

Lightning Over Saturn

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The Starquest had all organized piracy chasing her; the trouble was, she was unarmed. But old Carl Vierling had an idea about Saturn's lightning.

An A\NN/A Preservation Edition.

[Notes](#)

BEN Wolf knew something was wrong even as he guided the launch down toward the mountainous, hollowed-out chunk of rock in Saturn's rings, which Arn Vierling out of a deep affection had christened the Lab. First the all-clear signal had failed to come through, indicating that something had happened to the detectors which were supposed to warn those at the Lab of approaching craft. And then his anxious radioed questions had gone unanswered. Silence at the Lab—complete, frightening silence.

Wolf's strongly molded features were bleakly set behind the transparent bubble helmet of his space armor—for armor was always worn by those who threaded the deadly rock maze of the rings. He thought with a sick, gnawing urgency of Arn and her father-in-law, Carl Vierling, the two who had come to mean more to him than life itself—even more in some ways than the *Starquest*, the fruit of their united labors for the past three years. If anything had happened to them—

But what could possibly have taken place? An accident, perhaps? It was true that old Carl's experiments were frequently dangerous. But an accident for that cause could hardly account for the complete silence of those at the Lab.

Wolf suddenly wished he hadn't insisted on making a last trip to Titan. Most of the food and equipment he had gone to obtain hadn't been entirely necessary, consisting of gifts and little luxuries to celebrate the completion of the *Starquest*. For it was a truly momentous occasion. The *Starquest* was the forerunner of the ships which for the first time would carry the race of man beyond the limits of the Solar System and out to the numberless worlds of the galaxy.

With the *Starquest* began the era of interstellar travel.

Lips a pale line, Wolf brought the launch to a landing within a cup-shaped depression at what roughly was the Lab's equator. He let himself out of the airlock, made his way swiftly across the dozen or so meters that separated him from the huge cave opening leading down into the living quarters at the heart of the worldlet.

As he reached the interior of the cave he discovered the first clue to the disaster that had occurred. For the *Starquest* had been berthed within the cave during the installation of the *Hyperdrive* generators which old Carl Vierling had conceived and designed, and which Wolf and Arn had helped build. And the *Starquest* was gone.

Gone! Wolf halted, stunned. He stared wildly at the empty space the craft had occupied, a chill numbness gripping his body. Then thought of Arn and Carl Vierling rose starkly in his mind, and in another moment he was running recklessly toward the airlock at the other end of the long cave, which gave entrance to the living quarters within the Lab.

Ruin met him—and death. The airlock valves had been blasted open, and the rooms immediately beyond scarred by explosives and blistered by rays. Sprawled at intervals along a line of retreat were the

figures of the three technicians who had assisted with the work on the *Starquest*, their space armor shattered and ray-blackened. It was clear they had put up a stiff fight before going down under the weight of superior numbers.

Wolf paused a moment, looking down at the fallen men in silent tribute. He had worked with them and liked them. Their deaths were not easy to accept—nor, Wolf vowed fiercely, would they be forgotten.

His pulses drummed with fearful expectancy as he hurried on. What of Arn and old Carl? Were they dead, too?

The emergency seals had gone on at the entrances to the rooms further back, and there was air and warmth. The living section—recreation room, sleeping quarters and kitchen—was deserted of life and undisturbed. Only the machine shop and laboratory now remained, and Wolf increased his already frantic pace.

He reached the huge chamber with its clutter of technical equipment and scientific apparatus. There was air and warmth here, also. And foreboding stillness.

Wolf found Carl Vierling lying in a limp huddle at the base of a workbench, his iron-gray hair matted with blood. Of Arn there was no sign.

Certain that he was once more in the presence of death, Wolf bent slowly over the old man's motionless form, grief a constriction in his throat. But as he carefully lifted the gray head, there was a flutter of eyelids, a stirring of limbs. Old Carl still lived! Relief surging in him, Wolf began removing his armor.

HIS gray head bandaged and his elderly features haggard with despair, Carl Vierling sat in the kitchen, staring into a cup of black coffee, heavily laced with Venusian brandy. Ben Wolf paced the floor nearby, trailing clouds of aromatic smoke from the pipe gripped savagely between his teeth. His muscular figure moved with the unspent power and vitality of a caged animal, exuding an aura of thwarted fury.

Abruptly Wolf swung around to face the older man. "Those men you told me you saw, Carl, can't you describe them at all?"

Vierling shook his head. "It happened too fast. I didn't know what was going on until too late. The air was gone from the rooms around the airlock, and the sound of the fight didn't carry to the shop. I heard the detector alarm, of course, but I assumed it was you, Ben, as it appears Arn did also. Nothing had happened for so long, I guess we forgot to be careful.

"When the raiders came crowding through the shop door, I was too surprised to be observing. They were wearing space armor, but I did notice that they were strangers. I grabbed a gun and pressed the alarm buzzer... uselessly in both cases. Then one of them fired at me. The shot grazed my head, and I went down. I guess they thought they had finished me off."

Vierling sipped at his coffee and shook his head again. "For an instant I had the idea that the raiders were our own crew. The boys had gone out to do some work on the hull of the *Starquest*, and had put on space armor. They must have seen the raiders appear at the mouth of the cavern, which is why they retreated into the Lab airlock. But I suppose things happened too fast from there on."

Wolf threw out his hands. "This is a maddening situation, Carl! Three men dead, Arn kidnapped, the *Starquest* stolen—and not a single clue to the person behind it! We have to get Arn and the ship back—but where to start?"

Wolf puffed abstractedly at his pipe, his amber eyes narrowed under copper-hued brows. “One thing is clear, though. The person who engineered the raid on the Lab was in a position both to learn of my trips to Titan and to act on that knowledge. This person obviously has a gang behind him, for the attack on the Lab was the work of experienced fighters.”

“One of the hijack chiefs, it would seem,” Vierling suggested.

“I’m not so certain about that,” Wolf replied slowly, “My purchases on Titan told nothing about the *Starquest*. There was nothing to indicate that an attack on the Lab would be profitable. The only motive for the attack, therefore, could have been to satisfy a personal curiosity—or a personal spite. And the only person I can think of who would go against me for that reason is Hunk Palio.”

“Hunk Palio—and Luree!” Vierling exclaimed, rising to his feet in excitement. “Of course, Ben! Information of all sorts sooner or later reaches Luree. Palio could easily have learned of your trips to Titan—and decided to see what you were up to.”

Wolf nodded grimly. “Palio hates my guts. He’d act on a long chance if he thought it would give him an advantage over me. If the *Starquest* has actually fallen into his hands, it’s the worst thing that could possibly happen. Palio’s insanely ambitious. With our Hyperdrive to back him up, he’ll be able to rule all space. Nobody will be able to touch him.”

Wolf clenched his hands, his features bleakly set. “I’ve got to go to Luree, Carl. If Palio has the *Starquest*—and Arn—he must be stopped from going any further.”

“But it’s suicide!” Vierling said in swift protest. “You wouldn’t have a chance against Palio and his killers.”

THE luscious female with the green-tinted hair and the clinging strapless gown leaned precariously over the back of Hunk Palio’s big desk chair. Outside the one-way vision glass of the office wall swirled what, at first glance, might be taken for the last word in sybaritic living. With closer study, it would have been seen as one of the most vicious dives in all the seventeen colonial worlds.

“Hunk,” sugared the girl in the green hair-do, “what was that big ship the boys brought in last night? Everybody acts mysterious when I try to find out what happened.”

Hunk Palio was a little drunk on *negus*. Otherwise he would have cuffed her for being so nosey.

“It’s the biggest job I ever pulled off, that crate, baby. You’ll find out soon enough. So will the rest of the jerks that think they can push Hunk Palio around. No more, baby! I’m top dog, now?”

The green-haired “baby” patted his dark, bristly cheek. “That’s the stuff, Hunk. Show ’em who’s boss.”

Palio pushed himself away from the littered desk, lit a cigar and stood up. He pushed one thick, stubby finger against her pert nose.

“Just remember that ship is a secret, Janie. If anybody asks questions about it, I want to know. We may have spies here, on Luree, and I’ll pay a bonus if you turn them up. String along with me, baby—we’re in the top orbits, now.”

A nasty glitter showed for an instant in his deep-set black eyes. A command—and a warning. Then he turned and strode heavily out of the office where he could sit and watch the whole of the big salon outside without himself being seen. Janie watched his bulky figure on the short, powerful legs, and a hidden abhorrence flickered into her long-lashed gray eyes. After a moment she left the office also, to

stand by the glassite wall of the ornate dine-and-dance part of the observation dome which stretched over the huge structure.

Luree had once been planned for a kind of deluxe astrophysical laboratory, long before the space gangs had broken up the tenuous fabric of government trying to establish itself across the void that separated the seventeen colonies. Where Janie stood, you could look out and see the vast carpet of glowing, turning magical circles that added themselves together to make up the rings of Saturn. Seen this close, the rings were awe-inspiring. The builders of Luree—as Hunk Palio had named the place after he took over, Luree being his idea of poetry and expressing his concept of a proper name for a sucker-trap—had planned the big dome so the best rooms of the vast place were against the glassite outer wall.

The pirates had long since killed off the original scientific staff of the Nio observatory. Hunk was its third owner, the others having died by violence. It had been a long twenty years since the pirates had gotten hold of superior weapons and faster ships and blasted the feeble beginning of the Interplanetary Police Patrol almost out of existence. They still existed, however, and had a few ships, but everyone knew the IP was under the gang's central offices.

Nobody ruled the gangs, really. Not yet. But to operate efficiently, they had established a joint central office and organization for fair distribution of information. It was called, jocularly, "Missions, Inc."

The "missions" were pirate raids, involving mass murder and wholesale appropriation of goods, and often meant the establishment of another stronghold in the gang network.

"Missions" had a branch office in each big colonial city, but the main office of correlation of data and disposal of portable goods was on Earth, in good old New York. Each gang had its own area of space, received information useful in its particular area, and hence supported Missions, Inc. There were arguments, true, but on the whole the system worked. The IP was a useless figurehead, for the central office of Missions, Inc. ruled space.

The rings of Saturn are only about ten miles thick, but it's a deadly ten miles to jet a ship through. A lot of stuff circles the big world, including the planetoid on which the big glassite dome of Luree had been built. This planetoid, Nio, was not one of Saturn's moons, but an outer fragment of the rings, little more than a big rough rock of huge size.

JANIE of the green-dyed hair watched the vast carpet of glowing dust, studded with the varicolored round flowers that marked the larger chunks of rock in the rings, Each rock had its own little ring of fluorescing rock dust, which made the rings of Saturn the most beautiful sight in all space. The rings were one reason for Luree's steady trade. Every space tourist "just had to see the rings of Saturn." Hunk Palio had grabbed off the big dome that circled the rings at just the right distance to observe the phenomena at its best—and turned it into a tourist resort with red-light attachments. Janie was one of the attachments. She didn't have any choice in the matter, as everybody in the colonies did what the gangs told them to do.

Janie was only twenty-five, and she had spent seven of those years in abject servitude right here, on Nio. She often wondered how it would feel to be free and have a real home to go to. She had never had one.

Aside from gambling, exotic foods, liquors and narcotics, women were the stock in trade on Luree—and Hunk Palio saw to it that they cost his customers plenty. It was mainly for this reason that Palio was becoming recognized as the most powerful of the gang bosses. The IP had long been forced to wink at every predation connected with Palio's name—had to, or be wiped out. For Palio could call

down upon them more and better fighting ships than the IP dreamed of possessing.

A customer, a large, paunchy man with a red nose, moved into tentative position beside Janie. Absently she pulled the little gun-like device from the jeweled holster on her hip and sprayed the ray from its muzzle upon the plump countenance of the newcomer. His color changed from doughy white to dull red, and his big flabby hand went to her shoulder. He smiled, displaying a mouthful of expensive dental work. Janie hated him, but smiled affectionately.

“What’s your name, big boy?”

“Will Mather’s my label, beautiful. What’s yours? Do you work here, or are you just a visitor admiring the scenery?”

“As if you didn’t know!” Janie retorted. “Only girls that work here have the Afdar ray. Do you like the effect?”

“It sure puts ginger into the old carcass!” the man said enthusiastically. “Makes me feel like a two-year-old. But what is the idea of using it on customers?”

“It’s supposed to make them feel generous. Can you afford the tariff?”

Janie was a little doubtful. Somehow he looked like a family man, and her take was down, this week. She knew what happened to little girls who didn’t bring in the shekels. They were sent places—places she hoped she wouldn’t have to go for a long time yet. She didn’t want to waste her time on a sucker who would go running off to his wife instead of getting down to business.

The man laughed, a rich hee-haw, as if it were ridiculous to suggest there existed anything he couldn’t afford. Janie knew exactly what that meant—she’d heard it before. It meant he’d already spent more than he had expected to spend. She smiled and ducked under his arm, moving off along the glassite wall and watching the crowd for a more likely prospect.

And then she saw Arn Vierling; *Arn Vierling*—here!

Her mind went back seven years, to the time when she was a little fool trying to break into show business. Arn was a successful actress, then. Janie had read the papers avidly when Arn married the famous Ray Vierling, inventor of the deadly Vierling ray. That ray was now used on every ship in space and carried on the hip of every hoodlum who liked to think of himself as a killer.

Arn looked different, and Janie wondered what the other had been doing to herself. You would think she was disguised. She was thinner, her lovely profile sharply etched instead of softly beautiful, her eyebrows mere pencil-lines instead of the dark bars that were almost a trademark of Arn’s. It must be her—yet...

JANIE moved up beside her, drawn by an attraction compounded of curiosity, admiration and the old childish worship of the successful stage star. She sat at a little table near the corner of the huge bar. In a whisper that couldn’t have been heard two feet away, Janie said, “Hello, trouper, don’t tell me you’re incognito?”

Janie’s voice was hesitant. She’d met Arn only twice, and it was likely the woman wouldn’t remember her. But she needn’t have worried. The long, bare lovely arm lifted and gracefully tugged her closer with an odd gesture of familiarity, as though Janie were in truth an old friend.

The deep, thrilling voice that millions had listened to, murmured in a stage whisper that could have been heard half across the huge barroom.

“Do sit down and be sociable. I’m lonesome.”

Janie bent closer, a kind of fright rising in her at being so close. The thrilling voice was almost inaudible in her ear now.

“If you recognize me, don’t give me away, you little fox! I’m here on business, and I’m nobody you know.”

Then her voice raised again, that infinitely beguiling voice that could change so subtly, become softly intimate or coldly hostile.

“So you’re an entertainer in this delightful”—the voice sank again to a murmur you couldn’t have understood two feet away—“bordello! Now act like you never saw me before.”

The voice went up again, for the benefit of the audience craning at the two beautiful women. “This is really the most delightful”—her voice slid down again—“dive I ever got into. I hope I get out alive! How do you put up with it?”

Janie let her own voice out for the benefit of the milling customers, engineers from Titan’s mines, construction men from the boom towns on Rhea, crewmen from the big space docks on Iapetus, mechanics from the factories on Callisto, tourists, spaceship officers.

“Luree gives the most magnificent view of the rings to be had anywhere on the moons.” Her own voice sank to a whisper. “And believe me, I’m sick and tired of looking at them! Don’t worry, I won’t give you away. I hate this place and everyone in it. If you need my help—”

The long, graceful arm came out and almost fiercely pulled her closer. Arn hissed, “Is it here—the ship?”

Janie nodded, and Arn went on, “Tell me what you can about it, where it is and what Palio plans to do with it. This is important—horribly important!”

Her voice raised. “I want you to tell me all about this wonderful spa of the stars, honey! It’s really the most fascinating...”

THE gangs were ruled by chieftains who had won office as the result of superior intelligence, superior fighting prowess, or a combination of both. Each gang was for the most part an independent organization, though here and there the smaller and weaker gangs had banded together for their mutual benefit. The advantages of a union on an even greater scale were generally realized. A few attempts had been made to unite the gang under one leadership—unsuccessful attempts, for the proud and lawless spirit of the hijackers was not to be easily fettered by order and routine. Enormous wealth, enormous power awaited the man who could accomplish it. But that man would have to have what the others did not. The most important requirements were faster ships, better weapons.

Janie of the green-tinted hair thought of this as she watched the awe-inspiring spectacle of the rings beyond the observation dome. Behind her soft doll-like face was a shrewd mind that few suspected.

Faster ships? Was the mysterious craft that had just come into Hunk Palio’s possession the answer to that? Time alone would tell. But she knew of the vast ambitions that burned in the man’s apish body. Palio liked to think of himself as the emperor of the gangs, controlling the rich tides of commerce that flowed between Saturn and Jupiter, waxing fat on the unending stream of tributes and levies that poured in.

It was as an important step toward the fulfillment of those ambitions, Janie knew, that Palio had

established Luree as a pleasure resort. For by not directly competing in the hijack activities of the other gang chieftains, Palio won friends where he might have made enemies. And thus Nio—the planetoid-sized outer fragment of Saturn’s rings on which Luree was situated—became neutral ground. The various chieftains and their underlings could visit Luree without fear of attack by rival gangs. Palio’s “diplomatic corps”—suave bouncers, carefully trained for their duties—saw to that. And Palio’s fighting crews were constantly on the ready for those who might seek to pluck the rich prize that was Luree.

Luree was the bright bait that Palio dangled before the gang chieftains. Luree catered to every whim, every desire and vice, from gambling to petal-fleshed houris, strong liquors and exotic foods to narcotics as vicious as Venusian *caffi* smoke. The chieftains came, saw—were subtly conquered. In his role as an ingratiatingly considerate host, Palio learned of their strengths and weaknesses, their enmities and ambitions. This information was carefully recorded, added to and altered, against the time when it would be of use. When Palio finally was ready to shift from guile to force, he would know exactly what type of force to apply and exactly where to apply it.

Jane realized that Palio’s crafty schemes had an excellent chance of success. The thought filled her with an emotion akin to horror. Nothing worse could possibly happen than that Palio’s control should be extended beyond Nio and to the ring-worldlets and satellites of Saturn. Palio was evil. He spread rottenness through everything he touched. No one could know that better than a person who had been a part of Luree as long as Janie had.

And once, she thought bitterly, she’d had considered Luree a glamorous and romantic place. She knew better, now. She knew of the lives wrecked by gambling and drugs, of the slavery that existed here, of the misery and lost hope, the depravity and viciousness lurking beneath the surface. She would have liked nothing better than to destroy Luree—and Palio with it. Especially Palio. If her chance ever came—

A man appeared suddenly, close beside her, slipping an arm with sly familiarity about her waist. He had approached with a quiet stealth that was somehow in keeping with his narrow foxy face and close-set eyes.

“What are you doing, Janie, admiring the scenery?”

She twisted aside, startled, and then angry. “Oh, it’s you, Shiv. How many times have I told you to keep your paws off me?”

“Aw, why can’t you be nice, Janie?”

“Ask Hunk that question. You may be his right hand man, but that’s no excuse to get fresh.”

“Why should he care?” Shiv demanded sullenly. “You ain’t Hunk’s woman. You ought to know the only reason he keeps you around is because you’re good at helping run things, here. You know, Palio went out on a job to take Ben Wolf’s gal, that blonde Vierling woman. But he got something worth a lot more to him. But you wouldn’t know...”

Janie hid her sudden excitement. She saw she would have to handle Shiv just right if she were to get any more information out of him. The worried expression on his foxy face showed he had revealed more than he had intended to.

She flipped one slim hand in a scornful gesture. “I know your cheap tricks, Shiv, so don’t try to run my temperature up. I heard a rumor about the ship, but this blonde angle is carrying things too far.”

“That ship’s something different, Janie. There’s nothing like it in all space.”

“Where have I heard that before?” Janie murmured. “Next thing I know, Shiv, you’re going to tell me

this mysterious blonde is right here, in Luree.”

“No, she didn’t happen to be around. But the blonde’s a friend of Ben Wolf. Wolf wasn’t around when the boys grabbed the crate. They made sure he wouldn’t be, because this Ben Wolf is tough and full of tricks. I happen to know he’s the one guy Hunk really worries about. Anyhow, the boys brought back the fastest ship in existence—and Palio will get that blonde eventually, you know how he is. Just to get even with Ben, if for no other reason. So you better be friends with Shiv, girl. He won’t have any use for you when he gets her.”

Janie fought to control a strange weakness that had rushed over her. She kept her voice casual. “Ben Wolf? Isn’t he the guy who used to be a big shot hijacker before he got a rush of science to the head, or something like that? This was before Hunk took over Luree.”

Shiv nodded. “Hunk never got anywhere until Ben Wolf pulled out of the racket. Wolf made him look like a monkey plenty of times, and Hunk ain’t ever forgotten. That’s one reason why he had the boys grab that ship. Wolf gave up hijacking to work on that ship, Janie. Now Hunk’s evened up the score.”

“Oh, my!” Janie felt as if her heart had dropped right out of her, but she put her hands to her head in mock bewilderment. “This is all too complicated for poor little me. I’m going to have a drink and forget the fairy tale you just told me, Shiv.”

The fox-faced man caught at her arm. His close-set eyes were eager. “Don’t I get something for telling you, Janie? Every word of it’s on the level.”

“You’ll get a hole in your head if you don’t keep your paws where they belong! You didn’t tell me anything I should owe you for.”

Shiv anxiously caught up with her as she turned away. “Listen, Janie, don’t tell anybody what I just said. If Hunk finds out I talked, there’ll be trouble. He doesn’t want a word to leak out to Ben Wolf.”

“Why should I tell anybody what I don’t believe myself?” Janie asked scornfully. She hurried away, leaving Shiv to stare after her, worried, disappointed and angry.

Shiv Fraddin realized he had been a dope to reveal anything to Janie. He had dimly hoped to win her over, but she had proved as elusive as always. If she talked, Hunk Palio would know who had spilled the beans. And Shiv didn’t want any trouble with Hunk—not when his plans for double-crossing Hunk and taking over Luree were just getting under way. Shiv knew he had to get more of Hunk’s underlings over on his side before he would have a fighting chance. Hunk was no pushover.

Something would have to be done about Janie. Shiv Fraddin decided to take care of that right away. He would have to be subtle—but he was good at that. He could easily make it look as if some miner, half crazy from *caffi* smoke, had done her in...

PUFFING on his cigar, Hunk Palio strode leisurely through the vast dining hall of Luree. This hall was shaped like a shallow bowl, with tiers of tables rising on all sides from a gleaming dance floor at the bottom. Nearly all the tables were occupied, many with opaque light curtains switched on to afford privacy to the diners. Couples swayed sinuously on the dance floor to the undulant minor-key wailing of a Venusian band.

Palio waved his thick paw jovially as a number of the diners called out to him, pausing at several tables to exchange a few words. In this manner he proceeded through the dining room and into the cavernous gaming hall, beyond, where avid-faced crowds pressed about the gaming tables or stood at the vast semi-circular bar. The whir and clatter of gaming devices was drowned in the polyglot babble of

half a hundred different tongues as men of the various races of Earth strove with white-skinned Venusians and furred Martians to make themselves heard above the din. Here flamboyantly garbed hijackers and their painted women rubbed elbows with roughly dressed miners and uniformed spacemen with radiation-scarred faces, engineers and mechanics mingled with arrogant ranchers and lordly plantation owners. All were motes in the vast tides of trade that flowed between the satellites of Jupiter and Saturn, drawn by the manifold attractions of Luree, emptying their wealth with fevered abandon into the coffers of Hunk Palio.

And Hunk Palio listened to the pleasant tinkle of incoming riches, even as his black eyes darted about to see that his suavely impassive housemen and scanty-gowned hostesses were on the job. But actually his thoughts were elsewhere.

Maybe it was because he had met so few women like her in his lifetime. She was tall and pliantly slender, yet curved like a sculptured goddess, her luxuriant blonde hair framing a delicate oval face made vivid by full red lips and dark violet eyes. But she had more than physical loveliness. She had class... The word embraced qualities Palio had rarely encountered in women—intelligence, refinement, grace, poise. Those very qualities, so foreign to his experience, set his blood on fire. The blonde was something special, something off the beaten track.

Palio needed the blonde for the information stored in her beautiful head—but why stop there? he asked himself. His breathing quickened Palio needed that information if the ship was to be of any use to him. He had gotten wind of the craft through purchases made on Titan by Ben Wolf—purchases that were supposed to have been secret. But in Luree Palio had the roots of a grapevine through which the news of all the seventeen colonial worlds eventually flowed. His hostesses had been trained to milk important facts from drunken clerks, engineers and spacemen.

Ben Wolf's purchases had borne out rumors that he was engaged in some project of a scientific nature. Knowing Ben Wolfe, Palio had realized that the man never wasted time in minor pursuits. The stakes were always high in any game Ben Wolf played. So Palio had decided to investigate. He'd had Ben Wolf followed from Titan to a certain world-let in Saturn's rings—and then he'd laid his plans. The result had been the ship. The blonde, he'd missed—

She was Ben Wolf's girl. Through her, Palio told himself, he could strike directly at Wolf. Palio had hated Wolf ever since the days when he had been only a minor hijack chieftain and Wolf had dominated the racket with his greater cleverness and daring. Palio had been made to look like a monkey more than once—and he hadn't forgotten. Now it was in his power to even the score twice over.

Grinding underfoot the butt of his cigar, he strode deliberately from the gambling salon.

BEN Wolf's eyes were twin flames of anger, as he and the old inventor completed their move from the ruined "Lab" on the rock to another rock, nearer to Nio, where they could watch the activities of the Palio gang with a scope across some four hundred miles of glowing space.

"We've got to get the ship back, Carl! You know the IP can't and won't go up against Luree. And with our drive, Hunk Palio and his murderers will rule all space. They'll be Emperors of the most evil era in history, unless we find a way to get that ship. No one will be able to touch them!"

Vierling shook his head, "It's an impossible thing, Ben. We couldn't oppose the gangs before, how do you expect to do it now they have the best drive in existence? Sure, I know we've got to try. But it's suicide, however you look at it."

Ben swung the scope on its gymbals, and old Carl turned up the projector. The wall screens lit up with a view of the surface of Nio, the planetoid where Luree's dome had been built. This place, where

Ben and old Carl had moved, was Vierling's own private hideaway, burrowed out of the rock, equipped with luxurious living quarters, the big scope, and a small workshop where he tinkered with his inventions. They were trusting that Hunk did not know its location, as they had always been at pains to keep it secret. Carl moved the focus closer, to a view of the launching pits on Nio, hundreds of miles away across the rings. Nio was at its closest approach to their position. Luree was on the other side of the satellite. This was Palio's back door, the side the suckers never got to see, where his ships took off on raids and brought in the loot. It was also the place where the fruit of long years of toil on the part of Ben Wolf, Carl Vierling, and the four others now dead, had been taken.

Arn Vierling came in, her features Hushed and her eyes sparkling. Both men stared at her in stunned inaction a moment, then eagerly hurried in her direction. Vierling clasped her in his arms and said: "Arn, you're all right."

Arn said, "I've just come from Luree. The ship is still there."

"I thought you were a captive!" exclaimed Ben.

"No, I hid while the gang was here. I took the little life-raft and followed them, to learn who they were. In Luree, I acted like a customer-tourist, met a hostess I used to know on the stage. She told me." The old man motioned to the scurrying figures about the pits, where two great hulls were moving slowly out to launching position from the wide doors of the shops. He growled, "There go two more raiders, now. Loaded with non-standard ray, a hundred extra gun ports built into her sides. The IP hasn't a thing like them."

Vierling ran his fingers through his hair, his features mirroring hopelessness. "What can we do? There's no way to get back anything that falls into Palio's hands."

Arn swore suddenly, which was unusual with her. "Damn them! A few more months, and they'll be able to take over Earth itself!"

Ben turned the knob on the scope, and the focus moved closer. They could see the tiny figures on the black rocks, loading another squat gray hull with tools of death and readying it for space.

His voice steady and decided, Ben said, "If we had the Starquest, we could clean Palio out. I am going to try to steal her back. I am going to try to get into her there in the shops."

Arn Vierling leaned forward, her face suddenly intense. "You're needed here, Ben! I'll go. I can get in easy—as I just proved. I mingled with the customers when they came out for a look around outside the dome, then wandered in with them. Nobody knew I didn't come in on one of the tourist ships. And nobody paid any attention to me."

Ben shook his head. "It's no job for a woman, Arn. You'd have to kill guards—rough work even for a killer. Carl couldn't do it. I've *got* to do it!"

Arn's expression was stubborn. "If there's any way to get that ship, I'm the one to make it succeed. You and Dad wouldn't have a chance."

Gloomily Ben turned the knob, watching the scene shimmer and go out. "They'll spot you in time, Arn. Do you think any man would ever forget your face, once he saw it?"

Arn laughed, a rich bold laugh. On the stage, that laugh had thrilled the world, and it was thrilling, now.

"A lot you know about women! Why, I can get Hunk Palio to show me that ship himself, if I want to!"

Vierling said, “Ben’s right, Arn. They’ll spot you if you go back. You’re too striking to mix in a crowd like that. They’re probably asking what became of you, right now—trying to figure out who you were and where you went.”

Ben added, “Arn Vierling’s face is as familiar as the Vierling gun to those criminals. You can’t make it, Arn! They’ll know who you are. They know Vierling was financing this ship by now. They must have known who he was when they thought they killed him.”

Arn set her beautiful jaw. “You two may have cold feet—but you’re not giving them to me! Don’t forget I’m an actress, one of the best. With a different hair-do and makeup, you’d pass me on the street yourself. I’m going—and that’s final!”

The two men stood silent. Ben wished there was some hope, wished this sacrifice didn’t have to be made. Loving Arn, he could not bear the thought of her loss. There had already been too much death among them...

They had been seven in the beginning. Now they were but three, old Carl Vierling, with his shock of white hair and worried ruddy face—Arn, his acquired daughter, and Ben Wolf, the one-time hi-jack chief turned from his former way of life by the influence of Arn and the savant—and the possibility of decent law inherent in the power of the new drive.

It had been a whim of Vierling’s to build his shops and his home on different rocks of the rings—a whim with plenty of sense behind it. For the gangs had taken his Vierling weapon ray factories over, on Earth—and he had learned by bitter experience that only by perfect concealment could his inventions be kept out of the hands of lawless man. Now they had taken his greatest achievement from him, and it was a bitter and despairing man who faced Ben across the scope.

This “home” was an ideal shelter, for from the surface there was no sign of the chambers beneath. There was a fine view of Luree, an accident they now found might prove of some use. Nio passed the rock in which they hid frequently, as the one was retrograde in motion to the rings, and the other circled with the rings. The hideout had plenty of room, supplies were kept in plentiful amounts—and Vierling’s workshop was in reality a well-equipped laboratory. But they both regretted giving up the big shop where they had built the *Starquest* through the last three years of hermit-like concealment, of impossibly demanding ruses and dodges to keep their purpose from general knowledge. There was also in one of the big rock chambers a small three passenger model of the *Starquest*, the first experimental construction in which the new vortex hyper-drive had proven practical.

It was decided that Ben was to take Arn with him to Nio, and the two made their preparations. There was no longer any reason to conceal the drive; the gangs already had it. They might need its superior speed, so they took the little model which had been the pattern for the big *Starquest*.

Finally the little ship moved quietly away from the hide-out, the rock dust of the ring fluorescing faintly ahead where the vortices gripped the nothingness, drawing them on. Inside, Arn watched Ben handle the ship, making sure she knew just how. She might have to pilot the big *Starquest*, if she managed to get into it, on Nio.

The satellite was at its closest. There was little more than four hundred miles of glowing emptiness to cross, and shortly they settled down in the black rock shadows at a safe distance from the big dome of Luree.

“How did you get inside the place, before, Arn?” asked Ben. He shivered slightly, and fingered the little acid gun old Carl had given him just before they left. It was an invention he had never tried to market, because it was the last word in frightfulness. The thing was in a holster under his arm, an unfamiliar shape, very different from the snub-nosed Vierling rays used generally.

Arn rubbed her fishbowl with anti-condensation fluid, her beautiful face grim. “Just mix with a bunch of tourists. You’ll see them jumping around, having fun with the lack of gravity. When they go back into the dome, go in with them. That way there’s no questions to answer. Once in, stay where you can see me and follow my lead. That is, unless you get some ideas of your own. And stay away from Hunk Palio’s hostesses, you hear!”

Setting their fishbowls in place, they let themselves out of the ship. They moved in long leaps toward the distant glow of lights within the great dome ahead.

BEN Wolf had been five years away from this atmosphere of lusty and lustful merrymaking, behind which he knew only too well hid the merciless figures of Palio’s henchmen—as ruthless a gang as any in space. Now, he found he felt out of place, did not know how to act to remain inconspicuous. It was this caused his first mistake. He moved with the crowd to the bar and downed a couple of quick shots to give the impression of a thirsty man out to acquire a good shine.

He knew, but had forgotten, that sobriety was not tolerated on Luree’s crowded floors, except among the employees. He had forgotten that all newcomers first drinks were spiked with drugs, to put a sober and cautious man into a liberal frame of mind. The drugs had the quality, certain as death, of causing hiatus during which even a tightwad could be separated quickly from his dough.

So Ben Wolf, would-be out-smarter of the toughest gang in space, found himself looking about him with eyes behind which the mind was not only out of order, but full of a sudden new will toward enjoying what the occasion might offer in entertainment.

A green-haired hostess turned from the dice room doorway to look over the crowd. She wore a little toy gun in a jewelled holster on one sleek hip, and seeing Ben’s flushed face, she recognized the condition, new to Ben, old stuff to her. She pulled the toy-gun, pointed it, and he felt the sudden ecstatic shock of strange vibration, arousing in his numbed mind an unholy desire for the green-haired houri. Which was exactly the purpose of the “toy,” an ancient instrument built by the Afdar cult of Venus, forbidden by Earth-law.

The hostess moved off, confident of her victim’s pursuit. Ben followed, staggering a little, and caught up with her as she seemed to attempt to escape from him into the throng. As he stumbled into her, she smiled widely at his clumsiness, and seized his arm in an unexpectedly firm grasp. Her urgent voice in his ear sobered him for an instant, drove away the clouds from his mind.

“You fool, if anyone recognizes you! Now pretend you’re trying to make me, and maybe I can help you.”

Ben stood paralyzed. “Who are you? How do you know me?” he asked, trying desperately to recapture his drugged wits.

Vaguely, then, a chill remembrance of his position here seeped into his consciousness. Hunk himself would recognize him if he ran into him—and others of the gang must know him by reputation, if not by sight.

She led him along the wall, as if she had only paused for a word with a persistent customer, and Ben followed, half a step behind.

A stairway came out upon a narrow gallery, leading around the upper part of the huge dome, a breathless height above the transparent ceilings below.

Overhead the monstrous glow of Saturn hung, a great mottled belt about its middle, blood-orange

and milk-white. Ben, always struck with awe at close sight of the rings, watched the complex movements, dark specks and twirling circles against the brighter glow of the rings. He knew each speck would seem big as a mountain on closer view. But here, on Nio, the rings were an immense carpet of fire decorated with fragile flowers of flame.

The green-haired girl was leaning against the glassite of the dome, her eyes on his searchingly. She was inviting lipped, her red mouth parted, her body as perfect even as Arn's. Ben's usual standard of comparison. His tongue was thick in his mouth as he strove to question her, but she cut him off.

"Why did you come here, Ben Wolf? Do you want to make it easier for Palio to kill you? Don't you realize the gang doesn't want the knowledge of that drive in anyone else's hands?"

"Did Arn tell you?" mumbled Ben, trying desperately to reassemble his faculties, to get it straight in his mind. He still couldn't understand easily, his mind numb.

"She didn't have to tell me! But I knew Arn, years ago, in show-business. I know you came here in a desperate try to get back that ship. But to me it doesn't make sense."

Ben looked at her with anger, that a woman should think he was too incompetent to do something that had to be done. He shook his head to clear it.

She swung up the little pistol ray, the stimulating vibration splashed over his face, down his body. The thing woke him up, but it also awoke every gland in his body. He trembled with the shock of the sudden stimulation.

"Shut that off, woman. You know what it does!"

"Who'd know better? But it'll help your mind shake off the dope."

"How can I trust you? I can't I trust anyone here."

"You'll have to trust me! You'll need all the help you can get. If I had any sense I'd stay a mile away from you. But I owe Hunk a score or two. I'd like to pay him off, as he's trying to do to you."

THE green haired girl's voice was going on, a kind of strained quiet little talking, half to herself. "The space gangs have turned everything in the colonies into corruption. They run everything except Earth. But now they'll be able to boss Earth, too, and there'll never come a chance to get rid of them. Girls like me, everywhere, will be slaves, too, like me. You don't know what it means to do what I have to do, do you? I wish you did. I hate the racket and everything it does to people. That's why you can trust me."

Feet clumped on the metal ladder, leading to the narrow gallery where they stood. Ben guessed this was it; he could see it on the girl's face, knew she was right. The hoods knew who he was, had spotted him when he came in. They were going to take him now, while he was up here where the customers wouldn't see the rough stuff.

Ben felt the old-time thrill, a chill flame up his back, and the last traces of his mental blackout left him in a rush of anger at the way they had taken old Vierling's life-work from him. He pulled out the acid gun the old man had given him, and moved softly over to the top of the ladderlike stair. He hated to use this weapon on *any* human being. But he would, if they made him. It was silent, swift as thought in its unbelievably fierce corrosive action—far more sure than any bullet. Old Carl had tried to explain to him what went into the creation of that ultra-swift acid, but he had not been able to understand, Ben was scared of the thing himself. Wherever it touched flesh, the flesh boiled away, instantly, and the utter agony of the victim made him incapable of even firing a gun in retaliation.

His mind stopped racing, settled into its accustomed cold wariness, as a face came up out of the gloom at the stair end, glowing ghoulishly in the dimness.

“What do you want?” murmured Ben, the gun steady in his hand.

The man seemed surprised, stood frozen, with only his head above the floor of the gallery. Then his voice came into the glow-lit dimness, truculent, confident of the usual frightened subservience to the powers behind him.

“I’m looking for a guy who’s looking for trouble. I figure you’re the one, though I never laid eyes on you before. No one else would be expecting me, with a gun in his hand.”

The man had a weapon in his own hand, loosely, he had not expected to run head on into his victim, evidently. He didn’t raise the gun, but just stood, waiting, watching Ben with a greedy eye, hoping to get a chance to use his weapon.

“Drop it,” growled Ben, “I don’t want to kill you.”

“You can’t pull that stuff around here, Mister.” The man’s eyes were unworried, “You’d better put away that water pistol and come along to see the boss. He wants to talk business and I gather you know why.”

Wolf backed away a step. He didn’t want to take a chance of the acid doing any splashing.

“Drop the gun, and then I’ll go with you. You’re the one looking for trouble,” Ben hated to do it, kept mentally putting off the necessity of using the terrible acid gun. The guy was only taking orders.

“Listen, Mister, I *can’t* take you in that way! He’d put me in the mines if I let a customer take my gun. Be reasonable!”

“Sorry. It’s your life, you can lose it now, or later. Drop the gun!”

The weapon was a Vierling ray, from the old man’s factory, now in the hands of “Missions, Inc.” It was the same weapon mounted on the front of the big armored spacers, only smaller. It didn’t look any smaller as the man raised it slightly, and Ben’s reflex action pulled the pressure release on the acid gun. The hood’s face disappeared in a silent boiling froth. Too instantly agonized even to scream, he fell out of sight down the metal ladder. Ben knew he was dead when he hit the bottom. He turned back to the girl, but she was nowhere in evidence. Well, that did it. He had to go places in a rush now, or be shot down on sight.

He moved quickly along the gallery, and he had nearly completed the circuit of the big dome when he found his green haired friend again. She stood in a little opening in the glassite which led out along the side of the dome. You couldn’t go out there without a fish-globe and oxygen. She had a globe on her head and handed him one as he came up to her.

“We’ve got to cross the dome and get into the shops on the other side. It’s a long go, you know, the shops are almost on the other side of Nio.”

“You’ll guide me to the ship, girl?” asked Ben, hardly able to believe it.

“If people are ever going to be free of the gangs, it’ll be some woman like me who makes it possible, I suppose,” she murmured, watching him attach the globe and tank to his back, hooking up the catch for him. “Why wouldn’t I show you where the thing is? You’ll only get killed trying to get into it. It’s heavily guarded. But if you’re ever going to stop it, to get the drive back before they build a thousand of them—now is the time.”

BEN turned on the little tank of oxygen tucked it in the sack provided, hung it on his shoulder. He followed the woman out into the blackness where a tiny walkway ran along the curve of the dome. He wished he hadn't had to start things off this way. Arn would be left behind, now, if he did get into the ship, and he would have ruined any chance she might have had... but it couldn't be helped. Besides, why was he thinking he was up to anything but suicide? He was alone against hundreds.

The walk came out upon a long roof. They crossed, taking six-foot jumps, running interminably. It was several miles, he knew. They were far from the artificial grav generators now, didn't seem to weigh more than a few pounds. Endlessly the long leaps went on and on, and it seemed hours had passed when a wall jutted up from the bare rock. They leaped to the top and crossed another roof, walking along the ridge. Here they came to a higher wall, and a doorway. The girl went in, and Ben followed her, stood beside her while she dogged the airtight door. They both removed the fish-bowls, and Ben took off his shoes. He looked at the girl's sandals.

"They're sponge rubber soles," she whispered.

He followed her along the catwalk, strung through the steel triangle trusses of the roof. They were above the lights, and every so far little ladders went down to the big fluorescents; he hoped they wouldn't run into some electrician. His foot hit a projecting angle iron where the walkway was braced as it turned at a right angle. He stopped dead. He could see the workmen moving around the dozen or so hulls below. None of them looked up, and a din of hammering and the irregular sparkle of welders told him there was too much racket down there.

"There she is!" The girl stood pointing, and Ben saw the familiar rugged outline of the big ship that had been the focus of his life too many years to think about. There were only two figures near the ship, one at the bow, the other in front of the big air lock at center. Both had beam rifles, bulky super-powered Vierlings. Ben touched his hand to the little acid gun, feeling foolish. It wasn't much for the job ahead. The only way he could reach them from up here was from straight overhead. Could he even get in position to fire? He wondered how it was going to feel to kill a man who wasn't even looking at you.

They moved cautiously ahead. The lights below them and the heavy shadows served for excellent cover.

The racket below drowned out any sound they made. Wolf stopped the girl, whispered: "I don't even know your name, but thanks. I'll take it from here. You'd better get out of the way before the fireworks start."

He moved ahead; she stood watching him for a moment, then went swiftly back and out of sight in the gloom. Wolf crouched low as the men beneath moved about, but no one even looked up. Now he was directly overhead, and could see four more guards, grouped about the walkway that led up the slight rise from the floor of the shop. The ship was on a repair turntable, modeled after the ancient locomotive roundhouse installations. It was crazy to think he could get that hulk out of here unaided... it was probably already partly torn down. He quit thinking and centered himself just over the guard in front of the ship's lock, his little weapon held between his knees, sighting straight down. He squatted slowly, the sights on the man's round protective helmet—the acid might not penetrate the tough plastic that turned a bullet. He pulled the release trigger. The guard straightened, half reached up to pull off the helmet. Then the stuff got through his clothes. Ben guessed it struck into his spine below the helmet edge. He collapsed as if all his strings were cut.

BEN slid along the walk to get over the guard at the bow. The man was moving, walking on around the bow. Ben slid back to the corner of the walk, thinking there was another part of the catwalk that would take him directly over the group at the edge of the turntable. There was not. He put the little gun

back in the holster, pulled himself out on the slim steel angle iron of the truss, slid along the steel precariously. His finger-tips would just reach the big blower-pipe that paralleled the truss.

The guard from the bow joined the group of four, who were talking to a fifth who had come hurriedly up the walk. Wolf knew well what he was saying. The guards looked at their rifles as the messenger talked, pulling off the safeties, checking the little dial on the stock that told the amount of energy still in the magazine of energy-capsules.

They must have just found the man he had killed on the stair. He didn't have time to wonder why it had taken so long. He crouched, teetering there on the three inch angle iron. He took out the acid gun, turned the little knob that spread the spray wider. With luck he could get the whole group.

Aiming carefully, he depressed the full discharge knob, pulled the release. The group froze as the acid struck. Two of them looked up at him, their faces green-white in the glare of the fluorescents, then suddenly brown with acid and then as swiftly red with the bloody boiling bubbles of the acid reaction. Two of them triggered off their rifles even as they fell screaming. The rifles fell, throwing two crashing beams of destruction out across the shops.

Even as Wolf had fired, one of the guards had turned away, to get back to the other side of the ship. Only a droplet or two had struck him, but he was screaming in terrible agony and running, throwing aside his gun, tearing off his clothes in thrashing handfuls, maddened with pain.

Wolf looked around for some way to get down and into that ship, and to get one of those ray weapons. His own little "evener" was empty, now. He laid it down on an angle iron, then on second thought scooped it up and dropped it into the open end of an empty pipe end, disconnected sometime. It would never be found there. The space gangs didn't have that one, yet. Better if they never did. That's the way old Carl wanted it.

A floor pillar beside the turntable came up near him. The pillar was a cross braced girder. Wolf leaped across the space, banged up against it hard, gripping the cross braces. Gravity still wasn't normal, probably about half, to make the work easier. He shinned down the long beam, holding the sides between his hands, not using the braces. He landed in a crouch, scuttled across the littered table floor, grabbed up a rifle. The stench from the steaming bodies was nostril-corroding. He scuttled on around the bow where he stumbled over the body of the man who had ran. He was still moaning, his body arching and racking in agony. Wolf triggered the powerful rifle into his head, letting the brains out on the floor. He didn't look at the mess, but raced on to the big round lock in the side of the ship, a fierce exultation in besting the gang his only emotion.

He heaved on the opening lever. It gave. The door should have swung open, but it didn't! Wolf stood, numbed by the fact, staring at the rims of the door. After a long second, he saw the little tack-welds circling the door. They weren't taking any chances. It was welded shut till the experts arrived to examine her and draw up plans for construction of a number of new drives. Wolf spun the knob on the big rifle to quarter strength, stood back, tried the beam on the bottom weld.

Metal flew, sparkling and glowing. He was nearly blinded by the red hot sparks. He spun the dial on around to nearly off, and touched the beam to the next weld. The soft welding melted swiftly, and he went around the door rapidly. The heavy dura-steel of the door was not affected, being built to turn far heavier destructive force than one Vierling rifle.

Even as he tugged the big disc open, he heard cries from the far side, the pound of running feet. A beam slashed against the door as he ducked behind the dura-steel disk. Bits of the tack-weld metal flew in a shower of molten iron. Ben slammed the door shut, fastened the space-safety. They couldn't open her from outside now, not till he was under weigh.

WOLF dropped the rifle, tugged open the inner lock door, slammed it shut and levered over the main dog, letting the rest of the fastenings wait. His feet hammered along the companionway as he raced for the pilot's seat in the bridge-room. He hoped they wouldn't think to try to get him from the nose. The glassite view plate there might not turn a full-strength Vierling beam. He didn't think they could fire into the nose unless they climbed up into the roof girders, but he wasn't waiting to find out.

Ben gave one look out the oval view-plate, but there was nothing to be seen but the stretches of roof girders. He pulled back the vortex heater switch, depressed the master switch that started the dynamos turning. He counted ten, slowly, then pulled the lift lever.

He ducked as the roof crashed into bits. The crack and scream of rending girders and roof plastic, the hammering of torn materials mingled with the blasting thuds of rifle beams slamming into the hull near the nose. The racket was deafening as he pulled the lift lever all the way back. The nose vortex pulled the ship around on its tail, jerked her out into space. It left Ben Wolf unconscious on the wall at the back of the pilot's compartment. He had forgotten to get into the acceleration seat. The ship roared on, the dynamos heating, the red needles quivering along the whole row of dials. Then somewhere in the ship a main breaker blew, the acceleration stopped. But the *Starquest* was shooting away from Nio, heading for Saturn, just grazing the glowing carpet of little discs that made up the big ring—each ring of glowing dust marking a meteorite, and each one of them potential destruction if the ship's flight-path entered the ring. A mile lower and the *Starquest* would crash right into the rings. Wolf lay unconscious. The great ship skimmed along but milli-seconds of flight distance above the swarming ring rocks.

Back on Nio, Hunk Palio stood with one eye glued to the ocular of his scope, watching the flight of the recaptured *Starquest*. Softly he cursed, watching his plans crumble, his chances for domination speeding away. He ordered out his own fleet of raiders.

“Get that ship or don't come back.” It wouldn't be healthy for the guys responsible for the loss...

Gingerly Palio's ships approached the deadly circle of speeding rocks. Twenty miles above the other ship they jetted along. Then they curved off into courses paralleling the circling rocks of the ring—and Palio knew why. Their atomic jets, powerful as they were, would never bring them back from the vast planet if they followed the *Starquest*—now speeding ever more rapidly down to the glowing belted surface of the still unknown planet. For no ship had ever returned from an attempt to view the surface below the hiding clouds.

* * *

OLD Carl Vierling watched the insane flight of the *Starquest*, too, in the wall screen projected from the scope in the hideaway. His big gnarled fists clenched. He sprang from the swivel chair beside the scope, pulled down a switch that started the generators of the little transmitter and began to bellow into the phone.

“Pull her out, man! What in Hell ails you? Pull 'er out, Ben!”

Inside the nose chamber of the big ship, Ben heard the voice of the scientist, coming from the visiphone just beneath the instrument board in front of the pilot's seat.

He staggered to his feet at the whiplash of the bellowing old voice, the voice of his most loved friend, the man he admired above all others. The sense of peril in the ship, otherwise quiet as a tomb, was electrifying. The vortex was a silent drive, even when it was functioning, and now the automatic breakers had kicked off and the ship was in free fall. Dead ahead glowed the vast billows of the cloud belts of

Saturn, blotting out the rest of space.

Ben did not need more than the sight of the planet ahead to bring him back to full consciousness. Peril struck along his nerves like an electric flash, over and over, and he collapsed into the pilot's seat, pulled back the breaker release, watched the dials jerk, steady, start to register. He was in no mental shape to calculate a tangential course, he only knew with a dead sickening certainty that the radial velocity was far beyond anything this drive had ever been designed to overcome in the short miles remaining. His strength of will alone drove his mind to calculate that his only hope was to set his nose at right angles to his fall and give her every ounce of energy in the dynamos. If the force of his fall could thus be converted into tangential velocity, if he could miss that vast whirling belt of glowing cloud, he would, pendulum-wise, win free by virtue of the very velocity given him by his fall.

His eyes strained, watching the dials for overheating of the dynamos. It would mean death if the breakers blew again. One little fact repeated by the dials gave him a tiny glow of confidence. The nearer he approached the great planet, the stronger were the magnetic fields from which his vortex drive drew supplementary energy. Once he had the ship lined up, feeling it out with his nerves rather than his mind, once he felt the side-wise motion drag at the ship as he pulled away from direct fall, he leaned back, relaxed. If he was going to die, there was nothing more he could do. He didn't even look down as the glowing billows spread out, reached, and engulfed the great ship and lashed over the viewpanes with sprays of what he knew were condensing ammonia droplets.

The vapor now obscured all sight from the viewpane. The ship plunged on and on, and the full velocity he could not even estimate. The drive of the ship pulled him against the back of his seat and the immense gravity hugged him to the lower arm of his seat with a rib-cracking force. Gradually this force seemed to increase until the two pulls became agonizing. He blacked out mercifully. The *Starquest* went on fighting for her life.

Quite suddenly his eyes cleared. He caught a glimpse of a vast and tumbled jumble of mountains, of chasms that seemed to plumb down into the very central fires of the planet. Wolf was nearly unconscious, but wonder leaped within him as he saw that Saturn was not a globe. It was a crazy thrown together mass of non-homogeneous rocks, each the size of Earth's moon or more. Saturn must be a planet that had once exploded, whose heavier parts had reassembled, covered their wounds with clouds of gases, and gone on rotating.

Then like a vision the sight was gone, the clouds of gas again obscuring all sight.

ARN, waiting in the outer "office" of Hunk Palio's quarters for an interview, heard an outbreak of cursing, running feet, sharp barked orders. She knew that something had happened, and breathed a silent prayer it wasn't the death of Ben Wolf. Not waiting to go through with her planned deception of Palio, calculated to impress him with her abilities as an entertainer long enough to get some insight into the inner workings of his organization, she got up and left the waiting room, mingled with the excited milling crowd of tourists and others in the chambers of the Dome. She found most of them peering out through the transparent outer wall, trying to see what had occasioned the flight of a dozen or more big armed spaceships from Nio's other side.

Divining that someone, perhaps Ben, had stolen the *Starquest* again, Arn asked the man nearest her. "What happened, is the place attacked?"

Shiv Fraddin turned from his search among the customers for a missing confederate, for he had decided that now if ever was the time to strike at Palio, while most of the force was out chasing the *Starquest* and the rest were in turmoil as they searched the place for others who might have been with Wolf and who might still be in the Dome.

Shiv recognized her, which changed things considerably. Here was the dame Palio was looking for to get even with Ben, who had just stolen a march on Palio! Shiv could use her himself, later, as a club over Wolf's head—maybe even get the plans to that new drive in exchange for Arn Vierling. She was a valuable hostage. If things turned against him, he might even use her to bargain with Palio.

“Hello baby, where have I seen you before?” Shiv queried, his voice ingratiating.

“You haven't. But you could tell me what's causing all the excitement?” Arn was instantly sorry she had spoken to this individual, for Shiv had a face not calculated to arouse any sentiment but utter distrust.

“Yeh, I might do that, *if* you were nice to me. But not here, the suckers would hear too much. If you would just come along to the private rooms, I could explain where we wouldn't be overheard.”

Arn followed, conquering her inward shudders at the idea of being alone with him. Shiv led her to his own rooms, where he locked the door, turned to her, grinned. “You're going to be here a long long time, baby! I've got plans for you. I happen to know just who you are, so don't try any screaming. Palio won't treat you nearly as nice as Shiv Fraddin. Now just be a good girl, and wait here, and when I've tended to a little urgent business, I'll be back. Bye-bye...”

Shiv moved smoothly away from her, into the other room, locked the other door from the outside, and with a chuckle moved on to bring his plans for a turnover in the management of the Dome to a head. Arn Vierling found herself the prisoner of a man she didn't even know, and knew by his actions that he was not shutting her in for Palio's benefit, but for his own. After a heartsick moment, she set about finding a way out of the place, but her efforts were barren.

GRADUALLY the agony of the weight on Ben's right side decreased, he moved his arm, straightened out his spine, shifted an agonizingly cramped leg. He began to breathe, and even as his breath came back into his stifled lungs, the clouds of glowing stuff was gone, the vast circles of the rings spread their ceiling of glowing flowers overhead. He had pulled out of a dive no other ship had ever taken and survived! The *Starquest* had passed a more rigid test for survival than any other would ever dare to give her!

“Ben!” Vierling spoke anxiously into the visiphone. Ben's heart leaped as the old man's voice rasped at him. “Lad, I'm listening with my heart in my neck. Say something, for God's sake!”

Ben drew his breath deep with agonized lungs. “Tell me where the boys from Nio are. I don't want to say much, Carl!” Ben managed in gasps of labored breath.

“Man, is it a relief to hear from you! I was sure you were unconscious when you took that crazy dive. The gang pulled back from your trail when you entered the clouds. Some circled the rings clockwise, others the opposite, figuring your course would continue in the same plane as the rings.”

“Can you see me in the scope, Carl?”

“I don't want to tip off your location in case they're listening, Ben. Don't tell me where to look. Just work your way back when you get a chance.”

Ben took his bearings, and was overcome with his good fortune. His wild unguided course had brought him out around the northern pole of Saturn. Nio was on the far side and on the edge of the outer ring. He couldn't have figured on a better escape course if he had planned it. There was no sign of pursuit that he could detect, He decided to try and make it back to the hideout, where he knew he and the old scientist could mount some kind of weapons from the store of experimental apparatus—apparatus from which had emerged the Vierling ray, now the most generally used weapon in all space warfare.

“Coming in Dad. Get the door open—” and Ben pulled the switch which cut off the transmitter.

PALIO touched the compact high-velocity pellet gun in its underarm holster. He would undoubtedly need it if the showdown with Shiv Fraddin went the way he planned it. Then, with a last lidded glance around him, he jabbed the opening button at the side of the door to Shiv’s quarters. When the door refused to open, his resolve to have it out with his lieutenant mounted. He was either hiding inside or hiding something—and Palio pulled out his little master-beam which opened any door in the place. Hunk was not one to let his people keep secrets and locked doors from him. He touched the master beam to the lock, and the bolts shot back as the solenoids, whose existence was known only to Palio, acted in response to the beam.

Arn had been hopelessly pacing the floor. She whirled now, startled by Palio’s entrance. Not even her plain plastex coverall—the sort of coverall worn by all space-going individuals because of its comfort and practicality beneath space armor, could dim her loveliness.

In another moment understanding replaced her startlement. For she knew Palio by sight, as he knew her. Palio was far more startled than herself. In a husky, bemused voice, Palio queried:

“You, Arn Vierling, locked in Shiv Fraddin’s rooms! What gives here, anyway?” Then he sneered slightly, as he knew the one way to make people talk was to make them angry enough.

“So, I have stumbled upon a clandestine love nest, eh? And the immaculate Arn Vierling, of all people! I’m positively ashamed that I ever looked up to you.”

Arn put a hand to her face, moved back from Palio in honest bewilderment. She had assumed that Shiv had sent Palio to question her, had no idea of the duel for leadership between Shiv and Palio. The anger at his meaning seeped slowly along her veins, reddened her pale cheeks slightly. Her superb eyes flashed.

“If you ever looked up to anything, it is news, Mr. Palio. Mr. Fraddin locked me in here for purposes known only to himself. I assume you have come to release me?”

Palio grinned, relieved and full of a medley of emotions, fury at Shiv’s evident secret plans, aroused lust at sight of this woman of his enemy’s—Ben Wolf. One slim hand at her throat, Arn backed away as Palio advanced apishly toward her. Might as well amuse himself while he waited for Shiv’s return. Killing Shiv would be a pleasant job, would somewhat relieve the fury that consumed Him at loss of the *Starquest*.

SHIV Fraddin, having rounded up four others of Palio’s forces who had long smarted, under his heavy hand, returned to his quarters to prove his possession of the Vierling woman and to hold a counsel of war before attempting to remove Palio from their path. Palio having lost the *Starquest*—next best thing was having a hostage for whose return they could bargain for the secrets of Vierling’s superior drive. Shiv was full of confidence, sure he had things figured out his way now. He was startled to find his door ajar, flung it open in swift anxiety to make sure that his hostage was there.

The five men stood in a group at the door, each wearing an expression of surprise, amusement, and exultation. For Palio’s back was to the door, and his arms were wrapped about a blonde. He was struggling to bear her backward against the wide cushioned divan. He was making heavy weather of it. The blonde was fighting like a tigress, her slim body heaving and twisting with whiplash swiftness, her bright hair cascading down over her face.

Shiv pulled his own pellet gun in one swift motion, slid through the door and to one side like a snake.

Here was opportunity heaven-sent. His anger at Palio's violation of his privacy and his rights to his captive gave him every excuse for the murder he had long contemplated. The others, also seeing opportunity in the exhibition, put hands to guns and waited Shiv's lead.

Shiv couldn't fire without danger of striking his hostage. His mind, racing, drove him close to Palio's back, and though he hated to lose the chance to make Palio turn and go for his weapon, he swung up his heavy pellet gun and brought the butt down on the gang leader's head.

There was a dull thud of metal striking bone. Palio slumped limply against the blonde Arn and slid to the floor. He lay without moving, his dark face holding an expression of stupid surprise.

Arn dashed the hair out of her face, stared at Fraddin. "Thanks, Mr. Fraddin. I wouldn't have believed it of you." She tried to pull her torn coverall into more decent covering.

"Don't thank me; he had it coming a long time. Just stick with Shiv Fraddin and you'll get out of this alive at least." He turned to the others, fully conscious that if he slipped from here on his hours were limited in number.

"Now we've got to take control before the boys get back and sort out our friends as they unload from the ships. Let's hope Ben Wolf keeps them busy chasing him, and he will. We haven't got a thing that will touch that ship in speed. Legs, you take Jim and get into Hunk's sanctum. He's got an armament in there for just this kind of fracas, and we're going to need it..."

So marshaling his slim forces, Shiv started his campaign for control of the Dome of Luree, and of Palio's whole setup. Listening, Arn finally divined just where she fitted into the man's plans. Her only value to him was as a hostage for Vierling's life work, the Vierling drive.

SOME twenty minutes later, Janie of the green hair-do heard full details of the turn-over from Shiv himself.

Janie was appointed by Shiv to take care of the files and of the outer office until the struggle had settled down to complete order again. She found herself in Hunk Palio's office, alone, the three guards set by Fraddin in the inner sanctum. From a file cabinet she took a map of Luree and traced out a route to Shiv Fraddin's quarters, via the air-conducting shaft. Then she returned the map to the cabinet, and set forth purposefully on a single-handed mission of rescue. So far as she was concerned, Arn Vierling was not going to be any pawn in the gang's plans for domination of space.

Sprawled at full-length in the dark metal tube, Janie fumbled to release the clip fastenings of the outlet grille. Then she pulled the grille toward her and with difficulty slid it back into the tube. There wasn't enough room for free play of arms and elbows.

The opening was small, but Janie was slim and supple. She squirmed through and lowered herself carefully to the floor of Fraddin's suite. Arn was again pacing, wondering just when this thing was going to show a way to freedom again. The sound of Janie's landing out of the air-duct in the next room startled her. She whirled to the connecting doorway—

"Arn! Are you okay? Jeez, I been worried what these gorillas might do with you!"

"Janie!" Arn found herself embracing the little green-haired houri, her heart full of warm gratitude at the advent of a friendly face.

"We haven't time for a lot of gab, Miss Vierling. Shiv is taking over, and there's bound to be gun play before the thing is settled. So far everything's jake. What'd they do with Hunk?"

“I don’t know, Jane, and I’m sure I don’t care, They hauled him out of here like a side of beef, after bouncing a gun butt off his head; but I assume he is still alive somewhere, worse luck. Have you any plans, or is this just a social visit?”

“You know your boy friend, Ben Wolf, got away with the ship?”

“I assumed as much from the talk. I gather they mean to use me as a hostage to get the ship back again.”

“It’s not a silly idea. Your Dad would give in. At least holding you gives them a lever to use against him. Which is the main reason I plan to get you out of here. Come on, girl friend, be glad you’re still slim, and follow me into the air-shaft while there’s a chance.”

It was two bedraggled and dirty women who finally emerged from the tubes on the outside of the dome, where the over-used air was ejected into the vacuum of space. Janie had made a short excursion to the storage chambers and acquired a pair of fish-globes and oxygen tanks. They made their way to the still undiscovered launch in which Arn and Ben Wolf had come to Nio,

WHEN Ben emerged from the *Starquest* into the comparative safety of the hide-out, Arn was already back. She leaped into his arms and hugged him fiercely, he face shining.

“You did it! You big blundering hero, you! If you could have heard the gang...”

Ben hugged her hard. He had never been so glad to see anyone. It’s funny to be sure you’re going to die, and then not to die.

“Did you have any trouble getting away again. Arn?”

Arn released herself from his arms, turned to the somewhat diffident Janie who stood waiting in the background. “This little woman snatched me out of the jaws of you-know-what, and we both owe her a lot.”

Ben gave a glad shout. “The girl with the green hair-do!”

Janie gave a bow, and shook hands with Ben laughingly.

“Just call me Jane, Mr. Wolf. I am an old admirer of yours, having heard you cursed by people I hate.”

Old Carl stood watching the little encounter impatiently.

“We don’t have time for all that, interesting as it may be. They’ll be on us in short hours. There are only a dozen places you can hide a ship like the *Starquest* around here, only a few rocks where she could be. They’ll locate us by a process of elimination, if no one has happened to see us enter here in the past. We’ve got to mount weapons and be off. The *Starquest* is faster and far stronger than we expected. We’re safer in flight than holed up here.”

Ben’s voice took on a deep note of pride and confidence. “I nearly scraped rock on Saturn’s surface, Carl! No other ship has ever gone below the surface of Saturn’s cloud sphere and come back to tell of it. I can outfly anything the atomic drives can do, now. But outfighting the weapons the rackets have mounted on their ships is something else. Speed isn’t enough. And we’ve no weapons worthy of the name. We could show them our heels, but sooner or later they’d get a ship close enough to shoot us down.”

“I have an idea for a makeshift weapon, never tried before, but we need time. Time to test it, Ben.

We can't depend on an experimental weapon when life is the outcome. It's simple lightning, Ben. These rings and clouds of Saturn form the solar system's biggest condenser. They're charged full of electrons crazy to go to work. Biggest lightning works in creation, I'd say. An ion beam, properly manipulated, could throw bolts of power that no hull ever built could withstand."

"An ionizing beam isn't hard. Isn't that what conducts the power in an ordinary Vierling ray?"

"Yes, that's true, but in this case the problem is different. In an ordinary Vierling, the amounts of energy are controlled. In this device, how are you to hold back the immense amounts of natural lightning voltage? Fantastic power there, you know!"

Ben pondered, sat down and drew a little sketch. "It could be handled with two beams, Carl, making the target one leg of a triangle, the short leg of the triangle between the source of lightning and the ship."

"You've got the idea, Ben, but not the exact device. What I have in mind is a grid, on the same principle as the vacuum tube grid, that lets the electrons through. Free electrons flow from a place where they are many to a place where they are few. An ionizing beam gives them a conductor to flow along. The grid has to be used to keep the flow from back-tracking along the ionizing beam to our own ship. I meant to try this once, years ago, but the rush of work brushed it aside. Suppose we put a big wire grid out on the nose of the ship, and the ion beam firing dead center along the axis of the ship. The grid repels the lightning, being similarly charged, heavily so, as lightning flows from more to less. The firing trigger is like a camera shutter. It lets the grid blink only once, a fraction of a milli-second of opposite charge. In that fraction our ionizing beam flashes to the target, causing a path from the lightning cloud to the target, and the grid closes off the path of the bolt back along the beam—and also pours the opposing charge along the ion beam itself. Do you follow?"

Ben Wolf's eyes were flashing swords of battle delight. "It'll work, Vierling, you old wizard, it'll work!"

The old scientist grinned. "I suppose I've added another deadly force to man's self-destructive armament, but this time let's hope it's used in a good cause. We'll mount the ion beam coils of a Vierling rifle behind the grid, and the rings and cloud sphere of Saturn will be our source of ammunition. I doubt that Palio's crew will have anything to outreach that!"

Ben clenched his big fists. His heavy eye brows bristled. His square handsome chin clenched on his bared teeth. "Give me that gun, Carl, as fast as hands will do it. I'll blast Palio out of the ring, sure as my name's Ben Wolf!"

The old man turned, began to pull on a suit of stained overalls. "It will take about an hour—I've got a mess of spare parts around here. Meanwhile, you take a rest, I can do this with the girls' help. You've been through a lot and it might be better if you were fresh if you expect to battle that fleet of killers waiting for you out there."

* * *

"SEEMS like toying with volcanoes and expecting them to play lapdog," commented Arn, as she pushed a heavy chain hoist along the rails to position over the nose of the *Starquest*.

Janie, helping the old man trundle a freight-truck load of gun parts, mainly by getting in his way, asked:

"What's to keep the beam projector from blowing back on the ship..." and the old man sighed, as it was too much trouble to try to explain the fundamentals of electrics to her.

“Don’t worry, girl, it’ll work. Only thing that worries me... There are so many of them, can Ben keep away from them long enough to blast them?”

The big swivel and barrel and grid were heavy work for an old man and two girls, but two hours later they were ready.

Arn refused to stay behind, as did Janie, and the four piled into the newly weaponed *Starquest* and stole quietly from their hiding tunnel out into the glowing fluorescing rock-dust of the outer ring. They shot downward toward the glowing envelope of Saturn at an angle that would hide them in its rushing folds just where the ring plane bisected the envelope.

When the old man pushed in the accumulator switch, to charge the grid, they were hovering just under the cloud layer hidden from the sight of possible observers. The vast ring reached up and up a few miles away like a wall of light. The grid began to vibrate, and Ben wondered how the old wizard expected to blink off a charge like that when he was ready to fire the ionizing beam at a target. He knew the whole vast power of all Saturn’s accumulated electricity was throbbing in that grid, repelling any possible bolt along the beam, and he hoped they wouldn’t get any bleed-off rays from the ionizing beam from the Vierling ray-barrel. If this electronic valve device failed to work, it meant finish for them, most probably, as they could not forever elude the determined pursuit of the hijack gangs. They would not rest while a possible eclipse of their power flew around looking for builders.

Arn said: “The whole thing ought to be a radio-controlled torpedo, and we beneath the rock somewhere, to test it out. But go ahead, I’m holding my ears.”

Wolf looked at Vierling, who nodded, and he pressed the switch that blinked off the grid and simultaneously discharged the ionizing beam. Sparks flashed all along the nose of the ship beneath the glassite viewport. The rifle mount hummed with recoil, the grid vibrated madly with the sudden surge of power. Far ahead a vast bolt of lightning surged, leaped from cloud billow to cloud billow. The recoil wave tossed the *Starquest* like a chip on the ocean.

Ben gave a deafening shout of exultation, and they all peered anxiously at the still glowing path of the beam, afraid still that the bolt might flash again back upon the ship itself. But the grid was busily charging the path of the beam with opposed charge, and after seconds passed they realized that the device had performed as expected.

“I think we’ve got a killer-diller, Dad!” murmured Arn, pressing her father’s arm admiringly.

“I’m blind,” growled Ben, turning his head about, trying to see. “That lightning is brighter than magnesium flares going off in front of your eyes. Fix up some smoked glasses, if I’m going to fight this ship.”

Old Carl chortled. “You’re not going alone. We’re all in this, males and females, and we’ll all be needed. So don’t try marooning us in the hide-out. You can’t pilot the ship and fire the gun too. Now start looking for a target; I want to see what it does to a steel hull!”

* * *

SIXTEEN full-armored fighting craft had left Nio to hunt down the “stolen” ship. They were the most powerful fighting ships in space, and only such gangs as Palio’s had the over-size weapons, the defensive ray-screens, the equipment to fight in space. Lavishly the gang leaders spent their money on weapons, for only power to destroy kept them alive. Their orders were to hunt down the *Starquest* and recapture it, if they had to chase it to the bottom of Hell.

Hours had passed in the fruitless search since the *Starquest* had dived headlong into the cloud sphere of Saturn's atmosphere. But space is wide, and unless the ship had been destroyed in its dive, they had little chance of locating it quickly. They had nearly given up the search, deciding the ship must have streaked off for the rim of the solar system. Then Ben had first tested his new weapon, and the vast discharge of lightning shooting out for a thousand miles along the clouds below the rings was a strange phenomena never before observed in such magnitude. They had gathered above that point in the sphere, where the strange "storm" was taking place, more by chance than design. Arn did not notice the pirate fleet from her post at the *Starquest's* forward scope as the *Starquest* nosed above the clouds in their first search for an enemy ship.

They had come up out of the clouds directly under the Palio fleet, and the ray-beam scored past the *Starquest* in a shower of deadly glowing power as Ben swung in a long arc to dive again into the protecting cloud sphere. Again concealed, a barrage of ray bolts crashed about them still as the pirates chanced a lucky hit, firing into the clouds where they had disappeared.

One of the pirates dived for them with drivers full on, hoping to catch them in his infra-red vision beams. Ben poked his nose up again just in time to see his rays lash along the *Starquest's* path. He twisted aside as the enemy curved up and came almost into firing range of the *Starquest's* belly. Ben turned the controls over to Arn and belted himself into the firing seat of the converted Vierling ray installation.

Arn swiveled the ship around on its own track, swapping nose for tail, and Ben triggered the strange new weapon instinctively as the cross hairs bisected the dim, clouded shape of the pursuer.

Lightning flashed in blinding incandescence, seemed to bathe the hull in a spectacular corona of fire. The main bolt barreled through and through the hull and in an instant the dura-steel shell had fragmented, scorched steel hurtled, bodies flew in a dozen directions, and the whole mess of fragments and equipment, weapons and dead men and pneumatic seat cushions, cook-ware, bedding and whatnot, turned over and over like a miniature solar system, revolving furiously as it spun down and down into the obscuring clouds.

"How d'ya like them apples," cried Janie, and spat on the floor to emphasize her attitude of good riddance. But there was no one alive in that ship to resent her words.

"Like a Fourth of July rocket through a box-kite," crowed Arn into her ear, and for an instant the two women embraced like delighted children.

IT was doubtful if the rest of the fleet had seen the short encounter in the obscuring outer layer of clouds. They came on down. They flattened out their dive just above the cloud surface, came head on toward the spot where the *Starquest* waited. Ben played the lightning beam across the sky ahead of them, the vast bolts crashed in a steady flare of terrible brilliance. The approaching ships, doing a good eighteen hundred miles an hour, had no way of stopping or even veering off course.

The ships jumped and shuddered visibly as the immense shock waves tore space apart ahead of them. Then they were in range, and Ben touched the ion beam lightly to each nose. The bolts crashed into the protective fields of the ray-screens, lightning flared in great sheets of incandescence. Two more of the big armored fighters nosed down, arrowing into the invisibility of the ammonia clouds, never to come back. Nose plates were blasted off, hulls laid open—then the fleet was gone. Their speed carried them on and out of vision-range, and none of them knew if any more had been damaged or how badly the others had been hurt.

"Wonder if they know what's happened to them?" asked Wolf, grinning fiercely at Arn.

“I doubt it.” Her voice was cool and firm. “I don’t think it will soak in that quickly. They know something hit them, but just what hit them will take some thinking they haven’t the mental capacity to understand.”

“I think we ought to keep baiting them along,” said Carl Vierling, peering intently out into the murky dimness above the edge of the cloud layer. “If we head out into space we won’t have the power for the lightning—we would only be able to run. If they happened to triangulate our course, and get a ship ahead of us—they’d get us. It’s safer here.”

Unbelieving that any ship existed that could do such damage to the heretofore nearly invulnerable armored spacers, the remaining pirates swung about in a wide circle, looking for the ship they had glimpsed. They were sure the lightning that had struck at them was but an unusual natural display, a happenstance, and not of man’s doing.

“We’ll really sock them, this time!” growled Ben, as the group of craft completed their turn. He tried the beam in a series of short trigger pulls, and the result looked like a battery of hidden rocket throwers in action, but the flashing bolts of power from the vast cloud layer were more potently destructive than any rocket ever built. Swinging the heavy grid and ion beam on its swivel with a grunt at the weight, Ben got the thing working like a garden hose, splashing the furious energy off first one incandescent ray-screen and then another. The screens resisted momentarily, then flashed out of existence as the network of wires buried in the metal of the hulls became molten flowing metal along with the hull itself. But the interval of passage, slower this time, gave the gunners from Nio time to see the *Starquest* and fire. The heavy bluish Vierling beams crashed about the ship, rocking them back and forth with the violence, and a bolt smashed into the tail of the *Starquest*, leaving a gaping wound where the air rushed out with a roar.

Old Vierling swiftly pressed the studs that would shut the rear compartment doors, but the wrecks of the Palio ships had gone on out of range.

They waited, but none returned. Whether all were destroyed they did not know, but if not, the survivors must have reported the casualties to Palio on Nio, and been called in.

They sat there within the outer layer of cloud, trying to decide what to do to make sure they were not caught where they did not have available the vast reservoir of electricity locked within the boiling clouds of Saturn.

“It seems to me that Nio is just close enough to the rings to be in range of this weapon,” mused the old scientist, “provided the ring itself also contains the same type of static electric charge. It should, but does it?”

“We’ll have to try it out, along the plane of the rings,” Ben answered, moving the ship nearer the lower rim of the vast ring. “We can try it now, when we know the gang is in retreat, better than later. Here goes...”

The first vast bolt they drew into life from the ring dust itself nearly blinded them, crashing back from ring to clouds. Static crackled across the exterior hull like rifle fire, sparks sprang from their finger tips and their hair stood on end as sparks leaped and crackled everywhere inside the ship.

“Whew,” cried Arn, leaning back weakly into the pneumo-cushions. “I don’t think you’d better try that again without a target. Something leaked!”

“From redundancy to defect, the little electrons go... and that means you’d better be sure you’ve got plenty of chips or the gamble is over.”

“It’s a gamble we do not wish to take,” grumbled old Vierling, scribbling on a scrap of paper. “I’ve

got to install a dual meter on the device that gives a reading from the source and one from the hull, so we know we've got a higher similar charge. The guess work must be removed... Go back to the hideout, and we'll fix up a little safety device or two. That is a lesson we do not want to learn twice. The clouds might have had a higher charge than ourselves, and we would not be discussing the matter."

"It could be metered, at that," agreed Ben.

The *Starquest* darted off, her inductive vortex dynamos drawing power from the very magnetic fields of the planet and of space itself.

* * *

SOME hours later, the big ship lifted from her hiding place on the ring rock, spun silently along around the rim of the glowing carpet of whirling dust, awesome and vast. Following it came the little experimental model, fitted with similar weapons, to take a hand. In the smaller ship were Carl Vierling and Janie from Nio, and Ben Wolf and Arn manned the big *Starquest*.

Wolf, watching the big dome in the scope, saw a series of slow-moving shapes landing beyond. He counted four. "The last of the crippled fleet is landing," he commented to Arn. "Wonder how Hunk Palio is taking it?"

"Don't get too close," cautioned the girl. "They can throw a lot of juice from the big stationary dynamos, and they've got the heaviest installation of Dad's ray ever built in the factory. I know—I saw the invoice sheets of Palio's shipments."

"I'll try it from here, then move up a little and try it again."

They were about eight hundred miles from Nio. The whole segment of the ring-rim rose ahead like a rainbow bridge, and Nio loomed slightly off the side of the ring plane like a black lantern from a pole off the bridge. Ben sighted the Vierling, pressed the trigger that gave the dial readings newly installed. The old man had rigged it so that he could not fire except on the second trigger pull. The first lit up the two dials and gave the charges on target and source of power in approximate relation. A third dial also lit, giving the hull-charge of the *Starquest*—and Ben knew he wasn't going to forget to read the dials. Nio gave the lowest reading on the roughly approximate markings of the improvised dials, and Ben triggered off the real lightning.

Slightly behind them and to the left, old Carl moved another ion beam sideward toward Nio, so that the two beams were faintly visible, like the closing pincers of an invisible crab.

Vast sparks flew from the rim of the ring ahead, where the fan of ionization touched the immense natural static generator. Sparks miles in height leaped, pulsing weirdly, crashing out to join the brightly glowing path of the increasingly visible beams, and the dynamos of the grid leads hummed in a rising whine of power. A vast fork-tongue of fire leaped out from the rim's edge, crashed along the path prepared for it, fountained in one instantaneous flare of light on the black round of Nio. There was no sure way to see what they had struck. They might have wasted all that power on bare rock, but they knew they could reach the satellite.

Still Ben drove on, moving slowly closer, not to get into range, but to get better vision of his target. The little spotting scope mounted on the interior assembly of the revised Vierling grew warm under Wolf's tense watching eyes—then they could make out the big glassite dome of Luree.

"I hate to bust that dome and all the innocent tourists inside," muttered Ben, "But how else to make sure I get that crew of murderers I don't know?" His voice reached over the intercommunication radio

between the two craft—and Carl answered—

“Go ahead and blast it! Those people would thank you if they knew the truth about Luree.”

“I can see the silhouette of the shops. Nio’s spin is bringing them up on the far side.” Arn was sighting along the scope, worrying too about the necessity of firing upon helpless people.

“I’ll knock that shop silhouette right off the rim of Nio...”

BOLT after bolt crashed from the ring rim across the little bulge the shops made on the black silhouette of the planetoid. The outline of the shops became a ragged cut-out from which they could visualize the ragged mass of torn girders and timbers, shattered hulls and workmen gasping out their lives in the sudden vacuum. As they moved slowly closer there was yet no answering fire. It was possible the gunners in the little-used ray emplacements had not even reached their posts.

“Careful, Ben” came the old man’s voice from the radiophone. “They’re saving a card for us. You get close enough, they’ll let go with everything they’ve got. And they’ve got plenty.”

Even as Vierling’s words registered, the distant black disk erupted with flame from a dozen points of fire. The big rays lashed across the rim, lancing along the path already ionized in space by the lightning bolts.

The ship leaped over an invisible hurdle, shuddered under their feet as the heavy charges raced across the hull. The glassite of the bridge-chamber blackened over suddenly with the heat.

“Did they hit you, boy?” old Carl was shouting from the phone.

Arn paid no attention to the raging attack, but tugged at the controls of the ionizing beam, centering the cross hairs on the spotting scope and firing again and again. Ben put the ship into reverse drive. Their forward speed checked, and in a few minutes they were moving back out of range again.

“Arn,” said Ben, his eyes on the scene on Nio. “If we ever get through this alive, we’re going to get married. Okay?”

Arn shot him a glance of quizzical surprise. “What a time to pick for a proposal! Yes, you goon. Now get your mind on Nio and Hunk Palio.”

Ben picked a big boulder in the rim flow of rocks and moved the ship in behind it, so that they were out of sight from Luree. Letting the weight of the boulder be their tow-line he allowed the ship to be drawn along, only shoving the nose out from behind the mass long enough to draw a bead with the cross-hairs and let fly a bolt. He watched with sad satisfaction as the dome showed a vast spider web of cracks around a gaping hole. He hated to destroy the place, for it was a beautifully designed structure.

He knew that the weapons and heavier ray installations were in a series of underground chambers. He concentrated on picking off the tiny dots of flaring light which marked a stationery ray-rifle in action.

The rim rock behind which they had dodged moved inexorably closer to the planetoid. One by one the flickering ray-beams of the pirate’s emplacements ceased, as lightning bolts crashed across the hundreds of miles still separating them from Nio. This had been a fantastic attack such as no defender had ever conceived undergoing. The very mightiest works of nature seemed pitted against them as the vast bolts zigzagged across empty space and thundered and crackled over the surface of Nio. It seemed as if Nature had run amok, taken the side of the *Starquest*.

Quite suddenly a craft shot out from the pits by the now wrecked shops, spiraled outward madly. Then another and another, five in all, as rapidly as the way was clear.

“All that’s left of Hunk Palio’s invincible armada!” cried Arn, pointing to the vanishing dots.

“Let’s hope the bunch that are left are in a surrendering mood. Let’s hope all Hunk’s gang chose to run. If some of them are waiting for us to come in, in ambush, we’re out of luck.”

* * *

BEN Wolfe sat in Hunk Palio’s big chair in the private dining room heretofore exclusive to Hunk and his immediate associates. Across from him sat Carl Vierling, and on the other side Arn Vierling. Their eyes were full of triumph, excited anticipation of developments filled their words, and standing behind Wolf’s chair where she had so often stood to wait on Hunk Palio, was a green-haired young beauty, Janet Harder. Janet was saying:

“Now that you three have taken over, we’d all like some standing orders, some idea of where we fit in, and what comes next. Then, too, there will be a fleet or two of Hunk’s acquaintances here in a short time. They will want to know what gives, and they’ll probably figure out there’s been a turnover and come in shooting, hoping to take over Luree themselves. You’d better be ready...”

Carl Vierling shot her one of his glittering looks, like an old eagle pondering where to sink his beak. Ben looked at Arn but Arn definitely was leaving things up to Ben Wolf.

“Okay, Janie,” began Wolf. “Bring in the former employees one by one. We’ll take your say so on which are good Joes, and which are liable to try to sink a knife in us. As each one comes in you say a few words to tell us what to expect. If the person is okay, you say: ‘Here’s a right guy who’ll work with us,’ or for a no good, say: ‘Here’s Mister Jinks, one of the gang’.”

“Do you get it?” asked Arn, “The ones you don’t go for, we’ll ship off to Titan. The rest we’ll take in as part of our organization. And make it fast as you can. We don’t want to get caught before we’re ready to fight.”

The parade of employees—in reality for the most part virtual slaves of the gang—went on for three solid hours. There were over two thousand of them. Labor was cheap. They hadn’t cost Palio anything but their board. Most of them had been captured off passenger ships and freighters years ago.

When the session was over, they had five hundred loyal members of the new deal, and a thousand doubtfuls to await passage to Titan City. There were five hundred about whom Janie just didn’t know. These would have to be screened later.

Those with space experience Wolf appointed to staff the ships they had captured intact. Those with mechanical training he formed into a crew, with old Vierling at the head, to work over the fleet and put in the new drives, the new lightning weapons, get things ready for an all-out struggle for mastery of Saturn and satellites, at least.

When he had the work lined up, a day and a half later, Wolf promptly collapsed into bed and stayed there for two days. Then he took over old Veirling’s place at the head of the work crew while the old man took time off to rest.

They did not expect attack for weeks, but they wanted to be sure they were ready then. Wolf finished a ten hour shift with the work crew, stopped in the office for a check of the other activities before turning in. Seated in Palio’s swivel chair, he looked up absently as Janie came in silently, beside her the squat bulky figure of a man whom he at first did not recognize.

Janie’s face was strained. Suddenly she shrilled in a frightened voice. “Shiv must have left him behind.

He's been hiding out somewhere. He caught me going over Shiv's things, alone, made me bring him here. I thought you would be out with the work crew in the shops. But no such luck. . ."

Wolf looked at the snub-nosed little ray in the man's hand, and at the hard, dark eyes of the man who had killed too many times to remember. A man who had carved for himself the top niche in the ladder of power. Wolf managed a grim smile, though his stomach cramped slowly in him and acid rose in his throat. His voice was full of revulsion.

"Pleased to meet you again, Mr. Palio."

HUNK snarled, bared his teeth in nasty grin of satisfaction at catching his enemy apparently with his defences down.

"You won't be pleased long, Ben. You won't be alive long either. When the boys arrive, Hunk Palio is going to be here to greet them."

Wolf watched the gun in the hairy-fist. He glanced at Janie, her face tense under the green tangle of her hair. He knew suddenly what she meant to do. Her eyes on his were tragically affectionate. His heart, for some reason, ached with pity for her.

"You've been swell, Mr. Wolf. It's been fine knowing you. I'm sorry to see you die."

"I'm sorry too," murmured Ben, pulling his feet under him, turning to face his murderer. His *would-be* murderer, he hoped. Hunk raised the gun a hair, and Ben breathed a little prayer to his personal God, who somehow had Janie's face. . .

Janie suddenly left her feet in an oddly awkward and high leap, came down with both hands clawing for the gun, her feet wrapping about Palio's heavy legs. Her full weight flung against the squat, strong body made Hunk stagger sideward. Hunk clubbed at her with a balled fist, but she hung on to the gun hand with both hands. Wolf dived forward, got one hand on to the wrist holding the gun, bore down hard as the gun suddenly spouted the deadly blue Vierling beam. Janie screamed, her grasp slipped to the gang leader's waist. He jerked right and left to free his legs.

Wolf smashed his fist to Hunk's ear. The ray flamed again and again about their tangled, threshing legs. The three fell to the floor in a heap together.

Janie screamed again in agony, and then Wolf was on top, one hand hanging to the gun arm, the other hand grappling fingers into the soft neck flesh as he felt for the wind pipe. Hunk's heavy fist, still free, clubbed again and again into his face. Janie slumped weakly and rolled aside.

Hunk lunged to his knees, pulled Wolf to him, and his heavy black haired fist clubbed down on the back of Ben's neck. Pinwheels of fire spun in his mind in a blaze of pain. Wolf brought his head down, butted Palio's purpling face with his forehead, hard. Blood gushed out the heavy nostrils. It worked—their foreheads crashed together. Ben wouldn't try that again. Wolf lunged sideward, fell, brought up a knee that caught Palio in the paunch.

The struggling gun hand relaxed slightly. Ben shook it savagely and the gun bounced across the deep pile carpet noiselessly. The gang leader butted Wolf in the face, and Ben pulled him close in a bear hug. He couldn't quite handle this guy, he was too strong and too knowing. He wasn't going to make it. . .

Blue flame blazed out suddenly in front of his eyes. The weight on him was suddenly heavy, and then the stocky body rolled aside. Hunk Palio jerked in agony, tried to rise, fell back and lay quiet.

When Wolf got his breath and senses back, old Carl Vierling was prying his fingers from the purple

throat. Ben let go the heavy boned wrist, too, looked curiously at the white and purple marks of his death grip on the throat.

He sat up, and was suddenly very sick at heart to see Janie lying still beside them, her face smashed and bloody, her legs criss-crossed with ray-burns. She was obviously dead.

Strangely, in her dead hand was the gun he had shaken from Palio's grasp. In Palio's side the smoking hole explained how the struggle had ended. Janie had killed him even as she died.

Old Carl straightened out the pitiful slim body, wiped the blood from her broken face. His eyes on Ben's were full of human understanding. His voice broke with pity as he spoke, more to an unseen audience than to Ben.

"Let's make sure this woman's sacrifice means the end of power such as Hunk yielded!"

"That's a promise," whispered Ben. "And we can do it now."

The End.

Notes and proofing history

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