

Doom Ship

by Robert Moore Williams

When the space ship crashed, the lives of twenty humans lay in the hands of a fanatic!

An ANNA Preservation Edition.

[Notes](#)

“THE ship’s falling!” Screaming the words, the girl in the yellow dress tossed the cocktail, with which she had been celebrating the successful takeoff from Venus, straight up against the metal ceiling of the main cabin with a sudden gesture.

To John Balfour, who of necessity had developed a feel for such things—along with a feel for a thousand other things that helped a man stay alive on the Veiled Planet—it had seemed for some time that the ship had been yawning badly from her course. The steering jets had roared too often, he had thought, and the ship had been nudged southward well away from the lanes usually followed by space ships taking off from Venus. He had shrugged the feeling aside. Presumably the pilot knew his business. Presumably pompous Captain Vincent knew how to get a commercial liner into space. Presumably—

The lifting jets faltered, the girl screamed, the floor of the cabin tilted downward. The girl, grabbing hastily for a handhold, lost her footing and landed in Balfour’s lap.

In other circumstances, he would have thought it was quite nice to have this curvesome chunk of pulchritudinous female animal in his arms. In fact, sitting there watching her, he had been wondering if maybe, before the ship eased in to Luna Station on Earth’s moon—

There were a lot of things he had missed during the two years he had spent on Venus and women was one of them. The human women on Venus were a wary lot, generally, and the native girls just didn’t—Well, they did, of course, but it wasn’t the same. Now if this Lora Calhoun—

Balfour’s pleased anticipations had been interrupted when the jets faltered and Lora Calhoun herself landed in his lap in a flurry of yellow skirt that revealed two very attractive legs, though he did not have time to notice such things.

A loudspeaker in the ceiling suddenly began to blurt words.

“All passengers in your seats at once. Fasten safety belts. Prepare for emergency landing.”

The speaker was striving for a calm tone of voice. He wasn’t succeeding. The sudden faltering of the lifting jets and the tilt of the floor of the ship had frightened the passengers. Actually, so far as space ships were concerned, there was no such thing as an emergency landing. There was either a safe landing or there was no landing at all. The elaborate system of padded chairs with attached safety belts was largely to make the passengers feel safe. It fooled nobody. When a space ship actually crashed, all that was left to do was to pick up the pieces—if they could be found at all.

Balfour caught one glimpse of the passengers scuttling for their chairs like startled rabbits diving into their holes at the appearance of a fox. At the front end of the cabin, the Negro steward, who a minute before had been mixing and serving drinks, was holding on to the bar with both hands. In Balfour’s arms the girl was squealing.

The jets caught, burst out with a full-throated roar. Groans ran through the steel hull of the ship. The floor tilted. Balfour held his breath. If the jets held—

Through the port he caught a glimpse of something that warned him the jets had better hold. For a minute, the eternal cloud banks of Venus had lifted. Below him was spread a vast panorama of jungle, of mountains lifting up out of swamps, of rivers winding their way through that swamp, of inter-connecting canals. From this height the cities were not visible, but he knew they were there, hidden by the jungle, cleverly built into the mountains.

THE WORLD down below him was Go-roum, the impenetrable home of the savage warrior races of Venus. So far as Balfour knew—and it was part of his job to know—only one human had ever penetrated the Go-roum and had emerged alive to tell his story. He was that human. He had spent the better part of two years down there in that festering green tangle. During that time there hadn't been a minute when his life had not been in danger. If the Roum had penetrated his disguise, if they had suspected his purpose there, they would have sliced off his head with no more compunction than they showed in slicing off the head of a jungle lizard.

They were warriors. From the oldest doddering graybeard to the youngest boy in his cradle, they practiced daily with weapons. They were savages. They cared nothing for the life of any creature, including themselves. But they were not fools.

On the contrary, Balfour had clear evidence that the scientific advancement of the Roum equaled that of humans in some respects, and in one area at least, exceeded the discoveries made by earth's scientists.

When the first human landing had been made on Venus, the Roum had been the masters of the planet, holding tributary every other race, exacting tribute from every tribe, but at the first appearance of a space ship in their sky they had dropped their conquests as if they were suddenly too hot to hold and had pulled back into the jungle homeland from which they had sprung. Every Roum administrator, every Roum warrior backing him up, every Roum scientist investigating local resources had stopped work at a single command and had headed for home.

The liberated tribes had hailed the humans with great joy, as liberators, but the humans, viewing the hegira of the Roum, had not been happy about the situation.

If you startle a tiger at his kill and the tiger takes one look at you and the gun you carry and, recognizing the deadliness of the gun, does not dispute his kill with you, you know one thing for sure. *You've got to watch out for that tiger!*

The humans knew they had to look out for the Roum. The day would come when the Roum would emerge from their jungle strongholds to be at human throats.

Human suspicions were strengthened when they tried to make friends with the Roum. The Roum were willing to be quite friendly, outside their jungle, they sent deputations of scientists, to exchange information, they sent other deputations, to examine space ships, but the information they were willing to give in return was useless and they were not willing to permit humans to visit their homeland. The gate there was jammed shut, locked tight, and triple barred. Whatever they were doing there, they considered their own business. They didn't want any visitors, they didn't want any guests, they didn't want any scientific observers. All they wanted was to get inside a space ship.

Orders from up above had soon placed all space ships, all space ports, all space crewmen, off-limits to Roum.

You don't give a gun to a tiger. You don't give space ships, or the secret of their construction, to the

savagest race of warriors in the solar system, not if you've got good sense. Instead you put them in the strictest kind of quarantine, you isolate them as you would isolate the carriers of a dangerous disease, hoping that time and endless patience will enable you to make friends with them. While you are giving them time to learn how to live in peace, you keep both eyes wide open, watching for the flash of a knife being drawn, you keep both ears keenly alert, listening for the creep of stealthy feet coming up behind you.

Especially you don't give them space ships when rumors begin to come through that they have a new weapon. What that new weapon was, no man knew. John Balfour had spent almost two years, as a secret agent, trying to find out what it was.

Some of the results of the use of that weapon he had seen, the scarred side of a mountain that looked as if it had been hit by a continuous succession of thunderbolts, a ragged, burned section of jungle that looked as if it had been hit by an atomic bomb, only no bomb had been exploded there. Rourm scientists didn't have that secret yet. But they had something else, something perhaps as dangerous and as deadly, something that gashed the side of a mountain, something that mowed down the jungle.

He had seen where the weapon had been tested. When it was, its effective range, how it worked, he did not know. But one thing was certain, he did not want to see these weapons mounted in fleets of space ships, he did not want to see the Rourm warriors turned loose in the lanes of space.

Grim-faced Admiral Hatridge, in Venus Port, had listened to his report, and had ordered him back to earth in person to disclose his findings to the highest UN administrative authority, who must make the decision as to the action to be taken here on Venus. Perhaps his action might be a full-scale minor war, against the Rourm, as a preventative measure, but likely it would not be. You can't successfully atom bomb a jungle thousands of square miles in area. Also, you don't use an atom bomb on a hornet's nest unless you are sure you can cope with the remaining hornets. Also, you just don't use an atom bomb unless you have no other alternative, not if you're human.

DURING THE split second in which the jets faltered and caught, during which the loudspeaker shouted its commands and the passengers scuttled for their cushioned chairs and safety belts, these thoughts passed through John Balfour's mind. In his mind was one other thought. *If the ship crashed here, if the ship landed here, Rourm scientists would have what they wanted—the secrets of space ship construction.* Even from a wrecked ship, they could learn too much.

The girl twisted in his lap. The forward jets faltered, their steady roar became a broken blast. Balfour scrambled to his feet, dropped the startled girl in the chair he had just left, and headed forward for the control room.

Perhaps nothing could be done, but if anything could be done, now was the time to do it.

Two men were in the control room, pompous Captain Vincent and the pilot. They had their heads together and their eyes on the instrument panel. Captain Vincent looked up as the door opened. Surprise showed on his face.

"No passengers allowed in here. Get to hell out."

Technically, the captain was in the right. Passengers were not permitted in control rooms, especially during an emergency. But Balfour had no intention of letting a technicality stop him.

"Captain—"

"I'm doing everything humanly possible to save the ship. I don't want any advice from a passenger."

“You’re going to get some,” Balfour spoke. “Captain, this ship is over the Go-roum.”

“What?” Vincent gasped the word. Involuntarily he turned toward the port. Outside there was nothing but mist. “You’re crazy. We’re a hundred miles north of the Go-roum.” The captain’s eyes jerked toward the pilot, then came back again to Balfour. “Who the hell are you? What do you want?”

“I haven’t got time to tell you who I am. What I want is this: Don’t make a forced landing here. If we have a choice of landing here and landing somewhere else, then try to land somewhere else. Try to land out of the Go-roum, no matter how much additional risk you have to run.”

Captain Vincent’s face turned purple. “Are you trying to tell me to risk my life and the lives of my crew and passengers by gliding this ship an extra hundred miles when I see a chance to set it down in safety here—”

“I’m telling you to take that chance,” Balfour answered.

“Look, Captain!” the pilot shouted. The radar screen in front of him had come to life, revealing a high, jungle-covered plateau. What was hidden under the growth of trees the mist-probing radar did not reveal, but it showed one fact clearly—the plateau was fairly level. Beyond it were high mountains. Below it was a broken tangle of impenetrable gorges. The ship was miles above it but, with careful handling, it could be set down on the plateau.

“We can land there,” the pilot stated. The broken roar of the jets accented his meaning. “With luck, we can take off again, after the ship is repaired.”

Captain Vincent made his decision instantly. “Then land there.” His hand went inside his coat pocket, came out with a flat, snub-nosed automatic. His eyes glared at Balfour. “Get to hell out of my control room.”

BALFOUR sighed and stepped backward through the door. It was too much to ask the average run of human beings to risk their lives on the chance that other men might live yet this was what he had been trying to do here in this control room. If this ship fell into the hands of the Roum, if their scientists had a chance to study it, if the Roum warriors with their vicious secret weapon were loosed on the lanes of space, then certainly other men would die, men who had never heard of the Roum.

Counting passengers and crew, there were not over twenty human beings on this ship. Captain Vincent had refused to take a chance with their lives when taking that chance might have given untold thousands a better chance for life in some future that was to come. A few might have died here, that thousands might live later.

For a moment, John Balfour considered with pleasure the thought of throttling Captain Vincent. “The damned fool! Even if he saves his neck by landing here, the Roum will chop off his head soon enough.”

Down there in that jungle the Roum would certainly see a space ship in distress over their land. It would be a spectacle that would interest them as nothing else would. They might keep alive the human occupants of that ship, until they had learned everything the humans knew, but there would come a time when the lives of human cattle would no longer be of value to them. Then—

There comes a time when a man accepts the fact that he is going to die. This time came to John Balfour now. If the ship crashed, he would die. If the ship landed safely, the Roum would get him. No matter which way the scales dipped now, the answer was the same.

Some men accept their fate with sullen indifference, some accept it with paralysis, some, snatching at straws, scream with fear. Captain Vincent had been one of the straw-snatchers. Balfour accepted it in

none of these ways. He was still alive. Something might yet be done. Warning might be given. He hurried to the radio room.

A word from him to Admiral Hatridge in Venus Port that a space ship was down in the Go-room would bring a space cruiser in a hell of a hurry. If worst came to worst, an atom bomb could blow the wrecked ship into fragments of molten metal so small that no scientist could determine how they had once functioned. Admiral Hatridge would issue an order to drop such a bomb, if he had to! If he knew in time that such an order was needed!

Kicking open the door of the radio room, Balfour stopped, appalled.

A hammer had been used in here. Nothing else could account for the wreckage that had been done. The panels shielding the RF transmitters had been effectively smashed. Behind the panels the transmitting tubes were a tangle of twisted filaments and broken grids. Tuning coils had been smashed. The key, for code operation, and the mike, for voice transmission, had been pounded into broken metal and smashed plastic.

Yes, a hammer had been used to accomplish the destruction here. Whoever had wielded the hammer had used it first of all on the head of the radio operator. He sprawled forward on the floor, a youth with his sleeves rolled up as if he was ready for work. The back of his head had been smashed like an egg-shell.

No SOS, no warning, no call for help, would ever go out over this radio transmitter. This radio operator would never pound his key sending out an urgent warning to the admiral at Venus Port that a space ship was down in the Go-room.

At the thought of what this wrecked radio room meant, Balfour took an involuntary step backward. In the throbbing roar of the faltering jets, he did not hear the step in the passageway behind him.

Nor did he feel the blackjack hit him. He didn't know anything had hit him. Suddenly, he just didn't know—anything.

CHAPTER II

THE SOFT musical chirp of the *creech*, the tree lizard, came to his ears. For a moment, he thought he was back on Venus again, in the jungle, but on second thought he knew this was not right. He was on a space ship headed for earth. But, if this was true, how did it happen he could hear the musical chirp of a lizard that lived in the jungle of Venus?

It was too much of a problem. He gave up trying to solve it. Voices came to his ears. Somewhere men were arguing. Frightened men. He listened without any great interest. What were frightened men to him? Something wet and soft passed over his face.

“What are we going to do?” Squeaky Voice said.

“I still say our best bet is to take guns and supplies from the ship and head straight into the jungle,” Firm Voice answered. There was strength in this voice. Balfour decided he liked the man who owned it.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen,” a soothing voice spoke. “We can remain right where we are, in perfect safety. In forty-eight hours, at the longest, the ship will be repaired. Then we can take off again.”

Dimly, Balfour recognized this voice as belonging to Captain Vincent. Who was Captain Vincent? At this moment, he didn't know. He didn't much care. The voices came again but he had lost interest. Something soft and wet was passing over his face again. He opened his eyes.

Kneeling on the ground directly in front of him was as beautiful a pair of nylon-clad knees as he had ever seen. There was a runner, he noticed, in one of the stockings, and the pink flesh showed through. There was a yellow dress—He lifted his gaze. The higher up he looked, the better it was.

“I see you’ve come to,” a girl’s voice said. “And started acting just like every other man.”

“Is that wrong?” Balfour said. He didn’t know what he was talking about.

“No, I guess not,” the girl answered promptly. “A man who didn’t act like that wouldn’t be much good.”

“Oh,” he said. “What makes a man a good man?”

“Oh, strength and courage and a sense of fair play, and a lot of other things. How do you feel?”

“Fine,” he said. It was a lie and he knew it. He sat up. The effort made the world reel around him. He grabbed at the ground and waited for his vision to clear. The girl slipped an arm under his shoulder. “Thanks,” he said. It was odd that he couldn’t remember her name. There were some things about her he could remember, but definitely. Unfortunately her name was not one of them.

In front of him, at the edge of a sheared swath of broken jungle growth, a space ship rested. The main lock was open. Two men were crawling cautiously around the lifting jets in the bow, examining them. Other men were cutting down trees, clearing away underbrush, slashing away with axes and with long knives. They worked like men whose lives depended on their speed.

“So she got down all right?” he spoke.

“At the last moment, the jets came on,” the girl answered. “It wasn’t a bad landing, except that it was in the wrong place.”

“At the last moment—” This seemed important, somehow. He tried to think how. Thinking at this moment was a difficult task. There were blank spots in his mind and the back of his head hurt. He ran exploratory fingers over the sore spot, winced as he touched the bruise there. “How’d I get this?”

“You must have bumped your head when we landed,” the girl said.

“Ah,” he said. This was one possible explanation. It didn’t sound right somehow but he couldn’t, at the moment, see what was wrong with it. A pompous man in a uniform with a lot of gold braid was bending over him.

“Glad to see you have regained consciousness,” the man was saying. “Are you all right now?”

“Nope,” Balfour answered. Dimly he recognized this man as Captain Vincent. The captain’s face radiated determined cheerfulness but his eyes were worried and fretful. The captain looked over his shoulder. “I can’t remember much,” Balfour said.

“Probably a mild concussion,” Captain Vincent said. “After a severe blow on the head, the memory is often blank as to the events that took place a few hours before the accident. Nothing serious. The important thing is not to worry. We’ll be out of here within forty-eight hours—”

“Forty-eight hours?” The words touched a responsive chord somewhere in Balfour’s mind. At the touch, part of his memory came flooding back. He got quickly to his feet. He remembered now, who Captain Vincent was, and he remembered who he was and where he was. “Captain, we can’t possibly remain here forty-eight hours! We’ve got to take off immediately, within the hour, if that is possible.”

“Can’t do it,” Captain Vincent answered.

“But we’ve got to do it Captain, we’re in the Go-roum—”

“I don’t care if we’re in hell, we can’t take off immediately. That’s final.” The picture of outraged dignity, Captain Vincent stalked away toward the ship.

BALFOUR rubbed his head. His mind was still blank, in spots. He couldn’t remember how he had received the lick on the head. For that matter, he couldn’t remember how he had gotten out of the ship.

“I saw you in the passageway and dragged you out,” the girl explained. “I—we were all afraid the ship might blow up.”

“Blow up?” The words reached into his mind and struck a responsive chord. His clenched fist crashed into his open hand. “That’s the answer!” Excitement crept into his voice. “Captain Vincent!”

“What the hell do you want now?” Captain Vincent waited for him to come up.

“We’ve got to make preparations to blow up the ship, if the Roum come!” Balfour said. He tried to keep his voice calm, he tried to act as if his suggestion was completely reasonable. It was reasonable to him. The important thing, the only important thing, was to keep a space ship out of the hands of the Roum.

“Are you out of your head?” Captain Vincent gasped.

“It won’t be difficult,” Balfour explained. “We’ll run wires into the fuel tanks. If the ship is repaired on time, we’ll take off. If the Roum arrive before the repairs are complete—Boom!” He made a gesture with his hands to indicate the violent flare of a tremendous explosion.

All color drained out of Captain Vincent’s face as he listened. “Of course,” he said. “That’s a splendid idea.”

“You’ll do it?” Balfour’s face beamed. This had been easier than he had expected. Maybe it had been too easy.

“I’ll get the electrician on it right away,” the captain said. “You lie down and rest. Don’t worry about it.” The captain continued toward the ship. He moved at a trot now and he looked back over his shoulder as if he was afraid Balfour was following him. Balfour went back to the group of passengers.

“What was that you said about blowing up the ship?” the girl spoke. She seemed scared and worried. He wondered why.

“If worst comes to worst, that’s what we’ve got to do,” he said.

“Why?” A little paunchy, squeaky-voice passenger shot the single word at him.

He tried to tell them why. Listening, they gathered around him in a tense little group. Light filtered down through the leaves of the jungle growth overhead. Somewhere a *creech* chirped musically. When he had finished, the passengers were silent.

“You mean we’ve got to take a chance on death so that somebody else will have a better chance to live?” Lora Calhoun spoke slowly.

“That’s it exactly,” he said. She seemed to understand what he meant. A tall bronze-faced man seemed to understand.

“You’re crazy!” the little paunchy passenger screamed the words. “I don’t believe the Roum exist. If they do exist, I don’t believe they will bother us.”

“They exist all right,” the bronzed-faced man spoke. He extended his hand to Balfour. “My name is Jenkins. I’ve been a jungle trader and I know the Roum. You’ve hit the nail right on the head. If it comes to a blow-off, you can count on me.”

“Thanks,” Balfour said. He took the offered hand. The grip was firm and strong. Dimly he remembered this man as having the firm voice he had first heard when he was recovering consciousness. He had liked the voice then, he liked the man even better. “I don’t imagine there will be any trouble. Captain Vincent has agreed to wire the fuel tanks.”

“Maybe,” Jenkins said. “Maybe there’s trouble on the way right now.” He looked toward the ship.

BALFOUR turned. Captain Vincent had emerged from the lock. Two men were with him. The captain spoke to the two men and pointed toward the passengers. The two men nodded, moved forward. Balfour watched them. In his mind, something seemed to click. Suddenly he remembered what he had forgotten. His memory, jarred out of focus by the blow he had received, gave him back a picture of the wrecked radio room, the dead radio operator. He remembered the quick step that had sounded behind him as he backed out of the radio room and he realized at last that the jolt he had received had been a blow from a blackjack.

Who had struck it?

He didn’t know. But he had grim suspicions. With those suspicions came an even grimmer thought. Perhaps the landing of the space ship here in the Go-room had not been an accident! Lora Calhoun had said that the jets had come on full force just before the ship landed. That one fact alone ought to have made him suspicious. It would be easy to juggle the controls and fake an emergency, then cut on the jets so that the ship landed safely. If there was an investigation later, all the passengers and the crew could be called on to testify that the emergency had been real. The weight of their evidence might force Admiral Hatridge, in Venus Port, to believe that the ship had been forced to land in the Go-room.

That would clear the crew and the passengers of complicity in faking a forced landing. Somebody would have a fortune in Roum gold and would be safe to enjoy it. The Roum would have what they wanted most of all—a space ship.

Watching the two men approach, Balfour’s hand went automatically inside his coat, feeling for the gun he had carried on Venus. Too late he remembered that when the ship had taken off, he had presumed he was safe and had packed the gun in his bag. His hand came away empty.

“Balfour?” The two men stopped in front of him and the taller spoke a single word. They were members of the crew. They had a job to do but their faces revealed they didn’t much like the job.

“I’m Balfour.”

“You’re under arrest.”

“Who said so?”

“Captain Vincent said so. He said you are acting like you’re crazy and that he wanted you arrested and confined.” The speaker shrugged. He was just a member of the crew. The shrug said that when he was given orders, he had no choice except to obey them.

“Okay.” In indifference, in saying that he too, had a job to do, that he too was under orders, Balfour’s shrug matched the shoulder movement of the speaker. He stepped forward. With all his weight behind it, his left fist went out. It landed full on the jaw of the taller of the two men who had been sent to

arrest him.

The man went over backward. He hit the ground with a thud. He wiggled, shook his head, and tried to get to his feet. Behind him, Balfour heard a passenger gasp. He heard the girl cry out.

“Watch it, the other one has a gun!”

It pleased him, somehow, to know that she was trying to warn him. He saw the second, shorter crewman back up hastily when he swung his fist, he saw the man snatch at the bulky pocket of his coveralls. The man he had knocked down was also reaching for a pocket. Both of them had guns. Both were prepared to use them.

Balfour didn't hesitate. He moved toward the second man. Something went past him, fast. He caught a glimpse of Jenkins. The second man was trying to back away. Jenkins went in like a tackle, diving at the man's knees. The trader and the crewman went down together.

ON THE ground, the man whom Balfour had hit first was getting the gun out of his pocket. Balfour bent down. “I'll take it,” he said. Dazedly, the fellow yielded the gun. Balfour moved to help Jenkins. The trader, gun in hand, was already getting to his feet.

“You work fast,” Balfour said.

“I've had some practice,” Jenkins said.

“You make up your mind fast too,” Balfour said.

“Meaning about which side I'm on?” Jenkins said. “Hell, I know a man when I see one.” He grinned, then the grin changed to a frown. “Anyhow I didn't like the way the ship went down. The jets came on a little too pat to save us from crashing. I didn't like it.” The frown grew grimmer. “The question is—what next? Unless I miss my guess, it's not going to be healthy for you and me around here.”

“You haven't missed your guess,” Balfour said.

In the lock of the ship, Captain Vincent was waving his hands and pointing toward them. Two crewmen dropped to the ground. Each carried a sub-machine gun.

“Are you a good man in the jungle?” Balfour spoke, to Jenkins.

“Fair,” the trader answered.

“That's where I'm going. Come if you want.” Keeping the startled group of passengers between him and the men advancing from the ship, Balfour moved toward the jungle. Jenkins came right behind him. They were slipping out of sight in the jungle growth when Balfour realized that another person was following them.

“Hey!” he called out protestingly.

“I'm going with you,” Lora Calhoun spoke. “You're not leaving me behind with this bunch.”

His eyes were on the yellow dress she wore. Already it was coming apart at the seams. He could imagine what the sharp thorns of jungle creepers would do to that dress. “Do you know what you're doing?” he said.

“Nope,” she answered. “But I know why.” Her eyes were on his face. There was hunger in them as if she saw something she had not known existed. “You meant what you said about being willing to die so that somebody else might have a chance to live, didn't you?”

“I meant it,” he answered. “Then I’m coming with you,” she said.

In spite of the meaning back of her words, he opened his mouth to protest, then closed it with a snap as something blurred across the tangled area of broken growth in front of the space ship. A streak of light seemed to leap from the jungle. It was an odd kind of light. It blurred the air as it moved and it produced a crackling sound in the air, like the discharge of static electricity.

Coming from the edge of the green growth fifty yards away from Balfour, it leaped at, and struck the foremost of the two armed members of the crew trotting toward the group of passengers half hidden under the green growth.

The man flung his hands up in the air. His manner was jerky, he acted as if he had touched—or been touched by—a high tension electric wire. The tommy-gun described a short arc in the air. The man screamed, a sound ripped from the cavernous depths of his throat and from the deeper depths of his being. Balfour had heard a few men scream like this? He knew what it meant. When such a scream was ripped from the hidden depths of a man, it meant that death had found him both suddenly and unexpectedly. Like a rag doll falling, this man went down. When he touched the ground, he did not move again.

At the edge of the jungle, peering through the sights of a strange weapon that looked like a cross between a sub-machine gun and a miniature radar set, Balfour caught a glimpse of a dark face.

He snatched at the girl’s arm, yanked her past him, “Crawl!” he whispered.

The Roum had arrived.

CHAPTER III

HIDING AT the edge of the jungle, not daring to try to escape for fear that flight itself would reveal them, Balfour and Jenkins and Lora Calhoun saw the results of the piece of treachery that had taken place here. The instant the first shot was fired—apparently the Roum fighter who fired it had mistakenly thought that the tommy-gun was a far more dangerous weapon than it was—fighters instantly began popping out of the jungle. They came from four different places, in long files, each warrior on the run. Though no commands were given, each fighter seemed to know instantly what to do. The files formed a circle around the ship. Every human was caught within the circling net thus flung out. Instantly the net began to draw tighter around the ship.

Captain Vincent appeared in the lock. As if his appearance was a signal, a dozen Roum fighters detached themselves and ran to him. The captain greeted them with bristling anger. “What kept you so long? You were supposed to be here within an hour after we landed. I’ve had the devil’s own time trying to keep the passengers and the crew under control. One of the passengers even wanted to blow up the ship. You should have been here sooner.”

His anger was vitriolic. The Roum leader smiled placatingly. “We came as quickly as we could. The ship was not put down in the spot where you were told to land.”

In this moment it was obvious that the Roum had succeeded in getting through to at least one member of the crew of a space ship and this in spite of all the precautions that had been taken to prevent it.

“That dirty son—sold all of us out!” Jenkins gritted. Unconsciously he lifted the pistol he had taken from one of the two men who had tried to arrest Balfour, trying to line up the sights on Captain Vincent.

“Cut it out!” Balfour hissed. “How long do you think we would remain alive if they found us?”

“Not long,” Jenkins admitted. Reluctantly he lowered the muzzle of the pistol. “But it might be worth it if I could take him with me.”

“Wait and see,” Balfour said.

“What’s there to see if we do wait?”

“If I know the Roum, there will be something to see, and we won’t have to wait long. Watch!”

A file of Roum fighters were already entering the main lock of the vessel. One by one the members of the crew who had been working inside the ship began to emerge, each escorted by a roum warrior, until the entire crew and the passengers had been lined up at the stern of the ship. Under guard, the humans stood there, milling like uneasy cattle that have been captured by wolves.

A command rang out in the Roum tongue. Balfour knew enough of the Roum speech to know what was going to happen next. He saw the platoon of warriors step forward and lift their weapons. Involuntarily he covered his eyes.

Captain Vincent’s voice lifted in a shout. “No! You promised you would see me safely to—” The shout died in a sudden scream.

Balfour didn’t see it but the screams told him what was happening. The humans were being massacred. When the screams died out, he opened his eyes. All along the stern of the ship dead bodies lay on the ground. The Roum leader was stepping forward to deliver the *coup de grace* to a squirming human who was not yet dead.

BESIDE him on the ground, Balfour could hear Jenkins breathing in short panting gasps. Lora Calhoun seemed to have stopped breathing entirely. She had changed completely from the girl Balfour had first met, with a cocktail in her hand, celebrating the take-off from Venus.

“You’ll get over it in time,” he said roughly. “Come along now. We’ve got to get away from here before they start checking the dead bodies against the list of passengers and crew and discover they haven’t got all of us.”

“Anyhow Vincent got exactly what was coming to him,” Jenkins said. “That’s something, anyhow.”

“Something—but not enough,” Balfour said. They slid silently into the protection of the jungle. No shout came from behind them, announcing their discovery. The Roum were still too busy with the ship to take time to wonder if they had destroyed all of its human occupants. Later, the question would occur to them.

Within half a mile, Balfour stopped. The impenetrable tangle had closed completely around them and the ship was no longer visible. He squinted at the sun. “Couple of more hours of daylight,” he said. Jenkins nodded. The girl was silent. Creeper briars had already begun to do their deadly work on the yellow dress.

“We had better take stock,” Jenkins said. “We’ve got two pistols and no food. The first jungle cat, the first tiger lizard that comes along will just naturally gobble us up. There’s over a hundred miles of this jungle to the first trading post.” He shook his head. “I make the odds ten to one against our ever making it,” he said. “That presumes the Roum don’t discover our existence and take after us, in which case the odds are a hundred to one—against.”

Balfour nodded. “So you two get started,” he said.

“Eh?” Jenkins was startled. “What do you mean—‘get started’? What about you?”

“I want to have a crack at destroying that ship,” Balfour said. “The filler pipes leading to the fuel tanks open through a special lock just forward of the stern. I thought after dark I could open the lock, unscrew the filler pipe caps, run wires down into the tanks—”

“Where are you going to get the wires?” Jenkins said. “Where are you going to get the batteries?”

“Well—”

The trader laughed. “Don’t you ever give up, pal? Don’t you ever admit you’re licked?”

“Sure,” Balfour admitted. “It’s just that, back there when I thought the ship was going to crash, I decided I was as good as dead. Since I’m already dead, it doesn’t matter what kind of chances I take.” He groped through his mind for his reasons, found he didn’t actually know them. “So you two try to get through to Venus Port and report to Admiral Hatridge what has happened here. I’ll stay and have one last crack at the ship.”

“The admiral will wait a long time if he waits for me,” Jenkins said. “I don’t duck out and leave a pal in trouble.”

“But somebody’s got to get a report to the admiral,” Balfour said. His gaze centered on the girl.

“Not me,” she said. “And that makes it unanimous.”

“I guess we’ll all stay,” Balfour said. “As soon as it gets dark—” He looked back toward the ship.

In the Venusian jungle night comes quietly. Because of the eternal cloud banks overhead, the light is never very bright. The shadows begin to firm long before the sun is gone, resulting in a misty twilight. In that twilight, the night-roaming creatures begin to awaken, the jungle cats begin to prowl, the tiger lizards move from the quiet glades where they have been hiding during the day.

As the twilight thickened, the three humans moved back toward the ship. Ahead of them, lights gleamed in the jungle.

“They’ve hooked lights on to the ship’s generators and strung them outside,” Jenkins said. “But what are they doing?”

ABOUT THE ship, the Roum were as busy as bees. Immense activity was going on in the jungle. Trees were being chopped down, creeper vines were being carefully pulled from their positions and with their roots still in place, the long green tendrils were being led toward the ship. In this rain-soaked hothouse those vines would grow ten feet in a single day.

“Camouflage,” Balfour said. “They’re hiding the ship.”

He knew the camouflage would be effective. Within a few days, the fast-growing vines would hide the ship completely from observation from the sky. Since the vines were alive, even infra-red photography would not detect any difference in the vegetation on the plateau.

When the ship failed to report in at Luna Station, a search would be instituted for it but no search would ever discover this hiding place.

“Smart son-of-a-guns,” Jenkins said.

“Their smartest development is that weapon they carry,” Balfour said. “That’s an adaptation, for hand use, of the big weapon they have discovered.” He told them about the testing sites he had discovered. “Admiral Hatridge would give his heart’s blood for one of those hand guns. If he had one of them as a model, he could tell the Roum he knew all about their secret weapon, and that they had better keep the

peace, or else.”

“But he doesn’t have one,” Jenkins said. “And the Roum do have a space ship.”

“I know it.”

Keeping carefully out of sight, they studied the scene before them. Roum were visible everywhere, tall, dusky-skinned Venusians in trim uniforms. Their features and their bodies were very close to the human, except for a sixth finger on each hand and a slight slanting of the eyes. As they worked, each carried the stubby little weapon that resembled a cross between a tommy-gun and a portable radar set. Parties were hard at work in the jungle, other Roum were examining the ship from the outside. Lights glowing from every port indicated the examination that was taking place inside the hull.

“I was thinking, if we had uniforms—” Balfour said hesitantly.

“I’ve had the same idea in my mind,” Jenkins answered. “Come on. We’ll see if we can borrow a couple of uniforms from a couple of Roum.”

“What about me?” Lora Calhoun whispered.

“You stay right where you are.” Balfour said. “We’ll pick you up later.” They left her hidden at the base of a gigantic tree. She didn’t like it, but she didn’t protest.

“Stout girl, that,” Jenkins said, as they moved away.

“I agree,” Balfour answered.

The first Roum, busy cutting branches to use for camouflage, never really knew what hit him. So far as he was concerned, an arm suddenly came from nowhere behind him, clamped around his neck and jerked him backward. He didn’t even get a chance to notice that the hand on that arm was a monstrosity, that it held only five fingers.

“The uniform fits well enough,” Balfour said. The cloth was some closely-woven water-resistant material. A leather belt holding a knife circled the waist. Balfour knew this was the death knife, by which the defeated fighter was supposed to take his own life. He was interested in the gun. The principle of operation he did not understand but there was an obvious safety and an obvious trigger. More than how to release the safety and pull the trigger he did not need to know. He slipped the uniform cap on his head, rubbed dirt on his hands and face.

“Now a nice new suit for me,” Jenkins said.

The second Roum must have heard the approach of stealthy feet. He was nervous and very much alert. His wariness got him a chance to start a yell, which died in a strangled gasp as Balfour caught him in the crook of the arm and tightened the deadly hold around the neck. The warrior vanished into the jungle growth.

“You do that real neatly,” Jenkins observed.

“It’s part of my job to know how to kill a man—or a Roum—silently,” Balfour answered. Between them they swiftly stripped the silenced warrior of his clothing.

“Our luck is good—so far,” Jenkins said. He examined the gun, made certain he knew how to use it, slipped it in its sling.

Together, with no attempt at concealment, they stepped into the bright glare from the lights the Roum had strung up and moved directly toward the ship.

CHAPTER IV

SO FAR AS the Roum were concerned, it looked as if two of their warriors had come out of the jungle and were going definitely about their business. The warriors were in proper uniform, they carried their weapons properly, obviously they were Roum fighters. No one paid any attention to them. The Roum had not yet got around to checking the passenger and crew list against the dead bodies of the men they had slaughtered, hence they did not as yet know that any humans were missing.

The Roum were too excited to be wondering about such cattle as humans. They had what they wanted most—a space ship. When their scientists had finished examining the vessel, their hidden workshops would begin to hum with life, turning out long ships with which to range the star lanes. Because of the eternal cloud banks that covered Venus, they had never really appreciated the potentialities for conquest offered by the worlds beyond the sky. Most of them had never realized that some of the stars they saw occasionally were actually worlds like their own. They knew this fact now. To this race of fighters, the thought of new worlds to conquer was like a magic elixir stirring them on to new ambitions. Peace was only for weaklings, was their motto.

The two warriors went directly to the stern of the ship, where they began to examine the hull. Since they seemed to know exactly what they were doing, they were obviously acting under orders. They stood looking up.

Jenkins sighed. There was real regret in that soft sound. “You’ve got to have a special wrench to open the damned lock over the filler pipes,” he said.

“I see,” Balfour said. “They’ve got a new type cover. The old ones simply screwed out. I had hoped that we could screw them loose, then perhaps a match—”

“Hey!” Jenkins said, startled. “If you dropped a match in those tanks, how in hell would you ever get away?”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Balfour said.

The trader eyed him. “The hell you hadn’t. You intended to unscrew that cap and then drop in a match. You crazy fool! I could think of a nicer way of committing suicide but I couldn’t think of a faster one.”

Balfour shrugged. “I would have given you a chance to get into the jungle first,” he said. For a moment, he was silent. Then his voice came again. “I’ll go into the ship and find the wrench. You stay here and act like you’re busy.”

“We’ll go into the ship,” Jenkins gently corrected him. “While you find the bench, I’ll raid the electrician’s kit for a couple of spools of wire, a high tension coil to produce a jump spark, and some batteries. We’ll lay the wire into the jungle just exactly like we know what we’re doing.”

“Do you think we can get away with it?”

“We can try,” Jenkins said. They moved to the lock.

THE RAUM had not posted guards as yet. Probably the need for guards would occur to them later, but at this moment, flushed with conquest, certain that all the humans were dead, they had seen no need for sentries. No one challenged the two warriors who stepped up into the lock and disappeared inside the ship. They parted at the place where the main passageways separated. Both the tool room and the

electricians shop were at the stern of the ship but they were on opposite sides of the hull.

“Meet you at the filler pipe lock,” Jenkins said. Balfour nodded.

The door of the tool room was open. Inside a single Roum was busy examining the ship’s supply of tools. One by one, he was cataloging them and entering the records, in neat script that looked like bird tracks, in a small note book. Balfour stepped inside and gently closed the door.

“*Vasose se?* Who are you?” the Roum growled.

“I was sent to help you,” Balfour growled in reply: He knew enough of the language of the Go-roum to make himself understood. He hoped the occupant of this room would not notice his strange accent.

The Roum did notice it. “Your voice is strange,” he spoke, rising to his feet.

“I have a throat pain,” Balfour answered. “I want a special tool—”

In the rack across the room he saw the wrench for the lock over the filler caps. The human mechanic who had once used this room had cleaned the wrench and put it carefully in its place, against the day when it would again be needed. Balfour stepped forward and pulled it from its resting place.

“No one may take anything from this room,” the Roum growled at him. “Those are my orders.”

“Ah!” Balfour said. He swung the wrench. Made of steel, with a handle a foot long, it was a heavy tool. The projecting prong, designed to fit into the square opening of the small lock over the filler pipes, made its own opening—in the skull of the Roum.

Balfour wiped the stains from the wrench, slipped it inside the belt of his borrowed uniform. Gently, he closed the door as he went out. In the passageway no one challenged him. He dropped to the ground, still unchallenged, and moved directly to the stern.

For the first time, he dared to hope.

The lock was a steel cap. He fitted the wrench into the socket, began to turn. The block of steel turned easily under the pressure of the wrench. It came loose and sagged downward, held by a chain on the inside designed to keep it from dropping to the ground, revealing an opening about a foot in diameter. Visible now were the plain caps over the filler pipes.

The other end of the wrench fitted the socket in the filler pipe caps. He inserted the tool.

DIRECTLY above him, Roum were lifting long vines over the hull of the ship. Dim thunder was rumbling in the distance and rain had begun to fall in big drops. The Roum were swearing at the rain. The cap over the first filler pipe came off in his hands. He could smell the raw gases rising from the fuel inside the tanks.

Where was Jenkins? One of the tanks was open. One was enough. If one exploded, the others would go too. Balfour glanced toward the main lock. Jenkins was not in sight. He began to loose the cap from the second filler pipe.

The thunder growled closer and the rain grew stronger. Streaking downward through the light, each rain drop seemed as big as a golf ball. In this rain, in the growing storm, they would have an excellent chance to string wires into the jungle. Hope rose in him, stronger than before. Perhaps, after all, he was not a walking dead man! Perhaps he might live again! Perhaps, if he succeeded here, and Admiral Hatridge played his cards right in this grim game, a lot of people might live.

A shadow moved near him.

Startled, he jerked around.

Jenkins stood there. Jenkins was leaning against the hull of the ship.

“I didn’t get—the wire—or the batteries—or the high tension coil!” Jenkins’ words were spoken in a taut whisper.

“You didn’t get—” Balfour broke off what he was going to say. The tone of the trader’s voice warned him that something was wrong.

“I got a knife instead,” Jenkins whispered. He pointed to his chest.

Dimly visible, protruding beyond the uniform, was the hilt of a Roum death knife. The blade was within or very close to the trader’s heart.

“He saw—I only had five fingers,” Jenkins whispered “He had the knife in me—before I knew he realized I wasn’t a Roum.” The voice faltered into silence, then came again. “I’m sorry—but I didn’t get him. We won’t have time to string the wire.”

“You’re dead, man!” Balfour gasped.

As if he had not heard him, Jenkins continued. “The whole ship is arousing, inside. Run, man! Get to Lora! Get away.”

“Run?” Balfour whispered the single word. “But—”

“I know,” Jenkins spoke. “You’re thinking this job ought to blow. Well, it will blow! The pipes are open?” He raised himself to his full height, looked at the work Balfour had done. “Good!”

Lifting the weapon he had borrowed from the Roum warrior, he thrust the muzzle straight down the filler pipe.

“Any job a match will do, this little gadget ought to do better,” he said.

Appalled, Balfour stared at him. “But—”

The trader’s voice rose in a snarl. “There are no ‘buts’ about it. You would have done the same thing for me. I’m doing it for you. Run! you’ve got a chance, now, to get away.”

From the main lock a shout sounded. A Roum warrior had dropped to the ground there. He was shouting a single word over and over again. “Spy! Spy! Spy!”

“Get moving!” Jenkins gasped.

“And leave you here?” Balfour spoke.

“You don’t seem to understand,” the trader answered. “I want it this way. I’ve got a knife in me. No matter what happens, I’ve only got a few minutes to live. There is no possible way I can escape, no possible way you can help me. All I’ve got is a choice of how I die. Let me go out in a blaze of glory.”

BALFOUR made up his mind. If he were in Jenkins’ place, he would demand the same privilege. He didn’t say another word. For an instant their hands met, in the fierce grip of a final farewell, then Balfour turned and began to walk toward the edge of the jungle.

“Good luck,” the trader’s voice came after him. “I’ve got maybe five minutes. You had better be gone by then.”

Balfour did not answer. All around him Roum warriors were moving toward the fighter standing on the ground outside the main lock. A whistle was blowing. The shrill notes of the call for assembly rang through the rain-soaked night.

Lighting rolled along the horizon. Thunder roared. To Balfour, knowing what might happen at any second, the walk through the flood lights to the edge of the jungle was the longest distance he had ever travelled in his life. A thousand needles of anticipatory dread jabbed at his back.

At any moment a Roum warrior might challenge. In answer to the assembly call, all the Roum were moving toward the ship. He, alone, was going in the opposite direction. Would he make the safety of the jungle? He didn't know. He was past all thinking, past all worrying about such a little thing as life, past all hoping. He reached the edge of the floodlights, slid into the jungle.

“Lora! Lora!”

In the illumination from a flash of lighting, he caught a glimpse of the tall tree where they had left her.

Her voice answered him. Oblivious now, of the fact that he might be detected, he ran toward her. He found her. Soaking wet from the pouring rain, she clung to him.

“Quick! Down behind the tree!”

She didn't ask any questions. With the bulk of the giant tree looming protectively over them, they threw themselves flat on the ground. “Cover your ears!” he said huskily.

Off in the distance, thunder rolled. From the direction of the ship came a fierce shout, the cry of a hunter who had located his prey. Balfour knew the meaning of this shout. Jenkins, leaning against the hull of the ship, had finally been detected.

Answering the shout, came a flash of fire. Following the flash of fire was a monstrous blast of thunder. At the ship the dying Jenkins had finally pulled the trigger of the Roum gun the muzzle of which was thrust down the filler pipes leading to the fuel tanks...

The very ground under them leaped convulsively. The air howled with sound. The tree above them bent far over from the rushing air fighting to get away from the explosion. The night was filled with chunks of flying metal. The whole jungle seemed saturated with this metallic rain.

It was the tree that saved John Balfour and Lora Calhoun. It bent double from the blast but it did not go over. The stout trunk protected them from the ghastly rain of red hot metal flying through the night.

Eventually the last chunk of metal had come back to the soil of Venus. John Balfour sat up. His ears ached from the fury of the explosion, his mind seemed to be reeling. In the spot where the space ship had rested a tremendous blaze was shooting flames a thousand feet into the air. All the fuel had not exploded. The remainder, burning there, was turning the broken hull of the ship into a mass of twisted, fused wreckage.

“We've got to start moving now,” Balfour said. “Roum search parties will be all over this area. We've got to get out before they get here.”

“What chance have we got?” she asked. “You said yourself the jungle cats—”

“One good thing I can say for the Roum,” he answered. “They've got a weapon that will stop the biggest jungle cat that ever lived.” He lifted the little weapon he carried.

Through the rainy, lightning swept and thunder harried night, she followed him away from the wreck of the burning ship. Jenkins, he put out of his mind. The jungle trader had died as he wished, a hero.

Somewhere, someday, there would be a monument to Jenkins. Perhaps a monument would not be enough, but it would be something.

As for him, Balfour knew that again he dared to hope. Ten days and ten nights would be needed to reach the first trading post. From there, they could go forward in comparative security to final safety. The gun would protect them against the wild life, the jungle itself would provide them with everything they needed... Well, perhaps not with everything. He thought of the yellow dress Lora Calhoun was wearing. Then he thought of the ten nights, nights with her warm softness very close to him. A smile struggled to existence on his face... No, the jungle could not supply a yellow dress, or even a reasonable facsimile of same. It could only tear a yellow dress to shreds, revealing fully what lay beneath it.

On Balfour's face, the smile became a grin...

The End.

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