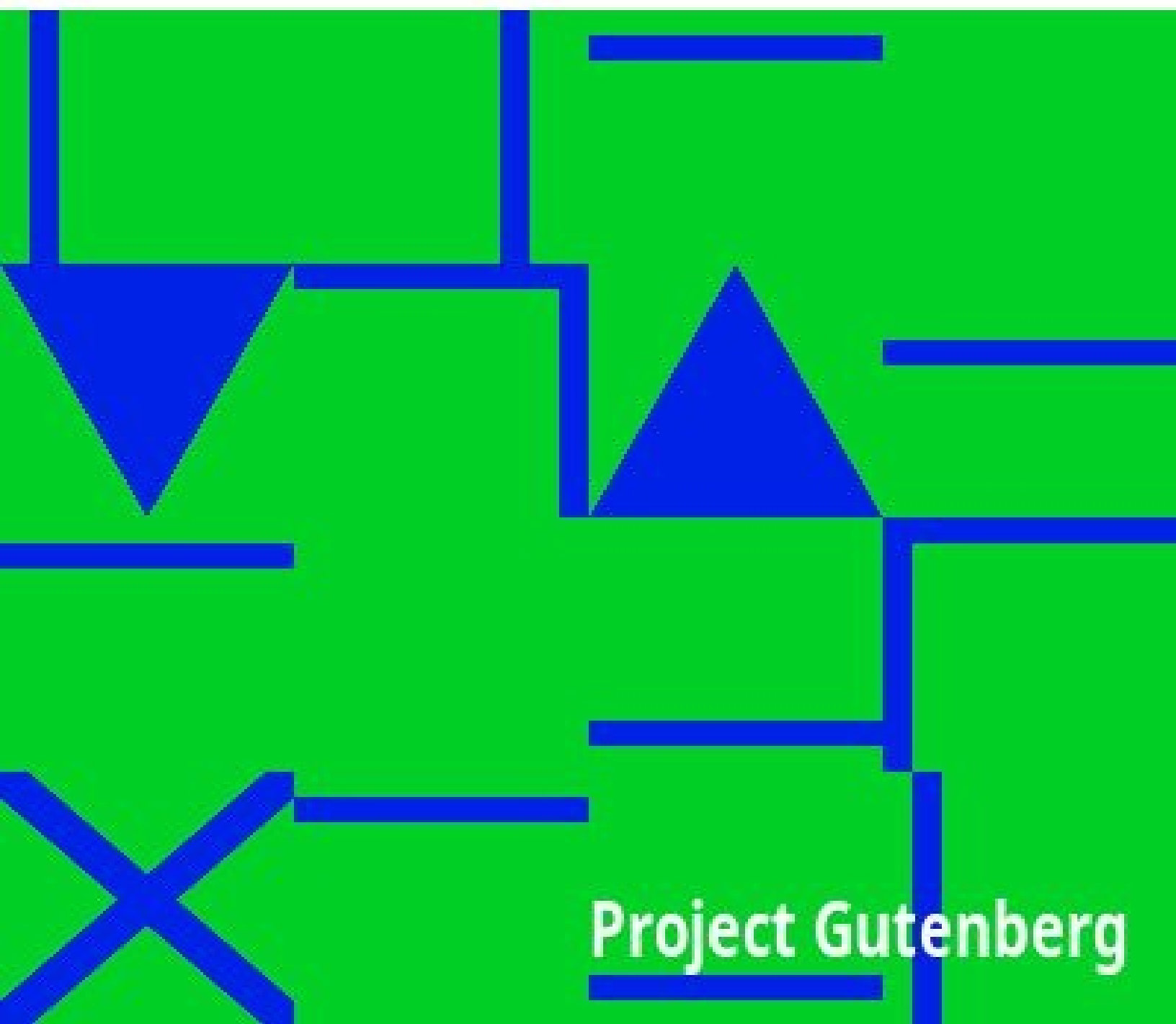


The Space Rover

Edwin K. Sloat



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The Space Rover

By Edwin K. Sloat

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Young Winford heads a desperate escape from the prison mines of Mercury.

[Illustration: *Winford leaped out into space along the cable.*]

Evan Winford leaned wearily against the controls of the little space sphere, and stared out of the window at the planet, Mercury, which lay a million miles sunward. Fail now? He gritted his teeth. No! He would wrench victory from Fate after all, even though at this moment mine guards must be searching the nearby mountains, for him and his companions, and a warning was being broadcast to all the planets and space ships to watch the little prison tender ship, the one that was used to transfer prisoners from liners out in space to Mercury and its Interplanetary Council prison mines to which all who were sentenced came on one-way tickets only. This was the first time, Winford reflected grimly, that the sphere had ever carried outbound passengers.

A long, quavering wail sounded from the hold below. Winford scowled. That fellow, Agar, again. Too bad, for he was unquestionably an engineering genius and thoroughly dependable when he didn't get one of his spells and imagine he was a godo-dog on the red steppes of his native Mars. A little rest and gentle treatment would unquestionably work wonders. Again the wail, followed this time by a series of growls.

Winford slid open the door that separated the control nest from the hold of the little prison tender ship. The other five men had withdrawn to the other side of

the cabin and were watching listlessly the big, ragged, barrel-chested Martian crouching on all fours against the side of the cabin and ferociously baring his teeth.

"What's the matter down there?" called Winford sharply.

Six pairs of eyes looked up at him. Agar forgot he was a dog and stared with the rest. They were an unkempt, ragged lot with unshaven faces and the dirty, white canvas uniforms of mine prisoners. The group was composed of four Martians and two Venusians.

"Let's go back," growled Nizzo, whose squat, powerful body and long arms bespoke his Venus ancestry. "It's death out here. No food. No water, excepting the emergency ration you have up there in the box. That will scarcely last till we can reach Mercury again. Now you tell us that the fuel is nearly exhausted. Let's go back. I say! We don't want to swing about the Sun in this as our tomb for all eternity. At least we eat and drink at the mines, even though the whips of the drivers hurry us on to an early death."

"You're crazy, Nizzo," harshly retorted Winford. "You know what they do when escaped prisoners are brought back, or come of their own free will. The Universe knows nothing of the caged saurians in the warden's gardens, nor of the incorrigible prisoners that go to feed them. But I know—we all of us know. Far better to remain out here and die whole, than to be devoured alive by a slobbering horror."

A heated argument ensued among the men below. Presently Nizzo looked up again.

"But you have no plan," he shouted at the Earthman. "We have followed you blindly so far, and here we are off the traffic lanes. Our only hope of being picked up now is one of space patrol ships. And short shrift may we expect from them!"

Winford scowled impatiently.

"Listen, men," he began. "This is a desperate venture, I know, and I picked every one of you carefully. You are not common scum of the prison mines. Every man of you can be depended upon to put through a daring escape of this nature. Every man of you is an innocent victim of the rotten politicians and corrupt officials that now hold sway in the Three Planets. Take Jarl there, for example." He

indicated a big, patient, resigned Martian. "He is under life sentence in the penal mines simply because his brother-in-law wanted his lands and wealth. As for myself, I had a sister who suffered the misfortune of being seen and coveted by Silas Teutoberg, a member of the Earth Council...."

He choked at the thought, his pale face rigid with emotion. Those below saw the flash of his lambent eyes. He controlled himself with an effort, and continued:

"I have said nothing of any plan beyond that of making our escape in this prison tender off Mercury, but I had a plan behind that. It is true that we seem to be off the regular traffic lanes, but space liners between Venus and Earth just now are cutting in quite close to Mercury, due to the position of the three planets in their orbits. This formed the basis of the whole venture.

"During the three interplanetary days we have floated out here, I have repeatedly scanned the Void, thinking every minute we would sight a craft we could reach. But so far luck has been against us. All I ask is that you do not allow yourselves to be discouraged, for sooner or later we'll get a break."

A chorus of enthusiastic approval answered him. Winford sighed with relief, then stared abruptly through the window and gave a shout. The others below swarmed up the ladder and crowded into the tiny control nest. Winford pointed.

Far off against the black depths of space toward Venus gleamed the tiny, elliptical, silvery hull of a ship, bearing slightly toward them. Although sharply outlined, the craft was hundreds of miles away as the men realized. Winford checked it swiftly through the telescope distance calculator, determined its speed, and rapidly formed his plan.

"There are plenty of space suits in the lockers," he said tersely. "Get into them. Stand by the air-lock. You, Jarl, get into the lock and take a cable with an electro-magnet anchor. Lash yourself to it. When I give the signal by blinking the lights in the lock, open the outer door and leap across to the other ship. I know you risk death from their rays, but it is our only chance. Clamp the anchor against the side of the ship and locate the emergency entrance lock."

"Suppose there is none?" interrupted Jarl stoically.

"Chances are there will be. The interplanetary treaties call for them on most ships since those five hundred passengers perished trying vainly to enter a liner after their own ship was smashed by a meteor out near Jupiter several years ago.

Anyway, it's our only chance. You, Nizzo and Ragna, enter the air-lock with Jarl so that if he misses, you can pull him back. Now hurry. I'll have to maneuver this tub around so that I can approach the ship, if possible, without being noticed."

The others scuttled back down the ladder, leaving Winford to rapidly work out his final calculations. The ship, traveling at a rate of six thousand miles an hour, would miss their little sphere by about a hundred miles. The ship was probably a slow speed freighter, a guess that was supported by the lack of port-holes in the hull.

It was a ticklish task that Winford faced. He could either approach the freighter from against the sun, trusting that the navigation officer on duty would fail to notice the dark blot of the little tender against the blinding glare. Or he could get on the far side of the ship and approach it, concealed by its black shadow. He decided on the latter plan.

The freighter was coming up fast. Winford eased the accelerator open, and moved off at right angles to its line of progress to place it between him and the sun. If the officer in charge of the freighter should see the tiny dot go shooting presently across his path, he would doubtless mistake it for a wandering meteor. As soon as he crossed the path of the big ship, Winford slowly turned his little craft toward the protecting shadow of his prospective victim, and picked up speed as quickly as he dared until the little tender was traveling at the same speed as the freighter. Lucky it was for him that the big craft was not a mail liner, for if it had been, the little ball could never have gained speed enough to equal it.

The shadow of the freighter presently enveloped the little ship, and the two hung side by side. Winford eased the tender in toward the big craft, fully realizing that the meteor warning dial in the control room of the freighter would hint at his presence by its pronounced fluctuation. But there was no help for it; he could only take the chance that the navigator in charge would not investigate. Winford peered up anxiously at the windows of the control room. Apparently the little craft had not yet been discovered.

Less than a hundred yards now separated the two craft. Winford flashed his signal to the air-lock. A moment later a dark blob that shut off the light of the stars in depths below floated across the gap from the tender to the freighter. The electric meter on the control board registered a sudden fluctuation as the electro-magnet anchor attached itself to the hull of the big ship.

Winford snapped off the propulsion beams, seized two ray pistols that lay on the chart table, and ducked down the ladder. His companions were standing before the inner door of the air-lock in their bulging space suits, awaiting his order to leave the tender. He quickly got into a suit, clamped on the helmet and screwed tight the connections. Then he opened the door of the air-lock and motioned the others into it, following the last man in.

Nizzo and Ragna were waiting there, and as the inner door closed, automatically opening the outer door, they pointed to the cable stretching away across forty yards of empty space to the side of the big freighter. Winford could make out faintly the form of Jarl, who was clambering cautiously up the bulging side of the ship on hands and knees, seeking the emergency air-lock. Winford beckoned to the others to follow, and leaped out into space along the cable.

It was a terrifying experience, for no matter how often a man made such a trip, there was always the primitive fear of falling into those millions upon millions of miles of space below where the stars gleamed, red, green, white and blue in the cold depths. Yet a man had no weight. He merely pulled himself along the cable, which kept him from getting lost.

He reached the bulging side of the hull and continued upward on hands and knees, now held to it by its own attraction for his body. The others followed, and scattered out seeking the emergency entrance lock.



At the end of an hour they were in despair. There was no emergency entrance lock! Winford bitterly resigned himself to their fate. This was the end of their daring attempt. He must go forward now to the control room windows and attract the attention of the navigating officer. It meant surrender and subsequent death in the teeth of the caged saurians, but if they remained much longer where they were they would freeze to death anyway, for the batteries that warmed their suits were running down under the continued strain, and when they ceased to

function, the deadly cold of interstellar space would claim them. He managed to make known his intentions to the others and was starting forward when Fate took a hand.

The prison tender ship, which was still floating at the end of its cable at the side of the freighter, relinquished itself to the play of the forces that rule the measureless void and began to set up an orbit of its own about the bigger ship. It came to the end of its tether and swung gently against the hull of the freighter, sending a violent vibration through it; then it rebounded and struck with another crash which was utterly soundless to the stranded men on the outside of the hull, who, nevertheless, felt the vibration plainly.

Winford halted abruptly. The crew inside the ship would investigate. Fate was offering the desperate men on the outside another chance. He turned and beckoned to the others and hurried aft toward the regular air-lock, which was operated only from inside the ship. Hastily he placed the men about the outer door. Then they waited.

Five minutes later it opened, and two men in space suits crawled out. Jarl captured the first man single-handed, and Nizzo and Ragna, with perfect teamwork, overpowered the second before he realized what was taking place. Within a minute the men crowded into the air-lock, and shut the outer portal. Automatically, the inner door slid open.

Winford stepped out into the passageway with his ray pistols, covering the half dozen members of the crew who gaped at the intruders in speechless astonishment. One man recovered his wits and started to run. Winford's pistol stabbed a ray after him, and he collapsed. The other members of the crew silently raised their hands in surrender and were herded into a nearby stateroom and locked in, including the two in space suits who had been captured on the hull outside.

"Overpower and imprison the crew at once," Winford ordered, as he emerged from his space suit. "Jarl, you take charge, and work through the ship. Miss no one. Bind them, imprison them, if you can, and if you must, use sterner measures. Remember you are now pirates, and if we don't capture this ship, the ship will capture us. I'll go ahead alone to the control room and introduce myself to the officers there. When you have cleaned things up, join me."



Captain Robers was peering out through the window at the dark blob of the space tender near the rear of the big freighter when the door of the control room opened softly and Winford slipped inside with leveled ray pistols. The two navigation officers on duty gasped in astonishment. Captain Robers whirled around. His momentary amazement gave way to wrath.

"Who the devil are you, and what do you want?" he bellowed.

Winford's eyes blazed coldly. The ray pistols in his hands twitched meaningly.

"Civility first, Captain. Hands off those instruments, gentlemen. Stand up. Face the windows. Thank you."

With catlike quickness Winford leaped behind the chart table. A glance showed that the ship was holding to its course with unchecked speed. Only the meteor detector fluctuated from the presence of the little space ship outside. No worry there. Disintegrator rays would soon dissolve it, and with it the last visible evidence of their presence on the ship.

"Now, Captain, you may turn about facing me. I want a little information."

"You'll sniff gas for this!" snarled the officer. "This is piracy pure and simple. Who are you, anyway?"

Winford smiled ironically. Captain Robers' eyes widened suddenly and he paled slightly, as he recognized the dirty white uniform.

"The mines of Mercury!" he ejaculated. "We received a heliogram not twenty-four hours ago warning us of your escape. You're Evan Winford of Earth!"

Winford bowed slightly.

"At your service, Captain. My six companions are even now trussing up the remainder of your crew down below. Don't choke, Captain. You are in no danger, unless you make it yourself. I desire a little information about the Universe. You see I have been out of touch for the last three years during my enforced sojourn on Mercury."

Captain Robers glared at Winford.

"Tell me, Captain, who are you, and what is this craft?"

The officer thrust out his chin stubbornly, then glanced at the pistol covering him

and changed his mind.

"Captain Robers. The freighter is the *Golden Fleece*."

"Port?"

"New York. I am homeward bound with a cargo from Ceres of the Asteroids."

Winford's eyes gleamed momentarily.

"Iridium, eh?"

Captain Robers declined to answer. The valuable metal, which was found mostly in abundance among the Asteroids and particularly on Ceres, had proved the bait that lured pirates in flocks from all parts of the Universe to prey on the freighters that carried it, usually under heavy guard. The *Golden Fleece* had obviously been trying to slip through under the camouflage of an ordinary tramp freighter when Winford and his followers boarded her. Robers saw no reason for trying to lie about Ceres, since Winford would discover it later when he examined the log. Winford, however, did not press the question about the cargo.

"Who is the owner, Captain?"

"The Interstellar Transportation Company, New York, Silas Teutoberg, president."

Winford leaped to his feet.

"Repeat that name, Captain," he ordered harshly.

"Silas Teutoberg," sullenly complied the officer. "But don't be so excited. He has already resigned."

"Why?"

A crafty light appeared in the captain's eyes. He sensed a slight advantage in retaining this knowledge himself.

"I decline to answer," he stated.

The lambent flames leaped ominously in Winford's eyes. He toyed with the ray pistol expressively, then glanced up at a sudden interruption. The control room door had opened, admitting Jarl and Ragna.

"The crew is all accounted for," announced Jarl. "We imprisoned a hundred men and have control."

"Very good, Jarl," replied Winford calmly. "Ragna, take these two navigating officers down and lock them up with the rest. Jarl, you remain here. I have a little task for you."

"Awah," replied Jarl, using the Martian term for "very good, sir."

"Captain Robers here is going to strip off his clothing and pass out through the air-lock into space." Winford spoke each word with cold precision.

The officer jerked up his head in sudden terror. He had once witnessed the modern equivalent for the ancient piratical sentence of walking the plank and the vivid memory rose before him. He saw again the nude man cowering inside the air-lock as the inner door shut, the wafting out into interstellar space of his struggling body as the atmosphere inside the lock rushed out of the outer opening door, and the fatal bloating of the body from the sudden pressure from within. The horror of it unlocked the officer's tongue.

"I'll answer, I'll answer!" he cried. "What do you want to know?"

"Tell me why Silas Teutoberg is resigning as president of the Interstellar Transportation Company."

In the momentary silence that followed, Jarl's eyes narrowed with sudden intensity. His interest escaped Winford, who was watching Robers closely. The officer gulped with relief.

"Teutoberg has been named governor of the new emigration colonies the United States is establishing on Ganymede," he explained hurriedly. "The Earth Council, which recently took over the most fertile provinces on the third moon of Jupiter, with the full approval of the Interplanetary Council, has named him for the post. The position is nearly the same as that of an absolute monarch. But he could not hold a government post and retain his executive position with the Interstellar people, so he resigned."

Winford eyed him skeptically. Captain Robers, now greatly agitated, gestured frantically toward the chart table.

"I am telling you the truth!" he assured Winford fervently. "You'll find somewhere on the table a copy of the Heliogram News which tells of his

departure from New York less than twelve hours ago in a specially chartered liner with his staff and friends for New Chicago, on Ganymede. It also tells of his approaching marriage to Princess Irkeen, daughter of King Donossus, a political marriage that will assure Teutoberg's position with the natives."

"Poor girl," muttered Winford under his breath, searching among the loose papers on the chart table for the copy of the news which was received every twelve hours by automatic helioprinter from New York millions of miles away. He read the article about Teutoberg through and laid aside the paper. Turning to the charts he jotted down a few hasty calculations, and stepped to the controls where he set a new course for the "iron mike" of the space freighter to follow.

"Captain Robers, I have changed my mind about having you go out into space from the air-lock," he announced, turning again to the anxious officer. "We will hold you prisoner with your men and later on will set you down on one of Jupiter's smaller satellites—Callisto, if possible, since the living conditions there are quite satisfactory. Word will be sent to Mars of where you can be found. All of your crew, excepting those who wish to sign on with me, will be freed with you. I and my six companions are hardly enough to operate such a craft as this. Incidentally, we are appropriating the *Golden Fleece* and its cargo. If the Interstellar people object, they may present the bill to Silas Teutoberg, and he can deduct it from the income my property yields him."

Captain Robers glanced up curiously at the harsh bitterness that crept into Winford's voice. Then his glance shifted to Jarl, and he was amazed to see the malevolent expression that appeared on the Martian's face as he listened to Winford's words. The moment passed, and Jarl silently escorted the officers below to be locked up with the rest of his crew.



Three weeks later, Earth time, the *Golden Fleece* slipped into the atmosphere of Callisto, the fourth satellite of mighty Jupiter, which swung in its orbit a million and a quarter miles from the great planet. Far off to the west, separated by two million miles of empty space, floated Ganymede, the third satellite, on which the people of the United States were now gaining a foothold with their newly planted colonies.

The big freighter, under the engineering genius of Agar, had made a marvelously

speedy journey from its original position just outside the orbit of Mercury to this point nearly four hundred and fifty million miles away from the little planet. Winford studied the ground below. He was only partly acquainted with the topography of Callisto and wanted to be sure to pick a spot where Captain Robers and his men could be certain of surviving until help arrived. His eye picked out a satisfactory spot close beside the Gnan River in one of the stunted conifer forests of the planet. Swiftly he dropped the big freighter until it hovered but a few yards above the ground.

A freight port-hole was opened, and Captain Robers, accompanied by half his crew, prepared to descend. They were all bundled in heavy garments, for the temperature of Callisto, never high, frequently drops to sub-zero readings. Winford stood at the port and watched the men climb down the rope ladder to the ground below.

Robers was last to go. He faced Winford bitterly, for this escaped lifer from Mercury had stolen not only his ship, but half his crew as well, and the prospect of a liberal share of the rich iridium cargo in the hold.

"You'll regret this day!" snarled the captain. "I'll be in the front row of spectators when you sniff the death gas in the glass execution cage on Mars. Hundreds have tried this sort of thing before you, and every man of them has come finally to the cage."

"You're only delaying us, Captain Robers," replied Winford coldly. "I am in a hurry to be on my way. Kindly move down the ladder and join your men. Your hand weapons and food supplies will be dropped by parachute as we leave. I might add that in a short time I expect to be in a position to broadcast an S O S message for you which should bring rescue ships here to Callisto for you. Good-by."

He turned away, leaving the officer to descend the ladder in baffled fury to the ground below, where his men huddled together in the unfamiliar cold, and stared half fearful at the far-away sun glowing like a yellow arc-light in the depths of space half a billion miles away.

When the rising ship reached the thousand-foot level, the weapons and food were dropped by parachute, and the port-hole closed and locked. Winford hurried forward to the control room where the two navigators, who had signed with him for a hundred and twentieth share of the iridium each, were already pointing the nose of the ship up through the purple heavens toward Ganymede.

"Open her up! Use the emergency propulsion beams!" ordered Winford. "We are overdue now for my tryst with this new governor at New Chicago!"

The officers gazed at him in awe, wondering what desperate thing he planned at the new colonial capital.



Winford was poring over the maps of New Chicago six hours later in the chart room when one of the navigation officers touched him on the shoulder.

"Battle sphere rapidly overhauling us from sunward, sir," said the man. "Approaching us against the glare of sunlight until it was so close when we discovered it that escape is now impossible. I'd say it is one of the new 4-Q heavies of the Interplanetary Council patrol fleet."

Winford hurried to the telescope. As his anxious eye took in the spherical outline of the battle craft, showing as a silvery crescent to the rear and starboard of them, he recognized it as one of the heavily armored spheres of the Interplanetary Council's fleet with the new long range K-ray disintegrator guns.

Winford seized a telescope speed calculator. The sphere was coming up far too rapidly to permit the *Golden Fleece* to pick up speed soon enough to escape—although he was confident the freighter could do it now, since Agar had changed its propulsion machinery.

Perhaps the commander of the battle sphere was merely curious about the *Golden Fleece* since it appeared to be an ordinary tramp freighter with no distinguishing emblems or other identification, and was coming close to give her a better look. Or perhaps he was hurrying to some destination and his nearness to the *Golden Fleece* was merely accidental.

Whatever the cause, there remained but one thing to do, and that was to keep the freighter on its course as though nothing out of the ordinary was taking place. Winford turned to the communication board and cut in the universal radio wave. The instrument was silent. He sighed. At least the commander of the battle sphere was not trying to communicate with him.

Winford turned back to the window again. The sphere was quite close now, and its speed was dropping rapidly. Suddenly the radio loud-speaker hummed to life.

"Ahoy there, aboard the freighter," sounded a stern, determined voice. "This is the Interplanetary Council battle sphere, *Eagle*, nearing you. We are coming aboard you to investigate. Make ready your air-lock to receive us. Attempt nothing hostile. Hundred-kilowatt ray guns are trained on you."

Winford cut in the microphone and answered with the customary "O. K." reply; then he turned to the two white-faced navigators.

"Carry on as usual," he said grimly. "Perhaps we can fool them once they are aboard."

Then he turned to the phone connecting with the crew's quarters. He hurriedly explained the situation to Jarl and instructed him to receive the boarding party at the air-lock.

The big battle sphere was drawing close alongside. Magnet grapnels shot across the narrow space between the two craft and gripped the side of the freighter, followed by the cable bridge along which the boarding party presently came wavering their way to the air-lock of the freighter.

Winford counted fifty men, then turned away dejectedly. This was no ordinary inspection party, but a prize crew coming aboard. He sat down wearily. Just as victory seemed almost within his grasp—had been actually in his hand when he had started to Ganymede—this battle sphere popped up out of nowhere like an inescapable doom to strike him and his companions down. He gritted his teeth. Some way, somehow he would still win out. He and his fellows had come too far to be cheated of liberty now.

The door of the control room opened, and a smart young officer in gold and gray of the Interplanetary Council Marine service entered, accompanied by three privates with drawn pistols who took their positions near the door. Winford noted the clean-cut lines and fresh features of the officer and felt that under different circumstances he would like to know him.

"I am Lieutenant Commander 6666-A," the officer introduced himself, using the designation the Interplanetary Council required of all their fighting men. "You are Evan Winford, are you not?"

Winford nodded.

"You nearly got away with it, Winford," complimented the officer with a boyish grin. "I almost admire you for it. But you made at least one fatal error."

"What was that?" asked Winford curiously.

"When you put Captain Robers and his men off this ship they smuggled out with them a hand-operated helio set. Each man carried a part. Within an hour after you left they had it assembled and were cranking out S O S signals. We happened to be but a million miles off Callisto and picked up their message. At once our commander decided to start out and rope in the *Golden Fleece* before you did any further damage. And here we are."

Winford cursed himself under his breath. Fool that he had been not to have had the men and their baggage searched more carefully before he allowed them to leave the freighter. Nizzo was responsible for that. He should be—but it was too late now. No use crying over spilled milk. He forced a grin and shrugged.

"The best laid plans of mice and men—" he quoted philosophically. "I hope the entire blame for this wild venture is put on my shoulders where it belongs when we are brought to trial. These two navigators here and the rest of the men are in no way responsible. I forced every man of them under pain of death to join me."

The young officer shook his head and smiled.

"Not a chance of that, Winford. You'll all stand trial alike, and you know it. You are rather a strange sort of pirate, it seems to me, to offer yourself as a sacrifice for your men. I'd say you are too tender-hearted for buccaneering in the Void."

"If I had succeeded in reaching New Chicago, you might have gained a different impression of me," retorted Winford, his lambent eyes flaming at the thought. "I have sworn to kill Silas Teutoberg, the new governor of Ganymede, because he sent me to die in the mines of Mercury for a crime I never committed."

The young officer laughed.

"You can set your mind at rest about him, Winford. He was due at New Chicago five days ago in his specially chartered space liner from New York. Nothing was heard from his ship ten days after he left New York with his guests aboard. His last reported position was near the Mars orbit and since then nothing has come out of the Void. They'll just chalk him under the 'Lost in Space' column on the admiralty boards of the Universe and give the credit for his disappearance to some hurtling meteor. We were on our way to search for the remains of his liner when we intercepted the messages from Captain Robers and his men on Callisto."

Winford's face was bleak.

"Fate has prevented me from achieving my greatest desire," he said harshly. "To rid the Universe of that scourge to humanity would have been one of the sweetest moments of my life. I've dreamed of it for years."

The officer lighted a cigarette.

"Perhaps you are right, but I'd say the chance is gone in more ways than one. Teutoberg is undoubtedly dead, and you are on your way to the gas execution cage on Mars. Incidentally, you are now my prisoner. I'll not lock you in the hold with the rest of your crew, but will confine you to your stateroom."

Winford surveyed him curiously.

"I warn you that I'll take advantage of any opportunity to escape," he said.

The officer grinned.

"That's to be expected. So would any other man doomed to die. But the coronium doors, locks and walls of the *Golden Fleece's* staterooms are practically escape proof, and with two of my marines on guard outside your door, with orders to kill if you break out, I feel reasonably safe."

Imprisoned in his stateroom, Winford threw himself on his bunk. Too early to attempt anything yet, he considered. It would be better to wait a few days—at least until *Eagle* had departed. Besides, he would have to work out a plan for escape.

He glanced up at the port-hole. The sunlight was shifting. He arose and peered out. Twenty-five miles away he could see the battle sphere standing out across the Void on a sunward course. The *Golden Fleece* was turning her nose toward distant Mars, a long journey, since the Red Planet was on the opposite side of the sun, seven hundred million miles away.

Winford knew what was taking place. The commander of the battle sphere was again resuming his mission of searching for the missing liner, while the young officer and his crew were taking the *Golden Fleece* with its iridium cargo and pirate crew directly to Mars.

Meantime the radio and audio-vision announcers on all the planets were broadcasting the sensational news of the capture of the escaped convict-pirates

and their forthcoming trial and certain execution on Mars. Winford turned bitterly away from the port-hole.



One week had passed. Winford started up out of a sound sleep. He listened tensely. There was a murmur through the big freighter. He recognized it as the clanging of the great alarm gongs through the hull of the big ship, muffled by the walls of his stateroom. Something was afoot!

He threw off the covers, sprang out on the deck and pulled on his clothes. This might be a break! Those gongs never sounded without plenty of cause.

He pulled a chair to the door, mounted it, and cautiously opening the transom which he had previously loosened, thrust his head out into the passage.

A marine was running down the passage. The guards before Winford's door tried to stop him, but the man ran on. Presently another came along. The guard was more successful.

"Say, Buddie, what's all the excitement?" he demanded.

"We've found Teutoberg's liner, or rather, it has found us!" exclaimed the marine. "They say old Teutoberg has trained his heaviest guns on us and is demanding that we surrender. Our skipper doesn't know just what to make of it. He's arguing with Teutoberg by radio that this old tub is in the hands of the law already and that he is taking it to Mars for the piracy court. Teutoberg says he won't be fooled by any such bunk as that; he knows we are all pirates and he is going to have this ship regardless of anything, since it belongs to his line. I've got to be hurrying along. We're getting the big guns ready, the few that we have."

Winford cautiously withdrew his head. His eyes were glowing. The whole scheme was as plain as day now. Teutoberg knew as well as every informed person in the Universe did that the *Golden Fleece* was in the hands of the Interplanetary Council marines. That talk about being entitled to the freighter because it was owned by his shipping line was so much rubbish. He was protected by insurance. What he wanted was the insurance and the ten million dollars' worth of iridium in the hold as well.

Furthermore, he had intended to have it all along. It was part of his diabolical

scheme to put the shipment on an unprotected freighter. Then he had chartered a liner privately for his venture in piracy. When the liner was "lost" he was out searching for the *Golden Fleece* along the lanes where it should have been had not he, Winford, and his companions captured the craft and sent it hurtling out toward Ganymede. And now Teutoberg had succeeded in trailing it down.



Winford surveyed the transom pessimistically. Impossible to get through it. If only he had a ray pistol to dissolve the door lock... The air ventilator! He dropped down on hands and knees and peered under the bunk. The opening seemed large enough to let his shoulders through. If he should become fast in one of the turns of the tunnel it would be all up with him. They'd probably find his body when the ship went into dock for repairs. But this was no time to think of that.

He crawled under the bunk, took out the grating and set it beside the opening. Then he wormed his way into the tunnel. It was a tight fit, but he could move. The first turn should bring him to the branch that opened out on the passage not far from his stateroom door.

Never would he forget that struggle when he forced his cramped, tortured body round the bend in the blackness a fraction of an inch at a time and crawled up the branch. If he was mistaken—but he wasn't. Presently he was looking out of the grating into the passage.

Members of the crew raced back and forth like disturbed ants. From the snatches of conversation that reached him, Winford learned that Teutoberg had succeeded in getting the range of the freighter and was holding her helpless under the imposing muzzles of his heavy disintegrator-ray guns.

The door of the control opened and the boyish commander, his face pale and drawn, thrust out his head.

"They're coming aboard, men," he shouted to the group in the passage below. "I can't stop them. Our only chance may come after they are aboard."

"Why don't you free the pirates and let them help us?" cried one of the men.

"Never," returned the young commander firmly. "They are in our care, and by

the gods, we are going to bring them and this ship through safe and sound!"

A moment later he descended the stairs and led his men aft.

Teutoberg displayed a flash of generalship, for his first ten men who came in through the air-lock were pistol experts. They rayed the marines in their tracks and cleared the passage leading to the lock, before the defenders could get organized. A few minutes later the invaders were spreading through the ship, hunting down and ruthlessly slaying the marines whom they outnumbered three to one. Scattered fights to the death took place on all the decks. Winford, snugly ensconced in his air tunnel, raged inwardly as the crackling of the rays and the agonized screams of the wounded and dying came to his ears.

The fighting seemed to be drawing nearer. He risked peeping out. The young commander and half a dozen of his men covering themselves as best they might with the inadequate protector shields of the service, retreated to the foot of the stairs leading up to the control room. As the invaders prepared to mow them down a sudden hush fell on the men and the invaders parted. A huge man stepped out before them. Winford sucked in his breath sharply as he recognized Teutoberg and saw him take a step forward in the direction of the marines.

Teutoberg raised his hand toward Commander 6666-A and spoke.

"Will you surrender, or must my men obliterate you? I would say that you pirates have your backs to the wall. Surely life is sweet. Why not surrender while you still have it?"

"We're not pirates!" declared the young commander hotly.

Teutoberg sneered.

"It will take more than a gold and gray uniform of the Interplanetary Council military forces to convince me," he retorted. "Uniforms of any kind can be obtained anywhere in the Universe where there happens to be a competent tailor."

"The only pirates, excepting yourselves, aboard this ship are under lock and key," said the commander. "That's where you will be before this matter is settled."

Teutoberg laughed. His manner changed suddenly.

"What a line of talk for a pirate," he commented affably. "Come, youngster, there is no need to sacrifice lives uselessly. Surrender, since you're outnumbered anyway, and let's discuss this thing on a sane basis."

Commander 6666-A hesitated. Winford could scarcely refrain from shouting treachery. Then the marines lowered their shields and rays. Next instant they went down under the charge of the invaders.

The young commander was chalky white when they dragged him bound and helpless to his feet. A trickle of blood made a crimson line from the corner of his mouth, and his eyes sparkled with helpless rage.

"You dirty snake!" he gasped. "You'll sniff gas for this!"

Teutoberg laughed scornfully.

"Take them back to the air-lock and shove them out naked one at a time," he ordered curtly. "That's the way they would have treated us. Save the young bantam for the last. Now, where is this Evan Winford? I have an old score to settle with him."

Up in his air tunnel Winford nodded grimly to himself. Teutoberg's words only added to the proof that he knew all along that the *Golden Fleece* was in the hands of the Interplanetary marines, for his request for Winford revealed that he had been following the helio reports of the capture of the ship by the marines and the stories being broadcast throughout the Universe of how Winford and Jarl and their pirate companions were being taken with the ship to Mars for piracy and execution.

Neither Commander 6666-A nor his men deigned to answer Teutoberg, but one of his own men had already discovered that Winford was locked in his own stateroom, and he promptly indicated the door.

Teutoberg scowled, drew a pistol in either hand, and strode to the door. One of the men unlocked it, and he kicked it open. He waited expectantly, then advanced cautiously into the room. The sound of his baffled curses filled the passage. Winford grinned mirthlessly.

"Someone dies for this!" shouted Teutoberg, storming out into the passage. "Where is he, I say? Bring me that Martian, Jarl! He'll know, if anyone does. Bring him, I say, and I'll torture the truth out of his big carcass!"

Winford's grin vanished. His eyes grew anxious as he waited, tense and breathless, until Jarl, with his big hands lashed together behind his back, was brought up from the hold.

"So we meet again, Jarl?" jeered Teutoberg, scowling blackly at him. "Where is this master of yours, this Winford?"

Jarl's eyes met Teutoberg's impassively. All too well he knew the innate cruelty of this Earthman. Some explanation would have to be made to satisfy him. Never a flicker of an eye-lash revealed what that explanation would be, but Jarl glanced stoically at the empty stateroom.

"He did it," he said calmly.

"Did what, you clod?" Teutoberg flung at him savagely.

"Ended his life as he swore he would."

"Suicide? Impossible! Where is the body?"

"He destroyed it together with his life by drinking disintegrator concentrate. He carried a capsule of it when we escaped from Mercury, and I've heard him swear time and again that he would die before he would permit himself to be taken back."

Teutoberg swallowed the story. There was nothing else to do, apparently. He raved and cursed. Once he raised his pistol to Jarl's heart and lowered it again.

"You'll take his place, Martian dog!" he snarled. "By proxy I shall treat him as he deserves, and you shall be the proxy. Back to the hold with you for the present!"

With that Teutoberg whirled about, strode up the stairs and vanished in the control room.

Commander 6666-A and his men were dragged aft to the air-lock, leaving the passage near Winford temporarily empty. He broke out the grating and wormed his way out of the air tunnel, dropping on the floor hands first. He sprang to his feet, and started grimly up the steps to the control room. Inside that room was Teutoberg, a bigger man than himself, and armed, yet Winford, barehanded, cautiously opened the door and stepped inside.

Teutoberg was standing at one side of the room gazing in rapt attention at the slaughter of the helpless marines. One by one he watched them emerge from the air-lock bloated and white in their nakedness with their convulsed limbs already growing rigid in the icy cold of space. Out in the open space between the two ships they hung motionless a few minutes, then swiftly dissolved and vanished under the ray of a small disintegrator gun on the liner.

Teutoberg smiled crookedly.

The door clicked behind him. Teutoberg turned with a startled oath. Winford, foul with grime and his clothing torn to rags, stood there. Teutoberg's eyes widened. Both hands leaped downward for the holstered pistols in his belt. At that instant Winford lunged for him.

One of Teutoberg's hands was now gripping a pistol. Winford struck frenziedly, knocking it from Teutoberg's grasp. The weapon slid under the chart table out of reach. Winford clutched Teutoberg's left hand which held the still holstered pistol.

Suddenly he saw an advantage, and his heart leaped in exultation. Round behind Teutoberg he pivoted—a wrestling trick he had learned as a boy. For an instant they stood back to back. Then with a mighty effort Winford heaved upward relentlessly on his opponent's forearm.

Teutoberg screamed in pain as something snapped in his wrist. The pistol dropped from his nerveless fingers. Winford flicked it out of reach under the table with his toe, but had no chance to reach for it, because Teutoberg had managed to work himself free.

With a bellow of animal rage and with arms flailing like wind-mills he charged at Winford again. Winford met his rush with a rapid series of blows and Teutoberg went down. But up he came, a wild light in his eyes. Again he went down, only to struggle gamely to his feet once more.

Winford was gasping for breath. It amazed him that Teutoberg could endure so much punishment. His arm must be broken and he was terribly battered, yet here he came staggering back for more. Winford now hunched down and, like a crouching animal, advanced slowly toward his enemy. Suddenly he started a right almost from the deck straight for Teutoberg's chin. It connected. Teutoberg

was lifted clear of the deck and hurled unconscious against the side of the control room six feet away.

Winford staggered to the communication board and his trembling fingers clutched the air-lock phone.

"Hello, hello!" he gasped. "Teutoberg speaking. Send no more marines out through the lock just now.... Yes, of course this is Teutoberg."

He hung the instrument back on its hook and clung dizzily to the edge of the table. At least the slaughter was halted for the time being.



He would have to act fast. He caught up the big water pitcher from the holder on the wall where it had miraculously escaped the fight, gulped deeply from it, and splattered water down his face and chest. Then he picked up the two pistols from the deck, placed one in his belt and gripped the other firmly as he approached the unconscious Teutoberg.

At the first splash of water in his face Teutoberg groaned and rolled over.

"Get up, you," Winford ordered harshly.

Teutoberg sat up groggily. The sight of the pistol and Winford's eyes brought him out with a sudden shock.

"Get over to that air-lock phone and say just what I tell you to," ordered Winford grimly. "One false word, and I'll ray you plenty."

Teutoberg staggered to his feet obediently and took the phone, for he had read death in Winford's hard eyes.

"Hello, Jarvis?" he asked, his body rigid under the prod of Winford's pistol. "This is Teutoberg.... Yes, I talked a minute ago. I've changed my plans, Jarvis. We've got to get the iridium out of the hold and into the liner as soon as possible, or we'll be sighted by some other craft. Take all the men but ten and go back to the liner. Make ready there for the cargo.... You'll have to clear some cabins; there is more than I thought. There isn't much food aboard here, anyway, and it is better to let the men go to mess right away and start transferring the cargo immediately afterward."

Teutoberg hung up the phone.

"Is that satisfactory?" he asked sullenly.

"It will do," was Winford's terse reply. "Now when the men have gone back to the liner, order two of the remainder to bring up Jarl from the hold to the control room here."

Jarl was as impassive as usual when he entered the control room and beheld Winford in charge there, although his two captors stared in amazement at Teutoberg, bloody and battered, seated against the side of the room with his hands upraised. Jarl calmly disarmed his two captors and closed the door.

"Only eight of Teutoberg's men besides these remain on the *Golden Fleece*," Winford explained to Jarl. "Take care of them first, then release the rest of our men from the hold. Tell Agar to take charge of the machinery as soon as possible, and have the gunners stand by for further orders."

"Awah," replied Jarl stoically, and left the control room.

He took care of the eight invaders in his very efficient Martian fashion, for he pistoled them with neatness and dispatch where they stood before the air-lock with the young commander and his remaining two marines, waiting to thrust them out into space. Winford had not instructed Jarl just how to take care of the situation, and the Martian attended to it in his own way. Commander 6666-A, with his arms bound behind his back, stared in amazement as Jarl calmly stepped over the dead bodies and went on his way to release his fellow pirates from the hold.

Up in the control room the radio loud-speaker hummed to life.

"Teutoberg, Teutoberg, are you there?" cried an anxious voice. "Three Interplanetary battle spheres are approaching from the direction of the Earth! They are still two thousand miles away, but they are coming on fast! We're going to cut loose and run for it. If you're not back here in five minutes, you'll have to stay where you are!"

Winford cut in then for Teutoberg, who gulped painfully before speaking.

"Go right ahead," he said in a strained voice. "I'm staying here on the *Golden Fleece*. I'll—I'll see you later."

"Why didn't you say you'd meet them in the Hereafter?" suggested Winford coldly, as he cut out the microphone. "That's where you are going as soon as Jarl returns. He'll be glad to help you on your way, for he hasn't forgotten the aid you gave his brother-in-law in robbing him and sending him to Mercury."

Teutoberg made no answer.

Things were happening swiftly. Already the liner was lurching forward frantically with every propulsion ray flaming as she started her flight through space away from the avenging battle spheres. Red lights twinkled on the control board of the *Golden Fleece*. Agar, at the generators now, threw in the power. The big freighter leaped ahead like a grayhound, soon reaching a speed that even the swift battle spheres could not equal, thanks to the engineering genius of the half-insane Agar.

Winford glanced around. Teutoberg was already gone. Jarl had taken him down to the air-lock. Winford tried to forget him. There were other things to think of. There were the details of taking the *Golden Fleece* out to Pluto near the frontiers of the Sun's domain—Pluto, that stronghold of the space pirates where a man could sell an entire planet or any part of it, no questions asked, if he could produce it for the buccaneer kings to bid on. The freighter and its cargo were as good as sold already, and the money they would bring would be more than enough to buy pardons and freedom for everyone in the crew.



There were many details to consider carefully, but instead Winford found himself thinking of Teutoberg down by the air-lock, stripped of his clothing, ready for his last adventure with life. As much as Winford hated the man, he was forced into an unwilling admiration for his dogged fight in the control room. A mere word in that telephone would save him. Winford shook his head irritably. The man deserved death. Yet again he saw the set features, the final walk into the air-lock. Suddenly Winford found himself at the phone and heard himself giving the order that would save Teutoberg's life. He sat down again, surprised at his own weakness. He was still musing when Jarl entered.

"You couldn't go through with it," observed the big Martian impassively. "I was

afraid you couldn't. It is as I have always said of you Earthlings. You think you want revenge, good old ancient vengeance; but when the moment comes and you sit in the high place and can have it, you weaken. Well, you won't have to execute Teutoberg now."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Winford.

"After I received your order and told Teutoberg he wasn't to go out through the lock after all, he grinned. It was an insult, that grin, just as though he knew all along you wouldn't have the nerve to kill him. And while I stood there asking myself if I should not go ahead and shove him out anyway, one of his men—one of the two we captured up here in this room—caught sight of that grin. He screamed something about treachery and Teutoberg betraying him to the pirates, and before I could interfere he drew a knife and stabbed Teutoberg to death right there before all of us. After that there was nothing to do but to heave his body into the air-lock and let it go on out into space."

Far back across the Void in a tiny space sphere which Winford had given him and his two marines to return to the distant battle sphere, Lieutenant Commander 6666-A saw through his telescope the white speck of Teutoberg's body leave the side of the *Golden Fleece* and wondered what it was.

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