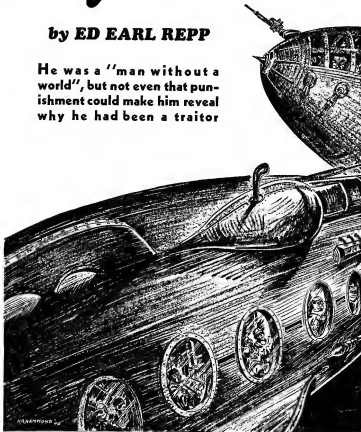


# The Invisible

by **ED EARL REPP**

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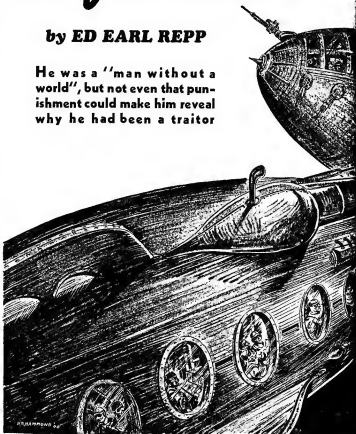


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# World



FIRST Mate Ian Patrick's thoughtful advance down the corridor stopped before the door of the radio room. Without knocking, he went into the vibrant atmosphere of buzzing transformers and reeking ozone. Sparks, chief operator of the liner *Oracle*, was hunched over the desk with ear crooked to the dim cracklings of an amplifier.

Patrick dropped a thin sheaf of papers before him. "Snap out of it, Curly," he grunted. "Location and readings as of two minutes ago. Send 'em out."

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"Snap out of it, Curly," he grunted. "Location and readings as of two minutes ago. Send 'em out."

Sparks' short, barrel-shaped body twisted in the chair as he glanced up at Patrick. Unconsciously the radio operator ran a

palm over the unsullied surface of his onion-slick scalp, a frequent gesture since commencing the use of a patent hair elixir. The first mate's employment of the nickname "Curly" dated back to the first bottle.

Sparks scowled at him. "Quiet!" he hissed. "Picked up a news broadcast. Vickers is at it again!"

Patrick's preoccupied air left him. He caught a breath and pulled up a chair to join Sparks at the loudspeaker. A news broadcast was something unusual out here in the void, millions of miles from Earth. With universal conditions as they were at the moment, Sparks spent most of his time trying to pick up news from war-harried Earth and Mars.

"—Vickers' message came with customary suddenness," rasped the dim voice from the speaker. "Just five days after the Allied Worlds High Command despatched the new and deadly Kuhlon guns by freight ship to the fleet off Jupiter, Karl Vickers radioed that his Plutonian hordes would descend on helpless Mars and Earth within a fortnight.

"This may mean almost anything, since his successful attack on Venus came within three days of a similar warning to that planet last month. If Vickers succeeds in slipping through the cordon before the Kuhlon weapons are installed in the ships, the situation will indeed be grave for the Allied planets. Vickers' disintegrators, while inferior to the new Kuhlon gun, are vastly more deadly than the weapons now in use aboard the fleet ships.

"But Commander Yerkes has radioed to Mars and Earth the assurance that Vickers is still somewhere within the noose of warships Yerkes has thrown around Vickers' hideout off Jupiter. Just where that hideout is, no one can say. Yerkes has narrowed the hunt down to a comparatively small terri-

tory; but since no asteroids are known to exist within that sphere, Vickers would still seem to hold his trump card—that is, complete mystery as to his whereabouts . . ."

The voice faded out, and none of Sparks' tuning would recover it. Sparks shut off the receiver and wagged his head.

"Bad business," he growled. "Where the devil can that butcher be hiding? If they could only get him in their sights just once—"

"I've got a sneaking hunch they don't much want to find him anyway," Patrick mused. "Vickers may only have five or six ships with him, but any one of them is worth twenty of ours. Compared to his disintegrators, our guns are like water-pistols."

"But if the Kuhlon guns reach the fleets in time!" Sparks reminded him fervently. "The freighter that's carrying them must be almost there by this time. The High Command hasn't announced what ship it is, but it must be a fast one—not a space tramp. Let's see—they said the guns were shipped five days ago. That would put the ship—"

Patrick sat up straight. "Right about where we are!" he exclaimed. "We're only four and a half days out ourselves."

A grin claimed Sparks' thick lips. "Hell, how do you know we aren't carrying the guns! Our course takes us darned close to the fleet!"

Ian Patrick chuckled. "If I hadn't supervised the loading and sealing of the holds myself, I might believe the skipper did have something up his sleeve. But all we're carrying is baggage and a few scientific instruments."

SPARKS looked a little disappointed, and he started to pick up the notes Patrick had tossed on the desk. Then,

with a scowl, he remembered something. Digging a folded paper from his vest pocket, he gave it to Patrick with somewhat the air of a man who handles a poisonous insect.

"Nathan asked me to give you this," he grunted. "Wants to see you, I suppose. Dammit, Ian, you're taking a risk every time you talk to that guy!"

Patrick flung the note into a corner.

"Do you think I don't know it?" he raged, his temper boiling up without warning. "What's he trying to do—get me in trouble? If the skipper knew I've been talking to that old coot, it'd be the rocket rooms for First Mate Patrick from now on! And at a time like this!"

"Where you made your mistake," Sparks offered, "was in talking to Jared Nathan the first time."

**PATRICK** jammed his hands in his pockets.

"I can see that now. He's hiding around every corner these days, as hungry for conversation as a starving man for food. Still—somehow I can't help feel sorry for him. Fifteen years aboard this ship! Not allowed to talk to a soul as long as he lives. Hasn't touched solid ground or seen an inhabited world since they put him on board! Not that he didn't deserve it," he finished grimly.

Sparks snapped on the transmitter and twirled dials.

"I can see him hugging his sides in his cabin right now!" he gritted. "Him—the man that turned that mad dog, Vickers, loose on the world again after he was stopped!"

Ian Patrick had no answer for that. Bitterness brimmed in his dark eyes, drew harsh lines in his face. He was thinking of Karl Vickers; of Jared Nathan, who had released Vickers fifteen years ago after his bloody dream of power had broken and a tribunal had sentenced him to death on Planetoid 53.

Karl Vickers was the butcher who had followed in the wake of the war-mongers of Europe. Possessed of boundless craft and hunger for power, he had the bloodlust of a savage, the cruelty of an Inquisitor. In a two-year war, he swept his Central European army over the world, conquering every nation on the globe with his new, resistless weapons. His purges of conquered ruling bodies were carnivals of lust and cruelty. With his blood thirst unsated, he descended on Venus and charged across the little world, murdering five million souls in the process.

It was on Mars that the remnant of Earth's armies joined the Martian legions to defeat him in the ghastliest battle mankind had ever witnessed. Vickers lived to be sentenced to slow death on Planetoid 53. On that bare chunk of rock, he and his war ministers were to be abandoned with a small store of food and a limited quantity of oxygen in their space suits. Death would be the slow, maddening kind Vickers deserved.

But Fate had other plans for him.

Fate, in the form of a traitor, Jared Nathan, rear admiral in the Terrestrial Fleet, had set the condemned men free in a life-ship before the planetoid was reached! After that, Nathan gave himself up to his own men—without a word as to his reason for the act!

Jared Nathan had paid—was still paying—for his treachery. But Karl Vickers was loose on the universe again. He was back from Pluto, where he had amassed the greatest killing machine in history. Venus had gone down under a series of raids. The strange, disk-like ships, led by Vickers' black flagship, *Vengeance*, had brought mass murder to the peaceful planet. Vickers left that planet in the hands of a few thousand of his savage Plutonian fighters, and now had his ships stationed about Mars and Earth awaiting his word to attack.

For the Tri-World allies the future was a black and terrifying one.

Ian Patrick got up, as Sparks' fingers began tapping out the ship's location to Central Navigation.

"Well, I'll see you later," he muttered. "I'm due on the bridge in ten minutes."

Leaving the room, he headed forward. His way took him past Jared Nathan's door, but he did not slacken his pace as he approached it. But as Patrick came even with the door, it flew open and Jared Nathan slipped into the portal!

THE dim light of the corridor showed a man of middle height standing there, gray of head and sallow of skin, a lonely-looking figure with the shadows of hell in his eyes. Dissipation had stamped its mark on him. Jared Nathan had few pleasures these days, and drinking was chiefest of them.

He stepped forward then and signalled to Patrick.

"Thank God you came!" he breathed. "I was afraid you might go by."

"As a matter of fact," cut in Patrick coldly, "I intended to. These conversations have got to stop, Nathan. It would mean my discharge if I got caught. The risk's not worth it."

"I know," Nathan nodded bitterly. "But—this once! You've got to listen to me, Patrick. I want you to throw the *Oracle* off her course tonight!"

Patrick was stunned. While he was trying to assimilate the audacious words, the traitor drew him into his untidy little cabin and shut the door.

"Throw her off her course!" Patrick gasped finally. "Are you crazy, Nathan?"

"Far from it. If anyone's out of his mind, it's Captain Baldwin. This ship is rushing into danger and apparently

I'm the only one who knows it! I'm calling on you to do something about it. All I ask is that you cut in around Planetoid 27 on the outer side, instead of passing between it and the sun. Then you can go back on the regular course."

Nathan's bleary eyes searched the young officer's face. With his seedy old blue suit and dissipation-rotted features, he was not an object to inspire trust in a man of Ian Patrick's responsibilities. Yet something in his face spoke of sincerity—and terror.

Patrick shook his head. "Do you think I'd risk jail for such a harebrained act? And at the request of you, of all people! It's no dice, Nathan. I didn't think I looked feeble-minded enough to pull a stunt like that! Understand this, once and for all, I'm through risking my stripes on your account. The next time you bother me, I'll have to report you."

But as he turned to leave the cabin, Jared Nathan flung himself before the door.

"Good God, Patrick! You don't know what you're doing!" he choked. "Karl Vickers is on Planetoid 27, waiting to pounce on us as we go by!"

"Vickers!"

The word came like an explosion from Patrick's lips, and one brown hand leaped out to seize Jared Nathan by his scrawny neck.

"If I thought you were in cahoots with that mad dog again—by the Lord, I'd kill you!"

The traitor's eyes did not flinch before the unsheathed steel of Patrick's gaze.

"For your own good," he drawled, "you'd better not kill me until I speak my piece. If Captain Baldwin wasn't such a blind fool, he'd know what I know—that Vickers means to have the load of Kuhlön guns we're carrying!"

His words had the effect on Ian Pat-

rick of a blow behind the ear.

"This ship — carrying guns!" he blinked. "You — you're drunk, Nathan!"

"Possibly," the smaller man replied dryly. "But still in good possession of my faculties. Do you mean to say you didn't know the holds were full of Kublons?"

"But I supervised the loading of the ship myself!" Patrick argued. "We're carrying nothing but baggage and scientific instruments."

Nathan shook his head. "I don't sleep much while we're in Earth ports, Patrick. I keep thinking about the things beyond these steel walls that I'll never see again—trees, lakes, hills. Consequently, I hear just about everything that goes on aboard ship during the night. The night before we left, I heard them unload our cargo and bring in a new one!

"It took eight hours to re-load, and the men were working fast. It doesn't take a master mind to realize we're not actually taking a bunch of fat-bearded business men to a Tri-Worldly trade convention on Mars, but a load of cannon to a panicky war fleet!"

Facts swarmed through Patrick's mind and kept him dumb. There was enough logic in Nathan's words for him to catch rays of truth gleaming through his suspicion of the condemned traitor.

The ringing of a bell in the hall jarred him. He was late on the bridge; the skipper was calling him. The down-to-earth sound seemed to put Patrick back on a footing of reality. Kublon guns—the devil! He gave a little snort of contempt.

"It won't do, Nathan. From another man, I might believe it. Coming from you—I guess you know what I mean."

Jared Nathan watched him go through the door. He heard his footfalls hurrying up the corridor. As the

sounds died away, his shoulders slumped and baffled tears swam in his eyes.

"Fool!" he cried. "You'll find out—I was right. But it will be too late then!"

## CHAPTER II

### *The Vengeance*

THE clammy spell that Nathan's words had left with him persisted in Ian Patrick long after he reached the bridge and sank into the pilot's chair. He wished he had had time to go below and check on the cargo—just as an additional reassurance to himself.

He tried to believe that the old ex-admiral was either a liar or twice a traitor. Both ideas rang in his mind like bad coins. Nathan had appreciated Ian Patrick's quasi-friendship and wouldn't have jeopardized it with a foolish lie. Treachery was also an improbability.

Nathan was kept from the other passengers and not allowed even to read newspapers or listen to the radio. What he knew of present tragic conditions was from Patrick's lips. The first mate of the *Vengeance* told himself Nathan was merely drunk—and tried to believe that, too.

But to his ragged nerves, the throbbing of the stern rockets was like a frightened pulse in the heart of the ship itself.

With the charts before him, Patrick kept his course on the dim guiding star out to the left of Planetoid 27. It was the sleeping period for the passengers and most of the crew, and silence walked the corridors. Patrick watched the asteroid swell like a great rock preparing to burst. The sun glistened on white-hot peaks, and shadows filled black valleys where sub-zero tempera-

tures obtained. Patrick thought of a platter-shaped pirate craft hiding in one of those valleys . . .

Almost abreast of the tiny world, the *Oracle* scarcely rocked to its slight gravitational pull. Patrick's sweaty palm drew the accelerator back to full. The asteroid flashed by them!

Planetoid 27 was safely behind, an empty threat exploded. Patrick laughed softly and thought of Jared Nathan nursing a bottle in his room while he cooked up the whole fantastic story.

"Damned old coot!" he muttered. "Had me sweating ice water!"

He threw a relieved glance back at the retreating rock. In the next moment Ian Patrick was on his feet. His face was the color of clay.

"The *Vengeance*!" he gasped. "Nathan wasn't lying. *Vickers has got us!*"

He stared in fascinated horror as the flagship curved up from below like a black discus spun into the wind. Belching jets streamed pale fire. Guns were thrusting out between the rocket tubes in the disk's rim, and while Patrick sat frozen, one of them flashed.

From somewhere he drew the strength to pivot and stah at the alarm buttons. Bells began to shrill all over the ship. Their clamor was drowned as the *Oracle* gave a sickening lurch. A resounding clangggg! dinned against Patrick's ears.

He grabbed at the edge of the control board and clung to it while the *Oracle* went into a dizzy pinwheel. One of the stern tubes had been hit! Patrick fumbled for the controls, fought to right the ship. By the time he got it back on an even keel, it was all over for the good ship *Oracle*.

The shadow of a black wing seemed to settle over it. Magnetic power brought it up against the flat bottom of the *Vengeance* with a smash. Seconds later, Patrick heard crisp tappings against the outer hull of the craft. Small

shapes darted by the ports. Vickers' Plutonian hordes were scuttling them.

Patrick tore the short rifle from the wall and sprang through the door. From his elevated position on the foredeck, he could see the terrible confusion of the main deck. The passenger list consisted of two hundred men, but they were scurrying around yelling like ten times that many women. Junior officers were shouting for order. The senior officers, Captain Baldwin at their head, were rushing up the ladder to the bridge.

Sparks came tearing down the hall from the radio room, with his haid forehead and pate wrinkled clear down to his rear collar button.

"Ian!" he shouted. "My God—what's happened?"

"Vickers!" That one word was all Patrick had time for, but it was enough. Sparks' jaw sagged and he had to grab at the railing as he came up beside him.

Patrick hurried down the stairs to meet the crew.

"Get back!" he shouted. "Nothing we can do up here. They've wrecked the controls. Pass out the rifles and we'll try to stand 'em off at the airlocks. It—it's the *Vengeance*!"

BALDWIN'S red face went gray. "The *Vengeance*!" He stood there stunned.

Don Haverill, second mate, moved toward Patrick, fury in his flat, beefy features.

"Where the hell have you been?" he snarled. "Fine kind of a warning to give us—after it's too late!"

His words shook the skipper out of his stupor.

"Cut that!" he barked. "You talk like an old woman. They won't get inside while there's a crew member alive! Get to the fore-lock and hold them, Haverill, Morris"—he indicated another



officer—"take five men to the stern-lock. The rest of you come with Patrick and me."

They scrambled down the companionway. Halfway to the bottom, they knew they were too late. The stern-lock burst open with a crash and a dozen stubby Plutonians poured through. Their terrible guns began to flash as they scattered through the crowd. Screams of dying men were added to the other unnerving sounds. Officers and passengers writhed down like ants under an acetylene flame.

Seconds later, the fore-lock fell inside. More Plutonians crowded into the main deck. Their rifles were never still as they cut a bloody path through the mob. Karl Vickers was among these killers. He towered two feet above his ruthless henchmen, his steel-gray hair bristly under the glass helmet he wore.

When the officers were discovered, Vickers gave an order that caused all the Plutonians to charge them. In the fight that ensued, Ian Patrick and the others played small part. With one rifle among them, they stood frozen there on the steps, their eyes filled with the sight of such butchery as befitted an abattoir, their nostrils cringing from the stench of burning flesh, their ears full of the horrible sounds of mass murder.

Karl Vickers, coming last, had to climb over the bodies of the dead. The floor was slippery with blood. Vickers' gray-blue uniform was splashed with scarlet.

At the last moment, Patrick remembered the gun he held. With a choked oath, he snapped it to his shoulder. One of the attackers flamed a shot at him before he could trigger. The end of the gun melted like thick syrup; Patrick dropped the red-hot weapon with a cry.

There was something unworldly

about the scene. One minute before, the ship had been peacefully cruising the heavens. Now there were upwards of a hundred bodies spilling their blood on the floor, and Karl Vickers was standing there opening his face plate to speak to them. Ian Patrick was remembering Nathan's words:

"You're dooming this ship to death . . ."

He heard Vickers' harsh tones. "Where are the guns!" the hard-eyed warlord demanded.

Captain Baldwin showed amazing calmness.

"There are no guns, you madman!" he spat. "This is a passenger ship—not a munitions carrier!"

Vickers' brutal lips curled. Patrick, fighting for control, stared into the man's black eyes. It was like looking down into dark pools that plumbed the depths of hell. Whatever the ex-dictator had once been, he was no better than a mad butcher now.

"Captain, you lie." Vickers said that quietly, a cold smile flicking briefly across his lips. "Where are your holds?"

Baldwin was stiffly silent. Then, pointing aft, he growled:

"Down that companionway. But you won't find any guns."

Vickers turned to follow his pointing finger. In the next moment the skipper sprang.

A WARNING leaped to Ian Patrick's lips, but the swiftness of the elderly captain's jump cut it off. This was suicide, Patrick knew. Nevertheless, he did the best he could: launched himself in a dive at the Plutonians!

Captain and mate were alone in their attack. Don Haverill and the others crouched on the steps, paralyzed. Sparks was swearing under his breath and fighting to get by Haverill.

Vickers moved like a cat, twisting his

big body to the side and bringing his gun into action. The full impact of the charge detonated on the top of the skipper's head. Patrick felt the sizzling, crushing heat of it. His eyes streamed scalding tears. He saw Baldwin crumple and strike the floor among the attackers, a limp, scorched bundle of blue rags and gold braid.

The renegade was still moving in that same blur of speed. There was not time to bring the gun to bear on Patrick before Vickers' flying body crashed into him. The best he could do was to smash the weapon down on the back of Patrick's head, and he did that with gusto.

The young space pilot knew one blinding instant of pain. Nebulas whirled before his eyes, shooting stars exploded; then darkness came, and the world folded softly about him. . . .

From unconsciousness he climbed to a nauseous semi-coma. And out of coma he came, sputtering and coughing, into stark consciousness again. Someone took a brandy bottle from his lips as he sat up. It was old Jared Nathan. Nathan corked the bottle, face sober, eyes hard. They were huddled in a corner of the room, the twenty-five who were left. A few Plutonians stood guard over them while the rest carried guns from the hold. Sparks sat on the floor, head held in his hands.

"I'm not one to kick a man when he's down," Nathan muttered, "hut—I think I mentioned something like this might happen!"

Unreasoning anger shot through Patrick's brain. He shoved the old man away.

"Damn you!" he choked. "We've got you to thank for this! Somebody tipped Vickers off that we were carrying guns. Who would do it—hut you!"

Don Haverill faced the space pilot hotly.

"And who gave him the chance to do

it—but you, Patrick! I've seen you sneak newspapers into his room time and again. Maybe you gave him a radio, too—that he could convert into a transmitter to get in touch with Vickers!"

Patrick lurched to his feet and his fist drew back. A big, beefy man stopped him by thrusting a fat paw in his chest. He was Charles Lionel, wealthy head of Mikron Laboratories, America's greatest radio plant.

"Take it easy, Patrick," he snapped. "Don't start trouble when we've got enough of our own. Haverill's words make sense. We'll look into your part in this when we get home—if ever." His bulldog jowls set stubbornly.

Most of the survivors were sitting, standing or lying with blank faces and shocked eyes, taking no interest in what happened. A few were wounded, the rest past caring what went on. One of the few who had witnessed the hy-play spoke now. His voice had a low, tense note.

"Let's forget our grudges and try to think!" he advised. His gray eyes flashed about the group. When he spoke, his thin lips barely moved.

"Whether we all die or not, the primary fact is that Karl Vickers' possession of the Kuhlons means doom for Earth and Mars. Gentlemen—we've got to stop him from leaving with them!"

Patrick's gaze snapped to him.

"Now somebody's talking sense! But how are a handful of terriers like us going to whip that pack of wolves?"

The quiet, gray-eyed man squinted. Patrick knew him for Page Theron, another big industrialist who had been bound for the conference on Mars. Theron shook his head slowly.

"I don't know," he said frankly. "But if we could just get Vickers himself, it would stop the Plutonian attack for good. They aren't leaders; just sav-

ages. If we only had a gun—"

Sparks glanced up quickly. "Wait a minute! The radio was still working when I left. We'll flash word to the fleets the minute Vickers leaves. They'll intercept him before he can get into his hideout, wherever it is."

LIONEL nodded eagerly. "You've said something, Mister! No use trying to stop him ourselves. But a few dozen cruisers will be more than a match for him."

"And if he slips through them as he slipped through the blockade?" Page Theron spread his fingers eloquently. "No; I say we rush him when he gets close enough!"

"Sounds like a prescription for suicide to me," observed Sparks.

Theron snapped his shrewd gray eyes upon the radio man.

"Suicide for us—but salvation for Earth, Mars and Venus!"

Lionel pursed his lips, and Patrick frowned at thought of such a risk.

Suddenly Sparks came to his feet, pointing upward.

"Caesar's ghost!" he cried. "Look!"

Karl Vickers had strode out on the balcony with an armful of vacuum tubes. He dropped them over the railing and they shivered into fragments on the floor. A couple of Plutonians followed him with armfuls of other vital radio equipment.

Page Theron smiled ironically. "Apparently we must follow my plan after all. I suggest you be ready to leap when I give the word!"

### CHAPTER III

#### Master of the Damned

THE gutting of the *Oracle* was over in another fifteen minutes. For the little group on the main deck, it was like

watching the approach of the executioner when Karl Vickers strode toward them again.

The unloading of the Kuhlons guns had been completed, and as a final move the warlord had caused the boxes of food which the ship carried to be piled in the middle of the floor.

"You may think me hard," Vickers smiled, "but I can't afford to take the chances a softer man would. I'm not particular whether you die or not. All I care is that the fate of the Kuhlons doesn't leak out too soon. To that end, I have destroyed your radio equipment and my men are now wrecking your rocket tubes. As a matter of principle, I shall also destroy the food. Purely principle," he sneered.

He turned swiftly, his gun playing a steady stream of projectiles upon the pile of food. In something under ten seconds, there was nothing left of the boxes of provisions but ashes and smoke.

"A typical move, brother!" It was Jared Nathan who had spoken, and the voice brought Karl Vickers around with sagging jaw. He stared at the traitor who had set him loose on the world fifteen years before. And suddenly his hearty laughter boomed, as recognition came to him.

"Jared! You—on this ship!" He stuffed his gun in its holster, but the short, thick-bodied Plutonian guard moved in closer. Ian Patrick heard Theron catch a quick breath beside him.

Vickers stuck out a hand to Nathan. "Fifteen years! You've changed, Jared. For the worse, I'm afraid. All these years I've been hoping to run across you and square that old debt. Thank your stars my men didn't kill you when we came in! You'd have been cheated out of the privilege of working with me. You're coming with us, brother!"

Patrick stared from Vickers to Nathan. "Brother," they had called each other! Did that explain Nathan's treachery?

Jared Nathan met Vickers' glance, ignoring the proffered band.

"You don't owe me anything, Karl. I'm the debtor now. If I had a gun in my hand, I could write that debt off the books with a great deal of pleasure."

Fury stormed into the other's face.

"Is that supposed to be a joke?" he snarled.

"Not to me," Nathan snapped. "You promised to leave the solar system and never come back, if I gave you your freedom. As your brother, I was foolish enough to listen. I sacrificed my own freedom, and the respect of every soul in the world, to save you from death. To thank me, you let me down like this!"

Vickers' heavy jaw worked. Abruptly, his big fist came up from his side. The sharp knuckles smashed into Jared Nathan's mouth, sending him back against the wall. Blood trickled from his split lips.

"You always were a fool, Nathan!" the renegade harked. "Well, stay here and starve like the damned fool you are!"

Turning to his men, he cracked out an order. In the next instant he had fallen back and the guards were between the handful of Earthlings and himself.

Theron groaned. "Too late!" he muttered. "If we'd jumped him then—"

"We'd have been killed anyway," was Sparks' dry response.

Ian Patrick felt as a man in quicksand must feel—utterly helpless. Karl Vickers and his crew were moving toward the air-locks, and with every step they took, the helpless peoples of Earth and Mars were brought that much nearer to slavery. At the last moment,

when the rest of his men had gone, Vickers turned back. Something like regret hrought a scowl between his eyes.

"Have I been hasty, Jared?" he called back. "After all, I owe you my life. It's not too late to change your mind. Luxury and endless pleasures with us—or starvation here. Which is it going to be?"

"Starvation, and to hell with you!" Nathan gave back. "All these years I've been thinking I was as rotten as they come, but now I see there's someone a few stages lower. I wouldn't be polluting myself by going with you!"

Vickers' harsh laugh was cut off by his shutting the face-plate to his helmet. He stepped back into the air-lock and the door slammed. The next moment, the sigh of escaping air told of his departure.

FOR a few minutes after the *Vengeance's* departure, carrying the renegades on their way, the little crew in the murder ship wandered dumbly about the floor. Lionel, Theron and the other business men went in search of friends who might still be alive. But a check-up showed that there were no wounded—only dead. The disintegrator guns possessed a progressive action; the slightest wound developed swiftly into a burning, spreading sore that soon covered the whole body and brought death.

Ian Patrick felt responsibility bearing down on him like a crushing weight. Baldwin's death automatically elevated him to the position of captain. But what cheer could he offer these twenty-five men who would soon be looking to him for a way out? Sparks, standing beside him, sensed what was going on in his mind, and was glumly silent.

It was possible that the rockets could be repaired, Patrick supposed. But without food, the men would soon be sick, ready to fight at the slightest

cause, as the first pangs of starvation gripped their shrinking bellies. Rockets or radio: these were their two slim chances.

More to keep the men occupied than for any other reason, Patrick decided to put them to work. At his call, they came listlessly to the stairs, where he stood on the third step. Haverill stared at him hostilely; Lionel had a sour glance for him as well. Patrick sensed that his friendship with Jared Nathan, whom they pointedly spurned, had caused ill feeling already.

"There's a job for every man of us," Patrick told them, "and we might as well be doing it. Sparks, how about the radio? Think you can do anything with it?"

Sparks frowned thoughtfully, cocking his head on the side.

"I won't say 'yes,' and I won't say 'no,'" he pondered. "I've got a few spare parts stuck away, and it's just possible—"

Patrick acted as though he hadn't seen Sparks' furtive wink. The pudgy radio man caught on quickly.

"Good!" he nodded. "Get to work on it. Horace—" He turned to the big Negro cook, who stood mournfully at the foot of the stairs. "If this were a sailing vessel, your job might be easier. We could have boiled rigging, at least. Think you can find anything at all—flour, rice?"

Horace nodded. "I got a little bit o' stuff stashed away, Mistub Patrick. 'Most a month's 'mergency rations below deck that they don' find!"

"Thank God for that!" Ian Patrick murmured gratefully. "See what you can concoct. Haverill, take a dozen men and look over the remains of the rockets. You, Lionel, organize a clean-up crew to get rid of the bodies. The disposal chute is the quickest and safest way of getting them out of the ship.

Keep working, all of you, until you hear the dinner bell."

A few of the men moved off. But Haverill and Lionel did not stir. Patrick snapped:

"Did you hear me? I told you to get to work!"

Don Haverill stuck his thumbs under his belt.

"Some of us don't like to take orders from a friend of Jared Nathan," he drawled. "Nathan's as much to blame for this as Karl Vickers."

Patrick shifted his glance to the portly tycoon.

"How about you, Lionel?"

Charles Lionel met his glare. "That goes for me too."

Patrick came down the steps slowly, but when he snapped into action, he was chain lightning. Haverill ducked and threw up his hands. The new captain's fist went through his guard like a bullet. Haverill's jaw resounded to the flat smash of the blow. He tried to turn aside to escape further punishment, but Patrick had him by the shirt front. He chopped two vicious punches into his face, followed with a short jab to the belly.

When the mate doubled over, Patrick pulled him up with a wicked uppercut to the point of the chin. Haverill went over backward and landed on his shoulder blades. Patrick pivoted.

Charles Lionel made feeble, pawing efforts to ward off the lighter, more muscular man. Patrick jabbed at his fleshy features until they were red and swollen. A final blow to the stomach caused Lionel to sit down with a windy grunt.

"Anybody else want to be captain?" Patrick shot at the group.

**H**EADS shook. Someone grunted: "At your service, Captain. I've got a glass jaw myself!"

"We'll get along fine then," Patrick

grinned. "Just remember there'll be more for the next mutineer. It may help you keep on the job!"

Patrick went above to get the final verdict on the transmitter. He met Sparks at the radio room door. Gloom shrouded the radio man's face. By way of explanation, he jerked a thumb at the interior.

Patrick looked in. His jaw hardened; then he slapped Sparks on the back.

"As scrap metal, it might bring a few dollars," he chuckled. "But as a transmitter—well, we'll find another job for you, Sparks. Apparently you haven't got a radio any more."

Side by side, they went down the hall. Down on the main deck, they could see Lionel husily supervising the ambulance corps, his glance fearfully straying upward from time to time. Clanking sounds on the shell of the craft told of First Mate Haverill's change of heart.

They had hardly reached the bridge to check on possible damage there, when Jared Nathan rushed in, awkward and breathless in a bulky space suit. In his agitation he made a great job of opening the face-plate. Finally the glass door was flung back and his words came streaming out.

"Captain! he panted. "Haverill says if we've got acetylene torches, we can have the rocket tubes in working order inside of three days! Will you come up and check on it?"

Patrick was stunned. Sparks recovered his voice first.

"Holy Jupiter! If that big blow-hard is only right for once!"

Ian Patrick whirled to the locker and dragged out space suits and helmets. He and Sparks climbed into them, while Nathan anxiously stood on one foot and then the other. Watching him out of the corner of his eye, Patrick could not believe his excitement was feigned. Whatever his past, Jared Nathan

seemed to have thrown his lot wholeheartedly in with Vickers' enemies now.

In forty-five seconds, the three of them were piling out the air-lock and tramping across the silvery surface of the space craft. At the fish-tail stern, they found Haverill and several others working with crowbars and sledges on the starboard rocket tube.

Haverill kept his battered features turned away from Patrick's view, but his voice crackled through the ear-phones.

"They bungled the job for sure! Look at this—they cut a wedge out of the tube about six feet back, so all the power would go out the side when it was blasted. They melted the barrel of the funnel, and tore off the landing fins. But we can patch the things up if we've got torches and enough acetylene!"

Patrick took it all in with narrowed eyes. He'd served his apprenticeship in space-craft factories, and still felt more at home driving rivets than punching control buttons.

"I think we can do it," he decided at last. "There are a dozen torches in the tool closet, and we'll use rocket fuel if we run out of acetylene."

He straightened slowly, looking off into the void that had swallowed Vickers.

"They all make one error. Missing our emergency food and botching the tubes was Vickers' mistake. The first battle in the war to annihilate him will be fought right here on this ship!"

## CHAPTER IV

### Rain—in Space!

NIGHT and day, torches drove their incandescent tongues into the tough hide of the *Oracle*, cutting away ragged edges, welding into place new pieces salvaged from floor and cabin walls. Ian

Patrick headed the crew working on the central stern rocket. At twelve o'clock, two days after the tragedy, he saw the last plate fitted in, the final rivet huffed smooth.

Excitement spread through the ship. Patrick kindled that eagerness to white heat by announcing that they would be on their way within the hour—on one rocket!

His plan was simple—and dangerous. Limp along on that one tube and work on the others as they went! It might mean fatal accidents to workmen clinging to the outside of the shell, but the men were ready for anything—anything that would get them home.

While the crew went to work on the starboard stern rocket, Patrick called a conference in the chart room. He included Charles Lionel and Page Theron in the five-man roll call. As navigators, they were useless; but the other men seemed to look to them for advice, and it was Patrick's idea to fill them with enthusiasm and thus keep the coöperation of the others. He was under no illusion that the job was over.

Haverill had taken the reckonings. They showed that the *Oracle's* drift had carried her to a point about a day closer to Ganymede than Mars. There was a navigation station on Ganymede, if Vickers hadn't gutted it; but doubt as to whether or not he had done so raised a question. Patrick put it up to them: Should they risk trying Ganymede, or head straight for Mars despite the loss of a precious day?

"I say Mars," Sparks suggested. "If we find Ganymede deserted, it'll be too late to do anything at all."

Lionel scrubbed at his unshaven red jowls.

"On the other hand, that extra day may defeat us in itself!"

The discussion was on, with Lionel and Haverill holding out for Ganymede,

and Sparks and Patrick for Mars, and Theron waiting to be convinced. In the middle of the argument there was the sound of a lock rasping, and Jared Nathan stood in the doorway.

"Er—gentlemen!" he interrupted. "You aren't really intending to go to either of those stations, are you?"

"We didn't ask for your advice," Don Haverill snapped.

Nathan's eyes flashed sparks, but he held his temper down.

"If I may make a suggestion," he went on coolly, "it will be too late to stop Vickers whichever way we go. The only way to stop him is to follow him!"

"Follow him!" Charles Lionel began to laugh. "As if we haven't had enough of him already!"

Patrick jerked an impatient thumb at the intruder.

"You're out of order, Nathan. Beat it."

They turned their backs on him and were on the point of resuming the discussion when Jared Nathan cleared his throat.

"Er—one other thing. Among some odds and ends in the captain's state-room, I found this. Now, don't you think you'd better do as I say?"

As one man, they whirled to face him. Nathan had a big pistol gripped in his hand and he was smiling coldly.

WITH a choked cry, Ian Patrick started for him. Nathan pivoted the weapon.

"Don't try it, Captain!" he warned. "I'm not afraid to use this if it comes to that. If I have to shoot every man on board, I'm going to make you see reason!"

There was silence; then oaths, shouts, threats. When the atmosphere cleared a little, Jared Nathan gestured at the door.

"I'll ask you gentlemen to leave, all

except Mr. Patrick. Don't waste your time looking for guns; this is the only one on board."

"But—good Lord, man!" Lionel burbled. "What do you intend to do?"

"Stop Vickers!" Nathan snapped the words. "It means the fall of our civilization if we don't. Once he gets the Kublons installed on a few of his ships, the show's over. I'll stop him if it costs every life on this ship!"

He took no more argument from them. From a weak, vacillating sot, he had overnight become a determined fanatic. At gun point, he forced the four of them out of the cabin.

"Now, then!" He sat down at the desk, laid the gun beside him, grabbed pencil and paper. "I may need you to help me with this course, Mr. Patrick. Been a long time since I plotted one—"

Patrick scowled. "You aren't serious about following the *Vengeance*?"

"Absolutely. For you and your friends, I am sorry. But it is all humanity against our twenty-five unimportant lives. This is the only way!"

Patrick tossed his hands. "But if there were the slightest chance of success! You know yourself that there isn't. Look at it sanely, man. We don't know where he's hiding, in the first place. In the second, if we did find him, he'd have five or six ships to our one. Besides, this is an unarmed passenger ship and his are fighters."

NATHAN tapped the shiny table top with his pencil.

"I'll take up your points in order. First, I think I can find him without trouble. Second, one good pilot can outmaneuver a dozen—and I flatter myself that I'm a good one. Third, I intend to install a gun immediately."

"Vickers took them all," countered Patrick.

"We've got fore-rockets, haven't

we?" Nathan spoke crisply, exhibiting impatience with Patrick's stubbornness. "I'm going to convert one of our forward tubes into a cannon. Crude, perhaps; but I fancy a half ton of scrap iron hitting the *Vengeance* amidships will stop her as effectively as a modern ray gun. Do I answer your questions?"

"No. Granted that you can construct some sort of a gun. But how are we going to find that devil by rushing around in space like maniacs?"

"I have a theory about that hideout of his." Jared Nathan cocked an eye out the port. "Do you remember the *Luna*, that radioed for help just before she crashed into a strange asteroid somewhere near Jupiter? Navigators plotted the *Luna's* location, and there was no asteroid within a million miles of that spot. We're going to find the asteroid into which the *Luna* crashed, and when we find it—we'll find Karl Vickers."

"But you just said there was no such body!" Patrick protested.

"You're jumping to conclusions. I merely said none had been found. Why not? Because the asteroid is invisible! Don't smile—" Nathan pointed the pencil squarely at Patrick's nose.

"I've suspected the existence of invisible stars and planets for years," he emphasized. "The erratic behavior of certain stars can only be explained by the fact that they have invisible companions—binaries, which throw them off their normal courses. Light rays have been bent in the laboratory. Why not in space?"

"A gaseous envelope around an asteroid might bend the light rays so that the asteroid would be completely invisible! That, Mr. Patrick, is what I expect to find is the case here. We're going to seek out Vickers, and when we find him—we'll destroy him for good!"

Ian Patrick stared at him, shoving



back his cap to scratch his head. Then, suddenly, he was sticking out his hand to Nathan, a sheepish grin on his face.

"I'll be damned if you haven't got it figured out from A to Z!" he chuckled. "You may have released that brother of yours once, but I'll take my oath on it that you're out for blood now. I'm with you, Nathan!"

Jared Nathan took his hand. He tried to say something, but his voice wouldn't come. Finally he turned away, moisture brimming in his eyes.

"I'll meet you on the bridge in five minutes, Captain. Time's wasting!"

THE *Oracle* limped away on schedule. Work proceeded steadily while they churned through the sky toward Jupiter. It was ten hours later that the second stern rocket was brought into action. Then Nathan put them to work on the forward rockets and his improvised cannon.

Ian Patrick only partly succeeded in convincing the others of the old man's sincerity. The foremost thing in their minds was that they were rushing toward almost certain doom. But they worked, under constant threat of Nathan's gun and Sparks' and Patrick's fists.

Nathan spoke once of his relationship with Karl Vickers, his brother. Until they were ten years old, they had been brought up together in Europe. Then the father and mother separated, the mother taking Nathan with her to America, where they became citizens. From that time on the two brothers' paths followed widely diverging trails.

Jared became a high air fleet official, while Karl gained fame as a radical. Since their mother had taken up her maiden name again—Nathan—their kinship was never disclosed. It had been her plea, Jared Nathan said, that caused him to release his brother

against his own good judgment after the two-year war. And even then, it was only Karl Vickers' promise to find a new home on some far-off world.

Patrick, watching the emotion in Nathan's face as he spoke, was inclined to believe him, even if he could not condone his action.

Three days passed. The cannon was completed and a number of crude projectiles fashioned. Jared Nathan kept the men so busy, they had no time to grumble and organize resistance. Night period and day period they sweated over their tasks, polishing chromium when there was nothing else to do. The exhausted men limited their speech to monosyllabic grunts, too utterly done in to talk.

Bearded, hollow-cheeked, stumbling with fatigue, they kept going like automats. But such a man-killing course could not go on long. The men were near the breaking point when Nathan announced, the fourth day out, that they could look for the asteroid any time now!

Terror mingled with hope as they rushed to the ports and stared ahead. A sort of savage eagerness to meet Karl Vickers again broke out. They already considered themselves as good as dead. If they could take the dictator with them, so much the better! But the void was empty in all directions.

Hours went by, and suspense dwindled. In the gun room, Sparks and his crew nodded half asleep on their racks of crude shells. A dull ache throbbed in Patrick's eyes as he continued to search the sky. In all the *Oracle*, only Nathan continued to hope.

Another hour, and even Nathan was losing his enthusiasm. His voice came dully from where he hunched over his charts.

"Anything ahead—even a—a speck of cloud vapor?" he asked wearily.

Patrick lifted his head out of a doze. The glass in front of him was streaky, and for a moment he could not understand why the vision was so poor. Then he realized that great drops of rain had begun to spatter against the windshield.

"Hard to tell," he muttered tonelessly. "Raining now. Can't see much!"

"*Raining!*" Jared Nathan shouted as he leaped from his chair. "Good Lord, man, have you lost your mind? Don't you know what that means? We're in some asteroid's atmosphere!"

## CHAPTER V

### The Final Blow

PATRICK heaved himself erect. Jared Nathan pounced on him and forced him out of the pilot's chair. He gave both forward rockets full blast and stared anxiously ahead.

Rain indeed! Buckets of it, rivers of it, driving in sheets against the glass, pattering like a thousand tiny bullets. Best of all, betokening the invisible planetoid ahead of them!

The *Oracle* groaned in every bulkhead. Her mad forward rush was broken. Down below, they could hear dishes crashing and men yelling as they were pitched to the floor. Nathan stabbed at the alarm buttons. His skinny body stiffened and he pointed ahead.

"There she is!" he yelled. "Clouds—mountains—"

Out of nothingness filtered a dark precipitate. A precipitate that rapidly resolved itself into mountains and valleys. The planet was small; they could see the horizon curving down out of sight on all sides. Nathan had to keep every rocket helching to prevent them from crashing. The *Oracle* almost brushed a peak as it tilted upward.

Nathan leveled it off over a broad, rain-soaked valley. His voice carried

a ring of steel as he relaxed from the controls.

"Nothing to do now but find him. That won't be hard on a planet of this size. He'll be out after us as soon as he hears our rockets."

A queer huskiness lay over Patrick's words.

"He's already found us, Nathan. Look below—in that little pocket in the hills. Six ships on a landing field!"

Nathan's bright eyes dropped to the floor port. Then he saw them. An array of disk-like ships arranged in a circle, like plates on a dinner table. Men, looking like ants, scurried around them. Some of them stood with feet wide-spread, staring upward.

Nathan snapped on the general alarm, drew the microphone to him.

"Places!" he yelled. "Snap on safety belts. You in the gun room, fire at my signal."

His thin hand drew at the accelerator, tilted the *Oracle* over in a vertical dive.

Sheer, down-rushing speed snapped Ian Patrick against the back of his seat. There was no need for safety belts yet. Raw fuel gushed into blazing rockets and sent them blasting downward at unbelievable speed. One second the landing field was a faraway penny against the green of wild hills; the next, a harrel-head; and now it was a flat circle of terrain on which space-suited figures rushed into their pursuit ships for a lightning take-off.

Patrick knew that this first unheralded attack carried all their hopes. Against those six ships, armed with the deadly Kuhlön guns, they would be powerless. Their first shot must destroy the *Vengeance*, or the race through space had indeed been a madman's dream.

Down . . . down . . . down! Every second, Patrick expected the command

to fire. When it seemed that they could never come out of the dive, Jared Nathan screeched the order to Sparks.

Simultaneously, Nathan cut the stern rockets and ignited the forward tubes with a deafening roar of titanic power. In that ear-crushing volley of sound, the higher crack of the cannon was almost lost. Patrick stared downward, watching for the effect of the shot.

A split second later, one of the ships leaped and fell back with its turret torn away. But it was not the *Vengeance*. The *Oracle* had ventured—and lost.

Ian Patrick could not know the terrible bitterness that filled Nathan's heart. All he knew was that the *Oracle* was out of its dive and zooming back into the sky. His nose was bleeding from the terrible pressure; every bone felt as though it must crack.

Then, through the squeal of straining braces Patrick heard Nathan shout into the microphone:

"Reload!"

Bitterly, he raised his head and stared at the old fighters. Nathan hadn't given up yet; wouldn't give up, he knew, until the *Oracle* was a mass of molten girders.

THE *Vengeance* and her four sisters were after them now. Ruby-colored rays crisscrossed above and below them. Constant explosions tossed the fleeing craft like a feather in a wind. The power of the Kuhlons was unbelievable. Where the scorching rays whipped the air, the very atmosphere cracked wide open.

Nathan, realizing Vickers would have their range in another moment, put the liner into a spiraling climb. The platter-like ships soared after them. In the relatively heavy atmosphere, they had breath-taking climbing and maneuvering power. Nathan saw that he must try another plan, so badly were they

outclassed. While his fingers darted over the controls, the *Oracle* began a series of contortions that had its passengers dizzy and sick in a few seconds.

But the effort was futile. The Plutonians kept right behind, constantly closing the gap. Jared Nathan groaned and started climbing again. Kuhlons rays darted about them incessantly, sometimes almost touching the craft.

It was Patrick who first noticed the difference in the force of the rays.

"Nathan!" His voice bore an overtone of wonder. "The rays don't have the power up here that they had below. You don't suppose they're running out of fuel for the Kuhlons guns?"

"They don't use fuel," Nathan stared blankly at him, then swung his glance to the port as a ray flashed within ten feet of the ship. All of a sudden the sharp creases around the old man's mouth relaxed. He began to laugh. Softly, then wildly, triumphantly.

"Patrick!" he gasped. "Do you know the full name of the Kuhlons gun?"

"Kuhlons disrupter auxiliary, I think," Ian Patrick muttered.

"Auxiliary — there's your answer right there! They don't take the place of ordinary weapons, merely supplement them. The Kuhlons is deadly in a planet's atmosphere, but it's not worth a damn in space! Works through the heavier molecules, I suppose.\* Now, if

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\* In all probability, the Kuhlons gun is helpless in a vacuum—space—and can operate only when the force of its disintegrating discharge is carried through the atmospheric belt surrounding a planetoid or an asteroid. In other words, some property of atmosphere, or perhaps a combination of them—oxygen, hydrogen, nitrogen, argon, among other constituents—provides the conductivity necessary for the metal-shattering ray to reach its objective. To prove this point, it would be an interesting experiment were the miniature lethal rays already invented, and which are said to be capable of destroying certain forms of animal life, such as a goat or a dog, to be focused on their victim through a vacuum.—Ed.

we can just lure them out a few hundred miles before they know what's happening! Then we can pick them off at our leisure!"

Flashed over the ship, that news almost caused a riot. From frightened lambs, the men became a pack of hungry wolves. In the gun room, Sparks waited impatiently for the moment when his gun would get a chance to sink metal fangs into the Plutonian ships. The *Oracle* streaked out into space, eating up several hundred miles.

With the *Vengeance* uncomfortably close, Nathan chose to act. He caused the rocket to sputter and miss, as if they were running low on fluid. The pursuers leaped after them like mad dogs. Jared Nathan gave them three seconds to close the gap. Then he skidded the *Oracle* around and faced them head-on!

"Fire!" He roared the command into the microphone.

The pursuing ships scrambled wildly out of the way. Pink tongues of flame streamed incessantly from their guns, but the rays fell on the *Oracle* as harmlessly as spotlight beams. The flat side of a Plutonian disk showed to the Earthmen for an instant, and before the craft could dart out of the way, a hullet had crashed through the shell and brought death to the crew.

The disks were perfect targets for the *Oracle* as she pivoted and raced after them. Nathan blasted four more shots into their midst and brought down another. Panic claimed the attackers. They were high-tailing it for home before another minute passed, their erstwhile victim right after them!

Nathan had to concentrate on the ship behind the *Vengeance*, for the flagship was out in the lead. He kept firing until finally a shot crashed through the craft and put it out of the fight.

At full rocket, the *Vengeance* and the

*Oracle* seemed to have about the same power. Faster and faster, nearing their ultimate speed, they roared back toward the invisible planet. And now another element entered the fight.

Nathan had used six shells on the dodging renegade ship and none had found its mark. He had his sights lined for a seventh shot when the radio crackled with Sparks' excited voice.

"My God, Nathan—we've used our last shell!"

STRENGTH drained from Jared Nathan as water escapes through a dynamited dam. He slumped against the back of the chair. His haggard eyes found Ian Patrick's.

"Now what?" he croaked.

Patrick shoved stiff fingers through his hair.

"We could make more shells—"

"But not in time. Another three minutes will see us back in the atmosphere. Patrick, if Vickers makes it, we've lost. He'll be out with the Kuhlons and finish us!"

Nathan's eyes went desperately about the cabin—and stopped on a portable acetylene outfit standing in the corner, which had been used in repair work on the bridge. He sat straight up.

"There's the gun that's going to win for us!" he pointed.

"An acetylene torch? I don't get it," Patrick frowned.

"Listen! If we don't have any shells, we've at least got one more projectile. I mean me—in a space suit! Cut the cannon power down to one-tenth, and I could be launched and land safely on the *Vengeance*. Armed with that torch, I'll cut a hole in the ship big enough to drive a wagon through!"

Ian Patrick felt his heart begin to hammer with new hope.

"You know it means death for you!" he asked. "The explosion when the air

inside rushes out will destroy everything around the ship."

Jared Nathan was already on his feet and pushing Patrick into the pilot's chair.

"Do you think I care about that?" he rasped. "Maybe I prefer it that way. Call the gun room and tell them to have a small charge of fuel ready."

Ian Patrick gripped the old man's hand as he started to waddle out in the cumbersome suit.

"You're all right, Mister!" he breathed. "This makes you about even with society, I'd say!"

Nathan smiled, the smile of a tired little old man.

"Tell that to them—back on Earth—will you? It means a lot to hear that—after all these years."

Then he was gone, and Patrick settled down to the grim business of keeping on the tail of the *Vengeance*. He could discern, faintly, a gray blotch on the horizon that was the asteroid. After what seemed minutes, Sparks' voice whispered through the audio.

"Ready!"

Patrick centered the cross sights.

"Fire!" he clipped.

The cannon made a dull *pop!* A small object darted from the nose of the *Oracle*. Jared Nathan, halfway across the space between the two ships, turned and waved his arm at the others. Patrick wondered how many of them had lumps in their throats at that moment. . .

Seconds later Nathan was abreast of the enemy, a little to port. They saw him turn on the acetylene torch and use its hissing flame to force himself near the *Vengeance*. He managed to get one magnetic foot-plate on the sleek, black hull, and after that he was ready to work.

Feverishly, he sprang to the job. He burned a large circle on the metal with

his blazing torch. Patrick glanced at his watch. Thirty seconds left out of the three minutes Nathan had given them. Thirty seconds before they would be back in the denser atmosphere at Vickers' mercy—

Nathan crawled about like an ant, swinging his torch, fighting against time, anxiously glancing ahead every few moments. Patrick could almost hear him swearing and praying in the same breath.

Fifteen seconds, now; ten—

The circular piece of metal, worn thin by the bite of the acetylene torch, burst loose like a manhole blown high by exploding sewer gas. The sharp edge of it sliced through Nathan's space-suit armor and let the precious air out. He writhed for an instant, then his body exploded like a deep-sea fish dragged to the surface.

The *Vengeance* began spewing men and equipment out that gaping hole, gutting herself of everything that was not bolted down. Pent-up pressure tore the hole wider, ripped the craft from stem to stern. A hundred little pink balloons vomited from the gash, to explode within seconds of reaching the atmosphere. Once those balloons had been men; now they were spatial dust.

CAPTAIN IAN PATRICK had little more than the strength to turn the *Oracle* and point her homeward. Already the battle, all the trying events of the past week, were commencing to seem like an ugly nightmare. There was only one thing that mattered now—home!

Home—and explanations to an anxious world. Whatever else those explanations included, they would be filled with praise for a man who had been branded a coward and a traitor, and had proved himself the bravest man Ian Patrick had ever known!