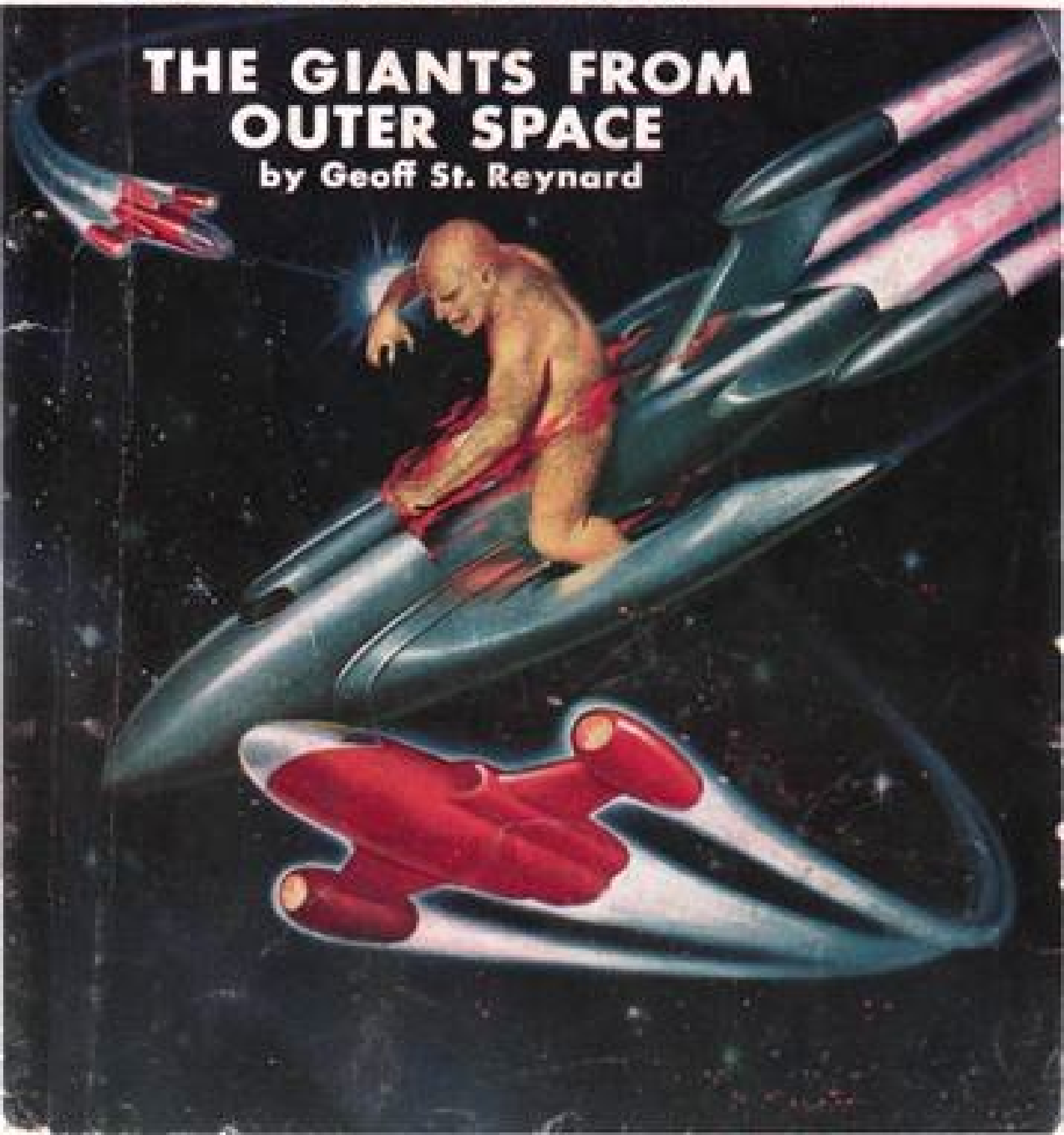


IMAGINATION

STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY

THE GIANTS FROM OUTER SPACE

by Geoff St. Reynard



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By Geoff St. Reynard

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CHAPTER I

"Okay, make another check on the reading."

Grim terror lurked in the void many light years from Earth. But Pinkham and his men were unaware of it—until suddenly they discovered—The Giants From Outer Space

"I've made four checks already—"

"Damn it, make another!"

"It's no use, Pink. The life-scanner's never wrong."

"No possibility of a monkey wrench dropped into its innards? It couldn't be seeing things that aren't there?"

"Not in a million years."

"Then there's no water, no air, no gravity worth mentioning, and still—"

"That's right. There's life on that silly-looking little apple. *There's somebody sitting on it!*"

In the ninetieth star system to be explored by the insatiably curious men of Earth, there were seven planets. Between the fourth and fifth from the star there was a belt of asteroids: some three or four thousand tiny planetary bodies traveling in vast ellipses around the star. At one time they had probably constituted a single planet, but some unimaginable explosion far back in time had scattered the great ball broadcast, and the largest of the resulting planetoids was now no more than 440 miles across. In the gargantuan belt of them, many were no bigger in diameter than the spaceship *Elephant's Child* herself.

When the instruments of the ship detected this belt of asteroids, Captain Pinkham turned aside as a matter of course, to cruise through it and let his cartographer map it, his organicus officer check it for signs of life, and all his other crewmen turn their inquisitive eyes and machines upon it. It was the seventh asteroid belt to be discovered by man, if you included the one

between the orbits of Jupiter and Mars, back home, incredible light-years behind....

No life had ever been discovered on an asteroid, except for the vegetable-animal space-eating bacteria on Pallas. No life—

Until now.

Captain Pinkham headed for the tiny bit of planet, let his ship's screens pick it up and relay its presence to the automatic recoil engines, which slammed the *Elephant's Child* to a stop about twelve feet away from the knobbly slate-gray surface. The energy testers, having come into play simultaneously with the screens, at once flashed the green "Not Radioactive" sign; a fairly useless gesture, since a positive reaction would have turned the ship away at an angle before it entered the danger zone.

The senior officer; said, "Jerry, let's take a look at that critter you think is perched on this thing."

The organicus officer grinned with one corner of his mouth. He pulled down a platinum lever, and a thirty-inch screen above his control board sprang to life. The black of space showed the bumpy planetoid like a ball of cold lava, and seated in the center of the screen, a man in a spacesuit.

Captain Pinkham licked his lips. "Okay," he said, "I owe you a shot of rye. You were right." Then he blinked his gray eyes. "My God!" he roared. "What's a human being doing out here in System Ninety?"

The outburst, he felt, was quite justified; in fact, he might have gone stark raving crazy with justification. There seemed no possibility that his space armada could have been preceded to this star system by another from Earth. The ancient Martians might have made it this far, but their spacesuits were nothing like those of Terra. So he and Jerry were now staring at a hopeless absurdity. It couldn't be there.

Pinkham leaned sideways and bellowed into the intercom. "Get in here! Everybody! On the double!"

The crew came running, from the engine rooms, the astrogatium and astrolab, from the sleeping quarters and the mess hall. The ship was gigantic; it took twenty minutes, for the ship's complement to assemble in the captain's control hall. There were fifty-seven men, eighteen officers. They stood in casual formation and gaped at the life-scanner's screen.

The spacesuited figure had not moved.

Captain Pinkham said, "One question. Which of you gadget-happy jokers gimmicked up the scanner on us? Who did this?"

Nobody said anything. Only one man smiled: Lieutenant Joe Silver, a very bright, very ambitious big cub who was on his second extragalactic expedition and obviously had visions of earning his captain's bronze comets within the year. Joe was a rather unpleasant young piece of beef, thought Pink; but he wouldn't pull practical jokes. He was too bloody serious. If he smiled, it was probably because he was enjoying the Captain's evident bewilderment.

"Then it isn't a joke," said Pinkham. "Three of you outside repairmen get into your suits and bring *that* in." He gestured at the silent figure on the motionless little world of the scanner. "Jerry says it's alive. Handle with care." He waved them his dismissal.

Some twenty minutes later he watched the screen as the three crewmen descended to the surface of the planetoid, pried loose the double anchor which the unknown Earthman had sunk into the ball's crust to hold him steady on the almost-gravityless world, lifted the bulky figure and leaped upward, like thick but weightless panthers carrying their prey, into the open air-lock.

The spacesuited stranger had not moved in the slightest.

Yet the scanner, which was never wrong, said that within the armor of the suit was life.

Pinkham sat staring at the blanked-out screen, and a queer chill began to crawl up his neck. An old slang phrase came to his mind, and wouldn't leave.

How come? How come? *How come?*



CHAPTER II

Pink and Jerry and Joe Silver walked around and around the spacesuit. Bill Calico, the astrogator, and Washington Daley, the senior lieutenant, sat in front of it on stools covered with Venusian joerg-hide, going through a routine of flippant gags that thinly disguised their bafflement. Finally Pinkham said, "When were these suits invented?"

"2144," said Joe Silver.

Bright kid, thought Pink with irritation. "Thirty-odd years ago. That's my guess, too."

"October 1st, 2144, is the patent date," said Joe Silver smugly.

"Click, click, click," said Daley. "Your mind is a damn file room, Silver. It gives me the jitters."

Joe Silver looked at him expressionlessly.

"I just read the date on the instruction plate," he said.

Captain Pinkham bent down and read aloud from the nayrust plate set into the back of the spacesuit.

"'Bernard Patent Slugjet Suit, size 24-B patented' ... here it is. 'Instructions for reviving occupant. The man in this suit is alive if the translucent face plate is tinted orange.'"

"It is," said Bill Calico with eagerness.

"'Unscrew the seven small x-screws around face plate. Depress lever Z on right side of chest plate. Loosen gorget, shoulder pieces, pallettes, brassarts, cuisses....'" They were following the instructions as he read. He thought, these suits were terrific, they were the best. But you had to have a billion dollars behind your expedition or you couldn't afford 'em. Each one cost half as much as a regular-size moon rocket! They shouldn't have stopped making them, though. They ought to have tried bringing down the cost. One

of these could save a man's life when nothing else in God's universe could; and a man's life is surely worth as much as half a moon rocket?

The Bernard Slugjet Suit. Guaranteed to keep a guy alive for a minimum of 250 years in free space. Guaranteed to let him emerge healthy and—miraculously—sane, provided he was picked up within the time limit.

You were jetting toward the edge of the galaxy, say. Your ship ran into trouble. A big meteor tore out your belly, or your fuel gave out, or any of a million things happened to crack up the beautiful great spaceship that was your vehicle and your pride and almost *you*, an extension of yourself, an expression of your yearning to conquer the stars. So you got into your slugjet suit and walked out an air-lock, if you had enough warning, that is. And there you were in space.

Your suit was actually a miniature spaceship itself; if there was land anywhere near, you aimed for it, loosed your powerful shoulder jets, and shot toward it. The suit had a range of about five hundred thousand miles, which was often enough.

But suppose it wasn't. Then you just stayed there in black space, and you started to touch buttons in the big gloves, to pull levers on the chest, and to activate other circuits by the sound of your voice. And the suit became a world for you, a world that kept you healthy and sane for a quarter of a millennium.

Your life processes were slowed down to a pace of only a crawl and a mumble, next door to death. Your breathing couldn't be detected. Your heart beat six times to the hour. Drugs did it, and vapors, the depressants of a hundred planets gathered and refined by Bernard for his suits.

You didn't sleep; you didn't need to. You were a slug, a worm in a cocoon, awake in an ultra-slow-motion way. In 250 years, you aged about fifteen. The suits were supposed to have a maximum efficiency of a thousand years; you came out an old man at the end of that time, maybe, but it was an even bet that you *did* come out.

And to keep your mind whole and unwarped, there in the immensity of brain-shattering space, you were entertained—well and constantly.

Three-dimensional movies were shown on your translucent face plate, so slow that to a person with unhampered reflexes they would look like stills. Music played to you, a low drone and buzz that to you was jazz, classical, anything you selected. The Minute Waltz took several hours to play in your ear.

Body wastes and carbon dioxide were eliminated, and breathable air released, by the same principles in use in spaceships. You were fed intravenously, vitamins, concentrates of everything you needed were stuck into you without your knowing it, for you lived too slowly to be capable of pain. The temperature of your suit was even. Audiotherapy was given you at suitable intervals. You were rescued, and came out of your suit as well-adjusted, as balanced as you'd gone in. Maybe more so.

Rescued? It wasn't all left to luck. The radio in your high bulbous crest broadcast a constant S.O.S. Your suit glowed so that it could be spotted easily, a crimson star against the blackness. Your own life within it called to every life-scanner within 500,000 miles.

Meanwhile, you were in a damn fine world of your own....

Pinkham finished reading the instructions, and walked around to the front of the bulky suit. Bill Calico lifted off the crest, Daley removed the helmet, Jerry and Joe Silver caught the suit as it fell away in two sections.

And Captain Pinkham caught the girl.

She was slim and full in the places where a woman ought to be so, and her hair, close-cropped, was black-brown and shining. Her face was good, damn good, bloody damn fine to a spaceman who'd been out on the ways for a couple of years; but Pink had the happy thought—it was the first one he had, before the shock really hit him that that this was a *girl*—that she would have looked just as good to him on Earth.

She wore the uniform of an organicus officer: just a bit dated, the lapels too wide by an inch, the synthetic fabric of the jacket just a little more clinging and revealing than the current fashion, the pants narrow at the cuff where

today's were bell-bottomed. She must have been out here a while; not more than thirty years, though. She did not look more than twenty-five now, and the normal life span was a hundred and ten.... Pink snapped his queer thoughts sharply into line. What did her age matter to him?

She was limp in his arms, as relaxed as a sleeping kitten. Her eyes, deep brown, were open but heavy-lidded. He half-knelt, cradling her comfortably, as Jerry anticipated his question and said, "She's okay. She'll be out of it in a few minutes. She's still living slower than we are."

Joe Silver, unaccountably across the room by the life-scanner, said, "Hey! There's another one!"

"Another what?" asked his senior lieutenant, Daley.

"Another fellow—or girl—in a Slugjet. Down that direction a few thousand miles."

As all of them but Pink raced to the screen, the girl began to sing, softly, musically, and very slowly.

*"I am sick of this bucketing Lunar run
In this dirty old steel cocoon;
I'm sick of the Earth and I'm sick of the Sun
And I'm sick to death of the Moon...."*

That was—what was the name?—the Lament of the Veteran Rocketeer, a ballad that Pink had been singing in his grade school days. He hadn't heard it for more than a dozen years. Probably popular when this gal blasted off Terra.

She stopped singing. "'Bout time you got here," she said drowsily. "I've been waiting for months. Didn't Fawcett's crest radio reach you?"

"Take it easy," said Pink, and told himself that was a stupid thing to say. "Who are you? What was your expedition?"

She blinked. "You aren't Commander Dyevis, are you? Who are you?"

"I'm Joe Silver," said that young upstart over Pinkham's shoulder.

"Nobody asked you," said Daley. They had left the screen, all but Jerry, who was making course for the second speck of life in the asteroid belt.

"This is the *Elephant's Child*, flagship of Armada Seven, 843 days out of Terra to explore star systems 87 through 93," said Pink quietly. "We just plucked you off an asteroid in System Ninety. This is—" *take it easy*, he said to himself this time, "this is October 18th, 2176."

"Holy Holmendis," said the girl, turning a little pale. "Our ship split up her seams in November of 2158."

Daley, the oldest of the lot at thirty-six, and the coolest spacehead of them all, said, "May I introduce Captain John Pinkham, our leader?" Formalities eased a shock, he knew, and helped you over the rough spots. "I'm Lt. Washington Daley and you are—"

"Organicus Officer Circe Smith, of Colonel Fawcett's exploratory armada," she said automatically.

"Fawcett!" said everyone, loudly and with amazement.

"So he got to System Ninety," said Pink. "Every spaceman on the ways has wondered about Fawcett for eighteen years. He vanished with two ships—"

"She knows that, Captain," said Daley.

"Oh. Of course."

"Our other ship was still okay when we broke up," said O. O. Smith, brushing her short hair back from a forehead that was wide and intelligent. "My crest radio was on the fritz, but Fawcett's was all right and he was supposed to call Commander Dyevis, who was cruising down by Planet Four. At least half a dozen of us got off in Slugjet Suits before the ship died. I guess his message never got to Dyevis."

"Lord knows," said Pinkham. The *Elephant's Child* shivered slightly as her recoil engines stopped her. Jerry came over from the controls.

"There's another one sitting outside," he said casually.

"Maybe it's Colonel Fawcett," the girl cried eagerly.

Jerry shook his head. "I'm afraid not." He looked at her a moment, then turned to Pinkham. "This one has four arms," he said.

CHAPTER III

They sat at dinner, the eighteen officers of the *Elephant's Child*, eating fresh vegetables and curried lamb from the hydroponics farm and the frozen food lockers. On either side of Captain Pinkman sat O. O. Circe Smith, of the lamented Fawcett expedition, and First Officer Ynohp of the extinct Martian Space Navy.

"If you Terrestrians came to Mars over one hundred years ago," Ynohp was saying, in a clear and metallic voice that came from the lingoalter on his chest—a tiny box which could be set to change any of nine thousand spoken languages into any one of the others—"and at that time my people had lost the secrets of space travel for approximately four thousand years, this means that I have been reclining on a planetoid here for at least 4,100 years. The probability is that it has been much longer. Unfortunately my time recorder has long since become inoperative."

He extended one of his four rib appendages and picked up a piece of carrot. "Naturally I was in a cataleptic state," he went on. "As you may know, in my race that means that all body processes are suspended *in toto*. There is no growth and no decay. Moth and rust do not corrupt, you might put it."

Pink frowned momentarily. There was a false note somewhere, but he couldn't put his finger on it. He tried to remember all he could about the dying race of Martians. What Ynohp was saying was correct, as nearly as he could recall, but ... he shrugged. My God! he thought, this critter's over four thousand years old!

Well, Circe's about forty-five.

The hell she is. She's twenty-seven, which was her age when her ship was wrecked, plus about one actual year of life which equals the eighteen she was lost in the Slugjet. Twenty-eight, then, really. I'm thirty-one. Not a bad combination.

Hey, boy, you're a confirmed bachelor, remember?

He chuckled. Who says so? He took a look at Circe. The prettiest spaceman who ever came my way, he said to himself happily.

The dinner broke up. Space etiquette demanded that he escort the Martian to his stateroom first, for the four-armed little gray man was senior to a mere organicus officer; when he returned to the mess hall, he found that Joe Silver had whisked Circe away to show her the new improvements in space drives and other technical details.

"At least," said Bill Calico, "he said he was going to."

Pink went off to talk to Jerry, who was a lousy substitute for a beautiful girl.

He found his O. O. tinkering with the life-scanner.

"Something wrong," Jerry said through his teeth. He was a slim young man—Pink, who stood six-three and hefted in at two hundred, would have made two of Jerry—and his normally joyous expression was now writhed into a frown. "The red light's not on, but the scanner's not working."

"How d'you know?"

"Had a hunch. Don't ask me why—unless it's that the Martian makes me suspicious. Anyway, I tested the scanner; turned it inside and aimed it all over the ship. Nothing doing. No life in here, according to it. So something's the matter with it, and I'm damned if I can figure what."

Pink said, "That means what?"

"Means that if Fawcett or any of his men are out there, we won't know it. We could flash right by them, or through 'em for that matter, and never know it."

"Nothing more serious, though?"

"That's bad enough, isn't it?" Jerry asked him.

"Sure, sure." Pink shook himself. "I feel—I guess *wary* is the word." Jerry looked a question. "Yeah," said Pinkham uncomfortably, "it's the Martian. A nice guy and all, but he makes me wonder."

"Four thousand years plus," nodded Jerry.

"No, not that. I think that's possible. It's something else, son."

"What?"

Pink said slowly, futilely, "I don't know." He patted the O.O.'s shoulder. "Keep at it, Jerry." He went out and walked down the long ramp to the astrolab. Daley was there. "How's it going?" Pink asked him.

"We aren't moving," said the lieutenant.

"I know. I told Kinkare to put her into the same orbit as the asteroid belt. We want to stay in the same relation to the planetoids till we decide where to look for Fawcett."

"I know you issued those orders, Pink. I meant we aren't in the orbit. We're hanging in space, and the dang asteroids are shooting past us." Daley flipped on his great banks of scanners. "See?" Bands of light were tiny balls of inert matter, flashing by an obviously stationary *Elephant's Child*.

Pink jumped for the intercom. "No use," said Daley. "It's dead. I sent Calico for Randy Kinkare." They looked at each other. "I think it's Ynohp," said Daley.

Pinkham took out a pad and pencil. Without saying anything, without admitting to himself that he agreed with his officer, he put down a number of figures. Then he said, "I left Ynohp just fourteen minutes ago in his stateroom. I've put down the distances he'd have to travel to reach all the things that have gone wrong since then. He could have done it—if he was invisible, and could move at the rate of two hundred feet per second."

"Maybe he can."

"You know Martians have the same rate of speed, roughly speaking, as Terrestrians."

"And if Ynohp isn't a Martian at all?"

"Washington, did you ever see a Martian?"

"Yeah."

"Could anything in the universe make itself look like a four-foot-tall, four-armed, slate-gray man with pink eyes?"

"I don't know," said Daley. "Maybe there's something in System Ninety that can. Hypnotism, matter transference, fluidity or a lot of other facts could explain it."

Kinkare and Bill Calico came in on the run.

Their news didn't surprise Pink greatly.

The space drive was out of commission.

They were adrift in the void.

CHAPTER IV

The intercom, the space drive, the life-scanner. So far apart that one man *couldn't* have put them out of whack. No one connected in any way with the others. Ynohp snoring gently in his stateroom. Pinkham, Daley, Silver, Kinkare, Jerry Jones, Calico, and the girl, all gathered in the Captain's quarters, tense, baffled, and all talking at once.

And out of the hubbub, one clear sweet voice saying something that didn't make sense and yet electrified Pink as if he'd put his hand on a lighted cigar....

"Maybe it's the space giants?"

"Shut up!" bawled Pinkham. The officers turned toward him, brows lifting, mouths still open. "Now," he said quietly, "Circe—Miss Smith—what did you say?"

"Space giants," she repeated "I don't think they exist, but I certainly saw something."

"Give it to us slow," said Daley.

"Well, a couple of times while I was anchored to the asteroid, watching tri-di movies, I had the impression that something enormous was floating just beyond my face plate, watching me. Of course I was slowed down so far that it must have taken me an hour to register the fact, and another hour or two to flick my eyes up away from the movies. What was a second to me was at least that long. But just once I got a clear view of something incredible. It vanished almost at once."

"What was it?"

"A very big man, naked, bald, with eyes like fires. That's the only way I can describe him. He looked humanoid, except he was so big."

"How big?"

"I can't tell and hate to make a guess—but at least a thousand feet. Of course I hadn't anything to compare him with."

"Wait a minute," said Randy Kinkare, the assistant pilot, voice reeking with unbelief. "How could you see through an opaque face plate?"

"It's not opaque," said Joe Silver officiously. "It's translucent from without and transparent from within. I took a look at it this afternoon."

"Space giants," groaned someone. "Oh, Lord!"

"We can't discount it," said Pink, realizing that he was doing just that, but refusing to disbelieve Circe. Illusion? Not a lie, surely? "She wasn't drugged, after all. She was in full control of senses that were merely slowed down."

There was a discomfortable silence.

Intercom, space drive, life-scanner. Maybe other machinery by this time. Sabotage in such a clever way that no one of the highly skilled officers and technicians could discover how it was done, what was wrong. Space giants? Ah, come on, Pink!

Ynohp. Something wrong with him, some flaw in his looks? No, he was Martian in every oversize pore. Some anachronism?

Hey! Anachronism. Pink's mind fished up the dictionary definition. An error in chronology by which events are misplaced in regard to each other....

He had it.

He got to his feet, motioned Jerry and Wash Daley to go with him. They congregated outside the door, as further talk broke out inside his quarters. He said urgently, "Remember what Ynohp said about his cataleptic state? 'Moth and rust do not corrupt.' He said it as if it were a quotation."

"It is," said Daley. "More or less word for word it's from the King James version of the Bible."

"Dated, if I remember correctly, about 1611 A.D.?"

"Yes."

"At which date the Martians had been without space flight for about 3,600 years. At which date, further, Ynohp claims to have been sitting on an asteroid for about 4,000-plus years."

"Coincidence?" asked Jerry.

Pink asked, "Do you think so?"

"Hell," said Jerry, "no."

"Let's go look at his space suit," said Daley urgently. They ran down the corridor, shoving for the lead.

Ten minutes later they sat back on their heels and stared at the interior of the suit.

Rust had corrupted here, or at any rate decay; the Martian steel, ancient and harder than any known metal, was worn to a papery shell, and in many places tiny holes had eroded clear through the suit.

"No man or Martian or anything I know except the space-eating bacteria of Pallas could have lived in that suit, cataleptic state or not." Pink looked around at his friends. *"What in the name of heaven have we brought into the ship?"*

Then the three were racing for the "Martian's" stateroom. They burst in, and found that now it was empty of life.

They stood, indecisive, just outside. Pinkham's gaze went to the door, on which, as was the custom, a hastily-printed card had been placed with the officer's name upon it. He read it. Then he blinked.

"Look," he said, gesturing.

"What about it?"

The card blared its secret, its pun, at them.

Y N O H P.

"Read it backwards," said Pinkham....

CHAPTER V

"None of you thought to look at the Martian spacesuit when we'd removed it?" asked Pink. The others shook their heads. They were all in his quarters again.

"Neither did you, Captain," said Joe Silver. "You were as busy looking at the Martian as we were."

"True enough," admitted Pinkham. "Well, the thing to do first is radio the *Diogenes* and the *Cottabus* to stand by for trouble." He lit a cigarette. "If the radio hasn't been tampered with," he said. "Silver, go tell Sparks to start sending to them. *Diogenes* is down by Planet Five, and *Cottabus* heading for Four. Tell them to look for us somewhere in the planetoid orbit. They'll have to come in on the radio beam. I don't suppose we can expect them for a day." Joe Silver gave Circe's arm an encouraging squeeze—they'd got on together pretty damn fast—and started out. "And instruct them not to pick up anybody, off asteroids or planets or out of the ether. I don't care if they see their grandmothers floating outside a spaceport."

The thought of his armada joining him made Pink feel more at ease. No sense to that, of course, but three ships are better than one, if only for moral support. "Daley," he said then, "lower the Mutiny Gates."

"You think it's wise?"

"If I didn't, I wouldn't do it," he snapped. It would be the first time that a mutiny gate had been used in more than forty years. All the large ships were equipped with them, great plastikoid barriers which operated from the captain's room, sealing off the officer's sector from the rest of the ship. They had been made standard equipment in the old days, before screenings became really effective and the danger of psychopathic trouble in the crew grew negligible. Now they were of theoretical use in case of boarding by alien life, or of damage to a large segment of the hull ... but they had never actually been brought into play in Pinkham's lifetime. "Drop 'em," he repeated.

Daley pulled open a drawer, tugged at an unused switch, which creaked protestingly; then the brief alarm clang that heralded the fall of the forty gates sounded in the distance. "If he's beyond the gates," the senior lieutenant said heavily, "the crew may be done for."

"No more than if the gates were up," Pink told him impatiently.

"You're projecting," said Daley. "How do we know the nature of the beast? He may mop 'em up in a fit of pique at being shut out there."

"The chances are he's on our side of the walls," said Bill Calico. "Nothing out there of much importance to him. The hydroponics farm, history room, library, and so on."

"We don't know what's important to him," said Daley. "We don't know what in blazes he wants aboard. We don't know a doggone thing!"

Silver returned. "I heard the mutiny gates go," he said questioningly.

"Are you all armed?" asked Pink. They nodded. "Then let's sweep the place," he said, glancing from one grim face to another. "Pick up the other officers as we go, and make a chain of inspection that he can't bust through. We'll corner him sooner or later. Then we'll see if atomic pistols will settle his hash." He looked at Circe. "You'd better stay here," he said.

"I agree," said Randy Kinkare suddenly. "And you'd best lock her in—from the outside."

"Why?" blazed the girl.

"We picked you up on an asteroid too," said the assistant pilot.

Pink, restraining himself from bashing Kinkare in the nose, said reluctantly, "You're right. We can't trust any stranger till we find out what's going on. Sorry, Circe."

"I suppose you're right." She sat down, a little flushed, eyes snapping. "Have I the right to ask for protection? I'm just as unsafe as you are, whether you believe me or not. Please leave Lieutenant Silver to guard me."

He couldn't refuse. He nodded curtly to Joe Silver, who looked too damn smug for words. So they'd paired off already? So much for his quick dream of marrying a spacegirl....

It had never happened to him before, though, and it was a hard dream to give up, all the more so for its abrupt flowering in a heart that heretofore had held nothing but love for the silence of the spaceways. John Pinkham, rugged, handsome, all a woman could want, had been dedicated to his profession since he was five; and many a wench had found that out to her disappointment. Now ... oh, well. Maybe there wasn't room for space and a girl in his heart, after all. And maybe she wasn't what she seemed.

He led them into the corridor and locked the quarters behind him.

Around the first bend and up the first ramp they found Second Watch Officer Wright. They knew him by his chubby build and his uniform. They couldn't recognize his head, even when they found it three minutes later.

CHAPTER VI

They gathered in Sparks' radio room. That was due to the simple fact that, aside from themselves, only Sparks was alive on this side of the mutiny gates. The other officers were scattered—in the most grisly sense of the word—all over the place.

"Seven of us, if Silver's still alive," said Daley. "Eight with the girl. Why us? He could easily have attacked us in a body." Five of the dead officers had been found in a heap, just-used pistols in their rigid hands. Atomic force was obviously useless against the thing from the asteroid.

Pink said, fighting nausea, "All the senior officers are alive. We can run the *Elephant's Child* without the eleven who died. Maybe that's why. Maybe we have to be preserved to carry this monster wherever he wants to go."

"Logical," said Jerry. "He'll have to be pretty persuasive, though. I hope he knows that."

Sparks said, "The radio's working. I had an answer from the *Cottabus* that she's heading this way. *Diogenes* hasn't replied; she must be further off."

"Evidently he doesn't care if the radio works," said Calico.

"Or else he wants the whole armada assembled," added Daley.

"I could use a drink," blurted Kinkare. "You got anything in this place, Sparks?"

"Gin on the shelf," said the radioman, pointing.

Kinkare picked up the bottle. "You always leave the cap off?"

"No! Somebody's been at it."

"Where is he?" asked Pink in a whisper.

"What, Captain?" Kinkare stopped the bottle halfway to his lips.

"Where the devil is the brute? We combed the place. He can't have got through the mutiny gates. He can't have slipped past our chain. Where the hell is he?"

"Maybe disguised as one of us," said Daley slowly. "He isn't a Martian, but he imitated one to the last pore. Why couldn't he imitate us?"

"Well, *I'm* me," said Kinkare, and put the bottle to his mouth. Then he dropped it, screeching. Pinkham stared at him and saw his upper lip turned violent, hideous scarlet. Blood began to drip to the rug. The skin and flesh of his lip had dissolved as though sprayed with acid.

Kinkare fell to his knees, covering his face with both arms. The others sprang to help him, Sparks reaching for the medicine chest; but Pink snatched up the gin bottle. What the hell? Acid? Or—

From the square spout poured a gush of smoke, writhing sinuous in the bright indirect light of the small room; it coalesced, clotted into a body. Impossible, brain-boggling, an unreal fantasy amid the most concrete achievements of man, the thing swelled into solidity before the Captain's staring eyes.

He was eight feet tall, three broad; his eyes were brilliant vermilion, his swollen head was egg-bald, and the expression on his coarse features was at once lecherous, evil, savage and cunning. He was stark naked, completely humanoid. And he had come out of the bottle.

A voice boomed from him like a vocalizing cannon. "I object to anyone trying to drink me!" he roared at them.

In the reeling chaos of all his beliefs gone wild, Pinkham had one sane thought, and yelled it as fast and short as he could. "Don't shoot! For God's sake, don't shoot!" Then, as Calico and Jerry held their pistols partly raised, he said urgently, "We'll only blast each other. Remember this thing's invulnerable."

The pistols were holstered with reluctance. The five pale men—Kinkare still thrashed in agony on the floor—gaped at the apparition, which said, "I am Ynohp the Martian." Gargantuan laughter rocked him. "I am your god, Earthmen. Bow down to me!"

"Damfido," said Jerry, which was evidently all he could manage to get out of "Damned if I do."

"Drop your weapons on the floor," said the being.

Pink drew his gun; casually he sighted on the great head above him, and risked one shot, which had all the effect of a sunbeam; then he let the pistol fall. The others discarded theirs. The naked creature reached out a foot and herded the weapons into a corner. "You can't hurt me with them," he said, "but you might try suicide, and I need you. Take heart, mortals," he said, laughing, "you may get out alive!"

Then he dwindled and his lines blurred into ephemera and he slid out through the door, which was open perhaps an inch.

CHAPTER VII

"But by all that's holy," said Daley (it was an hour later, and the eight were gathered in the control room, Kinkare now bandaged and relieved of pain, but unable to speak), "if he's a brain-picker, and got his lingo out of our minds, who did he get 'take heart mortals' from?" The lieutenant glanced at Pinkham. "It may seem little, but it's minutiae that will give us clues to his nature, and therefore how to fight him. Take heart, mortals, after all. Who talks like that?"

"You're right," said Pink wearily. "It's little things we've got to look for. Like, evidently, gin bottles."

"Item," said Jerry, who was eating a sandwich. "He's composed of something alien to any life we know. Gas? I doubt it. Atomic shock would disseminate gas. Are his molecules loose and do they edge aside for obstacles, compress together when he wants to shrink, and so on? Possible. But anyhow, he's different—and so far as we know, invulnerable."

"How did he gimmick the guns?" asked Calico, a note of desperation in his voice. "We picked them up as soon as he'd gone, and they wouldn't fire."

"Same way he gimmicked the intercom, the life-scanner, the space drive. Known hereafter as Unknown Method One."

"Another item," went on Jerry. "He talks English without using a lingoalter. Thus, probably, he's telepathic. 'Take heart mortals' he might have grubbed out of somebody's subconscious."

"It adds up to this," said Pink. "We're helpless against him. Granting this, I say let's go get him."

It made no sense, it was the gesture of fools in love with death or of madmen battling their own futility; but every officer there shouted, "Right!" Except for Joe Silver.

"I say, sit tight and wait," he said. "Something will happen. There's no use committing suicide."

"If he wants us alive, and we can't fight him, I think we're better off dead," said Jerry through his teeth.

"Hell. Where there's life there's hope."

"I suppose you're right," said Pink slowly. His muscles ached, his hands grasped ceaselessly at the air; he was a man of action, his desire for combat throttled by incapability. "Twenty-some hours before the other ships get here. If our deductions are on the beam, he won't do anything till then. He wants the whole armada."

Then, with a snarl of static, the intercom came to life.

At first they heard a jumble of voices. "What's wrong?" "Nothing works...." "Are all the officers dead?" It was the crew, beyond the barriers of the mutiny gates, evidently trying to get into communication. Over and over one voice said, "Hello, Captain Pinkham. Come in, Captain Pinkham."

Pink took two strides and flipped the switch of the visiograph. Tuning it first to one crew station and then another, he told them succinctly what bad happened. "Don't panic, for God's sake. The mutiny gates are for your protection. If they work, you may be able to do something later, regardless of what happens to us."

Their somber faces looked out of the screen at him. "Let us in, Captain," pleaded one big repairman. "We'll mob the critter."

"No use, Jackson. Stand by." He turned the dial of the visiograph into the officers' section, scanned one room after another. No alien being appeared. "I wonder if he's in here with us?" said Pink half-aloud.

Jerry came to him. "I have an idea," he said quietly. Then he whispered at length into Pinkham's ear.

"It won't work. He knows what he's doing."

"How do we know that? If he needs us, he's ignorant of spaceships. Look at the intercom—he turned it off, by some means, then turned it on when he found out what it was. The space drive must have been easy to guess at; likewise the life-scanner. But the intercom's a lot of complex machinery that only adds up to a television-telephone communication system. However he snarls the stuff, it's instantaneous and simple for him to do. I think he just took a crack at everything that looked important. Now he's experimenting, learning the ship, finding out what he threw out of joint. Obviously he doesn't give a damn if we talk to the crew!"

"You could be right."

"So if I do what I want to, it'll confuse hell out of him. It may give us an advantage. And we'll certainly learn something."

"It's worth a try." Pink looked at Jerry, his closest friend. "I'll send Silver to do it," he said.

Jerry shook his lean head. "This is my baby, Pink." Then he opened the door and went out, closing it behind him.

Pinkham said levelly, "Daley, come here." He whispered the plan into his lieutenant's ear. Daley said admiringly, "Good deal. And I think that's sense—he can't know much about the ship. I'll bet he was hiding in that bottle, casing Sparks's equipment and learning how to operate it. The quick look he got at the rest of us on our jobs before he started playing hob must have given him the barest, scantiest idea of things. So Jerry's notion could work."

"Or it could blow up," said Pink dismally. "Go tell the others. Whisper it, in case our guest is in here." He struggled briefly with his deepest feelings. "Don't tell Circe. We can't be sure of her yet."

"Roger." Daley left him alone at the intercom. Pinkham set the dial to show the large room toward which Jerry was making his way....

Somewhere beyond their ken, the incredible beast from the void made another decision, or tried another experiment; and the life-scanner flickered into working order again. Joe Silver saw it first. Its screen blinked, then its alarm buttons glowed vividly. Without the ship, at a vast distance but approaching rapidly, were an untold number of organic entities, life-sources

that reacted upon the scanner like approaching aircraft on a radar set. They could be spaceships, slugjet suits, or anything that contained the intangible thing called life. And the sister ships of the *Elephant's Child* were still too far away to register.

"Great Jupiter!" bellowed Joe Silver, pointing. "What now?"

CHAPTER VIII

O. O. Jerry Jones crept along the last ramp. Why the devil was he skulking like this? Habit, he grinned ruefully to himself; the habit of primitive man who crouched and slunk in the presence of danger, no matter what kind.

And the old preservation instinct was also giving him all sorts of reasons to knock this silly business off, and go back to the protection, however illusory, of the control room. For instance, said the sly instinct, if this alien is telepathic, as you so neatly proved to yourself, then doesn't he know all that you and your pals know about a spaceship?

Shut up, Jerry told himself. I was wrong. He can't be telepathic, or he wouldn't bother to keep us alive after he's combed our brains.

"Couldn't he have some physical use for you all?" said the instinct.

Get thee behind me, Satan, he growled in his mind.

He opened the door of the room he was seeking.

Where to start? One wall was banked with books; never mind them. Another wall was covered with strange-looking projections, tubes and spouts and wheels and levers, behind a long table of plastikoid. There? Good enough.

He had a momentary pang as he picked up a spanner from the rack of tools by the door....

Then he was across the room and smashing wildly at levers, spouts, wall tanks, faucets; beating metal into scrap, crushing shining aluminum to scarred uselessness; he did not rest his arm until the whole wall was a ruin of beaten metal and broken glass. Then he turned his attention to the third wall.

Here was a giant turntable, rack on rack of shellacked alloy discs, mysterious-appearing charts and cabalistic signs. These he wrecked as

methodically and ruthlessly as he had the first, but now there were tears glistening in his eyes. He ended the destruction with a moan of sorrow.

He paused to snap on the intercom. Pink's worry-lined face appeared. "How'm I doing?" Jerry asked his captain.

"Great so far. Calico is crying like a child."

"I have news for you," Jerry said. "So am I." Then he turned to the last wall. Before it spread a long array of mechanical devices: large boxes on spindly legs, with glassed tops and brilliant colors splashed across their surfaces; taller, narrower cases with crooked levers and viewplates on which were small designs and words. There was a kind of double cage with tiny cubes therein. There were great wheels with many numbers. Almost all were attached to the wall by electric cords, though some were entirely mechanical and others ran on self-generated power. Jerry began at one end and passed down the line, shattering glass and snapping wooden legs with his spanner.

He had almost finished when the door burst open and the tall humanoid form of the stranger appeared. A blast of rage almost lifted Jerry off his feet. The being came at him, its motion a flowing tigerish pounce. The spanner was twitched from his hand flung across the room. He backed against the wall, bloating with fear in spite of himself. The creature swelled above him.

"Whoreson knave!" it bawled angrily. "What are you doing?"

"Making d-d-damn sure you don't take the ship anywhere," said Jerry, croaking a little. "Now t-try and run it!"

He was suddenly lifted off his feet and dangled helplessly a yard off the floor. "Fix them," snarled the alien thing into his face. He had time to realize that its grip was extremely powerful, whatever its molecules and atoms might be made of. "Reconstruct them, or you die."

"Don't be an idiot," Jerry told it, making up his mind that he was as good as dead and might as well go out like a man. "There isn't a single spare part aboard for any of these devices." He managed a sick grin. "If you're so smart, you *know* I'm telling the truth."

Pinkham called from the screen of the intercom. "That's true, whatever-you-are. Those things are useless to you now."

The alien took Jerry by the chest, wrapping one hand around his back to do it; slowly it exerted pressure, and Jerry realized that it must have elongated the hand enormously to encompass him so. He also knew that his rib cage would shortly collapse. He shrieked.

Then Circe, the girl from the asteroid, was gazing from the screen, horrified. "No!" she screamed at the being. "You can't kill him for only wrecking the—"

"Shut up!" squealed Jerry.

"The recreation room!" she finished.

Abruptly he was dropped to the floor, where he lay gasping, massaging his bruised sides. The thing above him said, "Recreation room?"

"Sure. The soda fountain, the phonograph, and the pinball machines and games."

Then Pinkham had encircled her throat with one arm, clamped his other hand on her mouth, and dragged her back. But the damage was done.

The alien gave another of those mirthless peals of bull's laughter. "Clever," he said. "Oh, clever little man." Then he plucked Jerry off the floor once more.

I'm going to die now....

The brute set him on his feet, twisted him toward the door, and gave him a brisk, forceful pat on the backside that sent him staggering. He gained his balance and ran into the corridor. It was more humiliating than had he been slain.

CHAPTER IX

"It didn't work, but it taught us a few things."

"You're right. It taught us that this bitch can't be trusted. Either she's in league with *it*, a sister or brother of it, or else she's so stupid that she's a menace to our survival."

"Oh, you blithering jackass!" said Circe indignantly to her fellow organicus officer. "How could I guess what your plan was? Nobody told me. All I knew was that you were going to be murdered for doing a perfectly harmless—"

"She's right," said Joe Silver. "We ought to have told her."

"Shut up," said Pinkham savagely. "Any more of that and I'll figure she's corrupted you or addled your brains, and I'll toss you into the brig, Silver."

"You try it you pigsqueak," shouted Silver, who measured half an inch over Pink's six-foot-three. "Captain or not, this is a grade A emergency and we're all needed. I'll pull the Mars Convention on you if you try to shut me up."

"He's right," said Daley to the captain. "Mars Convention says that in a grade A emergency any officer above Second Watch is equal to the captain or commander, Pink." Then he turned to Silver, grinned, and lashing out with a hand the size of a spaniel, caught his under-lieutenant on the ear. It knocked Silver sprawling. "That's for slanging at your superiors," he said quietly. "And the Mars Convention says I can do *that*."

Silver got up and blinked. He seemed dazed and for the first time in his space life, uncertain of himself. He looked at the others and recognized himself as a minority here. "Okay," he said, "okay, I'm outvoted. But I say the girl is only suspect, by no means convicted of anything but ignorance of the plan."

Kinkare, unable to speak through his bandaged mouth, nodded strongly. Circe glared defiance at Pinkham. "Next time, for God's sake tell me what

you have in mind," she said. "Not that I'd let you sacrifice poor Jerry, anyway."

"Women," said Jerry. "Women on a ship. Jonahs. Sentimental imbeciles."

"I'll knock your teeth down your scrawny throat," began Joe Silver, and "Quiet!" roared Pinkham. "We're quarreling like kids. What's to be done now!"

"I was saying it taught us a few things," said Daley. "Let's figure them out. The thing's evidently not telepathic. It can't run a spaceship, or it wouldn't have been so worked up over the ruin of the soda fountain, which must have looked pretty vital to its inexperienced eyes. It's definitely tangible, for it picked Jerry up."

"It also murdered eleven men," said Pink. "That's tangible enough too."

"It's damned intelligent, for it must have spotted Jerry on the intercom, which means it was working it. It also speaks a very funny breed of English. 'Whoreson knave,' for example. Nobody here ever called anyone that."

"Whoreson knave is Shakespearean," said Jerry.

"And, to finish what I've deduced, the monster is as strong as a couple of men, at least." He grinned at Jerry. "Not that you needed me to deduce that."

Randy Kinkare was staring at the life-scanner screen. Now he beat a tattoo on the arm of his chair, pointed so that they all looked. The flecks of light that indicated organic life had thronged in toward the ship; not so numerous as the stars, they were still too many to count. One object on the screen was large now, large enough to be identified. It approached the ship at a slow but steady rate, and they gasped as they saw it was another of the human-like figures.

"His brothers," said Pinkham. "That must be their natural form, then."

It grew and grew. It seemed it must now be touching the scanner's outside cell; but no, it grew even greater. At last it could not be seen in its entirety, then only its face showed. It was a hideous face, twisted with sardonic

malice. The face grew. When it stopped, only one enormous eye filled the screen.

Jerry cleared his throat. "Do you know what that means?" he asked. "It means that, at a conservative estimate, the critter is—"

"Go on," said Daley impatiently, when Jerry's silence had lengthened intolerably.

"It must be at least one thousand feet tall," said the O. O.

There was a long, unbroken stillness, a hush of horror and disbelief in the control room.

Finally Circe said slowly, "I think I'm going to faint."

And she did.

CHAPTER X

The long-unused armaments room was half the width of the ship away. They went toward it silently, seven men and a girl, praying that their visitor would not meet them or spot their furtive advance on the intercom. They slunk into the gunroom and Pink, coming last, ran the heavy emergency bolt across the door behind him.

The armaments officer was dead, of course. Pink said quietly, "Who knows the principles of these weapons?" Daley and Joe Silver raised their hands. "Activate the viewers, then."

Two walls darkened and became the silver-flecked night of space; it was as if they had become suddenly transparent. Half a dozen of the void-giants showed near the *Elephant's Child*, hovering or slowly drifting around the bow of the ship.

"Now," said the captain, "if only our friend in the bottle has left us our guns—train 'em on those monstrosities and fire every forward battery simultaneously."

The lieutenants, seated in foam-chairs behind the double banks of the gun controls, manipulated instruments that were very like the sights on common atom-pistols. Thin blue lines moved across the reflected picture of the space beyond the ship's nose, steadied and centered on the nearest giants. Silver glanced at Daley, who said, "Count o' three, Joe."

Every man leaned forward, scowling at the screens. The nearest space-soarer squinted full in their faces, as though he could actually see them as they were scanning him. Coincidence, but—Pink shuddered.

"One," said Daley. "Two."

The *Elephant's Child* rocked wildly up and back as thirty platinum guns, the heaviest type in the known universe, fired their hell-projectiles—great shells whose inconceivable destructive power was released by the splitting of the curium atom. In flight, the ship would have absorbed the tremendous

recoil automatically; stationary as she was, it bucked her over like a blown leaf.

The shells, set to explode at the very closest range that safety permitted, flashed upon the twin screens like bursting suns. Human eyes looking directly at such a bombardment would have crisped in their sockets; even on the screens their glare was too bright for comfort.

The men blinked, peered sharply for signs of the effect on the giants.

Pink felt disappointment, so biting and gut-curdling that he nearly vomited. For at first the shells seemed to have had little effect except to hurl the giants back a mile or so from the ship. Then, as they slowly surged forward toward it again, he saw that they had not escaped whole.

One lacked an arm; another had, half his head blown away; a third drifted in without the lower half of his torso. The expressions of their bronze-yellow faces were not of pain, however, but only of rage.

"Hey!" bellowed Calico. "We nicked 'em up, anyway!"

"Look again," said Daley morosely, standing from his foam-chair. "Look at the head of the far left skunk."

He who had lost half his cranium was slowly regenerating it, the brow and cheek pressing outward to form new firm outlines, a missing eye gradually emerging from the bloodless tatters of the old socket. Pink said, "Well." He took a deep breath. "Well, that's that. Let's all get out and plink at them with bean-shooters. It'll do as much harm." All the giants were reconstituting their lost parts.

Now one monster, floating right up to the ship, wrapped his five-hundred-foot-long arms around it and gave it a shake. It was as if a man had rattled a box full of beetles. The officers of the *Elephant's Child*, who had ridden through the bucking of the tremendous explosion, were unprepared for this movement, for they had risen from their deep seats. They sprawled across the room, smashing up against the wall with bone-jarring thumps. Pinkham found himself entangled with Circe Smith in a pretzel of arms and legs that would under other circumstances have been ridiculous but pleasurable. Fearing for her safety, he grasped her around the waist; she yielded to him a

moment, then struggled back and stood up. Was her face flushed with indignation, fright, or—? He got to his own feet. The giant had released the ship.

"We are chastened," murmured Jerry, feeling a bruised shin.

"And now what?" asked Joe Silver. "Ordinary weapons are as much use to us as spitballs." He sat down. "Let's figure out what else to try. Somewhere there's an answer."

They all sat down, Pink said, "Remember Wolf 864?"

"Sure," said Daley, who had been on that expedition with Pinkham when they were young cubs out of jetschool. "Friendly natives, kind of vegetable-animal life, and we murdered half of them unintentionally. We had to get out and never go back."

"How?" asked Circe. "How did you kill them?"

"Germs. The common ordinary non-toxic germs we carry in our systems all the time. It was a massacre—and of a queer, sweet kind of beast. They had no tolerance for our microbes."

"I volunteer to find the alien and breathe in his face," said Jerry. "Somebody hand me an onion," he added.

The conversation went on. It grew aimless to Pink, a bunch of boys whistling by a graveyard, eight prisoners speculating on their escape when they had no real knowledge of their jailer. He fiddled with the intercom, saw that the crew had gathered by the mutiny gates and were waiting tensely, puny weapons in their hands. He spoke a few words of encouragement to them. 57 men—whom he hated to see die. Somehow he had to save them.

It was about half an hour afterwards that he first discovered he was breathing too shallowly.

CHAPTER XI

"What is it?" asked Circe. Her lovely face was a trifle pallid. "I feel odd—and you all look pale."

Then it struck Pink. None of the others, even Daley, had recognized what was happening. He did not dare waste a second in telling them. He tore the door open and leaped into the corridor.

Deliberately he tried to draw as much oxygen into his lungs as he could. It was growing rarer every instant; but never mind trying to conserve it—the life of everyone aboard depended on his reaching the atmospheria. For the air in the spaceship was rapidly degenerating, becoming unbreathable as what remained of the good stuff was inhaled and thrown off as useless gases....

Either the atmospheric system had gone on the blink by itself, he thought, which was a hell of a long shot and too much of a coincidence, or else the alien, experimenting, had turned it off by accident.

Maybe the brute didn't need oxygen. Of course he didn't! His brothers outside sure didn't have any. Then, if he were independent of it, but could stand living in it, the probabilities were that he didn't breathe at all; that his metabolism was geared to ignore the elements in which he lived.

Just possibly he was taking this way to kill them off in a particularly fiendish fashion.

Silently Pink cursed the architect who had designed the *Elephant's Child* with the armaments room in the bow and the atmospheria back near the crew's sector, a thousand feet of passageways off. Every door he flung open took another bit of strength from his aching limbs. As he passed a mirror, he had a glimpse of his face. His face was flushed now, the grim-set lips were bluish, his eyes seemed to bulge from his head.

He began breathing through his mouth. It may have been imagination, but he thought the air had a foul taste, like a sea full of putrid fish.

Pink fell to his knees. Abruptly his strength had waned to almost nothing. He was horrified to realize how swiftly the air was going bad. He had to get to the system! He struggled up, staggered forward like a drunk. His heart, pounding wildly a moment before, now seemed to be slowing, weakening.

He found himself singing....

*"Blast off at two, jet down at three
On the dead dry dusty sphere
What sort of a life is this for me,
A veteran rocketeer?"*

Great God, was he crazy? Singing, shouting the words to that old song that Circe had brought back to his mind. Using up what amounted to his last drops of energy and air. God, God, help me, he thought wildly; make me shut up. But the maddened outer part of his brain kept him singing.

*"I, who have seen the flame-dark seas,
Canals like great raw scars,
And the claret lakes and the crimson trees
In the rich red soil of Mars!"*

Then he fell, and this time he could not get up.

He would lie here and die, horribly, gasping for breath where there was nothing to breathe but death. The mind that had made him sing, that had thought of Circe longingly and of what he must do to save her and all his friends, that blacked out, fell into a pit of ebony walls and ink at the bottom, blackness and nothing left anywhere....

Somewhere deep in his skull, some unknown cranny blazed with the light of knowledge. He had only a few yards to go. He had to make it. This knowledge crept out and through his body, raised cold swollen hands and made them grasp at a wall, forced the feet of this dead man to scrabble for purchase on the floor of the passage. Pinkham knew that he was moving, but it was as if he were sitting on a distant planet and knowing it; there was

no realization that this was he, Captain Pinkham, clawing upward and shoving himself on. He looked at himself curiously, rather proud and a little contemptuous. What a fool, what a damn fool, he thought.

Here was a door. The half-blind thing that was Pink groped for the handle, recognizing dimly that if this were not the atmospheria, then it was all over.

He opened the door and fell at full length on the carpet. Instinct rolled him over and hauled him to his knees, and he said admiringly and far away on that planet of death, By God, this is a man! Through a red haze he saw that he was in the first of the two small rooms that made up the atmospheria. He lunged forward, falling, jerked convulsively upward, plunged down a mile and smashed his face into the carpet, felt pain that for a moment brought him out of his stupor. He was making for the master switch that controlled the nitrogen-oxygen-ozone-etcetra that poured continuously through the great ship when all was well. From a great distance he could see that the switch was shoved up; only by breaking a steel band of superb tensility could the alien creature have pushed that switch up, for Pink carried the key to the band on his master ring, hanging at his belt. It looked like viciousness, either of knowledge that this was the humans' finish, or of ignorance flaring into anger. What a *beast*....

He gathered himself like a mortally wounded lion. He launched his perishing frame at the switch, hands clawed to drag it down to the normal position.

He could not feel whether he even touched the wall, for his senses were obliterated. He lay on his face and knew that he would not get up again.

Idly, he wondered whether he had managed to reach the switch.

Then the final flame of intelligence winked out, and it was night and unrelieved blackness, and he fell asleep.

CHAPTER XII

Jerry blinked. He opened his eyes and blinked again.

Had Pink made it to the atmospheria?

He must have, for the air was sweet and normal once more. So either Pink or Joe Silver had saved them. The others had all dropped along the way; he had passed Daley's motionless form some yards back there—now he looked, and saw the senior lieutenant sitting up against the wall.

Jerry rubbed his forehead gingerly. What a headache!

By the time he managed to stand, shakily, Joe Silver had appeared in front of him. Before Jerry could ask questions, the big man said hoarsely, "Must have been the captain. *I* passed out before I made the door." He shook his own head, which evidently ached too. "The blasted door is now locked. I can't get in."

The three of them went toward the atmospheria, Calico and Sparks following slowly. Before they reached it, the door opened and the alien thing emerged, stooping to clear the lintel. In its tree-thick arms lay Pinkham, apparently lifeless, his head dangling.

"Aside, mortals," the beast mouthed at them, and added, grotesquely, "goddammit!" They dropped back, it passed them and turned a corner and vanished. "Wait," said Daley urgently, "don't follow it yet." He switched on the passage intercom screen. "We'll spy on it with this. If Pink's alive, we mustn't anger the brute."

Tense, they watched the image of the stranger as it prowled through the ship, carrying their chief. It passed Randy Kinkare, and they saw him shrink away, a noise of terror gurgling in his gullet. The lipless Kinkare had reason to be afraid.

The giant took Pinkham into his own quarters and laid him on a foam-couch. Then it sat down in an angle of the wall, and its gruesomely human-

like body swelled until it occupied much of the free space in the cabin.

"To scare him if he wakes," breathed Bill Calico.

"Isn't it frightful enough?" asked Jerry. "I have an idea: if the Rabelaisian types outside are at their normal size, which seems logical, then this one may be uncomfortable, having to go around all compressed to eight feet."

"Could be ... let's advance," said Daley. "We'll wait just outside Pink's door. Then if it tries anything—"

"Yeah?"

"We'll make a protest," finished Daley. "Somehow, we'll make a strong protest."

They left the screen, a few seconds before Captain Pinkham groaned and opened his eyes.

The alien regarded him with its habitual expression of overpowering slyness. "Why did you nearly die?" it asked. "Was it something I did?"

When Pink could trust himself to speak without gibbering—it was horrifying to see half his room filled by this bronze-yellow balloon of evidently solid flesh—he said, "Naturally it was something you did, you big ape. You turned off our air."

"Air?" It compressed its lips. "Ah, I remember air. A substance needed on Earth for life. We never understood it."

"Don't you breathe?" asked Pink. "Don't you take any element into your system and mix it with your blood and then—oh, you haven't any blood." He paused. "But don't you need *any* outside element to sustain life?"

"No. Nor do we eat."

"But you are organic life?"

"Of course. A life which you cannot understand, I see. A life impervious to anything beyond it, indestructible and eternal."

I think you're lying, said Pink to himself. Nothing in the universe is indestructible ... or at any rate, unalterable. Everything has its Achilles heel, even the atom.

The monster spoke, half to itself. "That, the locked switch was the air, then. I thought it was the air-lock." It laughed. Pink thought it had a pretty primitive sense of humor. "Not the air-lock, but the air."

"You wanted to let your friends into the ship," accused Pink. The beast nodded. "Didn't you know that opening the air-locks without sealing off their compression rooms would kill all the humans aboard?"

"No," it said. "I want you alive. Some of you. To teach us the working of this rocket."

"Spaceship," corrected Pink without thinking. Then, "Why do you want the ship?"

Its eyes glowed fire at him. "To return to Earth," it hissed. "To return to our own planet!"

"*Your* planet!"

"As much as yours, mortal." It leaned forward, obscuring practically all the room for him. "Show me how to open the air-locks," it said.

"In a swine's eye."

"With safety to yourself, naturally," it said impatiently, "Come, show me."

"Find the machinery yourself. Experiment. Knock us all off. You'll be stuck out here with a ship you can't operate."

It plucked him off the foam-couch and hurled him against the wall, jarring him in every bone. "Show me how," it roared. "Thou zed, thou cream-faced loon—" Shakespeare? wondered Pink—"show me the controls!"

Pink dived behind a stationary chair. He drew his useless pistol and threw it at the being's face; it rebounded to the floor. He snatched up a vase of ever-blooming Jovian lilies, sent them after the gun. The monster reached for him, snarling. He leaped over its hand, hurdling it as if he were a boy crossing a fence. On the far wall were many weapons.

When he made Captain, and was given the *Elephant's Child* as his flagship, he had transferred all his belongings to it, so that nowhere in the galaxies would he ever feel at home save here. Among his keepsakes was the collection of antique weaponry handed down to him by his father, whose grandfather had bought them in the long ago from many museums. Gradually he had added to the collection, souvenirs of the planets he had explored. They were bracketed on the wall. Zulu war clubs and Kentucky muskets. Martian spear-guns and antiquated jet-pistols; a Derringer, a Colt .44, a blowpipe from an unknown Pacific island.

The alien giant was too swollen to turn swiftly. Pink reached the wall display. He tore down an assegai, whirled and thrust it at the monstrous, contorted face, searching for the eyes.

He was a mouse, bedeviling a cat with a broom straw. The thing batted his spear aside, brushed him with its fingers in a powerful swat, smashed him against his desk. A corner caught him, and he felt a rib snap. The pain enraged him.

In that desk he kept his other collection, ammunition for those weapons: it was his boast that he had at least six rounds for every projectile-thrower there. Some of it had been painstakingly fashioned in modern times from the old formulae, some miraculously preserved through the centuries. On strange planets he and Jerry used to have target practice with the ancient toys.

Now the agony and the fear forced him into a gesture. He would die in this room, for certainly he'd never tell the giant where to find the air-lock switches; he had to go down fighting, and if to fight this impervious lout was the most futile of gestures, at least he would make it a glorious one!

Fumbling, he tore open a drawer and clutched a box out of it. This was the ammunition for the Colt revolver. Gripping it in his left hand, he jumped aside as the beast put out a hand for him. He fled across the room, his ears cringing from the titanic yells of fury behind him. Now he had to get the Colt .44 from the wall.

It took him three horrible minutes of dodging and bounding to reach the weapons again. He snatched at the revolver, missed, made another desperate grab as he dropped to the rug; the second time he had it. He crawled under a chest which stood twenty inches off the floor. Luckily the alien was trying to catch him, not slay him, for it could long since have smeared him into jelly with a piece of furniture for a bludgeon.

Feverishly he loaded the chambers of the Colt. For a moment his scattered wits could not recollect just how to operate this special weapon. Then he remembered.

The fingers of the monster, sausage-sized and disgusting in their parody of humanity, came groping beneath the chest. Pinkham wormed back and came up behind it, staring into the red eyes.

With a concentration of power that he had not known he could summon, he shot out from behind the chest and vaulted onto the top of his enormous desk.

The alien, lips curling, straightened till its head brushed the ceiling. It reached out for him.

In the last split second, Pink had a vision of himself, and instead of a glorious gesture, it seemed to him suddenly that he was making an awful ass of himself. Like a man before a firing squad thumbing his nose....

Nevertheless, he aimed the Colt full into the gargantuan face before him, and pulled the trigger.

CHAPTER XIII

The dawn-man, a thing like a wet rat, bared its teeth at the dinosaur.... The Cro-Magnon faced a horde of hulking Neanderthals with a grin.... The Crusader stood with a broken sword and brandished the hilt at the charging Saracens.... The Apache drew his knife to fight a double-troop armed with carbines.... The American flung his empty M-1 in the faces of forty Japanese ... *toujours le beau geste*. Captain Pinkham, standing in his cabin aboard the spaceship *Elephant's Child* adrift in Star System Ninety, leaned forward and pulled the trigger to the two-century-old, out-moded, laughable popgun of a Colt .44 firing once and twice and again and again into the face of the bronze-yellow space-dwelling giant.

The being loomed over him, and a scream like the death-wail of a meteor lanced into his eardrums and made him gasp with anguish. He pumped the last slug into the enemy and launched himself side-long, without much hope of landing anywhere but in a bushel-sized palm. He was actually surprised when he found himself on the rug. He scrambled for cover, but before he reached it, it dawned on him that he might not need it.

The alien had sunk to its knees, was making a convulsive effort to rise but obviously lacked the strength! Somehow, and God alone knew how, Pinkham had wounded the beast!

He drew back to the wall, watching. The agony of the big humanoid was doubling it over and throwing it upright as though a volcano were erupting in its belly. It flung out an arm, struck a foam-chair, which shattered explosively. Pink put more feet between them. The convulsions were like those of a harpooned whale. Yet the creature did not seem able to move from its knees. Finally, perhaps a minute after the first throes, it collapsed all at once, a crumpled titan. Pink cautiously opened the door, just as Daley was reaching for the handle.

"What in hell did you *do*?" shouted the lieutenant.

"Shot him with a revolving-chamber pistol of the mid-19th Century," said Pink. His rib was hurting and his flesh felt bruised all over. He grinned. "Figure that one, boy. Atomic disintegrator doesn't work, antique powder-using firearm does. I'm too beat to know why."

"It's crazy," said Joe Silver flatly. They all stood around the alien, which was sprawled on its back. The red eyes gleamed, but no muscle moved in the great body. They looked for signs of the wounds, for holes or dissolving matter, for anything different; there was nothing. "What if—" began Silver.

"This can wait." Pink took a deep breath, which hurt, and cleared his throat. "There's plenty to be done. Jerry, check your scanner and detectors for possible damage. Sparks, get on the radio to *Cottabus* and *Diogenes*; tell 'em everything, and warn them to come in cautiously. Kinkare, Daley, see what you can do with the space drive."

He walked to the chest and picked up the box of Colt cartridges. He loaded the weapon again. "This works—and for now I'm not asking why. I'll stay with this scum of the void and try to get something out of him that'll clear things up. Bill, you determine our position and give it to Sparks; then start checking all the other equipment for bugs." He looked at Joe Silver. "You collect the bodies of the dead officers and prepare them for space burial."

"Why me?" blurted Silver.

Pink gave him a long look. "Because it's an officer's job. Because I tell you to. And Silver—"

"Yeah?"

"I have decided that this is no longer a grade A emergency."

Joe Silver said stiffly, "Yes, sir."

Pink activated the intercom screen, told the crew briefly what had happened. Then he raised the mutiny gates, giving a sigh of relief. "Get going," he told his officers.

"What about the girl?" asked Jerry suspiciously. "She could still be one of them."

"Leave her with me. I have six bullets in this thing and forty-eight more after that." He looked at Circe, who was pale and weary. "Sit down, O. O. Smith," he said gently. "I think you're all right. But you realize we can't chance anything till we have proof."

"I understand," she said listlessly, and dropped into a foamseat, staring at the fallen giant. The others trooped out.

With the door shut, Pink walked to the head of the creature; it was a swollen and hideous head, but by rights it should have been even more hideous, should have had half a dozen wounds. The yellow hide was unmarked. Pink said, "You're alive. Can you speak?"

"Certainly." The lips barely moved. "I am but immobilized for the moment."

"What caused it?"

The being sneered at him without answering. Pink said, "I can keep you in this state for a long time, chum. And when we've shown our heels to your brothers, I'm going to dump you out an air-lock and let you drift around between the stars."

He knelt beside it. "What did you do to the space drive?"

There was a long pause. Then it evidently made up its mind. "The drive should be in working order now. Your men will discover so when they try it. As with the other contrivances, I merely placed a temporary stasis on the protons of certain atoms, which rendered them futile. There should be no damage by this time."

Echoing his words, Pink heard the first throbbing murmur of the activated piles. He looked without conscious volition at Circe, and they exchanged smiles of vast relief.

"You'll be popping out that air-lock sooner than I'd hoped," said Pink to the giant. Then he was startled by a great peal of harsh laughter.

"Oh, you pigmy!" shouted the alien. "You flea-brained besotted fool! Your ship is out of control even now, and your hours are numbered on one hand. You've lost, and haven't the brains to see why!"

And, thought Pink, listening to the mirthless laugh while a chill sought out his belly, the monster's words did not sound remotely like a bluff.

He knew something hidden from the captain, and even in his captivity he felt himself master of the *Elephant's Child*.

Why? Why? Why?

Then Pink turned and looked at Circe.

CHAPTER XIV

Pink woke from a sweating nightmare. He rolled over and his bandaged ribs creaked with a twinge. He had slept nearly a round of the clock; the other ships must be nearing the asteroids. He got up and dressed quickly, wondering who was watching Circe now, holding the revolver on her, praying that if she should change form, the old-fashioned gun would paralyze her as it had the giant.

The giant. He had to check on that devil immediately. He called his quarters on the intercom, and Lieutenant Daley's image waved at him reassuringly. The monstrous entity had not moved; its eyes still gleamed with malevolence.

"Your hours are numbered on one hand," said Pinkham to himself. "How many fingers on that mitt, I wonder?"

And even yet he did not believe the thing had been bluffing.

He ate a brisk breakfast in the mess hall, then stalked off to his own room, trying to analyze what he now knew of the giants' nature; but Circe's face intruded in his mind. He was in love with her. If she were an alien, then he was in love with the remarkable illusion she had created, of beauty and something more: of a deep integrity of soul that shone in her eyes and touched every word she uttered. And if that *were* an illusion, then he was a cynic and quite likely a positive misanthrope from this day forward.

"Get a slug of coffee," he told Daley. "Then hare back and we'll have some brandy. It looks like a busy day." Daley went out, giving him the Colt as he left.

Sparks reported the *Cottabus* and *Diogenes* had joined their routes and would be alongside within half an hour. Pink sat down and looked at Circe, asleep on the couch. He switched his gaze after a while to the enemy, who watched him steadily. It said, "A favor, Captain."

"No," he told it.

"Only a sip, a drop of brandy to wet these cold lips!"

"Cold lips, cold heart: old proverb." For the first time in his life, Pinkham wanted to torture someone. "You bastard," he said grimly, "you murdered eleven men, eleven good officers, and spoiled Kinkare's face for him. And you want a drink of brandy."

"Rubbing alcohol, then. Only a touch on my mouth. Drop it in my eye if you wish," said the thing pitifully.

"No—hey, wait a second. You told me your breed doesn't eat or drink. You don't need any outside element. Why the alcohol?"

It heaved what was possibly a sigh. "I can absorb certain portions of the carbon atoms of *al-kuhl*," it said. "It is the greatest pleasure known to my race. And, save for the paltry drops of gin in that bottle yesterday, I have not—let us say 'tasted'—it for some hundreds of years!"

"*Al-kuhl*?" repeated Pinkham.

"The Arabic slips easily from my tongue after all those years," said the thing, half to itself.

Arabic! "You weren't lying," said Pink, "when you told us you came from Earth, then."

"I was not lying. Give me some alcohol, Captain."

"No. How do I know it won't revive you?"

"My word on it."

Pink gave the hardest and briefest bark of laughter ever heard on the spaceways. It became silent. Finally he leaned forward to stare at it. "Your eyes have faded," he said. "By God, I think you aren't paralyzed. I think you're dying!"

After another silence it said, "Yes. I am dying."

"I couldn't be happier," said Pinkham viciously. "I even hope it's painful."

"It is not. The only pain came with the passage through my molecules of the l—" it halted abruptly.

"Ah," said Pink, hefting the Colt. "Of the lead. It had to be that, of course; but thanks for reassuring me. Your tribe's allergic to lead in a rather high degree."

The flames leaped in its eyes. "I haven't told you anything so valuable," it said, with a kind of weak bravado. "There are too many of us, too few of you, and not enough lead in this whole system to conquer us. You have found the secret, but you'll never carry it back to Earth. My people shall go there instead, when they have sucked the methods from your broken body."

"When will you die?" he asked it. In spite of his hatred, humanity was rising in him. It was beaten and he was too much of a man to crow for long.

"I hear remorse in your tone," said the alien. "For the love of God, then, give me some alcohol."

He remembered the headless corpse of Wright. He said, "No."

Perhaps a quarter of an hour passed. It began to talk to itself in a monotone, a sort of feverish delirium.

"I never thought of it, at least not often, for I steered my mind away from it; but once a decade or every thirty years I would remember, perhaps one of us would say, 'Oh, to have a flagon of palm wine,' and then the agony of desire would wrack me until I must fight my body and tear it proton from proton so that I hurt badly and the remembrance would leave me. *Al-kuhl, al-kuhl!* Why in all the universe must there be this one combination of stupid elements which drags every fleck of yearning from me like water wrung from a cloth? My race needs nothing, nothing—we long for nothing—we are the only self-sufficient beings in creation—why do we remember the *al-kuhl*?"

"Like a *keef*-smoker," said Pinkham quietly. "You don't long for anything else." After a little he added, "And you fear nothing save lead."

"True," said the being distractedly. "If it were not for lead and alcohol we would be perfect gods."

"Who are you?" Pink asked, conscious that his throat was constricted with excitement. "When did you leave Earth? Why don't I recognize you, out of history? What are you called?"

He had tried too hard. The alien rolled its dimmed eyes at him. "I wish I could smile now," it said through motionless lips. "Ah, if I could only smile knowingly! You will die today with that curiosity unslaked."

He was balefully angry at that; he leaped to his feet, thrusting out the revolver. "If I throw another slug into you, it just might hurt some more," he roared.

"I would rather die in pain than see your questions answered. I know well that curiosity is the worst torment to an Englishman."

"I'm not English," said Pink.

"It's all the same. I might as well have said 'human.'"

Pink recalled that he had the Colt, and so could take a few chances. "I'll trade you. One drop of brandy for each answer."

It considered. Then, without budging, it gave the effect of a shrug. "Why not? You'll be dead soon."

"You're so sure," said Pink.

"Look at your scanner."

There was something in the words that sent Pink racing. He was only just in time to see the finish of all his new-born hopes.

The *Cottabus* and *Diogenes* were approaching at a slowing pace; the *Elephant's Child* had deactivated her drive to wait for them. Whether the captains of the sister ships saw them or not, Pink could not tell; but a number of the space giants, so reduced in size as to be mere blots on the screen, hovered in the area.

As the ships gradually lost speed, a giant appeared atop each, growing rapidly from eight feet to a thousand, till they straddled the great ships like riders on Shetland ponies.

The thing on the floor chuckled. "We are much more comfortable at that size, you see, Captain. We don't like to cramp our molecular structure into these puny dimensions. We can get into bottles—but we prefer to expand as you see." Then it laughed. "Yes, there is one of us on your own flagship at this instant, where he has been waiting, compressed, till the others caught their seats. Your ships are captured as surely as in a net. You cannot dislodge them, as you know. You must carry them to Earth so, or capitulate and let them inside."

There was no scrap of fear that he would carry these devils to Earth, naturally. But for the moment, Pink could see no sure way to escape the doom that now lay over him and all his men. They would have to remain in this asteroid belt ... perhaps forever.

CHAPTER XV

The three spaceships lay together in the void.

In the *Elephant's Child*, 57 men, seven officers, and Circe Smith were seated in the demolished recreation room, which was the only place besides the mess hall with enough chairs to accommodate them all. Radio communication with the other ships was handled over an extension set connected to the main radio room by a triple quancord laid down with furious energy by Sparks.

"What we need, and need fast, is this," said Pinkham. "A method by which we can project lead, in pellets or spray or any damn form, with accuracy, using our platinum guns. There aren't any other weapons that will fire from within."

"As you know, we've tried a few methods. One of the gunners of the *Cottabus* went into an air-lock and tossed a lead ball at the giant on the *Diogenes*, using a sling-gun. He found the range was too long; and when the captain attempted to bring the *Cottabus* nearer, the thing on *Diogenes* simply reared his ship up by shifting his weight backward. So long as they can maneuver our ships as easily as toy boats, we can't use that simple method.

"Then *Diogenes* tried to smash our giant off his perch by simply ramming him headlong. Take a look at the screen and you'll see that *Diogenes* has a dented nose for her pains. Five men died in that try."

"Captain," said a hydroponics engineer, "isn't it possible that, if we keep trying to oppose these aliens, they may simply tear their way into the ships and retaliate?"

"Quite possible. Their strength is equal to picking the *Elephant's Child* apart, I'm sure." He glared at the men. "Listen: I don't have to pull punches with you. The chances of our getting rid of these giants and making it to

Earth are damned remote. There may be a chance, though, so we have to keep trying for it.

"The most important thing we have to do is keep this life-form of the asteroids from going to Earth. We of the armada are a terrible danger to mankind, through no fault of ours. We're so many Typhoid Marys, potential carriers of something worse than any disease. Even if we're all killed, the giants might manage to learn the control of the ships, and take them to Terra alone.

"So if we can't wipe out the enemy, our only course is to destroy ourselves and our ships. Every officer in the armada has instructions to blow up his ship if the giants should break into it. The thing is so important that I've issued orders to do that even though the use of lead-thrower weapons might conquer the invaders.

"If giants seize a ship and it is not destroyed within five minutes, the other two will turn their platinum guns on it.

"Any questions?"

Jackson, who was spokesman for the crew, answered promptly, "No questions, sir."

"Okay. Now let's have the technicians' report."

A lean, angular man rose. "I've checked all the books, Captain. There is no way to substitute a charge of lead for the war-head in the curium shells."

There was a stillness. "You mean we can't shoot lead at the giants except with the few handguns in my possession," said Pink heavily.

"That's right, Captain."

"The giants are too alert to be caught that way," said Bill Calico. "I have an idea—not much of a one, but it's a try."

"Let's have it."

Jerry waved a hand. "Please remove O. O. Smith first."

Circe flared, "I think you're just afraid I'll get your job, you incompetent—"

"Take her out," said Pink to Joe Silver.

Calico then outlined his plan. Pinkham said at once, "I'll relay it to the other ships. We'll try it immediately." They all nodded agreement. Pink bent over the radio; he gave the co-captains instructions in an ancient language which they all knew, but which he felt sure would baffle any eavesdropping giants—an old, old tongue known as Pig Latin.

The officers and men scattered to their stations. Pink and Jerry took Circe to the captain's quarters, where Pink took his seat for the plan's direction, Jerry holding the Colt on Circe and the dying giant.

The space drives of the three ships were activated, and in side-by-side formation they moved slowly forward, as Pink watched keenly for a sign of objection from the gigantic "jockeys" atop them. None so far ... probably they thought Pink was under the instructions of their brother inside. Five minutes went by. Eight. Fifteen.

The largest asteroid in this part of the belt appeared ahead; it was roughly fourteen miles in diameter. The ships dipped their noses as if to pass well under it. They drew very close. Pink bent to his speaker and bellowed, "Now!"

As one, the auxiliary jets of each ship roared into life. *Cottabus* and *Diogenes* leaped out beside their flagship, and like three hotshot pilots buzzing an airdrome, the captains took the enormous spacecraft hurtling for the surface of the asteroid. Passing beneath it—or, thought Pink irrelevantly, while every nerve and sinew concentrated on the dangerous task, perhaps they were flying over it upside down—they brought their years of training and experience to bear on the problem of missing that knobbed gray surface by the smallest margin possible. *Diogenes* actually scraped her superstructure, with a noise that made every hair on her captain's neck stand upright; the others missed the planetoid by no more than a foot or two. Then they were clear and again in the void.

According to orders, they slowed at a distance of four hundred miles, and eagerly scanned one another in their viewscreens for signs of the giants.

Pink gave a loud shout of relief, and took a second to realize that his co-captains had each groaned....

The riders on *Cottabus* and *Diogenes* had vanished, and were undoubtedly back there by the asteroid, reconstituting their bashed-up bodies angrily. But Pink now heard, with a sinking heart, that his giant was still with him. It had leaned backward from the knees, lying flat on the hull which it had gripped with legs and arms. Somehow it had grasped Pink's plan in time to prepare itself. The asteroid had flattened its face and chest like a plane smoothing wood, and it was now forming itself anew, with, so they told Pink, a truly malicious scowl on its reformed lips.

Jerry was standing with a hand on Pink's shoulder; he had forgotten Circe in the tenseness of the bid for freedom. She came up on the other side and put her own hand on the captain's other shoulder. He was startled, and realizing that she could have killed or captured them both, had she wished, chalked up another doubt in his mind against the theory of her alienness.

"Please come outside," she said urgently. "I want to suggest something to you."

He rose at once and followed her to the door, while Jerry frowned and the dying giant watched him out of faded red eyes. In the hall, she said, "You're almost licked, Captain. It's time for desperation measures." Pink laughed, but before he could ask her what the hell they *had* been trying, she hurried on. "Find out where the home of these monsters is; it must be an asteroid. Then go there. Land and get out with your guns. They will think our friend in there brought us to them—and you'll have the advantage of surprise. You have about a dozen firearms that will take lead bullets. That's enough for twelve of us. I think we'd stand a chance of success."

"And if they murder us all? What about the ship?"

She said, "Leave orders to blow it up if we fail."

Pink scratched his jaw. The girl had something, or the nucleus of something, there. He saw other possibilities in it—it was tantamount to

suicide, but there was nothing else left to try. He said, "If we live through this, Circe, I'll see you make lieutenant!"

"I'd rather make ... well, never mind." She turned to go into the room. He wondered if she had had Joe Silver in mind.

CHAPTER XVI

He said to the alien, "Where's your home planetoid?"

"Why?" it asked, mockery still in its weak voice.

"I'm capitulating. I want to make a deal with your people."

It said, "Ah, the human has sense after all. Our home is the largest of the asteroids, as you call them. The one you said at supper last night had a diameter of 440 miles. We call it Oasis—and a poor one it is, when we remember Earth."

Jerry said, astounded, "*What?*" His narrow face worked with surprise.

"Shut up, Jerry." Pink still had things to find out. "Can you tell your race, telepathically, what we're doing? I don't want them to lose patience and tear up the hull. We have a very angry gent atop us."

"It's the girl," snarled Jerry, before the alien could answer. "She's got you fooled like a—like a—good Lord, Pink, are you so crazy about her you can't see she's been waiting to put this idea in your head all this time?"

"Jerry," he said through his teeth, "shut your damn mouth. I'm captain of the *Elephant's Child*."

Jerry was aiming the Colt at him; accidentally, Pink hoped. Then the O. O. said, "If I have to blow out your guts to save us, Pink, I will." His tortured features writhed with pain. "Oh, hell, boy, wake up!"

"Give me one more minute, before you fly off the handle and make an ass of yourself—and a mess of me." Pink had to have that minute. It was so vital he couldn't save himself from the angered Jerry with the one phrase that would explain everything. "Jerry, one lousy minute."

"Just tell me you don't mean it about giving in."

He couldn't. My God, he couldn't. There was too much of a chance that this brute on the floor was telepathic with its own kind. "I have to do it, Jerry," he said.

"Then I have to tie you up till you're sane," said Jerry. "First, though, I've got to make sure about this girl." The muzzle of the gun traveled toward Circe, steadily, remorselessly.

Pink had no alternative; the lives of all his men hung in that teetering balance. He jerked his right hand, and the tiny gambler's gun, the antique Derringer he had hidden up his sleeve for emergencies, slid down into his palm. Instinctively his forefinger caught the trigger and with sorrow and determination he shot Jerry high in the chest, below the clavicle and a safe distance from the lung. Jerry staggered back, a look of amazement spreading over his face; he fired the Colt wildly, putting a slug into the floor. Then he sat down, making hurt, uncomprehending noises. Circe took the gun from his hand.

Pink heard a babble from the intercom. He grasped that some of his officers must have seen the occurrence. He still hadn't much more than a minute.

"Circe," he snapped, "turn off that intercom and then lock the door." To the giant he said, "Well, can you tell your friends?"

"I would have doubted you, had you not eliminated your objecting officer," it told him. "Now I will say that I cannot communicate with my race through thought transference; but if you head for Oasis, you will be safe."

Pink breathed a little easier. He snatched down a bottle of whisky and twisted off the cap. There was another fact he must learn. He knelt and presented the bottle to the inert lips. "Have a slug," he said.

"You are sensible," said the being with satisfaction. "Pour it into my mouth or my eye; I can absorb it through any orifice." Pink poured rapidly. The liquor ran down over the yellow hide.

"No, no," gurgled the monster. "Slowly! I absorb it far more slowly than you do—"

Pink stood up. He took a drink from the bottle and handed it to Circe. His face was radiant with success. "Toast the last slim chance, honey," he said, voice cracking with relief. "We just found out what we needed to know." He retrieved the bottle after she had downed a gulp, gave it to the dazed Jerry. "Cheer up, boy," he said. "You didn't get your pink skin plugged for nothing. Now listen." Rapidly he outlined Circe's plot, then the additions he had concocted. "See why I had to do it?" he asked finally.

"Yeah. Yes, I see." Jerry blinked. "Would you spray a little sulfaheal on this hole, Pink? It hurts.... Okay, I give in. I'm with you. It's a mad notion, but I sure can't better it. I'm with you." He looked at Circe, who was already busy with sulfaspray and bandages. "But can we trust this wench, Captain? She could be a wonderful decoy for 'em."

"She's in the clear, Jerry; if we hadn't been so blasted rattled we'd have realized it long ago. There was a test she could have passed in two seconds that would have eliminated all this fat-headed suspicion."

"What?"

"Holy Holmendis, boy—*lead*! If she were alien, the touch of lead would have crisped her up with pain and paralysis." Pink opened the door then, and the first tide of officers coming to Jerry's rescue were halted at sight of Circe tending his wound. Pink said to Jerry, and to them all, "While I was standing in the hall, I took a cartridge out of this Derringer, and rubbed the lead across the back of her neck. She never winced. That vouches for her, doesn't it?"

Jerry said, "It does. Heaven forgive us for a pack of drooling imbeciles! It does indeed."

Circe stood up. She came to Pink and stared him in the face. "So that was it," she said quietly. "You were testing me. And I thought it was a caress. Oh, you—" Then she hauled off and smacked Captain John Pinkham square in the left eye.

It hurt like sin, but Pink could hardly blame her. So he apologized, without words. He took her in his arms and kissed her soundly.

And Circe kissed him back.

CHAPTER XVII

The *Elephant's Child* rested on the surface of the asteroid Oasis, a waterless, airless, cold and gray ball as uninviting as any solid body in the universe. At the entrance to Air-lock One, the officers stood in a tight group listening to Pinkham; their spacesuits were fastened on, only the helmets remaining to be donned; their gloves were the modified digitmits which enabled the wearers to hold small objects and to operate machinery or firearms.

There were seven officers, and now three crewmen in spacesuits joined them. Jerry, whose wound was nearly healed already, thanks to the sulfaspray, passed out guns from the captain's collection. Each man carried a handgun, or, in two cases a long rifle. The ammunition for all amounted to one thousand two hundred and five rounds, in the main handgun cartridges. Pink had decided against using the Kentucky rifle, which was difficult for a modern man to load.

At each belt hung half a dozen curious objects, shaped like bottles but of a dull gray color and rough surface texture. These sloshed and gurgled when the men moved.

Pink concluded his instructions on the use of the weapons and the gray bottle-things. "Remember," he said, "keep in touch by your radio, and don't travel more than a mile from the ship if you can help it. Try the lure first, then when the containers are full, the guns. Be sure to keep at least one portion of lure for emergency; don't use it all." He grinned. "And don't drink any of the lure."

The men laughed, easing tension. Pink went on. "You'll have some trouble adjusting to the gravity—our average weight will be six or seven pounds, or, in Jerry's case, three or four." They chuckled again. "Remember we don't know how they'll react, so keep your minds open and use your own judgment in everything. Now let's go."

As he turned and activated the sliding panel that covered the first chamber of the air-lock, and they all settled their helmets down onto their shoulders and fastened them, an eleventh figure joined them, its helmet already in place. Jerry, shaking his head reprovably, handed this one the last weapon, a small automatic from the so-called "Gangster Age" of America. Then they went into the air-lock and the door shut tight behind them.

In the control room, Jackson and a few others watched tensely on the viewscreen as one by one the landing party jumped to the planetoid. He looked at his watch. "Two hours," he said. "Oh my God, I hope they make it!" For in precisely two hours, if they had not returned to the ship, Jackson was to blow it to metallic dust, and all the remaining humans with it.

Forty miles above the surface of the small world, the *Diogenes* and the *Cottabus* cruised at a good rate of speed, to keep their hulls free of hitchhiking giants while watching the progress of the expedition.

On the floor of Pinkham's quarters, the dying alien lay alone and cursed weakly at the sly and crafty doublecross he had so stupidly fallen for. He called upon a number of strange gods to curse these mortals; among the names he uttered was that of a deity called Allah.

In dressing room B, a technician discovered a crewman who was sitting against a wall rubbing his skull. "Somebody bopped me," said the man glumly. "I'm supposed to go out there and blast giants, dammit. Who could have swiped me so hard?"

Pink took an experimental hop. It should have carried him, at Terra gravity, about two feet. He soared over a hillock and came down gently on a plain of rock that looked like lava; his hop had carried him some scores of yards. He felt for an instant like a kid let loose on a wonderful playground. Then he snapped into it and began to scan the terrain for signs of life.

To the right was the mountain they had seen from the descending ship, with its irregular rows of gaping holes which suggested caves and therefore possible habitations. It wouldn't take more than five minutes to reach them

at an easy amble, or a minute at a brisk walk; about a mile away, they seemed.

Then with a horrified start he remembered the giant who had been atop his ship. Washington Daley had been delegated to deal with it—and Pink had forgotten, had not even glanced back to see how his lieutenant was making out! He whirled neglecting caution, and fell on his face. Luckily he came down like a big bulky feather, and caught himself and bounced up again, a rubber ball of a man on this alien world Oasis.

He was just in time to see the giant, bending forward over the front of the ship, begin to blur and stream downward toward the tiny figure of the human who stood below him. In a moment he resembled a cloud of tobacco-smoke, drawn into the gray container in Daley's hand. He vanished entirely, Daley clapped on the sealing lid, and gave a triumphant wave to his captain. Pink blew out a breath of gratitude and remorse; he'd have to be on his toes from now on, really vibrant with watchfulness. Laxity in one thing could lose this weird battle.

Strung out in a straggling line of erratically progressing units, the men of Earth headed for the caves. In a time so short as to be faintly ridiculous, they were moving up the mountainside. The gaping holes *were* caves, and obviously deep ones. Pink stood at the entrance of one for a moment, checking on the number of his men; then he waved a hand over his head, and entered the great den. Behind him came another figure, one whose slimness told him it was probably Jerry.

Their chest lamps lit up the interior, which was as gray, knobby, and featureless as the outside world. Pink held his Colt .44 in his right hand, one of the bottles in his left. The technicians of the *Elephant's Child* had worked like drudges over those bottles....

Every bottle of liquor aboard had been requisitioned. The liquid had been poured into plastic containers; only a few spoonfuls had been left in each bottle.

Then lead, melted down and beaten into sheets, was wrapped around each bottle, forming a thin and chinkless layer over all the glass but the lip; and the lead was painted with tough plastikoid paint, which covered it with a

film one-twentieth of an inch thick. Caps of lead were made for the bottles. At the end of a couple of hours, they had sixty-six bottles, glass inside, lead covered, and topped off with plastikoid which would conceal the presence of lead from any known test short of X-ray.

Each of the eleven men carried six of these bottles, then, actually lead containers, but apparently plastikoid; the lead stoppers were concealed in joerg-hide bags. If the giant who had been beaten in the spaceship was a criterion, the enemy would not recognize the presence of lead until it actually touched them—and then, thought Pink, with a quick prayer, it would be too late for them.

Beaming the radio to a distance of ten feet, he said, "Hey, Jerry, want to lay a bet on who bags the first brute?"

"Sure. Twenty bucks says I get him. And don't call me Jerry," said the sweet, quiet, and thoroughly startling voice of organicus officer Circe Smith.

CHAPTER XVIII

I didn't have to do it, Pink thought. I could have changed the orders when I saw that no giants were in sight. We could have blasted the one on top of the *Elephant's Child* and taken off and got out of range of 'em and gone back to Earth. We were free in that instant, when Daley caught the alien and corked it up in the lead bottle with the liquor that drew it. We shouldn't have come out here to the caves. We should have left Oasis to itself.

He knew that he had squelched this idea before it was born, because he had longed for a good fight; he recognized this alien life-form as unclean, and he'd wanted to stamp it out, or make a dent in its numbers anyway. So he'd gone ahead with the project, and now here was Circe, risking her life to be with him, and if anything happened to her he'd kill himself ... well, at least he'd mop up the giants who'd drawn him here, he'd make a pogrom, a massacre to avenge her....

She isn't dead, boy, he told himself. She's just in danger. Don't get distracted.

"Stick close," he told her shortly. "I'll whale the pants off you when we get back for this trick, but for now, stay close and keep your eyes open."

Then he tuned his radio outward. "Report," he said. His men checked in. Nothing had been sighted thus far.

So it was Captain Pinkham's luck to meet the first alien.

Rounding a turn, he saw that the cavern enlarged, became a huge grotto; seated around its walls, staring at one another in the uncanny silence of this airless place, were many of the giant life-forms. Only one was near him, and this monster was first to see him; it leaped at him with the abruptness of perfect muscular control, its feet a little off the floor of the cavern—Pink recalled that these things could levitate themselves in space.

There was no time to use the lure of the bottle. He threw up his old revolver and fired point-blank, catching Circe by the arm and hurling her to one side

as he did so. The giant recoiled as at a wall, doubled and thrashed in agony. Pink, rooted to the spot, waited to see the effects. Would one slug of lead be enough? And evidently it was, for suddenly the thing fell and writhed futilely on the ground, flinging its arms wide with diminishing strength. In a moment it was helpless, its only motion a slight heaving as its life retreated far within the gigantic bulk. Its red eyes glowed at him malevolently in the glare of his chest-lamp.

Strangely enough, none of the others had seen him yet, nor had any of them moved from the sitting posture. Swiftly he unhooked four of his six bottles and set them in a row on the rock floor. Circe returned, having bounced like a bit of india-rubber a dozen yards before checking herself. "You big bully," she said over the radio, and, her tuning being for distance, Daley in another cave said "What? Who?" in a startled tone.

Pink dragged her, five pounds of resistance on the tiny planet, and plunked her down behind a rock. "Sit tight," he said urgently. "Keep the gun handy. And check that you haven't spilled any alky—we'll need all the bottles we can get." Then he turned and shone his beam full on the traps he had set out. One of the aliens was bound to spot them soon.

When one did, it came at them with a rush, snarling soundlessly as it sought the source of the illumination. Towering over the insignificant bottles, it halted, shuddered, stared down—Pink held his breath—and the incredible disintegration and flow of the body happened. The giant entered the bottle, leaving not a trace of its thousand-foot carcass outside. Restraining a desire to leap out and cork up that bottle, Pink waited. The movement of this alien had caught the red eyes of others; they advanced, some hurrying and some cautious, till two more had scented or sensed the alcohol and poured into bottles. Pink kept his eyes on the little containers. Beside him, Circe gazed with horrified fascination at the coming gargantuas....

A trio of them were misting now; this was the test. One empty bottle remained. What would happen, Pink wondered; was one giant per bottle the maximum content? The three streaked down, like smoke sucked into a

vacuum cleaner. They jetted into the bottles, and again nothing was left outside. Pink said "Good," in a mutter, and forced himself to wait longer. The more the merrier. How long would it take them to soak up the alcohol? His captive had said the process was slow. How slow? How long did he dare wait?

He caught eight more, then the next hesitated, looking around for the source of light. Either he was capable of more resistance to the seductive element, or the bottles were now full of churning, lapping aliens. There were more of them approaching, but he didn't dare wait any longer. He jumped forward, potting at the foremost.

It went down thrashing, and he shot over it into the yellow of them. Emptying the Colt, he reloaded hastily and plugged or nicked another half dozen. By then he was standing over the bottles. Nothing had emerged yet. He stooped to slam on the caps.

With horrible speed two giants pounced for him; he saw them out of the corner of his eye. Then they slammed full length to the rock, and he knew that Circe's automatic was in action. He corked the last bottle and slung it on his belt, put down the two remaining containers. Then he turned and made a mighty jump away from them, dragging Circe with him. The aliens came on.

Some of them could withstand the pull of the liquor, and some could not. There was a phalanx of them coming, for a good third of the growth's population had seen the disturbance by now. Any who appeared to be passing by the bottles, he and Circe shot; those who hesitated by them and were drawn in exchanged their liberty for their lives, because in two minutes Pinkham had feverishly capped them into the leaden prisons. He hooked them onto his belt and said into the mouthpiece before his lips, "Go for the entrance, baby. I'll cover you."

"No!" she snapped back. "You are not going to sacrifice—"

"Sacrifice, nuts!" he yelled. "This is part of the plan you'd have heard if you hadn't sneaked into the landing party at the last minute. Get going!" He was reloading as he spoke.

She ran, almost flying down the cave-tunnel with great leaps that covered many yards each. He fired three times at the giants who now loomed above him; then he was running too, stretching his legs and throwing every ounce of power and panic in his frame into the incredible jumps. And apparently he had the advantage over the brutes, for he began to outdistance them; their mass being greater, he was helped by the lack of gravity.

Then a rock crumbled under his toe, he was thrown off balance, his momentum shot him full tilt against the wall of the passage, and his head cracked sharply against the inside of his helmet. He knew that he was losing consciousness, and that he had fallen and was rolling straight into the path of the raging aliens.

CHAPTER XIX

Thought came to him before feeling. Pink lay in a hazy world of shifting ideas, of coagulating and disintegrating forms of cerebration. He was not wholly unaware of what had happened, but his groping mind was more concerned with piecing together certain facts and fancies, reaching conclusions he felt were of the first importance. If his body were in danger, it must help itself, for Pink had other fish to fry.

As he sank into thick-witted stupor, then fought up to the light of reason, feeling his mind ebb and flow with ideas and mad conjectures, it came to him that he knew the truth of the giants, and had not stated it to himself before in so many words. He had deliberately shied away from it, in fact, for it stank of fantasy, of crack-brained superstition and imbecilic fairy tales....

Admit it, he told himself, giggling in the far reaches of his brain. Admit it. You know about these critters, Pink.

Yes. I know about them. They are the djinn.

The djinn that Solomon ruled, conquered, and put down. The enormous entities of Arabian Nights tales, whose habits and character and shrewd-canny-gullible ways of thinking were all set down in the books and marveled at by people even yet, hundreds and hundreds of years after they had been written. Marveled, sure, but marveled only at the imaginations that had produced them. And it wasn't imagination at all. It was the real actual goddam solid thing.

The djinn had been at once a triumph and a sad mistake of nature. They were the ultimate in physical perfection, needing nothing, living perfectly independently, huge and strong and yet able to assume the tiniest proportions when needed. Wounds were nothing, for their makeup was such that their molecules compressed away from weapons, to ooze back into place when danger was past. They controlled the forces of the atom, at least

to the extent of ability to freeze protons, and probably they could do many more stunts in that line.

All their powers, being far in advance of man's, had been misunderstood and misinterpreted in the old days. So when a djinni let his atoms flow into the most convenient shape for getting into bottles for alcohol or for passing an obstruction he didn't care to demolish, it seemed to men that he turned into a cloud of smoke. Hadn't Pink used that simile to himself?

The fact that they could levitate, probably by control of the force of gravity, and fly through the thin upper air, by some process Pink only dimly understood, was certainly enough to stamp them as minor gods in Arabia and all the other countries they had infested.

Sure, they were a triumph of nature; but also a colossal failure. For they were, despite their scientific powers, too stupid for pity, too insensitive for compassion, and too egocentric for tolerance. Their nature was that of the most depraved human being. Consequently they'd been beaten. In spite of their terrific strength, they'd been beaten by puny, unscientific, bumbling man.

How?

Well, Solomon had known about the lead. He'd sealed them in copper bottles with stoppers of lead, and Pink would bet a buck those bottles had been lead-lined, too. Solomon hadn't gone far enough, of course; he'd thrown the bottles into the sea, and sometimes they'd washed up and been opened. For bait, he must have used alcohol, too, since it was the Achilles heel of the djinn.

Had he nailed the entire breed of djinn in his lifetime? It seemed likely, for the legends stopped soon afterwards, didn't they? Pink wasn't sure. Anyway, there sure as hell weren't any djinn on Earth today.

How had they gotten out here, all the way to Star System Ninety? That was beyond conjecture. How come the first brute he had contacted, old Ynohp the phony Martian, spoke a kind of messed-up Shakespearian lingo? God only knew.

Now he'd discovered them, anyway, and they wanted to go back to Earth. If they got hold of the *Elephant's Child*, they might do it. He couldn't let them succeed ... but then the crew was going to blow up the ship in two hours.

Two hours!

Pinkham's mind beat wildly at the prison of lethargy and dimmed consciousness. How long had he lain here? Where *was* he lying? Did the giants, the djinn, have him? And Circe?

Circe. Making the most intense and painful effort of his life, Pink dragged his eyes open and tried to sit up. He had to find Circe.

He saw nothing, and there was a weight on him that held him flat on his back. Either his lamp was broken, or he was blind.

Sensibly, though it cost him untold hell to be sensible, Pink lay quietly until he felt all his faculties under control. Then he made an abrupt and violent attempt to sit up. Whatever it was that was holding him down rolled off. He managed to get to his knees, one hand on the rock beneath him, and then arms were thrown around him and a body pressed against his.

The horror of absolute blackness and the unknown predicament he was in proved just a little too much for him. Captain Pinkham gave a loud, long scream of fear.

CHAPTER XX

"What is it?" asked Circe, her voice wild with fright. "Pink, darling, what is it? Are you hurt?"

It was Circe who was holding him. Sobbing with relief, he said into the radio, "No, no, baby, I'm fine, I'm wonderful."

Her answering cry was a tiny sound of joy and affection. "I wish I could kiss you," she said, "but there are two spacesuits in the way."

He found her hand and squeezed it hard. "I wish I could see you, Smitty," he said, "but either I'm blind or—"

"Oh, I should have told you at once. I turned off our chest-lamps."

"But where are we?"

"Not far from where you fell." Her hand was a comfort in his, as much so as a squad of Space Marines marching down to greet them would have been. "You flew past me like a kicked football, Pink, and I veered off to see if you were okay. When you fell and didn't move, the first thing I did was snap off the lamps. About a second afterwards, the giants went past. They have a weird kind of glow in the dark. I think they could have seen us—certainly they don't exist blind in this ink-pool—but there's a ridge of rock and we were pretty well hidden behind it. I dragged you about forty feet and found this hole and we've been lying here ever since."

"The others," he said, remembering.

"I've been in touch with Daley all the time. He and Calico ran into a lot of trouble and Calico got a broken leg. Joe Silver took him back to the ship. Daley and Jerry found each other and fought off a horde of giants. Every man got all his bottles full of 'specimens' and then used up most of his lead. Sparks—" she hesitated a moment—"Sparks is dead. So is Randy Kinkare."

Pink said quietly into the dark, "I don't think Randy would mind that. He didn't have much of a face left."

"Whatever that first one did to burn him, that's the weapon they used on him and Sparks. Both of them were burnt to a...."

"Okay," he said. "Okay, okay."

"So Daley said they'd try to find us; but everyone got mixed up in the caves, and there hasn't been a sign or sound of anyone for half an hour."

"Half an hour?" The flesh chilled down his back. "How long have I been out?"

"I don't know. A couple of hours."

"My Lord! The *Elephant's Child* is to be blown up two hours from the minute we left her!"

"Daley said Silver was going to countermand that order."

Pink groaned heavily. "He can't! Jackson had my absolute command on it, and Jackson would see himself and Silver and the whole lot of them dead before he'd fail to carry out a command of mine. That was important; we calculated that two hours was more than enough to expend all the ammo, and that if we weren't back by then, the hull would be crawling with giants. Every bullet aboard came out with us. We couldn't take the chance of the ship blasting off with giants on her, maybe in the form of gnats or smoke or —no," he finished, "Silver, if he tried to change my order, is either dead or unconscious or in the brig right now." He lifted his left hand. "I've got to check the time," he said, and for an instant switched on the dial of his glove watch.

It was a hundred and two minutes after landing time.

He had eighteen minutes to get back to the *Elephant's Child*.

CHAPTER XXI

He beamed his radio to its fullest extent. "Daley," he said. "Daley, come in. Jerry. Cohan. Caleskie. Kole. Come in, anyone."

"Kole here, Captain. I'm on the plain. It was all fouled up in that cave."

"What can you see?"

"They've got the big trap out of the ship," said the distant, tinny voice of the crewman. "What a waste of good liquor! Beg your pardon, Captain."

"Giants?" Pink asked.

"About a million of 'em, all headed for the trap. We should have tried it first. Did you know Caleskie got his?"

"No, I didn't know. We had to suck them out into the open before they could spot the trap, Kole. Is Lieutenant Daley in sight?"

"I saw him a while back, sir. He was headed out of a cave with the O. O. But it turned out they were going the wrong way, because I—"

"Thanks, Kole. Report aboard ship. Don't get mixed up with the giants."

"They won't bother me, sir. It's like a bunch of big bees tearing after a vat of nectar out here. They don't even see me."

"What did he mean?" asked Circe. "A trap?"

"Plastikoided lead box, twelve by twelve feet. All the alcohol in the ship was poured into it an hour after we left, and they set it outside as far from the ship as they could safely go. I didn't know it would work, but it was a try. It still doesn't affect Jackson's orders. I didn't know, I still don't know, but that some of the djinn can resist the stuff."

"The *what*?" she asked, startled.

"Never mind. We've got about a quarter hour to get back. Where in blazes is Daley?"

A small, weakened voice said in his ear, "I'm here, Pink. Jerry too. But he's out cold. I don't feel so hot myself."

"Daley!" he roared. "Where are you?"

"Big cave, about size of Texas. Came across it trying to find our way out. Lot of giants here. One of them saw us and picked us up and banged us together. I think he must be saving us for a hearty lunch. He's sitting ten feet off watching us."

"Your guns, boy!"

"No good. All the slugs are gone. Pink," said the weak, worried voice, "do you know what time it is? You better hightail it for the ship."

"I'm coming after you," said Pink.

"Don't be a heroic son of a space cook, Pink!"

"Shut up and lie still." He switched his radio to close quarters. "Honey, you make for the *Child*. I'll pick up the boys and be right with you."

"You're crazy," she said flatly. "I wouldn't leave you if—"

He had switched on his chest lamp and drawn out a pen and paper from his pocket kit. "I'm going to write Jackson a note countermanding the order. Take it to him."

"You're wasting your time," she said grimly. "If you're going into the cave, I'm going too."

"You fathead, you can save the ship by taking this note."

"You're doing it to save me. I won't. What happens to you happens to me."

"My God the whole damn ship—"

"Doesn't matter to me if you're gone, Pink." Her voice was strange, half-hysterical and oddly loving. "I don't know why I feel this way about you,

Pink. I've never been in love before. If I hadn't been stranded, I'd be old enough to be your mother. You're a big cold dedicated spaceman, but I love you. Lead the way, if you're going to make a fool of yourself."

In that moment Pink learned wisdom, for he gave up his attempt at a note and bounded to his feet. Some well-spring of instinct had told him that a man could never argue a woman out of anything.

"Got your automatic?"

"And a full clip left."

"Come on, baby."

They ran down the cavernous corridor, grotesque tiny fleas making unbelievable leaps. In seconds they had entered the grotto.

Many, too many giants were still there. Some of them seemed not to have seen anything of the hectic occurrences, others were standing in small groups (if anything formed of thousand-foot beings could be called small, thought Pink as he rocketed along) motioning hugely to one another.

"Stay close," he called to Circe. She was moving as fast as he, her light frame an asset. They ran down one side of the cavern, ignoring giants who did not at first notice them. Pink beamed out his radio and said, "Daley! Locate yourself." "I'm in the cavern."

"You ape," said Daley, "why'd you come? We're in front of an entrance that's the middle one of three. Spot it?"

"I see four sets of three," said Pink, heading for the nearest as his heart sank.

"Sorry, I can't see any more than these. Be careful, old boy." There was a pause. "We have twelve minutes left," said the senior lieutenant calmly.

The first of the triple entrances—had they been built, or were they natural?—was at hand. Three gigantic djinn sat near them. The ground, uneven as a

lava flow solidified, might have concealed a score of humans. Pink gave a high leap, surveyed the terrain as he floated down. Nobody here. But a giant saw him.

Pink shot him in the ankle and dived like a skin-swimmer between his legs. He had lost Circe. He pivoted, wide-eyed, and saw her beneath the skyscraper torso of a bending giant. Their lamps were drawing attention now. He saw her shoot the titan and fly off at a tangent, disappearing behind others of the enemy.

Sixth sense warning prickled his neck. He whirled again to pot at a groping hand the size of a ten-story house; the hand contracted, bunched, groped outward and was hidden as the body fell upon it. Pink saved himself by a frantic backward shove that jolted him into the wall. Circe sped by and he followed, shouting into his radio. They joined hands and aimed for the next entrances, a mile down the hall.

Four speeding djinn abruptly barred their path, express-flying down on them.

CHAPTER XXII

"I know how a fly feels," gasped the girl. "I'll never wield another swatter."

Pink had emptied his Colt. He tried reloading on the run, or rather, he thought wryly, on the bounce, but it was a tricky job. And he had only about a dozen shells left.

Circe shot another angry monster. If lead took just two seconds longer to work on those immense systems, Pink realized, he and Circe would have been squashed long since. They had fought down half the hall, past three of the triple entrances, and now there was only one to check on. If Daley and Jerry weren't there, they might as well give up; the ship would go scattering into the void in about five minutes.

They had to watch backwards as well as before them. The giants were nearly all in motion now, the milling of such throngs of them having caught the vacant stares of those who had been gaping at nothing.

And suddenly there was Daley, standing before them and holding the limp spacesuited form of Jerry Jones in his arms. "Hey, Pink," he said, "down here."

Pinkham blasted two foemen in the hands as they grasped for him. "Like fighting giant redwoods," said Circe indistinctly, panting. They joined the two officers, jumping and digging in their heels to halt sharply.

"We have to make for that," said Pink, waving across the grotto at the invisible hole which led to the plain. "Straight through these dam Alps of aliens." He shot over Circe's head. "How you feeling?"

"Little rocky," said Daley.

"Take the Colt, then." He shoved it into the lieutenant's hand and hoisted Jerry like a rag out of Daley's arms. "Come on," he barked. "And don't get slapped. That's an order." He ran.

Their combined chest-lamps beamed out a couple of miles as they headed for the home stretch. Across the light passed the giant djinn, moving to waylay them, standing mountain-steady to intercept. Circe rocketed into the lead and led them on a zigzag course that avoided the vast parodies of human feet which barred the way like river dams.

They had had uncanny luck thus far. Why? Probably the giants were sluggish from long inactivity. Too, Pink knew, it's hard to hit a small darting object that's not more than one-one-hundred-and-sixty-sixth of your size. And the lead slugs of their guns had turned many sure captures into escapes.

But now the guns were empty.

"Feet," said Pink, quoting an ancient joke, "feet, do your stuff!"

Circe was amazing, dodging and pirouetting and even hurdling the gross feet when they couldn't be side-stepped. Pink gamely followed her lead, Jerry now slung over his shoulder. There was panting in his ears—Daley must be having tough going. Then he recognized the deep wheezing breaths: they were his own.

"Daley?" he gasped.

"Right behind you, Pink."

The mouth of their corridor was in sight. Then there were djinn, a row of them standing side by side with feet firmly planted to make a barrier. My God, he thought, this is it! Circe vanished, he did not see where. The feet were there, and arms reaching down for him. He pitched sideways, flipped by a questing finger; crashed on his shoulder, rolled, still miraculously hanging onto Jerry. The brashest course was the only one. He gathered himself and jumped onto a toe. It was as hard as the rock. And this thing, he said irrelevantly in his mind, this massive piece of solidity can vaporize into a gin bottle! He slid down the toe and scuttled ratlike under the lofty legs and was in the clear. The tunnel, itself an astoundingly high cave, appeared directly before him.

There was no time now to look for Circe and Daley, vital though their safety was to him. He carried Jerry into the tunnel and loped with

multiyarded strides for the plain. He could not see any lamp-glare but his own. But he could not stop. Humanity in that instant overcame all his private desires. There were fifty-eight souls who would be blotted out if he didn't make the *Elephant's Child* in two minutes. Sixty-one, if you counted Daley and Circe and Pink himself. In less than one of those minutes he had traversed the tunnel and come out above the plain.

The ship was still there. Some distance away from it stood the big trap, and even yet giants were speeding toward it from all points of the compass. Pink gasped a breath and launched himself out and down the steep hillside. He took it all in that one jump. As he was landing, a curiously weightless man on this tiny planetoid, Jerry came to life and writhed suddenly in his arms, upsetting his balance. Pink fell and his left ankle shrieked with pain as it turned under him and was smashed into the gray rock by his dropping body and Jerry's.

He sprawled full length and knew his ankle was broken or sprained. Jerry rolled free and collapsed, sighing into his radio. Pink tried to stand and the ankle buckled. Horrified, he looked at his glove watch.

He had seventy seconds.

CHAPTER XXIII

Pink bellowed, "Jerry!" He yelled it so loudly that his ears protested at the helmet echoes. Jerry said groggily, "Wha?"

"Stand up!"

Jerry sat up and at once fell flat again. "Judas priest, I can't. That you Pink?"

"We've got to make the ship," he bawled, twisting with pain.

"Make it what?"

"If you want to live, son—stand up!"

Jerry got to his knees. "I'm sick, Pink."

He had used up six seconds. He had to try it on his own. Jerry was too far gone to function properly.

Pink stood up. His teeth were grinding together like millstones, but he didn't stop. He knew pain and dread and rage that shook him. He faced the ship, and stood on his good leg and bent his knee and gave a tremendous hop.

As he fell on his face, an unknown number of yards nearer, a great alien passed him, the mighty sole slamming the rock a few feet from his prone body. Pink struggled upright and balanced on the right leg and made another hop. This time he didn't fall when he lit. Praying thankfully for the two seconds that saved, he sprang again. And fell, painfully.

It was a useless piece of bravado. It was impossible to reach the ship. He got up and leaped. He fell. He forced himself up and sprang and didn't fall and sprang and fell.

He couldn't waste a blink of time in looking at the watch or yelling with agony or even praying now. He went through his routine automatically, his mind a thing of terror. Eons seemed to pass him by as he hopped over the djinn-infested gray rock plain.

A superb spring took him abreast of the big lead vat. What wild scenes of delirium were going on there he could not even imagine. He hopped twice more and was at the ship.

At any instant, at this very second the ship would blossom into red-white carnage of metal and flesh and death. Impossibly Pink stood on his good leg and aimed for the scanner-port which he knew, or hoped, connected with the screen in the control room where Jackson sat.

Now the *Elephant's Child* was done, Jackson was shoving the switch over, now it would all disintegrate in his face. He flew through space and struck the hull flat; all the perishing strength in him glued his body, his fingers in their thin gloves, to that curving surface. His great helmet, with the crest insignia of comets and spears that marked him as the captain, hung for a short time directly in front of the scanner-port.

He shook his head violently, back and forth, back and forth. *No*, he screamed in his mind, wishing insanely that his radio were constructed so that it could be heard in the ship. *No*, he shook, *no, no!*

Then his precarious grip on the smooth side slid off, and Captain Pinkham fell lightly but finally to the asteroid.

He lay there unresisting. He had done his best, absolutely his damned best. Let it blow. Let it blow.

After a while he looked at his glove watch. It was two minutes past the time for explosion.

He had saved the *Elephant's Child*.

He turned and looked across the plain and saw, beyond the great trap into which giant-smoke was settling, two figures come running toward him with unearthly strides. One of them halted and gathered Jerry into its arms. The other reached Pink and knelt beside him and hugged him tightly. Pink laughed, a passionate sound of relief. Circe said, "You made it, darling. You made it!"

The air-lock began to open.

CHAPTER XXIV

The djinni on the floor said, "I concede this battle to you, Captain. I have seen the ending on the screen. But there are others out there, on Oasis and in the void. We'll win to Earth some day in spite of this victory."

Pink, snugly ensconced in a foam-chair with his sprained ankle propped up, his surviving officers seated around him, and Circe on the arm of the deep chair, took another drink of lemonade. He made a face, almost asked for brandy, and remembered. He said, "Maybe the same way you came to these asteroids?"

"No, not that. That way went only in one direction, through the fourth dimension, I think. The people of the continent you call Atlantis built that way for our use, though much against our desire; and the machine they made was so fearful that its use sank their whole land into the sea. They were a great, scientific people, and we have not their skill."

"Atlantis too," Jerry said. "Now we've heard everything, all but the Little People and Pan."

The djinni did not seem to hear him. Its eyes, like dead coals now in the yellow face, rested on Pink. "It was clever of you to recognize us from history."

"You go into bottles, speak Arabic, fly and are humanoid in form. I should have guessed your race hours before."

"We are not humanoid. You are djinnoid. We came before you in evolution."

"How do you know?" asked Daley.

"Our legends ... I cannot tell, being no more than six or seven thousand years old myself. But we are told we predate man."

"When were you relegated to this belt?" asked Jerry, who was still a little pale. "You were around in Solomon's time."

"Yes. He caught and trapped most of my race—we are not so numerous as you cursed rabbits—by the same means you used. One great vat he collected, after some years of the bottles, and sealed up a multitude of my folk and cast them off a ship; somehow the currents dragged the box to Atlantis. There my people were freed, and set about to conquer the land. But the Atlanteans captured them after several decades and, having constructed the terrible machine, sent them off to this forsaken hole in space. The cataclysm the machine made—evidently they hadn't been so clever as they thought, may Allah rot their souls!—set off volcanic action, which eventually sank their country. It was never very large, anyway...."

"How do you know this?" asked Pink. He was a bit breathless; at any moment the being might decide to shut up and die. He had to satisfy his curiosity about the space-dwellers.

"I was one who escaped Solomon. I made my way to England after a few centuries of wandering, of being a minor deity here and there, and in England in the late seventeenth century I met a brother. He had been on Atlantis, and hovering above it had seen the exiling of our race and the death of the land. Together we determined to find the machine, repair it if need be, and bring back our people. We thought they were somewhere in the bowels of the earth, or perhaps held invisible in the machine itself.

"We felt we were the last djinn at liberty. We went under the sea—"

"How?" This was Bill Calico, nursing a broken leg on the couch.

"We are oblivious to our surrounding elements, so long as they are not too dense for us to penetrate. After a year or two we found the machine. It was partially destroyed, but so simple that we easily repaired it. We could not see how it could make our race vanish, but as we are indestructible except by lead, and the Atlanteans did not know of that metal, we knew that they had vanished rather than died. When we had the machine fixed, I volunteered to try it out and see what happened. He was to reverse it and draw me back shortly."

The monstrous thing sighed. "It was too complex for us. First I found myself floating a mile or so off Oasis, and then my friend joined me. His adjustments had failed. The cursed machine had relegated us both."

"God bless Atlantis," murmured Circe.

"I presume you are taking the bottles and the great vat of lead back to Earth?" it queried slyly.

"Not on your life," said Daley. "As soon as we're out of System Ninety, we'll drop 'em into the void. Your damn tribe will be marooned properly this time."

"But they are alive in those prisons!" it shouted, its eyes momentarily reddening again. "Such compression is most irksome to them, and they must constantly shift about to keep clear of the lead in the stoppers. It's inhuman!"

"You're right," said Pink grimly. "It's djinnlike."

"How did you learn English?" asked Jerry suddenly. "Modern English, I mean."

"You forget; when you brought me aboard, in the guise of a Martian, you handed me a lingoalter. It was simple to speak the English of the 17th century into it and listen as modern speech came out."

"That's another thing. That Martian suit—how'd you get it?"

"They had come this far. We found the suit, with its occupant long turned to dust. We kept it for such emergencies. When the space ships foundered nearby a few years ago, we refrained from molesting this woman, thinking that she might some day be a fine decoy."

"You watched me in the suit," said Circe.

"We did. We had not seen a human in a long time." The djinni paused, then said, "The Martians had space travel when Earthmen were barbarians. They came to Terra, and we, sensing danger in them, drove them out. We saw to it that the Martians would tell tales of the horrors of Earth life, and never come back."

"By God," said Pink, "that's why they never colonized Earth, though they had spaceships! It's one of the biggest problems we've known."

"Then I've solved it for you. Will you do me a favor in return?"

"What?"

"Have you any lead left?"

"A little."

"Then lay it on my chest, and give me a quick death."

"Get it," Pink said to Daley. The lieutenant started a protest. Pink said, "My Lord, can't we afford to be merciful now? After all that slaughter?" And Daley went to find the lead.

Circe said, "Why do you want to go to Earth so badly? What's there that you want? You're such an independent form of life...."

"Atmosphere," said the djinni.

"But you don't breathe!"

"We do, however, talk; and we cannot hear each other in a vacuum. We wanted to find Earth again and know the pleasure of communication. On Oasis we had to talk with our hands." It groaned, grotesquely human in its agony. "Can you imagine living for centuries without the joy of conversation?" it asked pitifully.

Circe shook her head. "I don't much blame you," she said in a small voice.

Daley came back. He handed a small rough bar of lead to Pink. The Captain's mind seethed with questions he longed to ask; but the reaction of the battle was settling in with vengeance, and he could not see this great paralyzed brute live on because of his own more or less idle curiosity. He bent forward from the chair. "Sorry," he said, and dropped the bar onto its chest.

"Wait!" said Jerry. "How did you know how to spell *phony*?"

The djinni made a small hissing noise that had something in it of contentment. Its eyes turned jetty, and they knew it was dead.

"It died happy," said Daley to the slim O. O. "It knew it was leaving us a problem that we'd never solve. What a—what a malicious character it was!"

"Poor devil," said Circe. "No conversation for five hundred years!"

CHAPTER XXV

Four days later Pinkham and Circe stood quietly before a scanner screen, Pink leaning on a cane, and watched the great lead vat and then the multitude of bottles go tumbling into space. "We are giving them a chance of survival," mused Circe. "There's about one chance in a billion that some day they'll be found and released again."

"I wonder," said Pink, "if they did predate man in evolution? Or if they were originally native to another planet that expelled 'em? There were always legends of giants and ogres and djinn and demons on earth, myths that started to die out about the time this late friend of ours left the globe for good. Maybe the djinni developed side by side with man, but was limited because of his flaws. There are a million life-forms in the universe so alien to man as to be unexplainable, and a lot of them are right home on Terra."

Circe shook her dark head. "Is the whole thing real, Pink? Or is it a fantasy we've uncovered out here in the void?"

"Every damn thing about them is scientifically possible. But I know how you feel—it seems like a fairy story. If so many good guys weren't dead back there, I'd disbelieve it myself." He scowled a moment, then looked at her and brightened. "Honey," he said, "remind me that I have to send a radio message to Earth as soon as we're close enough."

"Radio message? What?"

"A sort of temperance warning, that's all." He grinned. "It goes like this: *If you find any bottles, don't open them!*"

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE GIANTS
FROM OUTER SPACE ***

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