

CHAPTER I

The Incurables of Ceres

ATIMER stumbled heavily and fell from the ramp to the frozen rocks. His hand went automatically to his belt. But the spacesuit he was wearing had no belt, neither had it the holster and the pistol that for so long had seemed part of himself. Weaponless, Latimer lay where he had fallen, snarled wordlessly at the guard whose farewell shove had caused him to lose his balance, at the vast hulk of *Charon* like some dark tower blotting out the stars.

For long minutes he lay there. He was aware that the airlock door in *Charon's* side had shut, that the telescopic ramp had retracted to its recess in the shell plating, and knew that it would not be long before the main drive of the prison ship seared the rocks that were his comfortless couch with all-consuming fire. But he did not care. To a man such as he the merciful penal laws of his time held little of mercy. Better, he told himself, a quick, clean death than a long lifetime lived out among the Incurables of Ceres. He looked at the stars and waited for what, at worst, would be only a microsecond of *agony*.

Somebody's clumsy, gloved hands were tugging at the sleeve of his suit. Somebody was trying to pull him to his feet. He did not shift his gaze from the glittering stars, but he spoke, his voice strange and tinny in his own helmet phones.

"Get away from here," he said. Then, more urgently: "Get away from here, you fool! Don't you know that the ship will be blasting off at any moment?"

The other made no reply, but the insistent tugging continued. Actuated by rage rather than by any urge towards self preservation Latimer started to scramble to his feet. Even to himself his motives were not clear—but his hands in their thick gloves tingled with anticipation of the stinging blows that would send this meddler scurrying back to the safety of the airlock under the brow of the low cliff.

Then the stranger spoke. It was a low voice, softly husky, well modulated—and even the inevitable distortions of the helmet phones could not disguise its magical qualities. Neither could they conceal the undertones compounded of despair, and misery, and resignation.

"Perhaps you are right," Latimer heard. "Perhaps you are wise. Perhaps your action—our action—will encourage others to follow suit when *Charon* comes again. And then this little world will be the poorer by so many little, personal Hells. And that will be good."

It was a low voice, and a softly husky voice, and it held within itself a honeyed sweetness that had long been lacking from the world of Alan Latimer. Not that his world had been in any way drab or dreary. It had been a good world—harsh, perhaps, but not lacking the bright color of new faces, fresh scenes, the explosive flares of excitement and danger.

Is, his world as it had been it is possible that such a voice, unconsciously intimate, full of unspoken promises, would have failed to stir him. But within the narrow compass of this new world, this world that he had made for himself, or that the peculiar, inimitable combination of genes that came from his parents, and from their parents, had made for him, the voice promised a light, a color, that must be sadly lacking from the days to come. Or it could have been that it brought back memories of a still older world, a plane of existence in which there were other realities than the harsh, turbulent life of the frontiers, the flare of rocket drive against the stars, and the stars themselves, sharp, crystalline, with no kindly atmospheric veil between their hard brilliance and his eyes.

"No!" he heard himself shouting. "We're alive—and we stay that way! Come on!"

He was on his feet now. He roughly disengaged himself from the clumsy paw that was still clutching the right sleeve of his armor, put out his own gloved hands to grasp the shoulders of the girl. He did not stop to examine the face that he could dimly see within the transparent bubble of the helmet. He swung her so that she was facing away from him and then, clumsy in his haste, rushed her towards the safety of the low cliff and the airlock. He hoped desperately that the officers of *Charon* would be looking down from Control, that they would see that the field was not yet clear for blasting off.

THEY were still a score of yards from the shelter when *Charon's* pilot depressed his firing key. Had Ceres possessed an external atmosphere the roar of the blast might well have deafened them for life. As it was their senses registered a blinding, intolerable light that seemed to strike clear through their skulls to the retina. The ground beneath them shook, and the wave of incandescent gases that was volatilized rock lifted them and cast them from it. In spite of the insulation of their suits they felt the scorching fury of the blast. Had it not been for the insulation they would have been burned to a crisp. And the force with which they were flung to the ground stunned them.

Alan Latimer was first to recover. He staggered to his feet, putting one hand out to the cliff face for support. Blood tasted salt in his mouth and there was a warm trickle from his nostrils. He disregarded it—attired as he was there was nothing else that he could do—and blinked to clear his befogged eyes. He looked up, saw *Charon*, a fast waning star among the stars, another spot of light among the countless millions.

For a while he watched her, his heart going out with her, revisiting in memory all the ports and cities that he would never again see. It was not until the girl stirred, striking feebly with her arm against his booted foot, that he bethought himself of her and her safety. He stooped, then, awkward in the stiff articulations of his armor, and picked her up. He strode the few short paces to the airlock, dull silver against the rugged black of the cliff. With little of evident tenderness he lowered her to the rocks, fumbled for the controls to the right of the entrance. When the outer door opened he dragged the girl into the little compartment. Already he was beginning to resent the fact that, wittingly or unwittingly, she had balked his plans for a swift, clean suicide.

Pressures equalized, the inner door opened, and he passed through into the ante-chamber beyond. Dimly, he heard the rattle of armor as he let the girl fall from a semi-sitting posture to one that was lifelessly supine. He snapped open the visor of his helmet, took his first breath of the air of the notorious prison world of Ceres.

"YOU made it after all," remarked the little man behind the big desk, disinterestedly. "You wouldn't 'a' been the first. There's many a poor sap gone out that way—an' thought that he was bein' hellish clever."

"So you knew?" demanded Latimer.

Big, menacing, he regarded the grey, clerkish keeper of the gate. He was ready to resent the fact that these people had known of his attempted suicide, had made no effort to prevent it. Then he remembered that it had been an inhabitant of Ceres who had pulled him back into the world of the living—and that she had received scant thanks for so doing. The dangerous flare died in his pale eyes, the hard lines of his deeply tanned face softened. With clumsy haste he dropped to his knees, flung open the visor of his rescuer's helmet.

"And *she* knew, too," chuckled the little clerk. "If I hadn't let her see the advance copy of *Charon's* passenger list she'd never 'a' gone outside. But as soon as all the passengers were tallied in but one—an' that one Lieutenant Alan Latimer—nothin' nor nobody could stop her. . . ."

All this Latimer half heard as he stripped the clumsy armor from the body of the girl. The clerk rattled on, then almost fell over backwards in panic as Latimer rose to his feet, reached out with one big hand. But it was only the gaudy silk handkerchief protruding from the little man's pocket that he was wanting. And when he had it he returned at once to the unconscious girl, began wiping away the trickle of blood that was still oozing from the corner of her mouth, that had gushed in a stream from her nostrils. Then—

"Fetch some cold water!" he barked.

The other hastened to obey. His grumbling monotone as he did so was faintly audible, irritating.

"Don't know why she bothered. Don't know why *he's* bothering. We're *free* on Ceres. If folks want to die, we let 'em. . . ."

"You! What's your name?"

"Marcus." Then, reluctantly, "sir."

"And what are *you* here for?"

The little clerk's voice was sullen. "Forgery. Embezzlement."

"And you know what *I'm* here for. So, keep quiet unless you're spoken to."

And in the silence that followed Latimer completed his superficial examination of the girl. He worked deftly, mechanically, assured himself that no bones were broken, and all the time the conscious part of his mind was bitterly regretting that he had not held her there with him to die in the blast of *Charon's* jets. The voice had stirred faint chords in his memory, but he had assured himself that it was imagination. Now that he could see the woman herself, shocked disbelief had rapidly given place to shocked credulity. The figure, true, was fuller, with more than a hint of blowsiness. But the cruelest change had been that in the face. Nobody could deny that Lauranne Towers was still beautiful. But the mouth that had always been a little too large, too full-lipped, was now frankly sensual. The fresh charm that he had known so long ago in Port Gregory was now the dangerous allure of the unashamed wanton.

Latimer dipped the handkerchief afresh into the cold water that Marcus had brought. Again he bathed the pallid face of the woman. She moaned and stirred. Slowly the heavy-lidded eyes opened, stared darkly at the anxious face of the ex-lieutenant.

"Alan. I couldn't believe it when I saw your name on the passenger list. I couldn't believe it, until I saw you sprawled on the rocks, waiting for *Charon* to blast off. . . ."

"I'm afraid it's true, Laurie. . . ."

"My dear. I don't know whether to be glad or sorry. It would have been nice to have died with you out there. It can still mean something to us if we live together. . . ."

"We can go outside and open the visors of our helmets," whispered Latimer bitterly. "It would be best that way, Otherwise, for you, a murderer. For me. . . ."

"Alan! Don't!"

"We can go outside. Where we have been, you and I, since those days in Port Gregory the devil alone knows. But we can share the journey's end. , .."

"I'm not stopping you!" cackled Marcus. "You're free, Lieutenant. You're on Ceres. The only laws are the laws you make yourself!"

"And here's one that I'm making now. And that is, get out of our sight at once!"

"You can't. . . ."

"I've killed two men, one with my bare hands. Better men than you. So. . . ."

WHEN Marcus had gone Lauranne rose unsteadily to her feet. She sat in the chair behind the desk that the little forger had vacated. From a pocket in her dress she produced a mirror and a compact, and with a hand that hardly trembled began to repair the ravages wrought upon her complexion by the events of the past half hour. When she had finished she opened the top drawer of the desk, brought out a bottle, two glasses, a box of cigarettes.

Latimer was grateful for the smoke, for the stiff slug of good whiskey. But, sitting on the desk, he did not like what he saw as he looked down at Lauranne. He did not like the way in which she tossed down her drink, refilled her glass immediately. He looked down, and the look on his harsh face could not be mistaken for anything else but disapproval.

"Cheer up, Alan darling. We're here, both of us. For life. So—better make the best of it."

"Yes. And we'll start like this."

He reached down, snatched the glass from the girl's hand, hurled it and its contents against the further wall. It did not break but fell down the metal surface with almost ludicrous slowness. The trickle of whiskey reached the floor only a second after what had been its container. And the sombre, chastened mood that had been driven away from the girl by the warmth of the spirits returned. She got up slowly from the chair, the utmost dejection in every drooping line of her figure. With slow, dragging steps she walked toward the airlock door.

"Where are you going?"

"What does it matter? Outside." Latimer waited until her hand went out to the controls of the inner door, then jumped down from his seat. Two long strides—almost leaps in the feeble gravitational field of Ceres—carried him to Lauranne. As before his hands went out to grasp her shoulders, but this time it was to turn her to him. And the pale, blond head of the man went down to that of the woman, was enveloped in the black mist of her hair. For long seconds they stood thus and then, gently, Latimer led Lauranne back to the desk, seated her in the chair behind the massive piece of furniture. He himself remained standing.

"You were right the first time," he admitted at last. "We must live, I don't know why, but in each other we have something. . . ."

"Something," whispered the girl, raising her tear-stained face. "*Something*. A pale shadow of our former lives. Don't lie to me Alan—for you, I can never replace the surge of an accelerating ship, the flare of rocket drive against the stars, the ordered routine of your little world of grey paint and burnished metal. For you, more than for me, this is the end of the trip. This is that last haven of which Swinburne sang:

*"There go the loves that wither,
The old loves with wearier wings;
And all dead years draw thither,
And all disastrous things;
Dead dreams of days forsaken,
Blind buds that snows have shaken,
Wild leaves that winds have taken.
Red strays of ruined springs.*

Latimer pulled thoughtfully at his cigarette. Thoughtfully he watched the smoke, watched it as though its spirals and convolutions held the secret of the Universe. The girl looked up at him, her face yearning, hurt that she should be ignored. At last Latimer looked down, his lips beginning to move. If he had been given the time to speak, his words must inevitably have been drowned by the trampling of heavy-booted feet along the corridor outside. His hand was a rapid blur as it flashed towards the holster that no longer hung at his side. Then, moving fast, he bundled Lauranne off the chair behind the desk, picked it up so that it could, if need be, be used as a weapon.

The door crashed open.

CHAPTER II

Boss of the Exile World

"YOU make your own laws," said Kimball. He leaned well back in the chair that was almost a throne, picked his teeth thoughtfully with a wooden toothpick from the little vase on the table by his right hand. Latimer, watching him intently, was repelled by the man's grossness, his untidy, slovenly attire, but was impressed by the aura of very real power that surrounded the Boss of Ceres.

Kimball spat the little chewed fragments of wood falling in a fine spray around the cuspidor at his feet.

"So our little friend Marcus told you that we were all anarchists," he sneered.

"I never said so." Latimer's voice was firm, uncompromising.

"I know you didn't. But I know Marcus. They allow me to have a few little machines to play with, Latimer. I've got a lie detector. But I never trouble to use it on people like you. I know your type, you won't talk until you feel like it. And then you'll tell the truth. Maybe not the whole truth, but, nevertheless, nothing but the truth. And I can use men like you. I can trust men like you."

"Thank you. And the alternative?"

"Nothing too bad. You become an ordinary citizen of Ceres. Which means that you have a

sufficiency of fresh air and food and artificial sunlight. Which means that you will be allowed to potter around with any of the footling arts and crafts that are encouraged here. Which means that you're liable to be beaten up at any time that my police see fit."

The room, with its luxurious appointments, blurred before Latimer's eyes. Fists clenched, he started forward. On either side of him a guard clutched his arm, another struck him across the mouth with a hard hand. Faint and far away he heard the voice of Lauranne. "Don't," she was saying. "Don't be a fool, Alan!"

And the words served only to stir him to fury. His right arm lifted, lifting with it the man who was clinging to it. It swung across his body in a swift arc and the guard at his left hand was felled by the club that the other's body had become. The guard who had struck him went down, the lower half of his face bloody and curiously blurred. It was not until later that Latimer felt the pain in his broken knuckles.

But there were too many of the guards. They fell upon him from all corners of the room, they bore him down with the weight of their bodies. And there was the sharp clicking of steel on steel, and the kiss of cold metallic bands on Latimer's feet and ankles, and when they pulled him to his feet he tottered there, unable to move.

There followed seconds of useless straining at the handcuffs, the leg-irons. Then the bloody haze before Latimer's eyes slowly faded, and through the thinning mists he saw the flabby, paradoxically strong face of the Boss. Kimball had one fat hand upraised in a demand for silence.

"Hear me out," he was saying almost plaintively. "You, of all persons, must know the need for discipline. If what I hear of you is true your crimes were no more than strict enforcement of discipline. And yet you seek to hamper my poor efforts to bring law and order to this lawless little world.

"Think well, Latimer. What would Ceres be were it not for some organized body to enforce certain standards of law and decency? Perhaps my rule is not democratic—but, I ask you, have we the raw materials of democracy here? I will be frank with you. Back on Earth I wanted too much power, and I wasn't overly particular in the methods I used to get it. I was apprehended once, psychoed and warned. But they couldn't change *me*. I was apprehended a second time—one of my underlings was both jealous and ambitious. And this time I was classified as an Incurable,

"And here, on Ceres, I still want power. And still I'm not particular about the methods I use to get it."

"So I see."

"Now you are being foolish. What would have happened to you if you had been brought before one of your Admirals and attempted to assault him? And they rule only squadrons of ships. I rule a world."

Latimer forebore to make unkind comparisons between the size and the striking power of those same squadrons and that of Kimball's domain. He only said shortly:

"All right, I'll play ball. What's in it for *me* if I come in with you?"

"Membership in my police force—with prospects of promotion. This carries the right to first choice of the comforts and luxuries brought by *Charon*. The right to marry whom you please."

"Marry?"

When Latimer heard Lauranne's little gasp—more of hurt than indignation—he was sorry that he had not been able to keep the amused incredulity out of his voice. But Kimball, his tone unchanged, continued: "Yes, marry. We are a very moral people, Latimer. There are those, of course, who are not moral, but unless they offend against public decency no action is taken against them. But as one of the governing class you will be expected to respect the laws that you, yourself, will enforce."

"Law and order," said Latimer musingly. "Here, on Ceres. Take off these damned irons, Kimball, and I'll sign your articles or whatever you call them."

Kimball motioned to the guards, one of whom produced a key. "And, in future, call me 'Boss,'" he warned. "And you, Constable Merrick, rustle up a copy of the contract so that Constable Latimer can sign. While you're about it bring along a marriage license. We'll tie this fellow up in more ways than one!"

THERE was something wrong with the park. It was not the grass, neither was it the gorgeous flowers; their equal would have been hard to find anywhere on any of the inhabited worlds. It was not the

cavern roof that arched far overhead—that was lost in a dim blue haze from which streamed the health-giving rays of the big sun lamps. It could almost have been the sky of Earth in misty mood.

Constable Alan Latimer stared about him, barely conscious of the light pressure on his arm that was Lauranne Latimer's hand. But she, ever conscious of him, read his thoughts.

"No children," she said. "That is what is wrong."

And the man looked about him at the wide expanse of green lawn, at the sedately strolling couples, young, middle-aged, old, and saw that she was right. It was all too orderly, unnaturally quiet. He realized with a sudden pang that, in all probability, the only happy man was the bent, grey gardener who was working with slow and loving patience in a bright flower bed near by.

Gently he disengaged his arm from his wife's light grasp, raised it so that it fitted about her waist. They strolled on, enjoying the feel of the smooth, velvety grass under their bare feet, listening to the songs of the birds that were such a poor substitute for the joyous clamor of children at play.

"That has always seemed to me to be cruelest of all," he mused. "The sterilization law."

"But it's kind, my dear. You couldn't bring up children in a penal colony. Whether or not their heredity was unsound they, themselves, would grow up to be criminal types. And if they were taken from us at an early age and sent to Earth for their upbringing, that would be crueler still. For us."

"Perhaps you are right. But I know Ceres better now. And it wouldn't be a bad world in which to rear children. No worse than many another."

"As it is now. But we are fortunate in our Boss. Broderick, before him, called himself King. And he was mad and bad. Then there was a long period of anarchy, which was worse than ever the rule of King Broderick had been. Kimball wants power and is quite ruthless, but he uses his power well. The man who follows him—who can tell? He may be strong and bad; he may be weak and good—which will be worse."

The two walked on in silence. "You know," admitted Latimer, "this is not bad. This world, I mean. I have you. I was a fool, my dear, ever to lose touch with you after I sailed from Port Gregory. But I was young then—and the Service was wife and parents and children. But I am glad that I have found you again. If only it could have been some other way. . . ."

"What did happen? I've respected the privacy of your past, Alan, just as you've respected mine. But . . . A woman is always curious, I guess."

"It will do no harm to tell you. The first time was when I was second in command of *Pathfinder*. We were on a survey job, measuring, charting, along with a spot of geology, in the Belt. It was the other side of the Sun from Ceres. Well, the charts we had weren't too accurate—and one day we found ourselves in one of those jams that it would be almost impossible for the finest mathematician in the System to duplicate on paper. We were on a collision orbit with no less than half a dozen hunks of assorted cosmic debris, and there was no way out. The automatic controls just blew all their fuses and died.

"Some didn't get into their suits in time, we never had a chance to get a message away, and in the finish there were five survivors in our number two boat, with myself in charge.

"The way things were, the best policy was to put ourselves on the Earth-Jupiter lane and wait until *Thunderqueen* came along. It was a long wait, and long before she was due, long before we could raise her on our lifeboat transmitter, tempers were wearing very thin. And we were hungry all the time—have you ever tried to make a meal of food concentrates? The nourishment is there, the protein and the calories and the vitamins. But there's no bulk. You're always hungry. And the boat was cramped, and we were all in each other's way, and we hated each other.

"And then, during my sleep period, one of the technical ratings, a fellow named Burton, tried to raid the food locker. I woke up, and we fought. I fought a little harder than was necessary, but once I got my fingers round his throat I couldn't let go."

"But that was only the first."

"Yes, that was only the first. I was warned, and psychoed, and discharged as fit for duty. And so I was until a barroom brawl in Port Lasalle. You know how I always used to boast about my skill with side-arms, about being quick on the draw. There was this fellow in the bar, town marshal, I think he was. I don't know what he was like sober, but he was most unpleasant drunk. Perhaps I was, too. Anyway,

he pulled a gun on me. And before it cleared his holster I'd drilled him between the eyes.

"And that was the finish for me."

LAURAININE said nothing. Latimer did not look at her face, but he felt the warm waves of sympathy that radiated from her. Only one who, like himself, had come to this sink-hole of the Solar System, could possibly sympathize.

They came to the grass verge. Automatically they stooped, put on the sandals that they had been carrying. They walked on over the smooth-surfaced floor of the tunnel. It did not matter to them that the artificial sunlight of the park had been replaced by lamps that made no pretense of being other than utilitarian lighting fixtures. There was a warmth between them, and a dim but steady radiance that needed no assistance from outside power supplies.

Yet, as he walked, Latimer took almost unconscious note of his surroundings. He was in a part of Ceres strange to him. The tunnel walls were devoid of the usual doorways and windows of residential apartments. The floor was coated with a fine dust. There were the tracks of one of the little scooters to show that somebody had come this way, and recently, but that was the only sign of traffic there was.

Still they walked on, half in a dream, welded to each other by the seal of confession. The voice of the sentry, harsh, commanding, came as a sudden shock.

"Halt! Who goes there?" "Friend," replied Latimer automatically.

He looked up to see one of Kimball's police, smart in his uniform of blue and silver. The metal-shod staff was held threateningly, at the ready.

"Advance, friend," began the constable, "and ..."

His eyes dropped to the little silver badge on the left breast of Latimer's civilian shirt, lifted to study his face. And there was a light of recognition, of the memory of past intimacies, in his eyes as he shifted his regard to the girl.

"All right," he said. "You're the new man, aren't you? Latham or Latimer or something. I suppose that Lauranne is showing you the sights."

The cold, hard flame leapt into vicious life behind Latimer's pale eyes. He was often to wonder later what he would have done, what would have been the consequences of his actions, had not his wife taken charge. He felt her grip on his arm, painfully tight, and he heard her say: "Alan, this is Philip Lane, an old friend of mine. Philip, this is Alan Latimer, my husband."

His hand went out, but only to grip that of the other. Lane was talking quickly, nervously, fully conscious that the air was charged with hostility.

"Haven't they shown you round here yet? You'll be getting your spell of guard duty soon enough..."

HE LED them down the tunnel, around a bend. And the tunnel was sealed with a bulkhead of gleaming steel. In this was set a door, like that of some huge safe or treasure vault. The levers and wheels and dials on its shining face would not have looked out of place on the control panel of a Jovian Mail Liner.

"And what's behind all that?" demanded Latimer, his anger giving place to curiosity.

"That's what we'd all like to know. But *we* never see behind that door. Nobody does, not even the Boss. But every year *Charon* brings a flock of technicians from Earth, and they're escorted here by a regiment of armed guards from the ship, and they potter around with the machinery and we know that we're all right for another year.

"There's light in there, Latimer, and heat, and the power that drives the pumps. There's *Power* in there, and every Boss that we've ever had in Ceres would have sold his soul to lay his grubby paws on it. We have men here, cracksmen, who could have this door, and the other doors, open in less time than it'd take you or me to open a can of sardines...."

"Then why don't they?"

"Because there's always at least one of us here to stop 'em. Because if they did we'd all find out if it's true what the technicians tell us. Because if they did folks back on Earth and Mars would see a first-class nova right in their gardens."

"You mean. . .?"

"I mean that if anybody tries to get through those doors, or tries to get through to the vault in any other way, up goes the atomic power station that's tucked away in there."

"Oh," replied Latimer inadequately. "Thanks, Lane." He looked at his watch. "Time we were getting back now. I have to be on duty at 2000."

"A policeman's lot is not a happy one," riposted the other. "But it could be unhappier. Eh, Lauranne?"

"I wouldn't know," she replied frigidly. "Come, Alan."

She felt that the muscles of his arm, beneath the thin shirt, were tensed. But now she felt that she was barely able to control the monster that had been called from the dark abyss of her husband's ancestry in *Pathfinder's* lifeboat; that, once called into being, had destroyed his career.

"Come, Alan," she said again. And when they were around the bend of the tunnel he turned to her and asked: "What is he to you?"

"He is nothing. And he *was* nothing. Will you be content with that?"

"Yes," he replied at last, slowly, grudgingly. "I suppose so."

CHAPTER III

The Ship from Outside

INSPECTOR Alan Latimer cursed as the telephone, shrill, insistent, interrupted his leisurely breakfast. It was Lauranne who answered it. She was gone a long time. When she returned Latimer looked at her with more than a faint distaste, reflecting that women such as she should never slop around in dressing gowns..

"It's for you," she said.

"Oh. Who is it?"

"The Boss."

"*You* were a long time talking to him."

"Was I? Anyhow, it's important." Latimer gulped a mouthful of egg, washed it down with coffee, rose slowly to his feet.

"In future," he growled, "when calls come for me—or calls that you *say* are for me—don't hang around in the booth all morning answering them."

"Aren't you going? It was *important*, I said."

"To you and who else?" Nevertheless. Latimer went through to the telephone booth, sat down on the little seat before the instrument. From the screen Kimball's flabby, pasty face glowered at him. "So you're here at last, Latimer. I thought you were never coming."

"The message took long enough to reach me."

"I don't care for your tone of voice, Latimer, but let that pass. Come round to my office at once."

"Why?"

"I don't have to answer questions. Button up your jacket and wipe the egg off your face, and *hurry*. That's all."

The instrument went dead. Latimer considered calling the Boss back, thought better of it. But the taste of the morning was bitter in his mouth as he went back into the breakfast room to finish his coffee. He drained the cup, put it back into the saucer with an unnecessary clatter. He went into the little ball of the apartment. He took his cap from its peg, clapped it anyhow on to his head without troubling to look into the mirror. He did not kiss Lauranne good-bye.

In Kimball's office he found the Boss nervously pacing up and down. Seated were two men, strangers. They were in uniform. Latimer stared. *Charon* was not due for two months yet. He looked more closely. The visitors wore the insignia of the jovian Mail Service: a five-pointed star transfixed by a jagged, conventional lightning bolt.

"Latimer," said Kimball abruptly, pausing in his restless pacing, the inevitable toothpick working with

a speed that betrayed the depth of his agitation, "these gentlemen are Captain Pemberthy and Commander Wood of *Thunderqueen*."

"*Thunder queen*, Boss? But... ."

"*Thunderqueen* I said and *Thunderqueen* I mean. Captain, this is Inspector Latimer of my police force, Ex-Lieutenant Latimer of the regular navy. . . ."

Latimer put out his hand. It was ignored by Pemberthy. The inspector flushed deeply and darkly under his tan, and the cold light flared briefly in his pale eyes. He looked fixedly at the short, stout captain whose hatless head gleamed in the lamplight, at the tall, angular commander. And then anger was replaced by puzzlement. Long and steadily he looked at Commander Wood and did not find that for which he was seeking.

"We had to make a forced landing on your world," began Pemberthy without preamble. "Our tube linings are burnt out, and we don't carry spares. Our hull is strained and leaking badly. We shall have to stay here until help comes... ."

"So what?"

"We're being followed. Chased, rather. By a big, black ship that seemed to come from the direction of Polaris—although that means nothing. And she was no Earthly ship. We approached her close when our radar picked her up; thought at first that she was some hitherto undiscovered planetoid with an orbit at right angles to the plane of the ecliptic. We were almost on top of her before we saw what she was. And as we were turning away she let fly with some ray that burned away most of our starboard fin and the venturis of the starboard auxiliaries. We ran, of course. She didn't take any more hostile action that we could see, although, for all we know, she may have used her ray again and missed. One thing she did do—blanketed our radio so that we could neither transmit nor receive...."

"Kimball!" broke in Latimer, "I suggest that you let these officers use our station."

"A blinding glimpse of the obvious!" snarled the Boss. "That was the first thing they asked of me. Carter went along with them. And this blanketing effect of theirs obviously covers us."

"So. Now, Captain, how do you know that you're being followed?"

"I don't know." Pemberthy's voice was peculiarly flat, almost lifeless. "I don't *know*. But it seems reasonable to suppose that any race sufficiently advanced for interstellar travel will be at least as far advanced as you in the field of electronics. They'll have had their scanners on us ever since the first contact. The mere fact that the radio is dead indicates that."

"And I'm still to be convinced that this marvelous big, black ship is from Outside!" stormed the Boss. "It could be pirates. And if it is, and if they come here, I'm making a deal. Ceres owes no loyalty to the Federation."

"How did you know it was an alien ship, anyhow?"

THE little, fat captain hesitated before making his reply. It was impossible to read his expression, there was no expression to read. His face was that of a carved Buddha. And his tall, thin executive officer sat woodenly in his chair. *Like a cigar store Indian*, Latimer was thinking.

"It was her shape," said Pemberthy at last. "And her hull wasn't smooth, but covered with all kinds of projections. Weapons they might have been, or part of her interstellar drive. And she had her name in big white characters on her bow. And they belonged to no Earthly alphabet. . . ."

"Could have been Arabic or Chinese. Anyhow, a ship capable of coming here from Alpha Centauri or Sirius, or wherever she's supposed to have come from, could have made rings round your decrepit old wagon."

"No. She would not be using her interstellar drive in the vicinity of a planetary system. And it is reasonable to suppose that, even using her reaction motors, she would approach such a system with caution. . . ."

"And so you brought her here...."

"It was the nearest port of refuge," replied Pemberthy simply.

"And do I organize the defense of Ceres?" demanded Latimer sharply.

"Yes. Of course." The Boss seemed mildly surprised that the question had been asked.

"What with?"

Kimball glared at him. He began to say something, then thought better of it. His tone, when at last he did speak, was placatory.

"You're the professional fighting man in this outfit," he said. "I leave that entirely in your hands. And I am sure that these gentlemen will do all that they can to help you."

"First," stated Latimer, "I shall want access to your engine room, Captain Pemberthy. I think that with your tools, your workshops, and with your converter to manufacture explosives, I shall be able to turn out some Hamilton torpedoes. Don't know how much use they'll be against a race that plays around with death rays, but unless they know enough to degauss their ships they should be fairly effective. And I shall want any arms that you, your passengers, or crew have in your possession."

"Any arms we have, we keep," said Pemberthy flatly. "And I regret to have to say that you will not be allowed to set foot aboard my ship." "Great Galaxy!" exploded the inspector. "This is no time to be petty. Don't you realize that the fate of this world, of the System, of Man himself, may depend upon your co-operation?"

The captain was silent. But the tall commander stirred and spoke. "Regulations," he said simply, and that was all. But it was the cue that Pemberthy needed.

"Yes. Regulations. You know what happened when your people got control of *Thunderbird*. That must not happen again."

It was Kimball who found a way out of the impasse.

"Why," he asked, "shouldn't you give these gentlemen details of whatever it is you want made? Then all that will concern you will be the finished article."

And that was how it was finally arranged. And the Hamilton torpedoes were to remain aboard *Thunderqueen* until such time as the black ship of the aliens chose to appear. And with that Latimer had to be content.

He found it especially humiliating that, with their own little world well-guarded, inviolate, the passengers and crew of the Jovian liner were made free of all Ceres.

But even that had its compensations.

FOR long years, ever since the first primitive story-teller soared on the wings of his imagination to the stars, the invasion from Outside had been an ever recurrent theme of mankind's fiction. At first the tide of conquest was to come sweeping in from the Moon or the sister planets, but the instruments of the astronomers had shown the improbabilities inherent in such a plot even before the spaceship slipped, with disconcerting ease, from the realm of fancy into that of fact. Thereafter the invaders were to come from the stars. From which particular star nobody was ever quite sure—but surely among all the glittering hosts of heaven there was one with planets to spawn a race to rival or surpass the technological progress of Man.

But the very idea had been a purely fictional concept for so long that the Ceresians, even if they did accept it intellectually, could never do so with their emotions. Perhaps the only man in the little world to whom this raid from interstellar space was probable, possible, was Alan Latimer. But he had taken part in the Navy's war games, those fleet maneuvers in which half Earth's forces fought, in theory, to the last man and the last gun, in which the other half played the part of Centaurians or Rigellians or whatever the fancy of the Commander-in-Chief might dictate.

As for the rest, the Boss had said that *Thunderqueen* had been attacked by pirates of humble Terran origin. And the Boss, as always, was right. It was true that the captain and officers of the liner stuck to their story of an alien ship, but it was obvious that they were lying as a matter of policy. As long as they could convince the Ceresians that they were about to fight a common enemy an alliance was possible. But that enemy had to be alien. Captain Pemberthy knew full well that his hosts would far prefer to throw in their lot with the raiders, if they were human, than with himself. It was all so obvious.

Meanwhile, if Inspector Alan Latimer chose to believe the cock-and-bull story of his fellow spacemen, there was more good than harm done. The plans made for the defense of the little world, the organizing, the drilling, were admitted to be necessary. When the pirates came in their black ship any kind of organized resistance would be a most useful bargaining counter. So would the weapons that were being made aboard *Thunderqueen* to Latimer's specifications.

And the strangers who roamed without let or hindrance through the caves and tunnels made a very welcome break in the monotony of life in the prison asteroid. They were not molested; there would be time enough for that when the pirates came. Besides, in spite of Pemberthy's refusal to surrender his arms to Latimer, it was quite obvious that he had enough and to spare of weapons for his own people. They did not wear them ostentatiously, but neither did they go to any great pains to conceal them. And one of the parks had been set aside for their use as a shooting range. Both men and women showed a proficiency that was an effective deterrent to any of the Incurables who might get ideas.

An ex-officer himself, Latimer could not blame the captain. If he had been master of a passenger liner he would not have allowed his charges to wander unprotected about a penal colony. But he would not have allowed shore leave. But perhaps the hull *was* leaking badly (if so, why not make some attempt to patch it?) and, quite probably, the first that would be known of the approach of the alien would be the sudden destruction of *Thunderqueen*.

THE police force had all been warned to be on the alert for the first signs of internal trouble. But Ceres could well have been some fashionable pleasure resort. Well-dressed men and women strolled the parkways, mingled without snobbery or embarrassment with the colonists. The theatres played always to full houses. Even allowing for the excellence of the talent this was mildly surprising, until one remembered that, with the mysterious blanket still thick over all radio transmission and reception, no Terran entertainment was available.

And as the purely arbitrary days rolled on without the merest hint of *Thunderqueen's* black ship there were those who wished heartily that the raiders or pirates would come or, even better, that the Jovian liner and all her people would go. The officers and passengers of the big ship were becoming altogether too ubiquitous. There is little enough privacy, at the best of times, in a world such as Ceres. And the four hundred odd people who were *Thunderqueen's* personnel seemed, to a certain growing minority, to have the nuisance value of ten times their number.

Alan Latimer was not of this minority. To him the days were packed with interest, and with the sense of urgency, of working against time. And Lauranne saw little of him in the brief periods he allowed himself for relaxation. She heard stories, stories that at first met with incredulity, that at last forced *a* grudging belief upon her. Always these stories featured the name of Ailsa. Rae. Lauranne remembered having seen the girl, Slight she was, and redheaded, with high cheekbones and eyes that were green. And she moved with a lithe grace that Lauranne herself could never hope to recapture. And while she knew in her heart that Alan was hers, yet she knew, with a dreadful certainty, that the coming battle with the aliens meant for her husband the slim chance of pardon, of a new life that she was not intended to share.

These thoughts had crossed Latimer's mind. In his more optimistic moments he had allowed himself to dream dreams. And he had hated himself that his wife was not part of these same dreams, but the dreams remained unchanged. But in these latter days the thought whose urgency crowded all else from his mind was that he was not ready. An antic fate had made him Earth's champion in the first battle between men and aliens, and both armor and armament were sadly lacking. He decided that he would force a showdown between himself and Pemberthy, would demand to be allowed to inspect the progress made in the manufacture of the torpedoes, the arming of *Thunderqueen*.

He said as much to Ailsa Rae, with whom he was walking in one of the parks.

"But it is all right, Alan," she insisted. "I've been down to the engine. room and the workshops. I know nothing about these things, but *I* saw row upon row of plastic cylinders, each with its fins and jets at the tail. And they're setting up launching cradles in all the airlocks. It will be all right, I tell you."

"Perhaps, my dear. But I want to see for myself. And I want to have at least one round for each of my own projectors. If this black ship of Pemberthy's drops on us without warning and blasts

Thunderqueen, I have no weapons to fight back."

"But... Oh, I can see it's no use arguing with you. You'll see the Old Man, and you'll have a first-class row. same as you did before, and you'll get nowhere. And . . ."

"Shut up!" ordered Latimer. He enforced his order by pressing his mouth on hers. And as she went limp *in* his arms he felt his resolve to have it out with Captain Pemberthy weaken. He was doing enough. He was doing more than his share. Let the Boss dicker with *Thunderqueen's* Master—he was the politician.

CHAPTER IV *Cold-Blooded Murder*

HOW long this mood would have lasted had it not been for the intervention of chance it is impossible to say. But it was the hard pressure of Ailsa's shoulder holster against his chest that aroused resentment, pulled him up from the pit into which he was fast falling. This girl, this woman that was his for the taking, was armed and he was not. It was an affront to his pride as a fighting man. It was unthinkable that a foolish merchant skipper should have the effrontery to provide his female passengers with weapons, and deny those same weapons to those to whom was entrusted the defense of a world, and more than a world.

He let his arms fall to his sides. The girl, taken unawares, staggered. And in her green eyes when she looked up at him was puzzlement and hurt, and a strange light that was neither.

"Where do I find the Captain?" demanded Latimer harshly.

"You should know," she replied sullenly. "He and Commander Wood are usually with your Boss at this time."

"Then I'm going there now. And Kimball had better back me up. Or . . ."

"Or what?" The voice was mocking. "Never you mind," he laughed, matching her mood of light raillery. He clasped her to him and kissed her heartily. And thought that if this had been Lauranne the little scene would have been followed by an atmosphere of dull resentment that would have lasted for hours.

Somehow, as he strode across the velvety grass, his spirits were light. He looked with appreciation at a tall, blonde girl, one of the liner's passengers. And he was not too surprised when he saw, a few minutes later, the same girl again. It couldn't possibly be the same girl, he told himself. She must be twins . . . And thought nothing more of it.

He returned the salute of the sentry at the entrance to Kimball's apartments with a snap that surprised even himself. As he strode along the corridor he found that he was rehearsing what he would say to Pemberthy. He repeated the most telling phrases, turning them over and over in his mind with relish.

It was not until he had almost reached the office that the sound of angry voices aroused him from his pleasant daydream. Angry voices? He listened intently. There was only one angry voice, and that was Kimball's. Pemberthy was speaking in his usual expressionless tones. And Wood appeared not to be speaking at all.

Latimer started to hurry. As he reached the door he heard Kimball shout: "*I know! I know what . . .*" And there was a peculiarly soft explosion, and a scream, and, when Latimer flung open the door, the sickening stench of burned flesh.

On the floor, in front of his desk, lay Kimball. Where his protuberant belly had been was a charred, gaping hole. The coils of the intestines, laid bare, seemed to have a life of their own, seemed to be writhing slowly and slimily. Latimer gulped. He turned away quickly. But not before he had seen the smoking gun in Wood's hand, the ugly weapon that Pemberthy was pointing straight at him.

When he looked back both Wood and Pemberthy were covering him with their weapons. They were, he saw, standard .5 service automatics. fitted with silencers, firing an explosive slug. And the hands that held them wavered not one fraction.

Latimer was not unarmed. He had his stout, metal-tipped stave, and the short dirk at his belt. Against two nervous inexperienced gunmen he would have stood a fighting chance. But these gunmen were not

nervous. Such *sangfroid* might have been expected from two officers of his own late service, but hardly from those whose whole training emphasized the safe delivery of passengers and cargo, the safety of their ships. He, Latimer, had killed his men in hot blood. The only hot blood in evidence in this killing had been Kimball's. The two merchant officers were no more than cold-blooded murderers.

DEMBERTHY was speaking. "I am I sorry that this had to happen," he said.

"You will be when you're sent out here to become a permanent guest," cracked Latimer.

"Let me finish. Your Boss, Kimball, was planning to seize our ship, to hand her over to the invaders that he will —would—insist on regarding as Terran pirates. We quarreled. He drew a knife. Commander Wood was obliged to fire in self-defense."

"What did Kimball *know*?" demanded the Inspector.

There was a little silence. Then Wood permitted himself the luxury of a mirthless smile.

"He thought that he knew that the ship that attacked us was manned by Terran pirates . . ."

"Another thing, you've said that you could not spare us arms. But even your women are packing guns."

"We should, perhaps, have been more frank. Put yourself in our place, Latimer. As far as we are concerned this place may be more dangerous than the jungles of Venus. Are we to deprive ourselves and our charges of all protection?"

"No," admitted Latimer slowly. "But the alliance between us—if you can call it such—has been far too one-sided. You and your people have been given the freedom of our world. And what have we got in return? Nothing but vague promises.

"Worse, you are supposed to be the law abiding citizens, we the criminals. Yet . . ." He pointed mutely to Kimball's body.

Pemberthy was silent. It was not, strangely enough, an embarrassed or a guilty silence. This the Inspector found strange indeed. He was willing to believe that the master of a passenger liner might well find a lack of frankness, a certain disingenuousness, very essential in the execution of his professional duties, might even, in time, become an accomplished prevaricator. But it is not so much the act of lying, of equivocation, that brings moral discomfort in its wake. It is being found out. But this was as nothing to the fact that Kimball's killers, men of peace, could view the body of the man they had butchered without the slightest trace of emotion.

"Let him see the ship," suggested Wood, his voice expressionless as always. "Let him see the ship, and convince himself that we *are* making his weapons. But first, sir, it will be as well to dispose of the body."

"Commander Wood is right," agreed the Captain. "Nobody need know that Kimball is dead. At a time of crisis such as this it will be as well if nobody ever does know that Kimball is dead. You, of course, will carry on as you have been doing; ever since our arrival you have been the real Boss. Kimball has been only a figurehead."

Latimer wanted to argue. He wanted to press the stud under the desk that would bring the guards pouring into the room. And, above all, he wanted to do violence to the two who stood there and to whom the body on the floor was just so much refuse to be unceremoniously dumped.

But ... They held the guns.

Had it not been for the fact that there was nobody else on Ceres to whom the military command could be entrusted, that he, Alan Latimer, was, even though Earth did not know, might never know entrusted with the defense of the Solar System, he would never have let himself be overawed by the threat of the heavy pistols, would have allowed the tides of fury to sweep aside all prudence, all considered action.

But Ceres had wrought its changes. So, too, had the heavy responsibility with which he had been saddled. And he held himself on a tight rein, and the red haze never quite obscured his vision, and the drumming of the blood in his ears was never loud enough to drown what the others were saying. "Well?" demanded Pemberthy.

"I still think that you're murderers. I still have to be convinced of the truth of your story. But . . ."

"Yes?"

"You give me no choice."

WOOD had found the cunningly concealed button in the paneling. He pressed it, and a circular section of the floor slid to one side. Latimer wondered how the strangers knew of the existence of the chute that ran down to the big fertilizer tanks. Probably Kimball had told them in a moment of drunken confidence. He had always been proud of this unconventional office fitting. But during his reign it had never, until now, been used for bodies. Bitterly Latimer reflected on how much better the Boss had been than his bad and mad predecessors, experienced a sense of very real loss; of hatred for his murderers.

Wood dragged the gross body to the edge of the round hole, gave it a last shove with his foot. It teetered for a second or so, then vanished. From very far away came the sound of a splash. Kimball had always been proud of Ceres' parks and gardens.

And in death he would serve them no less faithfully than he had done during his life.

Pemberthy waited until his executive officer had removed, with a piece of rag, all traces of blood from the polished floor, sent the hideously stained cloth to follow the body. Then, with his gun, he gestured towards the door.

"And tell the guards," he said, "that the Boss is working hard, must not be disturbed. You can arrange to have food sent in at intervals."

You fools, thought Latimer. *Whoever brings the food will see at once that there is something amiss ... Rut we're playing the game your way. All I have to do is to keep my jets clear.* The two officers returned their guns to their side pockets. The Inspector could sense rather than see that he was still covered, that the slightest hostile move on his part would be the last move that he would make. They closed in on either side of him as they walked along the corridor to the outside passages. So close were they that he found it difficult to return the salutes of the guards.

At the last door there was another constable talking to the one on duty. When he saw Latimer he stiffened to attention, brought his hand to the brim of his helmet. The most meticulously Prussian military officer would have found it hard to lay his finger on anything wrong with the salute, but in it there was something of what, in all services and all ages, has been called "dumb insolence."

The man was Lane.

"Mrs. Latimer's compliments, sir," he said stiffly, "and will you come round to your apartment at once?" Alan Latimer did not want to go. The memory of the girl Ailsa was too fresh in his mind, dreams of a future in which she played a prominent part were not lacking.

"That can wait," said Pemberthy.

"Oh, I don't know ..."

"Of course it can wait."

And who the hell are you to give me orders affecting my private life? Come to think of it—you and your long, lanky sidekick are ruddy anxious to get me aboard your damned ship. There's a catch in it somewhere. But I don't want to be bumped off the same as Kimball. All the same, I'd better play ball, my way. Up to a point. Can't afford to split brass-rags when the alien ship may be on top of us at any moment . . .

But he said: "I think I'd better go, Captain." He managed a mirthless grin. "You know what women are."

"I think you'd better come with us," Wood stated flatly. No trace of emotion was evident in his voice, in his eyes, but Latimer knew that the index finger of the Commander's right hand had tightened about the trigger of his gun.

Latimer glanced about him. There were too many witnesses for a murder. In addition to Lane and the constable on duty there were three more policemen just coming out of the administration offices. And there were a half dozen of *Thunderqueen's* passengers, men and women, coming along the wide corridor.

It should have been reassuring, yet he had the feeling that Wood would as soon shoot him down in front of all Ceres as in private.

"No," he said. "My wife wants me, and I'd better go. But that matter we talked over in Kimball's office, you have my word that I'm in favor ..."

The dull, expressionless eyes stared into his. Then, "We have your word?"

"Haven't I just told you?"

"Good. And as for your visit to the ship, some other time, perhaps." *That's what you think*, thought Latimer. He gave the two merchant officers a perfunctory salute, strode down the corridor with steps that he tried to make not too hurried. And the uneasy feeling in the small of his back persisted until he had put a bend of the passage between himself and Pemberthy and Wood.

HE HAD every intention of going straight to his apartment. He was curious as to the reason for Lauranne's summons, and he was grateful to her for having extricated him from what he felt to have been an awkward situation. Awkward? It was more than that. He became aware that his underclothing was clammy with perspiration, knew that he had experienced a fear altogether beyond even the most unpleasant and terrifying events of his past life. He told himself that this was because this was the first time that he had forced himself to stand up to a real emergency in cold blood. During his service career a recklessness, an unthinking bravery, had stood him in good stead—until the black day that this same recklessness spelled the ruin of his career and all his hopes. That's what it was, he told himself. But the explanation wasn't convincing.

He was deep in thought as he turned the corner into the corridor on which his apartment was situated. Unseeing, blind and deaf to all else but the problem in his brain, he let his feet carry him around the familiar curve. And when he cannoned into something firm, yet soft, something that said: "Well! Really!" he was taken by surprise and off balance, staggered and almost fell. If Ailsa Rae had not caught his arm he would have fallen.

"Wrapped in thought and clothed in haste," she said mockingly. "And hurrying home like a good husband ..."

"Why, yes. But not too good, I'm afraid . . ."

The girl fell in step beside him. Latimer was walking more slowly now, matching his pace to hers. He was telling her his troubles, his worries, asking her to use her influence with Pemberthy, if she had any influence to try to get him the arms that he so sorely needed.

"It's hopeless," he said. "I can't fight lethal rays with quarterstaves and cutlasses and crossbows—" He gassed his door and did not notice, would not have cared if he had noticed— "and that fat little beggar is sitting on top of enough material to turn this world into a fortress ..."

"I'll see what I can do, my dear, *I* won't promise anything, but the next time that he has me up to his room for cocktails I'll put your case as strongly as I can. The trouble is, he might be jealous."

"What of?"

"Nothing." She smiled up at him, her eyes greenly luminous under the rusty hair. "Nothing at all, Alan, but whose fault is that?"

"Perhaps mine."

"Yes. Perhaps yours."

"But a man has certain loyalties . . ."

"Why worry about loyalties when time is so short? Tomorrow, or the day after, the black ship of the aliens *may* attack. She may, even now, be attacking . . . And whether we win or whether we lose, it will have been something to have had each other. And you talk of loyalties. What cause has Lauranne given you to be loyal?" "I wasn't thinking of Lauranne," lied Latimer. "I was thinking of my duty to this world, to the race. I was thinking—" He lapsed into silence and thought:

Bloody liar. Of course you were thinking of Lauranne. And yet Ailsa is so different. And it's no use kidding yourself that you're going to win this forthcoming scrap and get a free pardon and marry the girl. Because you're not. Even with Thunder-queen's armory and workshops thrown open to you, you wouldn't stand a snowball's chance in hell. All you can do is fight to the last man and the last gun if Fatty Pemberthy lets you have the guns in time—and see to it that that mousy little mutant Fenwick does his stuff before you blow the last round away. So why not? But

Lauranne—

And there came to him the memory of those lines of poetry that his *wife* had quoted when he was new on. Ceres. Only a short time ago it was, as men measure time, but it seemed that Lauranne's voice was coming to him over unguessable gulfs.

*There go the loves that wither,
The old loves with wearier wings;
And all dead years draw thither.
And all disastrous things ...*

The dead years, he thought, and the old love that has withered, and a disastrous thing drawing closer and ever closer from the stars. . . . I will do my best, I will fight to the last man and the last gun, but I reserve the right to snatch some few moments of personal happiness from the wreck...

THEY had come, now, to one of the big park spaces. At this hour it was almost deserted, and the sun lamps in the blue haze of the high roof were dimmed. And across from the wide expanse of lawn and beds of flowering plants there were trees, and the azure mist seemed to curl through their branches. In this world of caves and tunnels where there was neither night nor day there was yet the dim mystery of evening. And the knowledge that the twilight had been turned on by some grubby little technician did nothing to detract from its magic.

For the magic was within themselves.

Slowly, arms around each other's waists, they walked across the grass to the trees. And in the privacy afforded by the overhanging branches they found a couch of soft moss. And the girl's face as she lay relaxed, was a pale glimmer in the dusk, and her eyes were like two of the stars that were all that was lacking from the man-made dusk.

Latimer stood looking down at her. There was power in those eyes and a depth in which he could easily drown. Now that the moment had come, the opportunity, he was strangely reluctant to press home the attack. It would be nice to be able to say that it was the thought of Lauranne that acted as a deterrent but it would not be true. What held him back was the realization that he was not the attacker but the defender, and the dim knowledge that far more was at stake than his unimportant virtue.

Ailsa said: "Why don't you sit down? The moss is soft . . ."

And Lauranne, although far from his thoughts, was not far away in the flesh. The bushes briefly protested at the rapid passage of a body through their interlacing branches, there was the dull gleam of an uplifted blade in the twilight, and there was a sputtering shower of blue sparks as the blade struck home.

CHAPTER V

The Monsters in Their Midst

ALAN LATIMER was fast. There was only one thing that saved his wife's life—and that was the strange thing that had happened when she buried her knife in the body of her rival. It didn't make sense. And so Latimer, who by his grip on Lauranne's wrists had prevented a second blow did not turn the knife as he could easily have done, did not end Lauranne's life as she had ended Ailsa Rae's.

But he said bitterly, with grim intensity: "*You bitch!*"

"I'm not sorry. You can't make me say I'm sorry. You can break my wrist and use my knife on me, but I'm glad I did it!"

"How did you know we were here?"

"What does it matter. I wanted to see you—oh, no, nothing personal merely something that you, as Big White Chief of Ceres should have known about. And when you didn't come I went, first, to the Boss's office. And there were two officers from the ship just going in with a big *case*, but the guards wouldn't let me in. And while I was still arguing Kimball came out with the two men from *Thunderqueen*,

and told me that you had been there with Pemberthy and Wood about an hour ago . . ."

"You saw *Kimball*?"

"And why not? Is there a law against it?"

"No. But it may interest you, my dear, to know that the last time *I* saw the Boss, Wood was sending him on a trip down to the fertilizer tanks. *And* he had his belly blown out . . ."

"But I saw him. I tell you I saw—"

Latimer relaxed his grip of his wife's wrists. He wanted time to think things out. It seemed that there was some phony time element involved, but Lauranne had said that she had seen the Boss *after* she had sent Lane with his message. And the problem was of such importance that it dwarfed into insignificance the fact that at their feet the girl Ailsa was sprawled ungracefully supine, a broken doll. He forgot Ailsa, but Lauranne did not.

Before Alan Latimer could stop her she had fallen upon the body, was ripping and thrusting with her knife. And a low moaning sound came from the dead woman's lips, and her right arm went up feebly, jerkily, to ward off the attack, and the right knee flexed and then suddenly straightened. And again there were the sputtering sparks, the smell of ozone. And something small and hairy scuttled on long, spidery legs from under the body, screaming shrilly and wordlessly as it ran.

Lauranne threw her knife, bit missed. And Latimer jerked himself out of his mood of shocked stupefaction and jumped. He landed squarely on the little monstrosity. And as he stamped its life out with his heavy boots he found himself feeling grateful that he was in uniform and not shod with thin civilian sandals.

He turned to look at his wife, and she stood and looked at him, and the twilight seemed alive with stealthy menace.

He said: "So that's the way of it. That's why Wood never knew me, although he was executive officer of *Thunderqueen* when she picked up *Pathfinder's* boat. And that's why there have always seemed to be too damn' many of these people from the ship."

HE STOOPED over the body. It was now as lifeless and as unconvincing as a dressmaker's dummy. It was not even very cleverly made, just a roughly human robot of metal and plastic. Latimer found the knife, himself began to rip and tear. But his use of the weapon was actuated by curiosity rather than by viciousness. And he found that the robot had a human brain, part of a human brain, just a sliced and mutilated mass of grey tissue floating in a transparent container, with wiring running from it to the little compartment in the lower part of the body that had housed the alien, the controls of the robot.

"Just a Trojan Horse," murmured Latimer softly. "But how. . . . Oh, that's the way it must have been. They're master psychologists, these . . . things. And, given the rough framework as a basis, they could create the illusion of a living, breathing actuality. And they'd have the victim's memory cells to work with. . . ."

He held the container in his hands. "It—she—must still be alive..." And he felt an overwhelming regret that he had never known the real Ailsa Rae—and when his mind slipped into imaginings of what must have been done to her, and to all of *Thunderqueen's* crew, he was glad when Lauranne jerked him back to the present with a voice that was unnaturally harsh.

"So you fell in love with a thing like an overgrown spider! Aren't you grateful to me for saving you from a fate worse than death?" she sneered.

"I suppose so," he replied listlessly, ungratefully. "But what was it you wanted me for?"

"You can take an intelligent interest now, can't you? Well, I went out through the northwest gate, it's hardly ever used, as you know. And I found a ship's boat. There was a man beside it, he must have died almost as soon as he set foot outside the airlock. The boat itself was damaged; some kind of projectile had smacked clean through the cabin. And the pilot must have been wounded by it, got into his suit, and lasted just long enough to get down to Ceres. . . ."

"A boat! Lauranne, this is great! It means that we can get news through to Earth!" Then his face darkened. For all that he or anybody on Ceres knew, Earth had fallen already to the invaders, was overrun with little horrors that scuttled on long, spidery legs, that screamed wordlessly as they ran. He

could not hope to fathom the alien mentality, but it seemed to him that those who had come in the captured liner would hardly have bothered themselves with Ceres, unless the penal planetoid was merely the laboratory out of which would come the formula for the conquest of the Solar System.

"We will see the boat," he said. "What about this?" Lauranne spurned with her foot the wreckage that had been Ailsa Rae. "And that?" She pointed with her toe to the pulpy mass out of which protruded one long, many-jointed leg.

"Yes. You're right. If *they* find this mess the balloon will go up at once. And we shall have no chance either to warn Earth or to put the other plan into effect...."

He took the knife, and with its aid scraped a shallow grave. With scant courtesy he pushed the robot's body into it, and then gingerly lifted the crushed remains of the alien and dropped them beside the body. He stood with the brain case, the pitiful remnant of what had been the girl Ailsa bobbing gently up and down inside it, in his hands. He made as though to put into the grave, hesitated, looked at the knife that he had left lying on the ground.

Lauranne snatched the case from his hands. She threw it down, snatched up the knife and put all her strength into one, chopping blow. The little plastic sphere split, the fluid and what had been floating in the fluid oozed over the moss.

"And that's all," spat the woman viciously. "Bury it with the rest of the rubbish and come and look at the boat."

THE sun was harshly bright over the northwest face of Ceres when they stepped out of the rarely used airlock. The lifeboat was not immediately visible. At first Latimer was inclined to doubt the truth of Lauranne's story, to believe that she had lured him out here for some dark purpose of her own.

It so happened that the killing of her rival was not murder, was just the first minor victory of humankind over the aliens. But he knew that this fact was merely incidental. And he felt for his wife a new respect that was more than the old respect revived. That had never held a tinge of fear. He was glad that she was leading the way, that he did not have to bear ever in mind his unprotected back.

"Here we are," said Lauranne suddenly, her voice tinny in the speaker of the helmet set. She was standing on the brink of one of the many craters that pitted the face of Ceres. This one was almost circular, was about fifty feet in depth. The walls were rugged, but it was the rugged. Hess of molten matter that, in solidifying, has made a permanent record of all the eddies, the liquid turbulence, of its flow. At first the boat was almost invisible. Only the very extremity of her bows reflected the shaft of sunlight that slanted down into the pit. And then, as the sun rapidly climbed into the black heavens, she was revealed as by the pulling back of a dark curtain.

Carefully, choosing each foothold and handhold with caution, Lauranne clambered down into the crater. Latimer followed. And it was not long before he was standing on the fused rocks, looking up at the hull of the boat that was of greater importance to him, and the race, than to the crew of the ship for which it had been supplied.

He shifted his regard to the open airlock, the flimsy, telescopic gangway, and the body that lay at the foot of the spidery contraption. It was that of a man, and though his armor was undamaged he himself had suffered grievous hurt. It was easy to see through the transparent globe of the helmet that one side of the face was dark with clotted blood, that, had the pilot lived, he would never have seen again out of that eye.

Latimer looked up to the cabin of the boat. He saw the ragged hole that had been made by the passage of a projectile, decided that the damage had been done by one of the four-inch guns carried by merchantmen as a concession to those who demanded that the liners of space go armed about their lawful occasions. He smiled grimly. If those antiquated weapons couldn't even put a ship's boat completely out of commission, what use would they be against a pirate or a raider from Outside? But all this was irrelevant. He climbed the catwalk into the cabin.

Once inside the little compartment he ignored the bloodstains, the damage that was more spectacular than serious. What held his attention was the log book on the desk by the control panel. He read the words: Log of the Spaceship *Thunderqueen*, Voyage 45. Commenced April 14, 2357; Finished. . . .

And where the date should have been filled in, would have been filled in had *Thunderqueen* completed her voyage, was a dark splash. It could have been ink, but Latimer preferred to think that it was blood. It was more symbolic.

With clumsy, gloved hands he tried to open the stiff board covers. At his first attempt he found himself reading the details of the liner's loading at Port Curtis, at the second attempt he struck a day's routine record of orbits and positions, all the trivia of a well run ship. And his third attempt revealed only blank pages.

LAURANNE had followed him into the boat.

"Shut the doors," he ordered. "Both of them." The woman obeyed. And then Latimer went to the locker in which were kept spares and tools of all kinds, took a sheet of thick, transparent plastic and hurriedly and roughly cut it to shape with the big shears. He took the electric welder out of the box, hoped that there would be enough power in the batteries to operate it. There was. And when the joints had been made to his satisfaction he opened the valve of the emergency air tank, snapped down the switch of the cabin heater. "Why didn't he . . .?" began Lauranne.

"Maybe he couldn't. It's easy enough when you have two hands to work with, and it's my guess that the poor devil had only one. . . ." Latimer was stripping the thick, metal-plated gloves off his hands as he spoke. He flung open the visor of his helmet. And he snatched the log book from the desk and started to read aloud.

SEPTEMBER 7, 2357

0056 G.M.T.: Screens reported object, relative bearing 047°-342°, on collision orbit. Automatic pilot took avoiding action.

0101 G.M.T.: Orbit and speed to Master's orders. Object apparently uncharted asteroid, approached for observation and investigation.

0207 G.M.T.: Vessel in closed orbit around object.

0215 G.M.T.: Number Six Lifeboat, Commander E. E. Wood, Cadets J. Perkins and T. Rasmussen, launched.

0303 G.M.T.: Lifeboat observed to make landing. Report received by R. T. from Commander to effect that he and Cadet Rasmussen have left boat to obtain geological specimens, investigate apparent artifact.

0317 G.M.T.: Commander Wood to Captain Pemberthy: "There's a door here, Captain, set in the cliff face. I think I can get it open. We're going in!" Captain Pemberthy to Commander Wood: "Don't. Leave it. Why doesn't he answer?" Communication with the Commander ceased, possibly because of high metallic content of walls of tunnel he had entered. Captain Pemberthy to Cadet Perkins: "Let us know at once as soon as the Commander and Rasmussen come out. Let us know at once if you see anything wrong." Cadet Perkins to Captain Pemberthy: "Aye, aye, sir."

0415 G.M.T.: Cadet Perkins to Captain Pemberthy: "They're coming out now, sir." Captain Pemberthy to Commander Wood: "Well, what did you find?" Commander Wood to Captain Pemberthy: "Nothing."

0445 G.M.T.: Captain Pemberthy to Commander Wood. "What are you waiting for, Wood? Why don't you blast off? Return to the ship at once." Commander Wood to Captain Pemberthy: "Slight Converter trouble, sir."

0507 G.M.T.: Lifeboat blasted off from asteroid.

0527 G.M.T.: Number Six Lifeboat in cradle.

"And then something happened," muttered Latimer. "There's nothing else on this page . . . " he turned over rapidly . . . "nor this . . . Ali, here we are, . . . But it's hard to read. . . . " He looked at Lauranne, his face grim. "But it was harder to write!" He resumed his reading, slowly and hesitantly as he struggled with the cramped, distorted calligraphy.

September 9—not that it matters what the date is, As long as I have it right for my navigation. . . . Not that I can do much in spacesuit with only one good hand. Thank God for the instruments. . . . And

guess I'd better pray that we do hit Ceres.

This asteroid. . . Didn't bring my work book, couldn't find it, But can remember figures roughly. Elongated elliptical orbit, 63° to Plane Ecliptic. Perihelion November 17, Solar Distance thirty-nine million, Dec.—from Earth-3° 45' north, R. A. 11 17 00. Can't remember odd seconds. And it's for Perihelion.

And get it. Get it. Don't land, blast at long range. Whoever reads this tell them that. Tell them to destroy on sight. Don't land.

This is what happened.

It was my watch when we picked it up. As Navigator had gone in boat had to try compute elements of orbit Good job I did. Figures here rough, but should be sufficient. And get it. Get. . . .

Boat came back. Wood got out, and two cadets. Walking little stiffly, but all seemed quite natural. Came along to Control lugging dirty big case or chest they'd found and brought with them. When Captain asked Wood where he'd been all this time, the three pulled guns they'd taken with them, held us up, Byrne, Second Pilot, jumped for them, shot in belly. Then shot Cadet West, Seemed as though did it to keep rest of us quiet, maybe, testing weapons.

Tied us all up then. Opened chest. And hundreds—thousands—things like spiders came out. Intelligent—could see that way examined everything. And *us*, Rasmussen stayed as guard. Rest went down to passenger quarters. Moat of them sleeping—turned out to see asteroid, got bored, turned in again. Could not have been much fight, but heard one or two shots. Waited what seemed like hours, then Wood and Perkins came back. One by one took us down to Main Lounge. Place fitted up like operating theatre—was operating theatre. They had their robots ready—just flimsy things of wire and plastic with motor, compartment in body for one of spider-things. And in head....

They opened up people's brain cases. Sliced away most of brain—kept only what they wanted—memory and such. Put this in transparent balls with a mess of wiring, put them in robots' heads. And then robots came alive—weren't *any* longer ramshackle dummies.

But the blood—and the screaming.... No anesthetics, of course. And bodies sprawling around with no tops to their heads—and damned spider-things dipping beaks into what was left of brains. .

One that tied me didn't make good job. Knots loose. Hoped to get free in time to save Ailsa, but too late. . . All I thought of then was getting away from ship in lifeboat, warning world.

Didn't see me going until almost at after door. . . . Made number 3 boat—and whole mob streaming after me. Aliens and people.... But weren't people, just robots. . . . But Ailsa there with rest of them, waving knife. ...

Got into boat, blasted off. And damned things cleared away gun—let fly at close range. Shell right through control room—transmitter smashed—face cut—hand broken. Got into spacesuit somehow: Second and third rounds burst right alongside—guess they thought they'd got me. Didn't start drive *again* till ship well clear...

Now, Ceres. Hope, they believe me. Must believe me. Use their transmitter warn world. Fifth Column. Trojan Horse. Wonder how fast those things breed?

Can't write any more. Weak. Hand stiff. Glove stiff. Pencil worn down, can't adjust. . . .

Perihelion November 17—Solar Distance thirty-nine million—Dec. three forty-five north—R. A. eleven seventeen zero zero. . . . And don't land. Don't land. Destroy on . . .

"And that's all," said Latimer.

CHAPTER VI

To the Last Man

WOMANLIKE, following his recital of the dead man's log, Lauranne had been inspecting the fittings of the little cabin. A switch went down under her inquisitive fingers. And, suddenly, there was music, strains that abruptly faded and were replaced by a man's voice.

"On the last note it will be precisely eighteen hundred, G.M.T.," it said. The measured notes came in

strong and clear. Then: "Here is the news. . . ." There followed a recital of the past day's events on Earth and in the colonies. There was nothing to merit a headline. There was no word of *Thunderqueen*, not a whisper of alien invasion.

Latimer sighed gustily. "I was always afraid that we were the last, and not the first," he admitted. "But this is as far as they've got." Then: "Hell! The radio! It works!"

"Of course it works. Pemberthy and Wood—or the things masquerading as Pemberthy and Wood—went along to our station with Carter. And in charge of the box of tricks right now will be a thing masquerading as Carter...."

"Here's the way I see it. When they indulge in their fancy brain surgery they help themselves to all the memories of the victim. They know a fair amount about Earth, and they found out about Ceres. This world has been just a laboratory guinea pig. They're working out techniques, finding out how much they can get away with. And when they're ready they'll take over, leave a garrison, and push off in *Thunder-queen* for Earth.

"And if they handle things really well, *nobody will ever know that there's been an invasion*. At least, not until they can afford to come out into the open and slaughter the few real humans who survive.. . ."

"And what do *we* do about it?"

"Now we have the boat we can warn Earth. What sort of shape is she in?"

"Not bad. . . . But how that poor devil managed to land her—weak as he was and with only one good hand—is more than I can say. The Jovian System is handiest now. . . . If we can take the boat there we can use their wireless...."

"But suppose. . . ."

"Have to take that risk I've checked the fuel. Even to Ganymede it means free fall most of the way." "And the other plan, the original?" "Don't know. But it would be safer. Trouble is that we can't trust Fen-wick to go ahead with his part of it unless he has moral support, or a pistol at his back. . . ."

"Yes, it would be best. That *and* the boat. And I'll see what I can do with Fenwick. . . ."

They clambered out of the lifeboat, down into the pit into which she had been set. As they passed the dead man Latimer thought briefly of giving him decent burial, decided regretfully that there where so many other things of far more pressing importance. And the unknown watch-officer of the Jovian liner would not thank them for wasting time on a ceremony that would, shortly, be entirely meaningless.

The sun had set and the cold struck through their insulated suits. Latimer looked up at the frosty stars, wondered whence had come the little world with its alien invaders. He wondered how many other races had fallen victims to its vampire inhabitants, then dismissed such queries from his mind as being useless. If things went well nobody would ever know anything about the aliens except such scraps of information that survived about their appearance, their methods of waging war. The log of *Thunderqueen* would be the tomb of a race. *If* Fenwick's doubtful courage would stand the test.

They came to the airlock. Together they entered the prison world of Ceres, with its parks and its gardens. its cargo of broken lives, its freight of menace from beyond the stars. Together they walked along the softly lit corridors, closer to each other than they had been for many a month. And together they entered the park in which the false Ailsa had been killed.

It seemed—here in this world without seasons—that there was the smell of autumn in the air. Every breath they took brought with it the sense of the transitory nature of all things. But the spell was abruptly broken when they came to the grave in which they had buried the shattered remains of Alien and robot.

An open, empty trench yawned before their eyes.

IT WAS Fenwick who was first to meet them.

As they hurried over the wide expanse of park they saw a little, agitated figure stumbling towards them. And the grotesque haste of the little man, flitting through the twilight like some agitated bat, served to emphasize the distant mutter of sidearms, the roaring murmur of many voices, of which they had become increasingly conscious.

"Latimer!" gasped Fenwick. "It is you, isn't it, Say it is you! They've taken the controls of the moving

ways, they hold all the airlocks. . . . And our people are holding out in the Marlowe Memorial...."

"How are they doing?"

"They can't hold much longer. The others have more guns—the only ones that we have are those we've taken from dead bodies. And they aren't bodies, Latimer. They *aren't* bodies. I tell you that they're only flimsy affairs of wire and plastic. What *are* these things? And they've brought heavy guns from the ship, mounted on carriages, and they're firing them down the corridors and tunnels... ."

"Is the tunnel clear?"

"I don't know. It was. I came past that way, and I didn't see anybody . . . or *anything*. . . . But you're not . . . Say that you're not!"

"I am, Fenwick. *We are*. Come on!" Latimer pulled out the gun that he had taken from the body of the thing clothed as Ailsa Rae. With his left hand he gripped the arm of the little thief. Lauranne, on the other side, did likewise. They hurried him over the short grass, towards the mouth of the tunnel that would afford the shortest approach to the big, burglarproof door. Proof—that is—against the common run of cracks-men. But this Fenwick was not of the commonality. Star-begotten, his father a spaceman, the faulty insulation of some long ago broken-up ship had produced in him a mutation, a gift, that could have led to distinction, fame, in the world of science. That would have led to such distinction had it not been for the fatal taint that had brought him to rot on Ceres.

It was an awareness of more dimensions than three. It was the ability with simple tools, or no tools at all, to force the most complicated lock of Man's devising to his will. It was a gift that could have been used to unlock the ultimate secrets of matter. And it was a gift that had been used to unlock safes and the vaults of banks.

It was a gift that, in the end, would procure for its owner a world for a funeral pyre.

As they left the park the thunder of gunfire became louder, more ominous. The crackle of the smaller weapons was almost continuous, and now and again would come the deep, reverberating boom of the artillery. Latimer thought of his men hemmed in in the Marlowe Memorial, wished vainly that he was with them. And he wished that he had some way of letting them know that the rearguard action they were fighting was not in vain, that every minute gained contributed to the ultimate downfall of the invaders.

There had been fighting along this tunnel. There were the bodies of men and women. Some few had been shot in the head; those corpses had not been violated. The majority had been killed by body wounds. Every battlefield in Man's long, bloody history has known the plunder of the slain, but never such gruesome pillage as this.

At the mouth of the tunnel leading to the door to the power plant there were four guards. They wore robot bodies, their own flimsy anatomies could never have hoped to handle the heavy guns that they carried. But these were no robots clothed in the illusion of flesh and blood. They had a rough, scarecrow similarity to humankind and that was all.

Unaccountably they hesitated. It may have been that they took the three running towards them for their own kind. Although that, in view of their undeniable telepathic powers, is doubtful. But they hesitated. It was only for a split second, but it was enough. The circuits and relays actuating their mechanical muscles could never hope to equal the speed with which Latimer aimed and fired. The sound of gunfire was thunderous in the tunnel, and before the last echoes had even considered dying all four of the alien guards were down, each with an explosive slug in the compartment in which lived the controlling intelligence.

And Fenwick was down.

HE WAS not dead; one of the bullets fired by the guards had struck the tunnel wall against which he was crouched. The explosion had driven fragments of stone deep into his side. He was not dead, yet. Lauranne knelt beside him, doing what little she could, whilst Latimer collected the weapons of their fallen enemies.

The wounded man writhed and groaned.

"Stay with me," he pleaded. "Don't let them open my head. . . . Don't. . ." He clung to Lauranne's hand, looked up at her with the pleading eyes of a hurt spaniel

"I'll stay," she promised.

With pistols stowed all around his person, Alan Latimer came to his wife and Fenwick.

"How is he?" he demanded, little of gentleness in his tone.

"He'll last," replied the woman. "Long enough...."

They picked up the wounded man, carried him to the huge, gleaming door that blocked the tunnel. They set him down on the stone floor. They looked in baffled wonderment at the array of wheels and dials and symbols set on the metal surface. It seemed to them that even if one should have the right combination the opening of the way to the power station would be a task only to be undertaken after prayer and fasting.

Fenwick looked up at the door too. It was not the first time he had seen it. When he arrived on Ceres he had been taken by Kimball, who had heard of his gifts, to make an inspection. The Boss had asked him then if he could open the door without unleashing the doom that lay behind it. Truthfully, he had replied no. If he had been able to answer yes he would have been, after the Boss, the most powerful man in Ceres.

Now he was the most powerful man in Ceres.

And the irony of it was that, if he were asked the same question as before, the answer would be *an* unqualified affirmative.

In the past the power that lay within his mind had been a wild talent, uncontrolled and uncontrollable. It had been impossible to concentrate, to hold the flickering picture steady. Not that it was ever a picture—the word is used merely for convenience. But the sense of perception came and went, faded and waxed strong, faded again not to return for hours, or days, or months. Now, with the changes wrought in his brain and neural structure by pain, by the slight decomposition that precedes the death of a living organism, the picture was bright and steady. And his mind, as it were, went out and handled the beautiful intricacies of lever and tumbler, electronic flow and magnetic field.

And understood.

"Are you sure you can tackle it?" Latimer demanded.

"Of course I'm sure. I . . ."

He tried to rise to his feet, reached for the nearest wheel, fell heavily. And a growing, glistening pool on the floor where he had fallen was mute testimony to the inadequacy of Lauranne's rough bandaging. He looked up at them, his wizened, grey little face contorted with pain.

"I can do it," he whispered. "I can *see* the levers and tumblers. But one of you will have to turn the dials...." Then, "But I don't want to die. I don't want to die!"

LAURANNE reached out. She snatched one of the pistols from her husband's belt. She cocked it, making sure that this simple operation was performed as noisily as possible. She pressed the cold muzzle against Fenwick's neck.

"*Now* will you do it?"

"Yes. Yes! That dial there, the top right hand one. Turn it to D-O-O-M-S-D-A-Y. . . ."

"*Doomsday?*" She struck Fenwick across the face with the barrel of the weapon. She struck him again. He started to scream, but she struck him yet a third time. . . .

"Stop it!" shouted Latimer. "You are smashing the poor devil's face!" "I know it. Now, Fenwick, this 'Doomsday' of yours. That word has an ominous ring.... Could it be...." her voice was low, almost caressing . . . "that the dial you want me to turn is one of the controls of whatever safety device this door must have?" She raised the pistol threateningly. "Answer me!"

"Yes . . ." whimpered the little crook. "Yes. Don't touch the dials. Just the wheels. And don't. . . *Don't!*"

She said: "If you're lying again *They* won't find any head on you worth cutting open"

"That lower right hand wheel ..." babbled Fenwick almost delirious. "Take it. Turn it to oh three, seven, then left-handed to three four six. Right-handed to oh three five. . ."

"Wait." She turned away from the wounded man, left him dabbing ineffectual hands at the blood streaming from his battered face. She ran back along the tunnel to where Alan Latimer was standing,

guns ready, poised to fight off alien interruption. She caught his arm, pushed her face close to his, whispered: "Haven't you forgotten something?"

"What?"

"The boat, you fool. Aren't you supposed to be galloping off to warn the System?"

"Not now. We can't leave Fenwick by himself to open the door. We must stay."

"Only one of us need stay. . ."

"Of course. You'll find the boat fairly easy to handle. And remember, free fall as much of the way as possible."

"I can't handle a boat. Given unlimited fuel for experiments I might make Ganymede, provided that the air and food and water hung out. You must go."

"But we can't leave Fenwick." "I shan't leave him."

Then Latimer turned to face his wife. He said: "You're right. Of course you're right. But can't you see that *I can't go?*"

Lauranne said bitterly: "If Ailsa Rae were sitting in that space scow waiting for you, you'd be off like a shot! Go, damn you! Do you think that I want to die with you after what has happened?"

Latimer turned white under his tan. His lips worked, but he said nothing. Then, at last, the bitter words came. "Take these," he said, pulling two of the pistols from his belt. "You might want to shoot me in the back."

He turned abruptly, strode down the tunnel. Lauranne stood and watched him go, half raised her arms, let them fall hopelessly to her side. "You fool," she whispered. "You fool. Of course I don't want to die with you. I want to live with you!" Slowly, listlessly, she made her way back to where Fenwick, an untidy bundle of rags, was sprawled on the tunnel floor. She looked down at the dying man, then at her wrist watch. "Thirty minutes at least," she muttered. "Have to give him thirty minutes to get to the boat, fifteen to get clear at maximum acceleration." And down the tunnel drifted the sound of gunfire, fainter but still continuing, showing that some few defenders yet were gaining for her the time she needed.

"And that's that," said the Admiral. He was pleased with himself, had good reason to be so. The forces under his command had made a landing, had taken prisoners without loss to themselves, had blasted a little world into a thin, faintly luminous haze. And when the Admiral let his mind stray to those same prisoners—obscene, spidery things that scuttled about their cages on many-jointed, flimsy legs—he felt no compunction over the act of destruction that he had performed.

"Where's that fellow Latham . Latimer?" he demanded of an aide. "Think I'll have him up for a drink

But Latimer did not come. Instead came a messenger who told of how the ex-lieutenant had burst into the prison compartment, had opened fire with two pistols, slaughtered the helpless Aliens. The guards had tried to stop him. One had been killed outright, the other was not expected to live.

"And he was saying something," concluded the messenger. "I couldn't make it out, sir, but it sounded like poetry. Something about old loves, and dead years, and disastrous things, it sounded like.

"But that was just before he shot himself."