

No Man's Land In Space

by Leigh Brackett

Lawless pirates shared their outlaw world until interplanetary war broke out. Then old hatreds flared anew.

An ANN/A Preservation Edition.

[Notes](#)

THE angry clamor rang through the narrow, stifling streets. In his headquarters, which were roofless and brick-walled like all the houses in the outlaw town of Sark, Geoffrey Dana heard it as it swelled and surged closer.

His dark, satanically pointed face hardened, his light eyes narrowed and grew colder still.

Loren the Venusian, jerked aside the fibre matting at the doorway. Heavy, acrid ground vapors sucked in around his feet. Dana caught the added grimness in his bitter young face, the veiled defiance in his blue eyes.

“More trouble?” asked Dana. Beyond the Venusian he could see men crowding around his doorway, silent and ill at ease now that they were here.

Loren nodded his wheat-straw head. Two men came past him with a stretcher, and Dana rose, tall and deceptively slender in his white spun-glass coverall. The darkness of the asteroid's night seemed to pour in with the bitter air.

Dana knew what he was going to see before he looked. In the last seven days five of his men had been brought to him this way. Six more had vanished. And his little kingdom of wolves, already sullen and restless because the Earth-Venus war had knocked their looting into a cocked hat, were getting ugly about it.

“Thompson the Earthman,” said Dana softly, his steel-grey head bent. The corpse was big and powerful. Yet it had a curiously pale fragility, a transparency.

“Bled empty, like the others.” said Loren. “Dana, the men...”

“Ah, yes. The men.” Dana went to the doorway, staring out over the grumbling, uneasy crowd. “Well,” he snapped. “What do you want?”

“You know what we want!” A big Venusian swamplander, condemned for piracy on three worlds, shouted it. “Where are our men going? What kills them? And what are you doing about it?”

“If you don't like what I'm doing about it,” said Dana silkily, “you can always leave Sark.”

Well hidden in the back, someone, a Martian by his accent, yelled, “You can't get out of it that way, Dana!”

“No,” growled the Venusian pirate. “You know damn well this asteroid is the only place in the System our hides are safe. But we've got a right...”

“A right!” The lamplight from his table cut sharp planes on Dana's pointed face, laid black shadows in

the scars, of living as much as of battle, about his thin mouth and cold grey eyes.

“You bleat about protection,” he said. “Who gives it to you? Who found this asteroid beyond Interplanetary Law? Who built this city, where you can run to cover? I’ve saved all your necks, and don’t forget it.”

A mutter of assent ran through the crowd. Dana took his advantage.

“I know this war is making things tough. Blockades and space-torpedoes are too much competition for good piracy. The big-shots are staying close to home, so there’s no kidnapping, and there’s damned little trading in valuables even on Mars. You know how my secret service works. The minute there’s anything stirring anywhere, you’ll know about it. In the meantime...”

“We wait,” said the Venusian, and spat. “Blasted Earthmen! If they hadn’t been so stubborn, we’d have fat cargo ships...”

“Earthmen!” an angry voice cried. “If you bloody insolent Venusian s hadn’t wanted so much...”

MEN began to shout, dropping from *lingua franca* into their own tongues. Groups milled, split, formed into factions. Fists were doubled, and a few knives came out. Dana forbade guns.

“Stop it!” Dana roared. “Stop it, I say!” His voice softened, but it carried to the last man in the crowd.

“Listen, all of you. You’re not Martians, or Venusians, or Earthmen any longer. Get that, and remember it. Your worlds have kicked you out. Forget them, because they’re gone.

“I’ve banned war news. The first man who listens to it, the first man who starts trouble over the war, gets a poisoned needle in his neck. Sark is my world. I built it, and I’ll run it.

“Hear that, you scum? We have no nationality. We’re gone geese here on Sark, with no law, no hope, and no god but me!”

He let it sink in, watching them with cynical amusement. Then he turned quietly to Loren.

“Where did you find the body?”

“Out by No Man’s Land,” returned the Venusian sullenly.

“Oh,” said Dana, and smiled like a wolf. To the men he said, “Go and get armed. Form into posses and fan out to cover the whole circle of the town. I’ll give you action, if that’s what you want.”

They went. Dana turned inside, reaching down his heavy needle-guns, loaded with deadly poison instead of the harmless anaesthetic he allowed his men.

Loren the Venusian stood waiting beside the stretcher, his flat, drilled shoulders stubborn. The bearers had gone. Dana, settling the guns on his lean hips, studied the corpse.

Like the five other bodies brought to him in the last seven days, Thompson the Earthman had a hole in his throat. A neat, clean hole whose edges were white as though with compression. His body was drained of blood.

Bending closer, Dana caught a faint pungency mingling with the acid reek of the air. That, too, had been on the five other bodies. It had a nagging familiarity.

He shook his steel-grey head impatiently, and looked up at Loren.

“I’m waiting,” he said.

Loren looked steadily over Dana’s shoulder.

“Thompson and Neta the Venusian had a quarrel in one of the dives,” he said. “They went out to No Man’s Land to settle it.”

“And,” continued Dana evenly, “when you followed to back up your countryman, you found Thompson dead. Where’s Neta?”

“Gone.”

Dana nodded.

“Six dead, seven vanished. You forgot, didn’t you, Loren?”

Rebellious blue eyes suddenly met Dana’s.

“Forgot what?”

“That the outskirts of town are forbidden after dark, until we clear up this mystery. What was the fight about, Loren?”

The Venusian’s eyes didn’t flicker, and his mouth set. Dana’s lean fingers tightened over his gun-butts, but he didn’t draw. Then someone moved in the shadows by the door, and a voice said,

“He won’t tell you, Dana.”

Daddy Gibbs came into the circle of light, a little unsteady on his feet, as always. Frowsy white hair straggled into faded blue eyes that had, at times, an almost childlike clarity.

Yet Daddy Gibbs, in his heyday, had looted thirty-one of the proudest liners in space in one year.

DANA scowled. He was in no mood to fool with the old man now.

“I don’t have to be told, Daddy,” he snapped, and stepped closer to Loren. “Someone’s been listening to war news,” he said silkily. “It was the war, wasn’t it, Loren?”

“Yes, damn it!” The young Venusian’s space-burned face was suddenly ablaze. “Venus is at war. I can’t help caring! Neither could you, an Earthman, if you were a man instead of a damned cold-blooded snake!”

The knotted veins stood out on Dana’s forehead, but he said quietly,

“You’re getting away with it this time. There’s trouble brewing here, and I need every man I can trust. I know just how far I can trust you. I know you were cashiered from the Venusian Space Fleet, and I know why.

“You needn’t jump. No man lands on Sark unless I know his background. And my secret service has ways of finding out.

“So I’m letting you go, this time. But not again, Loren. Remember that. Not again.”

He hadn’t noticed Daddy Gibbs heading for the televisor. Now it blared sharply.

“... struck again. The Venusian forces were driven back with heavy losses, but not before Terran cities had suffered from long range bombing. Retaliation...”

Geoffrey Dana said with dangerous calm,

“Shut it off, Daddy.”

But Gibbs, urged on by a chronic overdose of *tequin*, was leaning against the table, weeping.

“Earth,” he muttered. “Beautiful green Earth.”

“Mars,” blared the announcer, “following her traditional policy, is remaining neutral...”

“Until she sees which side is winning,” snapped Dana. “Shut it off, you drunken fool!”

The announcer went on unperturbed.

“So far Earth is holding her own. Military experts give her an even chance, provided Mars does not actively ally herself with Venus. However, many neutral observers believe this is only a matter of time, since Mars has a high stake in Venusian water.”

“Earth,” moaned Daddy Gibbs. “Why did I ever leave her?”

Dana’s hand choked the announcer off in mid-sentence. Fighting down a black fury which surprised even him, he whispered,

“If you weren’t a drunken old man, Daddy, you’d be dead. Ordinarily I can put up with your baiting. But not now.”

“All right, Dana.” Daddy Gibbs hiccupped and wiped his nose on a dirty shirtsleeve. “If you hate Earth so much...”

“Hate Earth!” roared Dana. “I don’t give a damn for Earth, except that this war is making trouble for me! Come on, Loren. We can get out there before those drunken louts get organized.”

Daddy Gibbs said, very clearly and steadily,

“You’re a liar.”

The sheer effrontery of it stopped Dana. He stared at Daddy.

“You must be very drunk,” he said.

Daddy laughed, looking like an ancient, mischievous child.

“I am. *In vino, Veritas*. I’ve found you out, Dana. You’re still an Earthling. Just like Loren’s a Venusian. If you weren’t, you wouldn’t get so mad at me.”

The black fury welled up in Dana, brought the blood hot and blinding back of his cold eyes. It was as though Daddy tried to bind him to something, bridle the freedom that had been the cynical watchword of his life.

His lean hand closed cruelly on the neck of Daddy’s dirty shirt.

“I have forgotten Earth,” he said, so low and quiet that Loren, watching hawk-like from the doorway, shivered. “And if you want to live, Daddy, you’d better forget, too.”

He dropped the old man and strode out, leaving Loren to follow.

CHAPTER II

The Beast

GEOFFREY DANA had good control of himself. Following Loren's gesture, running at an easy lope, his rage was quickly downed.

He had a certain affection for Daddy Gibbs, just as he had for Loren. They were different from the usual mob that inhabited his kingdom. He couldn't break them as he could the others. They'd die, but they wouldn't bend.

For that reason, it was perfectly possible that he might have to kill Loren. Unless he could forget Venus and the war, the boy was going to be an impulsive and rebellious trouble-maker. He'd done a crazy, sentimental thing and been exiled for it, but he still loved his world, and longed to be fighting for it.

Dana knew his polyglot wolves, and he was going to have peace on Sark if he had to kill to get it.

Shrugging that aside, Dana put all his attention on the deadly, puzzling thing that threatened his kingdom.

Seven of his men had vanished without a trace from these black streets, during the hours when the people of Sark took advantage of the relative coolness to pleasure themselves in the dives.

Fights and killings were no unusual things on Sark. The corrosive pools of No Man's Land had taken many a body. But seven in one week, coupled with the six dead men, made natural causes impossible.

Sweat beaded his face, and the taste of it on his lips was bitter. The sluggish south-polar breeze whispered through the roofless houses, keeping them comparatively free of fumes, but here in the streets the acid reek was choking.

Loren coughed and swore, and Dana grinned.

"Don't be too hard on the climate," he said. "It's what keeps anyone else from prospecting, colonizing, or claiming. It keeps us safe from Interplanetary Law, my boy."

Loren grunted. They were well into the outskirts now, and the sound of their running steps had an empty ring.

"What's behind all this, Dana?" demanded the Venusian.

"I don't know." Dana's satanic face darkened. "But by the gods of space, I'll find out. And when I do, someone will drown in the Ashi Geyser!"

He meant it, cruelly, and Loren shot him a quick glance.

"Were you born without a heart?" he asked quietly.

Dana spoke without stopping, his cold grey eyes intent on the deserted houses.

"The heart, as Voltaire once said, is a muscle. Sentiment got you kicked out of the Fleet—you should have let your brother take his own rap. Learn your lesson, Loren. Only fools are soft."

He didn't bother to see how his advice was taken. The last crumbling houses of the town showed No Man's Land through their broken ranks, and Dana's right-hand gun came out of its holster.

"Is this where you found Thompson?"

Loren's wheat-straw head nodded in the starshine.

"Dana!" he said suddenly. "Could it be Jordan Andrews?"

DANA followed Loren's half-seen gesture. Beyond the houses lay Sark's equatorial belt, the barren waste that gave it its Martian name—Bitter. Pitted with sullen, fuming pools and geyser basins, hung with choking vapor, it was the outlet for the corrosive flux that filled the half-hollow worldlet, boiling up in deadly fury from the furnace core.

Looming on a rise of higher ground in the heart of No Man's Land, the tight grey citadel of the Andrews Chemical Works thumbed its nose at Dana's kingdom. Its smug righteousness was a sore point with Dana's men, but Dana, the realist, had suffered it to exist.

It was nothing to him if Jordan Andrews wanted to sink every last Universal Credit he owned into building that chemical plant, to try, by tapping one of the asteroid's vast underground lakes of acid, to recoup his broken fortune.

He had let Andrews build it without disturbing the armed ship that had protected him. He left unmolested the freighters that called thrice yearly to leave supplies and pick up cargo.

Sark was unclaimed, beyond Interplanetary Law. Dana well knew that the Interplanetary Control would give its soul for an excuse to move in on Sark and do away with his kingdom.

An act of violence against Jordan Andrews might conceivably give them a pretext. Dana wasn't giving it. And presently, he thought, Andrews would fail and go home.

Now Geoffrey Dana shook his head.

"Andrews has nothing to do with this. What would he want with seven of my black sheep? And the dead men, with all their blood sucked out?" An involuntary shiver touched him.

"No, it isn't Andrews. It's something—queer. Those men were strong and tough, yet they died without a struggle."

He tensed sharply, iron-grey head erect.

"Listen!"

Across the uneasy silence of No Man's Land came the muffled crack of heavy needle guns in action.

"Andrews!" Loren exclaimed. "What in hell..."

Dana's lean cheeks creased in a wolfish smile. There were six men out there; Andrews and five assistants, cooped up in their air-conditioned fortress.

"Probably," he said softly, "their own purity became unbearable. All right, let's get busy. Don't get too far away from me, show your light as little as possible, and be careful."

Loren nodded and moved away. Dana permitted himself a puzzled scowl in Andrew's direction. The firing had grown ragged. Abruptly it stopped.

Dana shrugged and went on.

He would have had no warning at all, but for the brick that fell beside him from the top of a crumbling wall. Leaping away, he had just time to see a vast unhuman shape rise against the stars and hurtle down upon him.

HIS gun barked once before an arm like a python whipped about his body and pinned his elbow to his side. Lashing out savagely with his left against a bulk that glimmered ghostly white, Dana felt thick soft hair under his knuckles, and beneath that an armor of iron muscle.

His needles had either failed to penetrate the thick coat, or were harmless to this nameless creature. The sickness of futility came to Dana as he felt the impact of sheer size, the vast unhurried strength of the thing.

And then he caught the odor—the peculiar, pungent smell that had clung to the six corpses.

“My God!” he whispered. “This is it!”

Again memory stirred, urgently, but the arm around his body was slowly crushing the air from his lungs. Drawn close against a tremendous chest, smothered by soft fur, Dana bent his lean body and clawed out blindly with his free hand.

He had no leverage for striking. Instead, his fingers found a small round head, groped. . .

Something in him contracted with a chill stab of horror.

On that blank, round ball there was nothing—no ears, no eyes, no nose. Nothing but a three-sided puckering in the center of the front surface that drew open with a suggestion of razor fangs beneath soft bare flesh, and nuzzled his groping palm in a sucking motion, like an unclean kiss.

He cried out hoarsely and wrenched away, but the strength of the thing was incredible. A second arm wrapped him, held him closer, pressed him into the pungent mat of fur.

As though activated by special nerves, the fur puffed out like a cat’s tail, enveloping his face, closing mouth and nose and eyes. The pungent smell grew stronger.

Dana fought with silent viciousness. He was weakening. Was he going to find out where the vanished men went? Or would Loren find him, drained dry, with a hole in his throat?

Most of all, what was this horror, and how had it got to Sark? There was no native life here save moss and scaly lizards.

His lungs burned, his temples throbbed, his crushed ribs stabbed with pain. Then the constricting arms loosened sharply, forcing breath into him. The warm, heavy scent of the creature went deep in to him. A soothing dusk settled over his brain.

In a last lucid flash, he knew why the men died without fighting.

Dimly he felt the ground shake under him, heard a queer high-pitched whistling that deepened into a deafening roar. The crushing arms loosened as the furry body jerked, then dropped him altogether.

Dana fell heavily, caught through blurred eyes a glimpse of the monster vanishing into a crumbling house some distance away, its shapeless paws over its head.

Lying there gasping the hot, bitter air, Dana laughed weakly.

“Thanks,” he whispered. “Thanks, you damned little ball of fire!”

Out in No Man’s Land, the Ashi Geyser hurled its fearful corrosive spout high in the air.

CHAPTER III

Death Blow

GETTING groggily to his feet, Dana found the gun he had dropped in the struggle. The weird anaesthetic was wearing off. Cautiously, he approached the house into which the thing had gone—and stood staring into a deserted room.

The beast had vanished.

Through the bull-roar of the Ashi the sound of voices reached him, and the thud of running feet.

“Dana! Geoffrey Dana!”

It was Daddy Gibb’s voice, and it had a note of urgency.

Dana shouted, and flares began to bob along between the houses. Daddy’s white haystack of hair emerged from the hot dark. The old man had been running hard.

“Dana!” he gasped. “Something important... what’s happened?”

“One of Satan’s special imps jumped me a moment ago,” said Dana dryly. “The Ashi went up and scared it off.”

Daddy shook his head solemnly.

“God saved you, Dana, for a very special duty.”

Dana’s hard smile flashed.

“I don’t think I’ve done enough for God so that He should bother much about me. What duty?”

Daddy beckoned to someone behind him. A tall Terro-Venusian half-breed stepped forward, his eyes alight with keen excitement.

Dana swore.

“Varno! What are you doing here?”

“I landed just after you left,” said the tall man rapidly. “I have news, Dana, the biggest news of the century. I couldn’t trust it to the code band—too many military spies. So I took a chance and came.”

“Well?” said Dana, still scowling. Varno was the head of his Venusian intelligence department. He had them on every planet—men not yet known to the authorities, who kept tabs on everything that might be turned into profit for Dana’s outlaw empire.

They knew what ships carried cargo worth looting, what men of importance could dig up big ransom money, what trader in jewels might be safely robbed, who could be blackmailed.

They were the coordinators of the vast network of crime Dana ruled. And when things got too hot, there was Sark for a refuge. Dana was no piker. He worked in high places, and there was plenty of grease for greedy palms to see that the pleas of the Interplanetary Control for the destruction of Sark went unheeded.

“The news had better be important,” said Dana grimly. “You had my orders to stick with Venus.”

“It is,” said Varno, his eyes glittering. “Listen. Have you ever heard of Faruk of Venus?”

“He’s a scientist,” put in Daddy Gibbs.

“And a good one,” said Varno. “He’s been condemned as a renegade by all the scientific foundations for perverting discoveries to his own ends. But now he’s working on a secret weapon, which Venus says will end the war. And Mars, because of it, is right on the edge of jumping in against Earth.”

“You know what that will mean, Dana,” said Daddy urgently

“Earth knows,” Varno went on. “They almost got the secret, and the scientist. So Venus sent him into space in a camouflaged ship, to let him finish his experiments in peace on some asteroid.”

Dana’s cold eyes glittered. He was beginning to get the idea.

“How did you get all this?”

“We had something on one of the Venusian High Command, and blackmailed it out of him. No one knew just where Faruk was going, but it narrowed down to this general sector of space. Now, if we could find Faruk...”

“We could sell him for enough to make up what the five months of this blasted war have cost us!” Dana’s wolf smile cut deep vertical scars in his lean cheeks. “The highest bidder—and every world would pawn its soul to get him, if you’re right about the weapon.”

“I am,” said Varno. “Nobody knows what it is, but it exists, all right.” He frowned briefly. “Funny thing. We do know that Faruk was using a Lunar primate in his experiments, and I can’t see how that ties in with military weapons.”

DANA stiffened, his memory jarred to sudden life. Lunar primate! That pungent odor clinging to the corpses. No wonder it had seemed familiar! Once, in his almost forgotten childhood, he had seen a Lunar primate in a zoo, and screamed with the nightmare for a week.

Understanding came with a rush. That huge, pale-furred body spawned in the cold black caves of Earth’s moon, the tiny, featureless head.

“They don’t need eyes,” said Dana half to himself. “They use infra-red pits, like pit-vipers, to detect the heat frequencies of their prey. The air’s thin, so they have sensitive diaphragms instead of external ears, judging their distance from objects by reflection of sound waves. That’s why he dropped me when the Ashi went up. Any loud noise causes pain.”

He cracked one lean fist into the other palm.

“That explains the throat-wounds and the blood being drawn. The primates put their victims to sleep with that anaesthetic stink and the fluffy fur, and then suck ’em dry. They rarely kill by crushing, because that lets the blood leak out, but when they’re angry or frightened...”

“By the gods of space!” he whispered, his pale eyes widening. “That means—Great Lucifer, it means Faruk is here! Here on Sark. He’s using my men for food for his beast, and for...”

Seeing Varno’s blank face, he sketched the situation rapidly. The half-breed swore with incredulous joy.

“The nerve of him!” he said. “And yet, Sark would just suit him. If he needs men in his experiments—though I’m damned if I see why—he’d have to go where there were some. Sark is only habitable in certain limits—he’d be safer than on some asteroid with prospectors snooping around. And it’s beyond the Law. He can do as he pleases.”

“But not beyond my law,” said Dana.

Daddy Gibbs gripped his arm.

“Dana, you can’t do what you’re planning! If you capture Faruk, you can’t sell him to enemies of Earth!”

“Oh, shut up,” snarled Dana. “Well, now we know what we’re up against. We’ll find where he’s hiding, and then... Where’s Loren?”

“Loren!” Daddy spun around to study the eagerly listening men. “He’s not here. He’s been listening. Dana, he’ll warn that Venusian, save him from you. You’ve got to stop him. Venus mustn’t have that weapon!”

DANA’S pointed face hardened. Loren wanted desperately to go back to Venus. If he could save the life of this scientist for his world, he could get reinstatement as his reward.

If he warned Faruk, helped him escape, he robbed Dana of a fortune. Dana well knew the law of his kind. When the king-wolf slips, the pack is eager to pull him down. And the pack was already ugly and short of temper.

If this rich morsel was snatched, from under their noses, it was the end of his rule.

“Spread out,” he said quietly to the men. “Find Loren.”

It was Daddy who found his prints leading into the same house into which the Lunar ape had vanished, not five feet from where they had spoken. They didn’t come out—but Loren was gone.

Then, like the blow of a cosmic hammer, a roaring shock broke the Silence.

Thrown to his knees by a convulsive lurch of the earth, Dana saw a vast flame burst up from No Man’s Land.

“Andrews!” he gasped, watching huge blocks of concrete geyser upward like pebbles into the first of the dawn.

Swearing in forty different dialects, the men stared out at that column of flame. It flared, died, flared again, and subsided to a sullen rolling of smoke.

Dana, remembering the unexplained gunfire of a short while ago, scowled in thought. He wasn’t much of a chemist, but he knew that the acids and other compounds stored in their pure state could cause trouble.

Still, it was unlikely that the chemical tanks had let go of themselves.

Dana shook his head. No time now for conjecture. No Man’s Land writhed. Choking fumes shot in plumes of burning steam from active blowholes. The baked earth shivered, and Dana realized that the explosion had set off subterranean disturbances that might have hideous consequences.

The town of Sark was built on the one solid plateau on the asteroid. If that should break, develop fissures...

The Ashi went up suddenly, followed by the smaller geysers, spouting wildly, their internal pressure upset by the force of the explosion. Basins overflowed, sending seething torrents of acid to claw at the edges of the plateau.

“Back into the town!” yelled Dana. “Get into the houses, or you’ll suffocate!”

The men, with Varno, turned and ran. Dana, coughing in the bitter mist, grabbed Daddy Gibbs and started to follow. The ground leaped under him, and behind them the Ashi roared up and up.

A second shock threw both men down. Dana’s skin burned, his lungs were stabbed with pain. They had to get back into the higher part of town quickly, or not at all.

And he reflected bitterly that if Sark was really breaking up, every man on it was doomed. There were no ships but Varno’s little two-seater, not even the battered tramp that brought supplies every two months.

Daddy Gibbs made a queer, high-pitched sound.

“My God, Dana!” he choked. “Look!”

Dana swore savagely, a cold stricture tightening round his heart.

A few feet away the brick pavement was cracked wide in a fissure that stretched as far as he could see, cutting them off irrevocably from the town.

CHAPTER IV

Into the Pit

THE house beside them was their only hope. Fuming rivulets crawled up the street in the new blaze of the sun. The clouds grew thicker. There was just a bare chance that the breeze-created vacuum inside the walls would remain breatheable, and that the bricks would hold back the flood.

Then he remembered the Lunar ape, and Loren. Loren’s footprints led inside and vanished, as the ape’s had done. Hustling Daddy inside, Dana stooped and examined the dust of the floor.

There was only one explanation. It answered the question of how the ape had caught his victims, coming from nowhere and disappearing as though into thin air.

With a twinge of excitement, he found what he was looking for.

“A trap-door, Daddy,” he said, touching the marks of other fingers in the dust. Loren must have seen the ape go down here, and have followed, knowing that he’d find the scientist.

Dana shuddered, thinking what Loren might find down there in the honeycomb of black tunnels under Sark, if the walls of the acid lakes gave way.

He took his hands away and said, “No. Later, if and when this earthquake stops.”

The air by the floor was bitter, but still breathable—for how long, he didn’t know. There was a hissing sound outside, like the voices of many snakes; acids, flowing in from the gorged pools.

“What a rotten death,” Dana grunted.

Daddy looked at him.

“I’m not worried about dying. It’s Earth I’m thinking about.”

“Blast it!” snapped Dana. “Can’t you forget Earth?” A rush of impatient anger surged in him, and he added, “And who the hell are you to be preaching?”

Daddy grinned.

“ ‘They that be whole need not a physician’ ,” he quoted. “I’ve had a lot of time to think since I washed up on your beach, Dana. Besides, I’m not preaching. Just remembering.

“Remembering how the moon used to shine, and how the parks smelled after a rain. And snow. How we used to curse the snow! Drifts piled against the buildings, and the wind like a knife.” He coughed into the dust, and swore. “But a clean knife, Dana. None of this hell-fired acid.”

Dana felt the stinging sweat drip from his face into the dust, listened to the growing hiss of the acid. Swift rage drew his lips back like a wolf’s.

“So what?” he grated. “I’m hunting down the Venusian. Earth can buy him, if he wants. Isn’t that enough?”

Every shudder of Sark under his body had an echo in his heart. Sark was his, built with his brain and strength, ruled with his power. He was surprised to find how much he minded losing it.

“No,” said Daddy quietly. “It’s not enough.”

Dana’s dark, murderous face should have stopped him, but he only blinked and licked dry lips.

“Wish I had a drink. No, Dana, I want you to admit the truth. Admit you’re an Earthling. Otherwise...”

Dana’s voice was silkily soft.

“I’ll sell to the highest bidder. Venus, Earth, or Mars.”

The bull-roar of the Ashi almost drowned Daddy’s words.

“You’re an Earthman, Dana. Don’t let your hardness trick you into doing something you’ll regret.”

The cords stood out on Dana’s forehead. Again that feeling of being bound, that attempt at shackling his free choice, woke the dark anger in him.

He whispered, “Shut up!” and turned his head away.

WHAT he saw stiffened him in cold horror. Rising through the trapdoor, between them and the door, were the tiny head and vast silvery shoulders of the Lunar primate!

Dana heard Daddy scuff to his knees, letting go a sharp breath that broke in a cough. Through the thickening mist he saw the blank, featureless ball swivel on its neckless mount, sensing the vibrations of living bodies.

Round, hairless lips writhed back to emit a whistling roar. Razor fangs clicked. Then it hurtled up with incredible speed, throwing itself toward the men.

Dana fired without hope, remembering his former encounter, and waited grimly. This would be a battle to the death. The ape, muscles, twitching, was goaded to madness by the heat, the tainted air, and the convulsive heaving of the earth.

He was conscious of Daddy standing beside him, cursing or praying—he couldn’t tell which—in a flat monotone. As a purely reflex action, he jammed his left-hand gun back into the holster and let the other buck itself empty in his palm.

The beast didn't stop. The needles were futile. Arms like silver tree-trunks wrapped the two of them close against stifling fur. A wave of musky odor came through the acid reek.

Daddy fought, tearing at the white fur with futile hands. Dana watched the vast arm tighten, heard the slow, deliberate crunch of Daddy's bones.

The old man turned his head. Just for a flashing instant, Dana saw his eyes as the pain left them—clear and untroubled.

Daddy's lips framed the one word, "Earth!" Then he was dead, and the beast held him high, like a rag doll, roaring.

Dana heard the thud of the body striking the floor. A smoking little river crawled in through the door. The beast stood still, shaking, Dana half forgotten in his arms.

Then, with what was almost a whimper, it turned and bolted through the trapdoor, dropping down into utter dark.

Dana, held like a forgotten toy, fought down a swift surge of panic. The air was thick and bitter, hot with a dead, terrible heat. The ape ran with incredible speed through the blind corridors, which had once been blowholes for the molten core of Sark.

In the subterranean silence, Dana could hear far-off concussions, dull and ominous, and sometimes the ape staggered as the floor trembled under him.

Sark was breaking up.

The ape, Dana guessed, was heading for the Venusian's hide-out, whither he had been trained to bring victims—for what purposes he still couldn't guess. If the scientist had not already fled, his ship offered Dana a mode of escape.

Remembering Daddy, he smiled grimly. If there was any way of salvaging anything from the wreck, he was going to do it. His plan would have to be slightly modified, that was all.

The great underground lakes heaved in their beds. Dana heard the distant hiss and surge of them against their walls. When one of those walls should fissure, it would mean death for any living thing caught in the flooded tunnels.

In spite of the heat, the sweat turned cold on Dana's body.

He wondered if Loren had managed to find his countryman. If the ape didn't get where it was going soon, it wouldn't matter. The explosion had set off successive breakdowns in the half-hollow structure of the asteroid.

He thought of his men, crouching in the mud-brick houses, waiting, or fighting for Varno's little ship. There was a woman he remembered, too—a slim Martian with wicked green eyes. All of them, trapped and waiting for death.

Bitter sweat ran into his mouth as he cursed in silent fury.

CHAPTER V

Faruk

A BRUPTLY there was light, a radium torch in a small natural cave. The beast plunged through a

curtained doorway in the far wall and stood still, whimpering.

Dana saw a natural cave, radium-lighted, fitted with the barest comforts, an operating table and considerable scientific paraphernalia, and what seemed to be an intricate radio transmitter. Trays of chemicals kept the air reasonably clear.

A man lay on the operating table, his skull half shaven. Two flat discs lay beside surgical instruments of the most advanced type.

Against the wall sat seven men—the seven who had vanished from Sark. They sat like sleepers, with closed eyes, and their heads, too, were shaven and marked with three red scars, across the temples and the top of the skull.

In one side of the cave was a cage of heavy metal bars. This held five men, packed close together, watching tensely what went on in the room.

Beside the operating table, the razor still in his hand, stood a man in a stained surgeon's smock. The light caught on his sharp cheekbones and ruthless jaw, glinted angry copper in his eyes, set like sparks deep under a bald, magnificent brow.

Facing the man, his needle-gun rocksteady in his hand, was Loren.

The ape dropped Dana and crouched shivering at the feet of the man in the surgeon's smock, whom Dana knew to be Faruk, the renegade Venusian scientist. The man's hand dropped automatically to one vast shoulder, and he shot a fierce glance at Dana. Loren, never shifting his aim, jerked his head toward the disturbance, and his blue eyes widened.

"Dana!" he gasped. Then, "Get your hands up, and turn around!"

Dana shrugged and obeyed, his mind racing. Loren had managed to find his countryman. But he had him at bay. What had changed him so, from a patriotic defender to a captor?

Had he misjudged Loren? Was the Venusian, in the final pinch, as cynical as Dana himself?

"You too," snapped Loren to Faruk. "Get over beside Dana. Keep away from the transmitter. And if you turn the ape on me, I'll get you before he gets me."

WATCHING out of the corner of his eye, Dana saw Loren sidle over toward the cage and reach down a key ring hanging on the wall. Never taking his gaze from his prisoners, he fumbled for the padlock key and handed it to a gaunt, grey haired man in the cage.

"Open it," he said. "Come out, stay behind me so as not to block my gun, and get into the ship. I'll come after you."

Dana knew the man in the cage from his pictures. It was Jordan Andrews. The other five, including the man on the table, must be his assistants. They all looked pretty groggy, as though the effects of anaesthetic needles were just wearing off.

Dana glanced at the man beside him, absently fondling the ape. A little pulse was beating ominously under the heavy jaw, and the eyes were narrowed but not afraid.

Under cover of the clanking padlock, Dana whispered, "Those are anesthetic needles."

The scientist shot him a quick, searching look.

"The swine said they were poison," he muttered. "Look out for yourself, then!"

His order to the ape was quite inaudible to Dana, but the beast's sensitive diaphragms heard. Silently he whirled and shot toward Loren, arms outstretched.

Jordan Andrews was outside the cage. He tried to get back in, but the press was too great. He tumbled out, followed by the others, whose forward momentum was too great to stop, even though they saw the huge primate bearing down on them.

Loren fired, fast and straight, but the needles slid harmlessly off the thick fur. The scientist had flung himself out of sight behind the radio transmitter. The ape roared and swung its arms.

Then it stopped, its sensory pits baffled by the nearness of Jordan Andrews and his men. Loren sprang aside, shouting to Andrews, and the beast shook its head, whimpering.

Dana's wolf smile flashed briefly. His own poison-loaded gun sprang into his palm.

"Drop your gun, Loren!" he shouted. "You, call off your ape."

Everything froze to tableau stillness as the scientist blew inaudibly on a silver whistle. The ape crouched, shaking its head and roaring softly. Loren dropped his gun close to his foot, his dark young face dangerous under the pale-blond tousled hair.

Faruk stood up slowly, his hands resting over the controls of the transmitter, sweeping the room with his angry copper gaze.

"The ape," he said softly, "will stay where it is, ready to spring. Now—" Dull thunder drowned his words, and the rock floor jarred. Dana's keen ears caught a faint *crack!* and a sibilant hiss, as of an awakened cobra.

"That damned explosion started something," he said between his teeth. "What caused it?"

"Andrews," said Faruk evenly. "He opened his chemical tanks in the hope of trapping my men in the tunnel, but he was unsuccessful.

"Unfortunately, my men lack self-determination, which is essential in some circumstances. This lack of balance is the chief flaw I'm trying to eliminate. They didn't shut off the flow of chemicals, which mixed with drastic results."

He indicated the operating table.

"I wasn't anticipating either the explosion or its results."

Dana's cold light eyes swung to Jordan Andrews.

"I should," he said, "have killed you the day you landed here."

"Don't be a fool, Dana!" Loren broke in. "Andrews was fighting for his life. This rotten murdering swine..."

"I had use for Jordan Andrews," said Faruk quietly. "Which is no one's business but my own."

"He was going to make me work for him." Andrews' gaunt, shrewd face was grim. "Use my chemical knowledge to help him make *those*—" he pointed to the seven who sat against the wall—"or become one of them along with my men."

ANDREWS' eyes met Dana's, and the outlaw sensed the strength that had kept the manufacturer fighting when his life was broken and gone.

“If you kill this man, Dana,” said Andrews slowly. “you’ll have done one decent thing to justify your life.”

Dana’s mirthless smile cut deep vertical scars in his cheeks.

“And you, Mr. Andrews, have just snuffed a thousand-odd lives out of existence. This asteroid is breaking up.”

Faruk shrugged.

“They’ll be a small loss, Dana. What’s your game?”

The veins stood clear on the outlaw’s forehead, but his voice was level, Almost too level.

“The same as yours. Escape.”

“Doesn’t your conscience hurt, leaving your men to die alone?”

“Not in the least,” said Dana, and knew abruptly that he lied.

Again the floor jarred, and the ape moaned, cringing. The time was short.

“My gun is loaded with poison,” Dana said quietly. “I want your ship, Faruk, and you, unarmed. Quite frankly, you’re a valuable property, and I intend making the most of you. If you behave yourself, you’ll probably be none the worse off.

“If you don’t, I shall take your ship and leave you here to die. Is that clear?”

Jordan Andrews said,

“What about us?”

“Nobody asked you to come to Sark,” Dana returned coldly. “Well?”

The Venusian stared at the muzzle of Dana’s gun, and abruptly the truculent light went out of his eyes. His shoulders sagged wearily, and he sank down on the stool back of the transmitter.

“Everything’s gone wrong,” he sighed, and dropped his head dejectedly between his hands.

Dana’s jaw tightened. He hated whining above all things.

“Get up,” he said. “Get up and come on.”

“Dana!” It was Loren, and Dana was a little startled. The sullen, repressed mask was gone from the Venusian’s young face. It was ablaze with urgency, with some deep emotion.

“Dana, don’t take this man back!”

Dana laughed mockingly. He was backing toward the only other doorway in the cave, which he knew must lead to Faruk’s ship, keeping Loren and Andrews and the four men covered.

“Not even to Venus?” he said. “Where’s your patriotism, Loren?”

“It’s because I love Venus that I say it,” returned Loren quietly. “Do you know what the secret weapon is?”

Dana didn’t, and said so.

“Come on. blast you!” he snapped at the scientist.

“Listen to me, Dana! Why do you think I turned against my countryman? Why do you think I want to rob my world of the certainty of victory? Because I won’t have Venus go down in history as a world of monsters!

“If Venus can gain power honorably, well and good. But to rule the System with his weapon, to see my people enslaved...”

“It may not go to Venus,” Dana told him, “so relax.”

Jordan Andrews took one step forward, and Dana read danger in his gaunt face.

“It mustn’t go to Earth, Dana. It mustn’t go anywhere.”

Faruk’s voice broke in suddenly, changed from its former dejection, ringing with harsh strength.

“It will go to Venus, you Earthling dogs! And you, Loren—renegade. Venus will rule the System—and I will rule Venus!”

Things happened, suddenly, bewilderingly. Faruk was safe behind the transmitter. The ape lurched forward as the cave heaved and shuddered. Loren ducked for his gun and sent a stream of needles searching for Dana, who had thrown himself flat behind a metal chair.

Someone screamed. Men surged forward, fell back before the threat of Dana’s gun. The ape caught one hapless man and swung him high, its round mouth wide to a whistling roar.

Dana swore viciously. He should have known that a man with a jaw like that wouldn’t crumple so easily.

What was he doing there, silent behind the transmitter?

Loren’s voice rose sharply high above the bedlam.

“Look out! *Here they come!*”

The seven sleepers had awakened.

CHAPTER VI

The Final Choice

DANA glimpsed them, beyond the charging body of the ape. They went like beasts crouched for the kill, their faces distorted with sheer animal blood-lust.

All were armed with their own anaesthetic-loaded guns. The scars on their shaven heads flushed darkly in the radium light. Dana felt a sudden chill sweep over him.

What was this secret weapon?

The Lunar ape stood erect and roaring. His victim was quite still now. The seven men that had been Dana’s advanced.

There was a sudden silence in the cave. Then one of Andrews’ men cried out and broke for the door. He wobbled helplessly to his knees, his voluntary centers deadened under a hail of needles from the guns of the seven who marched across the room like a sickle of doom.

Loren’s gun barked. Dana saw the glittering needles spray into the oncoming line, lodging in

unprotected faces and necks—and the anaesthetic had no effect!

Dana knew that drug—a powerful preparation of Earthly hashish and the sister Venusian drug. It paralyzed the voluntary centers instantaneously, disorganizing thought and leaving the victim helpless but with no lasting impairment.

Yet it was useless against these “subjects” of Faruk’s experiment!

Loren’s voice rose, shouting his name.

“Dana! Will you sell the Solar System into slavery to these?”

A singing silver rain of needles swept over Jordan Andrews and his remaining men. They fell, just as Dana opened up.

Shooting from a bad angle, he saw his first volley miss, go past them toward the operating table. The second caught the nearest man. He went down, and Dana shouted. They weren’t immune to poison!

Loren was barricaded behind an overturned metal table, holding his useless fire.

“Dana,” he cried. “For God’s sake, think what this will mean to Earth, as I’m thinking of Venus! I’ll take you wherever you want to go—if you’ll not let Faruk live.”

Dana’s wolf smile scarred his cheeks.

“Sorry,” he said. “I’m neither patriotic nor virtuous.”

His accurate fire had brought down three more of the seven. Now, as though under definite orders, the remaining four charged him.

Lying tense, his gun jolting in his palm, Dana’s mind raced.

Those metal discs beside the instruments on the operating table. The scars on skull and temple. The immunity to drugs, but not to poison. The sudden bursting of lifelessness into a savage urge for destruction.

And the scientist, out of sight behind his transmitter.

Bits of the puzzle that had plagued him these last seven days began to fall into place.

The ape had brought men to the scientist. Faruk had performed some bizarre operation, turning the men into servants, who in turn went out to gather more men. Thus he had subjects for experiment, and a growing army for attack or defence.

Attack! That was it. These four men, oblivious to the deaths of their comrades, ignoring his fire, came rushing on.

He thought of legions of these creatures, manning ships, aircraft, mechanized land units, formed into battalions of infantry, ploughing with unconcerned ferocity into, over, and through all defences, simply because they knew no fear—nothing but the command to kill.

TWO more were down, and his clip was running out. There would be no time to reload. If one of those anaesthetic needles caught him, he might as well be dead.

The thunder of dissolution all through the asteroid was growing louder. The hiss of acid increased as the pressure of the lake widened the fissure in its walls. The time was perilously short.

Dana gripped his protecting chair and rose.

They were almost on top of him. The heavy metal frame smashed the head of the leader like a rotten melon. The other, surprised by the sudden move, leveled his gun for a finishing shot.

Dana dropped his hands to the floor and pivoted in a perfect *savatte* kick. The gun went flying. Straightening his bent body like a spring, Dana drove the man's jaws together so that his teeth splintered.

It was strange to do this to men whose necks he had saved. Men who had drunk and gambled with him. How many men on Earth would be faced with the same necessity?

How many in the whole Solar System, for that matter? How many worlds would be wrecked, as Sark had been wrecked, to satisfy ambition—Faruk's, or that of the world that bought his secret?

"The hell with it!" snarled Geoffrey Dana.

Just in time he saw Loren's wheat-straw head raised, and dodged the shot.

The man with the splintered teeth was coming up again, his expression unchanged except for the torn and bloody mouth. Dana caught up the chair and swung it again, and saw metal circles in the wreckage of the man's skull as he went down.

Those metal discs. The radio transmitter. And then he glimpsed Faruk's head upraised, and saw the helmet, with the wires running from the crest...

Radio-telepathic control! Surgical destruction of the voluntary centers of the brain, amplifying discs, and an especially tuned transmitter linked to the mind of the leader. Better than robots, because the raw human material was cheaper, more plentiful, more adaptable. Dana felt suddenly sick.

Without stopping the arc of his swing, Dana hurled the chair. It swept over the top of Loren's barricade, knocked him backward. His gun went off at the ceiling. And Dana followed the chair.

The cave jolted convulsively. A deep booming roar broke out, a splintering sound, a rush of liquid. The wall of the lake had given way. The ape screamed as Dana wrenched the gun from the stunned Loren's hand.

"Come on, damn you!" he roared at Faruk.

The Venusian rose slowly. His copper eyes were veiled, and Dana saw his lips move silently.

The cave was filled with thunder. A crack opened above the doorway leading to the ship, widened ominously.

Dana knew the ape was coming. He forestalled it, doing the only thing he could do. He leaped straight for the vast silver shoulders, clinging with his left arm around the blind head.

Even in that moment, Dana felt pity for the brute. It surprised him that he did. The ape roared, and he fired into its throat, tearing open the great veins.

It strangled and flung him off, and fell like a stricken tree. Dana saw swift, raging sorrow cross Faruk's face, and wondered that a man who could invent such a horrible form of warfare could feel affection for anything.

He backed into the doorway. Dust sifted down from the crack above his head. Loren was rising to his knees. He didn't say anything, but his eyes spoke. Andrews and his men moaned and stirred on the heaving floor.

Earth-men. Sheep, trapped by the wolves.

THE air was suddenly choking, bitter with acid fumes. Dana could hear the rush and surge of tons of liquid, out beyond the inner cave.

The two men faced him—Loren and Faruk. And Dana hesitated. Raged, cursed himself, and hesitated.

Quite unbidden, Daddy Gibbs' peaceful, dying face flashed across his memory. There was that same inner peace in Loren's face now, even knowing that he had lost.

Both he and Daddy Gibbs had done their best.

The dead men on the floor stirred eerily as the quivering earth shook them. Men with metal discs in their heads, who could rule the System. Rule, and destroy. Destroy worlds that other men loved, as he was discovering he loved Sark.

With Faruk in his hands, Dana could bargain for almost anything. Loren had had the same chance. He had thrown it away, because he wouldn't see his world disgraced and enslaved.

Sark rocked in agony. Dana was filled with sweeping rage that laid the veins like knotted cords on his forehead.

First Sark, and then—Earth?

All planets are Earth to someone.

Deliberately, Dana aimed and pulled the trigger. Faruk fell without a cry, over the body of his ape.

Dana sprang for the nearest of Jordan Andrews' men.

"Hurry up," he snapped. "Help me get them into the ship."

Again Loren didn't speak, but Dana saw his eyes and smiled.

A sardonic smile, because he had violated his own code of never thinking of anyone but himself.

The air was strangling when they got the last of the semi-conscious men into Faruk's ship, which lay ready for flight on a ridge close above the cave.

"Let's go," said Loren. "The whole crust is breaking... My God! We forgot the man on the operating table! He's still alive, under anaesthesia."

Dana shook his head and started to speak. But he stopped.

He could just see the walls of Sark over the short curve of the horizon—walls that crumbled and fell. Smoking rivers of acid rolled over them, and fierce, chaotic winds brought him faint screams.

An empire of wolves, built with his brain and heart, to prey upon the sheep. The planets were closed to him. With the destruction of Sark, his empire would crumble. There was no place where he might rebuild it.

His era was over, the last of the outlaw kingdoms of the System.

Going back would mean only imprisonment, the triumph of enemies he had held at bay for a lifetime. He was an exile now, from life itself.

“Get in the ship,” he said. “I’ll get the man. Oh, cut the heroics, blast you!”

He took Loren’s impulsively offered hand. “Make for Earth. Andrews still has enough influence to help you. And it’s a damned nice world.”

Then he turned abruptly back into the passage to the cave.

THE far wall had fallen, blocking the mouth of the tunnel through which the ape had come. Rivulets of acid seeped through. The crack above the outer door groaned as he entered, split wider.

A stone fell from the block in the tunnel, followed by a corrosive spout. There was a racking shudder, stronger than any before, and the whole wall collapsed behind Dana, shutting him in beyond hope of escape.

He stood among the dead, watching the acid spout claw away the stones around it and form a growing lake on the floor.

He felt suddenly very tired. Closing his cold grey eyes to ease the burn of the air, he ran lean fingers through his grey hair and sighed.

Then he laughed harshly.

“I hope you’re satisfied, Daddy,” he said. “I hope the devil mixes brimstone with your *tequin*!”

The acid was lapping toward his boots. The town of Sark must be gone now, a heap of bricks and dissolving bodies.

He climbed up on the operating table, fastidiously unwilling to be consumed until the last moment, and took his heavy gun out of its holster. There were still a few needles in the clip.

By this time Loren and his cargo of humans would be safely away. Dana’s hard smile flashed in the radium light. For once, the wolves were giving the sheep a break.

The ironic side of it struck him, and he chuckled.

“It will,” he murmured, “give the Solar System an awful bellyache to know that I’m the spotless hero who saved it from a fate worse than death. Ha! Wonder if they’ll erect a monument to me—or dedicate a new gallows?”

“Move over,” he added, giving the body beside him a shove. It rolled over, exposing what Loren had not seen; the buried needles of Dana’s first volley, that had overshot Faruk’s human robots and killed the hapless man.

He lay down, raising the heavy gun to his temple. The bark of it was drowned in the roaring hiss of acid, pouring through the broken barricade.

The End

Notes and proofing history

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