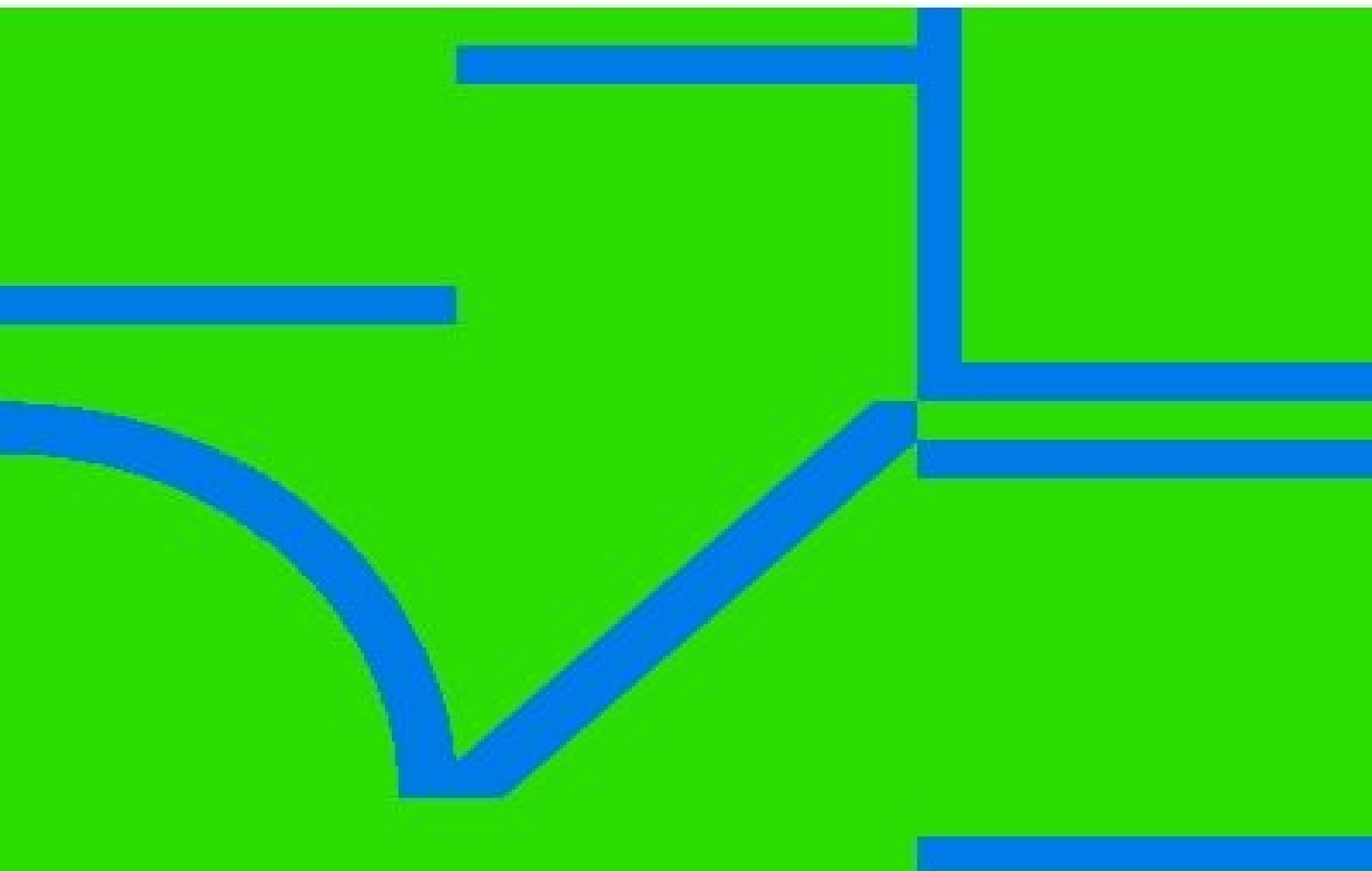


Feline Red

Robert Sampson



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FELINE RED

By ROBERT SAMPSON

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It was up to Jerill to think fast ... to do something ... before those strange beasts sucked away the last purified ore on the freighter Bertha.

A shouting wave of men rioted through the engine room.

From the bridge above the hulking atomics, Chief Engineer Durval vollied orders in a thunderous voice. "You men—you!" he raged. "Use your heads, not your feet. Drive them toward the door."

A scattering of Them—compact darting beasts the color of a poppy—scuttled into the shadow of an engine. Heavy Davison wrenches clubbed futilely behind them.

As Durval flew into new bursts of shouting, Scott Jerill, First Mate of the freighter *Bertha*, grimly shook his head. His lean face was not smiling now. "Call your men back," he commanded crisply. "We don't have time to drive those cats out like this."

Durval turned on him with a snarl. "Take over then. Think of a better way. If you hadn't hauled that load of space cats aboard in the first place...."

"Look out," Scott snapped.

With a crisp smack, a red creature the size of a man's hand struck the rail before them. It was all improbable angles, with no special shape, no front or back. It teetered crazily over the ten foot drop to the floor below. Then it settled, sputtering. It sounded curiously like an angry cat.

"There's one," roared Durval. His wrench slashed down, crashed shrilly on the rail as the cat skimmed effortlessly away. The wrench shot off toward the floor.

Durval shook his hand and roared. The cat, some twenty feet down the rail, cackled insanely. As Scott stepped slowly toward it, the cat hissed, bounded off the rail, and down the steps to the engine room floor.

Scott shook his head. "You're not going to catch them by hand. Better let them settle down, Durval."

"Settle down." The Chief brought the palm of his hand down on the rail. The rail trembled. "They've already settled down. On every generator in the place. One of them crawled under the main relay switch and shorted out half the board. Didn't hurt him a bit."

Scott interrupted gruffly. "We've got to get them out of here fast. Captain Elderburg wants to blast off here day after tomorrow, and we don't have half the ore cargo purified yet."

"And you won't have," Durval snapped. "If we blast off, we'll do it with an empty hold. I can't purify uranium with fifty cats running loose, getting caught in the machinery. It can't be done. Get these cats out and I'll give you a hold full of the best grade uranium Earth ever bought. But not till you get those cats out."

Scowling, Scott bit his knuckles. "We've got to get moving. The skipper thinks IP Metals is going to jump our claim," he said urgently.

"If you ask me, only a doddering fool would bring these things into a space ship." He glanced sharply at Scott. "What's this about IPM?"

Scott shook his head slowly. "Nothing. Forget I said anything. But get these cats out. And fast. Have you tried ultra-sonics on them?"

Durval's face slipped into new lines. "Maybe," he muttered. Leaning over the railing, he thundered, "Masters. Forget those cats a minute. Yes, forget them. Hook up an ultra-sonics sender and—"

The ship intercom over Durval's head clicked mechanically, hummed into life. "Mr. Jerill. Report to Central Control. Mr. Jerill. Report—"

Scott jabbed the Acknowledgement button. As he swung around Durval he glanced down into the engine room. Sweating men beat after the scuttling red

beasts.

"Report to me about the sonics," he told Durval. "If that doesn't work, we'll scoop up those red kitties with our bare hands. But we got to get started on that uranium ore purification. Faster than ten minutes ago."

He slammed the engine room door, cutting off Durval's angry roar. Striding rapidly through the bluish light of the corridor, an anger bitter as Durval's throbbed in him. But he took pains to hold it down.

"Confound those cats," he thought. "The *Kastil* on top of us, and we have to stop work to chase space fauna. And we have three days left. Three days."

So engrossed was he in anger that he almost blundered head-on into the grinning red-head who lounged up the corridor toward him.

"Hey, Scott." Second Mate Max Vaughn raised a lazy eyebrow. "Slow down. Think of all your ulcers."

Scott spun impatiently on his heel. "Can't stop, Max. Got to see the Captain."

"And you don't even stop to say hello to an old friend back from the mines of a nameless asteroid." He grinned, slapped Scott's shoulder lightly with an open palm. "What's all this scandal I hear about your space cats?"

Scott grimaced. "I caught a few while we were scooping up ore over at my pit. Thought the Extra-Terrestrial Life Division back on Earth might be interested in them. They don't eat. They don't breathe.... Only their cage got smashed open, and they got into the engine room. Nobody knows how."

"The good news has got around," Max said grinning. "You don't know it, but there's twenty more sitting outside the main cargo hatch right now. What gets rid of them?"

"If you think of anything," Scott said as he turned away, "tell me. Got to go. Elderburg's waiting."

"Have you tried hitting them with strong light?" Max shouted after him.

"No," Scott shouted back. He was very late, and the Old Man wanted you fast when he wanted you. "Try light if you get a chance."

He broke into an effortless trot, his boots padding lightly on the shining gray

floor. "Three days," he thought. He forgot Max. He forgot Durval and the cats. He thought, "Three days," and a fine film of perspiration spread cold across his back.

"We have three days," Captain Elderburg said. He was a small neat man with a prim voice. His bland eyes peered forward into some middle distance, ignoring Scott.

And Scott, sitting tautly in his chair, felt glad those eyes were not on him.

"In three days," the Captain said, "or probably before, the *Kastil* should find us. The *Kastil*—the best ship Inner-Planet Metals ever commissioned."

Scott nodded. In the savage, free-for-all world of the space-miner, the *Kastil* was known as the big ship, the new ship. The ship that could load its cargo hatches in a day, stuffing 100,000 tons of ore down in its belly for the hungry plants of Earth.

"I've fought IP Metals for fifteen years," Elderburg said slowly. His eyes were very far away. "For fifteen years they've grown bigger and bigger, and the bigger they've got, the rougher they've played. You know their record, Scott. Murder, claim-jumping. What they can't steal with a blaster, they take by law."

Glancing through the open port behind the Captain's head, out into the star-dappled dark of space, Scott asked: "Is there any way we can set up a permanent claim here on this asteroid without going back to Earth?"

"You know better than that." Elderburg's eyes turned full on Scott. "Unless we bring a full cargo of reasonably purified ore to Earth, we can't lay claim to these mines, or to any other mineral rights here."

His hands closed neatly, one inside the other. "And we've got to get a cargo back. This is our last chance. A strike as rich as this one will keep us going for a long time. But if we lose this claim to IPM, the days of the independent miner are over. Done with. We might as well sell the *Bertha* and get out."

"We'll be out of here in two days," Scott said eagerly. "If we...."

"If," said Elderburg very plainly. His eyes turned away from Scott and his hands

went all loose at once and spread out flat on the table.

"If we cannot load in two days, Mister Jerill. If your cats that you so foolishly brought on board the *Bertha* delay us so much that the *Kastil* locates us. And beats us home with a load of ore. If that happens, Mister Jerill, I will see that you are black-listed from the rolls of every space flight unit now operating. You will be completely responsible for the failure of this cruise."

Slumping back in his seat, he grinned maliciously at Scott. "I realize that our company was offering you a captain's position at the end of the expedition...."

Scott stood up. Anger hammered powerfully at his temples. "All right. I admit I made a mistake. And I take full responsibility for my actions."

"You must admit, Mister Jerill, that only a fool would bring an unknown space beast into a ship."

"Only a fool would deny that the cats are as valuable as uranium in their own way."

"Now, Mister Jerill. Be very careful." There was no mistaking the venom in Elderburg's speech. In his passionless black eyes, viciousness lay coiled. "Your cats have stopped purification of the crude ore for two days. Two days, Mister Scott. We might have been Earth-bound by this time."

Scott leaned over the desk. In a voice quivering with anger, he said: "Listen to me. If you...."

There was a shocking blast of light. Stunning volumes of white light poured from the port behind the Captain's head. It blazed too brilliantly for the naked eye.

With a strangled exclamation, Scott stumbled for the port, clutching his eyes. His fingers clawed nervelessly for the light control.

There was a sharp snap as the port closed. They felt, rather than saw, the light flick abruptly out. Elderburg tore at the door.

They lurched into the corridor. Green-yellow lights flashed before their dazzled eyes. Scott located the wall and began to run, using his finger tips as guides.

"A magnesium flare!" The Captain's words drove at Scott, hard as fragments of metal. "What fool set off a magnesium flare with the *Kastil* on top of us?"

They stumbled through the cool corridor to the second level air lock. As they approached, the lock clanged open. A space-suited figure waddled into the corridor. The helmet opened back, revealing the vivid red hair of Second Mate Vaugn.

"Light don't bother those cats a bit," he announced. Then his grin faded. "What's the matter?"

The Captain croaked, "You set off a flare—when—when the *Kastil* has been hunting our claim for weeks. When they're right on top of us!"

Max's face blanched. "The *Kastil*! Scott, you never told me...." Sudden cunning swept his face. "Why didn't you tell me the *Kastil* was so close, Scott? Why did you tell me to try light on the cats when you knew—"

"Scott told you!" Elderburg snarled. But at that moment Scott cried out sharply, pointing out through the port by the air lock.

Two miles beyond the *Bertha*, settled a black cigar. Blue-white fire flared from its base. "The *Kastil*!" Scott gasped. Useless rage flooded his chest. "The *Kastil*—and she's found us!"



Under the hurtling jet, the surface of the asteroid was a jagged tangle of stone. Scott, staring tensely from the observation port, felt a swift moment of wonder. Two hours since the IPM ship had landed. And he was in trouble with a vengeance.

As he had left the ship with a party of picked men, he had felt Elderburg's cold eyes on him. Eyes that thought—and threatened.

It was easy enough to read the Old Man's mind. An officer might make one vital mistake. But not two—not introducing the cats into the ship; not permitting a flare to be set off. Unless....

Unless he wanted the *Bertha* to lose time. Unless he wanted the *Kastil* to find the precious claim.

Cold raced through Scott's veins. His hands locked white about the space helmet he was about to don. He had to prove his loyalty. Had to prove that the accidents

were accidents. And little time was left, as the *Kastil* could load completely in two days.

"There's the pit, Mister Jerill." The navigator's voice was strained. "See anybody?"

"Not yet. Set her down."

The cargo jet dipped. The vast peaks of shattered stone sped up at them with terrifying speed. Scott refrained from closing his eyes, saw the razor-toothed surface of this shattered world streak toward him. Ahead, the bulk of the *Kastil* loomed. They must have used the ore pits as a landing marker, he thought. And—what was that?

Motion at the lip of the ore pit.

The jet grounded hissing on the burnt landing strip. "Watch it," Scott warned. "We got visitors out there."

There was an ugly muttering among the men. As Scott threw open the cargo doors and dropped to the rocky ground, he saw the crewmen checking blasters and the slender polonium tubes that could permanently blind a man.

He stepped away from the jet. And as he did so, seven men detached themselves from the shadows about the mine's edge, and strolled toward him. Seven men—two more than were with Scott. The odds might be worse, he thought with a sense of relief.

Cautiously, he loosened the blaster in his belt. They were tricky weapons to handle in space gloves, but he'd better be ready to use it fast.

"Party from the *Bertha*?" The words came thin and metallic into Scott's helmet.

"Right," he grunted. "You?"

"From the *Kastil*. Who gave you a clearance to land on our claim?"

"We have a prior claim on this pit," Scott flared. "We have it posted and registered. If you're going to mine, find someplace else."

A giant figure, grimly grotesque in a cumbersome vacuum suit, swaggered forward. "I don't see any of your claim posts."

Scott indicated a tall metal stake glittering somberly in the glare of the jet's

loading lights.

The tall man laughed easily, his voice thin and far away in Scott's helmet. "Think of a better story. We just dug that claimer in ourselves. Now suppose you people jet out of here. Ought to be plenty of good claims someplace else."

Scott scarcely heard the sudden bitter burst of protest from his men. His body felt light and cool. The blaster pressed hard against his side. "There are plenty of good claims," he said. "You better go find them."

He swung the blaster up in a single smooth motion.

The tall man stood very still. They were not close enough to see each other's faces.

Then, high on a plateau of stone above the tall man's head, Scott saw the stars blot out.

"Scatter!" As he shouted, he took a giant leap to the right.

A blast of energy seared from the darkness, gouging a vast hole where Scott had stood.

From behind a boulder he could see the fire of the blaster sweep across the upper edges of the rocks, just at the level where the stars were cut off.

For a moment, the cold green line of his fire flicked harmlessly over naked stone. Then a thick squirt of fire flared quickly. A still-born scream died in his earphones.

The men of the *Kastil* had dodged away into the darkness.

Scott's voice rang out harshly. "I'll give you men two minutes to organize and get out of here. If you're not out by that time, we'll spin our jet around and burn you out."

There was a brief stir off in the shadows.

"You're in a blind alley there," Scott continued. "There's no way out. And we'll blast any man who tries to climb out over the rocks. Is that clear?"

A glowing flash of energy exploded against the rock protecting him. There was no sound, but bits of stone lightly flecked his suit. Scott braced himself on the rough face of the boulder and worked the blaster around for an open shot.

"No more shooting," the heavy voice of the tall man growled. "You *Bertha* people. Can you hear me?"

"Yes," Scott said coldly. His eyes probed the shadows for motion.

"We're willing to be peaceful about this. I'm Captain Randell of the *Kastil*. There's no need for killing when there's plenty of ore for all of us."

"Not in this pit," Scott answered. "You have one minute."

"All right." Randell's voice, distorted as it was by the tiny radio, carried a sardonic edge. "We'll go—from here."

He sauntered out of the shadows, hands upraised. From the tangle of stone, his men crept out to join him. Without haste, insolent in their retreat, they crossed over the pit.

At the far side they paused. "This is the extent of your so-called claim." Randell's voice purred in their ears. "Our claim extends from this line. And if a man from the *Bertha* wants a quick blasting, he can cross this line." His radio snapped off with crisp finality.

Scott stepped from his shelter.

"All right," he ordered. "You men know the story. The *Kastil's* down here ready for work. And it's going to mean work if we're going to beat her back to Earth. Now, let's go. But watch your step."



They worked. Eighteen hours a day they worked. From the steel-like ground they scooped a dozen tons of the dirty black uranium ore and sent it hurtling back to the *Bertha*.

But in spite of all their efforts, the more modern equipment of the *Kastil* overtook them in a day. The blackness on their left was riddled with the flare of digging torches and the slender fire-trails of the jets soaring between the pit and the *Kastil*.

And now and again, Randell's drawling voice broke into Scott's ears. "You're slowing up, *Bertha*. Seventy tons for us today. Are you poor little men getting

tired?" He clucked sympathetically, then burst into a yell of laughter. "We'll have the ore cleaned off this rock before you get half loaded."

But Scott and the men of the *Bertha* worked silently, with savage haste, forgetting sleep and food to keep the tonnage flowing to their ship. They had almost forgotten the cats....

But not for long.

Staggering with fatigue, Scott swayed into Central Control, and sagged into a seat. He had been too long in a space suit. A dull pounding beat behind his eyes. "I came as soon as you called the pit, Captain Elderburg. You sounded pretty urgent."

"It's urgent," Elderburg said. "We're beaten."

Scott stiffened. Fatigue fell from him as he gazed closely at the Captain, saw for the first time the bitter dullness of Elderburg's eyes.

"You better come with me," the Old Man said heavily. He rose stiffly, led the way from the room.

In silence they shuffled down the corridor toward the engine room. A tic worked at the corner of the Captain's mouth, but he did not seem to notice it. "Durval held the cats off with ultra-sonics. He purified about ten tons of the stuff and stored it."

They threaded their way along a chill black catwalk to the center of the ship. In the engine room, men slumped sullenly among the big atomics. As Scott and Elderburg passed a group of the black gang, mutely dangling wrenches, there was a sudden stir.

"That's him!" One of the men had leaped up. The wrench whipped back over his shoulder. He leaped raging toward Scott. "There's the rotten...."

"Easy, Billy." He was dragged back, disarmed.

"How'd the *Kastil* know...."

The Captain tugged Scott's arm. "Don't bother with them. Come on."

Scott nodded numbly, followed, his head aching and a nameless wave of apprehension sliding through him. "Where are the cats?" he asked once.

Elderburg ignored him. "Put on a radiation suit."

They had stopped before a side door of the main hold. As Scott struggled into the suit his mind swirled in a chaos of thoughts. When the suit was adjusted he dropped the helmet shut and stepped forward. Through the lighter gravity of the air lock they lumbered. Then Elderburg spun the controls that opened the door.

"There you are," he said to Scott. He sounded completely deflated. No sting remained in his voice.

Scott stepped forward into the hold, then froze. His body went cold.

The hold was a writhing mass of cats.

Their queer angled bodies darted in a great pile beyond the door. Their red bodies glowed and twisted strangely. They flew about a huge stack of lead containers—uranium cells secured for the long trip home.

And Scott went sick with understanding. Through rigid lips, he forced the words: "Energy-eaters!"

The Captain laughed oddly. "And you wondered how they lived on this naked rock. They ate the raw ore, of course. No wonder they hung around Durval's machines sucking up what free energy they could. They broke through the air feeder system here. No wonder. With cells of 80% pure uranium waiting for them." His voice broke.

"So we're finished," he continued. "The *Kastil* will be loaded before we can even clean the cats out. We're done."

He swayed back against the bulkhead. Scott took his arm.

"Get away from me." Elderburg wrenched away, his loathing clear even behind the bulky suit. "If what the men say is true. If you sold us out—" His voice trailed off. "Call your men out of the pits, Jerill. We're blasting off tonight."

"No." Scott leaned forward, his eyes mere slits behind the lense of his helmet. "Is there any uranium left?"

"We saved two cells."

"It's enough," Scott snapped. His lean jaw lifted proudly. "It's a little late, Captain. But I can promise to get rid of the cats in two hours. With the ore

deposits Vaughn and I have collected, we can still load a good cargo and beat the *Kastil* out by at least a day."

Elderburg eyed him sharply. "How can you handle the cats?"

"Get me a lead-lined box about eight feet by...."

Static blasted shrilly in their ears. The voice of the ship's lookout, strained with excitement, shouted. "Captain Elderburg. This is Main Control. Get here fast. An explosion at Lieutenant Jerill's mine."

As Elderburg leaped for the door with a muffled roar, the lookout's voice tautened. "No. No. Not an explosion. It's the *Kastil*. They're attacking the mine. They're attacking the mine."



They crammed into the observation blister on the *Bertha's* nose. Scanners swept smoothly over the wilderness of stone jutting up between the ship and the mine.

"There's a fire fight going out there." Elderburg's square face knotted with anger. "Scott, take a party. Blow that livid scum crew off this rock."

"Right, sir!" Scott bolted from the observation port. The emergency alarm howled through the ship. He buckled on a pair of blasters with unsteady hands, a black fury sweeping him. He stabbed one long finger down on the intercom.

"Masters," he yelled. "Get the cargo jet ready. With full battle equipment."

"Right, lieutenant. What's up?"

"Piracy." He spun toward the door. Then jolted to a halt, hands balling at his sides.

A picture was forming on the Master Communication Screen.

Elderburg pounded to his side. "Who is it?"

The picture on the screen was very definite now—a swarthy giant of a man, cynically grinning down at them. "Gentlemen," the figure on the screen said, and Scott needed no further introduction.

It was Randell, master of the ship *Kastil*.

"We've had a very entertaining two days," Randell said. His thick hands rubbed easily together. "It's been a real pleasure watching you work. But I'm afraid the pleasure is over. We're leaving you now. Oh, that disturbance at your mine pit?" He laughed, but only with his mouth; the close-set eyes remained unchanging, watchful. "It seemed so unnecessary to bother mining ore when so much of it was stacked near our pit."

"You bloody murdering bandit," Elderburg thundered. "We'll blast you...."

"You'll blast nobody. Any party approaching the *Kastil* will get blasted. Any party near the claim—our claim—will get burned down. By the way, I'm afraid your men at the mine contracted space-sickness, or something. They seem to be dead. You needn't bother coming after them."

He began to chuckle. "I think the ore my men are bringing in now will just complete our cargo. See you back on Earth."

The screen went gray. The sound shut off with a loud click.

Elderburg swung on Scott. "Take your men. Clean out that nest of thieves before they remove any more ore. Order out full battle gear. We'll blast the *Kastil* apart if it takes every man on board this ship."

"No!" Scott caught Elderburg's shoulder, gripped him. "There isn't time for an armed attack. I have a better idea."

"Scott, I order you to...."

"Get me a box," Scott cried desperately. "Made of lead and six feet deep."

Elderburg jerked his shoulder free. His face contorted. "Get to your cabin, Jerill. You're under arrest."

"Captain Elderburg, listen to me. We can...."

"That's a direct order. Go to your cabin." He whirled away from Scott, slammed down the intercom lever. "Attention all hands. Prepare full battle equipment...."

Scott slashed his blaster hard across the back of the Captain's head. Elderburg staggered, clutched the back of the seat. Scott hit him again. Elderburg's legs went loose. He toppled face forward, struck the intercom and sagged to the floor.

Scott stepped to the intercom. "Attention. All men, prepare full battle equipment

and stand by. Stand by. Durval, get the largest lead-lined box you have and set it outside the entrance of the main cargo hatch. Shake it up. We have half an hour till the *Kastil* jets off."

He cut off the intercom, lugged Elderburg to the chart room and locked him inside.



The hold was beastly hot. Standing inside the hatchway, holding suspended over his head a three-foot long cell of uranium ore, Scott felt a moment of shuddering panic. Over the storage cells along the wall, over the tumbling bodies of the cats, an eerie glow quivered—the menacing flare of radio-activity.

Scott glanced nervously at the forward screen. Chief Durval waved toward him. "Your men ready, Durval?"

The Chief nodded. "Don't go getting yourself hurt now, Scott."

Scott grinned although he did not feel much like grinning.

He shuffled forward under the light gravity of the hold. The uranium cell balanced easily in his hands. Too easily. He could scarcely feel it press against his gloves. The heat control in his suit was jammed again. His hands streamed sweat.

He inched past the cats. A quick cold thrill passed through his stomach. With the energy of the ore almost gone, the scarlet beasts were growing increasingly uneasy. They were casting about for a new supply. It would be easy enough for a foot to slip, he thought. To spill the ore across the floor. New food for the cats—and the loss of the *Bertha's* last chance as strange space beasts sucked away the last purified ore.

He slipped cautiously past the last row of cells. A quick dash now for the open hatchway beyond....

Half a dozen of the bounding red beasts surged about his feet. Their weight drove his right leg forward. He staggered, caught at his balance. The lead cell above his head began to slip.

"Watch it, Scott!" Durval's voice cracked in his ears.

Straining every muscle against the queer weightlessness of no gravity, Scott struggled to regain his balance. He expected another blow at his legs as the cats leaped for the ore. It was hard to breathe the over-heated air of his suit.

But the cats had spun away. As he caught his balance, he stared after them, uncomprehending for an instant. The cats ran twisting in a somehow sinister dance. The bodies were queerly bloated. Down the upper portion of their bodies ran a heavy indentation. As they leaped and twisted, the indentation became a fissure, a crevice.

Then two of the beasts leaped, slammed together in mid-air. But more than two cats fell to the floor.

Their sharply angled bodies whisking back toward the depleted uranium cells, four cats appeared with shocking suddenness.

Reproduction. Elemental fission.

Scott had to clean them out, and fast. Soon the ship would be overrun with the energy-hungry felines.

He dashed toward the open hatch. Outside the opening, a great lead box, eight feet by eight feet, gaped upward. Beyond, four men tensely supported a vast lead cover.

"Is the uranium poured into the box?" he barked sharply.

"Yes, sir. All ready, Mister Jerill."

"Good." Turning from the hatch, he inverted his cell, poured out the uranium ore in a thick stream from the open hatch back across the hold toward the scrambling mass of cats upon the now empty rows of cells.

But he never reached the beasts.

A brawling torrent of animals leaped toward him. Hurling the container into their mass, he leaped to one side. They lunged into the trail of ore. Rolled, leaped, darted along the line. At the hatch edge, a pyramiding mass of cats paused a moment. Then plummeted over. Scott fell back against the bulkhead, his eyes fixed on the cats still scavenging among the empty cells.

Then these too were darting for the trail of ore. The uranium was scattered now. Cats plunged toward the new radiation in the box beyond the hold entrance.

The inarticulate cheers of Durval and his men rang in Scott's helmet. But his mind was already working at the next step of the problem.

"Durval," he ordered. "Get a decontamination unit in here. Clean this place out." Cats poured in a frenzied stream from the ship. "Call Mister Vaughn. Start purification of his ore as soon as it arrives."

Past the hatch, he saw the swift flash of the lead top dropping over the box. Excitement pounded hotly in his throat.

"I'm going to get rid of these cats once and for all," he called. "Be back in an hour."

"But what about the *Kastil*?"

"We'll worry about the *Kastil* later. Get that ore purified. We're blasting out of here in forty hours."

He swung from the cargo entrance to the top of the lead box. Under his feet, the lid trembled with the frantic struggling of the cats. "Load this crate in the cargo jet," he cried. "And hurry. We only have half an hour left."



The pounding of the jets matched the pounding of the blood in Scott's temples. "When we land," he instructed, "get this crate out fast. Everything depends on how fast you can take the cats down to the pit. I want you to bury it as fast as you can. Understand?"

He glanced sharply about the group, feeling their eyes clinging to him.

"Get as much rubbish on the crate as possible. And then obey every order I give you as fast as possible no matter how foolish the order may seem."

The jet thundered down over the landing strip, rasped to a halt. "Out," roared Scott. "Fast. Make it fast."

The loading compartment swung open. But as the men lifted the crate toward the door, the jet's intercom burst into life. "Jerill. Jerill, this is Captain Elderburg. I order you to return at once."

Elderburg had freed himself too quickly.

"This is a criminal offense, Jerill. Come back at once."

"Get that crate out," Scott roared. "Hurry. Hurry!"

"Mister Jerill," blared the intercom. "You are under arrest, according to the Articles of Space, for conspiracy, armed assault...." Scott cut the voice off in mid-sentence. He leaped into the hold, threw his weight behind the box. "Quick. Get it to the pit."

The men lumbered off into the darkness. Even with the light gravity of the asteroid, it was difficult to handle the crate as the scrambling cats pitched it from side to side.

Scott scaled a boulder. The hulk of the *Kastil* loomed just beyond, dark and threatening. A thin square of light showed at their cargo entrance. They were still completing loading.

"Hurry," Scott muttered feverishly. "Hurry."

The men reached the pit. Carefully, slowly, they lowered the crate into the shadows.

Sweat streaming down his face, Scott tore his eyes from the *Kastil* hatch, grimly watched as his men scooped rubbish into the pit.

A motion in the darkness. Out where no motion should be. Movement among the sunless stones.

Scott's breathing stopped.

A group of men closing in toward the cargo jet. Men racing out of the shadows. Men of the *Kastil*.

"Stop," Scott shouted frantically into his radio. "Get that crate back to the jet. Get it out of the pit. Back to the jet. It's too late. Hurry. Hurry!"

For a single astounded moment the men paused. Then, sweeping the rubble from the crate, they fumbled it toward the surface of the pit.

Scott leaped down among them. Pushed. "They're going to trap us." The crate struck on the pit's edge. Scott seized one end, forced it up over. "Grab that other end, Masters. Move, man. Don't argue. Move!"

Staggering over the uneven ground, they lurched toward the jet.

"I think you ought to rest for a moment." It was the cool voice of Randell, who stepped from the darkness with a blaster turned full on them.

Crewmen from the *Kastil* poured from among the rocks. Their blasters swung a menacing ring about Scott and his men.

"Step back away from the crate." Randell stepped forward, tapped his blaster against the side of the box. "Now what do we have here."

"Keep away from that," Scott snarled. "That's property of the *Bertha*."

"Is it?" Randell turned carelessly to his men. "Property of the *Bertha*," he drawled. "Well, we'd better have a look at it now. To make sure you haven't accidentally salvaged some of the *Kastil's* equipment. Oh, quite by accident, I understand."

He began to loosen the screw-clamps of the lid.

"Stop!" Scott leaped forward, no longer conscious of the weapons swinging on him. He dropped his hand upon the box.

"This is mine," he said. "I forbid you to touch it."

"Have you ever seen a man die of a blaster bolt?" Randell asked. "Step back."

The men of the *Bertha* fell back. Their shoulders touched the toothed rim of stone about the pit.

Randell chuckled. "Perhaps it's just as well we didn't blast off when we were loaded. There was always a chance you'd found something else of value here."

He flicked the muzzle of the blaster about. "If you don't mind, we'll inspect this crate in a better light. Back at the *Kastil*."

Triumph leaped through Scott. "This is piracy," he said, and sounded sincere.

"Piracy is what is proven," Randell laughed. "Do you really think you have a case in our courts?" He sighed softly. "Now, thank you for this unexpected pleasure. And good-bye. We'll see each other again on Earth, perhaps."

Then they were gone and immediately afterward, the *Kastil*, balancing on a white line of flame, leaped away from the asteroid and flashed out past the stars.

Scott stared after it, a faint smile touching his lips. About him rang the triumphant laughter of the crew.

Someone gripped Scott's shoulder. "Captain Elderburg on the intercom, Mister Scott. I just told him. And—congratulations, sir."

Scott grinned. Entering the jet, he faced the intercom, said: "It's over now, Captain."

"Good work, Mister Scott." Elderburg's voice was unsteady. "How did you do it?"

"Pretended to be taking something of value," Scott said. He relaxed back against the seat. "I knew Randell couldn't resist making a clean sweep of everything we had. So I gave him the chance."

Elderburg's laugh filled the cabin. "And when they open the crate...."

"Good-bye uranium." Pale eyes smiling, Scott waved a knotted fist. "And now, sir, we're going to start mining ore. This is our claim now. And we'll be blasting out of here in forty hours with the biggest load of uranium ore Earth ever got its hands on."

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