. My God!" He sounded as if he were going all to pieces.

"The skeleton!" Yates blurted out, burs in his voice. "Ye gods, professor, d'you suppose—Why sure—they just weren't snapped back."

Shaking, pasty white of face, Tony clawed his way halfway up the boulder. He hung there, just able to look outside. The whole floor of the cave was visible. And the skeleton lay there, gleaming white, and the ring shone on its tapering finger!

Laurette.

He lifted his head, conscious that his eyes were smarting painfully. Through a blur, he saw Braker, Yates, Masters and Overland, standing about thirty feet distant from the cave, silent, speechless, staring at the skeleton.

Braker said, his voice unsteady, "It's damned strange, Isn't it? We knew it was going to be there, and there it is, and it robs you of your breath."

Yates cleared his throat, and said firmly, "Yeah, but who is it? Crow or the girl?"

Overland took a step forward, his weak eyes straining.

"It's not a very long skeleton, is it?" he whispered.

Braker said, harshly, "Now don't try talking yourself into anything, professor. You can't see the skeleton well enough from here to tell who it is. Masters, stop shaking." His words were implicit with scorn. "Move over there and don't try any funny stuff like you did on the ship a while ago. I should have blasted you then. I'm going to take a look at that skeleton."

He went forward sideways, hand on his right hip where the Hampton was holstered.

He came up to the mouth of the cave, stood looking down on the skeleton, frowning. Then he knelt. Tony could see his face working with revulsion, but still he knelt there, as if fascinated.

Tony's lips stretched back from his teeth. Here's where Braker got his! He worked his way up to the top of the boulder, tensed, slid over to the other side on his feet. He took one step forward and bent his knees.

Braker raised his head.

His face contorted into a sudden mask of horror.

"*You!*" he screamed. His eyes bulged.

Tony leaped.

Braker fell backward, face deathly pale, clawing at the Hampton. Tony was on top of him before he could use it. He pinned Braker down, going for the Hampton with hands, feet, and blistering curses. His helmet was a sudden madhouse of consternated voices. Overland, Masters, and Yates swept across his vision. And Yates was coming forward.

He caught hold of the weapon, strained at it mightily, the muscles of his stomach going rigid under the exertion.

Braker kicked at Tony's midriff with heavy boots, striving to puncture the pressure suit. Tony was forced over on his back, saw Braker's sweating face grinning mirthlessly into his.

Stars were suddenly occluded by Yates' body. The man fell to his knees, pinned Tony down, and with Braker's help broke Tony's hold on the Hampton.

"Give it to me!" That was Masters' voice, blasting out shrilly. By sheer surprise, he wrenched the weapon from Yates; Tony flung himself to his feet as the outlaw hurled himself at Masters with a snarl, made a grab for Yates' foot. Yates tried to shake him off, hopped futilely, then stumbled forward, falling. But he struck against Masters. Masters' hold on the weapon was weak. It went sailing away in an arc, fell at the mouth of the cave.

"Get it!" Braker's voice blasted out as he struggled to his feet. Masters was ahead of him. Wildly, he thrust Braker aside. Yates reached out, tripped Masters. Braker went forward toward the Hampton, and then stopped, stock-still.

A figure stepped from the cave, picked up the weapon, and said, in cold, unmistakable tones:

"Up with them. You, Braker. Yates!"

Braker's breath released in a long shuddering sigh, and he dropped weakly, helplessly to his knees.

His voice was horrible. "I'm crazy," he said simply, and continued to kneel there and continued to look up at the figure as if it were a dead figure come to life at which he stared.

The blood drummed upward in Tony's temples, until it was a wild, crazy, diapason. His shuddering hands raised to clasp his helmet.

Then:

"Laurette," he whispered brokenly, "*Laurette!*"

There were six human beings here.

And one skeleton on the floor of the cave.

How long that tableau held, Tony had no way of knowing. Professor Overland, standing off to Tony's left, arms half raised, a tortured, uncomprehending look on his face. Masters, full length on his stomach, pushing at the ground with his clawed hands to raise his head upward. Yates, in nearly the same position, turned to stone. Braker, his breath beginning to sound out in little bottled-up rasps.

And the girl, Laurette, she who should have been the skeleton, standing there at the mouth of the cave, her face indescribably pale, as she centered the Hampton on Braker and Yates.

Her voice edged into the aching silence.

"It's Amos," she said. She was silent, looking at her father's haggard face, smiling twistedly.

"Amos," said Overland hoarsely, saying nothing else, but in that one word showing his utter, dismaying comprehension. He stumbled forward three steps. "We thought—We thought—" He seemed unable to go on. Tears sounded in his voice. He said humbly. "We thought you were the—But no. It's Amos!" His voice went upward hysterically.

"Stop it!" Laurette's voice lashed out. She added softly, tenderly, "No, I'm not the skeleton. Far from it, daddy. Amos is the skeleton. He was the skeleton all along. I didn't realize it might be that way until the ship lifted. Then it seemed that the ship was going to fall and I thought my hundred and five might help after all and anyway, I decided that the lieutenant was all alone down there. And that somehow made me

think of the time all the Christmas packages tumbled down on him and how I slapped him." She laughed unsteadily. "That made me remember that the university sent your present with a 'Do Not Open Before Christmas' sticker on it. I remembered you were leaving the university and they were giving you a combination farewell gift and Christmas present. You didn't know, but I did, that the professors decided you couldn't possibly be back before Christmas and so they sent it to the ship. You had always told them you admired—Amos. He hung on the biology classroom wall. It seemed."

I suddenly knew how things *had* to be. I put two and two together and I took a chance on it."

She fell silent, and the silence held for another full, shocking minute. She went on, as if with an effort.

"We threw everything out of the ship, remember? The Christmas presents, too. When I dropped from the ship, later, I reached the plain and I broke open the carton with the 'Do Not Open' sticker on it, and there was Amos, as peaceful as you please. I put the ring on his finger and left him there, because I knew that some way the wind or crack-up or *something* would drop him in the cave. He *had* to turn up in the cave.

"Anyway," she added, her lips quirking roguishly, "by our time, back there, it was December 25th."

Masters clawed his way to his knees, his lips parted unnaturally.

"A Christmas present!" he croaked. "A Christmas present!" His face went white.

The girl said unsteadily, "Cut it out, Erle! "

She leaned weakly against the wall of the cave. "Now come up here, lieutenant, and take this gun out of my hands and don't stare at me as if you've lost your senses."

Tony forced himself to his feet, and like an automaton skirted around Braker and Yates and took the suddenly shaking weapon from her.

She uttered a weary sigh, smiled at him faintly, bemusedly, and whispered, "Merry Christmas, lieutenant!" She slumped slowly to the ground.

Tony gestured soundlessly at Masters. Masters, face abject and ashamed, picked her up in tender arms.

"Come up here, professor," Tony said dully. He felt as if all the life had been pumped from his bones.

Overland came forward, shaking his head with emotion. "Amos!" he whispered. He broke in a half-hysterical chuckle, stopped himself. He hovered Laurette, watching her tired face. "At least my girl lives," he whispered brokenly.

"Get up, Braker," said Tony. "You, too, Yates."

Yates rose, vaguely brushing dust from his pressure suit, his lips working over words that refused to emerge.

Braker's voice was a hoarse, unbelieving whisper. His eyes were abnormally wide and fixed hypnotically on the skeleton. "So that's what we went through—for a damned classroom skeleton." He repeated it. "For a damned classroom skeleton!"

He came to his feet, fighting to mold his strained face back to normal. "Just about back where we started, eh? Well," he added in a shaking, bitter tone, "Merry Christmas." He forced his lips into half-hearted cynicism.

Tony's face relaxed. He drew in a full, much-needed breath of air. "Sure. Sure—Merry Christmas. Everybody. Including Amos—whoever he used to be."

Nobody seemed to have anything to say. Or perhaps their thoughts were going back for the moment to a preasteroid world. Remembering; At least Masters was remembering, if the suffering, remorseful look on his face meant anything.

Tony broke it. "That's that, isn't it? Now we can go back to the ship. From there to Earth. Professor—Masters—start off." He made a tired gesture.

Masters went ahead, without a backward look, carrying the gently breathing, but still unconscious girl. Overland stole a last look at the skeleton, at Amos, where he lay, unknowing of the chaos the mere fact of his being there, white and perfect and wired together, and with a ring on his perfect tapering finger, had caused. Overland walked away hurriedly after Masters. Amos would stay where he was.

Tony smiled grimly at Braker. He pointed with his free hand.

"Want your ring back, Braker?"

Braker's head jerked minutely. He stared at the ring, then back at Tony. His fists clenched at his sides. "No!"

Tony grinned—for the first time in three weeks.

"Then let's get going."

He made a gesture. Braker and Yates, walking side by side, went slowly for the ship. Tony following behind. He turned only once, and that was to look at his wrecked patrol ship, where it lay against the base of the mountain. A shudder passed down his spine. There was but one mystery that remained now. And its solution was coming to Tony Crow, in spite of his effort to shove its sheerly maddening implications into the back of his mind—

Professor Overland and Masters took Laurette to her room. Tony took the two outlaws to the lounge, wondering how he was going to secure them. Masters solved his problem by entering with a length of insulated electric wire. He said nothing, but wordlessly went to work securing Braker and Yates to the guide rail while Tony held the Hampton on them. After he had finished, Tony bluntly inspected the job. Masters winced, but he said nothing.

After they were out in the hall, going toward Laurette's room, Masters stopped

him. His face was white, strained in the half-darkness.

"I don't know how to say this," he began huskily.

"Say what?"

Masters' eyes shifted, then, as if by a deliberate effort of will, came back.

"That I'm sorry."

Tony studied him, noted the lines of suffering around his mouth, the shuddering pain in his eyes.

"Yeah, I know how you feel," he muttered. "But I guess you made up for it when you tackled Braker and Yates. They might have been using electric wire on us by now." He grinned lopsidedly, and clapped Masters on the arm. "Forget it, Masters. I'm with you all the way."

Masters managed a smile, and let loose a long breath. He fell into step beside Tony's hurrying stride. "Laurette's O. K."

"Well, lieutenant," said Laurette, stretching lazily, and smiling up at him, "I guess I got weak in the knees at the last minute."

"Didn't we all!" He smiled ruefully. He dropped to his knees. She was still in her pressure suit and lying on the floor. He helped her to a sitting position, and then to her feet.

Overland chuckled, though there was a note of uneasy reminiscence in his tone. "Wait till I tell the boys at Lipton U. about this."

"You'd better not," Laurette warned. She added, "You broke down and admitted the ring was an omen. When a scientist gets superstitious—"

Tony broke in. "Weren't we all?"

Masters said, dropping his eyes, "I guess we had good enough reason to be superstitious about it." His hand went absently upward to his shoulder.

Overland frowned, and, hands behind his back, walked to the empty porthole. "All that work DeTosque, the Fan-brothers, Morrell and myself put in. There's no reason to patch up the asteroids and try to prove they were all one world. But at the same time, there's no proof—no absolute proof—" He clicked his tongue. Then he swung on Tony, biting speculatively at his lower lip, his eyes sharpening.

"There's one thing that needs explaining which probably never will be explained, I guess. It's too bad. Memory? Bah! That's not the answer, lieutenant. You stood in the cave there, and you saw the skeleton, and somehow you *knew* it had existed before the human race, but was not *older* than the human race. It's something else. You didn't pick up the memory from the past—not over a hundred million years. What then?" He turned away, shaking his head, came back abruptly as Tony spoke, eyes sharpening.

"I'll tell you why," Tony said evenly.

His head moved up and down slowly, and his half-lidded eyes looked lingeringly

out the porthole toward the mountain where his wrecked patrol ship lay. "Yes, I'll tell you why."

Laurette, Masters and Overland were caught up in tense silence by the strangeness of his tone.

He said faintly: "Laurette and I were trapped alive in the back of the cave when the two worlds crashed. We lived through it. I didn't know she was back there, of course; she recovered consciousness later—at the right time, I'd say!" He grinned at her obliquely, then sobered again. "I saw the skeleton and somehow I was too dazed to realize it couldn't be Laurette. Because when the gravity was dispersed, the tension holding everything back in time was released, and everything went back to the present—just a little less than the present. I'll explain that later."

He drew a long breath.

"This is hard to say. I was in the back of the cave. I felt something strike the mountainside."

"That was my patrol ship—with me in it."

His glance roved around. Overland's breath sucked in audibly.

"Careful now, boy," he rumbled warningly, alarm in his eyes.

Tony's lips twisted. "It happens to be the truth. After my ship crashed I got out. A few minutes later I stood at the mouth of the cave, looking at the skeleton. For a minute, I—remembered. Fragmentary things. The skeleton was—horror."

"And why not? I was also in the back of the cave, thinking that Laurette was dead and that she was a skeleton. The Tony Crow at the mouth of the cave and the Tony Crow trapped in the rear of the cave were *en rapport* to an infinite degree. They were the same person, in two different places at the same time, and their brains were the same."

He stopped.

Masters whispered through his clenched teeth, "Two Tony Crows. It couldn't be."

Tony leaned back against the wall. "There were two rings, at the same time. There were two skeletons, at the same time. Braker had the skeleton's ring on his finger. Amos was wrapped up in a carton with a Christmas sticker on it. They were both some place else. You all know that and admit it. Well, there were two Tony Crows, and if I think about it much longer, it'll drive me—"

"Hold it, boy!" Overland's tone was sharp. Then he said mildly, "It's nothing to get excited about. The mere fact of time-travel presupposes duplicity of existence. Our ship and everything in it was made of electrons that existed somewhere else at the same time—a hundred million years ago, on the pre-asteroid world. You can't get away from it. And you don't have to get scared just because two Tony Crows were a few feet distant from each other. Remember that all the rest of us were duplicated,

too. Ship A was thrust *back* into time just an hour or so before Ship B landed here after being thrust *forward*. You see?"

Laurette shuddered. "It's clear, but it's—" She made a confused motion.

Overland's tired, haggard eyes twinkled. "Anyway, there's no danger of us running across ourselves again. The past is done for. That's the main thing."

Neither Laurette nor Tony said anything. They were studying each other, and a smile was beginning at the corner of Laurette's lips. Erle Masters squirmed uncomfortably.

Overland continued, speculatively: "There was an energy loss some place. We weren't snapped back to the real present at all. We should have come back to the present that we left, *plus* the three weeks we stayed back in time. Back there it was Christmas—and Laurette was quite correct when she broke my package." He grinned crookedly. "But it's still more than three weeks to Christmas here. It was a simple energy loss, I guess. If I had a penc—"

Erle Masters broke in on him, coughing uncomfortably and grinning wryly at the same time. "We'd better get down to the control room and plot out our course, professor."

"What?" Overland's eyes widened. He looked around at the man and girl. "Oh." He studied them, then turned, and clapped Masters on the back. "You're dead right, son. Let's get out!"

"I'm glad you weren't Amos," Tony told the girl.

"I couldn't very well have been, lieutenant."

He grinned, coloring slightly.

Then he took her hands in his, and put his head as close to hers as the helmets would allow.

He said, "When we get back to Earth, I'm going to put a r—" He stopped, biting at his lip. Remembrance of another time, on a pre-asteroid world, flooded back with the thought.

She started, paled. Involuntarily, her eyes turned to the open port, beyond which was a mountain, a cave, a skeleton, a ring.

She nodded, slowly, faintly. "It's a good idea," she murmured. She managed a smile. "But not—an emerald."