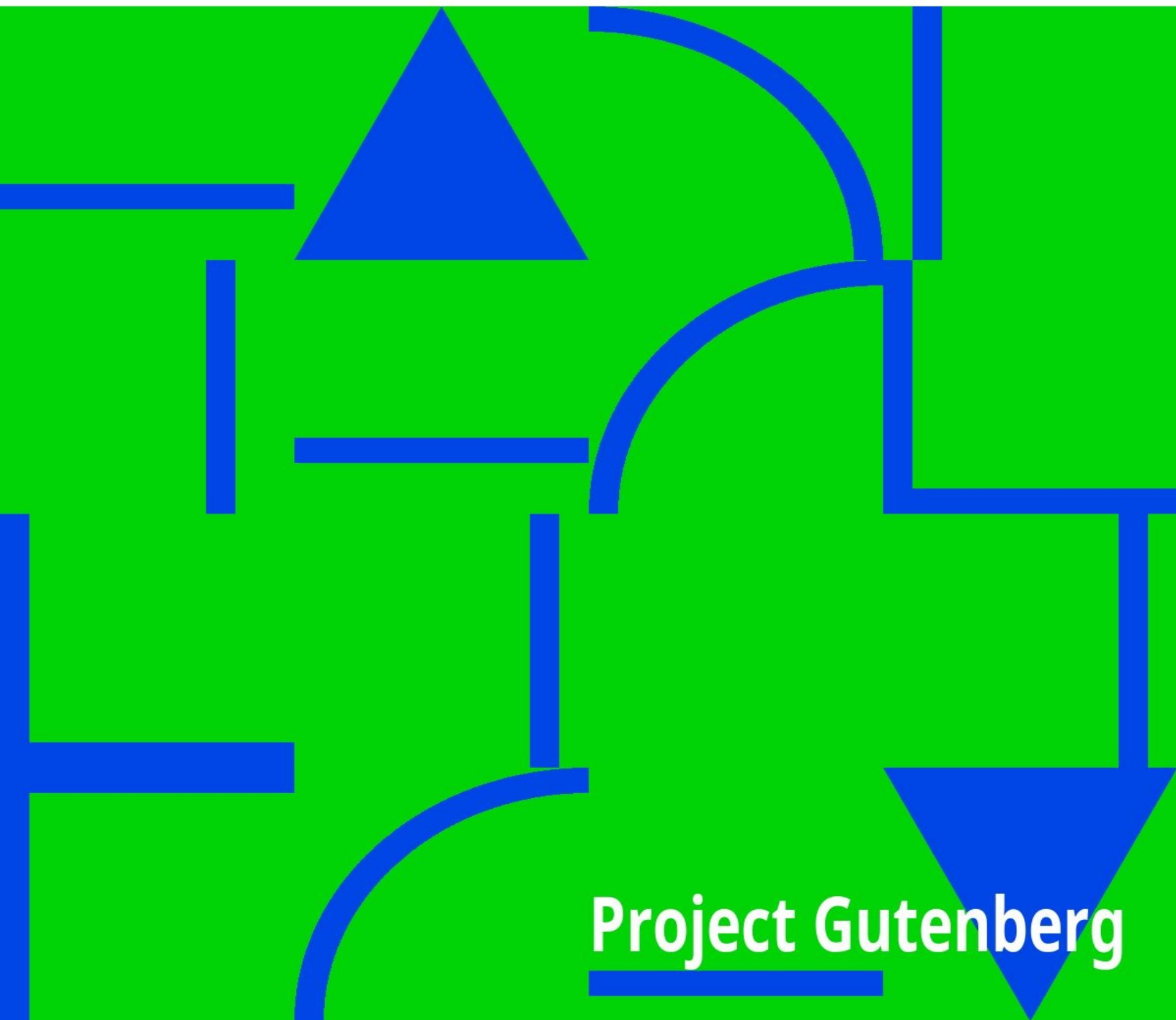


Faithfully Yours

Lou Tabakow



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FAITHFULLY YOURS

BY LOU TABAKOW

Illustrated by Emsb

If it's too impossibly difficult to track down and recapture an escaped criminal ... there's a worse thing one might do....

JULY 18, 1949 A.D.

The fugitive lay face down in the fetid undergrowth, drawing in spasmodic lungfuls of air through cracked and swollen lips. Long before, his blue workshirt had been ripped to ribbons and his exposed chest showed a spiderwork of scratches, where branches and brambles had sought to restrain him in his frenzied flight. Across his back from shoulder to shoulder ran a deeper cut around which the caked blood attested to the needle-sharp viciousness of a thorn bush a mile to the north. With each tortured breath he winced, as drops of sweat ran down, following the spiderwork network and burning like acid. Incessantly he rubbed his bruised torso with mud-caked palms to dislodge the gnats and mosquitoes that clung to him, gorging shamelessly.

To the east he could see the lights of Fort Mudge where the railroad cut through on its way to Jacksonville. He had planned to ride the freight into Jacksonville but by now they were stopping every train and searching along every foot of the railroad right of way. In the distance he heard the eerie keen of a train whistle, and visualized the scene as it was flagged down and searched from engine to caboose.

Directly before him loomed the forbidding northern boundary of the Okefenokee Swamp. Unconsciously he strained his ears, then shuddered at the night noises that issued from the noisome wilderness. A frenzied threshing, then a splash, then ... silence. What drama of life and death was being played out in that strange other-world of perpetual shadows?

In sudden panic he jerked erect and cupped his palm round his ear. Far off; muted by distance, but still unmistakable; he heard the baying of bloodhounds.

Then this was the end. A sob broke from his throat. What was he, an animal; to be hunted down as a sport? Tears of self-pity welled to his eyes as he thought back to a party and a girl and laughter and cleanliness and the scent of magnolias, like a heady wine. But that was so long ago—so long ago—and now.... He looked down at his sweating, lacerated body; his blistered calloused palms; the black broken nails; the cheap workshoes with hemp laces; the shapeless gray cotton trousers, now wet to the knees.

He pulled back his shoulders and resolutely faced west toward the river, but stopped short in horror as he heard the sudden cacophony of barks, yelps and howls of a pack of bloodhounds that senses the beginning of the end. He turned in panic. They couldn't be over half a mile away. In a panic of indecision he turned first east then west, then facing due south he hesitated a moment to take one last look at the clear open skies, and with a muffled prayer plunged into the brooding depths of the Okefenokee.

JUNE 13, 427th Year GALACTIC ERA

The building still hummed and vibrated with the dying echoes of the alarm siren as the biophysicist hurried down the corridor, and without breaking stride, pushed open the door to the Director's office.

The Director shuffled the papers before him and sighed heavily. His chair creaked protestingly as he shifted his bulk and looked up.

"Well?"

"He got away clean," said the biophysicist.

"Any fix on the direction?"

"None at all, sir. And he's got at least a two hours' start. That takes in a pretty big area of space."

"Hm-m-m! Well there's just a bare chance. That experimental cruiser is the fastest thing in space and it's equipped with the latest ethero-radar. If we get started right away, we just might—"

"That's just it," interrupted the biophysicist. "That's the ship he got away in."

The Director jumped angrily to his feet. "How did that happen? How can I

explain to the board?"

"I'm sorry, sir. He was just too—"

"*You're* sorry?" He slumped back in his chair and drummed the desk top with his fingernails, worrying his lower lip with his teeth. He exhaled loudly and leaned forward. "Well, only one thing to do. You know the orders."

The biophysicist squirmed uncomfortably. "Couldn't we send a squadron of ships out to search and—"

"And what?" asked the Director, sarcastically. "You don't think I'd risk a billion credits worth of equipment on a wild-goose chase like that, do you? We could use up a year's appropriation of fuel and manpower and still be unable to adequately search a sector one-tenth that size. If he just sat still, a thousand ships couldn't find him in a thousand years, searching at finite speeds. Add to that the fact that the target is moving at ultra-light speed and the odds against locating him is multiplied by a billion."

"I know, but he can't stay in space. He'll have to land somewhere, sometime."

"True enough—but where and when?"

"Couldn't we alert all the nearby planets?"

"You know better than that. He could be halfway across the galaxy before an ethero-gram reached the nearest planet."

"Suppose we sent scout ships to the nearer planets and asked them to inform their neighbors in the same way. We'd soon have an expanding circle that he *couldn't* slip through."

The Director smiled wryly. "Maybe. But who's going to pay for all this. By the time the circle was a thousand light-years in diameter there would be ten thousand ships and a million clerks working on recapturing one escaped prisoner. Another thing; I don't know offhand what he's been sentenced for, but I'll wager there are ten thousand planets on which his crime would not be a crime. Do you think we could ever extradite him from such a planet? And even if by some incredible stroke of fortune one of our agents happened to land on the right planet, in which city would he begin his search. Or suppose our quarry lands only on uninhabited planets? We can't very well alert the whole galaxy in the search for just one man."

"I know, but—"

"But what?" interrupted the Director. "Any other suggestions?"

"N ... no—"

"All right, he asked for it. You have the pattern, I presume. *Feed it to Fido!*"

"Yes, sir, but well ... I just don't—"

"Do you think *I* like it?" asked the Director, fiercely.

In the silence that followed, they looked at each other, guiltily.

"There's nothing else we can do," said the Director. "The orders are explicit. *No one escapes from Hades!*"

"I know," replied the biophysicist. "I'm not blaming you. Only I wish someone else had my job."

"Well," said the Director, heavily. "You might as well get started." He nodded his head in dismissal.

As the biophysicist went out the door, the Director looked down once more at the pile of papers before him. He pulled the top sheet closer, and rubber-stamped across its face—CASE CLOSED.

"Yes," he mused aloud. "Closed for us, but—" He hesitated a moment, and then sighing once more, signed his name in the space provided.

AUGUST 6, 430th Year GALACTIC ERA

Tee Ormond sat morosely at the spaceport bar, and alternately wiped his forehead with a soggy handkerchief, and sipped at his frosted rainbow, careful not to disturb the varicolored layers of liquid in the tall narrow glass. Every now and then he nervously ran his fingers through his straight black hair, which lay damply plastered to his head. His jacket was faded and worn, and above the left pocket was emblazoned the meteor insignia of the spaceman. A dark patch on his back showed where the perspiration had seeped through. He blinked and rubbed the corner of his eye as a drop of perspiration ran down and settled there.

A casual look would have classified him as a very average looking pilot such

as could be found at the bar of any spaceport; i.e. if space pilots can ever be classified as average. Spacemen are the last true adventurers in an age where the debilitating culture of a highly mechanized civilization has pushed to the very borders of the galaxy. While most men are fearful and indecisive outside their narrow specialties the spacemen must at all times be ready to deal with the unexpected and the unusual. The expression—"Steady as a spaceman's nerves"—had a very real origin.

A closer look at Tee would have revealed the error of a quick classification. He gripped his drink too tightly, and his eyes darted restlessly from side to side, as though searching, searching; yet dreading to find the object of their search. His expressive face contorted in a nervous tic each time his eyes swept by the clock hanging behind the bar. He glanced dispiritedly out the window at the perpetually cloudy sky and idly watched a rivulet of water race down the dirty pane. He loosened his collar and futilely mopped at his neck with the soggy handkerchief, then irritably flung it to the floor.

"Hey, Jo," he yelled to the bartender. "What's the matter with the air-conditioning? I'm burning up."

"Take it easy," soothed the bartender, consulting a thermometer on the wall behind him, "it's eighty-five in here. That's as low as the law allows. Can't have too much difference in the temperature or all my customers'd pass out when they go outside. Why don't you go into town? They keep it comfortable under the dome."

"Don't this planet *ever* cool off?" asked Tee.

The bartender chuckled. "I see you don't know too much about Thymis. Sometimes it drops to ninety at night, but not too often. You ought to be here sometime when the clouds part for a minute. If you're caught outside then, it's third-degree burns for sure."

He glanced down at the nearly empty glass. "How about another rainbow? If you get enough of them in you, you won't notice the heat—you won't notice anything." He laughed uproariously at the hoary joke.



Tee looked at him disgustedly and without answering bent to his drink once more. He felt someone jostle his elbow and turned sideways to allow the newcomer access to the bar. After a moment he wiped his forehead on his sleeve.

The bartender placed another rainbow before him.

"Hey, I didn't order that," he cried.

The bartender nodded toward the next stool. "On him."

Tee turned and saw a barrel-chested red-haired giant holding up a drink in the immemorial bar toast. He raised his own glass gingerly, but his trembling hand caused the layers to mix and he stared ruefully at the resultant clayey-looking mess.

The redhead laughed. "Mix another one, Jo."

"But—" Tee's face got red.

"I came in here to talk to you anyway," said the giant. "You own the *Starduster*, don't you?"

"Yeah, what about it?"

"Like to get her out of hock?"

"Who says she's in hock?"

"Look," said the redhead. "Let's not kid each other. Everybody around this port knows you blew in from Lemmyt last month and can't raise the money to pay the port charges, much less the refueling fee. And it's no secret that you're anxious to leave our fair planet." He winked conspiringly at Tee.

"So?"

The redhead glanced at the bartender who was busy at the other end of the bar. He leaned closer and whispered. "I know where the *Elen of Troy* is."

"The *Elen of Troy*?"

"Oh, that's right, you wouldn't know about her. Eight months ago she crashed on an uninhabited planet somewhere in this sector. So far they've been unable to find her." He leaned closer. "She was carrying four million in Penryx crystals."

"What's that to me?"

The redhead looked around briefly to make sure no one was in hearing distance, then whispered softly, without moving his lips. "I told you, they can't

find her, but *I* know where she is."

"*You* know? But how—"

"Look," said the giant, frowning, "I didn't ask you why *you're* so anxious to leave."

"Well?"

"I'll clear your ship and we can pick up the crystals for the salvage fee. A million each, and all nice and legal. We can leave by the end of the week and be back in probably six months."

"*Six months!*" Tee stood up. "Sorry!"

The redhead grabbed his arm in a hamlike palm. "A million each in six months; what's wrong with that?"

Tee jerked out of his grasp. "I ... I just can't do it."

"I don't know what you're running from," persisted the redhead, "but with a million credits you can fight extradition for the rest of your life. This is your big chance, can't you see that. Besides, this planet has some interesting customs." He winked at Tee. "I can introduce you—"

"I can't stay here," interrupted Tee. "You just don't understand."

"Look," cried the redhead exasperatedly, "I'm offering you a full partnership on a two million credit salvage deal and you want to back out because it'll take six months. On top of that you're broke and stranded and your hangar bill gets bigger every day. If you don't take me up on this deal, you'll still be sitting here six months from now wondering how to get your ship out of hock—if you don't get caught first. What do you say? What've you got to lose?"

What did he have to lose? Tee gripped the edge of the bar till his knuckles showed white. "No! I just can't do it. Why don't you get someone else?"

"The slow tubs around this port would take years for the trip. I can see the *Starduster* has class."

"Fastest thing in the galaxy," said Tee, proudly. Then earnestly, "I'm sorry, you'll just have to find some other ship."

"Think it over," said the redhead. "I'll wait. When you change your mind

look me up. Name's Yule Larson." He slapped Tee heavily on the back and swaggered toward the door. He turned and looked back. "Better go along with me. After six months they can auction off your ship to pay for the port charges, you know." The door swung shut behind him.

Tee sat down again and bent his head, nursing his drink. His eyes darted nervously around the room and came to rest on the clock. A shudder ran through him and he lowered his eyes quickly. As he sipped his drink his eyes returned to the clock continually, as though drawn there against their will. As he watched, the minute hand jerked downward and an involuntary gasp escaped his lips.

The bartender turned quickly. "Anything wrong?"

"N ... no, nothing." As he spoke, the minute hand moved again and Tee started nervously, upsetting his drink. He sat for a moment watching the bartender mop up the spreading liquid, then abruptly got up and tossed a half-credit piece on the bar. He hurried outside, steeling himself to keep from running. He paused just outside the door.

Stand still, he told himself. Mustn't run! Mustn't run! No use anyway. If I only knew when. If I just could stop and rest. If I had the time ... Time! Time! That's what I need. Light-years of time ... But when? When? If only I could be sure. He looked up slowly at the murky canopy of clouds. *If I only knew when!* He looked indecisively up and down the field, then squaring his shoulders resolutely, set out for the administration building.

At this hour the office was deserted except for a wispy-haired little man who sat at a desk fussing with some papers. He looked up questioningly as Tee came in.

"Is my ship re-charged and provisioned?" asked Tee.

"Uh, what's the name please?"

"Tee Ormond. I own the *Starduster*."

The clerk pulled a card from a file on the desk and studied it. "Ah, yes, the *Starduster*."

"I'd like to pay my bill and clear the *Starduster* for immediate departure."

"Uh, very good, Mr. Ormond." He consulted the card again. "That'll be fourteen hundred and eleven credits." He beamed. "We included a case of Ruykeser's Concentrate, compliments of the management." He handed a circular to Tee. "This is a list of our ports and facilities on other planets. Our accommodations are the finest, and we carry a complete line of parts." He smiled professionally.

"What about my key?" asked Tee, pulling out his wallet.

"Uh, let's see, number thirty-seven." The clerk started for a numbered board hanging on the wall. He never got there.

Tee whipped a stun-gun from inside his jacket and waved it at the clerk's back. It caught him in mid-stride, and unbalanced, he crashed heavily to the floor. Tee glanced briefly down as he stepped over the paralyzed form, avoiding the accusing eyes, and snatched the magnetic key off the hook. He forced himself to walk calmly across the field toward the hangar that housed the *Starduster*.

A uniformed guard stopped him at the hangar door. "May I see your clearance, sir?" he asked, politely.

Tee hesitated for a moment. "Oh, I'm just going to get something out of my ship," he said, smoothly. "The clerk said it was roj."

"The clerk said? But he can't—" The guard tensed. "Mind if I check, sir? Orders, you know." He bent his head slightly as he pressed a knob on his wrist radio. As his eyes turned downward, Tee swung the stun-gun in an arc that ended on the back of the guard's head. As he leaped into the *Starduster* he was sorry for a moment that he hadn't had time to recharge the gun, and hoped he hadn't struck too hard.

OCTOBER 11, 433rd Year GALACTIC ERA

Tee stepped out of the hangar and surveyed the twin suns. The pale binaries sat stolidly on the horizon, forty degrees apart. Their mingled light washed down dimly on the single continent of the planet, Aurora.

He started, as a man walked around the corner of the hangar. The man looked at Tee searchingly for a moment, then asked, "Anything troubling you, Tee?"

"Why ... why, no, Mr. Jenner. You just startled me, that's all."

"Well, how's everything coming?"

"Right on schedule. We'll be ready for the final test by the end of the week."

"By the way," asked Jenner, speculatively, "how come you ordered the ship stocked and provisioned, for the test?"

"Why ... why I think she should be tested under exactly the same conditions as she'll encounter in actual use."

"We could have done it a lot cheaper by just using ballast," said Jenner. "After this, I want to personally see any voucher for over a hundred credits before it's cleared."

"Yes, sir, but I just didn't want to bother you with details."

"An expenditure of over two thousand credits isn't just detail; but let it pass. It's already done. Anyway, on the drawing board she's the fastest thing in the galaxy." He smiled. "If she lives up to expectations, she'll make your ship look like an old freighter. We've got four million sunk in her so far, so she'd better check out roj."

He put his hand on Tee's shoulder. "You're not worried about testing her, are you? You've been jumpy lately."

"Oh, no, nothing like that, Mr. Jenner. I'm just ... well, I've been up all night watching them install the gyroscopes. Think I'll get some sleep." He yawned.

Jenner cupped his chin in his palm and stood staring after the retreating figure. As Tee turned and looked back nervously, Jenner entered the hangar office. He spoke softly into the visiphone and in a moment the screen lit up.

"Is this the prison administrator?" asked Jenner.

"What can I do for you?"

"My name is Jenner; Consolidated Spacecraft."

"Yes?"

"Suppose an escaped prisoner from Hades landed on Aurora?"

"No one escapes from Hades Prison."

"Well, just suppose one did?"

"I never receive information about escapees."

"But you're the administrator here."

"My job, as the title implies, is purely administrative. I merely arrange transportation for our annual shipment of prisoners to Hades, and see that the records are kept straight."

"But whom *would* they contact in the event of an escape?"

The administrator pursed his lips in impatience. "Hades has six billion prisoners at any given time. If one did manage to escape, they couldn't very well alert a million planets."

"You mean you wouldn't do anything?"

"As I said before, my job is purely administrative. Out of my jurisdiction entirely. Each planet has its own police force and handles its internal crime in its own way. What's legal on Aurora might very well be illegal on ten thousand other planets, and vice versa."

"I see. Thank you." Jenner cut the connection slowly. He flicked the switch open again, hesitated, and then closed it.



He walked out to where his gyrocar was parked, and in a few minutes set it down on the roof of Tee's hotel. Tee was just entering the lobby as Jenner came in and they went up to his room together.

"I'll come right to the point, Tee," he said, as soon as the door had closed. "I just talked to the local prison administrator for Hades." He looked closely at Tee.

"What's that got to do with me?" asked Tee, belligerently.

"Wait until I finish," said Jenner, curtly. "I hired you to test-hop our new ship because you were the best pilot available. I'm not interested in your past, but most of the company's resources are sunk in that ship. If something goes wrong because the test pilot is disturbed or nervous, the company will be bankrupt. I'm not saying you're an escaped prisoner, but if you were, you'd have nothing to

worry about."

"What do you mean?"

"The administrator told me he has no jurisdiction over escaped prisoners, so you see, if you had escaped, you'd have nothing to fear here. You're out of their jurisdiction."

Tee began to laugh wildly. "*Out of their jurisdiction! Out of their jurisdiction!* So that's the way they put it. *Out of their jurisdiction!*"

"Stop it!" said Jenner, sharply. "Do you want to tell me now?"

Tee drew in a gasping breath and sobered. "What would I have to tell you? So I'm the nervous type. So you hired me to test-hop your new ship. So I'll test-hop it. That's all we agreed on. What more do you want?"

Jenner sighed. "Roj, Tee, if that's the way you want it, but I wish—"

The visiphone buzzed, and when Tee flipped the switch, the worried face of the chief mechanic sprang into focus. "Oh, there you are, Mr. Jenner. Glad I caught you before you left. We've run into trouble."

"Well, out with it," barked Jenner. "What is it?"

The mechanic cleared his throat nervously. "We were testing the main gyroscope when it threw a blade."

"How bad is it?" asked Jenner.

"Pretty bad, I'm afraid. It tore up the subetherscope unit so bad we'll have to replace it. We can't get any on Aurora either. We'll have to send to Lennix, and that'll take close to a month."

"Roj! Knock off until I get there," barked Jenner. He slammed over the switch, viciously. "Of all the rotten luck!"

"Can't you get some plant here on Aurora to hand tool one for you?" asked Tee.

"No, that's just it," replied Jenner. "It's a special alloy. The owners of the process wouldn't give us any details on the manufacture. Anyway, even if we knew how, we couldn't duplicate it without their special machine tools."

"Does that mean—"

"I'm afraid so. The ship won't be ready for a month, now."

"*A month!* I can't wait a month."

"*You* can't wait a month? We've got four million tied up in that ship and you tell me *you* can't wait a month."

"Look, Mr. Jenner, I'll test it without the unit."

"That's impossible. The ship would vibrate into a billion pieces as soon as it went into subspace. No! We'll just have to wait."

"I can't wait," cried Tee. "You'll have to get another pilot."

"Just a minute! You can't walk out on your contract. If it's a matter of credits —"

Tee shook his head. "That's not it at all. I just can't stay that long."

Jenner looked at him angrily. "Well, your contract isn't up till the end of the week anyway. We'll see what we can do about a replacement then."

After Jenner had left, Tee sat smoking in the darkness. He placed his elbow on the couch arm and cupped his chin in his palm. Then restlessly, he snuffed out his cigarette and rubbed his hands together. They felt moist and clammy. He jerked nervously as a click sounded out in the hall. Only a door opening across the way. He bit the fleshy part of his middle finger and then began to worry his ring with his teeth. He lit another cigarette and dropped it into the disposal almost immediately.

He got up and began to pace the room. Six steps forward. Turn. Six steps back. Turn. Six steps forward—or was it five this time? The walls seemed to be closing in, constricting. His head felt light and his tongue and palate grew dry. He tried to swallow, and a feeling of nausea came over him. His throat grew tight and he felt as though he were choking. Rubbing his forehead with the back of his hand it came away wet with perspiration. He rushed to the window and struggled futilely with it, forgetting it was sealed shut in the air-conditioned hotel. He flung himself at the door, wrenching it open and took the escalator three steps at a time falling to his knees at the ground floor. A surface cab was sitting outside

just beyond the entrance. He flung himself in, breathing heavily and fumbling to drop a coin in the slot, pulled the control lever all the way over.

Twenty minutes later, the *Starduster* hovered for a moment over Aurora, then shimmered and vanished as it went into subspace.

OCTOBER 2, 435th Year GALACTIC ERA

The *Starduster* materialized just outside the atmosphere of the planet Elysia, and fluttered erratically downward, like a wounded bird. A hundred feet from the surface, the ship hesitated, shuddered throughout her length, then dropped like a plummet, crashing heavily into a grove of trees.

For Tee there was a long period of blessed darkness, of peace, of non-remembering, then his mind clawed upward toward consciousness. The fear and uncertainty were with him again—nagging, nibbling, gnawing at his reason.

He fought to close his mind and drift back down into the darkness of peace and forgetting, but contrarily the past marched in review before his consciousness: The twin worlds of Thole revolving about each other as he fled down the shallow ravine before the creeping wall of lava, while the ancient mountain grunted and belched, and coughed up its insides. The terrible pull of the uncharted black star as it tugged at the feeble *Starduster*. The enervating heat and humidity of perpetually cloudy Thymis. Pyramids of gleaming penryx crystals piled high as mountains, and Yule Larson towering above the landscape, draining gargantuan rainbows at a single gulp; striding like Paul Bunyan across the land in mile-long strides and kicking over the pyramids of crystals, laughing uproariously at the sport. And Jenner, grinning idiotically, pointing a thick finger at him and repeating over and over: "Out of their jurisdiction! Nothing to fear! Nothing to fear! Nothing to fear! Noth—"

"Stop it! Stop it!" cried Tee, and a brilliant burst of light like a thousand sky-rockets seemed to go off in his head. He shrieked like an animal in agony, then fell back sobbing, bathed in perspiration.

Something cool touched his forehead and he pulled away violently, then as his head cleared he opened his eyes slowly. A blur of shadows and light shimmering indistinctly, then suddenly like the picture on a visiphone the blurs coalesced and formed a clear image, and everything was normal again, the fear still hovering close, but pushed back for the time being.

A girl stood before him smiling rather uncertainly. The sweetness and cleanness of that smile after his recent ordeal washed over his tortured mind like a cooling astringent, and he smiled gratefully up at her. She put a cool palm on his forehead and as she started to withdraw it he clutched it in an emaciated fist and mumbled indistinctly through cracked dry lips.

She smiled down at him and smoothed back his damp hair. She pulled up a chair beside the bed and continued to stroke his hair until his eyes closed in sleep.

He awoke ravenous and thirsty, but lay quietly for a time, luxuriating in the feel of the clean soft sheets. He was in a simply but tastefully decorated room. Three of the walls were made of transparent glass and the warm golden rays of a type G sun bathed the room. Outside he could see green rolling meadowland, broken here and there by sylvan groves. A brilliantly colored bird swooped down and preened itself for a moment, then raised its head and flooded the silence with melody. Faintly from a grove of trees came an answering treble. The songbird cocked its head to the side, listening, then swooped upward on wings of flashing color. A small squirrellike creature bounded nervously up to the transparent wall and sat on its haunches, surveying the room with bright beady eyes. As Tee's ears attuned themselves he was suddenly aware of chirpings, trebles, clearpitched whistles, and from somewhere in the depths of the grove, a deep-pitched ga-rooph, ga-roomph.

A chubby little man with a round face and alert twinkling eyes entered the room. He seemed to radiate happiness and contentment. "Well, I see the patient's finally come around," he said, cheerfully.

"What happened?" asked Tee.

"Your ship crashed just beyond that grove."

Tee clutched at him. "The ship! How bad is it?"

"I think you were in worse shape than your ship. You must have had it under control almost to the end, though how you stayed conscious with space fever is beyond me."

"Space fever? So that's it. I remember getting sick and light-headed and just before I passed out I flipped out of subspace and the automatic finder, of course,

took the ship to the nearest planet. I must have landed by reflex action. I sure don't remember anything about it."

"Well," the man laughed, "I *have* seen better landings, but not when the pilot had a temperature of one-o-five. Anyway, you're safe now. Welcome to Elysia."

There it was again. Safe! Safe! Tee raised up, then fell back weakly.

"Is anything wrong?" asked the little man, alarmed.

"N ... nothing, I just ... nothing!"

The man was looking at him questioningly.

"Elysia," mused Tee. "I seem to remember an old old myth brought from the original Earth." He waved toward the sylvan setting, outside.

The little man smiled. "Yes, the old settlers named our planet well." He caught himself. "Oh, I'm sorry; I'm Dr. Chensi. This is my home."

Tee smiled. "Well at least you'll have to admit I showed good judgment crashing next to a doctor's house." Then more seriously, "Thanks, doc, thanks for everything."

"My degrees aren't in medicine," replied Dr. Chensi. "I'm afraid I had little to do with your recovery. My daughter's the one who nursed you. Oh, here she is now." He raised his voice. "Come in, Lara."

Since Dr. Chensi was using the only chair she sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Here," said the doctor, teasingly, "what kind of nurse are you, mussing up your patient's bed?"

She pouted prettily. "He's *my* patient." Then looking down at Tee with a smile, "You'll be up and around in no time now."

"*Time!*" cried Tee, raising up. "*What's the date? I've got to know!*"

"You've been delirious for two weeks," answered the doctor. "Another two weeks of convalescence and you ought to be as good as new."

"But two weeks, I can't—"

"Can't leave before then anyway," replied the doctor calmly. "I knew you'd want your ship repaired so I had it hauled to the port. Won't be ready for two more weeks. So you might as well relax."

Tee bit his lip, and clenched his fists to keep from trembling. It was a moment before he could trust himself to speak without a quaver in his voice. "Nothing else I can do, I guess. Thanks, anyway. And by the way, there's enough credits in the ship's safe to pay for the repairs, I'm sure."

"I think we should start the patient walking tomorrow," said Lara, in a mock-professional voice. She punched the ends of Tee's pillow. "Now you'd better get some sleep. You're still very weak, you know."



The days that followed were like an idyll for Tee. With Lara he wandered through the parklike wooded groves. They sat near shaded pools and ate wild berries while she told him stories of the founding of Elysia. They held hands and ran exuberantly across the grassy meadows, and waded like children in the clear brooks.

A thousand times, a word, an endearing term, sprang to his lips, and each time the fear clamped his tongue in a vise of steel. A thousand times he wanted to touch her, feel the silkiness of her hair, the warmth of her lips, but each time the fear and uncertainty stood between them like twin specters of doom, pointing and saying, "Fool! Why torture yourself?"

In the daytime when Lara was with him it wasn't so bad, but at night the fear and uncertainty crowded to the fore and blanked out everything else. It was then he prayed for the courage to kill himself, and despised the weakness that made him draw back from the thought. If only he could stop thinking. Make his mind a blank. But that was death, and death was what he feared. How long ago was it when he'd first realized that hope was an illusion, a false god that smiled and lied, and held out vain promises only to prolong the torture?

Then one day the word came that his ship was repaired. As though the word were a catalyst the terrible fear overwhelmed him, drowning out every other thought, and he knew he had to leave. When he had no means of leaving the planet he could partially close off his dread and wait resignedly. But now that the ship was ready, every moment he remained was an agony.

He led Lara to their favorite spot by a quiet pool. She looked radiant, and

smiled to herself, as though at a secret. He steeled himself and finally blurted out, "Lara, I'm leaving tomorrow." He hesitated and bit his lip. "And ... thanks for everything."

"Thanks?" She choked on the words.

"I'm sorry—" he trailed off, lamely.

"But ... but I thought—" She looked down.

He reached out and gently touched her cheek. "Can't you see I *want* to stay?" he pleaded.

"Then why? Why?" She was crying now.

"I ... I just can't. It's no good." He stood up.

She reached out and caught his hand. "Then take me with you. I've heard you at night pacing in your room. I don't know what it is that drives you on and on, but if space is what you want, let me go with you. I can help you, darling. You'll see. And some day when you grow tired of space, we can come back to Elysia." She was babbling now.

He pulled roughly away. "No! It's no good. I'm—If only I *could* stay." He brushed her hair softly with his palm and as she reached out toward him he turned and walked swiftly toward the house, pitying and hating himself by turn, while Lara sat forlornly by the pool looking after him.

He began to sweat before he reached the house and his knees began to tremble so, he had to stop for a moment, to keep his balance. Determinedly he started forward again and continued on past the house to the highway that wound by half a kilometer away. There he hailed a passing ground car and rode to the spaceport, where a few judiciously distributed credits facilitated his immediate clearance. Before the ship had even left the atmosphere he rammed in the subspace control.

MAY 4, 437th Year GALACTIC ERA

Tantalus lay far out on a spiral arm, well away from the main stream of traffic that flowed through the galaxy. It was a fair planet boasting an equable climate, at least in the tropic zone. But as yet the population was small,

consisting mostly of administrative officials who served their allotted time and thankfully returned to their home planets closer to the center of population.

Tee entered the towering building and after consulting a wall directory stepped into the antigrav chute and was whisked high up into the heart of the building. He stepped out before a plain door and as he advanced the center panel fluoresced briefly with the printed legend—GALACTIC PRISON AUTHORITY, Ary Mefford, Administrator for Tantalus.

He hesitated for a moment, then squaring his shoulders stepped forward, and as he crossed the beam the door swung open before him. The gray-haired man sitting at the desk studying a paper, looked up and smiled politely. He indicated a chair with a nod then bent his head again. After a moment he shoved the paper aside and looked questioningly at Tee.

"I want to give myself up," blurted Tee.

"I'm the administrator for Hades," said the man calmly. "I think you want the *local* authorities."

"You don't understand. I escaped from Hades."

"No one escapes from Hades," replied the administrator.

"I escaped!" insisted Tee. "Ten years ago. You can check. I'm tired of running. I want to go back."

"This is most unusual," said the administrator in a disturbed voice. He looked unbelievably at Tee. "*Ten years* ago you say?"

"Yes! Yes! And I'm ready to go back, before it's too late. Can't you understand?"

The administrator shook his head pityingly. "It's already too late. I'm sorry." He bent his head guiltily and began to fumble with the papers on his desk.

Tee started to say something, but the administrator raised his head and said slowly, "It was too late the day you left Hades. Nothing I can do." He looked down again. Tee turned and slowly walked out the door. The administrator didn't look up.

As Tee walked aimlessly down the deserted corridor, his footsteps echoed hollowly like a dirge. A line from an old poem sprang to his mind: "We are the

dead, row on row we lie—" He was the dead, but still he chased the chimera of hope, yet knowing in his heart it was hopeless.

JUNE 11, 437th Year GALACTIC ERA

The *Starduster*, pocked and pitted from innumerable collisions with dust particles, sped out and out. The close-packed suns of the central hub lay far behind. Here at the rim of the galaxy the stars lay scattered, separated by vast distances. A gaunt hollow-eyed figure sat in the observation bubble staring half-hopefully, half-despairingly at the unimaginable depths beyond the rim.

JUNE 12, 437th Year GALACTIC ERA

On and on past the thinning stars raced the patient electronic bloodhound; invisible, irreversible, indestructible; slowly, but inexorably accelerating. It flashed by the planet Damocles at multiples of the speed of light, and sensing the proximity of the prey on which it was homed, spurred into the intergalactic depths after the receding ship, intent on meshing with and thereby distorting the encephalograph pattern of its target. It was quite mindless, and the final pattern its meshing would create would be something quite strange, and not very human.

THE END

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