

ELIXIR

By James
Blish

Over and over, like a phonograph, the man repeated his message: "A ship is burning... a ship is burning." Yet, how could there be fire in space, without medium for combustion? Then they saw the cloud of sparks approaching...

IN THE ABSOLUTE blackness, the drumming of Vickers' fingernails on the control-board was like some eccentric trip-hammer. Jimmy Lane twisted protestingly in his hammock. "Captain," he said hoarsely. "Could you—I mean, do you have to do that?"

"Sorry." The drumming stopped.

"If he doesn't get here in another three minutes, we might just as well climb out of this sink-hole and give ourselves up," Elton said calmly. His voice was muffled; evidently he was lying with his back to Jimmy. "Without the serum itself, no one will believe a damn word of it."

"He'll get it," Vickers said. "And on time; you youngsters don't know Paul Walker."

That seemed to settle that. It didn't take much of the tension out of the stale air, all the same. The putative reliability of Paul Walker didn't dispose of the fact that the rest of them were canned in a tiny ship, while two hundred feet above them, on the frigid surface of Ganymede, a drug-driven mob of uniformed thugs was closing upon them—and, presumably, upon Walker, too.

It especially failed to dispose of the staleness of the air. Until Walker came, no current could flow in the little ship; and even with both airlock ports open there was no circulation. It was ironical to consider that the ship lay in a ventilating shaft, one of nine that kept the environment livable

in the underground plant that made Luris' serum. All that air; all that serum. For a moment Jimmy thought he'd be glad to swap the serum for a breath of the air.

Then he thought better of it. The serum was the only thing that gave their present situation meaning. It maintained Emile Calve's scabrous "empire"; the plant where Luris made it was the focus of Ganymede's underground group; and—if it could be gotten out of Ganymede—it promised not only an end to Calve's two-bit totalitarianism, but also incredible gifts for every living human being.

Luris had scoffed at that. "Sure, there's immortality in it," he had told Jimmy. "And regeneration. *And* auto-therapy. But some integration of the personality is necessary to begin with. They're using it as dope up above—don't look so damn shocked, you wouldn't be working in the plant if you weren't at least faintly aware of the facts of life on Ganymede—and that's the way it'll be used if it ever gets off Ganymede. Bluntly, that's why I'm working for Calve. We have one purpose in common: to keep the serum here; our motives differ, but Calve isn't picky about motives."

No, Calve wasn't picky; he was probably watching Paul Walker being put through a catholic selection of tortures right now.

There was a sudden scrabbling in the companionway, like a cat trying to get out of a box. It was quite impos-



Jimmy plotted his course carefully, to take himself safely out of the area of the burning ship.

sible that an outsize Negro could make so small a sound—

"Got it," Walker's voice said, with gentle satisfaction. "I shut the lock; make it quick, they're right on my tail."

Vickers gave him only a few seconds to get into his hammock. Then, with an unexpected gesture of bravado, he turned on all the ship's lights. Jimmy was in the middle of a chuckle when the blast-off hit him, and then it was very dark indeed all over again.

He was just struggling back to consciousness when the first bomb ripped

away the drive, tumbling him, bewildered, back into night for the third time.

WALKER lay on the foam seating that circled the control room. His head was bound elaborately, and his face was as wan as the pale stars in the ports over his head. He was completely motionless, breathing shallowly.

Then his lips moved. He began to speak, in a sing-song, utterly empty voice. "A ship is burning."

Jimmy watched, rumpling his hair

Certain crustaceans have remarkable regenerative facilities. Tear off a crab's leg, for example, and the critter can grow a new one. The human body, too, has considerable repair facilities, but there are some parts, such as the lung tissues, or brain tissues, which cannot be regrown; if damaged, these areas will be replaced by scar tissue. But suppose full regeneration were possible, and so long as any part of the brain remained, the whole could be rebuilt—except, in some cases, missing parts would have to be replaced by memory...

over his ringing skull. Behind him, Vickers said, "I keep having the feeling that he's trying to tell us something; it doesn't make any sense, what he says. But maybe he'll go on with it, next time around."

Jimmy swallowed. "It would be a kindness to kill him, Captain."

"No, not yet. This is maddening, but—well, there's nothing else for us to do, now."

"A ship is burning," Walker's voice droned.

It was like a record repeating itself. They all knew it by heart now, and what would follow it. If they came out of this alive, every one of them would be able to repeat Walker's ditty ten—hell, fifty years from now. Or, now that there was nothing left of the little ship but its control room and an empty hull, they could just sit right here and listen to Walker in person for the next fifty years. There were supplies enough, and power enough, and with Luris' serum in him Walker would probably outlive them all—

"Here it comes," Elton said.

"A cloud in space. There are no clouds in space." The stricken man paused. If only he'd vary it, just change the tone of his voice a little—

"The cloud is waiting," Walker said.

Another pause. Jimmy counted. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, *now!*

Walker said: "A great cloud of sparks."

There would be a long wait now. Elton turned his back abruptly and walked over to the front viewplate, looking out over the studs which had become nothing but ornaments a day ago. "It's just madness, Captain. Paul has a concussion from the explosion, and only the serum has kept him alive. We're hearing the madness of a dead man."

"Are we likely to be found?" Jimmy said. "I don't mean rescued; that's out of the question now. But if they

found the ship, they could see plainly enough that bombs had been planted in our engine room and under our nose. And there's the serum still intact; it's too simple a substance to break down just through age. Wouldn't they call that proof?"

Vickers nodded. "Yes; I think they would. There's the log, too. And if we're still alive to boot—"

"Still alive?" Elton said. "And *him*, too?" He pointed to the cataleptic figure on the airfoam.

"Why not? Would there be any better proof of the power of Luris' serum? You don't realize, Elton, what it means to have complete conscious control of your own nervous system. Walker, bunged up though he was by the explosions, partly repaired himself. What could a *sane* man do for his own body?"

"How many sane men," Elton said, "do you think this ship will contain by the time Earth finds it?"

"A ship has entered the cloud," Walker droned. "The sparks are all around it. Little flashes of fire are going out from the ship where the sparks touch it."

I don't have to listen any more, Jimmy thought. I can walk over there and put my fingers around Walker's throat and then there won't be that voice any more. Or I can take the torch and cut the hinges off the control room door, and it'll just blow away and we won't any of us have to listen any more.

● IT WAS PAUL WALKER WHO had done most of the work. On a planet where 85% of the population was Negro or of Negro extraction, only Walker had been able to make any real penetration of the fantastic empire of Calve; the rest of them had to be excessively cautious, except for Jimmy himself, who had blended smoothly into the Asiatic 10%. And it was Walker who had brought back the serum, Walker who had made the

promises to the Ganymedian underground—promises that, sometime, would have to be made good by Earth as a whole.

"Captain?"

"Yes, Jimmy."

"Walker might recover; we don't know how far the serum can help him. And he's the only one among us who saw enough of Ganymede to give evidence. I saw the plant and talked to Luris, but it's Walker that gives any project we cook up now its importance."

"My view exactly," Vickers said heavily; "without Paul, we will have failed in our mission. We didn't even know what the mission was until Walker unsealed his orders, for that matter. Of course, the log and the serum should be enough to start an investigation, but if we can wait until we're found, we can cinch it ourselves."

Elton said nothing. He kept his back to them and watched the pallid stars.

"Flashes of fire," Walker said, in an even monotone. "The ship is in the cloud. The ship is burning. I see it. A ship is burning. A ship is burning."

In the Rx cabinet the container of Luris' serum was lying, containing within itself immortality, ecdysis, and things still undreamt. Its fate depended upon four men as good as dead.

"A cloud in space. There are no clouds in space."

Elton said softly, "I see it." His trembling finger pointed. The others turned; after a moment, Jimmy saw it, too.

It shimmered, a mass of radiant sparks. It didn't look very large. Vickers stepped to the board and checked it with the charts.

"I hate to say 'I told you so,'" he said. "But we'll hit it squarely. In about an hour."

Jimmy said, "What is it?"

"Lord knows. Contraterrene, maybe, mixed with a terrene dust storm.

It's not very big—but it looks damned poisonous."

"The cloud is waiting," Walker said.

THE EMPTY SHIP WAS burning. Jimmy tumbled, already three miles away from it, banded in his pressure-suit. The suit clung to him so tightly that it made him feel injured, as if his whole body had suffered the battering that had crushed Walker's skull.

On every fifth turn he caught a brief glimpse of the ship. The twisted hull had already been embraced by the cloud; the sparks danced over it. Along her metallic flanks, a thousand lurid will-o'-the-wisps danced delicately, eating her away. After about half an hour she was burning like a magnesium flare.

The cloud itself was uncomfortably close. Jimmy would have liked to have the torch, but of course Vickers and the precious log and container of the serum had to have that; he had to content himself with the shoulder-jets. The orbit of the ship had been slightly off the center of the cloud, and by using the jets to augment that curve, he might be able to fringe the cloud.

It wasn't a very likely proposition.

He wondered where Walker was now. Was Paul still telling his story in the little auditorium of his pressure helmet, or would the actual destruction of the ship end the strange pre-vision? Odd that they hadn't thought of this possibility until the very end; and amazing that Luris' simple sodium-isotope salt could give even a man with a shattered skull such a glimpse into the future.

But Walker, like Jimmy Lane, was now tumbling end-over-end into nothingness, the serum coursing through his lymphatic system as it now coursed through Jimmy's, and Elton's, and Vickers'. Probably he would not survive, for his brain was too damaged to be capable of willing his body into suspended animation. They had

fired him out into space only because they had loved him; there was no chance that he would survive, and Jimmy had had to talk fast to convince Vickers that Walker should not be left to burn with the ship now that his vision had been realized.

It had been Jimmy's plan from the beginning; at first it had stirred vaguely at the back of his mind when the ship was wrecked; then, it had sprung full-blown into his consciousness.

"Suspended animation!" he'd said. "Captain, why can't we take a shot of the serum ourselves and abandon the ship? We could set a rough course toward Earth with the shoulder-jets, miss the cloud, and slow down our body-processes. It'd take years, but we'd still have the proof. Why, we'd *be* proof!"

● **JIMMY TOUCHED THE JET** controls. The end-over-end tumbling was nauseating, but he did not dare waste fuel by correcting it. As long as the vector of the motion lay outside the cloud, his actual orbit could tie itself in knots for all he cared.

The terrible flare that had been the ship was diminishing now, deep within the cloud. After a while it had dimmed enough so that he could look at it directly.

Nothing was left of the ship but her skeleton, traced in bright fire. One by one the smaller structural members flared and winked out. The last Jimmy saw of the ship was her massive keel-beam, a sword of flame in the twinkling darkness.

Then that was gone too, and the cloud swelled to devour him.

He fired the jets again, briefly. It was agonizing to have the cloud out of his line of sight three turns out of five. If he were going to hit it, he hoped fervently that it would be face forward—

Something was vaguely wrong with the rhythm of the turning. It took him a moment to realize what it was. The

cloud was in sight now on the fourth turn, had gone out of sight on the first turn. It was—

It was swinging below him.

He'd made it!

Mockingly, a pale will-o'-the-wisp danced over his ribs, then went out, leaving a bright weal in the metal. Jimmy held his breath. But it was the only one: a stray particle of contra-terrene dust, evidently. The cloud plowed along beneath him.

After nearly a day, it was behind him. Methodically Jimmy prepared himself for the quasi-death that would be the body of the trip. It had taken less fuel than he'd expected to miss the cloud; it was now possible to stop the tumbling and point straight at the dim green star that was his home.

And now to slow his metabolism. It would seem no different to him, since he had no reference-points by which to judge his speed. He would be conscious, of course, and the trip would seem very long, no matter how much longer it took by the clock. The dim green star was far away. Jimmy felt his whole being reach out for it in a surge of loneliness.

The sun began to swell, very gently. That was a good sign. It meant that the trip would not seem so long. Yet—could it be that easy? He'd hardly begun to exercise any control—

He looked at his watch. The hands seemed motionless, except for the normal, pulsating progress of the sweep-hand. He knew that, were his metabolism slowed down enough to produce any visible illusion of speed, even the hour hand should be moving so fast as to be invisible. But it wasn't.

But the sun was still swelling.

The apparent speed, then, was—real speed.

The thought was stunning. Through the agency of Luris' simple sodium-isotope biotic, Jimmy's nervous system had reacted upon the basic fabric of the plenum, catapulting him upon the instant into a hurtling projectile faster than any ship. His intense emotional

longing for Earth was being expressed as momentum...

The sun grew. After a while, the green star grew, too. Jimmy felt a sudden flash of alarm, and his nervous system braked him. He soared once around the moon, judging his speed by the flow of the craters beneath him, and dropped.

He took himself delightedly in and out of the stratosphere like a flying-fish, and plunged again. Despite himself, he was still travelling too fast when he snaked through the forest of sequoias which ringed the World Capital, and came out of it with a big green leaf splashed across the top of his helmet as if it had been painted there.

The expression on the face of the Planetary Commissioner when Jimmy shot through the window of his office was a study in outrage.

● JIMMY SAID, "SO THAT'S what he's done, sir. If you dilute the stuff a thousand to one, it increases neural conductivity just enough to give you a lift, like dope. It makes you feel more alert, speeds up your reactions, slightly increases your resistance to colds and all that. But in that dilution, it acts like morphine: you begin to feel lousy when the shot starts wearing off; and there's a period at the end where you have to consciously will your heart to beat and your diaphragm to push up and down—or they won't.

"Calve's built a slave state on that. Outwardly it's the same old Ganymede, peaceful, progressive, as near to Utopia as you can get in a lousy climate like that. But only because everyone's afraid to talk for fear his shots will be cut off; the few resisters are a little group who managed to avoid getting a shot in the first place."

The Commissioner scratched in his stiff spade beard with the point of a stylus. "When we gave Walker his orders, we had no idea it was as bad as this," he said thoughtfully. "I gather

that a shot of the serum full-strength will straighten out the addiction?"

"Yes. The effect is permanent then. After that, there seems to be no limit to the things you can do with your nervous system. Like this."

Still in a sitting position, Jimmy rose solemnly to the ceiling of the office, then sank down again. "Or this." He vanished, and there was the almost soundless little brother of a thunderclap as the air rushed in to fill the space where he had been. A second later he was back.

The Commissioner mopped his brow nervously. "I wish you'd take it easy. I'm still not used to that stuff. Now I suppose you want us to go out there and mop up."

"Why, sure," Jimmy said.

"You're a good boy, Jimmy, but your methods are naively direct." The Commissioner got up and began to pace, pulling at his beard. "Don't you realize that Calve will fight? And that with his men doped, he's got potentially the most ferocious army in history? He can order every last man to fight to the death—and every one of them will, no matter whether they want to. If only Walker had come back—no offense, Jimmy, you did a great job—but with what he knew of Calve's set-up, we could have worked out some way of pulling the Trojan Horse on them. Now—I don't know."

Jimmy said, "If I could get to Luris again—"

"What good would that do?"

"His only motive in playing along with Calve is to keep the serum from reaching the Earth. Maybe I could persuade him to stop making the stuff; or to make the next batch full strength without telling Calve."

"Why should he do that? Jimmy, the serum *didn't* get here; Vickers has it. We're searching for him, but it's a hopeless search. And it may be fifty, a hundred, two hundred years before he arrives—if he escaped that cloud of seetee in the first place. Obviously he didn't discover this space-

flying trick of yours. So Luris' position is the same as ever. Do you know the formula?"

"No. Walker knew it—"

The Commissioner spread his hands resignedly. "There; you see? Walker again."

Yes; Walker again. Yet Walker had to be written off; Vickers was now the important man. He had the serum. Walker was dead; or, if not dead, too seriously injured to be of any use even if he were found.

● **THE COMMISSIONER WAS** looking closely at Jimmy. "You said Walker pre-viewed the destruction of your ship."

"Yes," Jimmy said disconsolately. "His brain was trying to repair itself. Somehow one of the unused areas must have been brought into play—a sort of prophetic sense. Otherwise he seemed to be unconscious."

"You have the serum in you now. Can't you try to locate Walker?"

Jimmy started. It might be done, at that. Yet—just how did you go about it? Walker himself hadn't willed to know; he had known by accident. Jimmy closed his eyes and tried to reach out for Vickers; then, for Elton and for Walker.

He opened his eyes again. "I don't get a thing," he said.

The Commissioner shrugged. "Too bad, Jimmy. I don't think we'll get the Council to sanction any mass attack, under the circumstances. Oh, there'll be a committee investigation, but you know that those seldom amount to anything. With the serum behind him, Calve will be able to deal with any committee well enough. If you think of anything else—"

Nothing else occurred to Jimmy. He left the office on his own two feet, too discouraged to use the evidently useless gifts Luris' serum had made available to him. It had all been for nothing. The best he could do with Luris' great discovery was to remind himself that he was due to go before the Board

of Review at the Academy next Sunday, and he'd need to get out his old uniform—

Wait a minute.

He hadn't been told that his case was to be reviewed; it wasn't even customary.

Pre-vision!

Where would the three pressure-suited men be *tomorrow*?

Jimmy closed his eyes. Suddenly he was Vickers, tumbling comfortably through space. In Vickers' mind a procession of dreams passed, murmuring to something that sounded suspiciously like movie-music. Vickers was content to drift until time ended or the Earth found him, dreaming of sentimental scenes that might have happened if he had had the courage to make them happen that way. His metabolism was enormously retarded, and his dreams were outright embarrassing. Jimmy stopped pre-viewing Vickers after he had gotten a good picture of how the stars looked from where Vickers was.

Suspiciously, Jimmy looked at his watch. It had taken him half an hour to get that brief flash of what Vickers would be dreaming about tomorrow. He'd have to be more careful.

"Move outa the doorway, bud."

Jimmy blinked at the guard and moved, standing himself finally behind a potted plant in the anteroom. There he reached out for Elton's tomorrow.

● **ELTON WAS THERE.**

He was dead. In his decaying mind, phantoms of memories moved and disintegrated. A few nerve-ends in his nostrils registered the odor of his own carrion body. A dying brain-cell said, "Jimmy, you hear me. Please—" and then blanked out. Luris' serum could do no more for Elton. His last appeal eddied away into despair and darkness.

Jimmy discovered he was crying. He was not ashamed. He looked hopelessly for whatever tomorrow Paul Walker might have—

A second later he found himself translated back into the Commissioner's office. "Walker—" he gasped. "He's—"

"Damn it, I asked you to stop that jumping around," the Commissioner growled. "Walker? You've got a line on him?"

"Yes," Jimmy said. "He's alive; his mind repaired itself. I can't seem to get to him clearly, but he's alive and I can see a little of what he will be seeing—"

"Will be—"

"Yes. He's on Ganymede. I could recognize some of the landmarks. But there's something wrong, something serious. Can't we get a ship—"

The Commissioner smiled on one side of his mouth. He said, "If we have to steal one."

● **WALKER WAS WAITING ON** the field when Jimmy, the Commissioner, and a squad of hand-picked Marines left the airlock of the ship. The field was lined with oddly silent spectators, but no one made any move to come forward. Walker was alone. He seemed taller, somehow.

As they walked hesitantly toward him, Jimmy realized why Walker was taller. His head, unbandaged now, was at least three inches longer than it had been before. On both sides, from his temples back to his ears, he had lost his hair; there was still a peak of it on top, reaching down to his enormously expanded forehead, but it only served to make him look as if he were wearing an inadequate cap. His neck-muscles had grown and

thickened to support the burden of that incredible head; and his eyes—
his eyes—

Walker no longer had any eyes. Below the great forehead burned two lozenges of dull fire, like the flames that had consumed the ship in the cloud. Their even, featureless glow lit a face now as rigid and unchanging as marble.

"Jimmy Lane," Walker said.

"Yes," Jimmy said hesitantly. "How are you, Paul? I'm glad you're—"

"I am as I am," Walker said, his voice remote and terrible. He made no move either to leave the field or to walk toward them. On the edge of the field the crowd seemed to be holding its breath. "If you have come here to deal with Calve, he is dead. Some of his henchmen I have spared, to make the trip with me that I must make now that you have come; Luris is one."

"Wait a minute," the Commissioner protested. "If Luris is still alive, he has to come back and stand trial—"

The flaming things that had once been eyes swung on the Commissioner. He stopped as if paralyzed.

"I am not interested in your justice," Walker said. "Luris is now as I am. That is punishment, if punishment is what you seek. For the remainder—I need him. Therefore he will come with me."

"Paul," Jimmy said. "Please—what happened?"

"The inevitable, Jimmy Lane," Paul Walker said. "The second dose of serum given me before I was expelled from our ship was a massive overdose

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—and my brain had been damaged. It rebuilt itself while I spun unknowing away from the sun. That part of it that men never use developed, furrowed, grew. Because the serum was in me, I found myself at last in complete control of the unknown four-fifths of the brain. But the known one-fifth *had been destroyed*, and when it was rebuilt, it was rebuilt—according to the dictates of the rest.”

● **JIMMY LOOKED AT HIM. THE** body was the body of a man, but Paul Walker was no longer human, nor even remotely like anything human beings might become.

“But you came here,” Jimmy whispered. “You completed your mission, Paul.”

“At a certain stage it seemed to me to be necessary that I come here,” Walker’s deep, strange voice said. “At that time I was still not fully conscious.”

He passed one hand across his temple in a slow, tranced gesture, as if smoothing back the lost hair. The movement was jarring; it belonged to a past from which Walker was now utterly cut off.

“The penalty,” Walker said. “The penalty of the serum. The slightest overdose excites the buried brain, and buries the forebrain; at the end, the cerebral cortex is burned out completely.”

“We’ll be careful,” Jimmy said. “But Paul—you’ve cleaned out this mess. You could come back with us, teach us—”

Paul Walker pointed at the silent crowd. There was a mad scramble to get out of the vicinity toward which he was pointing.

“Impossible,” Walker said. “I have liberated these people; you see the result. They are terrified of me. They have good reason. I am no longer of them, nor of you. I have other interests. There is a race not far from here, circling a red star—but you could not understand. Luris!”

There was a puff of disrupted air, and Luris stood beside Paul Walker, eyes burning, face frozen forever into the same inhuman mold.

“We are ready to leave. This little race no longer has need of us. Good-bye, Jimmy Lane.”

Jimmy choked. “Paul!” he cried. “Paul! We loved you—we fired you from the wreck—do you owe us nothing?”

Walker bent the blank flames of his regard upon Jimmy Lane.

“Elton’s dead,” Jimmy said desperately. “But Vickers is still alive; so am I. Let us come with you. Vickers too.”

The Commissioner clutched at Jimmy’s elbow. Jimmy shook him off.

Walker passed his hand over his temple in that same dazed gesture. The thing that had been Luris said nothing, but looked upward at the cold stars. “This damnation,” Walker said, “would not be to Vickers’ taste; let him drift; it is best. Do you know what you ask for yourself, Jimmy Lane?”

“Yes. Give me the serum, Paul; the overdose.”

“Not necessary,” Walker said. “Wait—if this is to be done—”

There was a thickening of the air beside him, opposite the place where Luris’ lambent eye-sockets watched the stars. Then another pair of flames looked at Jimmy.

This had once been Elton.

“Would you have this man with us, that would be one of us, Jimmy Lane?”

“Yes—yes—”

“Let us go.”

Something struck Jimmy Lane a sickening mental blow. Unquestioningly, he died.

The creatures that had been Paul Walker and Jimmy Lane and Elton and Luris shook humanity from their shoulders and hurtled away into the cold, star-promised darkness.