

V U L C A N I I

By

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INTRODUCTION

I HAD MET JOHN one night at the radio club. I clumsily had bumped into him after a few drinks and started to apologize. Inadvertently I found myself talking of my past, and he of his. He became interested when I told him I was a writer. He told me he had a story he would like to tell if I had time to listen. I said I did so he invited me to his home the next day.

Arriving a little after sunset John invited me in and showed me to the basement. The room was filled with all sorts of electronic gadgetry, ranging from small AM radios to a large radar set, hidden by one of the blackened walls.

"Have a seat, Ken," John directed, motioning toward a pile of red cushions near the radio.

"Well, John, what do you have?"

"It would be easiest if I were to start from the beginning:

About a month ago I went to the Salvation Army and picked up an old radio. I brought it here to repair. Found the trouble right away ... a bad capacitor. I set the new one on the table and went upstairs to get some solder. When I returned the set was lying on the floor in a hundred pieces. I decided to piece it together anyway.

The truth of the matter is, I must have re-soldered the thing wrong. Maybe it had a cold solder joint or an excessive amount of acid in the solder, anyway ... it didn't bring in any of the local stations.

When I turned it on I could hear faint voices, but couldn't make out what they were saying ... it seemed to be in some foreign language. I have studied many languages but couldn't place what I was hearing. It was like nothing I had heard on this Earth.

I tried boosting the input to one of the tubes. The voices came in a little clearer. I tried tuning another station, but the voices were all over.

I installed a switch into one of the amplifier circuits and was not only able to hear the voices, but to respond to them as well.

Several weeks passed before I was able to make out what they were saying. I discovered I had been listening to scientists from the planet Jupiter, which they called Retipuj.

The leader, Jerry Howard Hawks, was one of the explorers of their planet. They relayed to me their latest adventure. It is this tale which I wish to retell ... combining the four versions. Each of them: Jerry, Nickina, Jack, and Jane gave nearly the same version, so it wasn't hard to figure out what really took place.

Well, here is what they relayed over the radio....

CHAPTER ONE
(Vulcan II)

SOMEWHERE beneath the red clouds of Massatina came a deafening roar and flash of light. The light streaks skyward, past the moons of Saturn, toward a planet in a solar system many light years distant. Aboard the light-ship (as it is found to be) an excited group of young scientists. The pilot hastily issues orders as a storm of meteorites flash by.

Passing through the galaxy at speeds twice that of light, the ship soon reaches a distant star system, where it slows to normal space speed. A planet looms large on the screen before the reclining crew. The pilot points a slender finger to one of the objects on the screen.

"According to the professor, we will find the deposit of Roly-X-Xem here. As you are aware, our job is to transport this rare mineral back to Retipuj and deliver it safely into the hands of the Solar Council before the year is up.

"We will land here...", he continues, pointing to a large land mass on the screen "to start mining operations. The professor urges we be wary of the local inhabitants. Our surveys have shown no signs of life ... but remember, when you are working ... be on your toes. Any questions?"

"Only one, Jerry. What do we do if we meet any of these 'locals'?"

"Well, Jack, we must first ascertain if they are friendly. If they are, we make friends ... if not, we collect as much mineral as we can and high tail it to Retipuj. We can come back with an armed escort if our quest turns out to be profitable," Jerry replied, looking to see if there were more questions. "Since there are no questions, return to your stations and prepare for landing."

The crew dispersed and were soon strapping into the high-back acceleration chairs. Jerry looked at several of the gauges before pulling the long lever before him. He glanced again at the gauges and struggled with the lever. A worried expression crossed his face. He turned to face the crew.

"I have some rather unpleasant news. It seems our landing circuits have burned out ... possibly the meteorite shower we passed through. We have already entered the pull of Vulcan II. I am unable to get the needed thrust to pull us free at this time. Brace yourselves ... and may Los help us all."

The surface of the planet loomed large in the center screen. The numerous dials before the pilot start to vibrate and quiver. A red light flashes on and off as the ground rapidly rushes up. A deafening roar is heard throughout the valley as the silvery ship makes its final encounter with the planet.

Raising his head off the stone flagging Jerry took in his surroundings in a single brief sweep of his eyes. He no longer

rested inside the ship, but in a darkened room. He felt as if he were in a cloud bank, the moisture in the room clinging to the remnants of clothing he wore. Ringing out his shirt he wrapped it about his waist and set off to discover where he was.

At first he stood up and felt his way along the ceiling. His hands encountered a solid object on his second pass. It was a handle of sorts. Bracing himself, he pulled. A trap door swung down and light shone through the opening. Raising himself so that his elbows rested on the edge of the hole, Jerry pulled himself through, into the room above.

The room he entered was filled with lush tapestries. At its center, a cluster of large rocks resembling a chair. To one side, a golden cord with silver tassels hung. On the other, a small table with a jewel encrusted stand supporting a round globe. There was a door leading from the room, yet Jerry saw no visible means of opening it.

He walked over and studied it a moment. Pressing here and there with his fingers on pieces of the framework. He pressed one protrusion and a panel slid back on one of the walls, revealing several wooden buttons. He studied them. There were inscriptions beside each. He did not understand the language. All buttons were of a darkened wood, except one. He decided to press this.

The floor beneath him gave way and Jerry found himself plummeting through darkness. He had descended several feet before encountering solid material ... but even this decided to give way after a few seconds. He reached out to find something to cling to, encountered only emptiness. His feet kept sinking. Drawing him into something soft and gooey.

The goo was chest high before he detected a small beam of light bobbing up and down in the distance. Someone, or something, was coming! It could be a member of his crew come to rescue him. Or maybe one of the inhabitants...

As the slime rose above his nose, the light disappeared. Jerry lost consciousness as the heavy weight attached to a vine thrown into the muck made contact with his head.

The rope snaked out, landing on its intended victim. Catching around the neck it was pulled taught and slowly reeled back to shore. A woman dressed in rags pulled on the end of the rope, pulling with all her strength ... watching the limp body as she drug it across the lake.

Once on shore the body was picked up by a creature standing at her side. It carried the body through a small passageway behind her. She turned to leave by the same door, closing it as she passed through. The lake again returned to darkness.

Awakening, Jerry felt the dampness on his forehead. Opening his eyes, he followed the curves of the arm resting on his head, to discover a wrinkled face glaring down at him. As

soon as the woman saw there was no real damage she took her hand from his head and placed it on her lap with the other.

Moving his eyes about the room Jerry discovered the light coming from a small aperture in the ceiling, some twenty feet above. In the center of the room was a small pond, shrouded in a slight mist. He detected some form of life swimming beneath its surface. A large wooden door locked by massive wooden bars formed one end of the room. The opposite side was barren, except for a large wooden cabinet. On the third wall was another cabinet, this with its doors open, revealing several books inside. These in the same language the inscriptions near the buttons had been in. Returning to his present surroundings, Jerry looked into the wrinkled face of the woman kneeling before him.

"Who are you?"

"I am Cilma Vul. It was I who pulled you from the 'Pits of Death'. I was wondering where you had come from. No one had entered that room for years," she answered, returning Jerry's gaze.

"I come from Retipuj. What has happened to my crew? How did I get into this room? How do I get out of here?" Jerry began.

"If you are thinking of escape ... forget it," came a reply from within the mists.

"That is for me to decide," Jerry said, turning toward the pond.

The mist dissipated as a woman, in her early twenties, stepped into view. She wore but a single garment. A sheet of cloth-like material draped around her shapely hips, over her shoulder, around the neck, crisscrossing in front, around the hips again, then falling between her legs, ending up tucked inside one of the previous folds around the waist.

"You may address me as Vickina," she replied, walking to where Jerry sat.

"Why do you say escape is useless?", Jerry asked, sitting up.

"To run from the Holey Men means certain death ... even if you manage to get past the guards outside this room," Vickina stated, motioning Cilma to depart.

"How is it you speak my language?"

"I was born on Rucmer, one of the inner planets of your own solar system. When I was young the Flat-Racians came and took me away. They made me a slave, just like the others they had taken in the raid. Years later, while traveling through the country of the OOSAGS, I escaped. I was captured by the OOSAGS though and made to perform certain ceremonies with their king.

"I was lucky. The Flat-Racians ... a race inhabiting the inner portion of the planet ... came and rescued me from their archenemy. Although many Flat-Racians died in the raid, they wanted to crown me Queen.

"Sraes Golitac, their king, wanted to marry me. When I refused, I was escorted to the boundary of their country. I wandered for days and was captured by the Mole Men. Zupus, their King, trained me as his private dancing girl. I have but recently escaped from him ... he had also asked to marry me. I looked him in the face then spat on him. He has given me ten days in which to reconsider. Should I still refuse, he says I shall be thrown into the 'Pits of Death'." Vickina said, taking a seat next to Jerry.

"I know at least a dozen women on Retipuj who would jump at the chance to marry royalty. Why do you refuse?" Jerry asked, tilting his head, trying to view her from a different angle.

"If I were forced to marry one of these creatures I would prefer Sraes Golitac. He is far more pleasant looking than any of the other Kings."

Scratching his head Jerry looked around. "Where are we?"

"The 'Deserted Valley of Lubbock'." she replied.

"Deserted?"

"Ten years ago there was a great war between the Red Men and the Flat-Racians over that land. Since then, nothing that enters the valley has come out. There IS one race, which lives in the valley. The Holey Race. They live there and take slaves from surrounding cities. Or, like you, from out there..." she said, pointing toward the ceiling. "They feed and bathe their prisoners luxuriously. As they bathe you they use some hypnotic power and divert your attention from them.

"The first time I saw them I screamed. Their bodies are filled with holes, which always gives me the jitters. The Holey Race remains here due to their tremendous fighting ability ... are you searching for Roly-X-Xem as well?"

"Yes, I am. Why do you ask?" Jerry inquired, suddenly sitting up straight.

"There is a war over that mineral. The Flat-Racians need it for food, and the OOSAGS just want it to deprive the Flat-Racians of it."

Vickina helped Jerry to his feet, waited while he regained his equilibrium. They advanced toward the ovoid door. Detecting foot falls in the corridor she motioned him back while she investigated. Peering into the corridor she saw two men advancing toward her.

"Guards!" she whispered to Jerry as she ran toward the pool.

As the two entered a short time later they found Jerry seated on the bench, chains binding him to its head ... they failed to notice, however, the chains had been hastily fastened and were not locked. One of the guards kicked him in the side on his way toward the girl.

"Mistress Sloto, Jadthu wishes your presence," he stated, Vickina appearing from within the pools' mist at the sound of the door opening.

"I told you before I do not wish to see the high priest of Gasla! I have to feed and care for this prisoner..." she replied, motioning toward Jerry.

"Is that all that is keeping you? ... Mala, draw your sword and run this ... ha, ha, ha ... prisoner through." Rotan replied, turning toward his companion.

Drawing a rusty, blood-covered sword from its metallic sheath, the other guard advanced toward Jerry.

Jerry grasped the end of the chain, prepared to swing it. Thinking his target chained to the bench the guard swung his sword in a high arc above his head.

Not wishing to remain idle, Vickina bit the hand of Rotan. He let out a loud yell. Mala, sensing something amiss, turned to see the girl running toward him. She was about to strike with a piece of wood when something intervened.

The momentary distraction was enough for Jerry to rise from his bench and swing the heavy chain. Rotan, however, had not been idle. He rushed up behind the girl and clamped her arms to her side, then proceeded to drag her toward one of the corners in the room. He knocked her out with the butt of his sword.

One player out of action, Mala turned to resume where he had left off. He encountered only an empty bench. Where had the chained prisoner gone? He was to find the answer shortly.

As the guard turned, Jerry ducked behind the bench. When he turned back again, Jerry attacked from behind, swinging the chain. It hit, knocking Mala off his stubby legs and onto the cold stone floor, momentarily knocked out. Jerry quickly picked up the fallen sword and ran him through.

Having knocked out the girl, Rotan turned to see Jerry withdraw the bloody sword from Mala. Picking up his own sword Rotan retraced his steps to the still form of the girl, paused a few seconds, then brought the sword down.

Jerry turned in time to witness Rotan approaching the motionless form of the girl. He watched him swing his arm upward, preparing the strike. Jerry launched into action. On feet silent as snowflakes, he ran across the intervening space and shoved the already bloodied sword into yet another warm body. As Rotan fell, Jerry sought the side of the girl.

Regaining consciousness, Vickina averted her eyes as Jerry unfastened the remaining garments of the guards. He placed their bodies in one of the large cabinets. Jerry handed the girl a set of clothing.

As Jerry completed fastening the last article of clothing from the guards, he turned to look at them. Their bodies were riddled with different size holes. He visibly shuddered. The guards blue skin brought vivid remembrances of rotting cheese and he felt sick, but soon overcame the situation.

Jerry applied rouge to their faces. Soon they could pass for guards he thought. Leaving the room the two traveled the corridor a distance before stopping.

"Vickina?" Jerry asked, "How is it they were full of holes?"

"They are like that because of an innocent man. W.G.Hyde, the man they persecuted, was caught molesting another's wife." Vickina explained, "Banned from the community he took refuge in the Sumaterian Mountains and created the Holey Race. He spent his nights collecting bodies from the various 'body dealers'. Those people who engage in robbing graves, then selling the bodies.

"He brings the bodies to his laboratory and places them in the snow outside so they won't decay. Whenever he needs one he brings it in, thaws it out and drills holes to drain their blood, which he drinks. He refills the holes with ZYLOR. So when he inserts his 'new blood' it will not spoil. This 'new blood' restores the bodies and he is able to control their movements."

While Vickina had been telling the story they had continued walking and had come to the end of the hallway. Before them stood an opening. Jerry entered and found a room illuminated by a sole X-19 radium light source. Except for a table and several chairs, it was barren. There were many corridors leading away. Each was dark but had enough light to see perhaps ten feet.

"What room is this?", Jerry asked, seating himself.

"The guards used to eat and sleep here." she replied, joining him.

"Where does this tunnel lead?" Jerry asked, pointing to his right.

"To King Anul's palace. We would have to pass through the Caves of Death in the country of the Flat-Racians. I can no longer pass through their country. If I return they would make me Queen and would not let me go so easily this time.

"I can tell you a way you might pass through the Caves of Death. In them lives a race of Blue Men. They rule the OOSAGS, who were once Blue Men but had been caught in one of Mr. Hyde's experiments in the Sumaterian Mountains." Vickina stated, leaning close to him.

"And these other passages?", Jerry said, swinging his arm in an arc, dislodging her head.

"The one on your left leads to the inner planet, the one in front to its surface." she replied, standing.

"I will proceed along this one," Jerry said, turning to the right. "You may come if you desire." Jerry turned and entered the passageway. He found Vickina had chosen to join him. As she caught up, he turned. "What kept you?"

"You freed me and now I am yours. I thought I might show you the Roly-X-Xem deposits," Vickina replied, jogging as she caught up to him.

"What do you mean, you are mine?" Jerry turned his head.

"It is a tradition on Vulcan II that when a man befriends a woman, that woman belongs to him. He can set the woman free,

if he wishes, by leaving her in a situation similar to the one in which he rescued her in the first place."

"You are right," Jerry said, changing the subject, "I'll need a guide. Which way do we go?" He said, indicating the two corridors confronting him.

"Take the second to your right," Vickina replied pressing closer to him.

The passage she chose was illuminated by several X-19 light tubes, giving forth their soft glow. As Jerry pressed further along the passage, he felt the surface change. No longer was he walking the smooth surface of the outer planet. It had changed to the much rougher surface of its interior.

The X-19 tubes which had been radiating blue light from below now started appearing over-head. Jerry learned from Vickina that they were nearing the Sea of Sincerity. As they progressed deeper and deeper into the planet the terrain grew rougher and rougher. Her sandals being torn away by the rough ground Vickina began complaining that her feet hurt. Jerry soon found himself carrying her.

After traveling what seemed several miles, Jerry found a spot where they could rest. Vickina knew they were now within the boundaries of the Flat-Racians.

As they rested Jerry placed his arm about her waist and drew closer to her.

"MR, HAWKS, WHAT ARE YOU DOING!", she exclaimed, drawing back.

"You do love me, don't you? ..." he asked, maintaining his hold.

"Y-e-s," she answered shyly. "Why?"

In answer, Jerry pressed his lips to hers. At first she resisted, then found her arms slowly drifting around his neck and drawing his lips closer. At that instant, Jerry sat upright. He, she, or it, whichever (or whatever) it may have been, was looking directly at Vickina. The creature framed in the tunnel was one of the strangest Jerry had encountered since crashing on the planet. He was sure that what stood before him was a walking hair-brush. He looked around and discovered that they were surrounded by perhaps fifty of these creatures.

He pointed to one he imagined was leader. "Who are you?"

He received a series of screams and yells.

Vickina turned to him. "These are the Flat-Racians I told you of. They have asked me to come with them. If I do not it means the end of you. I cannot let that happen."

With that she got up, turned and joined the waiting creatures. It wasn't long before Jerry joined the band ... saying: "If you go, I go."

CHAPTER TWO
(The Riddle)

Cages lined the walls of the immense cavern in which Lieutenant Jack Du (Slougher) Hakula found himself as he opened his eyes for the second time since the crash. At first he had raised his head too quickly and discovered too late the bars that confined him.

Raising his weary black eyes Slougher pulled the small cord dangling in front of him. The roof of the cage swung upward, permitting him an exit. Atop his cage, he reeled at the sight that met him. Row upon row of chemicals lined the walls.

The cage had been atop a large ovoid desk. On the desk he discovered a knife, fully as large as himself; a fork and spoon of the same dimensions; and an elephantine plate, on which his cage had been placed. Seated at the table was a man of enormous features. Upon either side sat blue humanoids with numerous translucent holes scattered throughout their bodies. To the mans left, in a corner of the room, several bodies lie and were being drained of their blood. The seated man reached toward Slougher.

Slougher jumped ten feet from the cage top to the table; then, racing toward the edge of the table, slid down the round leg until he reached the cold stone floor thirty feet below. On the ground, he raced for the open door. He came within a few feet of it when he felt a sudden pressure around his mid-section and was lifted by a huge red hand and set back atop the table. His neck was encircled with a metal band and chained to the cage with a short length of chain. The giant spoke.

"You shall be my greatest specimen. You've got guts, I like that. You've got brains ... but I shall soon possess those. I, William Godfrey Hyde, shall live forever ... once I possess the secret of eternal life."

"How are you going to get that?" Jack asked, rubbing his neck.

"If you must know, it is waiting on a distant planet for me to retrieve. I am involved in the construction of a spacecraft. The fastest in the universe. If I were to release you ... would you join me and help with my quest?"

"For the secret of eternal life? BOY WOULD I! That is, of course, if I can possess its secret," Jack said. Then, pausing a while, continued. "Hey, how is it you speak my language? Are you from Retipuj?"

"We are trained in all sciences. The study of language is only one. There still are people who do not possess the knowledge of our language, such as yourself. We shall teach you so you may be able to understand and converse freely among us. Take him to the language cell," he commanded his two aids.

"Yes Master," they replied.

The two escorted Jack through a maze and on to an open terrace. Here he was seated and a tri-angular helmet placed over his head. This was connected to a box-like apparatus on a low bench next to the chair. Although wary of trickery, Jack gave the signal to start his learning.

* * *

When Jane Salton opened her eyes she discovered she lie buried amidst the wreckage of the ship. Her arms were pinioned to her sides by a portion of the radar unit which had toppled after the 'Zutho' had crashed. Off to one side of her lay a metal bar a few feet in length; on the other, Corporal Jean Du Bartell (Slouch) and Johnny Branders. She called to them. Neither moved. She called again. They lay motionless. After close scrutiny she realized Johnny was dead and Slouch had been pinned to the floor under one of the support beams of the ship.

Painfully moving her legs Jane was able to inch the metal bar toward her. She positioned it beneath the radar unit. It took several tries before she was able to lift the radar unit high enough to free her arms. Then she pushed it high enough up to crawl out from beneath. She sat on the cool floor relaxing.

After a brief rest she set to work freeing Slouch from beneath his beam. It took the better part of an hour to accomplish this. As she completed this, the darkness outside began dispersing. Light filtering in through jagged cracks in the hull played across Jean's face. He raised himself carefully to his elbows.

"Jane. What happened?" he asked, clutching his head.

"All I remember is as we were crashing Jerry was thrown from the ship and landed among some rocks over to our right. Niki and Jim stumbled over John and fell through the air-lock right after that. I thought John had been knocked out when he struck his head on the gun rack after that gas bomb hit. I examined him a little while ago. He's dead. You know as much as I do ... I wish Jerry were here. He'd get us out somehow." Jane explained.

"Why do you want to leave? There might be inhabitants ... besides, you'll get to Retipuj faster with me than with him," Slouch said.

"I don't like the looks of this place. If we stay here much longer, I'm sure something will ... how can you get us back faster than Jerry?"

"My great-great-grandfather, while searching the outer regions of space," Slougher started, "came to this planet and got the same reception we did. He was forced down, but didn't crash. He was captured by OOSAGS, one of the inhabitants of this Planet, and taken to their King. He was placed into slavery. After several years he married one of the women. They

bore a son, Tim. They cared for him until he was twelve then sent him to Mars in a rocket they had built. They hadn't used the rocket my great-great-grandfather had used in coming to this planet.

"Ten years after the boy landed on Mars he too married. They had a child, a boy, George. Tim determined to seek out his father and bring him back to live on Mars. He set out in his own rocket. While he was away Jane, his wife, bore two more children, both girls. Tim was later killed as he passed through a shower of meteorites.

"Hearing of her husband's death, Jane sent George to Retipuj in a rocket. After killing her daughters she committed suicide.

"George met and married a woman on Retipuj. After several years they were blessed with three children: me, my brother John, and sister Jill. My father, rest his soul, died a year ago tomorrow ... the same date my great-great-grandfather, my great-grandfather, and my grandfather died on. I believe I am fated to die on that date one of these years."

"I think you have answered my question more than adequately. Since you can get me off this planet faster than Jerry, wherever he might be, I shall try to remain as close to you as possible." Jane said, letting out her breath. "So, where's the ship?"

"You must trust me to the location. I'm not sure exactly. My father told me if I ever got to this planet, I would know its location. Shall we start?" Slouch asked, motioning toward the open hatch.

"Why not?" Jane replied, following him through the opening.

* * *

Slougher felt a slight throbbing in his head as the switch was pressed. The sensation left as quickly as it had come. "Is that it?" he asked.

"If you can understand what we are saying then 'That is it'," the guards replied.

"I understand perfectly ... how is this possible?"

"The helmet," pointed out one guard, "is connected to the box over here. In it are many wires wrapped around coils which are used to store information for prolonged periods of time. When I press this switch the information stored in them is transferred to the helmet," he continued, running his wrinkled hand along the silken wire attached to the helmet.

"When the information enters the helmet," continued the other guard, "it is magnified and turned into electro-magnetic waves which are picked up by your brain and stored as information. When placed on the head correctly the helmet has needle-like projections which penetrate your skull in the area known to contain your memory cells. These projections inject a

liquid which converts the information being presented into a format that you are able to understand. This also works in reverse. When you talk you are able to speak our language, as you did when you addressed us just now."

"Very interesting. You can unstrap me now." Slougher said, pulling against the straps.

The two started to leave but stopped briefly at the door, conversing, after which they returned and unstrapped Jack. They led him through an opening in the wall behind the apparatus they had used. As he was pushed through, Jack stumbled on the thin wire stretched across its opening. The guards picked him up and lifted him toward the ceiling, where a rectangular opening had appeared.

Although stunned by the fall Jack was able to see where he was taken. Once through the opening a hairy pair of hands grabbed him and pulled him through the rest of the way. The Flat-Racians, as Jack later discovered, led him through a maze to a small room where sat a lone OOSAG.

Once Jack entered the creature pressed a button on the bench, closing the door behind Jack. The OOSAG got up and advanced toward him, looking Jack straight in the eyes. Jack discovered the eyes looked like platinum flakes suspended in a muddy stream. They held a strange hypnotic effect over him.

Mesmerized, Jack watched helplessly as he was partially transformed into one the OOSAGs. I mention partially as this ritual terminated suddenly as Mr. Hyde entered the room in a rage and placed the OOSAG back into confinement. He took Jack into another room. Here he discussed the construction of the Super Starship.

More than one Rohue had passed before a lone OOSAG entered the room and whispered something to the scientist. Quickly leaving with the creature Jack was left alone. He looked about for some means of escape. Noticing a pinprick of light in the wall, where but moments before there had been none, Jack walked toward the wall and peered through the opening. What he saw startled him then, looking through the hole again, he gave a sigh of relief as he recognized Slouch and Jane.

His view momentarily was blocked. He stepped back a few paces from the wall as a slit began to appear. The slit turned into a door through which his two companions walked. The reunion was brief and all three soon disappeared back through the door, into the tunnel beyond. The tunnel led to a cave at the edge of a river.

Using only their hands, the three began paddling down the river in the small canoe. The temperature of the water was a few degrees above freezing. After several strokes they would pull their hands from the water and warm them before again placing them into the icy water.

The small craft quickly began picking up speed as the current increased. In the distance a great roaring was heard.

The three frantically began paddling toward the shore. They escaped the falls, but were sucked into the stronger current of a whirlpool.

Fearing they could not make the shore in the frail craft Jack stood up, then dove into the swirling waters. The waters closed rapidly above him and the remaining members looked on in disbelief. A short time later a body bobbed to the surface, head down, and started floating toward the falls downstream.

* * *

Stepping from the rubble Slouch fell to the ground amidst the stream waters. When the 'Zutho' crashed it had been near the center of a large stream. As Slougher went under for the second time Jane rushed to drag him free of the current. As she did, she became caught in its deadly grip.

The current carried the two several miles downstream before Jane caught a low hanging branch and pulled herself into the tree. Moments later Slouch repeated the technique. The two climbed down from the tree and turned their steps toward a cave they had seen. It was located on the other side of the stream so they set about building a canoe from the bark of several large trees in the area. They peeled the bark with the aid of sharp knives they carried strapped to their legs.

"Where now? The cave?" Jane asked, as the craft was completed.

"We'll follow the river. If I am right and this is the THRYO ISLES then we will arrive within walking distance of the ship. If not, we'll follow the river to its mouth. All rivers and streams empty into the JUY OLP. From there I can easily find the THRYO ISLES," Slouch replied, dipping his fingers into the waters, catching the fish he spied swimming there.

Pulling the squirming creature from the water, he laid it in the bottom of the boat. Jane, who had been looking downstream, pointed out that they were nearing the cave. Slouch told her to lie in the bottom of the boat as he steered clear and tried to land on the bank. The strong undercurrent, which had kept the boat centered in the stream, now turned it directly toward the mouth of the cave.

Inside the cave, Slouch spied a small outcropping to his left. He wound a vine near his feet into a loop and snared one of the limbs of a tree near the edge of the water. As the line pulled taught he maneuvered the boat to shore. The two disembarked and made camp as darkness crept in. Slouch cooked the fish he had caught and they both ate and then fell asleep, exhausted.

In the morning they set off down the path they discovered the night before. As they walked down the path Jane became uneasy and complained someone was watching them. Slouch stopped and approached one of the cave walls. He placed his ear against it, listening. Then he bent down and started

digging in the soil near the wall. Bemused, Jane also started digging.

"What are we searching for?" she asked.

"A key."

They continued to dig for a while, then Slouch sat back.

"Nothing ... how about you?"

"All I found was this..." Jane said, displaying her find.

"THAT is what I was looking for!"

Slouch took the key and inserted it into a barely distinguishable hole midway up the wall. A door slowly slid inward revealing a dimly light room beyond. In the center stood their shipmate, Jack. He told them what had happened since the crash then they proceeded down the tunnel to the cave entrance, where they boarded the canoe and forced it into the river once again. After a short distance the canoe made a sharp turn and headed toward the shore. Shortly thereafter Jack jumped into the water and Jane screamed as his body floated by.

* * *

As Jack went under the water the second time he felt a slight pressure on his legs. He looked down. As the water beneath slowly cleared he saw a creature pulling him downward. He learned later this had been a Flat-Racian.

The creature, if it stood on its three webbed feet, would have been over six feet. While it did have two large, round, green eyes, it was lacking any form of nose. If it had any ears they did not show through the matted hair, which covered its entire body.

As the Flat-Racian neared the bottom of the river-bed a small opening appeared and Jack was pushed through, just as the air in his lungs gave out.

When he awoke Jack found himself in a room cluttered with books, tools, and numerous tubes filled with multi-colored liquids. His eyes wandered about the room and he was startled at what he saw. Because his eyes still hadn't adjusted to the dim light, he saw distorted objects at first. What he had thought to be a beautiful maiden turned out to be a stringed instrument with an hourglass body, which had been placed on a stool near him. What he had thought a gigantic ant turned out to be a radar set with a large antenna. By now his eyes were back to normal and he began perceiving things as they really were. He located the creature which had saved him.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Your friends made it to shore and we brought you here," it replied.

"Why did you save me?"

"Our Queen wishes to see you. You are to be brought before her upon your recovery. We must go now," it replied.

"What do you intend doing with my friends?"

"They will be released unharmed if the Queen finds the answer she is looking for."

"Answer? Answer to what?" Jack asked, following the creature.

"It is a riddle. No one knows the answer. Maybe you might. Since you are not of this planet you may solve it."

"Why did you pick me and not the others in the boat?"

"The Queen selected you. I know not why."

The Flat-Racian led Jack down several illuminated corridors. Along the walls hung weapons and relics from the past. Later on Jack passed several large wooden crates, six to seven feet long. They entered a large room just beyond them. In the center sat a woman, adorned in jewels and precious metals. Jack was brought to her. After bowing, at the request of his escort, Jack was called forward.

"You have been brought to me by my advisor. I, Vickina, Queen of all Flat-Racians, wish to speak with you in private. I have a riddle. Would you like to try to solve it?"

"I can but try, your majesty," replied Jack as he watched the room clear. "What is this riddle?"

"How can man exist when he is no more?"

"Now THAT will take some thinking. How long will I be allowed to seek the answer to this riddle?" Jack asked, looking around.

"You have sixteen Rohues to provide an answer."

"May I be allowed a question? ... What has happened to my friends? Why is it you don't resemble these creatures, yet you have become their Queen?"

"You may visit your friends for a period of two Rohues, no longer. As you have noted, I am not a Flat-Racian. I come from Yrucrem. The OOSAGS came and brought me to their King. The Flat-Racians, hearing of this and despising the OOSAGS, captured me and brought me here. I was here many long Rya before your ship crashed and I was imprisoned in the Valley of Lubbock. A man came and rescued me. I was recaptured shortly after that by the Flat-Racians again and was made their Queen. But this is not relative to the riddle. Now go."

"Well, see you in sixteen Rohues, I guess." Jack finished as two guards escorted him from the room.

CHAPTER THREE
(Capture)

As he and Vickina were led down the dimly light corridor it gave Jerry an opportunity to observe his captors.

"Why," he asked, turning to the girl, "are they called Flat-Racians?"

"The hair is deceptive. They are really very small. When the first Flat-Racians were born many years ago they were mutants. Their parents looked much as you and I. Some of the first generation still lives somewhere on this planet, but they are dying out.

"To hide their mutated form they developed a framework of hide and hair. As more became born they joined the others and soon formed their own culture. As the centuries passed the hides became part of their external structure. Today it is an integral part of their body." Vickina explained softly.

"What about the large eyes?"

"They are smaller than they appear. The hair is a form of crystal which gives them a magnifying quality."

One of the Flat-Racians again issued its shrieks and growls. As if a signal six of the creatures surrounded Jerry and escorted him down a central passage. At its end were two doors. He was placed into a room, Vickina into the other.

After what seemed hours Jerry was brought before a King. He was instructed to be seated in a specially prepared chair and straps were secured around his wrists and legs. A cone-shaped cylinder was lowered on his head and secured by straps. This was connected to a small box lying on a nearby table.

One of the Flat-Racians entering the room, clothed in white apron and wearing surgical gloves, approached the box, turned several knobs, pulled first a red, then a blue lever. Jerry could hear a high pitched whining inside the box and saw the lights outside blinking on and off. Feeling a throbbing in his head, his face paled. He closed his eyes and drifted into darkness.

When he regained consciousness Jerry found he was still seated. The Flat-Racian in white was bending over him. It held a small knife-like object in one of its three-fingered hands, a tube-like object in the other. Jerry was bound, but not as tightly as before. He estimated he had been out about ten minutes.

In that time the Flat-Racian had opened his head and inserted a small, but powerful, 'Brain Adjuster'. This would permit them control over portions of his brain.

The creature bent over Jerry. The hand with the small tube went toward his forehead. Jerry felt an tingling in his head, then blacked-out for the second time.

* * *

"Where is my companion?" Vickina asked, pacing the long throne room.

"'Es bin takin' to the chief 'ead-shrinker, me lie-dee," came the reply.

"What are you going to do with him?" she asked, looking at the priest.

"'Es to be sent to de pits o' death, if'n 'e survives the 'three tests' that is."

"Tests? I don't recall any tests when I was here last." Vickina replied, looking directly at him.

"Since yoose has come backs yoose should be made aware of de tests den. Foist 'e 'as to wound one o' de best fighters in de kingdom. Den 'e 'as to outrun our fastest runner in de game of Tigasoo. De last test is to cast de prisoner into de pits o' torture to see if'n 'e cun live through dem. I cun tell yoose one 'ting mistress, no man hast eber cum out o' de pits o' torture since I hast been here yit!"

"If he goes, I must be sent through these tests too!" Vickina shouted, stomping out of the room.

"If e' means dat much to de mistress, den we shall have to replace im' wid another," whispered one Guard to the other.

With that the two guards slipped silently into the hallway and set off on their mission. Vickina, not knowing of their decision, traveled in the opposite direction, sadness heavy in her heart. The two guards turned a corner and were lost from view of one who had been listening from behind a curtain in the room. This guard came out from behind the curtain and followed the first two at a distance. Every now and then he would duck behind an object as the two in front turned to check their progress. As they neared a door the third guard began catching their conversation, between ones humming and the others whistling.

"... I 'ave to admit dat 'e would make a good substitute. 'E looks much like dis Jerry. In fact 'e even ... like 'im ... I wish you'd stop dat whistling!"

"I will, as soon as you stop that ... there you go again!"

"Do you tink we are doin' de right ting? Substitutin'... for Jerry?"

"... think so. I think we would be better off if we ..." and the guard whispered into the others ear.

"Why didn't I tink of dat! Dat's better den substitutin'."

The two turned into a room and the listener silently departed back along the corridor. The shadows swallowed the retreating figure as the two guards re-emerged into the hallway with the Queen. As they traveled down the corridor the Queen could be overheard.

"It is a very good plan. Let us place it into operation at once." she said.

The listener had melted into the shadows long before this important piece of information. He traveled the corridor until he found himself before a brightly illuminated room. He entered, bowed once, then approached the man seated at its center.

"Something of importance has come to my attention. I am sure your highness should be aware of this information."

"What is it, high priest of Zitho?", replied the seated figure.

"If you will recall, your highness, you had me dress as a guard to see what I could discover about this prisoner and the Queen. After I informed the Queen this prisoner was to be taken to the pits she ran from the room and went to her royal chamber. Two guards left shortly after that. I followed them. They went to see her. On the way I overheard them talking and discovered a plan to rescue Mr. Hawks. I have just returned. When I left the two were in the Queens' chambers." the priest explained, standing before the lone figure.

"You may rid yourself of your disguise and go back to your chapel. I shall see to it that we have no more problems with this Mr. Hawks."

The King disappeared behind a fold in one of the curtains as the priest departed through the door. The room stood silent. The velvet curtains softly wavering in the breeze. There came a stirring at one end of the room. The King was returning.

Naked slaves started filing into the room through the door by which the priest had left. OOSAGS and Flat-Racians were led into the room. At the end of the long line were three humanoids. One sported a dark brown skin, one of blue skin, and yet another red. This group sat near a marble bench and waited.

"Jerry, do you really think we can pull this off?" the one of red skin asked turning to the one of tan skin.

"I am counting on it. If we don't it will cost us our lives. Are you guys still with me?" he replied, turning to the others.

"All the way," replied Anul, of the red skin.

"And you, Xerks?" Jerry asked, looking to the Blue Man.

"Sure."

"Quiet. Here comes the King," Anul Pointed out.

As the King entered with his guards, five on each side, the entire room arouse. The King passed the humanoids on his way to the throne at the center of the room. He failed to detect the quick pair of hands pass over him. After the King had passed Anul handed a small booklet to Jerry. The King seated himself and commenced the trial.

During the trial all prisoners were made to stand, so it is no wonder that by the time the King had come to sentence Jerry and his newly acquainted friends most of the company in the room was either asleep or in a semi-sleep state. The King

called the three forward.

"Is it not true that our Queen has taken a liking to you, Mr. Hawks?" he asked.

"That would be for the Queen to decide, not me your majesty." Jerry replied.

"Do you have a liking for her then!" the king shouted, enraged by the evasive answer.

"I find that to be no business of yours."

"I must assume that to be an affirmative answer then. Good. As there can only be one official lover, and that is the King, I proclaim that you have committed treason. I thereby sentence you to the 'Three Tests'. I also sentence your companions as well. I have had rumors they also have had relations with the Queen. Guards, take them away!" exclaimed the king rising from his throne, pointing a long finger in their direction.

"If I survive I will see to it that you do not!" Anul screamed, pointing a finger of his own back at the king. Then he and the others were taken from the chamber.

Back at their cell Jerry looked through the book Anul had taken from the King. He started thumbing through the pages. Stopped. Backed up a few pages, re-read a passage on the page again, then turned to the group seated around him.

"Beneath the Royal Box there lie three doors. Passing through one to the left will bring death, the one on the right misery and sorrow. The door in the middle ..." Jerry looked up then continued "The page is torn. Either the King has a bad memory or this book was planted. If it was the latter then there is an informant among us."

"I have been with the king more than twenty revolutions and can attest to his bad memory ... but it is not so bad that he would rely on a written record for something as important as that," Anul related.

"If this is so then why did you take the book?" Xerks asked.

"If it were a trap, then we could do the opposite of what was expected. If it wasn't, we might have the key to our escape. But, this informer ... interesting." Anul replied as he paced the length of the cell.

"Sh-h-h-h-h, someone is coming," signaled Jerry.

"Who has taken the kings' green book!" shouted the guard as he poked his head around the corner.

"I have a green book," Jerry spoke, showing the book.

"Jerry! What are you doing?" whispered Anul.

"The king will be glad that the thief has been caught," smiled the guard as he took the book.

Once the guard passed out of hearing Xerks, Anul and Poilu turned toward Jerry. It was Anul though who broke the silence.

"Why did you hand over the book? That was our one chance to get out of here alive."

"All the guard has is the cover to the book. I still have the book, see ..." Jerry stated, withdrawing the book from beneath a leg he had placed on top as the guard approached. "When the guard comes back this is what I want you to do ..."

* * *

"Fool! Can't you see that this is not a book!?! You have been tricked..."

"Hurry, your majesty, there is a fight in cell XHJ-1972," shouted another guard as he rushed into the room.

"Guards, follow me!" the King commanded.

The King made his way down the many corridors leading to the cell-blocks. The corridors had begun cracking under many tons of dirt and rock that pressed down on them. Pools of water formed here and there near the cracks. Children gathered this water into bottles. The bottles were collected daily by guards and sent to the water storage area. The children were also prisoners of the Flat-Racians ... but they were treated more like their own children than prisoners. They let them romp and play throughout the kingdom, but never let them leave its borders. When they were old enough for hard labor they were sent to training camps to become part of the king's guard.

The King turned the corridor leading to cell blocks XHJ-1900 thru XHJ-2000. Reaching the far end he inserted a key into a hidden lock over which hung the sign 'XHJ-1972'. He walked into the room as the door swung aside. Inside he found bodies strewn throughout. He surveyed the situation momentarily before turning to his guards.

"Clean up this mess and bring me any survivors. Go!"

"I hear and obey, your majesty," replied a guard, then the King turned and left the room.

"I am at a loss why you wish to come to every brawl between prisoners," inquired one of the guards as the king started back along the corridor.

"His highness is much smarter than us, you imbecile! If he did not participate in these brawls, some stupid guard might allow the prisoners to escape. Whoever lives after these fights is always sent to the torture chambers. His highness invites all prisoners to these tortures, to see what happens for fighting. Since the last torture there have been less fights. The prisoners would rather fight the beasts in the arena," replied the high priest as the group moved further along the corridor and disappeared from view.

One of the prisoners started laughing.

"We're sentenced to the torture chamber and he starts laughing. Let us in on it Jerry," asked Anul.

"His royal highness fell for the trap. We've got him just where we want him now." Jerry replied, clutching his side.

"But you said ..." Anul started.

"Never mind what I said. That was to throw off the

informer among us. Remember, have confidence. Don't be surprised at what I say or do over the next few weeks. What I am doing is for our own good, so please bear with me." Jerry cautioned.

"If we are sent to the torture chamber we won't last more than a few days. Are you that sure of your plan?" asked Xerks.

"Let me put it to you this way. If my plan doesn't work we won't last the first few minutes in that arena!" he replied as he lie back down on the bunk.

* * *

The King seated himself behind the long wooden bench and ordered the prisoners brought in. Jerry was first to enter. He was ordered to kneel before the king by the priest next to him. He remained standing.

"I ordered you to kneel!" the priest shouted.

"Why should I?" Jerry replied.

"If you value your life, which evidently you do not, I would advise you to kneel," whispered the priest who had brought him into the room.

"What did you whisper, Jetto!" exclaimed the king.

"I was informing the prisoner on the penalties for not kneeling, your majesty."

"Rule 34862 of the royal code book specifically states there shall be no whispering in the presence of the king. You two guards ... take this rule breaker and torture him. YOU, Mr. Hawks, will join your companions and follow us to the torture chambers," ordered the king.

As they were led from the room something lying on the floor caught Jerry's attention. He picked it up and placed it in his pocket. He did not know it but he had just bought himself more trouble than he knew.

The group entered a large room where a prisoner was chained to a post. The king approached and raised the head by pulling on the mans hair. He said a few words to him then released his hold, allowing the man to slip down the post and come to a rest on the floor.

As Jerry got a view of the man his eyes went wide in recognition. There, not ten feet before him, sat not the guard who had disobeyed the king, but his crewmate James Patrick Anders! Jerry had given both he and Nicki up for dead when they dove out of the ship after him. He had landed by a large rock and had seen Jim and Nicki fall through the trees and into the lake beyond. He hadn't thought anyone could survive that fall.

As the king approached a control board on one of the walls Jerry made his move. He gave the guard before him a quick shove, sent him reeling across the room ... clearing a path to the post. Taking the knife he had found and concealed, Jerry advanced to the post and started working the lock which

bound Jim.

"Get that man out of ... no, wait ... I shall rid myself of them both," stated the king pulling a lever.

The post was surrounded by thick smoke. Yells were heard from within. When the smoke cleared the chain was empty and the only thing left was a pair of sandals at the base of the post.

The second the smoke enveloped them Jerry opened the lock and set Jim free then whispered:

"Yell and leave your sandals at the bottom of the post. Head for the back of the room. I will bring someone there in a little while. Let's go!"

As the king congratulated himself Jerry rounded up the remaining members of his group and prepared to leave the room. He chanced one last look back into the room. The king was turning around. Jerry shut the door and placed an ear to it.

"Bring the other prisoners!" the king exclaimed.

"Your majesty, they have disappeared!" came the answer.

"Missing? Who were ... no, let me guess. The three in the cell with Mr. Hawks ... right?"

"How did you know this your highness?"

"Never mind. This Hawks character is proving to be more of a menace than I had counted on. We must capture him before he makes his escape and shows the other prisoners it can be accomplished. Send out search parties. I want him at any cost! DON'T LET HIM GET AWAY!" the king shouted.

Jerry turned and ran down the corridor and rejoined his friends. He told them what he had overheard. They began placing as much distance between themselves and the guards as possible. Rounding a corner, they began to hear the first signs of pursuit.

CHAPTER FOUR
(Death To The Queen!)

When the King discovered Vickina had aided in the escape of the prisoners he had summoned her. He sat before the long table in the throne room. Sraes Golitac, one of the greatest minds in the galaxy, was seated to his right; to his left sat Zagtho, the killer ... his duty was to devise the many ways of destroying the kings enemies. Next to him sat Tigasoo, who actually carried out the sentences. The Queen entered and stood before the board.

"You have dishonored us by helping the slaves. You are aware of the consequences?" the king questioned.

"Yes, Gittho, I am to die. May I please explain why I did this thing?" she pleaded.

"Proceed."

"Until this man came I had been bound by law to remain your Queen. You knew I resented that. I had been taken from my parents while still young. I never knew of love until I met Jerry. I need his gentle touch and kindness. I could not let you keep him prisoner while I remained alive. If I couldn't have him, neither could you. As it is your intention to kill me, then do so before I drive this dagger through your evil heart..." Vickina said, drawing the instrument from beneath her robe and leaping to the table.

Sraes grasped her hand and quickly wrested the blade from it. He succeeded in ridding her of the knife, but not before she had wounded him on his arm. The girl was taken by two guards and strapped to a chair.

"You should not have tried such a foolish act. You shall be tortured before I allow you to die. After you die you will be dissected. I shall have a Cryptographer present to record your ordeal. You will be making history ... ha, ha, ha," king Gittho laughed.

The chair Vickina had been placed in started moving. It traveled downward into darkness. When the movement ceased Vickina found herself in a large room surrounded by several doors, each marked with numbers. Her restraining straps were released and she was free to move.

Slowly moving her eyes about the room she discovered a figure seated behind a transparent partition. No doubt the Cryptographer. She walked over to one of the doors. Opening it, she walked into the room beyond. Here she was met by three Flat-Racians, she followed them.

They traveled several long corridors, passing through many caverns before entering a large chamber, at its center stood a raised dias. It was eight feet long and four wide, at one end was a soft cushion, at the other a two foot wedge of steel. A small metallic track ran from the wedge to the soft pillowy material. The track was centered on the board.

Vickina was taken to the board and strapped down. Her

feet were placed to either side of the wedge and bound with heavy straps. Her arms were secured near the top in like fashion. Her head was unrestrained. She watched as the wedge was moved to midway position. Tigasoo, who had entered as she was being strapped down, now advanced toward her.

"You shall lie helpless while I control the advancement of the wedge," he said, rechecking the straps for tightness. "You see the wedge? ... when it starts moving you will only have a few moments in which to live. Sraes invented this. If run 'till its entirety it would take days to complete ... I have repositioned the wedge here. In a few minutes it should be half-way through your body ... but you won't be aware of that, you'll be dead. The wedge travels at one inch per Rohue."

Tigasoo placed a thin, razor-sharp strip of metal along the edge of the wedge then walked over to the wall and threw a switch. The dias swung perpendicular to the floor and turned toward the Cryptographer, so the last moments could be recorded. Tigasoo pulled another lever and Vickina heard the whirring of a motor. She looked down and saw the wedge inching upward.

Vickina watched in horror as the blade disappeared from view. Seconds ticked by as the metal block inched upward another notch. She could feel the cold metal pressing against her skin. She tried pulling herself toward the head of the board with her hands, but the straps on her legs permitted no extra movement. She heard the wedge slip into another notch, then immense pain as the blade entered a soft area of skin.

As one of the Flat-Racians bent over her, she could feel its hot breath on her thigh. Tigasoo rushed over and scolded the creature, escorting it back against the wall. The Cryptographer crossed the safety zone and began recording the last moments.

Another second passed and a small stream of blood started trickling down the surface of the dias, collecting near the bottom. It was at this moment that Tigasoo threw the lever on the wall and stopped the wedge, backing it to its midway position. The girl was removed and her wounds tended to by the physician who had entered the room. Tigasoo approached her.

"Like the king said, this is only a torture ... you are not to die yet."

"How many ... ouch ... of these tortures ... ooo ... do I have to endure before ... ouch ... the end?" Vickina asked running her hand between her legs.

"I am not permitted that information. We must prepare you for the second phase," Tigasoo replied, pointing back along the way she had come.

Vickina was returned to the room she had first entered and selected another door. Entering she found herself looking at three more doors. She advanced to the center door and swung

it open. On the floor was a fire. Across the top of the room ran a cable from one end to the other. On the opposite side of the room were three doors, to get there one must pass through the fire ... by way of the overhanging line. Vickina closed the door and turned to the door on her right.

Opening the door, she discovered a small box in the center of the room. Inside it was a bronze key inscribed with 'Key to Freedom'. She touched the box. It started glowing. She quickly stepped back and ran to the door as water started trickling through holes in the box. Closing the door she walked to the last door and peered inside.

A pool of water stood in the center. At its bottom was a transparent door. Beyond she could see a forest and sunlight. Vickina knew this torture. Seeing the door the victim attempted to reach their freedom by swimming and opening it. What they didn't know was that half-way to the bottom of the pool was an air-pocket. Encountering this pocket, they would fall through, breathing in the air as they did, and splash into the water on the other side. This was fine, except the air in this pocket was impure and rapidly caused suffocation. The swimmer couldn't swim upward as they had to cross this pocket of air to do so. Since this pocket was several feet in depth it was an impossible task.

Vickina closed the door as water from the second room began filtering in. She stood there for a time thinking. As the water rose to knee level she waded over to the center door and opened it. The fire inside was extinguished as the water rushed in. It was a simple matter then to cross to the other side and try each door. She found a wall behind each. Vickina touched a bloody spot on the wall. She felt something cold beneath it. Pressing it she found herself in another room. This, she observed, must have been where the slaves slept who built the fires. She looked around until she found a passage leading upward. She entered and followed it for several Rohues. Then she found herself near its end. Looking up she discovered an opening through which a dim light filtered. Climbing through the opening she was assisted by a strong pair of hands. She discovered they belonged to Gittho, the king.

"Where did you think you were going, my dear?" he asked as he pulled her upright.

"Away from you!" she screamed, pounding her hands against his chest.

"I hadn't thought you smart enough to use the water to put out the fire. I see I underestimated your talents. Next time you won't be so lucky. Guards!" he said, turning to the guards.

Vickina was led away and placed into another room with a dias and was again strapped down. Above her she saw sharp instruments suspended from the ceiling. Their purpose only too clear.

Tigasoo lowered a lever on the wall and the instruments

began their descent. Vickina closed her eyes and awaited the impact ... it never came.

The sharp blades whistled as they fell through the air, it was this sound which covered the sounds of the four men entering into the room. Three overcame the guards while the other advanced to the girl and cut the bonds holding her in place.

When the blades above impacted the dias they were driven through to their hilts, but the girl had been removed moments before and was safe.

"What happened here!" the king exclaimed as the five people exited the room.

The group rounded the corner and were confronted by three guards. Surprised, the guards were easily disarmed. They were bound in their own clothes and placed in one of the seldom used rooms along the corridor, as evidenced by the layers of dust accumulating on its floor.

As the group prepared to leave the leader motioned them back, indicating someone was coming. The person rounded the corner and came into sight of the small group.

"Slouch! Where the devil have you been?" the leader of the group asked, recognizing his friend.

"After the ship crashed, me and Nicki ---" and Slouch relayed to them all that had transpired since the crash. "--- and that is how I came upon you when I did, Jerry."

"You know any way we can get out of here, Vickina?" Jerry asked, turning to the girl.

"There is a way that is heavily guarded by OOSAGS. This was mentioned in a book I read once."

"What book?" Slouch asked.

"A little green book the king used to carry. There was a chapter on escape routes. This book was removed from his royal highness during one of his trials. Do you know anything of this Jerry?" the girl said, turning to Jerry.

"Why don't you ask the one who stole it," he said, indicating Anul.

"You are the one who thought of it. Don't you still have it?" Anul returned.

"Sure," Jerry replied, pulling the book from beneath a fold of cloth.

"Can I see it?" Vickina asked.

"I guess so ..."

No sooner was the book in her hands than she opened the door and started running down the passage yelling at the top of her voice. "I may yet rule these Flat-Racians! If the king gets this he will not kill me."

"I think the lust for power has gone to her head. We must stop her. After her!" Jerry exclaimed.

"I think it best we wait for a while," Anul said.

"Why?" asked Jerry, stepping back into the room.

"She will be back as soon as she finds she doesn't have

the real book," Anul explained, holding up a duplicate.

"When did you switch books?"

"Last night while you slept I replaced yours with a fake. I this might happen and wanted the real book to be safe."

"If she thinks she has the real one and goes to the king she will be put to death when he finds a duplicate!"

"Don't underestimate the inquisitive mind of the female."

"What do you mean?" Jerry asked, turning his head.

"I mean she will look at the book before she gives it back to the king, to see why it is so important. When she discovers it contains blank pages she will know she has been tricked and will want to return it. She will do this because she loves you."

"How do you know that? And how is it you know so much about HER!" Jerry advanced on Anul.

"I have served the Queen since her arrival on this planet. She has always had a dream. In this dream she meets a stranger from another world. She helps him escape but in the process she brings him harm. He forgives her. When he leaves he brings her with him, against her will, and marries her. You must forgive her for what she has done, she is trying to fulfill her own destiny. You must take her from here against her own will. It is only after this has been accomplished that she will truly be yours."

"Here she comes," pointed out Poilu.

"Can you forgive me for what I have done, Jerry?" she said, returning the book.

"Of course. You were only thinking of your own safety."

"What! You would forgive a fool!?" she said, slapping him then walking over to a corner and sitting down.

"Well, Anul, explain that!" Jerry exclaimed, turning to the red man.

"I-I-I" he stammered.

"Let's get out of here," Poilu said.

"That's the best idea I've heard yet," Xreks stated.

The small group left the room and started down the corridor. They continued along the dimly light passage until Xerks said he recognized one of the tunnels leading to the surface. He felt this was the best way for them to go. He went first, then Anul, Poilu, Vickina, and Jerry brought up the rear.

The tunnel selected slanted upward at an angle of 50 degrees. The climb was rough but three hours later they finally made the surface. The subterranean world behind them they pursued the next leg of their journey, the "Caves of Death".

CHAPTER FIVE
(The Caves)

The travelers rested before their journey through the 'Caves of Death'. The creatures inhabiting the caves feared the light of day, roaming at night, destroying anything they encountered.

As the blue sun arose the travelers set off through the 'Caves of Death'. They had gone twenty miles when they reached a point where the surface of Vulcan II met the interior. This was called 'Suskernipus' by the Flat-Racians. Night had fallen. As they descended the interior, the atmosphere lie very cold.

Mid-way between Suskernipus and Trambag, their destination for the night, the group encountered three more travelers. These turned out to be the remaining crew-members: Nicki, Jane, and Slougher. The reunion was kept short as they decided to resume the march in an effort to reach Trambag before nightfall.

Several hours later they halted at Trambag, a point where the surface again joined the interior. Slougher slept in the center of camp. Slouch, Jane, Vickina, Anul, Xerks, and Poilu placed themselves in a circle around a rock. Jerry rested under a protrusion in the rocks surface, which had formed a natural cave. Slouch took first watch.

Jerry was awakened late in the night by a noise. He caught a glimpse of a creature scrambling over the edge of the rock, a sac slung across its shoulder. He looked around and discovered Jean lying beneath the large rock in the center of camp. Jack lie to his left, beneath bodies of several of the creatures Jerry had seen disappear.

"Well," Jerry said, half to himself, "I guess Jack fought well before he died. I wish I could say the same for Jean."

"Don't be too quick to judge, Jerry," Anul pointed out, tapping him on his shoulder. "Look over here."

Jerry looked beyond the rock Anul had moved. There were twenty creatures strewn about the ground. Evidently, Jean had fought them before being put out of action. Jerry dug a small grave and buried Jean after a small ceremony. They then commenced to dig another for Jack. Poilu walked over to the reclining figure of Xerks and kicked him in his side.

"Bring Jack over here, we'll bury him next."

Xerks stirred momentarily then arose and walked over to Jack, who began to stir.

"I-I-I th-th-thought you s-s-said he was d-d-dead!"

Jerry rushed to his friends' side. Jack began focusing his eyes. He recognized Jerry and tried to speak.

"Save it. You have to regain your strength," Jerry cautioned.

"No," Jack whispered, "I have to tell you now. It began

around the ninth rohue¹. A noise to my left awoke me. Slough was pinned beneath a rock and some creatures were placing the girls into sacks. They were a lot like the Flat-Racians in appearance. Their bodies were all covered with hair. On either side they had huge wings, three feet high with whip-like tentacles on the ends. In the center of the wings were several large dots, with smaller dots surrounding them. Their ears, at least that's what I took them to be, were bumpy and blue. Their beak was the most terrible of all."

"We know." Anul said, pointing to some upturned topsoil. "We just finished burying some."

"Jean and I tried to hold them off, but we were overpowered before we could issue any warning. I brought ten of them down before I was injected with some kind of drug."

"Come," Jerry said, turning in the direction the last creature had taken, "we must find the girls."

Vickina awoke with a start. She could feel every bump as the creature carrying her jogged over the rough terrain. The dense air assured her they were still on the surface. She peered out through sleep-filled eyes and noticed she was not the only captive. The other female members from the camp under the command of Zutho, known to his crew as Jerry Hawks, were also with her. Several rohues later she found herself alone with the other women. This time in a stone enclosed prison.

"So, these are the 'Caves of Death'." Nicki stated, letting her eyes travel about the room.

"Yes," Vicki replied, "these are the caves you have heard tell about so often."

"How did they get their name?" Jane started.

"Anyone entering never leaves, alive. You either learn to work for OOSAGS or die," Vicki added, slightly disappointed.

"What is wrong, Vicki?" asked Nicki.

"I wish Zutho were here to save us from these OOSAGS."

"What is this death you are so certain we will meet?" Jane said, testing the bars forming the door to the room.

"We will be taken to the Blue Men. We will bear their young. Once we are unable to produce we will be exterminated."

"Is there any hope of escape, Vicki?" Jane asked in a low voice, so the guards standing by the door would not overhear.

"Not without Zutho," came her reply as the two guards standing near the door entered and removed her from the room.

Jerry had been in the lead as they came upon the OOSAG bringing up the rear of the capturing party. They quickly overpowered the creature. They found where the girls were to be taken and quickly set off in the direction indicated by the OOSAG, who was also brought along. They soon came upon the

¹Equivalent to 1 1/2 Earth hours

band of marauders and trailed them, remaining out of sight until the caves of death were reached.

The OOSAG had been cunning, but his plan was discovered too late. It pleaded to be released in such loud squeals that Jerry was forced to knock it out. It slumped to the ground, immobile. Jerry turned his attention back to the cave they had entered, but too late. As the Oosag squealed a stone slab started descending from the roof of the cave, now it blocked the entrance through which they had come. Their only exit now lay in the dark hole appearing at the opposite side of the cave. Xerks was not long in crawling through to the darkness beyond. The others followed.

The corridor beyond lay dark and forbidding. There were many holes lining the walls, evidenced by the darker patches. Moments before the men climbed into the corridor three scantily dressed women had been thrown into one of these holes. No sooner had the last man entered than the hole through which they had come was sealed with a stone slab. Even under the combined strength of the four they were unable to move it. With no alternative, they proceeded down the corridor, peering into each darkened spot on the wall. They peered into one and found themselves in a perfectly executed trap!

As the guards looked away Jane and Nicki overpowered them and after a short struggle, left them unconscious. Vickina led the way into the corridor beyond. They began looking into the darkened holes along the corridor until they came to one which made them stop abruptly. Beyond they saw four figures tied to a large post in the middle of the room. Vickina recognized their traveling companions.

While the three women were looking into the room their guards recovered and snuck up behind them. The girls heard a noise and turned in time to be recaptured by the guards. They were led into the room just as a Blue Man placed his hand on a switch on the wall of the room. Nicki took in the situation and shouted above the high-pitched scream of the generators.

"Don't do that!"

Every eye in the room turned toward her as she was thrust into the room. She was pushed into the Blue Man.

"Why?" he asked.

"They are my friends."

"Mine too," Nicki joined in, finding her voice.

"Do you wish to join them? If they mean so much we will be happy to accommodate more."

"Why? We have done you no harm. As far as I know, neither have they," Nicki said, pointing to the four men.

"Let the women go," Xerks said, straining against his chains.

In reply the Blue Man strode over and slapped him across the side of his face.

"That's what you get for talking without my permission!"

"If my hands were free of these chains!" Xerks

threatened, opening and closing his fists.

"Hmmm ... maybe we should remove your bonds ... right at your wrists!" the Blue Man said. Then after a few moments silence added, "Guards! Fetch me a sword."

"Please forgive him your highness, he was only joking ... the ignorant fool," Jack pleaded.

"Spare their lives, your majesty, and you will bring us ruin," whispered a priest near the Blue Man.

"Spare him, he may be valuable later," whispered yet another.

The Blue Man simmered down and informed the guard to put his sword away. The men were released from their chains and escorted to another room, where they joined the women. The entrance was secured with a large rock and they were left in darkness.

"Where is Vickina?" Jerry asked.

"One of our guards took her when we were captured," Jane softly answered.

"What about Slouch?" Nicki inquired.

Jack relayed all that had transpired since they had been separated. Nicki broke into tears as she learned of Slouch's demise. Suppressing her own sadness Jane tried to comfort her.

Food was brought in. In front of them sat three cartons of water, a plate of meat, some green vegetables, and some eating utensils.

"They must think we have little chance of escape. They are leaving us these steel implements. We could use the fork to pick the lock ... unless ..." Jerry stated, walking to the cell door.

He stopped three feet from it and threw the fork at the metal bars. Upon contact sparks splattered in every direction. He walked back to the table and sat down.

"Just as I thought," he said, "electricity ... this could aid us in our escape. Here is what we'll do. Jack, you and Xerks ..."

When the guards took Vickina from her cell they escorted her to a room at the end of the corridor. As they entered she saw a pole connected to a machine by a long wire. On one wall of the room stood a mirror. At the top of the pole were two neck and arm bands connected by wires. Vickina's guards ushered her into a room adjacent to the first and behind the mirror, which was bi-directional, allowing them to look in without being seen. Vickina's escorts explained they had a surprise for her.

Moments later four men were escorted in and chained to the pole. Vickina nearly fainted when she saw Jerry, Xerks, Anul and Jack turn and face her. But where was Jean? Her horror turned deeper as Jane and Niki walked into the room. The latter screamed: "Don't!"

"Why," asked one of the guards in the room.

"They are my friends," she replied.

"Mine too," Jane stated.

"Why do you want me to see this?" Vickina asked her captors.

"Sh-h-h," came the reply.

"Why should I shush when the life of my future husband is at stake. Free him ... and I will do as you wish."

"Listen," replied the guard. So she did.

"... my hands were only free, what I would do to you!" Xerks exclaimed.

"Hmmm ... maybe we should remove your bonds ... right at your wrists!" the Blue Man said. Then after a few moments silence added, "Guards! Fetch me a sword."

"Please forgive him, your highness, he was only kidding - the ignorant fool!" Jack pleaded.

"Thank God!" Vickina muttered half to herself, "I am glad Jack spoke when he did or Xerks would be dead."

"Take them to the dungeon. They will stay and serve his majesty King Me. You, on the other hand," the guard beside Vickina said, "will have to breed the young of one of the kings' subjects, or it might even be king Me himself!" Then with a sigh continued: "I've always wished to breed young for the king but no, he only took the strongest, bravest, and prettiest women in the land. Until you came there was some hope for me. Now there is none! The king has had his eyes on you every moment. You --- a foreigner instead of the prettiest woman on the planet --- me!"

Vickina told herself she had an enemy among the enemy. Was it her fault she was so desirable to the king? She told herself to be watchful of this guard.

Although Jerry attempted escape at every chance he could he failed along with the rest of his crew. They slept in cells at night and worked the mineral pits during the day. The minerals supplied the raw material to work the giant generator which supplied power for the entire Northern region of the planet.

Ever since he had been placed in the pit Jerry had planned his escape. Xerks and Anul had also planned escape but had followed Jerry's plans even though they always seemed to fail. Their last attempt had reduced their food supply to twice daily as well as cutting their rest periods. They were returning from their latest attempt when they were summoned before the king. They arrived and faced Me, King of all Vulcanerians of the Northern hemisphere. (Before the revolution, Me had ruled the entire planet. Later, he was left with just the Northern half. The Southern half falling to the Flat-Racians.)

The group was ushered into Me's presence, and were forced to their knees. Jerry resisted, remaining standing.

"Kneel! --- slave!" ordered the guard beside Jerry.

"Why?" he replied defiantly.

"You're in the presence of Me. Don't ask questions, just kneel!" pleaded a slave next to him.

"What's this? Whispering ... in my court! Do you know the penalty for whispering?" Me shouted.

"But ... but ... but your majesty, I was telling this stubborn slave it would be very wise to kneel in your presence," explained the slave.

"Oh." replied the king. Then after some thinking: "You still were whispering! Do you know what that means?"

"Yes, O master," sobbed the slave.

"Will you go willingly?"

"Do your duty guards," commanded the slave, as guards stepped forward and lead the weeping slave off to his fate.

"What is to be his fate Kingsy?" Jerry inquired.

At first the king became enraged, then started laughing. "I will not only tell you what it will be, I will show you. I invite you and your companions to a ring-side seat."

He then brought into the room the slave, a Zilch² bird, and a couple of Glitches³. Then proceeded to wheel in a machine covered with numerous lights. Me threw a switch on the side of and lights began flickering. The wheels rolled the machine toward its victims. Stopping before the four, a glass case was lowered over each.

The next events happened in such short order I do not think all the details are clear. The machine backed away. Me walked over and flipped another switch. Lights started flashing, needles started rising, levers began moving up and down. The glass cases filled with smoke-like vapor. The slave grasped his throat. The animals fell to the bottom of their cage as a fog crept in. Drops of moisture ran down the slick outer glass. Me flipped a third switch and waited for the vapor to clear.

As visibility returned shapes began to form once again. Me had the cylinders removed. Niki, Jack, Xerks, Anul and Jerry fell to the floor in disgust. (Actually as they saw the objects left in the cages they had stood in horror. The guards behind each had been instructed to trip them, causing them to fall.)

²Zilch - a bird with the head of a human, feet of an elephant and the tail of a rat.

³Glitches - resembling ourchi chickens.

CHAPTER SIX
(King Me's Army)

The guards escorted Vickina to a room no more than ten feet directly beneath Jerry's cell. She was constantly advised on every move he made. She discovered he was to serve in King Me's army for ten Ryas⁴, at the end of which he was to be set free. But, if he were to set foot outside the city he was to be killed ... but he did not discover this until later.

After his relapse in the court room Jerry was told he was to serve in King Me's Army. As the smoke cleared a flesh colored tube had replaced the Zitch bird, some whitened material quavered where once Glitches had been, and where the slave had stood now resided a stringy-like substance floating in a pool of red.

Jerry discovered much later what really happened. The king was a practical joker at heart. That night he had pulled off one of his best tricks. The machine had really been a box powered by an Oosag hidden inside. It had pushed the box forward or backward depending on the direction the king indicated. The animals and man were made to disappear in much the same manner. When smoke filled the tube a trap door in the floor was activated and they all fell through. Slaves beneath had already setup the substances that would replace them. As the smoke cleared the gelatinous masses were seen but not the door. The smoke was caused by the reaction of two chemicals upon each other. One, coating the tubes, the other on the trap door. When the two met they produced the instant smoke.

Jerry was on his stone bed (which also served as table and chair) when the guard came to take him before the king. After having Jerry seated in the 'Truth Chair' the king dismissed the guard.

"Now." the king said, resting his hand on a switch by the machine. "Do you still seek your freedom?"

"It becomes more desirable each moment," Jerry replied, eyeing the apparatus.

"You must promise to serve loyally in my Army."

"How long must I serve?" Jerry inquired.

"Ten Ryas."

"What of my friends?"

"They will be presented the same choices."

"Freedom? or slavery!" Jerry shouted. "Serving in your army IS slavery. Why should I serve? You are nothing but a cruel, savage, ruthless king who doesn't even understand Astronomy."

"That maybe, but in my army you would receive three meals

⁴Ryas - the amount of time it takes Vulcan II to revolve around its two suns. Equal to 1 Earth year.

a day while you are doing some good for my kingdom. Were you a slave you would not have that luxury. What is this a-stron-ome?" Me asked, releasing his hand from the lever.

"If your majesty permits me to see the female prisoner, I will explain this science to him."

"I do not make deals!" Me exclaimed, placing his hand back on the lever.

"Do you want to be laughed at because YOU don't know anything of astronomy?"

"Well ... no," the king meekly replied, lessening his grip on the lever.

"Then let me see her and I will tell you all I know." Jerry said leaning forward in his chair.

"I - i - i - i. Well. One hour, no more" the king reluctantly agreed.

"No guards?" Jerry quickly added.

"Uh ... well ... I ... well. O.K. No guards. Guards. Take this man to the Queens apartments. Bring him out exactly one hour after he enters. Dress him in his uniform. Now be off with you."

Jerry was to see Vickina in a few moments ... and alone as well! Just the chance he had been waiting for to tell her how much he cared for her. He was escorted down a flight of steps and ushered into a room where he put on the uniform of the Royal Guard and made to look like one of the guards. Then he was escorted down two more flights of stairs, down a long corridor, and stopped before an oval door. He knocked.

The knock was answered moments later. Vickina appeared and asked the guards what they wanted. Jerry could understand why she failed to recognize him at first. His hair had been cut and dyed turquoise blue, streaked with a wide patch of red in the center and on the sides so he would be within army standards. He was wearing a cloak of Zitch fur, with strips of sparkling metal. A belt of solid gold held up his green pants. The red shirt was covered at the top by a brown bandanna.

Obeying their orders the guards booted Jerry into the room and closed the door. Jerry fell into Vickina and knocked her down. He tried to get up but found he couldn't, as he had also knocked over a magnetic belt which was pinning them to the floor. Jerry quickly explained who he was.

"I love you, Vickina," he said, propping himself up on his elbows.

"Call me Vicki," she replied, kissing him. Then reached over and depowered to the belt.

Jerry pulled her to him and kissed her again before they rose and sat on the sofa.

"Tell me, Zutho, what has happened since last I saw you?"

Moving closer Jerry relayed all that had happened in the throne room and then in the cell. He explained that he had joined the king's army in order to carry out a plan he had. Since the king had made him an officer, Jerry said he would

see to it the king was treated well when his plan panned out. While he still lived, Jerry vowed the king would not die by his hand. Vickina told Jerry to come into the other room and sit down while she changed into something more comfortable.

While Vickina was changing Jerry had a chance to view his surroundings. The pink wall on his left was covered with hand-painted portraits of famous Vulcanerian officials. Over the door in the middle hung a sign: DANGER! HIGH VOLTAGE. DO NOT ENTER. The wall to his right was green and supported numerous switches and buttons. This wall was covered with paintings of famous Vulcanerian women.

The blue wall in front of him held various instruments of destruction encased in heavy plastic and sealed by gold locks. This wall held the only window in the room. It overlooked the hallway and had been barred. Through the window he discerned two switches. These to be used during an invasion. They could either destroy the person operating them or open the window. The scientist who invented the switch had been killed so that none knew the secret of which switch to press. The sign over the switches read: WHICH SWITCH IS WHICH?

On the remaining wall, a black background covered with white and green dots, had the oval door through which he had entered. A triangle on the wall was labeled: THE IDIOT ROOM. Above the door was a light that illuminated as the door opened. This wall was formed by open boxes.

The ceiling was black and had a large depression at the center with an identically matching hump directly below it on the floor. The floor was painted in the likeness of the king himself; the hump, of course, being his nose.

At that moment Vickina stepped back into the room. She was dressed in a most fascinating apparel. Her robe consisted of a silken gown with frills around the bottom and a deep plunging neckline. The Zitch-hair sandals she wore made no sound on the stone flagging as she quickly crossed the room. She was near the Blue Wall. The room grew dark as she drew the shade over the window. No sound came above that of the two breathing.

Jerry felt something warm and light on his lap. Warm, smooth arms encircled his neck and then ... a warm tingling sensation on his cheek. His strong arms encircled the slim body as he kissed her. Time was running out.

"Zutho," she said, still hugging him. "When do you think we can leave this place?"

"As soon as ..."

He never finished. They heard the guards enter the outer chamber. As Jerry walked to the door in the darkness he knocked over a hidden chair and fell into the outer room.

"Would you look at that! She booted him out of the room. Maybe he has harmed the Queen. Ask her, Thrive ... No? Well, maybe he's just falling for her, eh? Ha .. ha .. ha," said one of the guards.

They escorted Jerry down a few doors from where Vickina had been and stopped. This was his new room. He was told to enter and then given a pile of books.

"Do I have to know all this stuff?" Jerry asked, pointing to the stack.

"You have it easy, pal," replied the guard. "To be a common soldier you have to learn all of that and more. At this time tomorrow you will be in command of a squadron in the Royal Army. That is, if you pass the test."

"What's all this?" Jack asked, as he stepped into the room.

"This STUFF is what I have to learn by tomorrow. It is much like our own training manuals. These are going to help me in the King's Royal Army." Jerry explained.

"What! You went over to the enemy! Are they forcing you?"

"No."

"No? What are you pulling? I know, you have something up your sleeve, don't you."

"I am pulling anything. I have no plan. I am just fed up with being a courteous, gentle nobody and want to go out and fight. Life has been too dull for me. In the Army I can get what I have always wanted: power, women, an army to command, power of life and death, but most of all ..." Jerry started.

"Traitor!" Jack screamed, stomping out of the room.

"I hated to do that to you old boy, but it was for your own good that you knew," Jerry said to himself as the door slammed.

Jerry was summoned before the king a short time later.

"I have summoned you to help me conquer the RED MEN. They have been raiding our caravans, traveling between the northern and southern boundaries of my kingdom. I want you to lead my troops into battle against them. You leave tomorrow. Everything has been arranged."

"Yes, o exuberant one," Jerry replied, bowing before the king. Then he rose and walked out of the throne room.

CHAPTER SEVEN
(The Red Men)

Before Jerry left the throne room he received a summons from Vickina. She bade him enter the Idiot Room. He offered her a chair but she refused. She went over to the green wall and pressed one of the buttons. The room was flooded by the soft light filtering through the depression in the ceiling. Coming close she whispered:

"Zutho, if you hurry you can jump through that hole and seek help before Me discovers I know the secret escape route made by the Frigorians centuries ago."

"I will not leave without you," Jerry said.

"But you must. It ... it is the only way you can be safe."

"No, Vicki, I cannot leave you behind while I go into the upper world."

"Last time you were here you started to tell me how we might escape," she said, changing the subject.

"Sure, I will tell you," he started, "as soon as I ..."

Again Jerry was interrupted in mid-sentence. This time by Vickina, pointing to the ceiling. Jerry looked to the oval hole. Blocking out the light was a figure in a red cloak. "A friend of yours?" Jerry asked, looking at Vickina.

"No! It is on of the RED MEN. They have come to capture soldiers and make them work in the Cimota Nrevac."

"Cimota Nrevac?" Jerry asked quizzically.

"A place where the radioactive mineral Muinaru VIII is mined," she replied, shrinking from the descending figure.

"You mean, something like Uranium?"

"Yes." she replied, as the man jumped the intervening space and landed beside her. Ten more followed in short order and the two were surrounded.

Jerry advanced toward the first. "What do you want?"

"Like man ... we want YOU." came the reply.

"Why do you desire us?" Jerry asked.

"Like man, who said US ... we want YOU and only YOU."

"Me?" Jerry asked, wrinkling his nose.

"You is in de ol' mans' army. We despises persons in de ol' mans' army ... right boys?" the leader said, turning to the others.

"Right-to daddy'o" they answered as they surrounded Jerry.

"Tie im' up boys. You," he said, pointing to the man next to Vickina, "take the girl. She may come in 'andy later."

Jerry resisted but soon was bound and gagged, then lifted up through the skylight. They were placed on an elevator and lifted two miles to the surface. There a group of RED MEN stood waiting to receive them.

A cool breeze swept across Jerrys' face as he was lifted from the elevator and placed into the cage with Vickina. When

the elevator returned to the surface a second time there were twelve more soldiers in it. They too were placed into the same cage. He was surprised to find three of his friends among them: Anul, Jack and Nicki. Slaves, all RED MEN, were laced to each corner and the cage started moving through the dense forest.

The blue sun rose in the west as a large band of RED MEN made their way through the leafy vegetation. The group had covered two to three hundred miles during the night. They had run into a herd of Milopers early in their journey and used them for transportation. The Miloper stands well over six feet, weighs nearly a ton and has a Blue-green hue. Like the elephant with its long trunk, the Miloper has a large nose it uses as a system of defense. The group stopped to rest and eat, and water their mounts.

They resumed their journey after feeding the prisoners a distasteful meal of broiled, diced spider guts, on top of stale, worm-infected, lizard meat. They exited the cool forest and continued their journey across the broiling desert.

As they marched into the desert Jerry saw several object barely visible on the horizon. He pointed these out to Vickina. The leader overheard and took up his jewel-studded binoculars, searching for the objects. He was surprised when he finally spotted them. Handing the instrument to his companion he turned to Jerry: "How did youse knows there was something there?"

Shrugging, Jerry replied: "I saw them."

"Man ... you has de finest eyes I has ever seed. May I look through them?" the leader requested.

Now THAT was indeed a strange request.

"Yeah .. sure .. go ahead," Jerry replied, curious as to how he was going to accomplish that.

The leader reached behind and pulled a helmet from his sac. This he placed over Jerry's head. He reached into the sac again and brought out a device with two wires protruding from it. He inserted one of the wires into the helmet on Jerry's head, the other behind his own ear. He threw a switch on the box and closed his eyes. Jerry's vision became blurred. He closed his eyes momentarily and shook his head to shake off the effects. It didn't help, his head started spinning. He opened his eyes and turned to disconnect the wire from the box, only to find no one behind him. He turned toward the front and discovered he was looking into his own face! How could he be in two places at once? Unless ... the mind had also been transferred. Seeing a plan form immediately Jerry disconnected the apparatus from his head and then from the helmet on his original body. He put the box back in the sac and turned to his side saying: "Like man, o-o-o-e-e he has de most booteful vision I ever seed."

"Like fellas ... I ain't Zutho. I is yoose's leader, Nutras," the mind in Jerrys original body explained.

The Red Men gave Jerry a dirty look. Feeling his ruse wasn't going the way he had planned, Jerry turned to Nutras: "If youse is Nutras, den how cun yoose be in dat body?"

"Simples. De machine has to transfer de brains or else de eyes wouldn't see. So gives me back me body!" Nutras cried.

"Who is your real boss boys?" Jerry asked.

"There's one way to find out," replied on of the crimsoned men. Pointing to the real Jerry he continued. "What would youse do in dis situation: One of us is caught in a sand pit and youse are on de edge with a rope?"

"Why, I'd walk off with de rope and let de man drown, natch." Jerry replied.

"And you?", pointing to Nutras this time.

"Why I'd throw him de rope, natch." he replied.

He looked at both men for a long time and then, after a conference with the rest of the Red Men replied: "You are in de right bodies."

"You were a fool to try such a stunt Jerry. I'm surprised at you!" Vickina stated, looking toward Nutras⁵.

"But I tells you I AM Nutras!" he exclaimed, stomping his feet.

"You know," whispered a Red Man near Jerry, "I almost believe he DID switch minds ... but that's impossible."

"If they only knew!" Jerry thought to himself.

The group had been moving all the time Jerry and Nutras had been exchanging eyes and had now come upon the two specs they had spied in the distance. The objects turned out to be two gigantic spaceships. They sat on their fins with spiral stairways leading to the top. Two guards had been posted near the entrance. The group entered the foremost ship. Then its captain took charge. He chained Vickina to the bulkhead in the women's quarters while placing the prisoners, including Nutras (in Jerrys' body), into the pen. Jerry was to have a conference with him as soon as they were in space. Meanwhile he had free run of the ship and could move about and inspect it.

Jerry first thought of Vickina. He went to the prison chambers and visited the women's quarters. She was in cell KLJ173. He walked in and asked the guard to leave them alone for a few minutes.

"I cannot do that. I have to make sure SHE does not escape," the guard replied.

"Will this make you see differently?" Jerry said, pulling out some vulcanerian nuggets.

"Bribery will get you nowhere!" he exclaimed.

"I have to see her. She may ..." Jerry whispered the rest, so the watching girl couldn't hear.

⁵Nutras -- you will have to remember that Nutras is now in Jerrys' body, so she was actually talking to Nutras.

"Well, in that case. Go on in. I'll go around the corner and wait ten minutes. No longer," the guard said as he walked around the corner.

Jerry walked in and sat down beside Vickina.

"What are YOU doing here!" she shouted.

"I am not who you think I am, Vickina. I am Jerry. Our minds WERE switched ... you don't believe me? How can I convince you?" Jerry pleaded.

"Only Jerry would know what I said when he kissed me for the first time. If you are he, tell me what I said," she asked, looking directly into his eyes.

"You said, and I quote: 'Mr. Hawks, what are you doing!', unquote." Jerry replied.

"Jerry!" she exclaimed throwing herself against the chains and into his arms.

"Sh-h-h. Not so loud. The guard might hear. I must try to keep my identity secret. Promise me you will not tell a soul."

"I promise. I'm so glad to see you," she said, hugging him.

"Alright you two. Come out of there ... Mr. Hawks!" commanded a guard who had joined the first. "You are coming with us. We found out your real name when the REAL Nutras picked the lock on his cell and told the chief a secret only he and the chief knew. You shall regret you took over his body. You will be put into the Maze."

By this time Jerry had been taken halfway through the ship and was about to enter a room. At its center stood a round table. On it were all sorts of bottles, wires and chemicals. He was seated at the table. No sooner had he been seated when he found he was no longer in the room with the table but was now in a room with several openings in the wall. He had his own body back. The openings let in enough light for him to discern needle-like projections protruding from the ceiling and on each wall.

"You have to travel these tunnels in order to attain freedom. If you do not wish freedom, stay where you are and be crushed as the walls come together. Touch any wall or ceiling along the way and you die. The needles have been coated with poison. Only three of the sixty people who entered this maze have ever come out alive," stated a voice from an opening hidden within the maze.

As Jerry stepped into the opening of the tunnel the lights were extinguished. Approaching a bend Jerry activated a hidden switch which dropped a heavy net onto him. Through the dark Jerry made out the dim outlines of a board with numerous sharp projections. This was slowly descending. Doing some rough calculations he estimated he had ten to fifteen minutes before it reached floor level and crushed him. He started working one of the links on the net with his fingers. After several minutes it broke and he managed to make a large opening.

Crawling from beneath the board Jerry looked back and saw it no more than two feet from the ground. Looking up he discovered a Red Man glaring back at him. The man claimed that in order to pass this point he was to fight him.

The Red Man planted a balled fist into Jerry's midsection, knocking the air from his lungs. As his opponent came to deliver another blow Jerry swung his fist in an upward arc, catching the man on his jaw. He reeled back and fell to the floor. As Jerry approached the fallen body the man lifted his legs and threw Jerry backward. Jerry curled himself and was on his feet again. The Red Man approached. Jerry delivered a sharp blow to his midsection with the side of his hand. The man bent over and Jerry chopped him on his neck with his other hand. As his opponent crumpled to the floor Jerry started off again down the corridor.

"He's been in there three days! Bring him out!" begged Vickina, as she watched Jerry travel through the enclosed circular passage.

"I keep telling you, he doesn't get out until you consent to be my wife," Nutras answered, as he opened another section of the circular maze Jerry had found himself in.

"He will die if he doesn't get food or water. He is barely able to stand. I will become your wife if you promise to release him from this," Vickina finally agreed, as she watched Jerry pull himself along the floor, seeking escape.

"Guards! Release that man," Nutras exclaimed, pointing to Jerry. "Feed him. Feed him well. Let him rest, then bring him before the THREE."

"Aye, aye, sir," replied three men, walking off down the corridor.

As Jerry rounded another turn in the endless corridor he was met by three guards. Having had nothing to eat for days he was easily overpowered. When he awoke he found himself lying on a velvet-covered bed. He rubbed the lump on his head. Raising his eyes from the side of the bed he spotted two feet. Following the curving limbs upward. Standing by the bed was a young maiden of twenty. Her face covered by a silken veil.

"Where am I?" Jerry announced, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed and sitting upright.

"You are on Nela V, moon of Vulcan II," she replied.

"What am I doing here?"

"I'll tell you what you are doing here," stated Nutras, stepping into view. "You are here to serve as slave in the Royal Palace. You would have been dead had Vickina not consented to become my wife."

"Your wife!" Jerry screamed and then, watching the guards surround him, restrained his anger.

"That is what I said, Mr. Hawks, MY wife.
Ha,ha,ha,ha,ha."

"What of the other prisoners?" Jerry asked.

"The ones that survived the torture cells are in the dungeon. By the way, three of them wish to meet you." he said, stepping into the hallway.

Jerry followed him down the hallway. As they neared the end of the corridor three guards joined them before they entered the elevator. The doors closed and the journey downward began. As the cage approached the third floor the lights inside were suddenly extinguished. There was a lot of commotion and then the lights returned. Jerry found himself knee deep in bodies. The three guards that had enter were the only ones standing besides him.

At first Jerry thought the three were his friends but as he looked closer he found their skin to be a deep black. He knew they had not come from Vulcan II.

"Where are we going?" he asked, trying to peer through the openings in the silver helmets the men were wearing.

"Can't talk now. Must hurry," came the reply.

"Are you friends?" Jerry cautiously asked.

"We enemies to all. None like us. We take you. Join three more. What me like me take," another replied.

"Why do you wish to be my enemy? Are you my enemy?" Jerry asked as they approached a door.

"Explain later. Must hurry. We are being followed."

As Jerry passed through the door he was hit on the back of his head and slumped to the floor. Three men picked him up and placed him on a sled which carried him off in the distance. After securing the door the three then joined a fourth in another sled and also departed.

When Jerry regained consciousness it was to find three bodies piled on top of him. He was speeding across the desert. Propping himself up on an elbow he surveyed his surroundings. He recognized the bodies as Anul, Jack and Nicki. Four dark figures occupied the sled trailing them. He tried shifting the bodies. Shifting one way he endangered Nickina and the other way he endangered Anul. He was stuck. When Nickina regained consciousness he tried again.

"Step down from the top, Nickina ... Now pull Anul off. That's it. Easy ... don't let him touch the motors. Now take Jack off me. Roll him ... thanks." Jerry finally said, rising.

"Do you know these people, Anul?" Nickina said, seeing Anul awaken.

"Three races exist on this satellite. The Red Men you have already met. We now have fallen into the hands of the Lufwa's. The third race are the Spider Men. The Red Men are the supreme rulers, the Lufwa's are their slaves. The Spider Men are scavengers and pirates." he replied, sitting up.

"I have a plan where we can use the Lufwa's to help us escape this satellite. They may even want to help without my plan. Now, this is what I intend to do. Anul, you ..." Jerry whispered, as the pink sky grew black as the sun set on the

horizon.

The red sun rose in the distance as two jet-sleds came to a halt in front of a dark cave. Four people were taken from the first sled by a couple of men from the second and led inside. Then the second sled chained the first one to it and drove into a nearby cave. Once inside the cave the four people were placed on a third sled then sent on its way along a track. This track ended at an oval doorway. The door opened and a blue light filtered into the cave. Inside the room the four people could see large spider-like creatures. These unlocked the passengers and herded them into the room. At the far end a large spider-like creature sat on a jewel encrusted throne. Three feet from his throne were four chairs. The prisoners were placed into these. The creature spoke.

"I, King Ssem, have ordered your capture. I have heard of your vast knowledge of A-stron-o-my. I wish to learn the nature of this science. Will you tell me what you have learned?" he asked, pointing to Jerry.

"What makes you sure I know anything about science?" Jerry replied, winking at Anul.

"I have spies in Me's court. They know of your knowledge. They keep me informed. I planned a raid. Now I have you to tell me all about this science."

"Why should I tell you anything?" Jerry asked.

"Why do you think we brought these other people along? We have ways ..." he replied.

"How about a deal?" Jerry asked.

"What kind of deal did you have in mind?" Ssem responded, raising one of his three eyebrow.

"I explain about Astronomy and you give us a spaceship."

"What is a space-ship?" Ssem asked.

"It is what we came to this satellite in," Jerry replied.

"Oh. You mean the Wonder Ship. We shall see. Now tell me of this strange science," Ssem replied.

"Well, to start with. In our solar system there are nine planets. And a planet is a ..."

"He's been talking to Ssem nearly a week. If we don't finish this tunnel quickly we might loose our only chance of escape," Anul said, passing a bucket of dirt to Nickina through the darkness.

"I still don't see how Ssem is going to double-cross Jerry?" Nickina questioned, as she passed the bucket to Jack.

"Ssem only needs Jerry for his knowledge. Once he learns everything Jerry becomes useless. You saw what happened to that Spider-man Ssem said was useless, three days ago," Jack answered, emptying the sand into a pit in the floor of the cave.

"I know. But will Ssem do that to Jerry?" Nicki said, passing the bucket back to Anul.

"Why not?" Anul returned, digging once again. "Jerry doesn't mean anything to him. All Ssem wants is his knowledge. After that Jerry is doomed ... Yahoo-o-o-o ... we broke through!"

"Can you see anything?" Nickina asked, edging forward.

"Yes. A lot of uniforms and guns. I think we came up in one of the store rooms," Anul replied, climbing through the opening.

The only light entering the room was from a dust-covered window in the ceiling. Anul blew the dust from three of the uniforms, handing two to his companions. Sifting through a pile of equipment he wiped the dust from a small box. Large lettering across it read "O.A.C. (Oosag Army Corp) TRITON POWDER. DANGER!". Picking up another uniform Anul ripped off the pocket and told Nickina and Jack to do likewise. He opened the box and started filling the pouches they had created. When they were filled he turned to his companions.

"The least bit of fire will ignite these. There is enough powder here to blow this entire settlement. The first thing we have to do is get a ship. Then we can get Jerry and blow up this place. Are you with me?"

"All the way," replied Nickina.

"I don't know," Jack hesitated.

"What's keeping you back, Jack?" Anul asked.

"What happens if they capture us again?"

"We will cross that bridge when we come to it. Right now we have to get out of here," Anul replied, opening the door.

As the rusty hinges screamed Anul passed through the opening. When the group was half-way down the corridor Nickina tapped Anul on his shoulder.

"How do you know so much about this place?"

"I was captured before ... why?" he replied, turning.

"Oh .. just wondering." Then turning her head toward Jack. "Jack? Aren't the ships that way?" she said, pointing the opposite direction from which they were traveling.

"Hey ... Anul, what's the idea? The rockets are down the corridor."

"How do you know?" Anul replied, stopping.

"When we came in we passed them, remember?"

"Er - li- er? guess so. But this is a - er - a shortcut. I learned this when I was here last time." Anul hesitantly replied.

Anul led the group a short distance then stopped in front of a large rock. He pressed one of its projections. It slid back. Inside was a small rocket. Half-way up the rocket was an opening from which hung a short ladder.

"You go first," Anul said, turning to Nickina and Jack. "I'll set the manual controls."

"How come there aren't any more ships?" Jack asked.

"Er - they - er - they are kept in separate booths like this one for safety." he replied.

No sooner had Jack and Nicki entered the ship when the door was shut and bolted. Anul stepped over to the wall and pressed a button. A desk rose from within the floor. Seating himself behind the desk Anul picked up a microphone and spoke. Inside Jack and Nicki listened intently.

"I am sorry you had to find out THIS way. You know, I was beginning to like you two. But as I said before, I am sorry you found out I am a Lufwa. When our leader heard someone from another world had landed on Vulcan II, he sent me to investigate. Jerry was too smart, he would find out what we were doing and try to stop us. If we didn't stop him first he WOULD stop us. TOO bad you had to pay the consequences. He is to be sentenced to death in a few days and will join you in space. You have enough air for one day, water and food for three, and enough power to clear the gravity of this planet. Have a good trip."

The room was flooded with light as the ceiling parted and the rocket rose into the atmosphere. Anul pressed another button and an opening in the wall appeared. A Spider-man walked through.

"You have proven yourself a worthy executioner, King Luna. You really fooled them with your name ... Anul. Very ingenious, reversing the characters so instead of being King Luna you became Anul the slave. Ha, ha, ha, ha."

"What about the other one? Have you kept him busy pretending to be ignorant of the science in which you specialize?" Luna asked, walking over and shaking one King Ssem's legs.

"Very. You know, he knows almost as much about Astronomy as we do. We shall go back and tell him what you have done and what we will do to him if he does not co-operate," Ssem stated, reentering the corridor he had recently come through.

CHAPTER EIGHT
(The King's Pets)

"He's going to send them where!" Jerry shouted, pacing back and forth in front of his new acquaintance, Kas Estac.

Jerry had met Kas during one of his rest periods. He spent twelve hours in the presence of Ssem, educating him on astronomy. Three hours roaming the palace, and the rest of his time sleeping. During one of his three hour breaks he had met Kas. He had been a slave. Jerry grew to liking him and asked Ssem to let Kas become his assistant. His wish had been granted and Jerry discovered from Kas that there were only a few loyal subjects. The others were afraid of Ssem.

Jerry was posted on what the king was planning through spies inside the royal chamber. When he found Anul was really King Luna he flew into a rage. Kas quieted him and told him what Luna was supposed to do to Nickina and Jack.

"As I was saying before, he is going to send them into space on a one way journey," Kas finished, standing.

"Is there any way ---" Jerry pleaded, moving to a new spot in the rug.

"Save them? I am afraid not. Unless ... you manage to get them out of prison before tomorrow. Or kill Anul."

"What if the rocket used to carry them into space was to ... circle and land a hundred miles, or so, from the palace? Would a search party be sent out after them?" Jerry questioned.

"Most certainly ... if anyone saw the ship circle."

"Good. Here is what I want you to do. Gather some of your most trusted people and ..."

Early next morning Jerry visited the room King Luna was to send his friends into space from. At its center stood the rocket.

A control desk stood to the right, the top still open from repairs. Looking at the control board Jerry found it much like his own ships. He removed a screwdriver from his pocket and set the altitude control for 80,000 feet. He set the distance indicator for three miles and then locked them in position. He walked out of the room and closed the door.

"Did you set the remote control?" Kas asked, seeing Jerry depart the room.

"Everything is set. How about you?" he replied.

"My men are ready. When the signal is given they will release them." Kas replied, walking down the corridor, following Jerry as he turned into the Royal Science Room.

"I have been waiting, Mr. Hawks. What kept you?" Ssem asked, rising.

"I had to fix something," Jerry replied, taking a seat beside the king.

"Let us proceed." the king commanded.

"Who are your -- uh -- guests?" Jerry asked, watching three people enter the room.

"These are my top scientists. The one to your right is Val Defer, top electrical engineer; in the middle, Skrex Diputs, founder of the light drive; and last is Uloip, head of the National Educational Council. Skrex, Val, Uloip. I would like you to meet Mr. Hawks." Ssem said, indicating Jerry.

"I don't recognize the names, yet I seem to know each of you," Jerry stated, shaking their hands.

"Impossible," Ssem stated, "they arrived just today to see a test I am performing in a few hours. Would you like to join us?"

"I will be on my rest period and would like to get all the rest I can before tomorrow," Jerry responded.

"What, may I ask, are you going to do tomorrow that will be taking up so much of your time?" Ssem asked, leaning forward in his chair.

"Don't tell me you have forgotten?" Jerry asked, turning in his direction. "That is when I show you how to work the giant telescope you constructed from my plans."

"Oh yes, that. I had forgotten. Now please tell me more of this science of yours." the king retorted.

"I am afraid there is not much more to tell. The only thing I have not told you is that the rate of growth of trees may be affected by the ever changing activity on the sun. Until tomorrow I am afraid I can tell you no more. Now to your part of the bargain. Have you made a spaceship ready?"

"Your ship is ready, but you will not be leaving until tomorrow." Ssem replied.

"Then I have your permission to leave and prepare for the trip to Vulcan II?" Jerry asked, rising.

"Why would you wish to return to Vulcan II?" Ssem inquired.

"Someone very dear is there. I could not go back to my home planet without first seeing her again," replied Jerry, noting the hesitancy in Ssem's voice.

"You have my permission to leave ... that is, if these three do not have any questions?" Ssem replied, looking toward the two men and woman.

"No, we have no questions now," they replied.

"I thought you said that there was a question which only Mr. Hawks could answer?" Ssem said, winking.

"Oh, that. Will you come with us Mr. Hawks," Poilu said, disappearing behind the throne into a secret passage.

"I guess so," Jerry replied, moving slowly toward the door.

No sooner had he entered than the King shut the door and bolted it.

"What did he do that for?" Jerry complained, testing the door.

"We are to question you in private. Ssem is taking no chances. There have been reports that four spies are among us in the palace," Val stated.

"Val. Do you have any relatives on Vulcan II?" Jerry inquired, peering through the helmet visor the woman was wearing.

"No. Why do you ask?" she replied, seating herself in along the corridor wall.

"Well, it may be coincidence, but you look like ... no it couldn't be."

"I look like who?" she asked, twisting her head in his direction.

"Oh, just a woman I used to know. Could you remove your helmet for a moment?"

"Sure", she replied, removing the headpiece.

"Vickina!" Jerry exclaimed, taking a seat beside her.

"Vickina ... who's Vickina?" she asked.

"The rest of you," Jerry stated indicating the others, "... remove your helmets."

"Xerks. Poilu!" Jerry shouted as the helmets were removed. "I thought so. Do you know each other?"

"We met only this morning," Uliop answered.

"You've been brainwashed. Let me see one of those helmets," Jerry commented, stretching out his hand.

Taking the headpiece Jerry closely examined it, verifying his hunch. Inside each helmet was a round metallic disc. In essence this was a super-sensitive receiver. Picking up the other helmets Jerry removed the disks and smashed them on the ground. Then he handed the helmets back.

"You will be yourselves shortly. For now place the helmets back on your heads. Now ... is there a way out of here?"

"That way," Val said, pointing to the door through which they had entered.

"I mean besides that way." Jerry said, frowning.

"Not that we know of. Now ... the questions we are to ask you. Skrex?" Val asked, motioning Xerks to rise.

"Do you think we should? After all, he may be correct. We did find ourselves in a laboratory this morning." he said, as things started coming back.

"If we are not who he says we are ... there is one thing that bothers me ..." Val said, turning to Jerry.

"And that is?" Jerry inquired, raising an eyebrow.

"A name ... Zutho. Do you know anybody named Zutho?" Val asked, turning to the others.

"Come to think of it," Xerks said, squinting his brow, "the name does ring a bell. But I don't remember who ..."

"I have never heard of such a person." Poilu said, turning to Jerry.

"I am Zutho," Jerry stated. "You have called me that many a time."

"Why would Ssem wish to monitor our behavior?" Vickina asked, looking back to Jerry.

"He wants me out of the way while he launches a rocket into space ... carrying Nickina and Jack," he replied.

"Why would he want to do that?" she asked.

"Ssem kills all who serve no purpose to him. I imagine when you completed your decoy mission you would also be terminated."

"Maybe we can still escape and save Jack and Nicki." Poilu stated, stepping toward the door. "If I remember correctly, this door is bolted by an electronic timer. If I can reset that timer with this piece of wire"

There was a distinct CLICK, then the door swung open. Poilu stepped into the dimly light room. He signaled the others to join him. No sooner had they all stepped into the room when they heard a WHOOSH. Jerry ran ahead of the group and pulled down on a hidden lever.

At one end of the palace was a deep pit sealed by numerous bars. In it numerous Vulcanerian animals. Three men stood near the pit. The moment Jerry pulled the lever an alarm rang. The three men rushed to the bars and pulled them from the pits. They climbed atop the structure and pushed a button. A doorway opened in the wall and a multitude of animals sprang forth. The beasts ran down the passageway and soon began entering a large room. Inside two men were heavily engaged in conversation.

"You have proven yourself a worthy executioner, King Luna. You really fooled them with your name ... Anul. Very ingenious reversing your name so instead of being King Luna, you were Anul the slave. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha."

"What about the other one? Have you kept him busy pretending to be ignorant of the science in which you specialize?" the other one said, walking over to shake the others leg.

"Very. You know, he knows almost as much about Astronomy as we do. We shall go back and tell him what you have done and what we will do to him if he doesn't cooperate," the first replied, entering a tunnel.

"... what was that?" Anul asked, turning.

"I don't know." the other replied, pausing in the corridor.

"Aren't those your pets, Ssem?" Luna asked, pointing toward the oncoming beasts.

"I fear our Mr. Hawks has escaped. To the escape plane!" Ssem commanded.

Seeing their prey receding, the animals streaked after the two. Lady luck seemed to ride with them that day as the animals were attracted to another portion of the passage by a sudden noise. Luna and Ssem quickly ran into a secret room and sealed its entrance.

The noise, which had attracted the animals, had been the raising of a heavy gate. This had released the prisoners, most being Oosags. Ssem had tripped a switch before entering the room. It had been this switch which released the lock on the prisoners cells.

"We are free!" exclaimed one of the Oosags.

"Look what bars our path though .." screamed another, pointing toward the charging animals.

"We must save Me, our king." ordered another as a crowd formed around one of the prisoners.

"Yes. You must save me, Me!" screamed the one in the center.

"Wait. Who's that?" one of the Oosags asked, pointing toward the furthest end of the corridor.

"Why ... it's that alien. Jerry Hawks!" screamed Me.

"Is that you, Me?" Jerry asked, seeing the creatures coming toward him, trailed by the escaping animals.

"Yes .. yes."

"Quick. In here." Jerry commanded, pointing to an open doorway.

The little creature obeyed quickly. No more than a few yards behind him the first of the kings fearsome pets could be seen. It had already devoured three of the Oosags and had caught yet another. Jerry pulled out a small box and extended a steel rod from its side. Pointing the rod at the advancing beast he pressed a button on its side. The beast disappeared! Jerry kept discharging the device until the beasts were exceptionally close, then he stopped and quickly stepped into the room, closing the door behind him.

"There are twelve left. They'll track down Ssem and rid the planet of his awful rule. As soon as I set this dial, we will have less than four hours to escape." Jerry said, twisting a knob on a black box hidden behind the throne.

Walking behind the chair he threw open a trap door and plunged into the darkness beneath. Once below Jerry's eyes quickly adjusted to the dim light. He looked up and saw first the Oosags, then Vickina, Xerks, and lastly Poilu drop through the hole. Assembling at the bottom of the stairs the small group followed Jerry through the labyrinth until they came to a stone wall. Here Jerry pulled a sharp pin from his pocket and inserted it into a barely discernible hole near the top of the wall. The wall slid back, revealing a brightly illuminated room beyond.

An the center of the room stood the Royal Rocket. Entering the opposite side of the room were two men Jerry recognized as Anul and Ssem.

"Get to the ship. I'll take care of those two," Jerry yelled, running toward the surprised men.

Seeing the small group enter the room, Ssem and King Luna started running toward the Royal Rocket. Jerry managed to trip Ssem, which knocked him out as his head contacted the floor.

King Luna managed to get inside the ship before anyone could stop him. He slid the door shut and started the motors. Ssem regained consciousness and started making his way to the ship.

Watching Ssem advance Luna said: "Let Ssem through, or I will roast you all right now as I launch this ship."

The door slid open and King Luna stepped out with a box-like device in his hands. He pointed this at Jerry. Ssem quickly hurried to the open door and stepped on board. Jerry tried to stop him but found that King Luna had made no idle threat. Luna pressed the button on the box the moment he saw Jerry start to move. A green ray shot from the box and Jerry fell to the floor. One of the Oosags ran to the ship to stop Ssem, he too received the same treatment ... but with different results.

The green ray streaked forward toward the Oosag and struck him in the middle of his body. What followed was sickening. Its hair burned in a blue flame as the Oosag died. With the hair removed the Oosag looks almost human except the head is much larger in proportion to the body. Its three eyes and six feet do make it differ in one aspect. With the outer layer of skin gone, the inner layer started wilting. The women couldn't turn from the awful scene as their eyes remained glued in sheer horror. A thin covering of mucous soon covered the body. After this had disintegrated an internal organ popped out and vanished. The heart and rest of the organs followed suit until the body had completely vanished. The group lifted their heads as Luna spoke.

"You have seen what can happen when I throw only a little power into this weapon," he said, indicating the now rising Jerry. "You also have seen what full destruction it can bring," he continued, pointing to where the Oosag had been. "We will build a bigger one and conquer the Solar System!"

With that he closed the door. The ship lifted from the floor and flew into space, leaving a mile long trail of flame behind.

"We must stop him," Jerry stated, getting to his feet. "We will take one of the other ships. Follow me."

Jerry led the group into another passageway marked: RESERVE SPACESHIPS. The corridor led into a large room. On the wall of the room were the remnants of several spaceships. It looked like they had been destroyed ... and not too recently! Jerry led them past the smoldering ruins into yet another room. This too had been filled with remnants of wrecked ships. Jerry turned to the group with sadness:

"Looks like we stay here and get blown up. The rooms you are in contained the entire space fleet under command of Ssem. It would take too long to go to the Red Men and ask their help in leaving this planet. It will take three hours to disarm the bomb and we only have an hour and a half before detonation."

With heavy hearts the group returned to the throne room and awaited their fate.

CHAPTER NINE
(Out In Space)

As the rocket shot upward Jack and Nickina were pushed to the floor which grew hot under the rockets blast. It soon became unbearable inside the cabin. Discovering a sliding frame on the floor Jack pushed it back and looked through the window. The satellite rapidly disappeared as the rocket continued its skyward journey. Suddenly they were thrown to one side as the rocket swung in a great arc. It continued this course for three hours before again roughly throwing them against the bulkhead. This time the rocket sped downward, gathering speed.

With the ground looming closer and closer Jack tried to dislodge part of the shield surrounding the rocket. He reached down and started tugging, the panel started to budge. He was thrown against the floor as a rush of air began entering through the small opening he had made. Pushing a large piece of metal from him Jack crawled toward the hole, Nickina followed. Removing his shirt he made it into a crude parachute. Nickina ripped part of her dress and followed suit. Jack jumped. Nickina followed as soon as he had cleared the opening.

At first the makeshift parachute didn't open, then, perspiration dripping from his brow, it popped and Jack started drifting slowly downward. The ground was still 200 feet away when he saw a giant bird swoop down on them from above. Jack immediately recognized it as a Leber ... one of the most fearsome predators on either Vulcan II or its satellite. The Leber lives beneath the ground and is considered to be quite intelligent. As the bird dove toward Jack another appeared in the sky to his left, where Nickina was descending.

Grabbing Jack in one claw and Nickina in the other, the Leber flew Eastward toward a mountain range. The second bird, seeing the first had robbed him of a meal, attacked from above. A brief battle ensued as the two birds fought over the prize. Letting go the humans the first bird tore out the eyes of the second then, battered and bleeding, again dove after its prey. Catching the two in its claws it resumed its eastward journey.

Weakened from battle the Leber dropped lower and lower in the sky. Several hours later it fell to the ground, exhausted. It released Jack and Nickina from its claws. They rolled along the ground until coming to a rest, unconscious, against the bole of a large tree.

Jack came to, washed the dried blood from his clothes, then wet a portion of his shirt, and placed it on his companions blood covered head. She sat up, blinking.

"Are you all right?" Jack asked.

"I guess so. How about you?" she replied.

"Quite. There's a pond over there," he said, pointing off to their right.

"Thanks." she stated and walked off toward the water.

Ten minutes later Nickina came back, scraping the last remnants of blood from her clothing. Sitting next to Jack she brought out some berries she had picked. They ate.

"Jerry must have planned this," Jack said, finishing his berries.

"Someone could have crossed Anul," Nickina added, wiping her fingers on her dress.

"I thought of that ... but why would they make the ship land so close to the palace? I think Jerry managed to pull that off."

"What do we do now?"

"WE should certainly try to save him. But how?"

As if some unknown force had been listening there suddenly appeared on the horizon a small flying craft. It dropped lower and lower as it approached the two. When it was twenty feet it touched the rugged ground and came to an abrupt halt. Waiting a few minutes Jack cautiously approached the craft and peered into it through a small opening in the top.

Slumped over the controls were three Flat-Racians. From the back of each protruded a dagger. On the floor were three more, daggers protruding from each of their backs as well. Spying a door on the opposite side, Jack walked around and opened it. As he stepped inside he detected one of the creatures moving. Nickina, who had been watching, quickly stepped past him and began tending to the injured creature. Nickina placed the injured one on a small couch in the rear of the vehicle. Jack removed the bodies of the others.

When the Flat-Racian was able to talk Jack asked what had happened. It replied but Jack was unable to understand. As Nickina had partly learned the language she translated.

"Peerc diputs Me skex ymmud --- When King Me was captured we were sent to return with him. Our first ship was destroyed, some of the crew managed to land safely. We set out again when we learned queen Vickina and more of our people had been captured. We were almost to the planet when we were attacked once again. We brought up our force shield, but our enemies forced their way through. We opened fire. Again we met with a surprise. Our lasers seemed to have no effect upon their ships. We tried diving on them. Our ships disintegrated as they came within 10 space leagues. By this time we had become caught in the pull of the satellite. We tried to outrun them. They caught up and boarded our ships, stabbing us. I had eluded them by remaining in the engine room when they had boarded, I am the sole survivor. If you see King Luna ... kill him. He is disguised as Anul .."

With that the creature went limp in Nickina's arms. They buried him along with the others and boarded the small craft. Strapping themselves in Jack turned the ship toward the

palace. As they neared it he detected a small ship leaving. Using the field glasses left by the former crew he saw Ssem on the ship.

"Stand by starboard blaster, Nickina." Jack ordered, as they neared the other ship.

"Are we going to blast?" she queried, focusing the small device. "Jerry might be on board."

"You will direct a hit on the starboard engine. As the ship starts falling we will board it. Now place some Z-Ray⁶ into their nose and blast the engine when I give the signal. Ready .. ready .. ready .. FIRE!" Jack shouted, as the ship crossed their path.

There was a puff of smoke and then a large hole appeared in the nose section of the Royal Starship. Through this hole Nickina fired a second charge of Z-Ray, followed by a small charge of Knock-out gas. There was a small explosion as the engine blew up. Jack waited a few minutes then boarded.

"There's Ssem," Nickina pointed out, stepping through the air-lock.

"And there's Anul! I'll place him aboard our ship. Remove their weapons." Jack stated, lifting Anul to his shoulders and walking toward the air-lock.

Placing Anul on the soft couch Jack walked returned to the other ship. He faced the awakening Ssem. Nickina quickly stepped behind Jack as Ssem withdrew a Z-Ray pistol from his side.

"If you were to live, Ssem, you would remain a threat to the galaxy. I am doing this in the name of the C.J.I.!"

With that Jack fired. At the same moment Anul, who was shaking off the effects of the gas, ran into him and caused him to fire wildly around the small cabin. Ssem took advantage of the situation and stepped toward Jack, wresting the gun from his hand.

"Clumsy oaf!" Jack shouted to Anul. "Now Ssem has the gun!"

"That's correct. Now all of you ... against the hull." Ssem commanded, motioning toward the opposite side of the ship.

"Anul, come with me. You are still my prisoner." Ssem commanded, stepping through the air-lock into the other ship.

No sooner had Anul stepped through then Ssem closed the portal and Jack and Nickina were thrown to the floor as the other ship hastily departed.

"Let's see if we can repair this one," Jack said, running toward the engine room.

After a few moments Jack cried "There!" and twisted the last bolt tight. "Let's see if we can still see Ssem's ship."

⁶Z-Ray - a powerful disintegrating ray developed by the Central Jupiterian Intelligence (CJI) agency.

"They have half an hour start on us. How could you possibly spot them?" Nickina asked, moving toward the viewport.

"When I placed Anul in the ship, I glanced at the fuel dial. There was only about three minutes left in the tanks. I was about to tell you when Anul ran into me."

"There they are!" Nickina shouted, pointing to a small object drifting in space.

"Forward half throttle. They still have guns in there, don't they?" Jack asked, turning toward Nickina.

"I started placing the guns from this ship over there when Ssem regained consciousness. They have about seven or eight weapons. What do we have?"

"Four weapons. Quantity doesn't matter, it is how powerful they are. If I remember correctly they have a Z-Ray pistol, gun, and generator on the ship. What were the other weapons you delivered?"

"Three blasters, two ray guns and a freezer-rifle⁷."

"We are equipped with only a freezer-rifle, a blaster and one ray gun. When we get within twelve spaceleagues⁸ I will go out the air-lock and try to board the ship. You will take our ship to a safe distance and wait. How far are we from them?" Jack asked, stepping to the air-lock.

"About twenty spaceleagues, but you are not leaving without me." Nickina stated, as she started to don her spacesuit.

"Quit the heroics and just guide the ship. That's an order! Remember in the eyes of the C.J.I. I'm a corporal and you're only an infantry woman."

"Fifteen spaceleagues .. fourteen .. thirteen ... twelve ... go!" Nickina shouted, as she watched the air-lock open and then close again.

Jack sailed through space with ease. He had fired his booster rockets and jumped. As he approached the craft he pulled a Freezer-gun from his spacesuit. No sooner had his magnetic boots touched the hull than the air-lock opened and Anul stepped into view. Jack approached, motioning him aside: "Quickly, step into space so I can freeze Ssem."

"I would if I could ... but, you see, Ssem is BEHIND me." he replied as Ssem stepped into view.

"I am afraid he is correct, so please won't you join us. I would hate to use this on you," Ssem stated, indicating the pistol in his hand.

⁷Freezer-Rifle - a gun employing a chemical used in freezing foods. One blast from such a weapon and a person would be frozen for four hours or up to five days.

⁸Spaceleagues - three miles Jupiterian or 10 miles if measured by Earthly standards.

"Jack should have taken over by now. I'll just come alongside and surprise him." Nickina said to herself, swinging the ship alongside the other.

Getting into her spacesuit Nickina plunged through the dark abyss of space between the two ships. As she landed on the outer hatch she heard noises coming from the forward portion of the ship. She diverted the blast from her booster in that direction. Atop the ship was a window with light shining from it. She drifted toward this and landed again. As she neared it the sounds grew louder. She stifled a scream when she saw the reason. Both men aboard the ship were beating Jack. Taking the freezer-gun from its holster she glided back toward the air-lock. Opening the outer lock she stepped inside. Closing the outer door she waited for the pressure to equalize.

Opening the inner door Nickina made her way forward. The door was partly opened, permitting her a view of what was transpiring. Through the aperture she could see the two had stopped beating Jack and had climbed the walls. At first she thought this strange until she looked at a corner of the room where she saw the stream of liquid emerging. As it drifted across the floor everything it touched was destroyed. Nickina hesitated no longer. She discovered the cause of the leak was a ruptured fuel tank. The intake valve had been left open and the exit tube was closed. She slipped into the room and started to untie Jack. When she had freed the covering from his mouth Jack shouted: "Behind you, Nicki!"

It was too late. No sooner had she turned then she was frozen. Jack too was frozen, along with Anul and Ssem. Although none of them could move they still could hear and see. They all saw the three Flat-Racians as they stepped into the room, one approached Anul.

"As traitor you shall bear your sentence until the end. You crossed us when you joined forces with Ssem, King Luna, ... you shall pay now. Take him down!" it cried, waving its hands about wildly.

No sooner had King Luna been taken down then he was taken to the pool of fuel and a cross placed on his forehead with the liquid. When the liquid was washed away a short time later, a dark red cross remained behind.

"You will not be able to fool anyone now. You bear the mark of a criminal. Throw him into space!" the leader ordered, moving on to Ssem. "You are a coward and shall receive the same treatment as did your friend."

With that the Flat-Racian took the stiff form of Ssem from the wall and made a cross on his forehead as well. After unfreezing his body he too was thrown into space. The leader approached Jack and Nickina. Raising his freezer-gun at the two he aimed and fired they went limp.

"Who are you two?" it asked.

"Lieutenant Jack Du Hakula and Nickina Julie Anders. Who are you?" Jack asked.

"Volans, General, Oosag Army Corp."

"A Flat-Racian the head of the Oosag Army? ... that is hard to believe," Jack started.

"I was a prisoner in the land of the Oosags. One of the king's subjects took a liking to me ... a woman. We were married and I was pronounced leader of the Oosag Army by the king ... father of the woman I had married." responded the leader.

"What do you plan to do now? What are you doing out here?" Jack asked, stretching his legs.

"The first question is answered by your second. You are in the remains of one of our ships. How did you come by it?" Volans asked, addressing Jack.

"It's a long story but here it is. When we were in the courts of King Me ..." Jack relayed all that had transpired since he left Vulcan up to the present.

After hearing the story Volans said: "Since you did give the commander a proper burial along with his crew, we will let you go free but where will you go?"

"Back to the satellite to get the rest of the crew from the Zutho. You will also be turning in that direction. Am I correct?" Jack asked.

"Yes, quite. Would you like to join forces?" asked Volans.

"We'd be glad to," Nickina replied.

"I still do not understand how that fuel got all over the floor or how you were able to board this ship without us knowing it," Jack sighed, looking at Volans.

"Although diminutive in size we are gifted with an unusual power. We can move things by concentrating. In such a way I was able to shut off the exit valve in the fuel line. While the fuel line was bursting we were able to sneak aboard. As your attention was drawn to the main fuel line you were easily frozen. I do not know how you knew we were behind you, Jack, but you somehow did. We must transfer all guns and ammunition to our fleet. Shall we go?" Volans asked, swinging his hairy arm and indicating the hatch.

Jack took Nickina's arm and started toward the door. For a second she resisted, then realizing it only a friendly gesture, went with him. Volans ordered the remaining Oosags and Flat-Racians to load the arms and ammunition.

CHAPTER TEN
(Exploding Planet)

"How long before it blows?" Xerks inquired, glancing toward Jerry.

"Ten minutes .. what's that?" Jerry replied, staring at the throne.

The chair rolled forward and three Oosags appeared. One, apparently the leader, confronted Jerry.

"Come with us, quickly!" it said and then disappeared behind the throne.

Jerry found the passage behind the chair and followed. The room emptied as Xerks, Vickina, Me, Poilu and the four remaining Flat-Racians followed. Only the dim light of the setting sun illuminated the clock ticking off the seconds as it broke the silence.

Three Flat-Racians led the group to an awaiting spaceship. Reaching it one of the creatures turned to explain:

"You will meet your friends in space ... Jack and Nickina. We must hurry. We know about the bomb you planted."

"How did you know of the bomb?" Jerry asked, climbing aboard the ship.

"Our race has what you call ESP," it answered, ushering the remaining members of the group onto the ship.

"Get me the 'Leader'," commanded an Oosag.

"Here it is, sir." replied a Flat-Racian, handing the Oosag the microphone.

"Volans? No? Where is he?" he asked, taking the instrument.

"He left to pick up Mr. Hawks and some others on the satellite ... where are you?" the voice blared over the radio.

"We were just on the satellite and picked them up. We have cleared its atmosphere and are heading toward the fleet. Do you think Volans has penetrated the atmosphere yet?"

"Just a minute .. yes. I cannot reach him on the mini-phone. He has less than five minutes before she blows. I'll leave the passengers with the fleet and go back for him. Be prepared to receive them. Over." the creature said replacing the instrument.

"If Jack is with him, I am going too." Jerry stated.

"Me too," Vickina echoed.

"Me too," replied all but the Flat-Racians.

"As king of the Flat-Racians, I command you to take me to the safety of the fleet while you risk your foolish lives on that planet!" Me stated, folding his hairy arms.

"If you wish safety, Me, we will dump you in space for the fleet to pick up later ..." the commander suggested.

"I'll get my spacesuit," Me replied, as he and several of the Flat-Racians left the room.

"We can dump him on the way to the satellite," command the captain, turning the small craft back toward the

satellite.

A short time later the spaceship shot forward at tremendous speed, leaving Me and some of the Flat-Racians floating in space.

"Three minutes," Vickina stated. Then, looking toward Jerry continued: "Do you think we'll make it?"

"Who knows," Jerry replied, looking out the portal as they began penetrating the cloudy atmosphere.

The captain directed the ship toward the palace, where he thought Volans might be. With the palace no more than twenty miles distant the craft started being roughly buffeted about in the air. Two minutes left before detonation it landed in the courtyard. Jerry ran toward the throne room, Vickina and Poilu to the dungeons, Xerks and the captain to the courtyard.

Entering the throne room Jerry immediately located the bomb carefully opened it. Withdrawing a sharp instrument he severed a wire then hastened from the room to find the others.

"If I was right we will still be here in three seconds, if not ... " Jerry stated as he counted the remaining seconds.

After a minute Jerry spoke again.

"Well, what do you think now, Volans ... do you still think I couldn't disarm it in a few seconds?"

"When you were captive you said it would take at least three to four hours to disarm the bomb. How did you do it in less than that?" Vickina asked.

"I was never a captive ... as a matter of fact this is the first time I've been here," Jerry said, looking at Vickina questioningly.

"First time you've been in the palace? .. why you ... then explain how you knew where the bomb was and how you met us," Vickina stated, her face turning red.

"I knew the bomb was here as someone aboard the ship told me. As a matter of fact ... that's all one of the Flat-Racian's ever talked about."

"Who was that Flat-Racian?" Vickina questioned, wrinkling her brow.

"King Me. As to how we met ... the last thing I remember was that I was on the ship commanded by the Red Men coming here from Vulcan II. Someone struck me on the head as I was washing. When I awoke I lie on the floor in the throne room. When I got up I saw the last of the Flat-Racians leave through the chamber behind the throne. I followed until someone clamped a hand over my eyes and mouth from behind.

"I was taken underground. When I could see again, I realized I was in front of you and that three flat-Racians were in front of me. I followed ... you know what happened after that." Jerry explained.

"So that's why you disappeared," Xerks added, a light dawning in his eyes.

"You mean you saw me?" Jerry asked, drawing closer to Xerks.

"Yes," he replied.

"There is something funny going on here. Wait a minute ... what's this?" Jerry said, picking up a metal bracelet.

"Let me see that," Volans said. "Good heavens! This means that William G. Hyde is on the loose again! We sent him to the prison asteroid several months ago, about one and a half Ryas after you crashed on Vulcan II. As well as inventor and criminal he was also an impersonator. He could even change his appearance. He must have taken on yours, Jerry. But for what purpose?"

"I'll answer that," Poilu stated, stepping to the back of the room, hiding his face for a moment. When he showed it again it had become that of an old man. "As you see, I am not Poilu ... that was just a persona I became to fool you. You asked why I had chosen your body, Mr. Hawks. I'll tell you ...

"When I was twelve my mother and father were killed in the first nuclear accident on Vulcan I. I was the only child they had. The survivors were transported to Vulcan II. War raged for many years on Vulcan II until peace came. One of the conditions was to allow mixed marriages. All survivors were able to marry either Flat-Racians or the Blue Men. I married a Blue Woman. After a few years she became ill and started dying. To keep her alive I had to feed her the hearts of newborn infants. I tried to get permission from one woman before taking her baby. The next day she accused me of rape. I was brought to trial and found guilty. I discovered later she had only done this to get rid of her unwanted baby.

"I was banned from the community and took refuge in the Sumaterian Mountains. My wife died while I was in court. I told the court that I wanted her body. They wouldn't let me have it so I robbed the grave a week later and brought her back to my laboratory in the mountains. I continued my experiments and produced the Holey Race. Clara, my wife, was the first to be brought back in this manner. Seeing my experiment successful I began robbing graves each night to create more of these miracles. In the meantime I used them to keep the generators running in my laboratory. I was working at that time on a spaceship that would allow me to transport this Holey Race to another planet where we could live in peace.

"I later discovered while experimenting on a new rocket fuel that the wasted gases it was producing was being drawn down the side of the mountain by air currents. At the foot of the mountain was a village of Flat-Racians. An azure mist covered the village for several days. When it eventually lifted the creatures had been transformed into what I called Oosags.

"I heard about Mr. Hawks. I knew he possessed the scientific knowledge I needed to continue my experiments. It was my plan to capture him and force him to help me build the spaceship. I hired a few Oosags. One of them turned on me at the last moment and I was again arrested and sent to the

prison asteroid. Up until a few days ago I had been on that asteroid.

"Several days ago a Flat-Racian, King Me, came and freed me. He said he had Mr. Hawks. King Me helped me escape from the asteroid and brought me here, to this satellite. He said he had a double he was using that had been transported to this satellite when the Red Men had raided his planet. The one you thought to be Xerks was a synthetic body I made in order to spy on you, Mr. Hawks. When I was freed I took the body of Xerks and burned it, then I replaced it. King Me also replaced his double.

"All I had to do was to look inside Mr. Hawks' brain to gain the information I needed. A few days after my release I found he had made the journey from his home planet to this in a ship someone else had invented. After brainwashing him, I released him. I placed a bomb in the throne room in order to revenge my mother and father. Until a few hours ago I thought this a good idea, but as time slipped away I began thinking about all the innocent people that would have to pay and for what? I decided the only way for revenge was to make the world a better place to live in. I remembered the bomb. In order to stop it I had to contact Mr. Hawks. Telepathically I notified King Me and told him to suggest to Mr. Hawks the possibility that the bomb might go off while his friends were down on the planet. As you see it worked and the bomb did not explode. You may do with me as you like."

Before anyone could reply a noise drew their attention to a curtain. Volans approached the curtain and was killed by a knife thrown from within. After waiting a few seconds Jerry advanced toward the curtain. He pulled it aside and discovered a note.

FOLLOW ME AND BE KILLED. STAY HERE AND DIE. NO ONE CAN LEAVE THIS PLANET ALIVE.

ME

"Me has turned bad," Jerry announced as the others joined him.

"Let's give Volans a funeral, then see what this is about," Poilu stated.

"Right." commented Vickina. "Let's prepare a rocket to carry his body to his true burial ground ... space."

"Three - two - one - fire!" commanded Jerry, as he watched the dial on the launching platform.

The rocket, containing Volans body, soared skyward as Jerry pressed the button on the control board. Once it attained an altitude of seventy-five miles it began melting.

"I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes!" exclaimed Poilu as he watched the debris fall to the

ground.

"Neither would I ... but I think I know why it happened," cried a voice from behind.

Turning Jerry shouted: "Jack! Nickina! Where the devil have you been?"

"It's a long story. It all started ..." Jack began.

Jack went over how he managed to get a scout ship and met Anul and Ssem. Then told of how Nickina and he were rescued and brought here to find them. He said both he and Nicki met a short while after searching the palace for them and started searching for Volans. Not finding him they came here to get their spaceship and search another part of the planet. As they approached the clearing they had spied Jerry looking skyward. Jerry told them that they had met Volans in the throne room and had asked him to join them. He had agreed but later had met with death.

"You said you knew why the ship melted?" Jerry asked.

"Yes. It is because King Me plans to keep us alive as his slaves. We met him in one of the passages beneath the palace. He told us of his plan to control the entire planet. We would be the first slaves. If it hadn't been for my own quick thinking we WOULD have been his first slaves. I found he had placed a heat shield around the planet. This shield radiates from within a volcano located somewhere on the planet. Yours truly slugged him and hightailed it outta there." Jack replied.

"If we can locate the volcano we can get off this planet. Do you know its whereabouts?" Jerry inquired.

"No," Jack returned.

"Nickina?"

"Negative."

"Anyone?" Jerry asked, turning to address the remaining members.

"It is said there is a fire God who lives on the southern end of the planet. The natives tell me it breathes fire and throws burning material into their village every three days," William Hyde stated.

"Rumor or not we must look into this. Prepare the ship for lift-off." Jerry commanded.

"No. That's not possible. When Me said there was a volcano," Jack explained, "he also said there were traps near it to keep natives away. He said it would be impossible to go near the volcano unless you knew the secret way in. I tried to get him to tell what the secret was but all he said was 'E T M'."

"ETM?" Jerry asked, looking to those around him.

"ETA is Estimated Time of Arrival. But ETM? beats me," Poilu said scratching his head.

"What if we change the letters? EMT, TEM, TME and MTE. That still makes no sense," William stated.

"Say that again." Jerry asked.

"Change the letters .." William started.

"No, not that. The combinations ..." Jerry queried, as a light began to glow in the back of his mind.

"Oh .. EMT, TEM .."

"TEM, ring any bells?" Jerry asked, halting him.

"No. Should it?" they replied.

"Is there any section of this planet with the initials TEM? Or is there any continent named TEM?" Jerry asked, looking to William.

"Come to think of it, there is a country in the South ruled by the TetraEgra Men," he replied.

"Good. We'll take the rocket to the edge of this country, then walk to the volcano. Let's go," Jerry stated, exiting the door.

"What do you think, Poilu?" William asked, turning to his friend.

"Why not," he answered.

Poilu turned and followed Jerry. William followed with Vickina, Nickina and Jack trailing.

CHAPTER ELEVEN
(Exploding Volcano)

"Someone comes O great Wazuzu!" a native cried running through the rows formed by the huts.

As the villager ran through the village yelling for the great Wazuzu to save them from the invaders other villagers began joining him. The huts abruptly ended at the edge of a clearing. In its center stood a spaceship gleaming under the midday sun. Glancing off the metal the sun blinded the villagers for an instant. Turning away the villagers took a side trail through the wooded region which surrounded the village on three sides. On the fourth side towered a large volcano.

The villagers traveled through the woods for ten minutes before turning onto another pathway, this lined with flat rocks, and followed it to the entrance of the spaceship which had invaded their peaceful surroundings months earlier.

"Wazuzu. Wazuzu. Are you there?" cried the messenger, standing in front of the villagers.

"Yes, I am here." a voice answered as a door slid back, revealing a human figure. "What is it you wish Futnat?"

"Someone comes, O great Wazuzu. I was hunting when I heard a noise. I went to investigate, thinking it might be food. I decided to climb a tree and wait. I waited ten minutes before three air-sleds appeared. The back of each was piled high with much equipment. As they passed one of the passengers said to another: 'The village rests at the bottom of the volcano. We should reach there in a few hours.' As soon as they passed I came here. I took the short cut you told us of," the native explained.

"Thank you Futnat. You have been very helpful. As lord of Refnar, the Volcano, I will see you receive the sacred water. Here," Wazuzu said, handing the villager a bottle of red liquid.

As the door slid shut Wazuzu made his way through a couple of corridors to an open doorway. He walked in.

"What did they want, Me?" asked one of the men standing by a large machine.

"We have visitors. Surround the village with the force-field. I think they come from Vulcan II. We must be ready. Battle stations!" Me stated walking out of the room.

"I'm getting sick of blasting every snooper who comes here. What do you think Me is doing in the volcano?" one of the workers asked as he adjusted a lever on the machine in front of him.

"I don't know, but whatever it is it's going to cause that volcano to erupt. The smoke over it has become increasingly blacker." the other replied.

"We had best set up the force-field or Me will get pretty mad. Sar? Sar?" the first asked, shaking the other. "What's

the matter. You have a funny look in your eyes."

"Nar. I was just thinking ... What would happen if the force-field wasn't turned on?"

"Sar! If that happened we would lose our lives. You know the moment anyone passes through the first force-field but not the secondary one they would have only three hours to live. We would not be the only ones affected. Everyone, except king Me, would perish. No, put that notion out of your mind and place the secondary field into operation." Nar said, returning to his work.

"You know, no one has ever been to the volcano except the workers, and they are kept here until they die. If those people did get past the barrier they might be able to look inside the volcano. It is not right to make a person a slave for the rest of his life. Me is forcing them to stay there. He is keeping us here saying that if we leave the field for more than three hours we will die. He even gave us a demonstration! Maybe these people can help if we let them in. Me says there is a doctor in the group. I think the name was Nickina." Sar came back.

"I don't think you should do it. Now throw that switch!" Nar exclaimed.

"I guess you are right. But I think they should still be able to enter," Sar replied, pulling the lever on the side of the machine.

"The village rests at the bottom of the volcano. We should be there in a few hours," William stated as the air-car passed over a log.

"Hey! What's that?" Jack asked, looking at the black smoke puffing from the volcano.

"Looks like smoke. But smoke rises and that stuff just lingers in a solid sheet. We shall investigate when we get closer." Jerry stated, releasing another marker.

"I have talked to many of the natives. They say an invisible force keeps them here. I wonder if they were drugged? Every native that came to me told me of an invisible force and died within the hour," William said, looking into the distance.

"Slow your ships. Radar shows something ahead. A sort of wall." Vickina said as she began slowing her ship.

Her craft was the last of the three and had been the only one equipped with radar. The second craft slowed as Jerry caught Vickina's words but the lead craft detected the warning too late. It came to a sudden halt and crumpled, hanging in mid-air. The other two vehicles slowed to a halt and settled to the ground. Jerry was the first to arrive.

"Looks like they smashed into that force the natives were talking of ... wait a minute. William is saying something." Jerry exclaimed bending over the fallen body.

"Force-field ..." the man said with his last breath as

the aft portion of the vehicle settled to the ground, crushing him.

Poilu and Jane were pulled from the wreckage with minor injuries. They had been located in the rear of the vehicle. Jerry tried to go around the front of the vehicle but found he couldn't.

"There seems to be a wall," Jack said, joining him on the other side. Stretching out his arms in either direction he continued "It seems to extend as far as I can reach in both directions."

"That must be the force-field William was talking about," Jerry replied, circling the craft and joining Jack.

"What exactly is a force-field?" Jane asked.

"I can answer that," Poilu chipped in. "A field of force generating from a central location and extending in all directions. As you know, all things are composed of small molecules. In living matter these molecules are tightly placed atoms. In a force-field the atoms are closer together, creating an impassable barrier. Like trying to pass solid through solid."

"Is there any chance of getting through?" Jack questioned.

"Not that I am aware of." Poilu replied.

"Wait. What's this?" Nickina said, pulling a paper from the dead man's pocket.

On it were five very distinct words:

GO THROUGH FIELD WITH COLUMBIUM

Jerry Looked at the message. "Nicki. Go back to the ship and get the Columbiu hoop from the sensing device and the reel of Columbiu from the lab."

"Will do," she replied, stepping aboard the air-car and roaring off.

"Well, we can't do much until her return. Let's see what we can find out about this field while she is gone," Jack said as he started determining how far and in which direction the force field extended.

Half an hour later Nickina arrived back at the wall and hopped out of the air-car. Advancing toward the group she handed Jerry a small hoop and box she had brought. He took the hoop and placed it near the front of the downed vehicle. He removed his and the hoop did not fall. Jerry opened the small box and removed a small amount of the string-like material. He tied this securely around a small branch and coiled the rest in his hand. He started swinging the branch over his head in a circle. On the third revolution he let go and the branch soared straight through the hoop, landing on the other side several feet in front of the crashed vehicle.

Jerry began pulling the branch back through the hoop.

Three feet from the edge it hung in the air. Jerry cut the string and pulled it back saying: "The force-field is about three feet thick. I'll attempt to make a larger hoop from the Columbian. Just a few more twists .. ah .. here we go."

With that he displayed a crude circle. This he placed alongside the hoop. The circle was approximately seven feet in diameter. Jerry stepped through and waited as the others joined him. Once on the other side of the field they set off down the well marked trail.

They had followed the trail well over two Rohues when they came across a village. The villagers ran as they spotted the approaching visitors. All except one. This one advanced and met the group.

"What do you seek in the land of Wazuzu?" he asked.

"We seek entrance to the volcano," Jack replied, stepping forward, pointing toward the smoking mountain.

"The only way in is through the top," replied the villager.

"I heard rumors of a secret entrance. Do you know of this?" Jerry asked, showing the villager some tokens he had brought from the ship.

"I do not know of any secret way," he replied, turning away.

"Before you go," Jerry said, bringing his knapsack forth, spreading its contents along the ground. "Would you like any of these."

"The sacred water!" he exclaimed, turning quickly and picking up a bottle of red alcoholic brew.

"I will let you keep the Martian Bug Juice ... er, I mean, sacred water, if you tell us of the entrance we seek."

"It is far to the east of our village. It is well guarded. I might be killed for telling you its location. But why do you, the gods of the volcano, ask me where the entrance is. Are you but testing me?"

"Evidently this village believes anyone having the sacred water is a god of the volcano. I'll play along until I find out what they really know," Jerry whispered to Jack. Then, turning to the warrior continued: "I was only testing you of course. You have passed. You knew we were the gods from the volcano because we had the sacred water. You may go about your business ... we will not harm you."

"Do you think he told the truth?" Jack asked, as the man ambled off.

"There is one way to find out," Jerry said, picking up his sack and walking toward the east.

The setting sun found the group four miles into the forest, east of the village. They had been walking steadily and were ready to turn back when Jerry decided to call a rest stop. While he, Nickina, Vickina and Poilu sat on the rocks Jack perched atop a stump. No sooner had he sat down then the

rock began moving. As it kept moving a opening appeared in the ground. When the rock stopped Jerry went to the edge of the opening and peered inside.

"A tunnel!" he exclaimed.

"Now I get it!" Jack stated. "Remember what King Me told me before I decked him? The initials ETM. It is the Mountain Tunnel East or 'East Tunnel, Mountain'"

"That's right. We are east of the village and the tunnel goes straight into the mountain." Jane declared, following Jack into the tunnel.

Once inside Poilu withdrew a light from his knapsack and took the lead. The tunnel wound in and out through the ground, bringing them within several feet of the surface at times. After being in the tunnel a few minutes they discovered they could see without the aid of the light. At certain points near the surface they occasionally caught a glimpse of the surrounding terrain. It was at one of these spots that they saw the base of the volcano. Jerry warned them to silence.

An hour later they saw sunlight again. This time mixed with grey smoke.

"We must be on one of the sides of the volcano," Jerry whispered, stepping through a cloud of smoke.

Jerry stepped out of the tunnel and saw he had correctly predicted their situation. They had emerged near one of the sides. Looking upward he judged the height of the old volcano to be about a mile. Looking through the clouds of billowing smoke he spied its center. A large flame roared beneath the cloud and stemmed from a large pit. Entering and leaving the pit were many workers, each heavily laden with rocks. Above the pit Jerry saw a sheet of smoke and realized what was transpiring. He turned to the others.

"They're mining Roly-X-Xem! It must be the largest find in the universe!"

"How right you are, Mr. Hawks!" replied a voice from behind. "Yes, it is I, Me. I do not know how you got through my force-field but now you are my slaves!"

As if on cue several slaves stepped forth and escorted each member of the group to the other side of the interior of the volcano. As they moved across the bottom a messenger hurried up to Me.

"The second force-field, sir ... was never put up .. we are doomed!"

"What! Where are the two I put in charge?" Me screamed.

"Nar is dead. We cannot find Sar. Someone said he passed through the first field and disintegrated. Others say he lurks around the entrance." the messenger replied.

As if this blow was not cruel enough yet another messenger arrived. "We have to evacuate. The volcano is erupting."

"What! What happened?" Me asked, shaking the Oosag.

"We were digging through the topsoil when we struck a

vein of lava. It spurted out killing nearly all of the work team. The survivors lasted long enough to tell me what had happened," replied the second messenger as he too collapsed.

"What's this about a second force-field?" Jack questioned Me.

"A strange thing this volcano. It gives off a chemical which when combined with the elements of the force-field causes anyone passing through the field again to perish. However, if a person were to walk through the first field and then another he could last three to four hours before perishing. How long has it been since you came through the field?" Me asked, turning to Jerry.

"Why, I guess almost a full day."

"A full day! How can this be possible?" Me exclaimed, shocked.

"What do we possess that you do not?" Jerry asked, looking at the king.

"You have a different color skin, that's about it I guess. You mean the color of ones skin makes the difference? What about Poilu? his skin is blue like mine?" Me said, looking again at Jerry.

"I guess Poilu must have absorbed some of the rays emanated by the rest of us." Jerry replied.

"Time is running out. You will take me outside the force-field. Now!" Me screamed.

The king ordered the prisoners from Retipuj released. Then he ordered they be escorted, along with himself, through the tunnel and out to the first force-field. His slaves followed his orders, although reluctant at first, and escorted them to the first force-field. They arrived at the same spot Jerry had crossed the field. The Columbium ring still floated in the air next to the air-car. The ground started shaking.

"The volcano, master! It is erupting!" shouted one of the slaves.

They heard the shouts of slaves in the distance mixed with the roar of the erupting volcano. As the last of the group stepped through the opening they saw several villagers racing toward the hole made by Columbium.

"Quick. Remove the loop from the force-field!" Me ordered.

"But master," complained a slave, "the lava will overrun the villagers. See, some of them are partly through the hole now."

"All the more reason to close off their escape, fool!" Me said, pulling the loop out of the air.

"The volcano god has deserted us in our hour of need! The volcano is mad. It will kill us! Come back Wazuzu ... we will do as you have asked." the voices cried from beyond the barrier.

Reaching into the king's pocket one of the slaves pulled the rolled up ball of Columbium from it and started forming a

loop. When it was almost complete Me pulled a disintegrator gun from his other pocket and fired. The slave disappeared, so did the circle of Columbium. Me turned to the group. "Now get into those air-cars and get me to your ship!"

"But there is only a enough room for six people master!" pleaded a slave.

"That's right. There will only be six. Shall I name them? Of course I will. They will be Me, of course. Mr. Hawks, Vickina, Nickina, Jack and Poilu. I am so sorry that the rest of you couldn't make it." Me said.

Me pointed the weapon at the remaining slaves and pulled the trigger. He pointed the gun at Jane, took aim, then hesitated. Instead of firing at her he fired at the force-field. Although no opening appeared there was a puff of smoke. This enveloped the king. When it had cleared the king was gone ... and so were the air-cars. The lava on the other side of the field was no more than half a mile away. The screaming villagers could still be heard over the roar of the volcano.

"We had better get out of here, and fast. That lava will burn through that barrier shortly," Jerry stated as he led the way through the dense underbrush.

As if in answer the lava reached the barrier and started pouring through it. The lava flow broke through en mass as the last of the small group disappeared into the forest.

They evaded the lava flow for four hours since breaking through the force-field. As they ran Jerry kept looking toward their ship in the distance. They had now come within sight of it. Nickina gave a sigh of relief as she saw its silvery surface gleaming under the sun.

"Why is it still here?" Vickina asked, turning toward Jerry. "I would have thought Me would have been far away by now. Look, there are the stolen air-sleds."

"Before we left I took the precaution of taking this," Jerry explained, showing a tiny pellet.

"The fuel cell? No wonder the ship couldn't rise," Jack breathed a sigh of relief.

"Now we must board it and get out of here," Poilu stated, moving toward the air-lock.

"We had better hurry," Nickina exclaimed, pointing behind them. "Here comes the lava!"

Rushing across the open field the six figures dashed into the air-lock and quickly took their positions. Descending quickly

to the engine room Jack started making preparations for take-off. He noticed Me lying on the floor by one of the engines, dead. He did not learn how he had died until several hours after take-off when it was discovered Me had tried to force the reactors to burn and had been splashed with radioactive mass.

"Prepare for lift-off!" Jerry commanded over the intercom.

"Lava three feet from the fin commander," Nickina stated, looking through the viewport.

"Minus 5-4-3-2-1 ignition ... lift-off." Jerry stated, reading the dial in front of him.

The force of the ship leaving the planet pinioned the passengers against their cushioned seats. As the ship rose it left behind a trail of fire a mile long. The ground it had once been seated on was hurriedly covered by crimson lava. The spacecraft shot through the atmosphere at tremendous speed. At seventy-four miles above the surface Jerry leveled the ship and let it orbit temporarily about the satellite.

"If my theory was correct, we can now penetrate the seventy-five mile mark without being melted. If it isn't ..." he said as he pulled the ship out of orbit and continued skyward.

Having successfully passed the seventy-five mile mark Jerry turned the ship toward the waiting Oosag fleet. Maneuvering it near the lead ship they were soon boarding it. Waiting for him was the captain of the Oosags.

"Where is Volans?" he asked, looking beyond Jerry.

"He died giving his life to save ours." Jerry explained. "His last words were for someone named Zupus to take command."

"I am Zupus," the Oosag replied. "Now tell me what happened down there."

"Well," Jerry started, "to begin with when we got to the surface ..."

CHAPTER TWELVE
(Uniting Three Races)

"You mean to tell me King Me is dead! Preposterous!" screamed Zupus, pacing back and forth in front of Jerry.

"I tell you it's true," Jerry replied.

"If that is so. If what you say is true ... the only thing to do is vote on a new king. We will have a short conference. Come," Zupus commanded, waving a hand to his crew.

Half an hour later Zupus returned.

"We have decided that you, Mr. Hawks, shall be the new king. Although it may seem strange for us to be ruled by a foreigner, that is what we wish. We proclaim you king of the Flat-Racians."

With that Zupus placed a golden crown on Jerry's head. Jerry took the crown from his head and placed it atop Poilu saying:

"Although I would not mind being king, I think in order to insure peace on this planet I must unite Flat-Racians with Blue Men. Now that you have a king I think the next step is to insure you have a Queen. In crowning Vickina you would also unite the Mercurians from which she was born. You know that you have united three races ... the flat-Racians, the Red Men and their brothers the Blue Men, and now the Mercurians as well. You have without a doubt already gained the cooperation of the Jupiterian race by offering me the crown. We will return to our planet after landing once again on your sister satellite. You see, during the lava flow I noticed something on its surface ... Roly-X-Xem. We will mine the mineral and return home."

"You can't mean you are going to leave me here," Vickina complained, looking harshly toward Jerry.

"If I were to marry you I would have to remain here. If we marry outside our planet we must remain to maintain peace and harmony with the new inhabitants. Do not worry, I will return to Vulcan II often," Jerry said, turning to leave.

"I thought you loved me!" Vickina cried, turning her back to him.

"I do, but I want you to rule and bring peace. If you want, I will take this shipment of Roly-X-Xem to Retipuj and then return to live with you. Would you like that?" Jerry said, gently turning her around.

"Would you? Or are you saying that to make me feel better?"

"I really mean it. Here," he said, kissing her, "keep this until I return."

"I will only be happy when you are back from your journey."

"We shall leave now then. Come ... Nicky. Jack. Jane."

Jerry stepped through the door and slipped his spacesuit on. Then turning in the air-lock he said one more goodbye to

Vickina and stepped into space. He made his way back to their ship and turned it toward the satellite.

Later the rocket landed on Vulcan IIs' satellite near a not too active volcano. Several people departed in air-cars. All of them bore large sacks. These they promptly filled with a green mineral found in plenty along the cooling lava. They spent half an hour gathering the mineral then returned to the ship and lifted off the planet for the final time. The ship quickly departed and headed for Retipuj.

"Well, Ken, that's about it. What do you think," John said, leaning forward in his seat.

"Kind of hard to swallow. I don't know. Let me know if you hear anything more, OK?" I replied, standing.

"There was another transmission shortly after this one. However, that will take some telling and I am tired tonight. Maybe another day?" John asked as he opened the door and let in the icy wind.

"O.K. May be later." I replied and left thinking I would probably return a later time.