

Trouble on Titan

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by Arthur K. Barnes

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Chapter I: Snaring a Trapper

THE conference was not going well.

It was taking place in the New York offices of the London Interplanetary Zoo, on the top floor of the tremendous Walker Building. The suite was built of the finest modern materials and equipped with all the comforts science could devise.

Vacuum-brik walls shut out noise. There were mineral fluff insulation, Martian sound-absorbent rugs, plastic body-contour furniture, air conditioning. The press of a button brought iced drinks or lighted cigarettes of aromatic Venusian tobaccos through a recess in one wall.

Despite all these comforts, the visitor was having a bad time.

At one end of the room was a small screen. On a stand before it was the morning “newspaper,” consisting of a tiny roll of film. Subscribers could turn on the latest news at any time by simply flashing it onto the screen. A dial enabled the reader to flip through the entire “paper” with a twist or two.

Varicolored backgrounds—white for local news, green for foreign, yellow for sports, and so on—made it easy for the reader to turn to any desired section.

Right now it was turned to the pale violet interplanetary page.

GERRY CARLYLE CHALLENGED IN RACE TO SATURN

London Zoo Contract at Stake As Prize for Victor

N. Y. Sept. 4. - UP - Scientific circles stirred with interest today as the supremacy of Gerry “Catch-‘emAlive” Carlyle in the role of interplanetary trapper—the rigorous profession of capturing monstrous life-forms on our neighboring planets and returning with them alive for exhibition in Earthly zoos—was challenged by Prof. Erasmus Kurtt.

Miss Carlyle’s contract with the London Interplanetary Zoo comes up for renewal soon. Prof. Kurtt suggested that so important a position should be given only to the one most fitted to hold it.

Intimating that he considered himself the better “man,” Kurtt proposed a race with the rich L.I.Z. contract as the prize.

The contest would be decided on the basis of a journey to any designated planet, the capture of any designated monster thereon, and safe return to Earth under the racer’s own power. First home with the creature alive and well would be declared the winner.

Prof. Kurtt suggested that the planet Saturn would afford sufficient difficulties to test the mettle of the contestants.

Speculation was rife...

The news item was switched off sharply, coincident with a sound suspiciously like a feminine snort. Claude Weatherby, public relations director for the London Interplanetary Zoo, mopped his brow furtively. He felt that he would rather contend with the tantrums of any of the world’s greatest collection of planetary monstrosities than with Gerry Carlyle’s famous temperament.

GERRY was in an uncompromising mood. It was apparent in the set of her shoulders, the swing of her arms as she paced the office floor. Undoubtedly one of the most famous women in the world, she was also among its most beautiful. But hers was the beauty, not of the aloof Grecian goddess, but of the jungle tigress. Underneath its alluring curves, her body was tough, resilient, inured to hardship and battle. She could be softly feminine on occasion. But also, like the jungle cat, she could be dangerous.

Starting her career as a girl still in her teens, Gerry Carlyle had fought her way to the top of the most exacting of all professions. Success was not won by resort to feminine stratagem, nor by use of her amazing beauty. Gerry scorned such wiles. In a man’s world, she competed with men on their own terms. Her success was due to hard work, brains, courage, and the overwhelming effect of her forceful personality.

“Captured by Gerry Carlyle,” the well known legend on so many of the tanks and glass cages at the London Zoo, was a symbol of what may be achieved by grit and enterprise in a democratic world.

Visibly drawing upon his nerve, Weatherby tentatively resumed an argument.

“After all, my dear, it’s only a publicity stunt. We appreciate that you are the outstanding personage in the business. Please be assured of that. We would never have consented to the race if we hadn’t had absolute faith in your ability to defeat this fellow Kurtt.”

“I understand all that,” Gerry said coldly.

“Perhaps we should have consulted you before barging ahead with plans for a jolly send-off ceremony with you and Kurtt. But, really, we were confident that your famous sportsmanship—”

“Spare me the crude flattery, Claude. You haven’t told me all the circumstances surrounding this silly challenge. I like honesty. I make a point of being straightforward. Why don’t you?”

Weatherby crimsoned and began to splutter. Gerry stopped him short with an imperiously unpraised hand.

“Here are the facts. The planetary hunters, of whom I am one, can be counted on your fingers. Another two or three, Claude, and you’d have to take off your shoes to count them. We form probably the most exclusive little coterie anywhere in the Solar System. The chance of anyone’s possessing all the qualifications to become a successful trapper of monsters is literally one in millions.

“Now this fellow Kurtt—he’s no more a professor than you are—is definitely not one of us. He’s a smalltime, penny ante hanger-on, chiseling a few dollars by talking some sucker into financing him for short trips. There are two unexplained things. In the first place, none of the genuine hunters would have the appalling lack of ethics to try snaffling a fellow-member’s job. It just isn’t done.

“A man like Kurtt wouldn’t dare suggest such a thing. He hasn’t the—er—courage. Unless, of course, someone important egged him on. And secondly, where on Earth would a phony like Kurtt get the financing? This is big business, Claude, as you well know. The returns of a successful trip of mine may run close to a million dollars a year for the L.I.Z. But it also costs hundreds of thousands to carry out an expedition.

“As for the race—against Hallek or Moore or one of the others it would be fun.

But to associate with a man of Kurtt's unsavory reputation is harmful to me and the Zoo. The whole thing—"

"It certainly doesn't smell good," interpolated a third voice.

WEATHERBY and the girl glanced at an easy chair in the corner. Barely visible were a pair of muscular, booted legs draped over the chair arm, and a cloud of pipe smoke. When it dissipated, the ruggedly good-looking face of Captain Tommy Strike, Gerry's fianc♦, grinned sourly at them. "Look, Claude," he explained. "What Gerry is asking, in her quaint way, is who's backing Kurtt?"

Weatherby hemmed and hawed, his British tact quite unequal to the task. "Fact is—uh—we—ah—didn't realize ourselves who was behind Kurtt till after we'd agreed on the—uh—bally publicity stunt. The man behind—"

His voice petered out entirely. Gerry Carlyle gazed with rising consternation at Weatherby.

"Claude♦!" she cried. "You don't mean to say— It can't possibly be that horror from Hollywood on the Moon. Not Von Zorn again♦!"

"Well—" Weatherby made a defeated gesture and hunched his shoulders like a man about to be overwhelmed by a storm.

Gerry groaned in mortal anguish. Of all people in the system to be in her hair again, Von Zorn, czar of the motion picture business, was positively the least welcome. The feud between these two for the past few years had raged from Mercury to Jupiter, with skirmishes on the Moon, Venus, Almussen's Comet, and various wayside battlegrounds. It had convulsed the System with delight.

With Gerry, it was the matter of an ideal. She took it as a personal insult when Von Zorn's clever young technicians synthesized, for motion picture consumption, robot-controlled planetary monsters instead of using the real thing. She always loved to unload a roaring cargo of the genuine article just in time to show up the menace in Nine Planets Pictures' latest action epic as the wire and papier mache creations they really were.

With Von Zorn, it was a matter of box office. There was no percentage in making high-budget films when Gerry was constantly turning them into low-gross productions by her genuine attractions at the L.I.Z.

By vigorously pacing across the room and back, Gerry tried to reduce her head of steam.

“So!” she finally burst out, and the syllable was like the bursting of an atomic bomb. “Old monkey-face hasn’t had enough, eh? Still whetting his knife in case I turn my back. Thinks he’ll run me out of business. Put one of his stooges in my place so he can dictate to the Zoo the way he dictates to those poor, deluded devils at Hollywood on the Moon!”

Weatherby and Strike sprang to their feet, ready to duck or run, as the emergency might indicate.

“Well,” Gerry continued in a voice that can only be described as a cultured feminine snarl, “all right, I accept the challenge! And I can promise Kurtt and that sly simian, Von Zorn, a trouncing that they’ll never forget!”

She strode to the visiphone, snapped the lever. The eyes of the switchboard girl in the outer office stared frightenedly from the screen. Obviously she had been listening in through the interoffice communicator. Just as obviously, she held her employer in awe.

“Get me Barrows!” commanded Gerry peremptorily. “Get me Kranz. Rout out that whole slovenly, craven crew of mine. Tell ‘em we’ve got things to do and places to go, if they could possibly spare a little time from their carousing.”

GERRY paused to smile a little. No one knew better than she that her crew was neither slovenly nor cowardly. They were picked men, culled from the thousands of hopeful adventurers from everywhere who constantly besieged her in their desire to join. They were intelligent, highly trained, vigorous, and incredibly loyal to their beloved leader. Several in the past had given their lives for her.

Though they sometimes played a game of grumbling about Gerry’s iron-handed rule, they fiercely resented any outsider’s intimation that her leadership was anything short of perfect. They lived dangerously, and severe discipline was the price of survival. They were envied by red-blooded men everywhere, and they were proud of it.

Gerry tossed her head confidently and smiled.

“I think Mister Kurtt won’t find any such team as mine to go to bat for him. As

for you, Claude”—she gazed at him as she, might regard some remarkable but slightly distasteful swamp-thing from Venus—“you may run along now. Whip up your excitement and publicity fanfares. Make ready for the colossal ceremony, the great race.

“You’ve inviegled me into this nonsense, and I’m agreeing only because it’s a chance to hoist Von Zorn on his own petard. But it must be done on the grand scale, Claude. I want nothing petty.”

Gerry walked to the passage that led to her private suite and exited with a faintly grandiose air. When angry, she had a tendency to dramatize her anger. Weatherby shut his gaping mouth. He seized his hat with the attitude of a man who has just been reprieved from the gas chamber.

“Y’know,” he said bewilderedly to Strike, “she’s quite a changeable woman. Sometimes I think she’s a bit difficult to fathom.”

Tommy smiled as he held the outer door for Weatherby. It was the understanding smile of one who has just listened to a masterpiece of understatement.

“Quite,” he agreed. “Rah-ther!”

Chapter II: Getaway Day

THE start of the Kurtt-Carlyle race AL was spectacular enough to satisfy the wildest dreams of any publicity man. Staged at the Long Island spaceport, it was carried out in the most hallowed traditions of such events.

The newscasters were there with their three-dimensional color cameras, picking up the ceremony for millions of listeners. Thousands of eager spectators thronged the many galleries of the port. To them, Gerry Carlyle was the epitome of all the heroines of history, adored for her beauty, her courage, her amazing exploits.

Weatherby, through the “papers,” had given the affair a tremendous buildup. Notables, as advertised, spoke briefly. Among the foremost was Jan Hallek, the genial Dutch hunter whose fame was second only to Gerry’s. He expressed the attitude of all the recognized men of the craft. Ostentatiously he wished Gerry the best of luck and was politely distant toward Professor Kurtt.

The mayor of Greater New York, currently a presidential candidate, dwelt at length upon Gerry’s courage and far-sightedness. Somehow he tied them up with the political party he represented.

The Governor of Idaho, the mayor’s campaign manager, professed to see in Gerry’s expeditionary force a perfect harmony between Capital and Labor. If his party was returned to power at the polls in November, he promised to bring about that ideal condition in the country.

Gerry and Tommy Strike viewed all this uproar somewhat cynically through the telecast set in the Ark itself. They were dog-tired. For one solid week, almost without rest, they had rushed through the tremendous task of outfitting the ship for an extended journey.

The mighty centrifuges were completely checked by expert mechanics, to be certain there would be no failure of motive power in mid-space. An endless stream of supplies—food, medicines, clothing, water, reading matter for the crew’s off-duty hours—poured in through the open ports. Weapons of all kinds were stowed away in the arsenal. Space suits and all emergency equipment had to be examined. Scientific instruments were taken aboard.

A course was charted by Lewis, Chief Astronaut, double-checked by Gerry herself. She and Tommy had to call on their last dregs of energy to push through their program to completion in time.

Now Tommy was slumping exhaustedly in an easy chair and puffing the ancient pipe with which he had saved Gerry's life on Venus. That was the memorable occasion when she had determined to obtain the unobtainable murri. For sentimental reasons, he refused to throw it away. Like all organic matter when over-ripe, it smelled evilly.

"It seems to me," he grunted wearily, "that this fellow Kurtt is pretty thoroughly hated for a guy who isn't doing much harm. Why not give him the benefit of the doubt?"

Gerry sniffed in disdain.

"Come to the starboard port and look at his ship."

The Kurtt vessel lay in a starting cradle on the far side of the field, apart from the mob milling around the telecast ceremony. It was two-thirds the size of the Ark, plainly a refitted old-style rocket ship. One section, instead of being metal, was composed of glass to permit a spectator to see into the ship. The glass had a greenish tint, indicating a high iron content—the strongest type of glass to resist high pressures.

"SEE that?" Gerry demanded. "This Kurtt fake has made two or three short trips to the Moon, or maybe Mars. On the strength of that, he loads his ship with a conglomeration of sickly beasts from some broken-down zoo. Then he goes hedge-hopping about the country, making one-night stands, collecting nickels and dimes from the yokels. He's just like an old-time medicine showman. He tries to sell copies of his ungrammatical book, which is a dreary account of what he thinks were dramatic incidents in his miserable existence."

Tommy grinned. "I still think it must be that feminine intuition of yours working overtime. I gather you just don't like the guy."

"He's an out-and-out fake. Are you defending him?"

Strike dodged the trap.

“Not me. If you and everybody think he’s a phony, that’s good enough for me. What worries me is that you’re liable to underestimate him. After all, he has plenty of money behind him now. See those rocket tubes? They’re lined with the latest super-resistant materials. Which means our friend must have completely new atomic engines, using Uranium Two-thirty-five. That costs. And besides, he’s pretty confident, else he’d never have picked Saturn to race to.”

“The best rocket ship in the system can’t match the Ark for speed. I’ll bet we could cut his flying time in half if we had to.”

Gerry knew her ship and the almost unlimited power of centrifugal force it utilized. She had no fears for its superiority.

They were interrupted by a messenger who came running in excitedly. The climax of the grand shivaree outside had arrived. The presence of Gerry Carlyle was expected. She sighed, made swift magic with a lipstick, smoothed her shining hair, glanced with poorly concealed satisfaction in a mirror. Then, with a provocative wink at Strike, she hurried before him to the main port.

When Gerry Carlyle and Tommy Strike made their appearance, the cheering was tremendous and prolonged. Candid camera fiends clicked their shutters and fought for unusual angles. Autograph hunters battled one another grimly for “Catch-‘emAlive” Carlyle’s signature. The inevitable college youth tried to handcuff himself to Gerry’s wrist in a futile effort to achieve fame. For Gerry Carlyle’s name was synonymous with glamor—more than the most highly paid star who ever acted for Nine Planets Pictures.

In a swift blitzkrieg, the pair smilingly thrust their way through to the battery of microphones. And there, for the first time, Strike met Professor Erasmus Kurtt. It was a shock.

Strike’s innate sense of fair play had him prepared to lean over backward to do the fellow justice. He had already felt sorry for him in view of his universal unpopularity. But Kurtt was a creature not even a mother could love.

He was tall and rather lean, yet had a remarkably rounded little paunch. He looked as if he had just swallowed a whole melon. His hair was thinning on top, and his scalp was greasy from too much of some tonic. As he talked, his single gold tooth gleamed rhythmically in the Sun. He constantly hunched himself in an ingratiating gesture, while regaling bored reporters with his life story.

Obviously he was excited with being in the spotlight. In short, he was the sort of character people always avoid for no particular reason, except complete disinterest.

“See what I mean?” whispered Gerry, as she advanced with a dazzling smile toward the mayor.

Strike nodded. He saw all right. Never in his life had he met anyone so thoroughly unlikable. Easy-going though he was, he felt he could really dislike Kurtt with no effort at all.

TOMMY managed to efface himself in the front line of the crowd. This was Gerry’s show. He had no desire to intrude or make speeches or shake hands with anyone. He watched with impersonal detachment as the two contestants were introduced for the benefit of the color cameras and televisors.

Gerry, in the name of sportsmanship, had to shake Kurtt’s clammy, fishlike paw. She listened patiently while Kurtt’s oily, pompous platitudes rolled off his tongue. He called her “charming little lady” and “my dear” and made patronizing reference to her achievements “in spite of the handicap of her sex.” Long after that, he concluded with the pious hope that the best man might win.

Strike watched uneasily as the unmistakable signs of rising temper made themselves manifest in Gerry’s demeanor. He shrank instinctively before the expected storm. He did not shrink without cause. In the lull following perfunctory applause after Kurtt’s speech, Gerry’s clear voice rang out.

“Where’s Von Zorn?”

Kurtt smiled a pathetic imitation of a smile.

“Er—I beg your pardon?”

“Don’t evade me, Professor.” She turned directly to the microphones. “Ladies and gentlemen, you are doubtless wondering who is really responsible for this race. There is only one man I know in the entire Solar System who has the shockingly bad taste to try to take my job. Von Zorn, the motion picture person, is backing the professor, hoping to run me out of business. Von Zorn isn’t here because he doesn’t have that kind of nerve. Or perhaps he realizes that he has overmatched himself again. Or—”

The horrified announcer quickly pushed himself into the scene that was being telecast to millions of delighted listeners. Making smooth small talk, he deftly edged Gerry out of focus and sound before her tirade came to an end.

Strike shook his head. The combination of Gerry's long-standing feud with Von Zorn and Kurtt's unethical behavior had been too much. In spite of rigorous schooling, her famous temper still sometimes got out of hand. But now, of all times! Naturally everyone was rooting for her. Suppose though, after this scene which clearly indicated her contempt for her opponent, something should go wrong. What if Kurtt won? The humiliation, for a proud girl like Gerry, would be unbearable. Yes, the Carlyle neck was definitely stuck out this time.

Strike began to have a nagging little premonition. More closely than ever, he watched the ceremony. Gerry, as had been agreed upon beforehand, was to make public her selection of the monster whose capture was necessary for victory. She named the dermaphos of Saturn, so-called because, according to Murray—the great pioneer explorer whose books were standard texts in every college—the dermaphos' hide glowed with a faint phosphorescence. Kurtt, much to Strike's increasing uneasiness, was not in least taken aback. Not much was known about the dermaphos, except from the writings of Murray and one or two other explorers. They described it as a relatively large creature and rather rare. Confident in the ability of her own crew to surmount any and all obstacles, Gerry had purposely chosen a beast that would be difficult to capture. But Kurtt was nodding and smiling, perfectly agreeable. It was a curious phenomenon, and it gave Strike considerable to think about.

At last the ceremony came to an end. Police firmly herded the crowd off the tarmac, leaving it clear for the two take-offs. Strike, awaiting his fiancée at the main port of the Ark, was too disturbed even to call her down for losing her temper at the microphone. Instead, he asked:

“Has it really occurred to you, kitten, just what's at stake in this silly race? You've deliberately selected a limb, sawed it half-through, and climbed out on it. If it breaks, after your interesting but impolite and boastful remarks, we're washed up. Completely. And Kurtt isn't acting like a man who's convinced he can't win.”

Gerry smiled with complete aplomb. “Masculine intuition, my love?” she taunted. “I know I acted like a cat just now, but I simply couldn't help it.

Anyhow, I'll be a good girl and attend to business from now on. So you needn't worry about who's going to win this race. That, my brave worrier, is in the bag."

"I wonder," said Strike thoughtfully, as the rocket tubes of Kurtt's ship began to rumble mightily.

Chapter III: Hell Hole

THE Inferno, as described by Dante, is an unpleasant place. But for sheer ugliness, inhospitality and danger, it fails to approach the planet Saturn. Twenty-one days in that dreary hell convinced Tommy Strike of Saturn's absolute hideousness.

There was one favorable aspect. The surface gravity of Saturn was not much different from that of Earth. All other aspects concerning that malodorous world afforded nothing but discomfort and peril to human beings. Of this Strike was positive as he gazed over the bleak landscape.

The surface of Saturn was rugged. Tremendous mountain ranges reared massively into the murky atmosphere, colossal on a scale that would dwarf anything known on Earth. Most of their surfaces were frozen solid. That was not so much because of temperature—for internal heat made Saturn sufficiently warm to support life—but because of the great pressures created by Saturn's thousands of miles of atmosphere. This was proved by the occasional outcroppings of blue-gray "rock," which were solidified ammonia. Clumping steps along the corridor of the Ark drew Strike's attention. It was Gerry, dressed in the special suit designed for use under such abnormal pressures. As an extra precaution, helium was used instead of nitrogen to prevent any possibility of the "bends." "More observations?" inquired Tommy despairingly.

She smiled with gentle understanding.

"Yes, a few more. But our three weeks' work is showing splendid results. It won't be long now. I know it's boring, but you realize as well as I that we're up against a completely and unclassified unknown form of life. Most people, of course, think our job's done when we bag a specimen and get him into the ship. As a matter of fact, the hard part is yet to come. Catching 'em alive is much easier than keeping 'em alive and well."

"I know, I know." Strike knew the entire lecture by heart. "We must exactly duplicate in the hold of the Ark every feature of the animal's environment. As far as possible, we must learn of what he's composed, his habits, what he eats and drinks and breathes, and how much. Transporting a creature through millions of miles of free space into an alien environment is not a job for an

amateur.”

Gerry applauded clumsily with her bulky gauntlets.

“Bravo! Sometimes I really think you’re learning something about this business. Coming along, my hero?” Strike made a wry face, but obediently turned to the empty suit standing within the air-lock. A moment later, properly dressed, he stepped with Gerry to the hard-packed soil of Saturn’s lowlands. The hour was mid-day, though full daylight was only a weak solution of night.

Gerry squinted a weather-eye at the heavens, observed the turgidly boiling fragments of cloud masses whipping past. The daily windstorm, which came regularly enough to set a clock by, was about over. Now its tag ends were confined to the upper reaches. Common to all the larger planets, Saturn suffered tremendous gales of ammonia and methane that raged above the main body of hydrogen-helium atmosphere.

THE Ark was resting in the bottom of a moderate-sized valley. This landing place had been chosen partly because it afforded shelter against the elements, but mostly because of a remarkable feature of Saturn’s atmosphere.

There were still traces of oxygen on the planet. Being heavier than the other gases on the planet, the oxygen had gathered in “pools” in the low spots. Since animal life was dependent upon oxygen even on that miserable planet, the result was that small “islands” of life were distributed over Saturn existing only where sufficient oxygen remained. Naturally that helped Gerry’s search considerably. The Ark simply hopped from valley to valley till they found a spot with one or more specimens of the dermaphos they were seeking.

After finding a colony, all their efforts had been devoted to the most thorough analysis of the animal’s environment, to reproduce it perfectly within the space ship.

As Gerry and Strike walked ponderously along a familiar path, they encountered other members of the crew already at work. One party was busily engaged in digging vast amounts of Saturnian vegetation for transplanting inside the ship. This was to feed the dermaphos.

The plants were invariably low-growing vegetables, clinging close to the ground to prevent being uprooted by the terrible winds. The leaves were thick, spatulate,

like some of Earth's ornamental cacti, and dark in color. Others were shaped like tightly bunched artichokes, some like large, flat mushrooms. One type, the favorite of the dermaphosphors, looked like a belligerent cabbage.

As the two walked along, occasional gusts of wind rattled a miniature hail of armored insect life against their metallic suits. Once a blundering birdlike thing flapped heavily by, shrieking mournfully, "Meeee! Meeee!" It was the Screaming Meemie.

Farther on, Gerry paused before a small, dense bush somewhat resembling the carnauba palm tree, from which Brazilian natives get coffee from the seeds, and cream from the sap.

The Saturnian plant went the carnauba one better, however. Its leaves made a tasty salad when mixed with its fruit, and a delicious drink could be distilled from its sap. To top it off, a fragrant spice could be shaken from its pinkish blossoms. Hence its name—the Blue Plate Special plant. Gerry stripped the bush eagerly, dropping her prizes into a specimen bag.

Once Strike pointed out a splatter of sticky stuff clinging to a stone. Rising from this, clear out of sight into the low-flying scud, rose a thin, silvery strand.

"Kite," remarked Strike over the tiny portable two-way radio in his space suit.

Gerry nodded. The Saturnian kite was an eight-legged creature with folds of membrane between its limbs, much in the fashion of the Terrestrial flying squirrel. It also spun a filament like a spider's web, though its thread was infinitely more powerful. The kite's web was actually thinner than piano wire, yet its tensile strength was almost twice the wire's.

The kite was insectivorous. During each of the periodical winds, it allowed itself to be swooped into the air, maintaining contact with the ground by spinning its lengthy filament. One end of the thread was firmly attached to a rock by some organic adhesive manufactured within its glands. In the teeth of a gale, it spread itself wide imitating a parachute net, to trap the millions of insects being dashed about by the wind.

At any time, the kite could descend by "reeling in" on the practically indestructible strand.

“I’M glad we managed to catch a couple of those things,” Gerry remarked. “I have an idea we might make a fortune from them.”

“No kidding! How? Sell ‘em to little boys every March, instead of using paper and string for their kites?”

“No, silly. Get a couple of those creatures to spin a few miles of that amazing filament, and you could weave a coat or any other garment that would never wear out. Just think what the cotton and wool and silk tycoons would pay us to keep that off the market!”

Strike disdained to reply. In a few moments, they entered the area where they had located their dermaphos. The animal was apparently a rather rare specimen, yet once it had been located, it remained pretty well staked out. That was because it was an extremely sluggish creature, moving only short distances at any time.

Without much searching, the two hunters relocated their monster. Strike stood staring at it wryly.

“Not much of a beastie, is he?”

The dermaphos certainly was somewhat of a disappointment, being absolutely unmelodramatic in appearance. There was nothing exciting about it, like the Venusian whip, or the cacus of Satellite Five of Jupiter. Nor was there anything attractive about it, like the famous energy eaters of Mercury.

It appeared to be merely a ten-foot, crested lizard with a thick, warty hide. There were peculiarities, of course. Its six feet had only two toes apiece, indicating that evolution on Saturn had taken cognizance of the futility of scratching at that dense, rocky soil. More strangely, despite the pictures in Murray’s tests which showed rows of phosphorescent lights like those that decorate deep-sea fishes, this dermaphos did not glow. For the most part, though, it was an ordinary creature, considering what important matters hinged upon its capture.

“Well, what’s on the program today, kitten?” Strike wanted to know.

“A pound of flesh. Dr. Kelly is playing the role of Shylock, and would like a sample of our friend here for analysis. He’s been working on the puzzle of why the dermaphos doesn’t phos. So he’s been taking pictures and all sorts of tests.”

Strike considered. The dermaphos' hide was much too thick for any sort of injection of local anesthetics, though it could be gassed into temporary unconsciousness. But that would be the means to be used for the actual capture, and Gerry disliked to give her prospective victims any advance hint of what was in store for them. Some of the planetary life-forms were amazingly adaptable. After one shot of anesthetic, they could develop immunity to it.

“Big reptiles are always sluggish,” said Tommy jauntily. “I’ll bet I can whack off a piece before he even realizes what’s happened.”

He selected a hand-ax from the row of hooks round the outside of his suit, which had more equipment than a Boy Scout kit. Confidently he stepped around behind the dermaphos as it browsed sleepily on the leathery foliage. Seizing the tip of the monster’s tail, he smashed the ax down. Instantly he was flung off-balance by a ton of enraged flesh. He fell heavily, and the world spun with incredible speed.

WHEN his eyes focused properly again, Strike found himself staring into the gaping jaws of the dermaphos. In his ears, the angry and frightened scream of his fiancée was ringing. “Tommy! Tommy! Are you hurt? Don’t move. I’m coming!”

Strike grinned shakily.

“Relax. Everything’s under control, I think. He can’t hurt me in this suit. Just get around behind him and warm his stern with a heat beam. And listen, Gerry, remember, your credo—no unnecessary heroics. Stay well out of danger.”

A faint sobbing breath in Strike’s earphones was the only audible indication that the girl was anything but under iron-nerved control. For a minute there was an armed truce, while the dermaphos tried to make a decision. Strike remained motionless. Ax in one hand and tail fragment in the other, he stared unblinkingly into the unquestionably lethal mouth of the ugly Saturnian monster.

Since he was involuntarily in a position to do so, he made observations. The beast had sharp teeth in front as well as grinders in the rear. That showed that he was probably omnivorous, though none of the hunting party had seen him eat anything but vegetation. Besides, at least four of the fangs appeared to be backed by glands of some sort. The acid secretion drolled slowly onto the breast of Strike’s pressure suit, and it was so powerful that the metal became pitted.

Beyond the range of Strike's vision, Gerry went into action. The dermaphos squealed suddenly with rage and flipped its mighty bulk around to face a new tormentor.

Strike rolled wildly aside to avoid the thrashing monster. Even in that confused instant of activity, he got a glimpse of the raw spot on the dermaphos' tail where he had hacked off the living flesh. It was still smoking from Gerry's well aimed heat ray blast, and Strike found time for swift sympathy. That must have stung the unhappy creature badly.

Then the brief drama was finished. Strike clambered to his feet and moved to safety on the far side of the clearing, while Gerry calmly lured away the slow-moving dermaphos.

Presently the two hunters joined forces again. Strike bowed clumsily and offered the bit of flesh from the animal.

"Compliments of the management," he said with an affected accent, "for mademoiselle."

The two looked deeply into each other's eyes, and unspoken volumes passed between them. They were a modern couple, those two, wont to spend more time kidding and roughhousing than in tender words. But they were also in love. Physical danger to either, though pretty much to be expected in their profession, was always harrowing to the other.

"It's times like these," Gerry said slowly, "when I think of chucking the whole thing."

"And settle down in a little gray penthouse in the west?"

They grinned at each other. Gerry could never of her own volition quit the rigorous, exciting game in which she was an acknowledged leader. It was in her blood like an incurable disease. She was the kind to die with her boots on, probably on some distant world where human feet had never trod before. Life, for her, consisted of boldly tackling murderous life-forms for the benefit of the millions of spectators who yearly thronged the London Interplanetary Zoo.

There was no other, and they both knew it.

Chapter IV: Disaster!

SHRUGGING off the momentary reaction, Strike and Gerry made their way slowly back to the Ark. Dr. Kelly, a red-headed Irish biologist with a Harvard accent, met them as they stepped inside the air-lock. Excited, he seized the piece of the dermaphos. With a brief apology, he rushed off to his little laboratory, trailing a mutter of inaudible comments. Gerry looked after the scientist in wonder.

“Seems to be in a terrible rush,” she observed.

She learned the reason shortly. Turning toward the control room, she and Strike came across Lieutenant Barrows, whose young face was frowning in pure, concentrated worry. He gasped with relief when his superiors arrived.

“Oh, Miss Carlyle!♦!” he blurted. “Something unexpected has turned up. Professor Kurtt visited us today!”

“Kurtt, here? That’s impossible! Saturn’s thirty-two thousand miles in diameter. He couldn’t just drop in on us like a bill collector!”

Once again Strike felt that familiar prickle of apprehension whenever he thought or heard of Kurtt. The fake professor looked like a harmless bore to the naked eye, but close inspection revealed his deadly qualities. Tommy had learned never to underestimate an opponent, and he recognized the man’s cool, quiet shrewdness. And this latest move made him feel more uneasy than ever.

“I dare say,” he pointed out, “that it was no great trick to find us. Saturn seems to be poor in any sizable metallic deposits, so a good detector would record the presence of the Ark promptly. No, that isn’t what worries me. It’s why he came.”

Barrows said that practically half the crew were away from the ship, doing scheduled tasks. The remainder, the scientists, were in their labs.

“When I stepped out of the control room,” he continued, “I found Kurtt and four of his crew strolling along the main corridor as if they owned the place. He apologized for walking in, but said no one answered his hails. He tried to pump me about our progress, but he got mighty little out of me.” Barrows looked faintly complacent.

“Is he gone now?” Gerry snapped.

“Oh, yes, Miss—”

“Crew know about Kurtt coming here?”

“Those in the ship heard him talking with me as I tried to maneuver him outside without a fuss. Dr. Kelly knows, and Dr.—”

“Did Kurtt let anything slip about what he’s been doing since arriving on Saturn?”

“Well, I thought he seemed a little worried. I don’t really believe he’s located a dermaphos yet, Miss Car—” “Okay. We pulled a boner by not setting a guard. But it’s obvious that Kurtt came nosing around to see if we’d found a dermaphos yet, and, if so, to try stealing it off right from under our noses.”

She took a deep breath and began to give her orders to the now thoroughly alarmed Barrows.

“Call in all the crew. Everyone. As soon as they get here, tell Kranz to take five men with him, and a full complement of weapons and gravity plates. Have Kranz stake himself out by our dermaphos, but make no move till I contact him by radio. Just watch, and protect our property in case Kurtt should try to hijack it. On your toes, now. Snap to it!”

HARDLY missing a beat in her machine-gun firing of orders, Gerry whisked into the control room and switched on the inter-ship communicator.

“You researchers, attention! Bring your reports to the control room at once. We’re leaving shortly, if it’s at all possible.”

Before actually catching any alien monster, Gerry always had her scientific staff learn every possible item concerning the beast. Then the data was thoroughly gone over in a general meeting. If they agreed that enough was known to insure safe transport of their prize, the expedition was then brought to a swift close.

The present conclave quickly came together in Gerry’s presence. Analyses of vegetation and general environment and other data were quickly given. A few unexpected items were brought out. The first concerned the planet itself.

Apparently Saturn, locally at least, was quite rich in uranium. That fact would have been worth a fortune a few years ago. Since the discovery of vast uranium deposits on the Moon, however, uranium on as distant a planet as Saturn was interesting, but of no particular value.

More to the point was the fact that some of the plant life, particularly the cabbagelike favorite of the dermaphos, seemed to utilize uranium as Earthly plants utilize sulphur and other minerals. Deposits of uranium salts had been found in the foliage.

Most interesting of all was Dr. Kelly's report, based on a quick check of the sample of dermaphos flesh which Strike had brought in.

"The fact that the beast didn't phosphoresce had been worrying me," he explained. "It occurred to me that perhaps it was a fluorescence that showed up in Murray's pictures. Of course, the dermaphos doesn't noticeably fluoresce to the naked eye, either. But there are quite a few mineral salts which fluoresce under the impact of ultraviolet. I remembered that the electroscopes showed the presence of uranium, which reacts under ultraviolet rays.

"Then I thought it was entirely possible that Murray's photos were taken with UV flash bulbs or photo-floods. So I experimented with my own camera, and some UV lights. Sure enough, it's the uranium in the dermaphos itself that causes it to glow under ultraviolet! It eats uranium. Just why, no one could say without prolonged study of the animal, both alive and dissected.

"Our bodies use many minerals, of course. My guess would be that uranium salts act as a catalytic agent in the processes of metabolism and digestion, somewhat as some of our own ductless gland secretions. Then, after their work is done, they are eliminated unchanged through the skin. That's only a guess, of course. —"

"Good work, men," Gerry cut in. "It tells me what I want to know. We can make our capture immediately. I want to pull out of here at once, because our rival has been prowling around and might think it cute to hijack our dermaphos. Barrows."

"Yes, Miss Carlyle?"

"The hold is fully prepared?"

“Two of them are replicas of Saturn to the last detail. I have put all the incidental specimens like the kites and the Screaming Meemies in one hold, according to your orders. The second hold is reserved for the dermaphos. He rides alone, so there will no chance of a free-for-all fight ruining our prize.”

“Spare us the lecture, Mister Barrows.” Gerry was acid, impatient. “Radio Kranz. Tell him to make the capture. It should be quite simple. Use anesthetic gas bombs, of course. The rest of you prepare to take off.”

Quickly the control room emptied, leaving only Gerry and Strike. For perhaps fifteen minutes they worked silently, making ready for the departure. Then Strike, glancing out the forward port, spied Kranz returning on the double-quick with his squad. Behind them, suspended by gravity bands adjusted to neutralize exactly the force of gravity, the sleeping dermaphos was hauled along.

“Kranz is back,” said Strike. “He has the prize.”

Gerry jumped, her nerves on edge. “Good.” She sighed with relief. “That finishes us up here. A good job well done, and will I be glad to leave this place! Nothing left now but a few comfortable weeks in space, then the victory celebration. Professor Kurtt, I’m happy to say, is stymied.” Strike said nothing. He had a nagging sense of having overlooked something, a feeling almost of foreboding. It had all been too easy so far. Was it just a sort of calm before the fury? It was. When they were only a short distance from Saturn disaster struck.

“ABANDON ship!” The call rang through loudspeakers in every corner of the mighty rocket craft.

“Abandon ship. Prepare to abandon ship.”

That cry had resounded throughout the Ark many times before, but only in periodical lifeboat drills, practise for an emergency that no one dreamed would ever really arise. The Ark, one of the greatest of space ships, had been built with every resource of modern science to make it impregnable against the assaults of space or unpredictable conditions on alien worlds. Could such a ship ever be destroyed? It seemed impossible.

The quiet, icy voice of Gerry Carlyle, as calm as if she were ordering dinner, came through the speakers in every compartment.

“Abandon ship. Prepare to abandon ship.”

Throughout the length and breadth of the Ark there was orderly confusion. The mighty hull shivered suddenly, racked by some terrible internal disturbance. It was the fifth explosion of rapidly increasing severity that had shaken her from stem to stern.

The report from the engine room was incoherent. The huge centrifuges seemed to be crumbling, flying apart inexplicably. As each cluster of rotors broke away, it hurtled with frightful speed clean through the double walls of the ship. The control panel was a jumble of wreckage, as if smashed by the blast of some cosmic shotgun. It was only a miracle that there were no casualties yet.

As oxygen rushed out into the vacuum of space, automatic bulkheads began to rumble shut. Tortured metal screamed somewhere deep in the ship. Presently the acrid stench of ammonia filtered through the corridors. At least one of the animal holds with internal pressure equal to that of Saturn’s atmosphere, had blown outward, perhaps weakened by the rupturing of the adjacent engine room walls.

There was no panic. Speedily the members of the crew gathered up those items of equipment that were designated as “vital” in case of such emergency. Then, three to a car, they entered the miniature rocket ships within special locks in the sides of the Ark. A signal flashed on each control board. The pilots flashed back their readiness for the take-off.

Abruptly the ship spouted monsters and rockets like a surrealist Roman candle.

IN the glassite bow of the Ark, Gerry Carlyle and Tommy Strike, true to ancient traditions, waited for their crew to get clear before they abandoned their ship. As each lifeboat shot away, another light gleamed on a panel in the pilot room.

Finally there were seven lights showing. All the lifeboats but one were clear. Hovering at a safe distance from the Ark, they waited for further orders. Gerry took one final look about the room. It had been more of a home to her than any other place. Then Strike and Chief Astronaut Lewis hurried in. They had stowed away the charts and instruments.

“All set, gentlemen?” Gerry asked coolly.

“All set.”

Both men carefully avoided any sentimentality. They knew Gerry was as bitterly heartbroken as they were, and knew also that she would fiercely resent any suggestion of feminine weakness. It was one of the traits for which they admired her.

The three of them stepped into the last lifeboat.

Strike sent the little rocket streaking away out of immediate danger. They took a backward glance, after they had withdrawn about a half mile. The stricken Ark was drifting helplessly.

Slowly revolving, she revealed a gaping hole in her stern. The tangled ruins of one of her centrifuges dangled from the gash like exposed intestines. Outlined against the bright hull was one of the Saturnian kites. It had been cast forth when one of the holds near the engine room had given way. Accustomed to withstand Saturn's pressures, the kite had literally exploded into tatters. That was what would happen when all the specimens were exposed to empty space.

Gerry shuddered. Quickly, though, she established short-wave communication with the castaways and rallied them around like a cluster of silvery, flame-spurting metal fish. The first thing was to take stock of their situation.

On the credit side was the fact that they had been less than twenty-four hours away from Saturn, and still accelerating, when the accident struck them down. Saturn loomed gigantic in the sky. Its eternal rainbow rings looked so near, it seemed almost as if one could reach out and break off a piece.

Before Gerry could issue an order, an excited voice hammered through her loudspeaker.

"Miss Carlyle! Captain Strike! A space ship is coming up under the stern of the Ark!"

Chapter V: The Etiquette of Murder

GERRY and Strike stared at each other in electric tension. Another ship? Rescue?

“This is incredible,” said Gerry in an awed tone. “Why, the odds against another ship being in this part of the Solar System at this particular moment must be billions to one.” Sudden misgivings troubled her. “You don’t suppose—”

They ran into each other, striving to see out of the forward port. Gerry groaned.

“It’s that Kurtt! He would show up at a time like this. I’d almost rather not be rescued than to have—”

“This wouldn’t be more than mere coincidence, would it?” Strike asked, his voice low and tense.

The radiophone signal buzzed. Gerry reluctantly snapped the switch. Coming through the televisor, Kurtt’s buttery voice fairly dripped sympathy.

“Are you there, Miss Carlyle? Dear, dear, what a shocking disaster! I sincerely trust that no one has been injured. What could possibly have been the matter? Some structural weakness, no doubt.”

Strike saw Gerry beginning to seethe.

“This is a time for diplomacy, kitten,” he whispered. Facing the transmitter, he said: “Look, Kurtt. We’ve cracked up. Under these circumstances, of course, our little contest must be put aside. If you’d be so good as to ease over this way and take us aboard—”

“All in good time, Mr. Strike,” Kurtt replied soothingly. “All in good time.”

But his ship, instead of rescuing the castaways, moved alongside the Ark. It fastened itself to the riven hull like a leech. With a strangled exclamation, Gerry seized a pair of binoculars. She could see right through the glassed-in portion of Kurtt’s ship. That part of the hold was partially filled with Saturnian vegetation, mostly the artichoke type and Blue Plate Special plants, doubtless intended to

feed captured specimens. There were a few of these visible, but no dermaphos.

But the presence of the dermaphos was not long in coming. Mistily, through the green glass, Gerry could see figures moving, a port sliding open. Choking with rage, she cried out:

“The thief is helping himself to our dermaphos! We spent weeks preparing to make our capture, before finding one of the things. And now he helps himself, just like that. How does he get that way?”

As if in answer to her anguished exclamation, Kurtt’s unctuous voice became audible again.

“Laws of salvage, Miss Carlyle, as you know. I hate to take advantage of your misfortune. Still, all’s fair in love and war. Rather lucky for me that I happened along. I hadn’t had time to locate a dermaphos before you were all ready to leave. That’s the penalty of traveling in a slower ship. How fortunate that your specimen was still secure in its compartment. Might have been thrown free and ruined.”

“Okay!” snapped Strike. “You’ve got the dermaphos. Now give us a hand here, will you?”

“Ah, I was coming to that. As a matter of fact, my poor ship is so small. That’s the penalty of not being wealthy and glamorous. You see, there is hardly room for any more passengers. Insufficient food and oxygen, you understand. I might take two or three aboard, but how can I choose whom to take and whom to leave behind? Am I God, thus to deny succor to my fellow-men?” He registered pious shock. “Oh, my, no!”

Then he continued.

“I’m so sorry, but it is beyond my poor capabilities to aid you. However, be assured that I shall send out rescue parties just as soon as I get within radio range of Earth.”

Thunderstruck, Strike stared at the microphone as if it had turned into a snake.

“Kurtt!” he bellowed. “You can’t do this. It’s murder! You wouldn’t go off and leave us stranded in mid-space. Kurtt, are you listening?”

BUT Kurtt's rocket ship was already gathering momentum. It spewed flame in a great red blossom, kicking sharply away from the side of the Ark. For a supposedly slow ship, it gathered speed surprisingly as the pilot recklessly poured in the fuel. Within a minute's time it dwindled. Then its dark shape was abruptly lost in the blackness of interstellar space.

Strike turned to his fiancée.

"I had a hunch we were underestimating that bird. He's as cold-blooded a killer as the most vicious specimen we ever caught. Well, there goes everything. Von Zorn has backed a winner at last. The Zoo contract, the Ark, and us—wiped out."

Gerry's shoulders twitched. Strange burbling sounds came from her throat. Suddenly she threw back her head and burst into hearty laughter.

"Oh, I just thought of something. What a joke on poor Kurtt! Only he doesn't know it yet."

Strike and Lewis stared at one another in horrified astonishment. Was Gerry Carlyle of the iron nerves and the stout heart giving way to hysteria? The mere idea was a grim reminder that they were in a predicament from which there was little hope of escape. The two men quickly looked away, ostentatiously pretending to busy themselves with nothing in particular. The girl's hearty laughter abruptly ceased.

"Stop acting like silly boys who were caught stealing the jam! I'm not hysterical. It is a joke, a colossal one. But I'm determined to be there when Kurtt finds out about it. It's too good to miss. So let's get busy and find a way out of this mess."

Quickly Gerry opened a small locker, took out the Emergency Chart every astronaut must have before being allowed to leave Earth. A map of the Solar System, it was marked to indicate the nearest source of aid in case of breakdown, illness or any other disaster at any particular point in space.

Gerry's finger quickly traced out the Saturnian system. The four inner satellites were colored black, signifying that they were airless chunks of rock, utterly useless for any purpose.

Rhea was marked with a red cross to indicate mineral wealth. Both the outer

satellites, Iapetus and Phoebe, had arrows to show rocket fuel and food caches for stranded space wanderers. Hyperion was too small to be considered. But Titan, largest of all, had both blue and red crosses, indicating habitability plus mineral wealth.

Gerry was faced with the need of making a vital decision. Moreover, there would be no changing that decision once it was made. Of that handful of satellites, they could manage a lucky landing on only one. After they made their choice, there would be no getting away again unless and until the Ark was repaired. The tiny, short-range lifeboats would be useless for cosmic distances.

Coolly Gerry stowed the Emergency Chart away and turned to the row of slim reference books that lined the bottom shelf. This little library was her pride. The most complete of its kind in the System, it had been compiled by Gerry herself.

It was a digest of every known fact concerning the planets, their satellites, and the asteroids. In it were represented every space explorer from Murray to the present, and the gleanings of knowledge by interplanetary hunters like Hallek and Gerry Carlyle. There was also a lengthy contribution —Gerry made a wry face—by Anthony Quade, Society of Spatial Cameramen, and the data he had collected while roaming the void for movie locations.

SHE opened up the volume on Saturn and its satellites, turned to Titan and quickly flipped the pages. Titan was extraordinarily rich in minerals of almost every conceivable type. Only transportation costs prevented mining there. Also, its atmosphere was breathable, its temperatures apparently not lethally extreme.

More remarkable, according to Murray's writings, there was civilized life on Titan. The cities there had been built with an amazing genius for metalworking. But Murray's notes were sketchy on the subject. It seemed that the inhabitants of Titan were few in number and difficult to communicate with, though quite friendly.

The fact that highly evolved life existed on the satellite was not startling. Advanced civilizations had been discovered in at least three other places in the System. If any nomadic tribe, gifted with the ability to work in metals, had wandered in from outer space and decided to locate in the Solar System, it was only natural for them to select Titan and its wealth of ores.

Gerry was not interested in making any social contacts at the moment. But it was

the fact of life on Titan that motivated her final decision. The Ark needed metals for repair, and they were to be had on Titan. As a last resort, the inhabitants might conceivably be able to help. The girl weighed this possibility carefully against the undeniable fact that if any other rocket ships were to enter the Saturnian system, they would land only on the two outer satellites, never on Titan. Confident in her own self-reliance and the ability of her crew, though, Gerry made her choice.

Incisively she gave her orders. The eight little lifeboats moved purposefully toward the Ark. Jockeying skillfully into place like tugs about an ocean liner, they began to haul the mighty space ship toward its rendezvous. Saturn's largest satellite was rapidly hurtling closer to the site of the disaster.

At first there was little appreciable progress. Then gradually momentum was gathered, aided by the growing effect of the satellite's gravity. More swiftly moved the Ark, till the lifeboats were forced to reverse their positions and act as brakes. The surface of Titan expanded with a terrifying rush. Desperately the miniature rocket ships strove to check the dangerous descent, blasting furiously with every available ounce of their limited fuel supply. In the final moments before the crash, the entire underside of the Ark was obscured by the savage blaze of the little rocket tubes.

Timing it perfectly, Gerry gave the order to dart away from underneath the falling juggernaut. With an awful concussion, the Ark's stern plowed deep into the soil of Titan, throwing a huge powdery wave into the air. Then, almost in slow motion, the rest of the tremendous metal giant toppled downward. Rocks and dust sprayed out on either side. The Ark lurched once like a dying monster, and gently rolled over on one side.

Gerry smiled, pleased with her expertness. She had brought the ship down so its torn hull would be easy to reach.

Gently, like a flock of curious birds, the lifeboats fluttered to rest in a ragged circle. Gerry dabbed at her forehead with a wisp of handkerchief, then smiled hardily at the two men.

"Well, here we are on Titan, without benefit of brass bands." She paused, before continuing in a casual voice. "You know, I wonder if the place is destined to be our tomb."

Chapter VI: Sabotage

THE eyes of every occupant in the eight lifeboats gazed questioningly at the surface of the strange little world. Had Gerry Carlyle's fanatical attention to detail paid dividends again, enabling her to select the one right place for them to land? Or had the sketchy information in her library betrayed them into descending into a hostile environment? Perhaps it would be so freezingly cold that repairs to the Ark would be impossible. In that case, they were doomed to a lingering death.

In the main boat, Gerry and Strike were relieving the tension of doubt by swift routine, refusing to take anything for granted. Thermometers, atmospheric drift gauges, barometers, and bolometers were projected through vacuum suction tubes. Air samples were drawn in through the Bradbury valves and automatically analyzed. Visual observations were made through the glassite ports, for Titan was rather well lighted by the reflected glow of Saturn.

The surface of the satellite was irregular, hilly. Jagged cones of possible volcanic origin formed a low range of foothills, with a pass leading to the region beyond. Dunes of fluffy material like volcanic tuff dotted the near landscape.

This and other reports were exchanged between the lifeboats. Presently a complete picture began to appear. It was even more favorable than suggested by Murray's notes. The thin atmosphere was largely nitrogen, helium and oxygen, with indications of negligible amounts of other gases in unstable equilibrium. Methane was present in small amounts. This, being the product of organic decomposition, indicated vegetable life.

The temperature was only slightly below freezing. Doubtless Titan received heat from Saturn and the Sun, almost undiminished by any absorbent atmospheric layers. Gravity on a body only a few thousand miles in diameter would be relatively weak, less than half normal Earth gravity.

With understandable pride, for the value of her incredible thoroughness had proved itself again, Gerry finally contacted all the lifeboats.

"We're perfectly safe, men. Dress warmly. Carry a bottle of oxygen with a tube, and take a breath of it every minute or so in order to prevent blood bubbles from

forming. Hand weapons, of course, just in case. So, everybody out!”

A faint cheer returned to her through the communicator. The lifeboats disgorged their human cargo as if eight weird eggs were hatching out. After a brief period of leg-stretching and adjusting to temperature and adjustment to temperature and weak gravity, Gerry immediately organized her forces to cope with their grave predicament.

The extent of damage had to be surveyed by the engineers and workmen. Then a party under Strike’s leadership prepared to reconnoiter the immediate vicinity to make sure they were in no danger from hostile life-forms. They used one of the lifeboats, powered with the little fuel remaining in the tanks of the other seven. Finally Gerry herself led a small expedition to examine thoroughly the other parts of the Ark.

Strike reported all clear. The only thing of interest was one of the cities Murray described. It was just a few miles away, but apparently long deserted. Gerry reported that the damage to the ship was surprisingly small. The crash upon Titan had been eased expertly. A few dents in the hull and a number of fixtures torn loose inside were the only internal casualties. Two compartments had been torn open to outer space—the engine room and the first Saturnian hold next to it.

Both groups gathered around outside the tangle that once was the engine room, watching the workmen clear the debris away. With oxygen bottles in one hand and tubes leading to their mouths, they looked like a group of solemn Turks puffing on their hookahs.

INSIDE, where the engineers crawled about with portable X-ray equipment, were twin centrifuges. Running in opposite directions to obviate torque, they were composed of thousands of tiny rotors spinning at a rate of nearly fifty thousand revolutions per second.

The principle had been worked out three-quarters of a century before by Professor Rouss, of the University of Virginia. Rouss ran rotors eight thousand revolutions a second in blasts of compressed air, achieving centrifugal force a million times as strong as gravity. The Ark, a mighty centrifugal flier, was the ultimate development of that early experiment. The double centrifuge in her stern was powerful enough to move a great mountain.

After an hour’s steady labor, the Chief Engineer reported to Gerry. There was an

odd look on his face.

“Well, Baumstark,” she urged impatiently. “What’s the score?” Speaking in clipped phrases, Baumstark replied.

“Seem to have two outs on us, Miss Carlyle. We’ve pretty thoroughly X-rayed the mess. The starboard centrifuge is undamaged, but the others is in a bad way.” He held up several strips of film. “You can see what the Laue patterns show — advanced crystallization. Big sections of the rotors collapsed from metal fatigue at the same time, and flew apart.”

“Do you have any idea what caused it?” she asked tersely.

Baumstark took a battered ruin of tubes and coils from one of the workmen. He offered this as evidence.

“This probably was a vibration pack. We found it crushed in among a cluster of shattered rotors. Someone deliberately introduced it into the centrifuges, and it created rhythms that induced metal fatigue. We’ve been sabotaged, Miss Carlyle.”

Gerry and Strike exchanged a long look of slowly dawning comprehension.

“So,” murmured Strike. “My hunch was right. Friend Kurtt evidently found time to do the job right before Barrows found him wandering around inside the Ark. Clever, in a way, much better than a bomb. It became effective only when we started the centrifuges for our take-off. Kurtt wanted to be sure he wouldn’t wreck things till we were well out in space. With luck, the vibrator would have been hurled out through the hole in the hull, and we would never have known the cause of the trouble.

“Kurtt, of course, simply had to hang around near Saturn, wait till we showed up, and then tag along at a safe distance. Sooner or later, he knew he could grab our dermaphos without an argument. No wonder he was so agreeable when the dermaphos was chosen, and no wonder he picked Saturn. It’s far enough out of the way so it would be unlikely that anyone would be around to interfere or rescue us.”

Gerry, whose intuitive hate and distrust had been proved so well founded, took this evidence of utterly cold-blooded treachery with surprising calm. She smiled with grim promise.

“I rather pity poor Von Zorn when we get back.”

Strike looked troubled.

“You don’t think Von Zorn actually ordered Kurtt to do anything like this do you?”

“Oh, no. He doesn’t like me, because I know him for the faker he is. But he fights fair. That much I grant. No, Von Zorn will be appalled when he learns what his hireling has been up to. But the fact remains that Kurtt is Von Zorn’s man. And I think I can do business with that fact when we return.”

“If we return, you mean. Kurtt never meant to let us survive, and he’s done a pretty good job so far.”

“Right. That’s the next question.” She turned to the chief engineer. “Baumstark, can we manage with the one centrifuge?”

“No, miss. Torque.”

“Then how about repairs?”

BAUMSTARK glanced around resignedly, wet his lips and shrugged.

“Dozens of rotors and stators either gone or badly weakened. Probably two hundred replacements necessary. We have a few spares, that’s all. I—I don’t see how it’s possible for us to get the Ark moving, miss.”

There was profound silence. Strike’s heart dropped to his boots as he thought of Kurtt speeding to triumph with the fruits of their labors. Then he grinned wryly.

“Did I hear something just then?” Gerry raised her lovely, troubled face and gazed at him inquiringly.

“I think that third out just whizzed past us into the shortstop’s mitt.”

Of all the women in the System, Gerry Carlyle was probably the least prone to accept an adverse decision without bitter protest. She would doubtless start an argument with St. Peter, claiming it was undemocratic to force a new angel to wear a halo and strum corny tunes on a harp against her will. Hence, though the

greatest Umpire of all seemed to be calling them against her, Gerry vowed to go down swinging.

Before any sense of defeatism could overcome her men, she was snapping orders with her accustomed spirit. In the Ark's tiny workshop was a small electric induction furnace. Gerry had that brought outside. Then she dispatched four men with ore-finding doodlebugs. The latest development not only located bodies of metallic ores, but also, by registering infinitesimal differences of electrical resistance, indicated what kind of metal was present.

A powerful alloy had to be used to withstand the terrific speeds of the centrifuges. Only a combination of strong but light beryllium and the densely strong but heavy neutroxite, not found on Earth, could be used. These had to be found by the ore hunters.

There were other difficulties, though. Baumstark seemed to draw them from his helmet like a magician. The first was the fact that to smelt ores, their induction furnace would eat a tremendous amount of amperes. So much power could never be provided by the generator that operated the lights in the Ark.

"Rewind the generator," was Gerry's reply.

Then Baumstark pointed out that they hadn't a source of power sufficient to keep that generator moving to produce the necessary amperes. Tommy Strike solved this one.

"Steam," he said. "Haul out one of those tanks we use to carry aquatic specimens and set it up as a boiler. Just beyond that pass there, about half a mile away, there's a forest of some sort. Leafless trees in all kinds of queer geometric shapes. Perfect for firewood. I saw no evidence of water on Titan while we were scouting around, but we can fix a trap that will save most of our steam. So we'll be able to use the same water over and over again."

The ease with which obstacles were overcome by the ingenuity of the captain and crew of the Ark inspired a cumulative feeling of irresistibility in all of them. Gerry glowed with pride. This was the result of her careful selection, severe discipline, rigid training, and years of constant reminder that every possible contingency should be anticipated.

Under some circumstances, she might even have welcomed this challenge to her

ability and self-sufficiency. But the terrible threat of Kurtt—which paradoxically loomed larger the farther he sped from them—left no time for any complacency.

One thing was lacking before they could commence their work, and it was found within the hour. The ore hunters came charging into camp with a gleam of triumph in their eyes, like that of a Forty-niner who had struck the mother lode. Both beryllium and neutroxite had been located nearby, practically on the surface of the ground. It would be a comparatively simple matter to mine it in quantity.

Gerry at once parceled out the various jobs, and work commenced furiously. At that particular season of the Titanian year, the satellite was illuminated by either the Sun or Saturn for three-fourths of its day. Hence, by working shifts, the crew of the Ark lost little time because of darkness.

The only delays were caused by unforeseen difficulties. The first occurred at the slanting shaft drilled into the hillside, following a vein of almost pure neutroxite. Returning to work after the first short night, the men found the stope had collapsed. Gerry's examination revealed that four holes, about six inches in diameter and close together, had been bored low in the wall of the shaft, weakening it to the point of breakdown. The holes were smooth as glass, and apparently continued into the very bowels of Titan.

"If none of you fellows dug these holes," observed Gerry, "then they must have been made by a burrowing animal of some kind. I'll stick around while you work and see if I can't spot our hecklers."

Digging continued, with men lugging sacks of the heavy ore back to the Ark. The light gravity enabled them to handle what would have been hundreds of pounds on Earth. Presently a muffled, whirring sound came from inside the tunnel, and the workmen popped out in a hurry. Gerry, heat ray in hand, set herself at the tunnel mouth.

At the rear came a sudden flurry of rock dust, and a remarkable creature burst into view. It was about the size of a woodchuck, but quite round. Its mouth was set precisely in the center of its head, perfectly circular, and was armed with a formidable set of teeth. Two tiny eyes glittered deep in their furry sockets. Balancing upright like a weighted doll, it stared solemnly at Gerry Carlyle.

The girl moved forward quietly, hoping to capture it by the scruff of the neck.

Immediately the animal turned to face the wall of the cave. A number of little flippers, placed at haphazard spots all over its body, sprang into view. The creature began to spin in a clockwise motion at a furious rate, literally boring into the ground with its terrific teeth. In ten seconds the strange creature had vanished.

It was Kranz, peering in astonishment over Gerry's shoulder, who named it in a burst of inspiration.

“Call it a Rotary Mole!”

Chapter VII: Mystery of Life

THE Rotary Moles—there were four in the local family—proved quite a nuisance with their constant burrowing into the mine shaft. When driven out, they sat around staring curiously at the operations like so many sidewalk superintendents watching an excavation. In desperation, Gerry was forced to devise a method of capturing them.

She abhorred the wanton killing of wild life, which rendered useless her high-powered hypodermic rifles. They would destroy any animal as small as the Mole. Also, the anesthetic gas dispersed too quickly in the thin Titanian air to be of much good.

After brooding awhile over a method to catch the things harmlessly, one of the men gave Gerry the clue. To scare the Moles away, he threw a half-empty can at them. They darted off, then came racing back to the splotch where the pineapple juice had soaked into the ground. At once they all up-ended and began to spin, boring madly into the damp spot. Unquestionably they had a passion for fruit juices.

That made it easy. Gerry built a box trap and filled it with soil. Then she set it out the second night and emptied two cans of juice on it. The next morning they had four Rotary Moles in a sadly battered trap. Another hour would have enabled them to win to freedom.

“What a testimonial for the pineapple people!?” Gerry gloated, as she stowed the Rotary Moles out of harm’s way. “They ought to be glad to pay plenty for it.”

After the boiler-generator-furnace hook-up had begun to function, another interruption occurred. The first batch of neutroxite had been poured into sand molds. The smelting of more ore was proceeding satisfactorily, when the electricity unaccountably weakened. Checking along the wires from the generator to the furnace, Strike found what appeared to be a rather slender copper bar lying across the wires. With the toe of his boot he kicked it aside.

Three minutes later there was another short in the circuit. Tommy again was forced to remove the apparent copper bar from the wires. This time, after kicking it away, he bent down to pick it up. He received a mild electric shock. When he

dropped the thing hastily, the copper bar began to walk away.

“So,” murmured Strike grimly. “You want to play.”

He pursued the perambulating bar. It ducked swiftly into the pile of wood used to fire up the boiler. With one sweep Strike spread the fuel about the landscape, but there was no copper bar to be seen.

He began to swear softly as he peered around. Gerry, fascinated by his antics, came over.

“What goes on now?” she demanded. Strike explained briefly.

“It must be a sort of chameleonlike thing,” he concluded. “First it imitated the wires. Now it’s imitating the sticks of wood. Probably generates a current within itself like an electric eel. Maybe if we wait around, it’ll move again.”

Gerry snorted in exasperation.

“And no doubt it amuses and warms itself by shorting our wires at every opportunity. Another monkey-wrench in the machinery that we’ll have to dig out.”

Carefully they began to sort the woodpile, searching for a stick that would give them a mild jolt. A loud complaint from Baumstark warned them. Behind their backs, the chameleon had sneaked over to absorb the juice from the furnace leadins again.

They tried to surround the thing, which now resembled a copper bar. But it scuttled away lizard-fashion much too rapidly to be caught. Thoroughly annoyed by these alarming delays, Gerry said reluctantly

“We’ve got no time to waste in studying that little beggar, and find out how to capture it. If I don’t get an inspiration within an hour or two, we’ll just have to kill it outright.”

FORTUNATELY the inspiration came. In Gerry’s quarters was a large mirror, her one concession to feminine vanity while on expedition. This she carried outside and set up alongside the chameleon’s favorite spot—the electric wires—tilting it so it would reflect nothing but the dark-blue sky.

The third brief night passed, and Gerry awoke to the sound of hilarious laughter. Hurrying out, she found Tommy guffawing and pointing inarticulately. The chameleon, in its natural state looked like an ordinary chunk of flesh with legs. It lay twisting futilely before the mirror, sputtering feeble electric sparks. Part of it was blue as the sky, while the rest shaded into a rapidly shifting mottled color.

“The poor devil tried at first to imitate nothing, looking up at space,” Strike explained finally. “Then it must’ve caught sight of its reflection in the mirror and tried to imitate itself! The natural result was a complete nervous breakdown!”

After this interlude, nothing arose to interrupt their work. Metals were smelted, poured into molds. Emery-wheels howled as the little rotors were ground smooth. Before long they were ready to be welded into place in the matrix of the huge centrifuge. That was when they faced the most appalling complication of all. It was found impossible to weld the rotors!

“It’s the beryllium, miss,” explained Baumstark worriedly. “We used only moderate heat to smelt it. That was okay. We had to use a terrific temperature to smelt the neutroxite. That was okay, too. But now, in order to weld, we have to use enough heat to affect the neutroxite, and it’s too much for the beryllium. It just oxidizes away. We need a flux, and it can’t be made.”

After everything had been going so well, for this apparently unsurmountable obstacle to arise was almost enough to drive even a Gerry Carlyle to tears. Had she finally made the fatal mistake that all adventurers sooner or later commit?

When she had chosen Titan to land upon, rather than the outer satellites, she had made a gamble. By going to Iapetus or Phoebe, it might have been possible to cram the lifeboats with rocket fuel, leaving room for only one person to pilot. With skillful navigation and great luck, some of them might have been able to make the Jovian satellites, and the mining outpost on Ganymede, to organize a rescue party for those left on Titan. Instead, Gerry had characteristically decided to shoot for big stakes. It was a wager—complete repair of the Ark and triumph in the race with Kurtt, against annihilation. She had wanted all or nothing.

And for the first time Gerry Carlyle knew the sick, stifling sensation of despair.

But there was one last trump in her hand. Gerry still had the notes in Murray’s diary concerning a civilized race on Titan, with remarkable skill in the use of metals. If those people were still on Titan, perhaps they could help. If they were

gone, as Strike's report of a deserted city would indicate, perhaps the castaways could read from the ruins something that might be of assistance to them.

There was still fuel left in one lifeboat, so Gerry, Strike, and Lieutenant Barrows piled in. They took off with a roar, heading straight "north" for the city Tommy had seen earlier. After swiftly covering about six miles, they sighted it. Half a mile from its limits was a level plain, and there Strike set the rocket ship down gently.

At a cautious distance the trio examined the strange city. It appeared to have been built for a population of approximately twenty thousand, by Earthly standards. It had been constructed on the basis of some baffling, alien geometry. The designs resembled the geometry of man, but the patterns just evaded complete comprehension, barricading themselves in the mind just beyond the borderline of full meaning. All around its edges, the city was crumbling to ruin. It was as if some invisible monster of decay were slowly eating toward the center, which was still in excellent repair. And in all that weirdly beautiful expanse, not a single living thing moved. Barrows broke the quiet.

"Isn't it incredible how persistent and unconquerable life is? We find it everywhere, under the most terrible conditions—the inferno of Mercury, the stewpot of Venus, and crawling under tons of pressure on Saturn. Now even on this barren rock, a great civilization evolved. Those Arrhenius spores sure got around, didn't they?"

Gerry smiled. "I doubt if what we see out there actually evolved on this empty ball of stone. Probably it came from some other universe, many eons in the past. Shall we explore it without waiting for reinforcements?"

There was no dissenting voice. Gerry always meted out harsh punishments for infractions of her safety-first rules, but now time was working swiftly against them. Besides, the place looked so deserted, there seemed to be no reason for the usual caution.

So they moved into the city. Their first discovery was that it had been built for a race of beings smaller than humans, making it seem like a large-scale model of a city. Doorways were five feet in height, windows in proportion. Oddly, there were neither doors nor window panes, suggesting utter indifference to temperature changes. Nor were the buildings, save for a few curiously graven

towers, more than three stories in height.

As the group walked slowly toward the heart of the city, they found it in a remarkable state of preservation. The streets were clean, totally devoid of rubble or dust. It almost seemed as if the place were waiting patiently for the return of its masters, and was tended daily by some mysterious, invisible presence. The echoes of their booted feet rattled in the emptiness.

Gradually, as Gerry led her scouts into the center of the city, a curious feeling began to oppress them. They felt the gradually increasing certainty that they were not alone. They paused irresolutely, every nerve on the alert. Did they really hear that stealthy rustling in the depths of the mysterious, darkened apartments? A cautious peek within showed strangely malformed furniture, but no living thing.

“I don’t like this,” said Gerry uncomfortably, one hand on her heat ray gun. “Perhaps—”

The brassy clangor of a mighty gong shattered the stillness with two tremendous, shivering notes. Gerry, Strike, and Barrows raced in a breathless sprint for open country. With wild, awkward bounds that broke Olympic records at every leap, they scrambled and sailed like jumping-jacks running amuck. They didn’t stop for breath till they were out of the city and safe beside their little rocket ship.

WHEN they looked back through the grayish daylight, they received an even greater shock. The city was alive! Peopled with bipeds moving about the streets, in and out of buildings, it was just like any normal town. The change was so abrupt, the terrestrial explorers gaped at the city, then at each other. They were too shocked to talk. All they could do was gulp stupidly.

Gerry was first to recover the use of her voice. She used it to get in radio communication with the Ark.

“Listen carefully, Kranz,” she ordered. “We’ve discovered civilized life here. There’s not much rocket fuel left. So instead of our coming back in the lifeboat, I want you to lead a reinforcement party. Head straight north, through that little pass. But first go to my room and look in the locker behind the door. On the top shelf you’ll find a contraption that looks like a half-dozen wired bowls attached to a power unit. Bring it out, and take along a new supply of oxygen bottles.”

Instead of settling down to wait, Strike unhooked his binoculars for a long look at the city's inhabitants.

"They're nothing to be afraid of," he decided. "They're less than five feet tall, slender, delicately built. Besides, didn't Murray say they were friendly? They'll probably recognize us as humans, just like Murray. Come on. Let's pay 'em a visit now."

Gerry dubiously agreed, so the trio moved back toward the city. They were met at its edge by a group of four Titanians. As Strike had said, they were frail, uniform in height to the last millimeter, and entirely hairless. They were dressed in a metallic cloth which was wound around them like mummies' wrappings. It was obvious that they dressed for modesty rather than comfort, however, for their flesh was tough and hard.

Their features were generally human. Instead of ears, though, there were four filaments sprouting from each side of the head, and shaped like a lyre.

"Be nice to 'em," Gerry cautioned. "Remember, their good will may be our last hope."

Chapter VIII: Monster of Evil

ONE of the Titanians stepped forward with a graceful waving of hands, a low bow. “Mradna luaow,” he said politely.

Tommy grinned, also bowing ludicrously.

“You don’t say! Republican or Democrat?”

The Titanian smiled unmistakably, bowing more rapidly than a Japanese diplomat. Pointing to Gerry, he said: “Ree yura norom.”

“That’s what I’ve always said,” Tommy agreed amiably. “Great kid. But she needs a man around to keep her from getting hysterical.”

He blocked a playful punch from his fiancée. After a few more exchanges of pleasantries, the Titanians led the castaways into the city.

It was entirely different this time, filled with the quiet hum of life. Vehicles moved silently and swiftly through the streets, though neither wheels nor motive power were visible. Occasionally they caught glimpses of a form of escalator inside the buildings. Throughout their tour, the strange people never once gave vent to any expression of surprise at sight of the visitors from Earth.

“They’re the most super-polite race I’ve ever seen,” Strike said uncomfortably. “In fact, too much so. They have the exaggerated formality and worship of mannerism of a decadent people.”

Gerry, slightly startled at this penetrating comment, agreed.

“Yes, the aura of decay does seem to saturate the place. A pity, too. They’re such nice little men.”

The tour of inspection, instead of clarifying, simply added more mysteries. There was no indication whatever of any central source of power generation or machinery. And nowhere did they see anyone at work. Titanian life seemed to be one long round of quiet amusement and leisure.

The journey ended before one of the Titanian apartments. Gerry and Strike

entered, leaving Barrows outside to watch for Kranz. They found the odd furniture strangely comfortable, but were inconvenienced by the low ceiling and lack of light. Evidently the Titanians could see in the dark better than cats. Food was offered, but it was a case of one man's meat being another's poison. It made both of them temporarily sick.

Gerry picked up a vase-shaped object, beautifully molded of metal, though incredibly light. She tried to break it between her hands, then hammered it savagely on the wall.

“Not a dent!” she exclaimed in awe. “The stuff is some kind of alloy, too. Tommy, these people do have a secret that will enable us to repair the Ark! If we can only learn it—”

They looked at one another with rising excitement.

To kill time, Strike amused himself hugely with silly antics. First he entertained the astonished Titanians with feats of strength that were quite simple in the reduced gravity. Then he tried to find a common denominator in his attempts to communicate with signs. He was less successful in this.

During this display, he made one disturbing discovery. There was a ragged, apparently bottomless hole in the floor at the back of the room. A nauseating odor rose from it, suggestive of nameless evil.

FINALLY Kranz arrived with five other crew members. Strike, Gerry and Barrows took the oxygen bottles that were offered then. Then Gerry seized the apparatus which actually resembled a series of bowls joined by wires.

“Now!” she exclaimed in triumph. “Now we can really talk to these people.”

Her statement created a sensation, and the entire party crowded into the apartment. The Titanians seemed delighted at the prospect of entertaining this bunch of overdressed, muscular, hairy guests. They listened with every evidence of profound interest as Gerry expounded the principles of the gadget she held in her hands.

“This is a thought helmet,” she declared, with an air of defying anyone to contradict her. She held up one of the bowl-like metal things. “It's an invention of my cousin Elmer at Federal Tech. It has built-in headphones, and contains a

compact power unit. Thought, of course, is a delicate electrical wave that's generated by the atoms of the brain. When the companion piece to this helmet is placed on the head of another person, each acts as a super-sensitive receiver of mutual electrical thought impulses."

Strike made the mistake of offering an argument.

"So what? After you pick up your impulses, they'd have to be reproduced in your own brain. Did Elmer think of that?"

"Elmer has thought of everything," Gerry replied biting, "except how to deal with impertinent interruptions. May I continue, please?"

"Um."

"The impulses received are greatly amplified in the coils of these helmets. By electrical induction, they set up similar impulses in the brain of anyone who wears the helmet. So the wearer experiences the exact thoughts he has tuned in." Gerry donned one of the helmets. Then, approaching one of the Titanians, she induced him by politely gentle signs to emulate her example. There were three other helmets with leads to Gerry's master helmet.

"These," she explained, "are one-way receivers. You can hear what goes on, but your own thoughts are not broadcast. Otherwise there'd be an awful jumble. Here, Tommy, Barrows, Kranz ... All set?"

Carefully Gerry threw a switch in her helmet and then the Titanian's.

A faint humming sounded, but that was all. There were no thought impulses. Strike began to grin.

"I think I could beat Elmer just with my sign language."

Gerry sighed. "My, aren't we the impatient one, though!" The terrible uncertainty and lack of time reflected in her voice as sarcasm. "Human thought waves, my love, range within a narrow band of wave lengths. We must stay within that range to hear thoughts. Each brain has an infinitely fine difference from every other brain. We have to tune in."

She began to twist a sunken vernier dial on the Titanian's helmet, broadcasting a

repetition of a single thought:

“We wish to be your friends. We wish to be your friends.”

The three men also twisted their dials and simultaneously picked up Gerry’s unspoken thought. The expressions on their faces were ludicrous. But before they could say anything, the Titanian’s features also registered amazement and pleasure. He bowed and fluttered his hands ingratiatingly. Gerry raised her eyebrows in triumph.

“Now to tune in on our friend. I’ll speak my thoughts aloud, so all you need to do is get on the Titanian wave length.”

THERE was a moment of silent dialing and then the Titanian’s thoughts came in with sudden strength.

“So happy to welcome the strange bipeds. Our homes, our sustenance, our lives are at your disposal.”

This had the sound of ritual rather than a genuine offer. Gerry cut her switch momentarily and turned exultantly to Strike.

“Just think! We’re in contact with an intelligent race, with all their customs, science, literature, and intellectual progress. Probably the culture of a planet from another universe. Why, a few weeks here may open up undreamed-of avenues of research in all lines of human endeavor!”

“We haven’t got weeks to spare,” interjected Strike. “Remember Kurtt?”

“Urn, yes. Kurtt and the race.”

Gerry suddenly looked harassed at this reminder that their lives depended upon her tact and ingenuity. She started to reestablish thought contact with the Titanian, but was interrupted by the booming gong that had frightened them earlier in the day.

The Titanians all spread their hands regretfully, mouthing their incomprehensible syllables. Gerry snapped the switch just in time to catch the end of the explanation.

“It is the Time of Offering now. We must retire. Please do not go away. We shall awaken shortly. Our homes are yours.”

Bowing ingratiatingly, the Titanians lay down upon their curiously constructed beds and instantly dropped into a coma. All through the buildings came the rustling, pattering sound of thousands of tiny feet. The party from the Ark watched in wary bewilderment. The tension was snapped by Gerry’s gasp.

“Look there—coming up through the hole in the floor!”

It was a hideously malformed little devil that stared around with bright, beady eyes at the intruders, then popped out into the room. It stood about three feet high, in appearance much like a sea-horse. At the base of the nauseous, scaly body there were four short legs, ending in hoofs. The creature seemed top-heavy. Just as the Titanians were the epitome of kindness, this thing was stark evil.

“No sudden moves, boys,” Gerry ordered in quiet tones. “This monkey looks as if he could be pretty mean.”

There was intelligence in the beast’s eyes as it surveyed the unexpected situation. Abruptly the slender snout opened and it hissed, long and piercingly. It also recognized a foe.

War had been declared.

THE group from the Ark pressed it slowly back to await developments. There was something mysterious, unexplained. They wanted to learn the vital elements of the situation before deciding on a course of action.

The monster apparently took this withdrawal as capitulation, and promptly went about its business, ignoring the others. The hoofs made a faintly disturbing clop-clop as it crossed the room to bend over one of the sleeping Titanians. From its snout protruded a long, thin extension that was almost needlelike. Before anyone could speak or interrupt, it was plunged into the throat of the Titanian!

Action erupted in a swift flurry. Someone had his heat ray out in a flash, hurling a soundless, searing bolt. The monster doubled up in quick pain, nipping at the glowing spot on its horny hide. Then it turned, hissing viciously as if charged.

Cool and efficient, Gerry instantly took command.

“Concentrated heat beam,” she ordered calmly. “Its armor is too strong for diffused rays.”

As she spoke, she had her own weapon unsheathed and adjusted with a single swift motion. While the monster drove at them, Gerry emotionlessly drilled it twice and stepped out of the path of the plunging body like a graceful bull-fighter. It crashed against the front wall and collapsed, smoking from half a dozen heat ray blasts.

Immediately after the brief scuffle, two more ugly devils magically popped up into the room. For a moment it looked like real trouble in the confining, narrow room. The leading Titanian, however, stirred restlessly and raised himself on one elbow. He was groggy, like a bear roused from hibernation. But he managed to convey by gestures of negation that Gerry and the hunters were to do nothing to interrupt. Then he heavily dropped back on the couch and sank into a coma again.

“He wants us to lay off, men,” Gerry said in bewilderment. “Evidently this sort of thing goes on all the time. Maybe he isn’t being hurt, and will tell us about it when he awakens. This whole business, though—” She shook her head. “It absolutely beats me.”

The new monsters methodically went about plunging their needlelike tongues into the sleeping Titanians’ exposed throats. Gerry repressed a shudder, turned sharply away. She found Strike making the most of the opportunity to study the body of the dead one.

“Find out anything?”

“A little,” he said abstractedly. “For one thing, this tonguelike jigger is sharp and bony. Also it’s hollow, like a hypodermic needle. And the cheeks inside are lined with pouches that’re partially filled with some oily stuff.”

Gerry forced herself to wait patiently while the ugly little monsters came in three relays to gouge at the necks of the helpless Titanians. Finally they disappeared for good, and the vague scurrying sounds all over the city died away to silence. This in turn was broken by the double note of the deep-toned gong.

The three Titanians awoke, bright-eyed and seemingly refreshed, to turn graciously again to their guests.

Chapter IX: Children of Esau

EAGERLY Gerry donned the thought helmet once more, placing the corresponding helmet upon the leading Titanian. Gone now were all thoughts of delving into the mysteries of an ancient and dying civilization. Even the urgency of their terrible predicament faded momentarily before the importance of learning the queer relationship between the Titanians and the monsters.

“They are the Gora,” came the Titanian thought waves, anticipating Gerry’s questions. “They are native to this world.”

“Which means that you’re not?”

“No. Many ages ago, the Old Ones came here from a far star. There was death on our original home, though I know little about it. When we arrived here, our presence was resented by the Gora. But their catacombs were underground, and we did not interfere much with one another. Then it was discovered by the Gora that we people have a strange gland in our bodies—”

The Titanian lifted his chin to expose his throat. There was an opening there, reddened from the recent mistreatment.

“Formerly, when our race was expanding, our artisans worked miracles with metals by virtue of the secretion from this gland. Now, however, there is no longer any need to build, and that secret has been lost.”

A thrill of excitement passed through the Ark’s crew.

“So to us the gland is a vestigial organ of no value. But to the Gora, the secretion serves not only as food and drink, but as valuable plastic material for many uses. From the moment they learned this, there was constant warfare between us. Raiding parties of the Gora would lie in wait for incautious individuals, or occasionally make daring night raids into our homes. Once captured, a Titanian was rarely seen again live. He was doomed to a ghastly slavery far underground, a living death.

“We, in our turn, fought back with powerful weapons. Poison gases were released in the burrows of the Gora. Traps were set. But in the end, superior

intelligence solved the terrible problem. To end the futile, destructive warfare, we as the dominant race made a pact with the inferior Gora. After all, the glandular secretion was of no particular importance to us. So we agreed that twice every planetary revolution we would set aside a brief period.

“During that time, the Gora are permitted to come up from below and replenish their supplies of the secretion. This period, known as the Time of Offering, is marked by the great gong. In return, the Gora agreed to take over all manual duties in running the city and keeping it in a fine state of repair. They clean our homes, operate all our machines, while we are free to engage in cultural pursuits and enjoy the more abundant life. Thus, by virtue of intellect, we have relegated the Gora to the status of our slaves.

“They are utterly dependent upon our glandular gifts. They must appease our every whim or suffer the consequences. We have a falling birth rate, which you may have guessed from the fact that the outer portions of our city are no longer in use. This fact also strengthens our dominant position.”

STRIKE and Gerry exchanged a long look of profound horror. “What a monstrous bargain!” burst out Gerry in dismay.

Barrows smiled uncomfortably. “Why, the idiots actually think they put over a fast one! Why don’t they look around? Can’t they see the evidences of mental and moral decay, the results of easy living? Dominant race! The Gora give them a few concessions and grab off the secretion—the most precious thing they have.”

“Poor little children of Esau,” said Gerry somberly. “They sold their birthright for a mess of pottage.”

The Titanian, able to get only Gerry’s thoughts, bowed politely.

“I am sorry. I do not understand.” Gerry removed her helmet, cradling it in her arm.

“I have an orange grove back in California,” she said with apparent irrelevancy. “We have a lot of trouble with ants.”

“Aunts?” queried Strike. “Troublesome relatives?”

“Ants. Those creatures that get into everything with amazing persistence.”

“That describes my female relatives, all right.”

“No, I’m serious, Tommy. Ants have an astonishingly complicated and well developed economy. They take plant-lice and carry them up to the tender young leaves of the citrus trees. They let the insect cows extract the vital juices of the plant. Then the ants return and stroke them with their feelers to induce them to exude this juice. The ants promptly harvest it and take it down into their formicaries. They handle aphides the way human beings handle cows, tending them and ‘milking’ them. Any encroachment upon their little system—ladybird beetles, for instance, eat aphides—is met with fierce resistance.”

“I get the analogy. This relationship between Titanian and Gora is a parallel case. The Gora are pretty ant-like in habits, at that. Symbiosis.”

There was a lengthy silence while the politely attentive Titanian looked from face to face, trying to interpret the expressions of pity and sorrow. Again, more heavily than ever, came the pressure of their desperate situation and the need for swift action. But it was sharpened now by the knowledge that a possible solution to their troubles was at hand.

Gerry slipped on her thought helmet again. In her most diplomatic manner, she began to dicker for a supply of the probably vital glandular secretion. The Titanian’s answering thoughts were evasive, regretfully negative. With a great show of deprecating hand-waving, he indicated that this would be a technical violation of their pact with the Gora. No amount of urging or offers of barter could move him.

Strike suddenly leaned over and snapped off the switch on Gerry’s helmet.

“Before you start losing your temper,” he urged, “and alienate them for good—Look. It’s obvious they’re scared stiff of what the Gora might do in retaliation. The stuff about violating their pact is just a pretext. And if they’re scared, there’s no persuading ‘em. So I have an idea. Let’s call this visit quits for today, and I’ll tell you later what I’m planning.”

The distant Sun had already disappeared, and Saturn bulged low on the horizon. Gerry made excuses, refusing to impose upon Titanian hospitality further. She promised to return the next day to resume the interesting conversation. Escorted

by the unbelievably gracious Titanians, who were visibly relieved at the change of subject, Gerry and her men marched toward the hills where their rocket ship lay.

THE lifeboat barely managed to accommodate the entire party. There appeared to be just sufficient fuel left to carry them back to the Ark. Gerry, before taking off, twisted around to speak.

“Would it be too much to ask just what’s on your mind, my sweet?”

Strike smiled. “Skip the sarcasm, kitten. Here’s the way I see it. We aren’t sure yet whether this Titanian stuff will help or not. That’s the first thing we must know. After that, maybe we’ll have reason to battle for it.”

“And how will we find out?”

Strike took from his shirt the decapitated head of the slain Gora and waved it aloft triumphantly.

“There’s a sample of the stuff inside the cheek-pouches of this thing. It’ll be enough for Baumstark to make a test.”

It didn’t take long, back at the Ark, for the chief engineer to grasp what was wanted. He promptly disappeared into the engine room with welding apparatus in one hand and a cupful of the all-important secretion in the other, searching for rotors and matrix upon which to experiment. A reddish glow flickered and shadows danced. Finally Baumstark reappeared. His grin was so wide that he dropped the oxygen tube from his mouth. He held up thumb and forefinger in a circle, squinting through it in glee.

“Perfect💎!” he gloated. “It works perfectly!”

Beyond question, the secret of the ancient Titanians’ genius with metals lay in their glandular secretion, which acted as a miraculous flux. It lowered the melting point of neutroxite far below beryllium’s danger point, fusing the alloy rotors onto their matrix beautifully.

There was a swift gabble of explanations from the scouting party to the crew members who had stayed with the Ark. Then Baumstark posed a sombre question.

“I’ll need quite a lot of this stuff for the welding job. Can you get it?”

“That’s why I wanted to get you away from there before explaining my plan, Gerry,” Strike said. “I was afraid the Titanian might read your thoughts while I told you what I intend to do. We’ll have to scrape together every hypodermic syringe in the Ark, improvise some if we can’t find enough. Then back we go tomorrow. When the Time of Offering comes again, we enter and help ourselves.

“It must be done without the Titanians’ knowledge, of course. They’re too scared of their ‘inferior’ neighbors to risk any violation of their pact. And naturally we’ve got to give those little devils, the Gora, something to think about in the meantime.”

Excitement ran like electricity through the crew. Darkness came, blackly impenetrable. But hope, which had burned only as a dim spark, now flamed into a blazing beacon. With courage and skill, they might yet save themselves.

WHEN dawn came, Strike laid out his plan of campaign. Gerry willingly let him take full command. There were two proton cannon in the Ark itself, but they were huge. In those days, it still took a vast machine to produce an effective stream of subatomic bullets. So Strike detailed one squad to remain with the ship, using the proton cannon to protect their final stronghold, in case the coming war should be carried to that extreme. The last dregs of rocket fuel in the lifeboats had now been used up, so the raid had to be carried out on foot. Eighteen of the crew, including Gerry and Strike, formed themselves in groups of three. One was equipped with hypodermics and containers for the vital fluid, the other two armed to the teeth. The rest of the men made a skeleton squad to be posted midway between the Ark and the city of the Titanians, prepared to fight, a rear guard action if necessary.

“This may go off quietly, without a hitch,” said Strike. “I hope it does. But if we have to fight—and it’s our lives we’ll be fighting for—I mean to put up a real scrap.”

Timing their approach to arrive shortly before the morning Time of Offering, Gerry Carlyle and Tommy Strike led their little party over the six miles of barren, trailless badlands and into the Titanian city. Though they were gripped by interest and excitement, their expressions demonstrated their grim determination to carry off the coup successfully. They knew the penalty for failure. It was death

—if not by the Gora, then by scarcely less horrible thirst or starvation. There was little water on the satellite, and the food of the Titanians had proved unsuited to human consumption. They had to win or die.

Gerry was met by apparently the same Titanian trio who had entertained them the previous day. They were still as smiling and ingratiating as ever. A faint qualm stirred her conscience.

“My only real regret,” she said, “is that we can’t stay and uncover the secrets that lie hidden in this ancient city.”

“Don’t forget Kurtt,” reminded Tommy. “He must be a third of the way back to Earth by now.”

“I remember. But don’t worry about the race. We may not win, but it’s a foregone conclusion that Kurtt won’t, either.”

“Your inspired logic escapes me. However, I agree that there’s plenty around to interest us here. Too bad we can’t put off this job of having to fight for our lives. Maybe we can return some day and dig around a little. Yeah—maybe💎!”

Chapter X: Hotfoot on a Frigid World

THE party was well into the occupied portion of the city. The Titanian began gently hinting by signs that he wished to communicate through the thought helmet. Strike quickly assigned each squad to a street-level apartment, urging them to be alert for the signal. Oxygen bottles were fastened to the men’s belts to leave their hands free. The dull booming sound of the gong came at once.

The Titanians as usual conveyed infinite regret that they should be forced to leave their guests. It was a rudeness that pained them deeply. Strike bowed and waved his hands understandingly, watched them disappear.

“Now!” he shouted.

The squads scattered on their assignments. Strike, Gerry and young Barrows darted into the nearest apartment. The Titanians had already composed themselves in their deep slumber.

Swiftly Gerry whipped out an enormous hypodermic and went to work. While

Barrows held the container, she shot stream after stream of the sticky ichor into it, exsiccating the gland. Strike seized the smallest piece of furniture in the room, a queer device shaped somewhat like a piano stool. He strode to the hole in the floor and listened.

Like a distant waterfall came the rush of thousands of little feet. The miniature thunder rolled nearer and nearer. Then he heard something scrambling just beyond the limit of his vision in the black pit. A horrid snout poked sharply into view.

“Down you go!” shouted Strike.

He slammed down the stool-like contraption on the protruding head. The Gora vanished with an agonized hiss. The hole was completely blocked by the stool.

Gerry and Barrows glanced about apprehensively. Reassured by Strike’s confident grimace, they turned to the second sleeping Titanian. Underneath the stool a Gora was hammering and pushing, but they were no match for Strike’s weight and strength. One bony, needlelike tongue jabbed clear through the bottom of the obstruction. Strike promptly snapped it off with a vicious blow.

All over the city now, the sounds of uproar began. The Gora who had been blockaded had evidently spread the news. Enraged monsters were erupting from unclosed holes and converging upon the source of the disturbance. Just as Gerry started to work upon the third of the Titanians, four of the beasts rushed through the doorway, hissing with fury.

Strike calmly picked up a huge table and with one hand scaled it across the room. The resulting carnage gave him a lot of pleasure. He sat upon the up-ended stool, still blocking the hole, and drew two guns.

“What was that yarn about the tailor’s boy who killed seven with one blow? I’m not doing so badly myself.”

His heat ray licked out once, twice. For the time being, six dead Gora effectively barricaded the entrance. Gerry hurriedly finished her work, tossed the hypodermic aside. Barrows sealed the precious can of fluid.

“All set?” asked Strike reluctantly.

As Gerry nodded, the reptilian tangle of dead bodies burst inward under a new assault. Gora began to stream in. Coolly the three began to fire, backing toward a window that led to the street. The deadly sniping quickly stalled the attack. The odor of burning flesh filled the room. The Titanians, aroused by the clamor, lurched about. Still half-asleep, they wrung their hands in futile distress.

BARROWS slipped through the window first. His disappearance was marked by an exclamation of pain and anger. Gerry and Strike, piling through after him, found the lieutenant battling ferociously. Blood streamed from a slash across his forehead and welled slowly from two stabs on his left arm. He was encircled by twitching, dead and dying Gora.

The remaining squads from the Ark were converging rapidly upon the central rendezvous, fighting deadly rearguard actions. Swiftly Strike counted his forces.

“Only seventeen!” he snapped. “Who’s missing?”

It was Kranz, a veteran of the Carlyle adventures from the very first expedition. Dead or not, he couldn’t be left behind. Without a backward glance, Strike asked which apartment Kranz had been in. Then he yelled a fierce battle-cry.

“Come on, gang. Let’s go!”

In a single mighty bound, he leaped clear over the encircling Gora and dashed for the indicated building. He vanished inside. After momentary hesitation, four of the crew jumped after him. The structure trembled with the fury of the battle within. Then Strike reappeared with the bleeding, semiconscious Kranz over one shoulder.

The additional weight made it impossible for Strike to return by jumping over the enemy. But he peeled back his lips in a fighting snarl and rushed with reckless fury, his two guns spitting deadly heat beams. For a minute the Gora seemed on the verge of overwhelming him. But just before they succeeded, they broke in confused panic before the advance of that terrible engine of destruction. They fled, hissing and squealing.

Strike and the others rejoined Gerry. Kranz still dangled over his shoulder. “Now’s our chance,” panted Strike, between draughts from his oxygen bottle. “Make our run for it while they’re disorganized. Ready? What’s the matter with you?”

Gerry stood staring at Strike with her lips parted, her eyes shining. She was experiencing that strange emotion—a compound of awe, fright and admiration—that every woman knows when she sees the man she loves in two-fisted action.

“Anything wrong?” demanded Strike.

“No, Tommy,” she replied obediently.

“Then get going.”

“Yes, Tommy.”

Gerry led the way out of the city. They ran laxly, with the gliding, ground-hugging stride that saves energy and covers space on low-gravity worlds. They crossed the plain and were well into the hills, within sight of the small party waiting there, before the Gora took up the chase. Without pause, Gerry’s group kept right on going. It was their first and only duty to get the flux back to the Ark.

Twenty minutes of steady jogging brought them three miles of the way. Exhausted, they called a brief halt. Flinging themselves down on the ground, they sucked at their oxygen bottles avidly. But the bottles had been drawn upon heavily during the mad flight across Titan. Now they were nearly empty. Everyone made the discovery at once. Promptly they closed the valves, consciously forcing themselves to modulate their heavy breathing. It was not too successful. A dozen ordinary breaths left their lungs starving for oxygen.

Strike rose slowly.

“No time for rest, I guess. My fault for not caching a supply of bottles on the trail somewhere. Got to keep moving as long as possible. Save as much oxygen as you can for a final dash.”

THEY were still one-fourth of the way from the ship when the embattled rearguard caught up with them. Blue-faced from lack of oxygen, not one of them was without wounds. They had been trapped in a cul-de-sac and forced to storm their way out. Without oxygen reserves, and bleeding from cuts, they were staggering in the final stages of exhaustion.

Nor was there any respite at hand. In the near distance rose a towering column of dust in the breathless air, kicked up by hundreds of enraged Gora. The monsters stampeded along the trail to avenge the death of their kind and wipe out the intruders who threatened to upset their tight little economy.

As if the danger were not serious enough, the rearguard leader injected another menace into the situation.

“Our heat ray guns, Miss Carlyle,” he gasped. “They’re running low. The beams are weak. Have any spares?”

A quick check-up showed that no one had any spares, and the guns of the main party were also found to be nearly exhausted. Strike shifted the burden of Kranz from one shoulder to the other.

“Well, Gerry, what do you do in that orange orchard of yours when the ants get as bad as this?” he asked.

“We put a patented device around the trunks of the trees, impregnated with something the ants can’t cross over,” Gerry said thoughtfully. “Sort of they-shall-not-pass strategy.”

She paused, trembling on the verge of an idea. They were approaching a narrow defile between steep cliffs. On the farther side of this would be the open plain leading to the Ark. If they could somehow block that defile

“Of course!” yelled Strike. “We’ll give ‘em a super-colossal hotfoot!” Everyone stared at him as if he had gone insane. But he herded the party quickly down the canyon, stopping just beyond the narrowest part.

“With the remaining energy in our guns, we couldn’t begin to annihilate the Gora,” he panted. “But we can lay down an impassable barrier. Look!”

He aimed a continuous blast at the rocky canyon bottom. The lavalike stuff smoked faintly, began to glow. Finally it bubbled and heaved like a mud geyser as it became molten. The effort completely emptied Strike’s weapon. He cast it aside. But the others had caught on. Recklessly they poured their heat rays along the rough rock floor, from one side of the passage to the other. They made a complete band about five feet wide, extending from cliff to cliff, of seething lava. When their guns were useless, the party withdrew to a safe distance to

watch.

The vanguard of the Gora raced into sight, pouring down the narrowing V-shaped gap toward the bubbling ribbon of doom. When they were almost upon the boiling magma, the leaders skidded to a halt, hissing shrilly. But those behind were unable to see any reason for stopping. They piled into the leaders with irresistible momentum. All of them sank waist-deep in the molten rock. Squealing hideously, they writhed in brief torture.

A cloud of steam quickly rose, mercifully hiding the slaughter. Louder and shriller came the shrieks of the dying Gora as hundreds, blinded by the steam and their own insensate fury, rushed headlong to an awful death.

STRIKE, first to find his voice, yelled above the noise.

“Better move on, gang. That stuff’ll cool and some of ‘em will get through.” Tearing themselves from the horridly fascinating scene, the hunters walked slowly away. They reached the Ark without further incident.

Their first action was to fling themselves down in the recreation room, seal themselves in tight, and literally bathe in blessed oxygen. Even Kranz, seriously though not fatally wounded, craved to saturate himself with oxygen even before going to the infirmary. Breathing easily was the most important immediate reward of their victory.

For two Titanian days and nights, rotating shifts of eager workers kept the shriek of welding and the clangor of hammers going almost without ceasing. At decreasing intervals, marauding bands of Gora came snooping around. But a blast of the proton cannon quickly discouraged their taste for this sort of entertainment. The last few hours of labor were without interruption of any kind.

Finally the centrifuge was repaired and new plates had been installed to make the engine rooms air-tight once more. As Gerry prepared to depart, she felt a curious mixture of relief and reluctance.

She had no fear that the Titanians would suffer because of human interference. The Gora were, indeed, too dependent upon the Titanians to avenge themselves upon their hosts. But there was so much to be learned, so many mysteries unsolved, so great a story yet untold! She wished they could remain and solve the mysteries. Perhaps they could even assist the likable Titanians to break loose

from the invisible chains which bound them to their parasitic masters.

Instead, though, they had to leave at once. There was the matter of Kurtt, and Von Zorn, and their livelihood was in the balance. Yes, there was a score to be settled here, and the sooner the better. Maybe they could return some time. But now

Ports clanged shut. The rotors began to whine in rising crescendo to a thin whistle that passed beyond the range of human ears. The Ark trembled, then rose in a breath-taking swoop. There were some doubtful moments among the engineers as they apprehensively watched the results of their welding. But no signs of strain developed. The patched centrifuge seemed as good as new.

“Full speed ahead!” came Gerry’s command.

The Ark began to accelerate rapidly. Titan fell away, dropping to the size of a baseball, a marble, a pinpoint of light that was ultimately obscured. Saturn itself began to shrink, as if being squeezed by the encircling rings. The Ark began to approach a speed of thousands of miles per minute.

Still the relentless acceleration continued. There was no fuel supply to worry about. Gerry could call upon the almost infinite power of centrifugal force to drive them faster and ever faster through the vacuum of interplanetary space.

Gerry had no intention of coasting. Mechanical breakdown under the terrific drive was the only hazard. Carefully calculating the staying powers of her centrifuges under continual stress, she decided the risk was not too great, considering the prize at stake. So the speed was built up beyond anything ever achieved by ordinary rocket ships dependent upon atomic fuel. Jupiter loomed on the starboard, with its flock of scattered satellites, then quickly dropped behind.

Chapter XI: The Price of Victory

DAYS passed into weeks as the Ark continued her furious rush through space. The asteroid belt presented its hazardous barrier. But Gerry, disdainful to go cautiously above or below, plowed straight through.

It was a hectic stretch, with alarm bells ringing and the ship's lights dimming constantly as the repelling screen took the juice. But the Ark negotiated this cosmic blast and fled onward.

Finally the yellow-green speck that was Earth grew larger, easily visible as a disk to the naked eye. Worry began to seep through the crew as they neared the end of the journey. Despite their tremendous dash, they still had not seen any sign of Professor Erasmus Kurtt.

Had he already returned in triumph? If so, the belated appearance of the Ark, laggard and empty, would result in humiliation beyond endurance. Gerry's hot-headed taunting speech had burned all her bridges. She would be the laughing-stock of the System. Strike finally voiced his doubt.

"Seems to me, Gerry, we should've caught up to Kurtt by now. Maybe he's already home. Or maybe he cracked up somewhere. Maybe we ought to've picked up another dermaphos on Saturn before leaving. Maybe—"

"Maybe you think Kurtt will win this race. I admit he must have pushed along pretty fast to have kept ahead of us this far. You can take my word for it, Tommy. We'll find him utterly helpless, probably revolving around the Moon as a satellite."

Strike gaped stupidly at this calm statement of authority. But his astonishment was nothing compared with the emotions he felt when they came within telescope range of the Moon. They began decelerating with body-wracking speed. They had seen Professor Kurtt's space ship! Its glassed-in section was unmistakable. The ship was spinning futilely about the Moon in an eccentric orbit, elongated by the strong pull of Earth.

Strike turned toward his fiancée, demanding fiercely:

“All right, all right! Never mind the laughs. Explain this, will you? How did you know? What’s happened to Kurtt?”

Gerry controlled her delight long enough to elucidate.

“It’s so simple, Tommy. It all hinges on one of the first principles of our craft — study your specimens. Kurtt didn’t. He let us do all the work, then simply helped himself to a monster he knew nothing about. One thing he didn’t know was that the dermaphos needs uranium for its metabolism. He stored away a haphazard mess of vegetation for it to feed on, as we could see when he stole our dermaphos. But only a small percentage was that cabbage-shaped thing with the uranium salts deposits.

“Then he put our dermaphos in the glass showcase of his, where it was exposed to the full sunlight for many days. What happened? Well, the metabolism of the creature, accustomed to a minimum of sunshine, was stepped up tremendously. He became ravenous. He ate up all the vegetation and probably all the other Saturnian specimens in the hold. But a dermaphos can’t utilize this food without the catalytic assistance of uranium salts.

“He sensed the presence, probably by its radiation, of the Uranium Two-thirty-five in the nearby fuel hoppers.

I know the construction of the type of ship Kurtt uses. Between the hold and the fuel hoppers, there’s only a light door. The dermaphos, growing more active under stimulus of the sunshine, can easily smash it. It doesn’t take much Two-thirty-five to operate a rocket ship, so the dermaphos finished it off in a few mouthfuls.

“Kurtt is left with just the fuel remaining in the firing chambers and feeder tubes, not enough to decelerate for a landing on Earth. The best he can possibly do is fall into a braking orbit around the Moon, ultimately swinging around it as a satellite.”

STRIKE stared at Gerry in exasperation, resenting her omniscience. Yet she was apparently correct. If so, it was certainly a huge joke. He began to chuckle. “So that’s why you laughed when he took our dermaphos! Well, I hope you’re right, smartie.”

There was excitement when the Ark finally drifted past the Moon toward Kurtt’s

helpless ship. Several private yachts and little sputtering spaceabouts were circling around like crows after a hawk. The space taxis traveling from Hollywood on the Moon to the big bloated gambling ships detoured so their passengers could get a look at the phenomenon.

They all scattered wildly as the mighty Ark eased into position beside Kurtt's rocket.

"Kurtt will be having conniptions about now," Gerry said. "He can't win the race unless he returns under his own power, and he can't do that unless he has someone bring him extra fuel. That, of course, would be contrary to the terms of the contest."

Deftly she maneuvered alongside the glassed-in hold. It was empty of life, animal or vegetable. She had been right about the appetite of the dermaphos. Presently Professor Kurtt himself appeared at one of the forward portholes. He stared at the Ark like a murderer who looks upon the ghost of his victim. Stark terror bulged his eyeballs. Gerry motioned vigorously for him to go to the ravaged hold and arrange for the crew of the Ark to make contact there.

Kurtt refused in pantomime. Gerry casually pushed the button which automatically slid the proton cannon from the concealed ports. In full view, they pointed directly at the hull of Kurtt's ship. Kurtt grudgingly obeyed. He appeared in a pressure suit and assisted his men in joining the two ships by the contact tube. Gerry led her crew into Kurtt's ship. Fully dressed in pressure suits, they entirely ignored the ugly looks and mutterings from Kurtt's men. She found her dermaphos in the fuel compartment.

Promptly she gas-bombed it into a coma, strapped the gravity plates around it, and transferred it to the Ark. The pressure there had once again been built up to resemble Saturnian conditions.

Then she peremptorily ordered Professor Erasmus Kurtt to come at once to the control room of the Ark. Kurtt came reluctantly, shucking off his pressure suit at Gerry's command. The girl and Strike stood staring at him balefully in silence. Kurtt grew visibly more nervous by the moment.

"You're taller than I am," Tommy said at last. "Almost as heavy. It'll be a fairly even match."

Kurtt gulped and whined a feeble protest. Gerry cut him short.

“Just a question or two, Professor. You have any objections to our reclaiming our dermaphos? Laws of salvage, you know.”

Her voice was bittersweet, but Kurtt shook his head in mute fright. “Do these jackals”—she waved at the bunch of curiosity-seekers hovering about—“know anything what happened? Could they have seen the dermaphos? Have you communicated with anyone since you ran out of fuel?”

“N-no. No one knows anything. I was t-trying to f-figure out a way to get t-to Earth.”

The girl smiled in complacent satisfaction.

“That fortunate circumstance may save you a lot of grief. We might not even have to air this matter in a court of law. And now, Tommy? I think the rest of this case is in your department.”

TOMMY escorted Kurtt into another room and closed the door. Faintly his words came through the door.

“You deliberately wrecked our ship in mid-space, stole the fruits of our labor, and calmly left us to die. Don’t get the idea that we don’t like you, Kurtt. We just think you’re a louse. This’ll hurt you more than it hurts me—”

There was the sound of a hard fist striking bone. Then there was tumult. Gerry cocked an ear critically and turned to the visiphone to put in a call to Hollywood on the Moon. Von Zorn was not there, but the call was transferred to the California offices. Presently the simian features of the great Von Zorn—the little Napoleon of the film industry—glowered from the telescreen.

“So it’s you!” he snapped, staring at her under lowered brows. “From the reports I been getting of such excitement at the Moon, I should’ve guessed as much.”

“Don’t you want to know what happened?” asked Gerry with suspicious sweetness.

“All right. So what goes on? Where’s that dog, Kurtt?”

Carefully sparing no single detail, Gerry told the story of Kurtt's dastardly trick. Throughout the recital, Von Zorn's face turned crimson, then pasty white, then a peculiar shade of puce.

"Lord!" he groaned, fully realizing what it might mean to him if the murderous behavior of his candidate became known to the public. "I—I—So help me, I didn't authorize him to do any such thing as that. With me, it was supposed to be just a race, on the square. Honest!"

Gerry sadistically enjoyed the spectacle of Von Zorn squirming and perspiring. Then she said regretfully:

"Yes, I know it was just Kurtt's idea."

The relief on the man's face was comical.

"Well, then," he barked, "I give up Kurtt. Of him I wash my hands. Absolutely —"

"Ah, ah. Not so fast. I know you don't play dirty, but does the world know it?"

Von Zorn's complexion was in a constant state of flux. Now it became pale again.

"But—but you wouldn't break that story when it would ruin me unjustly! Come, now. I know you better than that. You're too much of a lady!"

"I am not. And only one thing will prevent me from telling the whole story. I'll let you have an armistice on my terms."

"Why—why that's blackmail!"

"It is, isn't it?" she agreed pleasantly. "Are you going to pay?"

"Okay," Von Zorn groaned. "So what's the price?"

"A huge banquet in my honor tomorrow night. Tommy, the crew and I are to be guests of honor. You will be the host."

Von Zorn buried his face in his hands at the thought of this humiliation. "There

must be flowers, motion picture celebrities, and newscasters,” Gerry continued remorselessly. “The speech of the evening will be made by you, eating humble-pie. You will stress the fact that not only have I brought home the dermaphos, but also your entry in the competition. I am bringing back Erasmus Kurtt—”

She turned as the door opened and Tommy Strike entered. He was slightly bruised. Behind him he dragged a shapeless bundle, which he laid at Gerry’s feet with the proud expression of a cat bringing something for its young. She examined the repulsive thing briefly.

“Yes.” Gerry turned back to the telescreen. “We’re bringing Kurtt back alive.”

Von Zorn moaned in protest.

“I can’t do it. It ain’t human. It’s cruel.”

Gerry was adamant.

“Yes or no? After all, I’m letting you down plenty easy.”

Von Zorn braced himself visibly. “All right. This once maybe I can do it. But if it kills me from shame, I’d hate to live with your conscience.”

GERRY CARLYLE and Von Zorn traded long, silent looks over thousands of miles of space, via the visiphone. Slowly Gerry smiled. “You’re a pretty good loser, at that,” she said.

Von Zorn grimaced, remembering what Gerry could have done to him if she had been at all vindictive.

“And you’re not such a bad winner. But this is only one round. I ain’t lost yet. Next time, maybe, huh?”

Gerry smiled with scornful superiority.

“Just keep on swinging, little man. Some day you’ll learn you’re fighting out of your class. Well, see you tomorrow night.” She snapped the screen to darkness and turned to Strike. “And that is that.”

“Not quite,” contradicted Strike.

“Have you forgotten the proper fadeout to every melodrama, after the forces of evil have been defeated and the villain properly thrashed?”

Gerry smiled tantalizingly. Tommy shoved the battered Kurtt aside with one foot and seized his fiancée. There was a struggle, but it was quite brief. It ended in a well known gesture of mutual affection between the male and the female of the human species.