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JANUARY 1934

VOLUME 2, NUMBER 1

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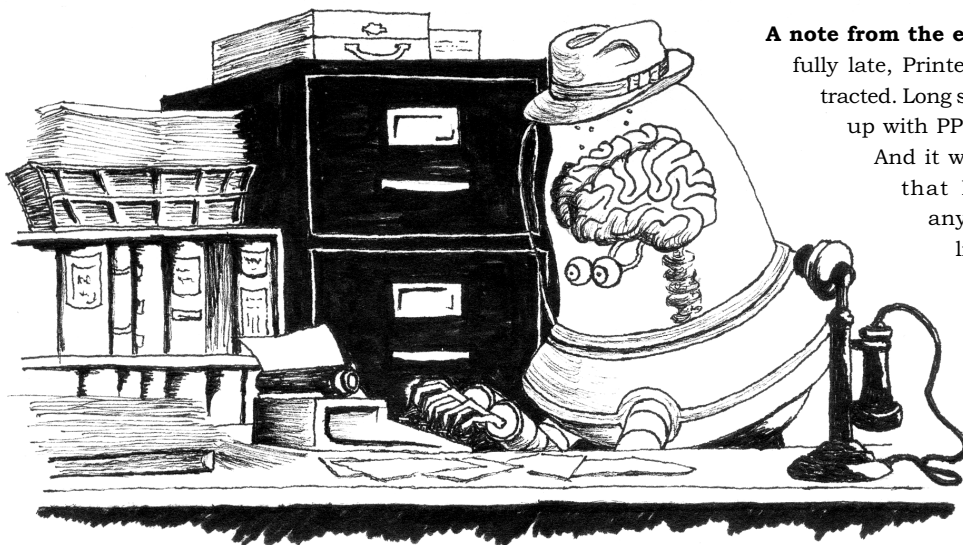
the **ADVENTURES** of
ROCKET PATROL
boardgame

Printed POISON

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A note from the editor brain: Here it is, shamefully late, Printed Poison #5. Yeah... I got distracted. Long story. I realize any goodwill I built up with PPs 1 to 4 is probably long gone. And it won't be helped any by the fact that I can't accept submissions anymore. Primarily because the likelihood of a PP#6 is, well, up for debate. No more promises.

The artwork this issue is 100% by me. No more ripping off pulp artists. A copyright respecter is me! So, um, I reckon that'd make all of Printed Poison five © 2005 P. H. Dechene.



The Perils of Modern Conjuring

A young girl plays cards... with death!

by Henry Ponopscotch

CHAPTER ONE: THREE CARDS OF DOOM

"Gambling, Joe? Do we hafta."

"Aw c'mon, Peaches. It'll be fun."

Three-Card Mary liked this spot on the corner of Mellon and Spent. She had the Watt Building at her back. Enough north-and-south foot-traffic on the sidewalk so that her game could attract a little crowd, but not so much that she couldn't spot a flatfoot coming from a couple blocks off. Across the street was Filmore Park. It was little more than a short gravel path between two low hillocks

and wasn't more than half a city-block in size, but it's iron benches were well sheltered by trees and provided enough privacy that they proved irresistible to her favourite sort of foot-traffic: couples out for a stroll. Young men seemed willing to risk just about anything if it meant they might win the respect and awe of their ladies fair. And a Three-Card Monte game offered one chance in three for such a triumph. Not bad odds where pitching woo was concerned. And if for instance a young man thought he actually had the game figured — say, he'd spotted a small crease in one corner of the Queen of Spades

— then the love of his “Peaches” seemed a sure thing. Not to mention he’d win a few bucks into the bargain. How could a young man resist?

“But Joe, I heard these games are always crooked.”

“Shhh. Look, the girl dealing’s just a kid. It’ll be fun. Everything’s under control. I know what I’m doing.”

It was true... the part about Three Card Mary’s age. She was only fourteen and her hands were barely big enough to handle the cards. And though she concealed her form beneath a man-sized shirt with its sleeves rolled up, baggy trousers held aloft by suspenders, and a grey fedora which also served to hide a girlish bob of black hair, these things only brought her immaturity into sharper focus.

She stood behind a suitcase that was turned on its side and more than half as tall as she was. It was left ajar, the open side facing her, and across the gap she’d balanced a board covered by a piece of red felt. She used this as a makeshift game table.

The crowd around her consisted of ten people. In addition to Joe and “Peaches,” who’d just arrived on the scene, there were a few kids several years younger than Mary who were there to snicker at the girl dressed up like a boy; then there were a few older boys, teenagers who’d already ventured some change on the game; and, with the exception of a wino who lurked near the back of the semi-circle, the rest were businessmen who’d stopped by to watch the action on their way home from work.

“The name of the game is Three-Card Monte,” said Three-Card Mary, “And the road to riches is the one that follows the lady.” She turned the cards face up: Three of Diamonds, Queen of Spades, Ten of Hearts. She paused briefly and pointed to the queen with her hand open and palm upward to show she had nothing hidden there while flashing her other palm to the crowd to show the same. Then, she turned the cards face down again and started tossing them back and forth. Her brow creased as she concentrated on what she was doing, and though her patter sounded confident, her passes were slow and clumsy, the cards landed askew, sometimes colliding with one another as she shuffled them.

The card with the creased corner moved about, left to right to center to left to right. And when it finally came to rest, Joe reached out, bill in hand, but he wasn’t fast enough. One of the older boys beat him to it and dropped a quarter on top of the creased card.

Mary waved Joe’s bet off. “One at a time, please, sir,” she said.

She flipped the card over. Queen of Spades.

“Nice work, tough guy,” she said, and pulled another quarter out of her pocket, matching his bet. “You’ve a good eye, buster.”

She flipped the card face down again and began tossing them back and forth. The creased card shifted about the table.

“Okay, you’ve had your fun,” said Peaches.

“No, shh...” said Joe.

“C’mon. Let’s go, you said you were gonna buy me supper.”

“I will. Hang on a minute, will ya? This’ll be fun.”

Again the cards stopped moving and again Joe reached out to place his wager. He moved faster this time. Fast enough to beat two eager youths brandishing silver. His bill landed on the card with the creased corner first.

“A ten, Joe?” Peaches gasped.

“I know what I’m doing.”

“That’s a lot of money, sir?” said Three-Card Mary. “I don’t know. We’re just playing for pocket change here.”

“Yeah, Mack. What ya tryin’ ta pull?” said one of the businessmen. “She’s just a kid.”

“C’mon Joe,” said Peaches, tugging at his arm. “Let it go.”

“No way,” he said, shrugging off Peaches and ignoring the growing hostility of the players around him. “Our little card sharp here should be in school right now. Or at home. Instead she’s out here playing a man’s game. In a man’s suit. Think of this as a lesson, okay.” Then, to Mary: “Whaddya say kid? Can ya cover the bet?”

Mary reached into a pocket and pulled out a handful of crumpled bills. She counted out ten dollars worth and set them down next to the bet. Then she pulled the card from under Joe’s ten, flipped it over, and whaddya know Joe...

“Three of Diamonds,” Mary said. “Sorry mister. The lady got away from ya that time.” She gathered up the money and pocketed it.

Joe’s jaw dropped. “What th-“ he said. The crease was still in the corner but the card was undeniably the three. “Why you little cheat!”

“Cheat, sir? I’m just a kid,” said Mary, “in a man’s suit. I’d never dare.” She turned over the other two cards: Ten of Hearts in the center, and there next to it, it’s corners undamaged, the Queen of Spades.

By now the businessmen, the teenagers and even the younger boys were laughing and pushing him away from the circle. Peaches jabbed him in the shoulder with a knuckle and though she was much smaller than he was, judging by the way he winced, she could throw some muscle behind a punch.

“You lost ten bucks Joe. Now how you gonna buy me supper, hunh?”

“But she... Peaches... the game was crooked.”

“Yeah, just like I said,” Peaches replied.

And as Joe’s pleas of “It’s not my fault” faded away, Three Card Mary started passing the cards back and forth again, her motions smooth and well-practised, talking up the crowd.

“Three cards. Only one queen among ‘em,” started her pitch. “Catch her and you’re doing fine. Anything else, your dough is mine.” The businessmen and some of the older boys walked off, laughing even though they knew the game was gaffed; they’d had their fun but it was time to move on. The young kids

stuck around hoping to see more people get fleeced. And two of the older boys hung around too, jingling handfulls of change, eager to continue playing. One was a tall youth, a cap pulled low over short red hair, his face covered in freckles; his arms were long enough to touch his knees. His friend was much shorter and his cheeks were round as a baby's. He wore a dusty bowler atop his head, and his skin was so pale, his hair so blond, that he could just about pass for an albino.

Mary also noted that the wino had stayed on and was now watching the game more intently. This worried her. Guys like him never had any money worth taking, and if they started getting belligerent or hitting up her players for change, she might lose some potential marks. And besides, there was something about the way he was hanging around and eyeing her game that was unnerving.

Then, from the corner of her eye she saw a few more boys join the circle. They were probably sixteen or seventeen years old. Old enough to have jobs and thus a few bucks in their pockets, but too young to know what to do with it yet. They'd been across the street when all the commotion with Joe had started, and had come over to see what was up.

"Three-Card Monte. C'mon, you wanna try?" she heard one of them whisper.

"Aren't these games rigged?" whispered another.

"Maybe. But listen, it's a known fact that they always let you win one game. Y'know, just to get ya hooked."

"Really?" asked a third.

"Sure," said the first. He was probably the leader of their little group. "Look, we'll just bet a fiver. Then take the winnings and split. Easy money."

Mary smiled to herself as she tossed the cards. It was music to her ears. Think like that, boys, and you've already lost.

Nobody beats Monte.

* * * * *

Mellon and Spent Streets intersected on the edge of a region known as the Five Points, a relatively pleasant neighbourhood of court buildings, office towers and municipal offices. But thirty years before Three-Card Mary had been born, Five Points had festered like a canker on lower Manhattan. It was a pustule seething with criminals and ganglords. As a home, it was fit only for the pigs that routed in its streets, the cockroaches that multiplied in its cracks, and only the hardest of hard-luck cases who settled there could rise out of the muck and through brute strength and tyranny eke out something that approximated a comfortable living. Eventually, the city had had enough of the lawlessness and tore it down. The tenements and taverns were demolished. The crimelords the authorities could find were imprisoned, their gangs broken up and driven to other neighborhoods. The Old Brewery, center of that villainous domain, was razed, it's rotted boards burned

to ash so that not even its smell could survive the century. Street names were changed. The Five Points that was synonymous with larceny, murder and predation was erased from all but memory.

Certainly, there was still crime. It persisted in Five Points as it did everywhere in Manhattan. But over time, the crimes had changed their character and moved out of the underground gambling halls, the taverns, the bordellos of old. In the buildings dedicated to governance and business that took their place, corruption took the elevator up to the top floors, quietly turned the city counsellor's eyes to municipal construction contracts with which he could fatten his wallet, wrapped the businessman's heart in chitin, drove his conscience into the crack between profit and liability.

It seemed Five Points would forever be home to pigs and roaches.

But crimes like those left the streets clean, allowed room for parks, and meant that Three Card Mary could walk down Bottle Alley after sundown, her pockets full with a day's worth of takings, and not have to fear that she would die at the end of a knife.

She was still wearing the gray, man-sized suit and had even thrown on the jacket to stave off the evening chill, her sleeves rolled up to keep both hands free. In her right, she was carrying her suitcase, and once she was deep enough into the alley that she'd be hard to notice from the street, she dropped it near a wall and sat down on it, leaned back and waited. It took about ten minutes before she heard:

"Mary, you in here?" Two figures were approaching from the street.

"Yeah," she replied, standing up. "You're late, Blackjack."

"Sorry. Me an' Pants stopped for a sandwich. We hadn't eaten since noon. We brought you one."

Walking up to her were the two older boys who had stayed-on at her game. The taller, red-haired one was Thomas "Blackjack" Murphy, the shorter one in the Bowler hat was Walter "Pants" Peterson and together they were Mary's skills.

Blackjack handed her the sandwich. It was wrapped in waxed paper.

"Thanks," she said as she stuffed it into a jacket pocket. "Can we settle up now? I've got to get home before my dad does."

"Sure," said Blackjack. "How much was the take?"

Mary turned her suitcase on its side, knelt down, and laid out a stack of bills and beside it another little pile of change. The three of them crouched around their winnings.

"I counted it while I was waiting," she said. "That's forty-two bucks there."

Pants let out a low whistle. "Jeepers. That's a lot of money," he said.

"More 'n we've ever got before," said Blackjack.

"You can thank Joe for a lot of it," said Mary. "So, you ended the day four bucks up, Blackjack. Right?"

"Yep," he said.

"And you won two off me?" she said to Pants.

"Yeah," he replied.

To keep up appearances and lure in strangers, she'd let them win games now and then. Fifty cents here, fifty cents there. Over the course of a day the two of them usually ended a few dollars ahead, and all that counted into the total pot.

She began sorting the money into three parts. When she was done she said, "Here's your cut," as she pushed a pile to Blackjack, then "And here's yours, Walter," as she pushed another pile towards Pants.

The boys grabbed up their money greedily, but as they were counting it, Blackjack's face became suddenly serious. "Uh, Mary," he said, "I thought this was supposed to be fifty-fifty."

"Again? We do this every time," she replied. "It is fifty-fifty. Fifty percent for me because it's my game, and you and Pants split the rest."

"But I've only got six dollars and fifty cents here," he said.

"Yeah," said Pants, "And I only got eight fifty."

"Boys," said Three Card Mary, "It's simple arithmetic. Try and follow along, will ya?" She looked at each of them in turn to make sure they were paying attention, then: "We split the pot in half, right?"

"Right," they said in unison.

"Okay, now I took in forty-two dollars, right?"

"Right."

"And half — fifty percent — of forty-two dollars is twenty-one bucks. Right?"

"Right."

"So, my half is twenty-one bucks, and you two split twenty-one bucks. That's ten and four bits apiece. Right?"

"Right," said Blackjack, "but I've only got six fifty here."

"Yeah," said Pants, "and I've only got eight fifty."

"But you forget," said Mary, "that Blackjack, you've got four bucks in your pocket that you took in today. And Walter, you won two. That all counts into the pot."

"*Ri-i-ight...*" they said, their faces screwed up as they struggled with the math.

Mary continued: "So four plus six fifty is ten fifty. And two plus eight fifty is ten fifty. And ten fifty plus ten fifty is twenty-one bucks. And twenty-one bucks is your half of the forty-two dollars we took in. See? Like we said: fifty-fifty."

The boys thought for a moment, then started smiling.

"Okay, sorry to doubt ya, Mary," said Blackjack, sheepishly. "I'm just no good with numbers, you know?"

"It's okay. That's why I'm here," she said as she pocketed her share of the winnings.

"Yeah sorry," said Pants, "This is a good gig an' all. But some of the guys've been saying we got to watch out for ya, so we're just being careful, y'know?"

No hard feelin's, right?"

"Right. No hard feelings." said Mary as she unfolded the sandwich and took a bite of it. "This is good. How much I owe you for it?"

"Fifty cents," said Blackjack. "But don't worry about it. It came out of the winnings."

Three Card Mary stopped chewing and dropped her arms in exasperation. "Boys," she said. "I didn't count that into my calculations. I paid you out as though you were four bits richer. That means you each owe me twenty-five cents."

Blackjack and Pants stood there dumbfounded.

"Oh, forget about it," said Mary. "We'll square up tomorrow."

There was a fourth in the alleyway now, shambling towards them. He cleared his throat. It was an abrupt, guttural noise, as of a tin can getting stomped flat by a passing car. "Fellas," said the interloper, "I couldn't help but overhear your transaction and I think you'll find the young lady is trying to cheat you."

He was a large man and Mary recognized him straight away. It was the wino who'd been lurking around her game for most of the afternoon, and even from a distance of several yards, she could already smell the flowery reek of alcohol in the air. As he stepped closer, she saw his corpulence strained against a suit of brown tweed, though in spots the thick weave was blackened by mud and grease. Holes had worn through the elbows and knees, been perfunctorily patched with odd-colored fabric, worn through, then patched again. His hat was rumpled and set askew on his head, and from beneath it came a mass of brown hair that looked more like it was unravelling than growing from his head.

But his round face, smeared with red and black dirt though it was, seemed jolly enough.

Blackjack and Pants, who stood between this crusher and Three Card Mary, whirled around to face him.

"Whadya doin' nosin' around here?" said Blackjack.

"Yeah, go on, screw, ya bum," said Pants almost at the same time.

"You don't have to get all in a lather," said the wino. "And you don't owe the lady four bits, either."

"Says you," said Pants.

"Yeah, Professor Rum. Back off!" said Blackjack.

The wino stopped. "Professor Rum? Never been called that before." He smiled, flashing brown-stained teeth. "Very funny. I like it," he said.

A sharp hiss escaped Three Card Mary's lips. There was something not right about this wino. His words weren't slurred. His gait was steady. And she couldn't say for sure, but there was something immobile about his cheeks that made them look like they weren't part of his face at all. For once she was at a loss for words and fear started her heart beating rapidly. She stretched out her left arm and touched Blackjack's back with her fingertips while

she lifted her suitcase with her right and gripped its handle tightly. She was getting ready to run and if need be, use the heavy piece of luggage as a weapon — it wouldn't be the first time.

"Pallie," Blackjack's voice cracked, "we don't want trouble. But if you don't clear out, then you've found a pile of it." An idle threat. He was useless in a streetfight.

"My friends," the wino's smile didn't waver, he simply spread his arms wide, his palms open and empty, "I don't want trouble either. Promise. I just want a second to talk to the young lady. Mary, is it?"

"Why would she want to talk to the likes of you?"

The wino's smile disappeared. "I'm a friend of Manhattan Max."

Mary's left arm went down. The hand holding the suitcase relaxed.

Pants whispered back to her: "What do you want to do?"

Blackjack kept talking: "Yeah? And I'm Brooklyn Bob's brother. Now beat it."

"Blackjack. Pants," said Mary. "Leave us a second, will ya?"

There was silence for a moment.

Then: "You sure?" Blackjack asked turning to her. "He's an old drunk."

"We should stay, Mary," said Pants. "Just to be safe."

She shook her head. "No. It's okay. I'll be fine."

"Three Musketeers," said Blackjack. "All for one."

Mary looked over at the wino.

"Sorry. This is important," he said to her. "And private."

Mary looked up at Blackjack, locked eyes with him, "Go on. It'll be fine," she said slowly. "Go home." It was past eight and dark in Bottle Alley. The only windows that faced into the narrow passageway were three stories up, the only doors opened from the inside, and the route out behind her was blocked off by a chainlink fence she didn't know how quickly she could climb. She hoped he could tell that the look on her face said, *Don't go far*.

Blackjack nodded, motioned to Pants, and the two of them headed towards the street.

* * * * *

Thirty-two inches long, sixteen tall, and eleven deep, Three Card Mary's suitcase was large and cumbersome enough to be considered a small trunk. Tipping it on its end and opening it revealed two compartments: the one on the right was shallow and sealed by a twill-covered flap; the one on the left contained a rack of drawers — a long one at the bottom and in the middle, and a row of three smaller ones side-by-side at the top. Outside, the corners of the suitcase were reinforced with bronze fittings, its latches were lever mechanisms that made a satisfying *Thack* noise when opened, while the handle was made of a thick strip of cowhide wound around a bakelite core. The body was hard, dark-brown leather

stretched over a light metal frame. And though Mary had only owned it for a little more than a year, she'd hauled it all over Manhattan, tossed it over more than a few walls and fences and through the odd window, and consequently its surface was covered in a myriad of scuffs and scratches.

It was the most useful thing she owned, she said, and she took it with her wherever she went. And whether this wino approaching her was friend or foe, it was a comfort to feel its weight in her hand.

"Okay, they're gone," she said. "What's happened to Max? I haven't seen him in days."

The wino was close enough that she could tell the smell of booze that emanated from him came from his clothes and not his breath. It was all part of a disguise.

"Not now. Not here," he replied in a hushed tone. "I can't be certain that I wasn't followed."

"Then what do you want?"

"Come with me. We have to get you someplace safe." He motioned for her to follow, then started towards the street.

Mary didn't budge.

"Sorry pal," she said. "I don't know you from Adam. I'm not going anywhere."

The wino stopped and smiled at her. "Smart girl," he said. "What are we going to do then?"

"We talk here."

He walked back to where she was standing, shifted his bulk with his hands so he could crouch before her, then spoke barely above a whisper. "And if I told you Manhattan Max was dead? And that you're in danger. Would that change your mind?"

It hung in the air between them for a moment: Max was dead. That much she believed, but for the time being she pretended she didn't. Pretended she wasn't fourteen. Pretended she wasn't going to cry about this later and focussed instead on the stage makeup this man was wearing.

"Change my mind? Nope," she said. "Max always said never trust a man in a rubber nose."

He smiled again and looked away. "Good advice. What can I do so you will trust me, then?"

"Take off the nose."

"It'd wreck my outfit."

"Then suppose you start by telling me who you are."

"Call me Rum for now." He looked over his shoulder, towards the street then back at her. "Like I said, I'm a friend of Manhattan Max's. A good friend. A magician like he was."

"That how you were able to find me here?"

"Nah. You're too sly. I had to follow your chums. Thought they might've been on to me when they stopped in at the deli, but turns out they were just hungry. Did you know I was going to tail you?"

"Not exactly," she said. "It's always best to act like someone's after you when your pockets are full of other people's money."

"Max again?"

Mary nodded.

"More good advice," he said.

"So why are you following me, Professor Rum?"

He looked around again, checked the street. The few people who were out at this time of night were too preoccupied to pay their conversation any mind.

"I was sent to protect you."

"Sent? By who?"

"We're a secret organization. Of magicians. Did Max tell you anything about us?"

Mary shook her head. "Wouldn't be much of a secret if he did."

"No." The wino smiled again. "It wouldn't at that."

"And what does your secret organization do?"

"It's a secret. Let's just say we provide a public service."

"Like protecting little girls?"

He nodded. "Listen, Mary..." He put a hand on her shoulder. His grip was firm and his palm was heavy, but she took a step backward and shook him off.

"Okay," he said, "but what I have to tell you isn't easy." He paused for a moment, then: "Max was murdered. Three days ago. By some very nasty people. And if I don't get you out of here soon, you might be next."

"Why me?" her voice squeaked as she asked it.

He scanned the street again. "Please Mary, it's best if we go now and continue this someplace else."

He wasn't answering her questions.

She thought of Max and let the tears come.

"Oh, there now," he said, "Not that."

He reached out to pat her shoulder but she batted his hand away. She had bowed her head and two salty trickles were rolling down her cheeks. "Why me?" she asked again.

"The people who killed Max are after something and they think he left it with you. But don't fret, you're not alone," he smiled at her, "You've got friends now. Max's friends. But it's time we got moving."

Mary sniffed and shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know," she said.

"Come on," he continued, struggling to sound cheerful. "Where's the brave little card sharp who made forty-two bucks at Three-Card Monte today? Made that palooka Joe look like a chump and tried to take her friends for an extra fifty cents to cap off the day, hunh?"

Fifty cents? Tried?

"You know how to work the angles, Mary. Max taught you that," he said. "I've been watching you. You can work this one. And any way you want to slice it, it's time we got moving."

"You're right," she said, looking up and smiling at him, "It's time." With her free hand she wiped the tears from her cheeks.

"You'll come with me then?"

She nodded. "If you can answer one last question."

"I'll try, but we really should hurry."

"It's an easy question," she said. "How much money do I have in my pocket?"

"What do you mean?"

"You were listening in when we split up the pot. How much do I have in my pocket?"

The wino's confusion showed even past his rubber nose. "Half the take. Twenty-one dollars. Why?"

Three Card Mary chuckled. Then, she swung her suitcase upward as hard as she could. At the top of its arc, the bottom corner slammed into the wino's chin with a vicious crack, snapped his head backward, and sent him sprawling.

"Wrong answer!" she shouted

She let the momentum of the swing carry her forward and lept past his prone form but she didn't make it more than two steps before she felt fingers grasp her ankle. She fell forward landing hard and face-first upon the pavement. The grip about her leg was vice-like and unrelenting and though she tried to crawl away, it tugged at her, dragged her flat again.

"Blackjack! Pants!" she called out to the streets, hoping they weren't far, then turned to deal with her assailant. He was lying nearby, two hands clutching at his damaged jaw, blood drooling from between his fingers.

"You shouldn'ta done that!" he spluttered.

Mary rolled, kicking at the fingers holding her fast while curling into a sitting position and grabbing up her suitcase with both hands. She raised it above her head and brought it down hard just below her foot, driving a bronze cornerpiece into the wino's forearm, snapping bone. She felt the grip about her ankle go limp as a howl, more animal than man, loosed from where the wino was struggling to his feet.

Free, she rose and dashed away, heard uneven steps close behind her, felt certain that fingers were reaching for her neck, so, holding the handle with both hands, she spun once as she ran. As she feared, the wino was only a couple steps behind her, but the end of her suitcase hammered into his side and knocked him to the ground once again.

This gave her enough time to run out of the alley and into the street. "Blackjack!" she hollered again, "Pants!" But there were only a few strangers walking nearby, and while they stared at her, alarm registering on their faces, no one moved to help her.

She bolted headlong down the street, choosing to head deeper into Manhattan, towards the busier neighborhoods around city hall. And as she ran, it hit her: both of the wino's hands were holding his jaw. Both of them. She remembered that clearly. But if that was the case, where did the arm that grabbed her leg come from? Then the memory of the bestial noise he'd made when she had finally freed herself struck her and curiosity won out. She turned her head, looked over her shoulder and saw that the wino was still in pursuit. He was shouting "My

...continued on page 9

4,000 Miles Straight Down

a One-Page Mystery

by Jack Draper

In our modern history textbooks, it is merely a footnote, but at the time, Lord Geoffrey Wilstonshire's December 4, 1893, announcement that he would pilot his iron tunneller, the *Miracle Mole*, to the Earth's core was greeted with much fanfare.

Seeing him off that rainy morning were some 300 onlookers and well-wishers who'd gathered on the grounds of his Cotswold estate in southern England; and though the paper *Union Jacks* they waved grew soggy, and their choruses of *God Save the Queen* could barely be heard above the downpour, their enthusiasm could not be made sodden. His seven-man crew were all smiles as they boarded the vessel, and Lord Wilstonshire himself was said to have positively glowed as he waved and pulled the hatch closed.

The British papers were all banner headlines as the *Miracle Mole's* conical bore tore into the soil and the machine began its 4,000 mile journey straight down.

Fully three months they expected to be underground, but boredom had not stowed away on this vessel. The mechanics — Brandon "Yellow Dog" Morse, Jonathan "Jack" Yarmouth and Lance "The Rat" Ratzinger — had their hands full keeping the tunneller in tip-top shape while Harold Newbury, the expedition's cook, fed the men off their stores of *paté de frois gras*, tinned duck and other delicacies. The officers, Oliver Thamesbury and the Marquis Charles Hamburg, both members of Lord Wilstonshire's private club in London and each a renowned adventurer in his own right, swapped tales of big-game hunting in Africa and Asia, while Doctor Phineas Fullbright, the expedition's physician, his skills unneeded as long as the journey continued so successfully, sat back and enjoyed the company of his fellows.

Meanwhile, in his private cabin, Lord Wilstonshire himself, who'd maintained his fortune over the years through speculation in precious metals, spent his time with his

ledgers, pouring over estimates of the mineral wealth to which he expected to lay claim.

Then, after six weeks of tunneling, there was an enormous crash as the *Miracle Mole* came to a sudden stop. No amount of coaxing could get it to continue.

"We've done it!" exclaimed Lord Wilstonshire. "We've pierced the Earth's mantle!"

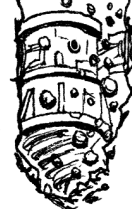
A check of the gauges proved there was no immediate danger outside. Yellow Dog threw open the hatch and the crew of the *Miracle Mole* found themselves in a vast open space as black as the blackest night on the surface. But, much to everyone's surprise, the atmosphere was not hot here as the Royal Academy's scientists had predicted. Quite the opposite. The temperature was many dozen degrees below freezing and the ground was covered in a thick layer of ice.

Wrapping themselves in emergency cold-weather gear, they embarked upon an exploratory hike only to discover that they were not alone in this frigid, subterranean land. There was a native population here — a *human* population. Their dark faces peaked from swaddling layers of gray fur, and while they seemed amicable enough, they spoke a language entirely alien even to the most well-traveled among the crew.

After swapping awkward greetings, Lord Wilstonshire, in the best tradition of English explorers, announced to these savages that he was claiming this new land in the name of the British Empire. But the crew of the *Miracle Mole* had to share another helping of surprise among themselves, for in response to this, the leader of the troglodytic tribe spoke up, in a heavily accented but completely understandable English: "Stupid man. You can't claim this land for the British Empire. It's already a part of the British Empire."

How could this be???

solution on page 50





The Adventures of Rocket Patrol Boardgame

The galaxy is in imminent danger! A super villain has lain hands on a doomsday device, holed up in a secret lair, and is about to put a sinister plot in motion. Now you, one of Rocket Patrol's heroic captains, must find out what the plot is and thwart it. Pronto!

Number of players: 3 to 6

What you need: A single 6-sided die, a pawn for each player, an envelope.

Preparation: Print the cards. They are formatted to fit on Avery, perforated, business card sheets (cards are 3" by 2"). Or you could print them on light card stock and cut

them out. Or print them on paper then paste them onto the faces of regular playing cards. Then, print the game board (on light cardstock is best but not necessary). And finally print and cut out enough note sheets for every player.

To start: Sort the cards into their different types -- VILLAIN, DOOMSDAY DEVICE, LAIR, and SINISTER PLOT. **Secretly**, draw one card of each kind without **anyone** seeing what the cards are. Store them in the envelope. Those cards represent the mysterious crisis Rocket Patrol is trying to avert.

Next, shuffle the remaining cards and deal them all out to the players. Some players might get more cards than others. Them's the breaks.

Next, everybody sets their pawn — representing their rocketships — on Spacebase Charon. Roll the die to see who goes first. Play will progress clockwise around the table.

A turn: When it's your turn, roll the die and move that many spaces on the board. If you land on a planet, you can do one of two things: *Investigate the Crisis* or *Thwart the Plot*. If you don't land on a planet, you can't do anything else but wait until it's your turn again.

Investigate the Crisis: You've landed on a planet and are searching for clues about the Crisis. To do this, guess a VILLAIN, DOOMSDAY DEVICE, AND SINISTER PLOT. And as you are investigating the planet you've landed on, that's the LAIR part of your guess. Starting on your left, the other players have to show you a card from their hands if they can. If a player has more than one of the cards you've guessed, they only have to show you **one card**. In this way, you can eliminate possibilities until you're ready to Thwart the Plot.

Thwarting the Plot: When you think you know who the VILLAIN is, what DOOMSDAY DEVICE he/she/it is using, where his/her/its LAIR is, and what the SINISTER PLOT he/she/it has up his/her/its sleeve (or sleeve equivalent), you can thwart the malefactor!

All you have to do is, while it's your turn and you're on a planet (any planet), is announce that you are Thwarting the Plot and state the VILLAIN, DOOMSDAY DEVICE, LAIR and SINISTER PLOT that you think are behind the Crisis facing Rocket Patrol. Then, **secretely** look in the envelope and, **without anyone else** seeing, check if you're right.

If you guessed wrong, Rocket Patrol takes a dim view of having their time wasted. Consider yourself suspended. (That is, you lost and are out of the game.)

If you guessed right, you've won the game. The galaxy is saved. Good for you, Captain!

Landing on Spacebase Charon: If you land on Spacebase Charon you can't Investigate (as there's no LAIR there). Instead, roll the die and move again.

the Perils of Modern Conjuring continued...

money! Stop her, she took my money!" as he lumbered after her. One hand was covering his bleeding face, the other appeared to be holding his jacket shut. Or was it that he was holding his bulk in place? Carrying something beneath his clothes? Certainly, what she thought at first was paunch seemed misshapen to her now and as his legs pumped beneath his belly, it moved entirely unlike flab.

All this she discerned in a moment of inattention to where she was heading. It was just long enough for her to realize that this Professor Rum was far more dangerous than she'd imagined, that her reputation in this neighborhood was such that the people in the street would probably believe the lies he was shouting, and just long enough for her not to notice the man who stepped out onto the sidewalk and blocked her path.

She plowed directly into him. But the collision didn't knock him down. Instead, with one arm he pulled her around behind his back and held her there. He was dressed in a dark suit and she caught a glimpse of a black automatic in his free hand, a white square of fabric in the centre of his collar.

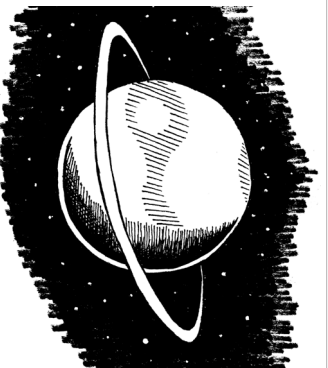
"Hi there," he said. "I'm Jack. Sorry it took me so long to find you. Need a hand?" ☹

...to be continued in the next issue which will come out eventually.



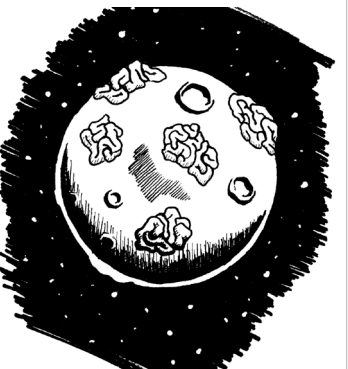
SETBACK

When it was known as "Victory Base," this was Rocket Patrol's premiere science facility and many military technologies were developed here. Setback is now uninhabited.



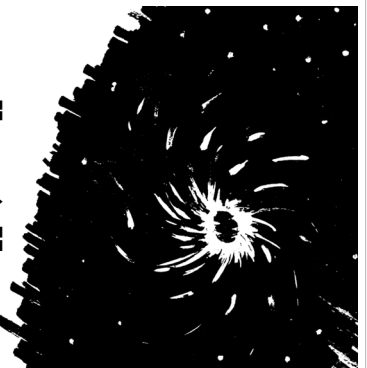
NAKAGURI

Gray, unremarkable, and devoid of any important resources, Nakaguri is widely considered the most boring planet in the galaxy. But if that's the case, why is it that every Rocket Patrol scout that gets near it goes missing?



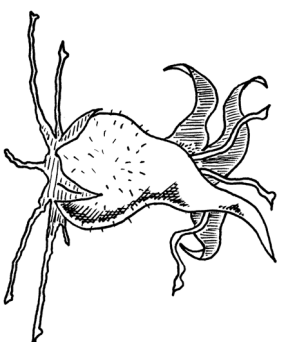
CEREBROX

Equal parts mineral and neural tissue, scientists believe Cerebrox's original lifeforms evolved into living brains that merged with the planet's geology and formed a single, gigantic mind.



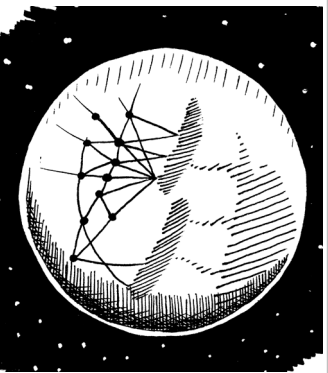
UGOLINO'S MAW

A maelstrom of comets: millions of the frozen orbs stream in and out of this treacherous region of space. Rumor has it that those brave enough to navigate to its centre will find hidden there an interstellar Shangri-la.



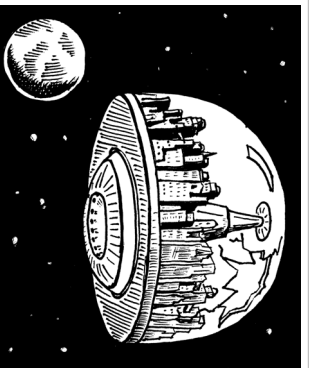
RAVENOUS PODS

An alien, fungal lifeform, Ravenous Pods are carnivorous and their barbs secrete a deadly poison. Nearly impossible to kill completely and known to spread at an alarming rate, Ravenous Pods are incredibly dangerous when removed from their native environment.



DUST WORLD

The explorers who first landed on this desert planet discovered the ruins of an ancient, alien civilization. Parched and empty, sand chokes the canal system of Dust World, mystery is the last inhabitant of its cyclopean cities.



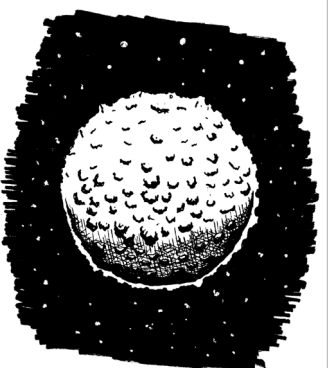
SKY CITY

Thirty years ago, Sky City's dome was breached, and millions died as a result. Conventional wisdom has it the space base was hit by an asteroid. But there are those who wonder why all the broken glassed was found floating *outside* the city while no asteroid fragments can be found within.



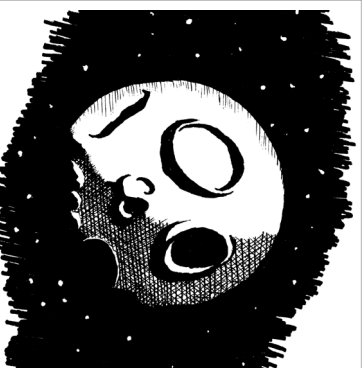
HEMAGLOBE

Situated in the midst of the Devil's Squall nebula, Hemaglobe was built by the planet engineers of the long dead Vampire Empire. Its lone moon rotates in a geo-synchronous orbit and casts a vast shadow on the planet surface: a perfect, permanent eclipse.



DROSS XXIX

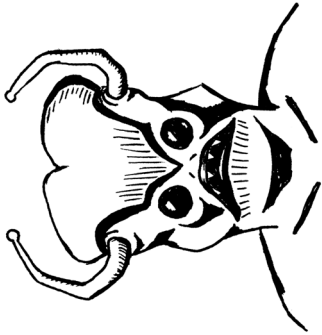
A highly contaminated garbage planet on the edge of the Boxer Asteroids, Dross XXIX was abandoned when the crews manning the scows that unloaded waste there revolted and refused to go near it again.



REVENANT the Ghost Planet

Revenant was once home to a human colony, but 150 years ago, the entire planet mysteriously disappeared. Lately, some spacers have reported seeing it drifting through deep space.



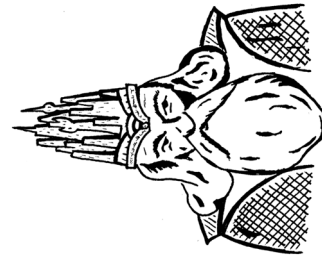


THE ZREELBEK

It came from the far reaches of the galaxy, the last of an ancient ichthyoid race. Its motives are inscrutable, its tremendous intellect entirely alien. All that is known for certain of the Zreelbek is its capacity for evil.



VILLAIN

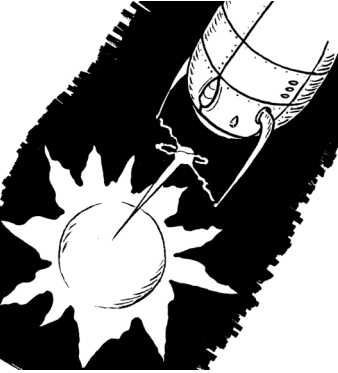


THE EIDOLON OF ATLANTIS

Though the existence of Atlantis was disproved many centuries ago, the Eidolon is the spectral manifestation of that lost civilization. It's goal: to elevate human society to the mythic ideal of Atlantean culture *by any means necessary*.



VILLAIN

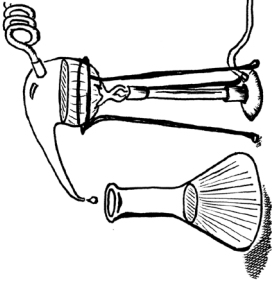


THE HELOS GUN

An ancient, alien technology many believed lost for all time, the Helios Gun is a reverse-energy beam with the power to snuff the internal furnace of a star. It can turn any solar system cold and dark.



DOOMSDAY DEVICE

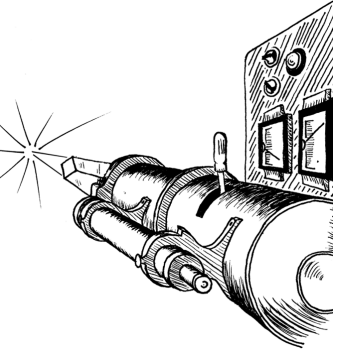


THE NEANDERTHAL DISTILLATION

The laboratory technicians who worked on this chemical were transformed into violent, stupid ape-men, merely from being in the same room as the Neanderthal Distillation A single vial of this potent genetic-regressor poured into a planet's water system could destroy a civilization.



DOOMSDAY DEVICE

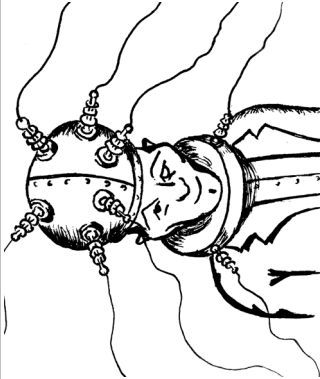


THE ATOM KEY

A prism carved from the only known sample of Anti-Quartz. By focussing light rays, the Atom Key can unravel the forces that hold matter together, effectively disintegrating anything its beam touches.



DOOMSDAY DEVICE



LUSUS DEI the Planet Killer

Once a brilliant scientist, Lusus Dei was driven mad when he attempted to augment his intelligence through the application of an electrical current. He derives pleasure now only from building supremely powerful weapons and then using them.



VILLAIN



THE FURY (Vivian Virago)

Vivian Virago was raised on Castor II, a human colony that was accidentally destroyed by a stray negator missile. How she survived the destruction is unknown. What is known, is that she has since turned all her anger and grief against Rocket Patrol.



VILLAIN

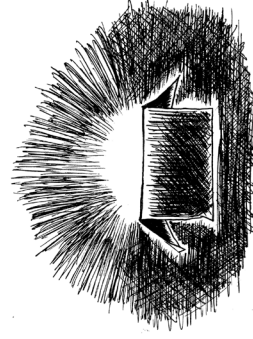


FRIGGA the Infernum Moon

Hauled through space by robot-controlled, planet-tugs, Frigga is a rich source of Infernum, the most volatile chemical ever discovered. If it ever impacts with an oxygen source, the resulting explosion would be beyond imagining, thus making Frigga the most dangerous projectile in the galaxy.



DOOMSDAY DEVICE

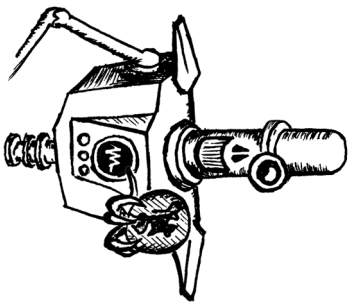


THE BOX

The mysteriousness of the Box's origin is exceeded only by the dangerousness of its contents. Where does it come from? None can say. Who built it? No one knows. What havoc can it wreck if it falls into the wrong hands? Few dare imagine.



DOOMSDAY DEVICE



THE DOOMBOT

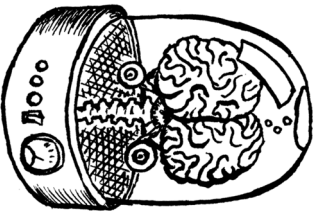
An indestructible, mechanical rocket captain seemed like good idea at the time. But since it was first activated, the Doombot has turned its ruthless, machine intelligence against the very civilization that created it.



"CAPTAIN" DAN HEX

Rogue Patrolman

His good looks and charm hide a heart driven solely by greed. "Captain" Dan Hex turned his back on Rocket Patrol when he realized he could get better financial returns from evil.



THE ADVERSARY

It is a mind so evil no body could contain it. Though it is just a brain under glass, the Adversary uses "thought waves" to control a network of minions that spans the entire galaxy.



ALL DISHES ARE SERVED COLD IN SPACE

"Mark my words, they have foiled my plans for the last time. Though their entire armada stands in my way, they shall feel my wrath!"

"Crows coming home to roost" is how some unsavoury types would describe this revenge plot against Rocket Patrol.



TIME WAITS FOR NO MAN BUT ONE

"The future is likely overrated anyway."

The chronolithards of Universe 2 have foreseen that someone will soon attempt to collapse the fourth dimension, thus stopping time and subjecting us all to an eternal now.



THE ARMAGEDDON GAMBIT

"I've travelled from one end of the galaxy to the other, from the Antipodean Cluster to the Zone of Nihil, and it's my considered opinion that it has to go. All of it."

Rumor has it there's a plot afoot to destroy all life in the galaxy.



THE GREAT ROCKET ROBBERY

"Whoever said money can't buy happiness never saw this smile on my face."

They claim it'll be the biggest heist in the history of the universe. And it's a good thing the super-intelligent pigeon-creatures of New New York caught wind of it. Those birds just can't keep a secret.



CONQUEST OF THE STARS

"The strong rule, the weak serve: it is the natural order of things. Fortunately for me, I am very, very strong."

Space merchants can make a tidy profit during war time and lately they've been licking their chops as they've heard someone is amassing forces and plans to conquer the Star League.



THE MAP TO INSANITY

"The master calls us..."

Why someone would want to release an insane god from its extra-dimensional prison is anyone's guess, but word on the street is somebody's been nosing around about how to free Xuul the Goat from the Zone of Nihil.

It takes all kinds...



WHAT THE HEART COMMANDS

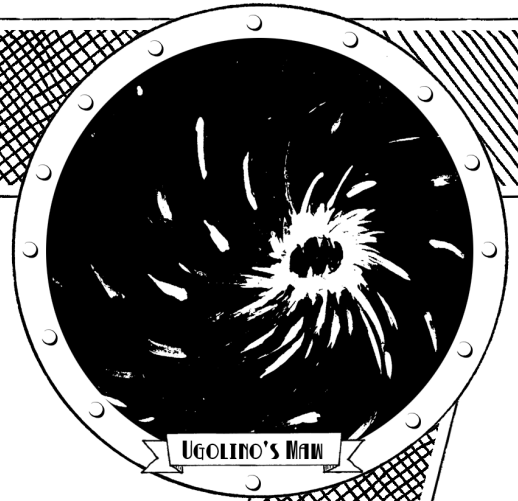
"Her beauty haunts me. I can bear it no longer. If I can't have her, no one will."

Princess Micomicona of Micomicoon X has received threats that she will soon be kidnaped and forcibly married.





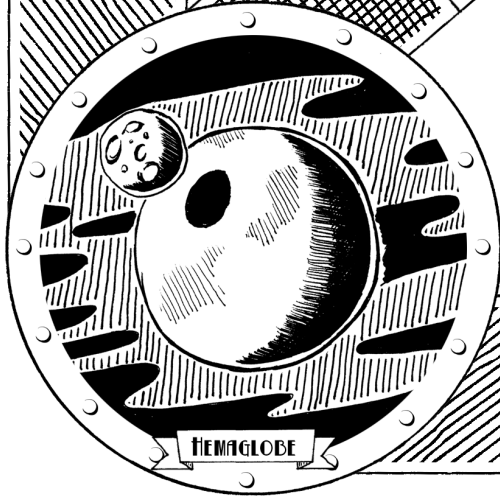
REVERANT



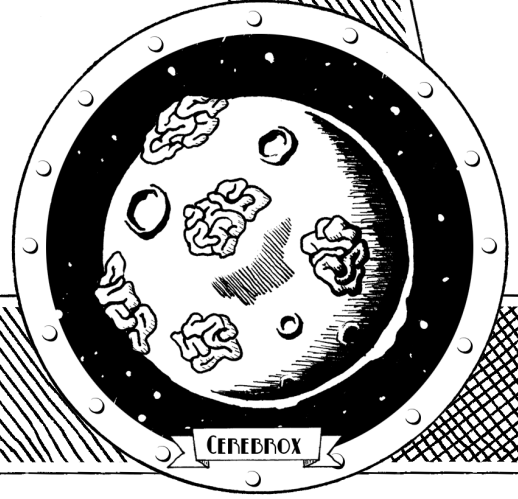
UGOLINO'S MAN



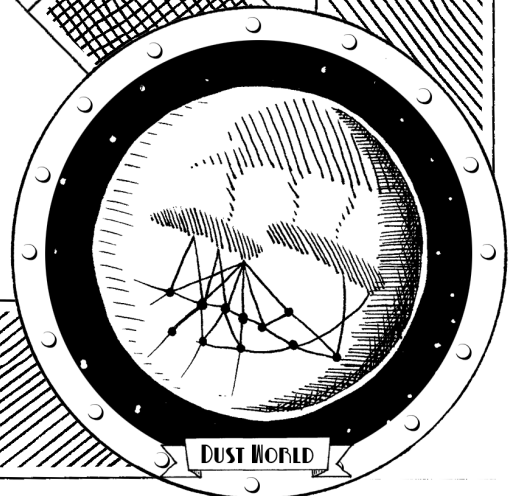
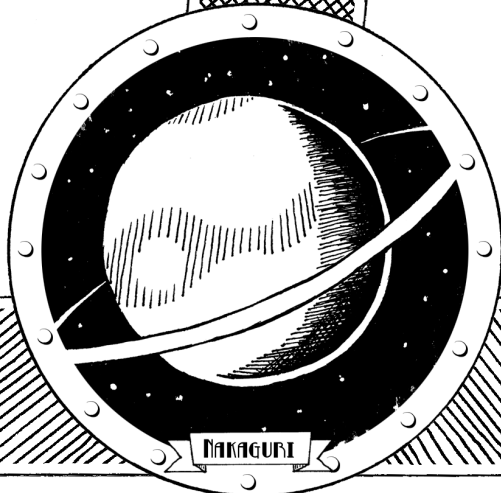
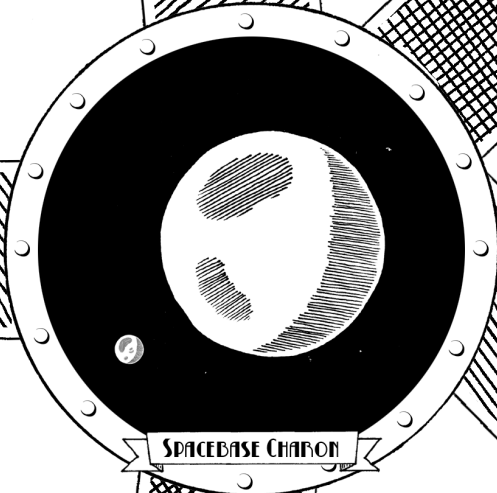
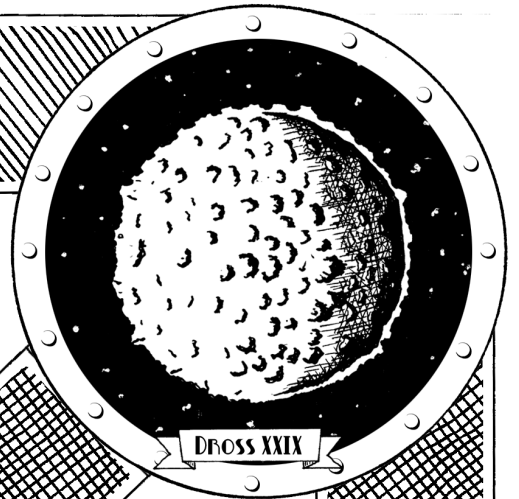
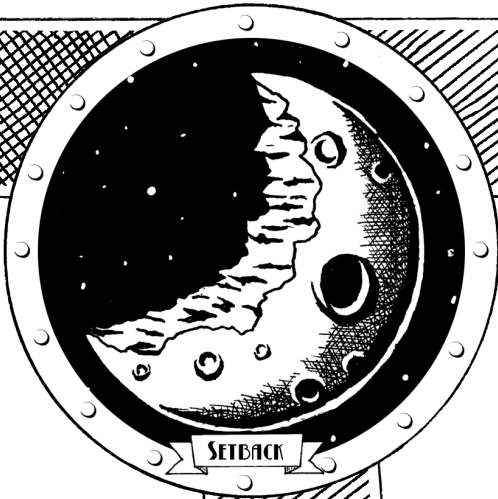
SKY CITY



HEMAGLOBE



CEREBROX



the Adventures of **ROCKET PATROL** boardgame

VILLAINS

the Adversary
"Captain" Dan Hex
the Doombot
the Eidolon of Atlantis
the Fury
Lusus Dei
the Zreelbek

DOOMSDAY DEVICES

the Atom Key
the "Box"
Frigga, the Infernum Moon
the Helios Gun
Neanderthal Distillation
Professor Lomax's Robot Army
Ravenous Pods

LAIRS

Cerebrox
Dross XXIX
Dust World
Hemaglobe
Nakaguri
Setback
Sky City
Revenant
Ugolino's Maw

SINISTER PLOTS

Commit biggest heist in history
Collapse the 4th dimension
Conquer the Star League
Destroy all life in the galaxy
Free Xuul the Goat
Kidnap Princess Micomicona
Take revenge against Rocket Patrol

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That Bloody Moon

a One-Page Mystery

by Jack Draper



Ernest Tidyman lived by himself in a little house near the Waktmapaw Woods, and though outwardly he was an ordinary man, he was remarkable in one respect. Animals hated him.

For as long as he could remember, cats hissed and hid when he crossed their paths, no rat had ever sullied his pantry, dogs both wild and tame nipped at his hands, swarms of flies parted before him, horses bolted, skunks fled, monkeys shrieked and rattled their cages, entire flocks of geese took wing and headed south when he came near though it were the middle of summer.

You would think with such overwhelming evidence of the enmity the animal kingdom bore him, he would grow to feel in kind. But that wasn't the case. As much as beasts hated him, he loved them in return, and it was in the hopes of winning their affection that he bought that house at the edge of wilderness. By growing close to nature, he thought, he could remove whatever taint it was that made him so unappealing to things natural.

His first winter in that little house near the Waktmapaw Woods was a cold one, and the morning after the first full moon of the season he noticed prints in the snow outside his back door. He consulted a wildlife guide and was excited to discover that they were canine in origin — a dog no doubt, but the prints were large enough that Ernest fancied that perhaps they were left by a coyote or even a wolf.

The next night he left food outside — scraps of meat — and waited by his window but much to his disappointment, he fell asleep and never saw the animal. The only evidence of its visit was the missing food and a set of fresh prints left in the snow. The same thing happened the next night as the moon was still at its brightest: Ernest set out food, tried to stay awake, fell asleep in the wee hours, then woke the next morning to find the food gone. After that the animal stopped coming around, and did not reappear until the full moon of the following month.

It was round about this time that the murders began. First, there was Mrs Grisby, the librarian in the nearby town of Ezekiel's Turn who met her end walking home from a church social, her bingo winnings untouched. The next month brought the slaying of Hank Marsh, a local farmer and renowned drunk, who was found headless and, presumably, legless, in the Iktikamee Woods. Another month passed and Bill Hanson, a teacher at the county's



one school, was discovered — mystery upon mystery — slaughtered in the bushes outside the window of his star pupil, Miss Wilemena Fell, 16.

On and on it went. One killing a month, always around the full moon. And though the papers reported few details, Ernest Tidyman read with horror that the murders were clearly the work of one man — probably an escaped lunatic — and were considered particularly vicious.

As the months passed and winter gave way to spring, spring to summer, and the body count continued to rise, the girls at Hathwick's Grocery noted that Ernest Tidyman's mood was becoming increasingly dour. In fact, he had become so depressed that they were not at all surprised when Sheriff Wagner informed them one morning that Ernest had been found dead in his house, an apparent suicide.

Could it be that Ernest's failure to win the affections of even one animal was finally too much for him? *Or is there more to this tale?!?!*



solution on page 50



Blood for Terror Planet

Captain Zack Brass and the crew of the Hellcat battle an evil from beyond the edge of outer space!

by **Martin Scribbler**

PART ONE: FEBRUARY 13, 2315

“Ten space leagues to the Devil’s Squall, Captain.”

“I can see it, ensign. The countdown won’t be necessary.” For the past twelve hours, the Devil’s Squall, a stellar nebula of shifting green and silver tendrils, had loomed ever larger through the glassteel of the fore viewport. Comprised of countless glowing particles, it was an awesome and beautiful sight to behold. Captain Jeremiah Goddard gripped the wheel of his vessel tighter, its chrome becoming slick with his sweat. Though fifty ships or more had travelled this route safely in the last decade, and though he himself had captained six of them, he knew that three colony ships and two long-range scouts had gone inexplicably missing in its roiling mists. No distress call was ever received by a human outpost. No emergency buoy was ever recovered. They simply disappeared without a trace, and over five thousand passengers and crew disappeared with them.

Like all nebulas, the Devil’s Squall was a collec-

tion of dust and fragments of whatever star had exploded to form it. But unlike many, it was alight with a phosphorescent glow and within it, an invisible storm raged. Electromagnetic currents rippled among the particles, whirling and eddying in places, buffeting and tugging at any ship that dared to pass through. Even from this distance, he could feel the nebula’s thrumming in the steel of his rocket’s deck.

Yes, it was a mysterious region his ship, The Star Argosy, hurtled towards; it was whispered about among spacers and said by some to be haunted. A funny thought that, in this age where rocketships plied the vast distances between stars. Science had given man the power to conquer the black void of night and yet the spectres and bugaboos trailed after, lurked and plotted evil even in alien darkneses. The ghost story lingered.

Despite all this — the tales, the invisible currents, its reputation for danger — the scientists of Rocket Patrol had declared the Devil’s Squall harmless. They produced charts and tables to show that its turbu-

lence made piloting challenging but not impossible, and that its electrical forces could not damage the hull of even the weakest ships in the fleet. They claimed the lost vessels were likely the result of a series of tragic but fluke occurrences, muttered the phrase “pilot error” among themselves, and designated the nebula a Hazard Class E. All claims to the contrary were dismissed as spacer superstition.

Captain Goddard knew better than to discount spacer superstition out of hand, but even though he heeded the stories he’d heard, his experiences with the Squall couldn’t contradict the pronouncements of science. In every one of his six trips through, he had experienced nothing more out of the ordinary than some turbulence and electrical interference. Neither of these were problems he hadn’t faced before, and admittedly he’d seen far worse in other, more treacherous, regions of the galaxy. Certainly, if pressed, he couldn’t deny that the Devil’s Squall appeared harmless. But that didn’t change the fact that whenever he watched those mists encircle the Star Argosy, a cold fear would grip his heart, squeeze damp out through his palms.

“I’ll address the ship now, Jenkins. Cut the music,” he said.

The ship’s purser turned to a series of machines that were concerned with monitoring and maintaining the comfort of the passengers. He turned a dial on one of them, then lifted the stylus from a rotating, platinum cylinder. “All set, Cap’n.”

Goddard cleared his throat as he flicked a switch on the console above him. He pulled down a flexible, rubber tube and spoke into the little brass trumpet on its end. “Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen, for the interruption in our program of popular musical entertainments. This is your Captain speaking.” His voice was smooth and reassuring; the words he spoke, practised. There was no way that the wealthy, cultured passengers who heard this announcement, each of whom had paid over a hundred thousand earth dollars to book passage on the Star Argosy, would know that the man who spoke to them was an aging and weathered space dog. “In about thirty space minutes, our ship will enter the Emerald Fog, a most resplendent example of interstellar vivacity. Renowned throughout this region of the galaxy for its sparkling beauty, the Emerald Fog is the floating remnant of an exploded star.

“You will note that as we pass through the Emerald Fog, the ship’s lighting will dim and we may experience some shaking in the hull. This is all perfectly normal and absolutely nothing to worry yourselves over. The turbulence is no more severe than you would experience in a boat on a windy day back on Earth. But if you do find yourself suffering from the spacer equivalent of seasickness — ‘space sickness,’ we call it...” Pause, two, three, four. Allow them a moment to laugh. “Please be assured that this too is perfectly normal and will pass soon. If you have any other concerns or questions about interstellar

clouds, please feel free to seek out one of our stewards.

“Those of you not already in the ballroom, I would encourage to make your way there so that you may observe this extraordinary phenomena through our sturdy, glassteel observation windows. And as our shipboard address system will suffer some slight static while we’re in the cloud, Perry Stardust and the Far Side of the Moon Orchestra will be performing a special selection of light favorites to accompany this marvellous sight. The whole galaxy is putting on a show tonight especially for you, ladies and gentlemen. I hope you will enjoy it.”

He flicked off the address system, and slid the speaker-trumpet back into its holder.

“Poor lubbers,” said an ensign at the navigation console. “Haven’t got a clue what we’re heading into.”

“And it’s our job to make sure they never find out,” said Captain Goddard. “Now get your greenhorn hide away from that station. Consider yourself relieved.”

“But... Cap’n, I didn’t mean...”

“Didn’t nothing. We have to get every reading we can out of the astro-naviscope before the Squall eels up our instruments, so I’m taking our bearings myself. I’m not leaving the lives of twelve-hundred lubbers in the hands of a swab navigator, no matter who his daddy is. Understood?”

“Aye, Sir.” The ensign stood at attention, his face red with humiliation.

“And seeing as you’re so concerned about what the lubbers on this ship do and don’t know,” continued the Captain, “you can work out the rest of your shift among the stewards. Jenkins, see that this man is outfitted properly.”

“Aye, Sir,” said the purser who motioned for the ensign to follow and the two of them marched across the bridge and exited it through a hatch. The rest of the crew was silent for a moment then returned to their duties. A few of the more seasoned officers even sniggered at the recruit’s misfortune.

Though he much preferred to stand at the wheel and steer the ship himself, Captain Goddard relinquished the helm to his pilot and busied himself at the astro-naviscope. He knew he probably shouldn’t have come down so hard on the ensign, especially considering he normally he didn’t mind a little levity on the bridge. This was just a colony ship afterall, not a war rocket. But still, those passengers paid the crew’s salaries and for that, they deserved to be spoken of with respect. And as he stared into the green glow of the scope, he tried to kid himself that this was why he’d acted so severely. The truth was he always chewed somebody out just before entering the Devil’s Squall. It helped him relax.

* * * * *

“Ahh, ladies and gentlemen,” said Perry Stardust. He held the microphone as though it were actually working, but they were already well into the Emerald Fog and would only get screeches and howls if

they tried to use the amplification equipment. "That was 'How Deep is the Ocean' featuring the very talented Mr Dale Scots on the clarinet." Polite applause came up to him from the sea of tuxedos and gold and silver evening dresses. The ship lurched slightly and the dancers made a collective "Whoa!" noise then laughed. They were having a grand time despite the turbulence. Or perhaps because of it. They had no idea how difficult it was for sixteen musicians to stay in tempo when the floor was rolling around like this. Just as well. He looked out across the heads at the broad expanse of glassteel that formed the far wall of the ballroom. It gave a panoramic view of the glowing, green mists of the nebula. A glorious sight. And a pity he'd never really had a chance to watch it go by. It would take the Star Argosy six hours to cross and the orchestra would play for most of that time. A real test of endurance, this.

"Ahhh, I see the Emerald Fog is putting on a dazzling show for us tonight. What do you say boys, we play along with a little 'Moonlight is for Lovers'?" The musicians nodded with practiced enthusiasm at his question. He swung his baton in an andante rhythm and one, two, three, his boys started to play. They were a little trembly he had to admit, but not bad. Not bad, all things considered.

A few bars went by and Perry Stardust turned to face the audience, smiling as he drew his trumpet from under his left arm. Waited for his cue. Bided his time. Watched the tuxes and the silk gowns turn below him. The only light he had to see by came from the candles on the tables and streamed in from the Emerald Fog, and while together they were bright enough to fill the room, the thin, phosphorescence of the nebula gave the dancers' skin a grey tint. He fancied they looked like sea creatures, a school of gayly dressed minnows milling about in the shallows.

Across the dance floor he saw that some kind of commotion was brewing. It was right on the edge of the ballroom, near the door. An officer was there who stood tall, caught Perry's eye and gave him the 'play louder' signal.

Poor guy. It's not all dress uniforms and smiles for the stewards. Somebody over there has probably been sick. What a mess.

Could be worse than being the band leader, he reminded himself. Much worse.

Perry Stardust brought his trumpet to his lips and blew a happy melody. Blew it as loud as he could.

* * * * *

A crackle blasted through a speaker, loud enough that it caused the entire bridge crew to start. It settled into a static growl over which a voice could just barely be heard.

"Turn that blasted thing down! What durned fool is using the intercom system while we're in the middle of the Squall?" shouted Captain Goddard. "Phipps! The helm!" He stepped from behind the

wheel of the ship, handing it off to the pilot, and rushed across the bridge to the communications station. He rested a hand on the shoulder of the lieutenant who was seated there before a rack of radio equipment and adjusting a series of dials. The communications officer had managed to reduce the riot of noise to a manageable level, but while an anxious voice was audible through it, the sense of the message was hopelessly garbled.

"Did you catch any of that?" the Captain asked him.

"No sir. Sorry sir."

Goddard flipped a switch on the console, pulled a retractable hose from its housing and shouted slowly and clearly into the brass mouthpiece: "Say again! Louder! Over!" and waited.

There was a moment where only the electrical bedlam of the nebula's interference was audible, and then, all ears straining to make it out, came a slow, shouted reply:

"Old!... Scratch!... Is!... Loose!"

And then, for a moment, there was only the crackle of the loudspeaker.

Goddard ran a palm across his face, making his brow only damper, then flicked off the speaker control. The bridge was silent and the twelve officers of the bridge crew were clearly alarmed. All eyes were on their Captain.

"Where did that come from?" he asked.

"Area G. Section 16," said the communications officer who was pointing at a lone, orange light among a matrix of tiny bulbs. It flickered a moment longer then winked out.

"Bowels of the ship," Goddard muttered as he straightened. From the leather holster at his hip, he drew his electro-pistol and removed the safety. He addressed his crew gruffly: "Alright. You all heard the message. Gather the emergency detail on the double." Five of his men left the bridge to grab equipment, while the remainder busied themselves at their stations.

"I'll lead the team myself," he said. "Phipps, you're in command while I'm gone." The ship rolled dramatically down, forcing him to grab ahold of a hand-rail for support. "And mind our pitch, Phipps. We'll need it as steady as you can keep it."

He holstered his weapon and from under his shirt, drew a key that dangled on a long chain. He inserted it into a slot in a panel above the ship's wheel and turned it. A small, glass door sprung open next to it, revealing a button the size of his thumb. He pressed it, withdrew the key and walked off the bridge without saying a word to the men who remained behind.

* * * * *

"Old Scratch is loose." The code words told Captain Goddard only one thing: something had gone horribly wrong aboard the Star Argosy, and they were now very probably facing the unknown doom that had claimed five ships and five thousand souls in

the Devil's Squall. It was the message of last resort. To be used only when they were on the very brink of Hell itself.

But with no more detail than this, Goddard found himself working his way through the narrow passages in the depths of the rocket, jogging between steam pipes and electrical conduits, with a small cadre of his most trusted men: two doctors, two engineers, a science expert, and a hardy spacer named Donato whose only expertise was knowing how to survive in the black vacuum between the stars. He had to trust that on the decks above, the emergency measures were being carried out as written. The stewards would be gathering the passengers together and shepherding them toward the core of the rocket. Other crew members would be sealing all the hatches between sections and putting up shield plates over the external windows. And on the bridge, his officers would be preparing to ignite the bulk of their remaining fuel in one enormous rocket burst, the hope being that this would be enough to carry them out of the Devil's Squall and away from whatever it was that threatened them. But first he had to find out what the danger was specifically, and if he didn't get word back in twenty space minutes, the blast would be initiated without his authorization.

Of course, he took little comfort from knowing all this. These were the same emergency measures that would have been used by the last colony ship to meet its demise in the nebula.

Six space minutes had already passed, and they were just reaching section G-16—the Star Argosy was a big rocket. Goddard was in the lead as they stepped through the hatchway, walked down an iron catwalk then descended a narrow ladder. The air was hot and thick with steam, and down here, the ship's lighting had failed completely. But, as even portable electrical equipment couldn't be relied upon, the group had to carry aloft magnesium torches which gave off a foul-smelling smoke and burned so bright in their centres they stabbed at the eyes and left trailing dots of red and purple if you inadvertently looked at them.

As they ran down a passageway between a row of giant boilers, the clanging of their boots against the metal deck must have alerted someone to their presence. From the far end of the section, they heard a scream, "Help! Here! I'm down here! Hurry!"

"Who is that?" asked Doctor Barnhoff.

"Not sure," replied Captain Goddard. "But it sounds like he's at the engineering station."

The group raced through the maze of machinery and presently emerged in an open area, but something was wrong. Great gouts of steam were flooding the space and the light of their torches reflected off the clouds, reducing visibility to only a few feet. They had to slow to a walk, and cautiously follow the man's screams. They found him splayed out on the floor next to an intercomm device, clutching the speaking-tube with his left hand while his right was

pressed to his throat. He wore the uniform of an ensign, its leather torn, and stained red. The flesh of his neck had clearly been shredded. Blood seeped from between his fingers.

"Let me at 'im," said Doctor Barnhoff, who dropped to a knee next to injured crewman and opened his medkit.

"Frakes. Knox," said the Captain to the engineers. "See if you can do something about this steam. But be careful." Then he knelt next to the ensign. "What was it, son?"

The doctor pulled the man's hand from his throat, but an artery must have been cut. A jet of blood shot from the man's neck. Sprayed the Captain's face with gore.

"Darn it," spat Doctor Barnhoff as he smacked a wad of steril gauze against the wound, staunching the flow. "We're going to have to sew this up, Jack," he said to the other medic.

Goddard wiped his face and looked down into the terrified eyes of the man. His face was growing pale from loss of blood. Shock was clearly setting in. He had to get him to talk before he faded.

"Come on, son. What happened here?"

"It was him!" the man shrieked. "Old Scratch is loose! Old Scratch! We're all dead, Captain! All dead!"

"Old Scratch? But what does that mean, son?"

"The Devil himself! Old Scratch! Here, Captain! All dead! All dead..." the ensign's screams petered out. His eyes rolled back in their sockets. He went limp.

Doctor Barnhoff pushed Goddard aside.

"Is he...?" the Captain asked.

"Just passed out. Now let me tend to this man."

The steam was starting to dissipate, and as Goddard looked around he could see the rest of the emergency detail working among the pipes that coursed through this section. They must have found the leak and stopped it. He looked down at his watch. It was powered by trusty clockwork, and still ticked off the seconds. He had nine space minutes to sort out this mess and get word up to the bridge before the fuel was ignited.

Melville, his science officer, came over. "Somebody opened all the steam valves, sir. Lines were venting all over the place, but I think we've got most of them."

"Good," said Goddard.

"What was he doing down here?"

The Captain motioned towards a pair of mops and a spilt pail. "Cleaning detail, most likely."

"Where are the rest of them, then?"

"All dead I expect."

"He wasn't serious, you think? Old Scratch? That's just a code. Spacer slang."

"Somebody attacked this man," said Goddard.

"Captain, we have a problem!" shouted Frakes, one of his engineers. He was standing at a systems-monitoring station.

Goddard joined him. "What is it?"

"Look at this reading." Frakes pointed at a glass

window. Behind it, a roll of graph paper scrolled past on which a thin pen scratched a horizontal line.

"That should be moving side to side. This meter just reads zero," said Frakes.

"Is the Squall interfering with it's machinery?" asked Melville.

The engineer shook his head. "No. It's powered by air pressure from the line."

"Then..." the Captain stepped back and examined the system this station monitored. "Oh no," he said as he realized where they were standing. "Can you turn it back on?"

"Maybe. If I can find where the damage is."

"What is it?" asked Melville.

"Life support," said the engineer. "This shunts heat off the rocket and back into the fuselage. Right now, everything's bleeding off into space. Once these boilers go cold, we may as well be a meat locker."

"How long do we have?" the Captain asked of the science officer.

Melville ran a few calculations in his head. "The hull still conducts heat as long as the rockets are firing, but it won't be enough to keep us alive. Figure, three hours at normal burn. But only one after an emergency flame-out."

"Quick, Melville," said the Captain as he checked his watch again. "We've got five minutes. Get on the intercomm and try to call off that burn. Jack," he hollered to the medic who was assisting Barnhoff with the injured ensign. "He only needs one saw-bones. You high-tail it back up to the bridge and do the same in person in case we can't get through."

"Do what?" Jack said.

"Call off that burn! And run!"

The two men dashed off.

"Cap!" It was Donato. He was one of Goddard's oldest friends and now his Executive Officer. They were both old spacers who'd enlisted young and worked their way up the ranks the hard way. "Take a look at this," Don continued. He was standing against a boiler, lighting a cigarette.

Goddard went over. "Yeah?" he said. Don jerked his thumb at the side of the massive iron cylinder. On it, scrawled in blood was a message. It read: "Nighty-night."

"And Knox found your other janitor," Don said as he pointed upward.

Above them on a catwalk, Knox stood. He held aloft his torch to reveal a body dangling upsidedown from the pipes that ran along the ceiling. The dead ensign's eyes were wide open, his mouth gaped, and for his chin to hang at that angle his neck must have been severed half-way through. On his hands he still wore yellow, rubber cleaning gloves.

"He's bled dry," Knox shouted to them.

Goddard looked down. There wasn't a spot of blood on the floor beneath the body.

Don took a drag off his smoke, and smiled grimly. "Next time," he said. "We spend the extra month and go around the Devil's Squall. Okay?"

"Anything useful from the astro-naviscope, Digsy?"

"I may as well be reading random numbers, Captain."

"Good. Good. And Cadet Pep. What's the word on the lights?"

A youth in the green uniform of a Rocket Patrol student stood just inside the bridge hatchway. He was still panting from racing about from deck to deck. "I sampled five different sections," he said. "Lighting ranged from a thirty-five percent reduction in brightness on upper decks to a full ninety percent reduction on the uninsulated levels."

"Excellent. Perfect."

The ship began to roll severely down and to the left, forcing the bridge crew to grab on to rails or chairs for support.

"Reign it in a bit, Hocks. We can assume they were trying to fight the currents, not getting tossed about like a cork in the ocean. They were civilian spacers, but I'm sure they weren't complete incompetents."

"Trying my best to pilot like a civilian, Cap. Not as easy as it sounds," said the pilot as he spun the pitch control and steadied the ship.

"I imagine," said Captain Zackery Brass. He smiled. Their rocket had launched from a super-secret base on Pluto's moon Charon over twelve weeks ago and so far this had been a completely uneventful journey. He was glad to have the monotony broken up.

"How about you, Cadet Pep? What do you think of your first mission with Rocket Patrol?"

"Well, gee. I guess..."

"What is it Pep?"

"Well, aren't you worried that maybe what happened to the Star Argosy will happen to us?"

"That's precisely what I'm hoping for. It'll be easier to find them if we experience the same things they did. That's why we're letting a rocket crewed by some of the best-trained Bluejackets in the Patrol pitch and roll around like this."

"So we're just going to float about in the Devil's Squall and hope we get lucky?"

"Oh, not just that." Captain Brass smiled. "Doc," he said to his second-in-command. "Time for a stage two?"

From a pocket in the blue leather jacket from which this elite squad of spacers got their name, Doctor Murray drew a silver, clockwork pocket watch. "Seventeen thirty on the space clock," he said.

"Well, I think we've been in here long enough let's start her up."

Captain Brass left his command station and went over to a little hatch in the floor that led to the deck below. He spun the wheel on it, popped it open then looked down. "Wensley!" he shouted down into the hole. "Light it!" And then he sealed the hatch back up.

“Come on Pep, let’s go watch this.” He led the cadet to the front part of the bridge and stood under the broad dome of the glassteel viewport. The sound of gears turning, of metal grinding against metal, filled the cabin. And as the noise droned on, a long antenna slowly extended out from the front of the rocket and became visible through the window.

“We don’t have much electrical,” said the Captain, “Wensley and the men are having to crank that out by hand. It’s pretty laborious, but if this works....”

“What is it?” asked Cadet Pep.

“Do you know the story of Hansel and Gretel, Cadet?”

“Of course.”

“Remember how they left a trail of breadcrumbs in the forest so they could find their way home. Well, the first thing the Captain of the Star Argosy should have done when he knew he was in trouble was set up his own trail of breadcrumbs. Only this is a special trail that can only be seen under certain circumstances. You see, we don’t want any crows coming along and scooping up our breadcrumbs like they did in Hansel and Gretel. So this is a chemical trail the Argosy left, and it can only be seen in the presence of a special light. A light that this antenna will give off. Watch.”

Presently, it stopped extending, and the cadet noticed that the tip of it ended in a cuplike shape. From this he saw a blinding flash as a substance was ignited, and then it settled into a bright yellow glow.

“Over there cadet,” said the Captain as he pointed off through the glassteel to a point several hundred yards off their port side. “There it is, your trail of breadcrumbs.”

Clearly visible against the green and gray mists of the Devil’s Squall there was a thin trail that looked very much like red smoke frozen in place. It seemed to start with a little blob on the end nearest them, then travel a long ways on the same trajectory as their own ship. But then strangely, it veered sharply down and to the starboard and disappeared in the roiling chaos of the nebula.

This development clearly excited the Captain. “Hocks,” he said to his pilot, “follow the smoke.”

* * * * *

Hours passed and the Hellcat, largest war rocket in Rocket Patrol, plunged deeper and deeper into the swirling green mists of the Devil’s Squall. It traveled alongside a trail of red chemical smoke and though the nebula’s electrical currents tore at its hull and invisible magnetic tides battered it from every side, it never swerved far from its intended trajectory. The fury of its engine — a furnace stoked as hot as the mythic fires from which the vessel drew its name — propelled it forward at unfathomable speeds, the skill of its Blue Jacket crew yoked it to its course, prevented it from yawing off course.

The Hellcat: an apocalypse bridled by human will.

A lone head poked into a glassteel dome that jutted from a spot several yards behind the rocket’s forecone. It was Cadet Cody Pep and he was taking his turn in the observation platform the crew had dubbed the “crow’s nest.” Within the Devil’s Squall, none of the readings from the electrical instruments could be trusted, so they had to rely on the visual observations of rotating shifts of crewmen at portholes about the vessel — important work as visibility had been reduced from the infinity of open space to little more than thirty or forty space leagues, a distance the rocket traversed in a spaceminute. What’s more, no one on the Hellcat knew the precise nature of the menace they were hunting. A shower of magnetic meteoroids, space pirates, or some unimagined peril, their quarry could be any of these, and it could be that the keen eyes and vigilance of these observers would be the first to uncover the deadly evil that haunted the nebula.

“Haunted”: as Cadet Pep was coming to understand, it was a good word to apply to the Devil’s Squall. Outside the rocket, the stellar cloud was ever-shifting. Plumes of nebuloïd matter whirled up into columns, billowed into amorphous cloud-tumors, swelled and split apart into ragged tentacles of star dust. Light these forms with an eerie, green luminescence, add in the legends he’d picked up from the crew and a dash of his own imagination, and was it any wonder that as he looked out through the glassteel Cadet Pep saw spectres moving within a sepulchral fog? With each spaceminute he sat there, it was all he could do just to keep himself from sounding the alarm.

Coming up the chute through which he reached his perch, Cadet Pep could hear the command crew on the rocket’s bridge below, their voices tinny and amplified by the narrow metal passageway. There was the muttering and finger snapping of Electricals Officer Lieutenant Stanley Atkinson, a wiry, young man who everybody called Static. On first meeting he appeared to be a hyperkinetic and inattentive youth, but appearances in Static’s case were deceiving. Hidden behind tics and nervous laughter was a genius of all things related to electricity and an expert with every conceivable sort of radio gear — he was a veritable wizard of the juice. At present, he was sitting at his station, a padded headphone pressed to one ear, while with his free hand, he adjusted a series of large dials and tried to pick out from the nebula’s interference a useful signal, perhaps a distress call from the Star Argosy. Cadet Pep could hear his intermittent, “Criminy, zilch there,” as his search turned up nothing.

Then there was Master Pilot Robert Hocks who Pep could hear straining against the rocket’s bucking controls. He was a massive brick of a man who towered over everyone on board. He stood nearly seven foot tall, was almost four foot across at the shoulder, and though his arms and legs were thick with bulky muscle, he could manipulate the myriad

wheels and levers that yoked the rocket's fiery thrust with finely-tuned dexterity. Thanks to this combination of herculean strength and mercurial agility, the yanking forces of the Devil's Squall were merely an inconvenience to the Hellcat's progress. Still, they had been travelling this arduous route for several space hours, and judging by the way the master pilot was starting to grunt and groan, the effort was beginning to tire him.

Beyond Hocks, he could hear Digsy, the navigator, discussing the garbled readings coming from the astro-naviscope with the second-in-command, Doctor Maxwell Murray.

Digsy's real name was Lieutenant Hilary Diggs and he was a descendant of bona fide aristocracy. His great-great-great-great-great grandfather was Lord Julius Diggs, a world-famous explorer and archeologist during the early part of the 20th century who had uncovered the tomb of Pharaoh Imhatenkamen and thereby secured his title from the royal family of England. The British Empire had long since faded into obscurity, but Digsy still maintained something of that noble air. His uniform was always pressed and immaculate, its gold insignia polished to a mirror shine. He kept his black hair tidily combed no matter if he was tromping through a jungle on an alien world, squaring off against intergalactic tomb robbers, or, as he was now, aboard the Hellcat as it lurched through a treacherous region of space. True to his roots, Digsy was a natural born explorer. He had a love for maps of all kinds and a voluminous knowledge of the galaxy's myriad cultures both ancient and modern.

At present, he was engaged in a heated technical debate with Doctor Max Murray who was supposed to be seventy-seven years old; this would make him by far the eldest crewman aboard the rocket, but Cadet Pep would have guessed his age as at least a couple decades younger. The Doctor was broad shouldered, muscled, and in the peak of health. He kept his head shaved bald so there was no trace of gray hair, and while his skin was deeply lined, on him they did not appear to be wrinkles in sagging flesh but rather furrows chiseled with purpose into hard marble. Only the wire-rimmed spectacles he wore gave the lie to his age: the lenses were round and almost a full inch thick so that they magnified his eyes and made him look especially owlish. However his fading vision may have hampered him, it was more than compensated for by his tremendous intellect. Not only was Doctor Maxwell Murray a famed surgeon, he also held PhDs in Chemistry and Alien Biology from the Martian University as well as a Masters degree in Astrophysics from the Jovian Institute of Stellar Sciences.

Through all these sounds — the sounds of Digsy and Doc Murray conferring, of Hocks struggling to control the rocket and of Static at his radio station, and through the roar of the Hellcat's engine itself — cut another sound of an entirely different charac-

ter: the sound of someone snoring. It was Cuthbert "Cutter" Morse, the Gunnery Master who was as usual sprawled out in his chair at the space-cannons station, head tipped back, eyes shut, and an obnoxious snorting noise issuing from his sinuses. Such behavior would never be tolerated from another officer, nor would his shaggy beard, unkempt uniform and air of general disarray, but Lieutenant Morse was a master tactician and deadeye with every form of projectile weaponry known to man. Despite his appearance, he slept lightly and was at all times distantly aware of everything that went on around him. At the slightest indication of danger, he would snap awake, assess the situation, and take whatever appropriate and deadly steps were necessary to deliver his crewmates from harm and their enemies to their doom. In addition to this skill at space combat, he was also an expert pugilist; and, among the lifeforms in the galaxy known to play chess competitively, he was ranked in the top ten players.

The one person Cadet Pep could not hear was the master of this crew of elite adventurers. But as he surveyed the sinister fog for signs of danger, he felt his rising fears calmed by the knowledge that on the bridge deck below, it was Captain Zack Brass who called the shots. He knew that this mighty soldier would be standing below, gazing out through the foreportal, alert to every detail, thinking ahead of all eventualities. And despite the great responsibilities he bore he would be smiling with the enthusiasm of a true adventurer.

Captain Zack Brass was the apogee of Rocket Patrol training and Cadet Pep remembered the first time he'd boarded the Hellcat and met this legendary man. It was a startling sight. The line of his features, his unusually strong, bedimpled chin, the mobile and muscular but not too-full mouth, the lean cheeks, all denoted a strength of character seldom seen. The black of his hair shone like polished jet. And though he was a big man who stood just over six foot tall and weighed every ounce of two hundred pounds, the bulk of his great form was forgotten in the smooth symmetry of a build incredibly powerful yet lithe. Sinews wrapped his form like great cables. Their size, the way they seemed to flow like liquid metal, denoted a strength little short of superhuman. He was a masterpiece of muscle.

Most marvelous of all though were his eyes: a deep blue the color of nightfall, but alive with the sparkle of an entire galaxy of stars. When Zack Brass fixed this gaze upon a person, it became clear that undeniably, here was a leader of men. A man with the capacity to dominate all obstacles.

"Cadet!" Cadet Pep snapped out of his reverie as the Captain's voice shouted up to him through the access chute. "Confirm: eight degrees starboard seventeen degrees ascendant."

On the dome's glass, little white marks measured degrees of deviation from the rocket's centrepole; they made it possible for sightings to be verified between

the crow's nest and the bridge. The cadet turned to look at the point the captain indicated — a spot just to the right and above the forecone — while drawing out a telescope and extending it to its full length. He placed its wide end against the correct spot on the glass and peered through the narrow end. With each lurch of the Hellcat, he shifted the telescope's aim and while it wasn't easy to compensate for their zigzag course, he soon thought he'd found what the Captain had pointed out.

"I see it!" he shouted back down, "Confirmed, Captain!"

What Cadet Pep required a telescope to see, Captain Zack Brass had already discerned with his sharp eyes: a single point of light that burned with a bright, consistent whiteness quite unlike the winking particles of the nebula.

It was a star! It had to be, Cadet Pep thought, and that meant they were near the edge of the Devil's Squall. In a few moments they would be clear of the fog.

"Come on down then, Cody," said the captain. "You'll want to see this."

Cadet Pep closed the telescope with a snap and returned it to a pouch on his belt. He climbed off his perch and descended the ladder by ignoring the rungs and pressing his hands and palms against its outside. He whizzed down the access chute and a moment later he touched down on the bridgedeck, the clang of his boot soles heralding the rocket's escape from the Devil's Squall. He looked out the foreportal to see the fingers of green fog peel away. Cadet Pep steadied himself against the map table as the rocket lurched one last time and finally wrestled itself free of the interfering electrical field.

The cabin lights flared to their full brightness. Mechanical chatterings and hums filled the bridge as machinery came to life. A bell rang and Doc Murray pulled an earphone and speaking tube from a console in the ceiling above his station. He spoke briefly with the voice on the other end, stowed the communication device then said, "Norris in the furnace room reports the lower decks have full power again."

Captain Zack Brass nodded though his attention was full upon the glassteel.

A vast stretch of emptiness was before them, in the midst of which there glimmered a single point of white light, a lone star still several thousand spaceleagues off. Beyond it, in the distance, instead of the star-speckled black of open space Cadet Pep expected to see, the sky was all gray-green murkiness. It was as though they'd found a gleaming jewel in shallow, brackish water; and like a splash of blood left at the scene of a crime, the trail of chemical smoke left by the Star Argosy pointed directly towards it.

"I'll be damned to the Dogstar!" exclaimed Hocks, "This isn't the other side of the Squall, at all." Now that he didn't have to struggle to maintain the rocket's course, he was standing easy, holding the main

wheel with one hand while shaking out his other arm. "Where are we?" he wondered aloud.

"Dead centre, no doubt," said Captain Zack Brass. "Eye of the storm."

Static popped up in his chair so that he was crouching on his seat, a head phone pressed against one ear. "Criminy," he shouted, "you won't believe what I'm hearing."

"Let me guess," said the captain, calmly, "distress signals?"

"Dozens of 'em," replied the radioman as he adjusted a frequency dial. "Automated beacons from league ships. They're emanating from somewhere near that star."

"See if you can identify which ships exactly," said Captain Brass.

"Cap," said Digsy from his station at the astro-*naviscope*, "there's a lot of background interference still — the nebula's all around us — but I think we can get some useful data out of the scope. One thing I'm sure of though, this star isn't on any of the charts."

"Not until now, lieutenant," said Captain Brass. "Not until now."

"Orders, Cap'n?" asked Hocks.

"Just follow the Star Argosy's trail," he replied. "Unless I miss my guess, we're going to find something very interesting in orbit around that star."

* * * * *

Not far away, Cutter Morse's mind wandered.

He heard: "The Star Argosy's there, alright. I'm getting it's distress signal, sure as shooting," Static's voice, it went on: "And there's lots others. The Space Queen, the Cometary Express, the Silver Highliner, and, jeepers! The Sun Buster, the Atom's Fury, the Nether Kite..." the list continued. Contained both civilian and military rockets. Each had gone missing in or around the Devil's Squall over the last 75 years.

Cutter's warrior mind analyzed what he heard: *The Sun Buster, unplundered and undamaged, has blue-bombs and an antiquated z-ray cannon; the Atom's Fury left Arctic Station with a full compliment of Landsmen, that's 144 elite soldiers; the Nether Kite has an electro-cloud field, her captain arms his crew with electro-pistols and keeps a supply of tar-gas guns as backup...* And so on, mentally adding up the armament in Static's list of vessels, and considering the implications.

But Cutter Morse was only half awake.

Though he was sprawled out and snoring at the gunnery station, his dream self was running across the gravel landscape of the Murong Steppes on Pollux 12. In the distance, he could see the brown shapes of mountains; they rose up from the edge of the desert plain like teeth. Slung over his shoulder, he carried a fire rifle, but even with such a powerful weapon, he knew he needed to find shelter quickly. He was out in the open, a dangerous place to be on

Pollux 12; it was an inhospitable planet inhabited by hybrid creatures, all of which were predators.

Alongside him, a boar was keeping pace.

"Old Scratch is loose," said the boar, the words came out as though its voice were a collection of belches. "There's a story behind that: 'Old Scratch is loose.'"

Cutter didn't find the talking animal at all alarming. He'd dreamed this boar before.

"It's old spacer code for the worst of dangers. Like saying 'kiss your ass goodbye,'" it said. "But there's more to it than that. An ancient story veteran spacers keep dark. Goddard woulda known it. And it'd be the last thing running through his head just before he died."

Cutter stopped and faced the animal. It trotted a few steps ahead then turned to him.

"It was the last communication on all those ships, you know," said the boar. "Just before they went down. 'Old Scratch is loose.' That's what they woulda been saying."

Cutter knew all of this. Why was the boar telling him?

"Why are you telling me this?" he asked. But the boar was gone. In its place lay a hunk of greenish metal partially covered in sand. He bent and swept the dirt away.

Hellcat.

The word was engraved into its surface, seven stately characters cut deep into a copper plaque. It was the rocket's nameplate. Cutter picked it up and examined it more closely. The bolt holes were undamaged so it clearly hadn't been pried off the rocket, but their edges were crusted with a thick layer of oxidized iron. *As though the bolts rusted away*, he thought. And when he flipped the plaque over, he found that the green patina coated both sides. It had clearly been lying here for some time. Perhaps years.

From the distance he heard the thomping of chitinous feet, followed by an angry, keening hiss. Tiger-lizards were coming. Sounded like a full pack of them.

He dropped the scrap of metal, rose up into a combat stance and scanned the horizon as he unslung the fire rifle.

And Cutter Morse kept dreaming...

* * * * *

"You see, cadet, usually when a star explodes, it is reduced to a cloud of dust and gasses and become a nebula. But sometimes, though most of it has blown to smithereens, a chunk of the star will survive and go on burning. It might be many times smaller than the Earth's sun, but that bit will have enough mass for it's gravity to pull in all the particles around it and clear out a bubble in the midst of the nebula. Telescopic equipment can't pick out the star fragment because it's too small and the surrounding brightness makes it invisible, so most

places like this will go undiscovered and uncharted."

Orders had been given, the rocket's trajectory set, and his crew were bent over their instruments, so Captain Zack Brass was taking a moment out to educate his young charge on the astronomical phenomena they had discovered.

"That's what we've found here," he continued, "a tiny star in the midst of an unmapped nebular hollow. When we return to Rocket Patrol Headquarters, the scientists will doubtless find this very interesting. But for us it means we have a destination in sight and no magnetic tides to deal with, so," the Captain grinned, "now we can stoke the rocket and really make some time."

Indeed, since word of the Star Argosy's disappearance had reached Rocket Patrol and the Hellcat had been dispatched from Space Base Charon, Captain Brass and his crew had been gradually closing a 42-week head start. The Star Argosy was a civilian vessel built to ferry passengers between league planets, leisurely journeys that could take months and occasionally even years to complete, and speedwise, it was no match for a military vessel. Going full bore, it would have taken the Argosy an entire Earth day to travel from the edge of the Devil's Squall to this unknown star. But thanks to its infernum-fueled rocket, the Hellcat would vault across this distance in just a few hours.

Infernum! Most dangerous and most marvelous of chemicals ever uncovered by man, a fuel like no other and the substance that would forever transform interstellar travel. At most temperatures above twenty degrees Kelvin, infernum was a glowing liquid metal that moved like blown glass but was the colour of molten gold. With just one exception, it was chemically inert and thus easily contained. But in the presence of oxygen, it reacted violently, combusting with a force researchers likened to a blast from Hell itself. Thus it gained its name and its reputation, and though it's exact atomic structure was barely understood, it's myriad properties as yet incompletely tapped, if the mathematical haruspicy of Earth's economancers was to be believed, it would be the galaxy's dominant energy source inside of three decades.

The Ganymedan mines from which it was oh-so-carefully extracted seemed to offer up an inexhaustible supply of the stuff. And armed now with a knowledge of the geological features which indicated an infernum vein, Rocket Patrol's scientists had discovered other rich sources scattered throughout the galaxy and they had begun in earnest to design and build rockets that exploited the seemingly boundless pools of energy that Infernum promised. In time, regions once too distant to be explored would be opened, new worlds would be discovered and mankind's colonizing march would extend across the galaxy. But for now, Rocket Patrol and the Star League government that ruled it, kept the new fuel source a secret, it's explosive power too extreme to

let it slip into civilian hands. The ease with which it could be turned to nefarious ends would make its misuse far too tempting to those with a grudge against the League. And thus, until they found a way to dilute its chemistry or to control its use, infernum's existence was being tightly guarded, and only the most trusted of Rocket Patrol captains were allowed to helm a vessel powered by the miracle fuel.

"But why would all these ships end up in the middle of a nebular hollow?" asked Cadet Pep. "Were they disabled by the magnetic forces in the Squall maybe? Then dragged here by the star fragment's gravity?"

"Not likely," replied the Captain. "Out in the nebula, the star's gravity is negligible compared to the Squall's magnetic tides and the Argosy was headed in this direction almost from the moment it's path deviated from its planned route. No, something — or should I say, *someone* — piloted these ships to this spot. I thought I'd detected some intelligence in the way the Argosy's course was plotted."

"Who would want to come here," puzzled the Cadet.

"I don't know. But I will say this for our mysterious helmsman, he wasn't one of the Star Argosy's crew. Rocket traffic through the Devil's Squall sticks to carefully chosen routes where the nebula is at its narrowest and the magnetic forces their weakest. This deep in, the nebula would have overwhelmed Captain Goddard's boys. Us too, were it not for Hock's skill and the Hellcat's infernum drive." The Captain paused and looked intently through the foreportal. The star fragment, that was only a dot of light when first spotted, sat against the gray-green fog of the Squall the size now of a Star League quarter. His brow furrowed as he considered something his hawkeyes spotted in the distance. "Well, I'll be," he said.

"Neptune's moons!" shouted Hocks. "Where'd it go? The Argosy's trail is gone!"

"Impossible," said Static, "I'm still getting their distress signal and it's coming in stronger than ever. They've gotta be around here somewhere."

And yet, through the foreportal, Cadet Pep could see that it was true. The trail of red chemical smoke that the Hellcat had been following since they entered the Devil's Squall ended in a ragged plume that trailed a narrow, arcing streamer.

"Captain," it was Digsy. "I'm getting some surprising readings here."

"If you've found planets around that star," said the Captain. "You'll have to try harder than that to surprise me." The abrupt termination of the trail had not even phased him. He had stepped forward and was standing inches from the glassteel of the foreportal, tapping a finger against it, indicating something farther off. "There's another light source out there. Just beyond the star fragment. Too steady to be a light from the Squall. Too dim to be another star."

"With eyes like yours, we can practically toss the astro-naviscope out the airlock," Digsy said. "And yes. There are planets. Plural. Six of them."

"Unprecedented," said Doc Murray. "A miniature star with its own planetary system. And at the centre of a nebula, no less. Normally, any orbiting bodies would have been obliterated when the original star went nova."

"They must have formed afterwards," said Digsy.

"Unless they're *ghost* planets." The moment Cadet Pep said this, he regretted it. His remark silenced the entire bridge crew, with the exception of a barely muffled snicker from Static. The Cadet's shoulders slumped and he felt a sickness in his belly. Back home on Earth, he was top of his class at the Rocket Patrol Institute in the Montana Protectorate; hence, his field assignment to Captain Brass' crew. But here, out among the stars he'd always dreamed of traveling between, he was constantly reminded of the fact that he was merely a 12-year old kid. Each naive, inexperienced, or just plain stupid comment that came out of his mouth made him wonder anew if he'd made the right decision in entering Rocket Patrol.

Then, from beside him he heard another chuckle, a slow rumble of mirth. Only there was no derision in this laughter; instead, it was bemused and somehow comforting. "An interesting idea, cadet, and I will keep it in mind," said Captain Brass, "but I suspect you're letting your imagination get away with you again. There are no monsters in space. Only scientific phenomena that we can measure, classify, and then deal with. For now, I think we can safely say these planets formed after the star went nova. Of course, for that to have happened the Devil's Squall must be a much older nebula than Rocket Patrol's scientists had anticipated."

"By application of Hopkin's Planetoid Formation Theory," interjected Doc Murray, "I'd estimate—" he paused a moment as his powerful brain ran a series of complex calculations, "—two billion years older than we first thought."

"Nonsense!" said Hocks. "There's no way the Devil's Squall's that old. There aren't any nebulas half that age anywhere."

"True. *Nebulae*," said Doc Murray, accenting the more correct plural ending, "are notoriously unstable. Most dissipate to the point where they're barely detectable over a few hundred million years. Clearly, the magnetic forces in the Squall have held it together so that it could survive for many times that."

"That'd make it cosmically ancient," said Digsy. "Oldest formation in this sector."

"Yes," continued the doctor, "the star that became the Devil's Squall must have gone nova before most of the stars in this region of space even formed."

"The galaxy would have been a very different place back then," said Captain Zack Brass. "We wouldn't even recognize it."

"That's all fine and dandy," said Hocks. "But what do we do now? We've lost the Star Argosy and all

this scientification isn't helping us find it."

"Oh, we haven't lost the Argosy at all," said Captain Brass. "Digsy, that planet I can see ahead of us. Which of your six is it?"

"Third in from the star," replied the navigator as he consulted his instruments. "We're in its orbital path right now."

"As I suspected," said the Captain. "Keep on towards that planet, Hocks. I think you will find the Star Argosy hasn't disappeared. It's landed."

* * * * *

Across a rocky, desert plain, Captain Zack Brass and his Bluejackets raced. Above them, a circle of blackness dominated the sky, a mating of sun and moon that spawned a caliginous disc and cast a swath of dark across this alien planet.

"Unprecedented," Doc Murray had said as the Hellcat came in for landing, "Bizarre," said Digsy, when the readings from the astro-naviscope revealed that like Mercury back in their home system, this planet rotated at such a speed that one of its sides perpetually faced its sun; but unlike Mercury, between them, a moon intervened. It was an airless satellite, pockmarked and misshapen from eons of collisions with space debris and its orbit kept pace with the planet's rotational speed. Thus sun, moon and planet stayed in perfect alignment, and a spot on the planet's surface several thousands of miles wide, in the midst of which the Hellcat had landed, was forever in the moon's shadow. A permanent, perfect eclipse.

The only light in this circle of darkness came from the dim corona that fringed the moon and from the Devil's Squall which filled the surrounding sky and contributed to the planet surface a wan, pallid grayness that didn't brighten so much as leach colour away.

The six men — Captain Brass, Doc Murray, Digsy, Static, Hocks and a now roused and alert Cutter Morse — were making their way towards an area of perplexing geography they knew to be over the next ridge. The Hellcat's topography scanner showed it to be a fractured landscape of jagged ridges and steep channels, and according to Static's remote radio unit, the distress signals they were chasing — every single one — emanated from various points within that maze.

Each man carried a voltic rifle at the ready, a pack full of gear slung across his back, and a gut full of grim determination, for though they grew ever nearer to their goal, the needle on Doc Murray's life-sign scanner did not tremble. Many Star League ships had landed near here — or crashed, more likely — and their hopes of finding any survivors became fainter by the moment.

The seconds ticked off and the men began their final ascent. Static's triangulation indicated that the Star Argosy was transmitting from not more than a mile distant so once they topped this rise they should

be able to see the giant passenger ship.

They moved silently, ready for any danger. These men had fought side-by-side through many a campaign, traveled together from the Antipodean Cluster to the Zone of Nihil, and operated now in everything as a single unit. Coordinated, disciplined, stealthy: each knew intuitively where the others were and where they would move, each could anticipate how their comrades would react under pressure. Orders barely needed to be given, words hardly ever passed between them; that is, unless of course, they were confronted with something utterly unexpected.

They reached the summit of the hill and looked down.

"Infernos of Phobos," muttered Hocks.

"What is it?" asked Static.

Below was not the badland of canyons and hoo-doods their topography charts had suggested. Instead, it was a vast plain, littered with the rusting, metal carcasses of a hundred Star League vessels.

"A rocket graveyard," said Captain Brass.

* * * * *

The last words Cadet Pep ever heard Captain Zack Brass say were these: "Buck up, you're on guard duty. Stay by the hatch and keep an eye out. Be ready to throw it open if we have to hightail it back here. We're counting on you."

It was just as he and the Bluejackets were leaving the Hellcat and was meant to make Cody feel like a member of the crew, but the words were like lemon juice in a cut. This was the first planet the cadet had been to outside of Earth's solar system, and he'd have to spend it inside the rocket with the engineers and the relief crew, playing doorman. Not exactly the life of adventure he'd expected when the Institute had informed him that he'd been accepted to the Hellcat's crew.

All his life he'd admired Captain Zack Brass, thrilled to the accounts of his adventures the newspapers carried — like the time that, half naked, he'd bare-knuckles bested the chief of the ogre-like humanoids of Procyon 2; or the time he'd rescued the Viceroy of Venus' son by diving into the waters of Lake Mungo and wrestling an 18-foot long eel-monster; or the time he'd donned a space suit and rode the needle nose of his first rocket, the Resolute, into the Ophiuchan Disturbance where Hocks had jerked the vessel into a cartwheel maneuver which catapulted the fearless spacer, untethered, into the centre of that deadly region of space wherefrom he liberated the Mentor Shroud of Flux — these were the tales that had inspired Pep to join Rocket Patrol in the first place, the stories of derring-do that drove him to toil so assiduously at his studies. All that effort so that he could become tops in his class and have a shot at doing what every boy his age dreamed of: joining this team of starhopping intrepids — but as an equal, not as their mascot.

"We were almost licked, Pep," an imaginary Cap-

tain Brass said, "That... that... *thing* was right on our tails. If you hadn't opened the door just then, why, I don't know what we would've done."

It was a laughable fantasy, even Cadet Pep knew it. Captain Brass had never hightailed it away from anything. Still, Pep sat and waited as ordered, staring out the porthole, up at the eclipse. It was like a hole in the sky a full hand-span wide.

Harmless though, Doc Murray had assured him. When in eclipse, Earth's moon was not quite large enough to cover the sun completely, and thus its corona was a ring of intense light that streamed directly at your eyes, not apparently bright enough to get your reflex to look away to kick in, but strong enough to cause permanent eye damage if you stared at it for more than a couple seconds, blindness if you looked any longer. Here, the moon hung in a much lower orbit and thus blotted out the star fragment in toto, it's corona was merely a shimmer reflected off the moon's surface, dim and gloomy.

Harmless, though? Cadet Pep had to wonder.

Once, in a history class back at the Rocket Patrol Institute, his professor had shown how human sentience had been inspired by a solar eclipse. "His brain had grown to an enormous size, and his reasoning capacity and memory had expanded as a result," said the professor, "and yet prehistoric man still scrabbled about in the dirt little more than an animal. Then one day he looks up and sees the sun, source of all light and warmth, but it is being swallowed up by a black disk that was once the moon. And unlike the monkeys and birds and lizards, he knows, thanks to his tremendous memory, that this is not the normal course of things. And thus it occurs to him that the world must be coming to an end. Moments pass, the sun is again revealed, the crisis is somehow averted. And yet, over the next few days, those of his tribe who did not avert their eyes from the eclipse have been struck blind. Though the world was saved, a steep price has been paid by his people. They are part of a cosmic bargain. Is it any wonder then, that our prehistoric man would come away from all this changed? That faced with the demise of and then redemption of the world, with ultimate despair followed by sublime joy, that he would experience a catharsis of such import that his reasoning brain, which had hitherto been used only to find morsels of food on the savannah, would be inspired to a consideration of his position in the universe? Indeed, at this moment, human sentience was born."

This is a place where the sun was eaten and never restored, considered the cadet. *What fell creatures must have evolved in this darkness?*

Such were the cadet's musings when the figures appeared in the distance: there were three of them headed towards the rocket, racing to beat Hell. Cadet Pep spotted them when they were a little more than a thousand yards off, too far for him to identify them. But, the instruments had said that apart from

the Hellcat's crew, there weren't any organisms within miles of here bigger than a mote, so that meant it could only be....

But there were only three of them?

His heart racing, Cadet Pep slammed his fist down on the alarm button, flicked on the intercom panel and shouted into it: "Norris! They're coming back! Get down here, full burn!"

No response. No matter. He could hear the klaxon sounding a deck above him. That would have the crew moving. They'd be down in seconds.

Leaping from his stool, he spun the hatch-release wheel, swung the door open and dashed out onto the platform. Through his spy glass, the cadet tried to make out their faces, scanning for any sign that Captain Brass was among the survivors, but it was just so damn gloomy out there. He fumbled with the light amplification control next to the eyepiece, but the light here was cursed, it illumined along a shifting series of frequencies and finding the right resonance setting was a finicky job.

At least he could tell that the figures were wearing the blue leather jackets of Rocket Patrol's elite soldiers, of that he was certain, even in silhouette he recognized the cut.

His finger turned the amplifier dial across a harmonic setting. For a split second, the entire landscape flared to brightness in the lens of his spyglass then plunged back into darkness.

He lowered the glass. Fear gripped him. He had seen the figures clearly just long enough to know that though they may have worn the uniforms of Rocket Patrol, these were not any of the six men who had left the ship. Their faces were twisted and hideous, masks of anger and hate. Human, most certainly, but overcome by something monstrous.

And whoever they were, they would be upon the Hellcat in a matter of minutes. Whatever their business, it could be only malevolent.

Cadet Pep took a step backward, about to bolt back into the ship and slam shut the hatch when he realized that, apart from his own breathing, he could hear nothing else.

The klaxon aboard the Hellcat had been extinguished.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end.

He had the uncanny feeling that he was no longer alone on the platform. That someone was behind him, just outside the hatchway, blocking his way in.

He turned.

It wasn't Norris.

* * * * *

Like toppled dream structures from the mind of Alexandre Eiffel, the Star Argosy's great crystal chandeliers sprawled now among shattered glassware, ashtrays, stains of long dried cocktails, and the splintered remains of chairs. Captain Zack Brass and Lieutenant Diggs picked their way through all this

debris, working their way up the slope of what had once been the ceiling of the ship's ballroom; forty feet above them, tables hung, bolted to the erstwhile floor.

Off to their right, the observation window loomed. It was undamaged, the glassteel had held, despite the fact that only a small fraction of the reinforcing steel plates had been put up, and that, in crashing, the Argosy had ploughed a deep furough, half burying itself — the window was neatly divided into two roughly equal sections of earth and air.

It was clear that the rocket had hit the ground at speed and upside down and lay now bent like a stubbed-out cigarette, its front end smashed into the dirt, its tail jutting up at a 40 degree angle. And evidently it was one of the last of the rockets to crash here as it lay right on the outskirts of the field of junked vessels.

"Anything?" asked Captain Brass. The two men were scanning the ceiling-cum-floor with their electric lanterns, searching for any clue as to what had happened to the ship's passengers and crew.

"Nothing," replied Digsy. "Looks like everybody cleared out of here long before the crash."

"Yes," said the Captain, "and in a hurry no doubt. The window's incompletely battened-down and the band left their instruments out." He pointed back to a spot under the stage where sheet music carpeted over a pile of dented trumpets, broken guitars, and punctured drums.

Once they reached the top end of the ballroom, they tossed a grapple up to the doorway and hand-over-handed it up a thin cable to get out of the room. From there, they made their way up a broad hallway and were joined shortly at an intersection by Hocks and Doc Murray.

"Any luck?" asked the Captain.

The two men shook their heads. "The state rooms are dead empty," said Hocks. "Cleared out ages ago."

"But that's not the queer bit," added Doc Murray. "Most everything seems to have been abandoned: clothes, personal items, jewelry and valuables—"

"That seems to rule out an act of

piracy, then," said the Captain.

The doctor nodded. "But what are missing," he continued, "are things like blankets and sheets, towels, mattresses even. Every bed is stripped of its linens. Every lavatory emptied of its cotton."

"That is odd."

"And you? Find anything that would shed some light on this mystery?" asked the doctor.

"Nothing," said the Captain. "The forward sections are a mess. The forecone is crushed. We couldn't even get onto the bridge. Whoever it was who piloted the Star Argosy here was either squashed on impact or just pointed the rocket at the ground then ran to the back of the ship. One seems as likely as the other."

There was the faint crackling of a radio coming alive, then the sound of Static's voice, "Captain, can you read? Over."

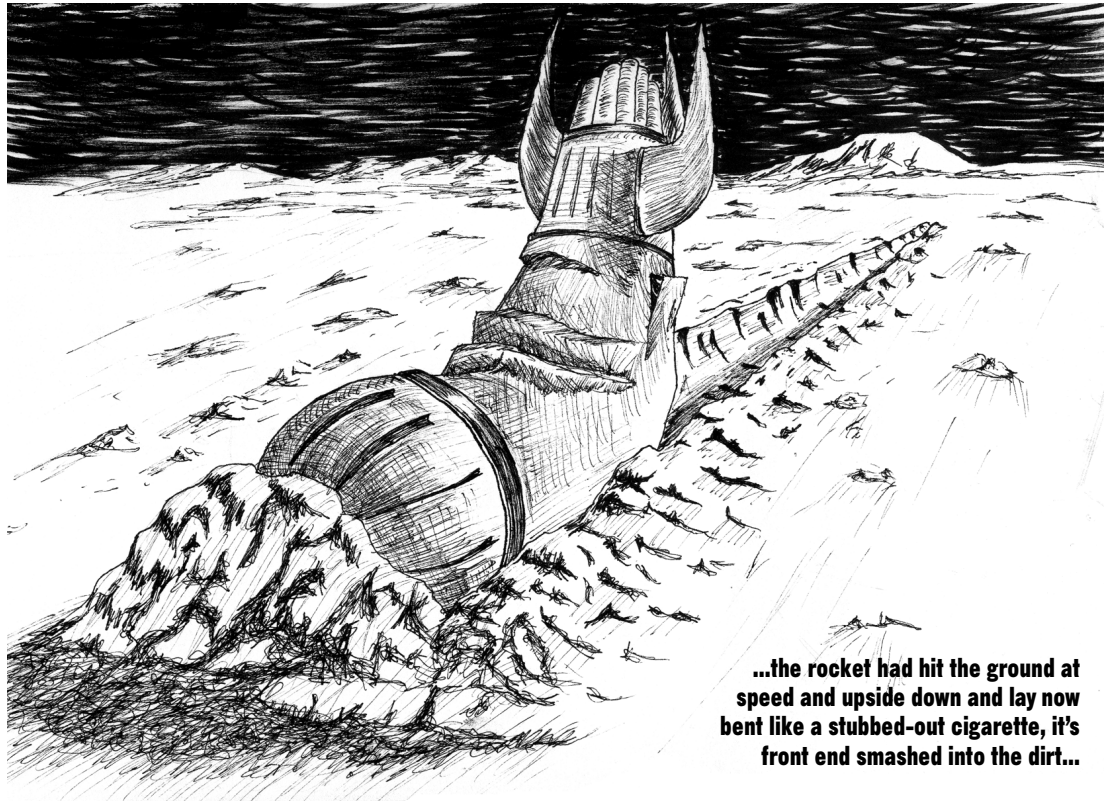
Captain Brass rolled back a sleeve and spoke into his wristradio, "We're receiving. Over."

"I think you'd better get up here, Cap. We're in Outflow Control Section 5," came Static's tiny voice from the miniature speaker. "We've found something pretty strange. Over."

"Be right there, jets on full. Over."

"Considering the day we're having," said Hocks, "if they hadn't found something strange, I'd find that strange."

And with that, the four men set off at top speed. The section to which they were heading was deep inside what was a huge colony rocket, but before launching from Space Base Charon, Captain Brass and his crew had pored over the Star Argosy's sche-



...the rocket had hit the ground at speed and upside down and lay now bent like a stubbed-out cigarette, its front end smashed into the dirt...

matics; thus, each man knew the layout of the ship like the back his hand. Their progress was slowed though by the fact that they were running up a steep incline and along ceilings, no less. Stairwells were upside down to them. They had to use the undersides of catwalks and vault over piping and fixtures that, if all were righted, would have been safely above their heads. And to traverse several rooms, they had to employ their grapples liberally. But the physical conditioning to which Bluejackets subject themselves served them well, and in the end it took only a little over fifteen spaceminutes for them to join up with Static and Cutter at the hatch outside Outflow Control.

“What have you found?” asked the Captain.

Static didn’t respond immediately. Instead, he gestured wildly with his hands for a moment, then, as though it boiled out of him: “Bedding!” he spat, “Piles and piles of it!”

Cutter then, who’d endured the radioman’s gesticulations impassively, cut in, “Looks like they bivouacked here. Passengers and crew.” He opened the door to the next section. It was a large chamber, fifty feet wide by fifty feet deep, and against the walls, piping clung, tracing the outlines of the room and exiting via a series of tunnels at the other end. The ceiling lay twenty feet below the door, and as Captain Brass peered down at it, he found that indeed, the entire surface was covered by the missing blankets.

“They must have been trying to keep warm,” said Doc Murray.

“Makes sense,” said Captain Brass. “The Outflow Control sections are the closest you can get to the rockets and still be in an oxygenated environment. Of course, they’d only resort to this if the life support system was down. Was it damaged?”

“Sabotaged,” said Cutter.

“Impossible There’re a million redundancies built into life support on a passenger rocket,” said Hocks.

“Are you sure, Cutter?” asked the captain.

“Positive,” he replied. “I traced the lines back towards the boilers and a whole series of narrow but vital steam pipes have been snapped—”

“Snapped?” said Hocks. “Don’t you mean cut?”

Cutter shook his head. “Snapped. Must have used some kind of mechanical prying device because the metal is broken and bent. It would have seriously slowed repair because you couldn’t patch it. Have to replace the pipe. And they wouldn’t have had time for that. Not with all the boilers out. Things would’ve gotten very cold very fast.”

“They got to the electricals too,” said Static. “I could get a current through navigation lines and engineering; circuits that have to do with controlling speed or steering the ship are fine. But anything to do with communications, lights or temperature is dead as a doornail.”

Doc Murray was kneeling by the hatchway, looking down at the piles of blankets. “Cutter,” he said,

“were the other Outflow Control sections like this one? There should be four more of them.”

“Nope,” he replied. “I checked them all. We only found blankets here.”

“But even if people crammed all down the tunnels over there,” said the doctor pointing across the room, “there isn’t nearly enough space to accommodate all the passengers, let alone the crew.”

“Not unless you stacked ‘em like cord wood,” said Static.

“Or dehydrated ‘em and put ‘em in a tin,” said Hocks. “Listen chaps, this chin flapping won’t get us to last Tuesday. All we have is a pile of blankets and bupkiss more. Until we find something concrete like a body we’re just speculating.”

“Could they have survived by doing this?” asked Captain Brass.

“It’d depend on how long the boilers were down for,” said Doc Murray. “but off the top of my head I’d have to say it’s highly doubtful. And even if there were survivors, they’re nowhere nearby. Every gauge on my life signs detector is still reading zero.”

“Alright,” said Captain Brass, “Hocks is right. We still know very little and have found next to nothing to indicate where all these people have gone. Not a trail of blood, not a last will and testament scribbled in the final hours, not even a log book from a crewman. But this is a big rocket and there are still several engineering sections and a mile of maintenance tunnels we haven’t gone over yet.

“Static and Hocks,” he continued, “stay on board and search this ship from tip to tail. Start by getting the lights running. Interior only. No sense announcing our presence any more than the Hellcat’s landing jets already have. The rest of us will head outside to set up a perimeter and look for any clue as to where the crew and passengers went. If they survived, then they were marched out of here by whoever this saboteur is in league with. If they didn’t, they were hauled out. Either way, there must be a trail of some kind. We just have to find it.”

* * * * *

Static was in an awkward position. He was trying to run power from the emergency beacon’s battery into the lighting grid — two very disparate systems — and he had to do it while the entire ship was turned upside-down. Consequently, he was in an electrical’s room in the bowels of the ship, tethered to a water main and dangling fifteen feet in the air so that he could reach control boxes that would have been at waist level if everything was right-way round. In his left hand, he held an amp meter, leads from which were clipped to a pair of exposed wires, while, with his right, he was toggling a breaker switch.

Nothing. Still no juice to the lights.

“Hocks!” he shouted.

The pilot was below him, belaying the line that held the radioman in the air. “What?” he asked.

“Can you zip up to the router box in A section?”

"Up?" puzzled Hocks. "To what section?"

Static rotated the circuit diagram in his head. "Sorry, down," he said. "Go down. To A section. There's a router box there. You can't miss it. I need you to bypass a circuit for me."

Hocks let the line out a bit and said, "Look, I'll just let you down and you can do it."

"No, no, no," said Static. "I have to stay here and flick this switch." He pointed to the breaker switch. "And watch this meter." He held up his amp meter. "Just tie me off and I can walk you through on the wrist radio. It's easy peasy."

Hocks grumbled, then tied off the line to a steam valve. "Fine," he said. "Don't go anywhere."

* * * * *

Hocks lowered himself onto the hallway's ceiling, his feet touching down quietly. The passage was a little shorter than he was so he had to crouch. He held his lantern aloft and looked each way. The light penetrated the gloom well enough, but because the hall was concave and sloped upward in both directions, he couldn't see more than a dozen yards. Regardless, the hall seemed empty enough.

"Okay," he spoke into his wristradio. "I'm in A Section. Where to now?"

"Head about 50 yards towards the stern of the rocket," Static's voice came back to him. "There'll be a green box on your right... I mean, left... on your left."

Hocks grumbled. Because he was in the last third of the ship where the fuselage curved in on itself, the incline was even steeper than in other parts of the ship, and the closer he got to the stern, the worse the incline would become. To get the climb over with as quickly as possible, he set off at a half jog. He'd admit to tackling worse slopes than this, but he didn't recall enjoying them either.

The corridor was in the outer shell of the ship and beneath his feet there was a row of portholes, each a little dome so that maintenance crewmen could poke their heads out and survey the hull for damage from stray meteorites and space debris. As he jumped over one, he looked down and saw Captain Brass and Digsy on the ground far below. As he jumped over another, he noted that they had a chart out and were discussing something. He'd stop to bang on the glassteel and wave if he thought they'd hear him.

Then he looked up, saw a shadow at the edge of his lantern's light, and stopped dead in his tracks. The shape was human, alright. He had his back turned to Hocks and was crouched down and looking out a portal, probably at the Cap and Digsy.

"Static, cut yourself loose and get down here," he whispered into his wristradio as he turned down its loudness dial. "I think I found somebody."

He set his lantern on the ground, wedging it against a diffuser box so it wouldn't roll down the slope, and moved further up the hall. The figure was

wearing a steward's uniform and he was clearly an ensign: he had the epaulettes to prove it. He was swaying slightly but didn't acknowledge Hocks in any way, didn't even seem to notice the light from the lantern.

"Hey there, chum," Hocks said aloud. "You alright?"

From his wrist, he could hear Static answering, but the volume was too low for him to make anything out. He shot back a curt but quiet, "Get here, now!" into the microphone, then turned his attention back to the stranger he'd discovered.

The ensign still hadn't responded. He was probably in shock considering what he'd likely been through. But Hocks didn't like the way things were playing out so far. This could be an injured saboteur as easily as it was an innocent survivor. So, just to be on the safe side, he drew an electropistol from its holster and held it behind his back. With his thumb, he reduced its amperage output — set it to something low enough that it'd knock a guy down, maybe even out for a few minutes, but wouldn't cause any permanent damage.

"Everything's going to be alright now, pal," he said, trying to make his voice sound as soothing as possible. "We're from Rocket Patrol. Come to get you out of here." Still no answer. "If you're hurt, we've got a doctor."

Hocks was close now, only a few yards off, and could see that the ensign was in bad shape. His curly brown hair was falling out but there was no blood or torn skin on his scalp, so it probably hadn't been pulled loose, it was just dropping out of his head in irregular clumps. The skin on the back of his neck was gray and splotchy, and there was a slightly fecal odour coming off of him.

"C'mon chum, you're looking a little worse for wear. Let's get you to ol' Doc Murray. He'll fix you right up," he said. He was close enough now that it wouldn't take much of a leap to grab the ensign. "You can trust me. My name's Hocks." But, instead of leaping, he stopped dead in his tracks, for he was also close enough to hear that the ensign was speaking — whispering, actually — quietly echoing everything that Hocks was saying:

"Chum, chum, chum. Doc, doc, doc. Rust, rust, rust. Hocks, hocks, hocks."

And when Hocks went quiet, the ensign began sniffing at the air, the noise from him thick and mucal. His head snapped around. His eyes were two orbs of tightly wound savagery above a rictus of anthropophaginian hunger. His throat creaked and the ensign pounced, legs propelling him into the air with animal speed.

Hocks swung his electropistol around and fired.

* * * * *

On the ground below, the Star Argosy's broken form looming up at an alarming angle over them, Captain Brass and Digsy were going over a topogra-

phy chart. Based on the shapes its contour lines suggested, they were sorting out which ships had crashed where, and based on their deductions, deciding where best to focus their explorations next. And as they conferred, in a porthole directly above them, a ribbon of blood splashed against the glassteel but went unnoticed.

"That's big enough to be the Sun Buster," said Digsy, pointing to a spot on the chart.

"And roughly the same shape," said Captain Brass. "It was a sturdy rocket. Maybe more of it's intact—"

Just then, his wristradio began to crackle and Static's voice could be heard: "Captain, has Hocks checked in with you?" he said. "I got a message saying he'd found somebody and that I should join him, but then I lost his signal. Over."

The Captain's brow furrowed, "I've heard nothing," he said into his wristradio.

"Hang on." He signaled Digsy to follow him back towards the rocket and as they raced off, he punched a button on his wristradio and spoke into it:

"Hocks. Brass here. Check in. Over." No answer. "Hocks. Check in. Over." Again, no answer.

"Doc!" Captain Brass shouted. His second-in-command was nearby collecting soil samples. "Contact Cutter and tell him to join us in the Argosy. Hocks isn't responding." Then, he punched another button on his wristradio and into it he said, "Where can we find him? Over."

"Section A, zone three, top quadrant," replied Static. "Over."

"And why haven't you checked on him directly, lieutenant?"

"Tied to the ceiling. Having trouble getting down, sir. Over."

Digsy, Doc Murray and Captain Brass reached the entry hatch. It was twenty feet in the air above them and a rope ladder dangled from it.

"Doc, you first," said the Captain. But before the doctor could put his boot on the first rung, from over a little rise, Cutter Morse came running. The safety straps on his electropistols were released and he was arming his voltic rifle.

"We are not alone out here," he shouted once in earshot, "and we need cover, pronto."

"What are you talking about?" asked Captain Brass.

"There's movement out there. Among the rockets and beyond those boulders," he gestured in a broad arc, taking in the area that surrounded their position. "They're quiet, whatever they are. Dead quiet. But they're out there." Cutter Morse couldn't describe how he knew that hostile forces were nearby. No sound consciously registered with him; he had seen no shadowy figures lurking in the darkness. If he picked up on anything, perhaps his finely honed senses could feel a change in the way the air currents were moving, or perhaps there was some odour in the air too faint to be smelt but just strong enough to trigger some primitive hunting part of his brain.

Regardless, he knew with certainty that a large, predatory force was moving to surround them.

And his companions knew better than to doubt one of his warrior hunches.

"They'll have closed the circle as tight as they can in a few moments," he continued. "Then they'll have to come out into the open."

Static's voice came in over

the Captain's wristradio: "It's official. I could use a little help getting down here. Over."

"We've got a bit of a situation of our own," replied the Captain. "Cutter says there's something out here with

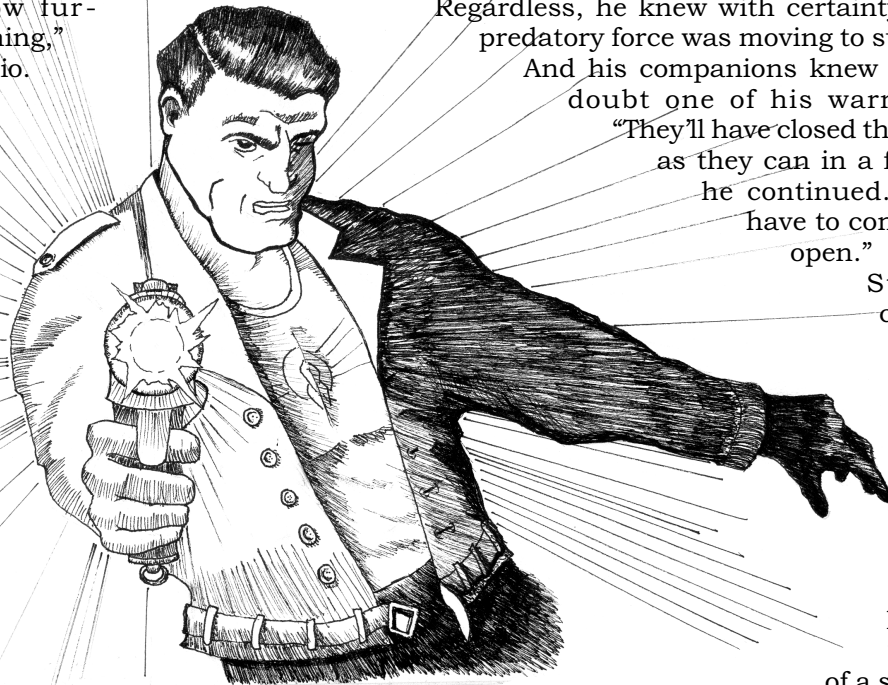
us. Over." He turned to Doc Murray who had his life-signs detector out and was scanning the area. "Can you shed any light on this?"

"Sorry," replied the doctor. "I'm still getting a zero-zero on respiration plumes and a zero-zero on neuro-electric emissions. I think we can rule out humans and probably all other organics too."

"Robots then?" suggested Captain Brass as he armed his voltic rifle. Digsy was beside him, checking the charge on his electropistols. Cutter was a few steps away with his spyglass out, scanning the darkness.

From the Captain's wristradio came: "Call off the search, Cap. I can hear Hocks coming down the hall. Over."

"There," shouted Cutter Morse. "One o'clock. Just coming out from behind those rocks. Nine of them."



Hocks swung his electropistol around and fired.

Captain Brass peered through his glass and set the light amplifier.

Nine figures were running towards them. Then from behind a hunk of metal debris, two more joined them. They were human and dressed in garb that would be normal back on Earth but was perhaps a bit too fancy for traipsing around on a desert planet; three of them wore Star Argosy uniforms. The group was equal parts male and female and even from this distance Captain Brass could tell their pallour was sickly, their hair was dropping from their scalps in clumps, and they definitely did not seem happy to discover visitors. Their lips were curled into snarls of anger and they ran with their arms out, fingers curled and ready to claw.

Captain Brass recognized the behaviour. He'd seen it many years ago when he brought *Lusus Dei* the Planetkiller to Bedlam, prison moon for the criminally insane. There were prisoners like these there, suffering from a similar, murderous insanity — more beasts than men, really — and according to the jailers, hopeless cases: they would die within a matter of months, their madness seeming to devour them from within.

"They look like they could be crash survivors," said the Captain.

"Hostile crash survivors," said Cutter as he got down on one knee, set the light amplifier on his voltic rifle scope, and took aim.

"Granted. But reduce your amperage, anyway. Subdued, they still might answer questions."

Cutter dialed down the power on his weapon, then let loose a series of blasts. Glowing quanta of current shivered through the air, each impacting with one of the charging figures.

But they did not fall.

Amps enough to reduce a linebacker to quivering had just run through each of their bodies, but they only staggered back, paused a moment, then resumed their charge. The electrical charge proved as if anything, they now seemed to be running faster. The only sign that the voltic blasts had caused any inconvenience was the yell of incoherent anger they provoked: a yell that roused dozens more of these lunatic assailants who had been hiding on each of Bluejacket's flanks but clambered now towards the Rocket Patrolmen, murder in their eyes.

"That's suboptimal," said Cutter Morse, as he ratcheted up the power on his weapon.

At the first sign that the gunnery master's electrical onslaught had proved bootless, Captain Brass, Digsy and Doc Murray brought their own weapons into play. None of them wanted to deal out fatal damage if it could be helped — these were the people they'd come to this planet to rescue after all — so after each volley they boosted the power on their weapons in small increments. But it shortly became apparent that the non-lethal settings were ineffective.

"Cap!" It was Static again through the wristradio,

but this time his voice was pitched with alarm. "That is not Hocks! It looks like one of the Argosy's crewmen! He's below me right now and he looks really sick. There's blood all over his uniform!"

"Be there in a space-sec, Static," replied the Captain.

By now, they'd dialed their rifles far beyond the deadly range and with each pull of the trigger were dispensing blasts of energy that could fell a charging elephant and leave electrons to spare. But it was to no avail. Each powerful crack from a Bluejacket weapon would send one of their enemies careening through the air a bone-shattering distance, but like a crab swept up by a broom, it would land, right itself, then scramble forward seemingly uninjured, and if anything, faster and more powerful.

"Time to fall back to the ship," shouted Captain Brass. He jerked his thumb at the rope ladder. "Doc, you're still first. Digsy next."

Doc Murray stowed his weapon and started up the ladder.

"This guy is loopy, Cap!" came Static. "And none too bright. He's trying to get at me by climbing the walls."

"Switch him off, Static. Seems the Argosy's survivors have turned hostile. Some kind of psychosis-inducing virus, do doubt," replied the Captain, then he continued issuing orders: "Cutter, switch to slugs. Digsy, do the same. If they can take this kind of punishment, we don't want to face them hand to hand."

The two men pulled heavy levers on the sides of their voltic rifles. Internal mechanisms rotated into place and the gun barrels, which could unleash charges ranging from a painful but harmless jolt up to an atom-rattling whammy, were recast as electromagnetic acceleration chambers that propelled super-heated, explosive projectiles. There was no subtlety to the voltic rifle when it released slugs from its magazine, but there was also no doubt about the havoc it bestowed: fire, blood and noise, like the cannons of old.

Cutter Morse was the first to take aim and fire; an instant later the closest of the attackers disappeared in a ball of yellow flame. And as Digsy brought his weapon into play, the entire front line erupted in bursts of fire that left only charred remains behind. What was once a rescue mission was fast becoming a massacre.

Above the gun battle, Doc Murray pulled himself up the last few rungs of the rope ladder and scrambled into the narrow entry chamber. He set his rifle down for a moment so that he could dump his backpack, and as he surveyed the fighting below, he gathered up his weapon again and armed it. He punched a button on his wristradio and, to be heard over the din, yelled into it: "Digsy, come on up. I'll provide cover."

A soft clang, as of a bootsole smacking against a metal pipe, reached Doc Murray's ears. Then again,

another clang. It had to be close by for him to hear it through all the noise. He turned just in time to see a figure leap from the shadows. The heel of a massive palm clocked him square in the jaw, smeared up his face and knocked his glasses away. His rifle clattered to the floor. Half-blind, he grappled his opponent and pushed back from a fatal drop through the hatchway.

Meanwhile, far below, as Static's voice shouted through his wrist radio, "My electropistol is just making him angry, my voltic's out of reach, and I think I can hear some of this joker's chums coming down the hallway," Captain Brass scanned the plain with his rifle scope.

"Hang tight, Static," he muttered back, "we'll get you out of there." He could see more clusters of crazed survivors on all sides and though they were still far off, they were advancing openly now that the sounds of battle were echoing through the rocket graveyard. Already the main group of attackers was less than fifty yards from the Bluejacket's position and advancing quickly. They'd be dangerously close within a matter of spaceseconds. And though the voltic slugs were highly effective against them, he knew that the rifles simply didn't fire fast enough to deal decisively with such a large number of opponents. He needed to find a way to slow them down, and fast.

Captain Brass looked up at the metal carcass of the Star Argosy that loomed over them. He put his voltic rifle to his shoulder, snapped off the electron-flow yoke, and took aim at the gargantuan stabilizing fin that swooped out from the rocket's fuselage. He pulled the trigger and held it down, releasing the voltic rifle's entire battery in one go.

As the stream of electrons zigzagged skyward, Doc Murray was struggling near the Star Argosy's hatchway. His opponent was strong — stronger than he was — but an unschooled fighter. Thanks to years of combat training and more than a little talent at scientific wrestling, the doctor was able to hold his attacker at bay despite his disadvantage in the muscle department. But the stamina he was pitted against didn't seem likely to flag any time soon, and he didn't know how long he'd be able to keep this up. He felt fairly confident that with a little effort he'd be able to work his way free, but if he tried to flee into the ship without his glasses, it wouldn't be long before he was caught again.

That left only one avenue of escape.

The shadows in this antechamber were too deep and his vision too poor for Doc Murray to make out his attacker's features, but he could read his intentions through his body: to draw blood. He was clawing at the leather of the doctor's uniform and would twist his mouth toward any naked flesh that drew near it — a primitive fighting tactic more suited to the schoolyard than man-to-man combat, but the doctor knew it could prove dangerous if he let his guard down for a moment. He also knew that he

could capitalize on his opponent's single-mindedness if he was willing to risk getting bit. So, he slackened up the elbow he had wedged under his attacker's chin, let him strain forward, stretch his face towards the doctor's unprotected neck, lean in, unbalanced. Then Doc Murray bent right while kicking forward with his left leg and tripped up his assailant. The maneuver sent him stumbling off to the side as Doc Murray twisted free then walked calmly away: walked backward, right out the open hatchway.

He fell only a few feet as he put a foot forward and hooked his knee around a rung of the rope ladder. From the hatchway above, he heard a howl of idiot fury and saw his attacker leap from the ship. Doc Murray rolled down while drawing his electropistols from their holsters. Plunging toward him was little more than a formless blob to his myopic eyes, but he'd trained for years to aim through this miasma. He pointed his weapons, flicked up their amperage with his thumbs, and let the falling foe have it, full-bore.

Two crackling packets of electricity smacked into his enemy's head, propelling him through the air, cartwheeling, deflected but undamaged, arms still scrabbling to tear into skin. He landed among the rocks and sand some fifty feet ahead of the Bluejacket's position, bounced once and came to rest. Like a cast off rag doll in the dust, his body was twisted up and folded into an unnatural position, and for a moment, it looked like this impact would prove terminal. But the moment passed, and with a crackle of bones snapping back into place, he untangled his limbs and stood. His uniform was shredded, his skin torn, and he was covered in a thick, black mud formed of dirt and blood. With a howl, he turned his attention towards the Patrolmen on the ground.

Captain Brass still held his weapon aloft and aimed at the Argosy's tail fin, the last of his rifle's battery draining off in a ribbon of current that tore into the ship's fuselage and set its armour plates to rattling. And once it finally cut out, the Captain lowered his weapon and looked down. His eyes locked with the those of the enemy Doc Murray had deposited on the plain.

Then, from high above them, came a grinding sound as hundreds of tons of metal scraped against thousands more; the fuselage of the Star Argosy acting the trumpet and amplifying the racket. Even the moron hoard had to stop a moment and look up.

Then down it came: a storm of steel and titanium.

Slabs the size of automobiles slammed into the soil, crushing random attackers. And finally, with a groan, the fin itself shook loose of the fuselage. It was a monolith — twelve storeys of metal — and when it hit the ground, the noise was deafening.

Just outside the perimeter of the metal storm, the Patrolmen watched with relief.

"Nice shot," said Digsy.

Captain Brass said nothing. His face was serious and touched by a deep remorse. In the moment before the metal had come crashing down, he had recognized the foeman that Doc Murray had shot from the Star Argosy: it was Robert Hocks, their masterpilot. And he lay now under a million pounds of metal.

“Want me to hunt down stragglers?” asked Cutter Morse.

“What’s going on out there?” shouted Static through the wrist radio. “I’ve got five of these guys with me now. Five of them. And all that noise has really got them spooked.”

“Check,” replied Captain Brass. Then he looked at Digsy and pointed to the rope ladder. The navigator nodded. Cutter Morse stood ready, scanning the gloom through his rifle’s scope.

“Doc,” said Captain Brass into his wrist radio. “What’s your status?” He looked up. Doc Murray was still on the ladder, about a quarter of its length from the hatchway, and waving down at them.

“Ran into a spot of trouble,” he replied. “Had to ride out that earthquake hanging upside-down here. I’ll explain when you get up.”

“Why won’t these guys die?” It was Static again, panic in his voice. The crackle of his electropistols and howls of his attackers were audible in the background. “They’re climbing the pipes, Cap. I keep knockin’ ‘em down but they keep comin’ and it’s just a matter of time before one of ‘em jumps for me and makes it.”

“Hang tight, lieutenant,” replied the Captain. “We’re on our way.”

Then: *Paff!*

A pellet exploded against Cutter Morse’s jacket and released a cloud of black smoke. In a split space second, it expanded out to a ragged globe that enshrouded the gunnery master from ankles to neck. He tried to step free but the gas trailed after and he only managed to get his head and shoulders clear before the smoke went solid, immobilizing him from the chest down within a shiny, resin statue the shape of a cloud.

“Tar gas!” shouted Cutter Morse.

The warning came too late as — *Paff! Paff! Paff!* — similar clouds erupted around the other Blue-jackets. Doc Murray was hit when nearly to the Star Argosy’s hatchway and found himself stuck to the rope ladder with only his head free, the rest of him encased like a bug destined to become a curiosity within amber. Digsy tried to leap away but was caught in mid-air as a plume of the chemical stiffened about his legs, but though he was dangling horizontally four feet off the ground, he had his electropistols out and was scanning the half-light for sign of the gunmen. Even Captain Brass found himself captured though he managed to keep his rifle arm free. But the meagre hope of defence they offered was dashed as more shots were fired, this time from a conventional sniper weapon, and disa-

bled Digsy and the Captain’s guns.

Tar-gas guns have hardly any range at all, thought Cutter Morse. *Where are these guys hiding?*

As if in answer to his unspoken question, four figures approached, one from each compass direction. They appeared from among the boulders and metal debris that littered the plain, becoming visible when fewer than a dozen yards off, and yet they didn’t seem to be coming out of hiding so much as coalescing from the shadows themselves. It was as if the queer light of this alien planet drew aside like a curtain to reveal them.

Each stood over six foot tall and wore a dusty, leather cassock. Their heads were bald, their skin mottled gray and their ears seemed shriveled and pointed. Their faces were half obscured beneath scarves, and they covered their eyes with goggles, the lenses of which were tinted black like a welder’s. All four carried bulky tar-gas guns, and one of them also carried a sniper rifle slung across his back.

Captain Brass’ left arm was held immobile and outstretched in a sleeve of inky-black resin; but, the hand was still free and the wrist radio upon it was activated. From its speaker, there came an electrical crackle followed by a terrified voice: “Cap, one of ‘em’s got up. He’s put—” For a moment, Static’s words were lost in a chaos of electropistol shots and predatory howling, then that too was drowned out by the sounds of Static’s agonized shrieks.

As one of the gray-clad figures approached him, Captain Brass grunted, his face turning red as he strained against the tar gas in a vain attempt to free himself.

The figure bent down and examined the wrist radio. With a single, long finger, he jabbed a button, silencing Static for good.

* * * * *

“I tried to warn you,” said the boar. “Didn’t I? ‘Old Scratch is loose,’ I said — three, four times — but did you listen to me?”

Cutter Morse was back on the Murong Steppes. There was no sign of tiger lizards, but he walked with caution, his fire rifle at the ready.

“You could’ve been more specific,” he said.

The tar gas chafed, figuratively, at Cutter’s ego. He knew the Nether Kite had a stock of the weapons, but he’d been lulled to incaution by the apparent brainlessness of their attackers. In point of fact, the assault they’d faced was as subtle as piranhas at lunch and dangerous only by virtue of their assailants’ superhuman resilience. He hadn’t expected any of the Rocket Patrol technology stranded on this planet to have been used against them. What’s more, he hadn’t anticipated that this was merely a test force with which to soften up the Patrolmen while exposing their weaknesses.

Cutter Morse would not underestimate their opponents — their real opponents — again.

That misappraisal had gotten Static and Hocks

killed and the rest of them captured. And for the next little while anyway, the odds of escape weren't looking too good. It'd be another hour and a bit before the chemical bonds within the tar broke down and it reverted to its gaseous state. And once they were free, there was the problem of getting past their captors. Attacking them head-on would probably prove a waste of time. Though they looked vaguely human, they were clearly much stronger than any of the Patrolmen, Captain Brass or even Hocks included. As evidence, though each blob of tar weighed about 400 pounds in its solid state, only two of the gray-clad figures were needed to load the Bluejackets into the back of a six-wheeled transport vehicle. (A vehicle filched, he reckoned, from the cargo bay of the Atom's Fury.) Even more impressive, only one of them had been required to lower Doc Murray from where he dangled, and when that task was done, the figure had leapt from the hatchway and landed, uninjured, on the ground 20 feet below.

They share the fortitude of the human crash survivors who attacked us, he thought, and yet they don't seem entirely human themselves. What's the link?

As for plotting a more stealthy escape, that would have to wait. They were currently in the dark in the transport's cargo space, being driven through the rocket graveyard towards... what, exactly? He had no idea. And no idea what these creatures had in store for them.

"They say," said the boar, "that spices and pasta earned Marco Polo a fortune in the markets of Venice, but to get there, he first had to swap five years off the end of his life for passage through the Caliphate of Jeisharu."

"You're making no sense," replied Cutter Morse.

"Sense or no, it's recorded, historical fact. That's what five years got you back then. Question is, what do you have that's worth that much?" asked the boar.

And Cutter Morse kept dreaming...

* * * * *

"I've seen him do this a million times, but I still have this urge to prescribe something to keep him awake. Must be the medical training," said Doc Murray. "He really can sleep through anything."

"If there was anything Cutter could do to get us out of here, he'd be awake, doing it," said Captain Brass. "Failing that, he's conserving his energy."

"I know that," said Doc Murray. "I'm thinking more of the tar. Can't have left him in a terribly comfortable position for sleeping. Personally, my legs are starting to cramp up."

The four men were in the pitch black, in the cargo space of their captors' transport vehicle and they had been for close to an hour. They were currently being driven across rough terrain but were non-plussed as to where their final destination would be.

"And you're certain that was Hocks?" asked Lieutenant Diggs.

"Certain," replied the Captain. "He'd clearly been infected by whatever got those survivors. But it was him alright."

"What kind of infection could've gotten him so quickly?" asked Diggs. "He was as fit as an ox."

"We don't even know if it's an infectious agent," said Doc Murray. "I've seen forms of space madness that resemble this. Of course, that doesn't explain Hocks, and it wouldn't explain the invulnerability to electrical bolts and the extreme resistance to physical damage."

"No, it seems most reasonable that a bug would be to blame," said Captain Zack Brass. "We'll need to gather more evidence, obviously, but it's our best working theory at the moment. Only some kind of rapidly-spreading, transmogrifying virus fits with everything we've seen."

"But none of us have been affected," said Doc Murray.

"You said yourself that when Hocks attacked you on the Argosy he was trying to bite you," said the Captain.

"That's true. He was trying his level best to get his teeth into me."

"It's a good thing he hadn't then, for as we know, some germs spread only through the saliva," said Captain Brass. "If, as Static's initial radio message suggested, Hocks had encountered one of these survivors inside the Argosy, it seems likely that he was bitten and thereby infected."

"But what about the madness? The great strength?" asked Diggs.

"We can see similar things in rabid animals on Earth — extreme aggressiveness, heightened physical power, a deadening of the mental faculties — only in this particular case, the symptoms have been amplified many times."

"Space Rabies, then?" said Diggs. "That sure would explain a lot."

"But not everything," said Doc Murray. "The electrical bolts from our voltic rifles could have taken down a herd of rabid elephants. And why didn't they ever show up on my life signs meter?"

"Troubling details, I admit," said Captain Brass.

"A side effect of the Devil's Squall's influence?" offered Diggs. "Maybe the interference is changing the charge on our rifles somehow and screwing with the readings on your meter."

"I wouldn't put money on it," said the doctor. "The Captain's rifle was strong enough to rip the tail fin off the Star Argosy and my life signs meter still registered our signals. It just didn't register anything else. Not even these mutes with the tar-gas guns. They're the key, if you ask me. Whatever they are will answer a lot of our questions. Until I get my eyeglasses back I won't be able to assess them myself. But from what you've described, they're about seven-tenths human, which leaves three-tenths for something else besides."

"True. And to that, I can add nothing," replied the

Captain. "As I said, we will have to gather more evidence."

In the pitch black came the sound of rapid, dull thuds. It was Digsy. His arms were free and he was hammering at the obsidian-like carapace that ensnared him.

"Lieutenant...?" said the Captain, the rest of his question implied by the tone of his voice.

"Any way you slice it, all this means that Static is either dead or one of them now," he said, his voice a mix of anger and despair. "We never got word to the Hellcat. Hocks is dead. And we're stuck here, helpless."

"Calm down, soldier," said Captain Brass, his tone stern. "Remember your training."

Digsy's arms went limp. He muttered: "No time to mourn on the battlefield."

"By my calculations," said Captain Brass, "we have about an hour until the tar reverts to its gaseous form. When that happens, we'll be in a better position to plan an escape."

The three men went silent. The only noise came from the rumble of the transport vehicle, and the harsh strains of Cutter Morse's snoring.

The exchange troubled Doc Murray. He had served with Captain Zack Brass longer than anyone else in the Hellcat's crew. He considered the legendary officer a friend, but despite their fifteen-plus years of acquaintance, they were not close. Still, by dint of years of observation, he knew his captain well. What's more, he knew that Rocket Patrol offered only the most dangerous of careers and over the years he had seen crews change. Some moved on. Crewmen were lost to transfers and promotions, occasionally to marriage or illness. Others died. A few succumbed to accidents or natural causes. But most died through violence. Such was the way of Rocket Patrol. And even the elite bluejacket soldiers that Captain Brass chose to surround himself with, had an alarming mortality rate. The ghosts outnumbered the living crew on the Hellcat.

And yet, Doc Murray knew all too well how driven by his career, how dedicated to the goals of Rocket Patrol and the Star League government was Captain Brass: so much so, that his Captain never left the battlefield.

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Lieutenant Hilary Diggs kept a map in his head. It was more than just a good sense of direction. Whether he traveled on land, at sea, or through space, he was able to keep constant track of every change of course, every shift in velocity, just by feel. At any time, he could sit down at a star chart and plot out a line from where he'd been to where he currently was in the galaxy. And if more detail was needed, he could usually provide it.

This uncanny skill of his wasn't quite as accurate as an astronaviscope — he was sometimes off by a few yards — and it was definitely possible to over-

load it by sending him on a particularly turbulent route such as they'd faced in the Devil's Squall. But it was certainly up to the challenge of keeping track of their movements thus far across this alien planet.

For instance, he knew that they were currently 96 standard miles from the Hellcat, 86 standard miles from the Star Argosy, and 37 from the nearest edge of the rocket graveyard. He also knew that the holding area in which they'd been deposited to wait the final hour until the tar broke down into a harmless, swampy-smelling gas, was ten yards underground.

And finally, he knew that they were currently being marched up a twelve-degree incline and in twenty yards they would be above ground again.

The bluejackets had been summoned from their cell wordlessly, and it was in silence now that they made their way up this hall. It was wide and plain and seemed to be built from a granite-like rock; the only adornment were strings of exposed wiring on each wall that fed regularly spaced electric bulbs. In front of them, four of their strange captors led the way while five more followed up behind them. Like the figures that had captured them, these guards concealed their faces behind scarves and goggles, wore cassocks of durable, black leather, but each of these men were armed with a voltic rifle. And, reminding him of the scavenged tar-gas guns, Digsy was fairly confident that one of the weapons threatening him now was the same he'd been carrying not that long ago.

The hall came to an end and two of the lead guards stepped forward to push open a pair of heavy stone doors. The entourage stepped through and emerged above-ground, outside, in the planet's grim, permanent twilight.

"Unbelievable," said Digsy.

"Impressive," said Captain Brass.

"What?" asked Doc Murray. Without his spectacles, he couldn't see much more than a few yards away. "What is it?"

"A city," said Cutter Morse.

They had stepped into a cobbled square, a quarter mile wide. Around its perimeter there rose a desert metropolis, all spires and stepped pyramids, obelisks and domes. The buildings were built from slabs of a yellow-gray sandstone. As if to make up for the drabness of their colour, the architects of these buildings took full advantage of the half-light by decorating their constructions with dramatic sculptures. Gargoyles with grotesquely exaggerated features, murals in bas relief, and sharply carved designs adorned nearly every surface; shadows were the paint of this alien city.

(By contrast, behind them, the eight-storey building they'd emerged from was square, windowless and as interesting as a cinderblock. They had been held in its cellar.)

Across the centre of the square, a toppled and broken statue lay. It must have stood over eighty

feet tall in its original glory. That it depicted a human like creature, was certain, but any details lay face down or were turned to rubble when it collapsed.

Throughout the square, cloaked and hooded figures wandered.

"I've never seen anything like this. The architectural foundations seem almost Mayan," said Digsy, his archaeological training kicking in, "but the embellishments look Gothic. And I can see some primitive Hittite and Sumerian influences as well. The scale of construction is grand, but it's remarkably derivative. I can't say for sure of course, but you're not going to get a hodge-podge of Earth styles like this unless the architects were humans."

"You don't say?" said Captain Brass. He elbowed Digsy in the arm and gestured with his chin towards the guards in front of them. Something in what the navigator was saying was making them take notice: they were looking from one to the other, their shoulders seemed to stiffen under the leather of their cassocks, and their pace had quickened slightly. It was the first indication they'd had since their capture that their guards used language, let alone understood English. "Tell me more, lieutenant."

"Look at that over there," said Digsy, pointing to a building off to their right. "That buttress work wasn't seen until fifteenth century Italy, but the columns at the base are reminiscent of classical Athenian design. The faces on that ring of sculptures at the top, the Death Gods of the Aztec moon cults had similar features. It's all a jumble of Old World and New World architecture and that's significant. Means it was built in the historically recent past. Nothing truly ancient here. Nor original"

"But we're so far from Earth," said the Captain, "and this planet hasn't made any of the Star League surveys. How could that have happened?"

The guards were clearly becoming agitated, and that their agitation was in fact anger was evidenced in the way the lead guard was now gripping his weapon with greater verve.

"Maybe it's the work of one of the first colony ships lost in the Devil's Squall?" ventured Digsy. "With some determination, seventy-five years might be enough to build all this. And homesickness can make for some determined people. Of course, it may all be the work of an alien culture aping things they've seen in human records. We saw something similar with the Quidnunks of Asellus Four. They'd been observing us for years and admired our achievements so much that they began parroting human culture on their—"

The lead guard spun around. The butt of his voltic rifle shot into Digsy's midsection. The blow was delivered with such speed and violence that the navigator had no time to respond. He was lifted a foot into the air by the impact and landed on his knees, winded, clutching at his gut. As he concluded his sentence by gasping "—planet—," Captain Brass hit out with his fist, clocking the lead guard in the jaw.

Despite the alien's superior strength, the Captain struck with such precision, his blow was sufficient to knock the guard back a few steps.

Instantly, Cutter Morse leapt into action. With a well-placed kick, he disarmed one guard while a simultaneous throat jab disabled another. As the gunnery master scrambled for the loose weapon, Doc Murray made his move. Realizing his myopia made pugilism untenable, he drove a shoulder into the midsection of the nearest blur, counting on the fact that if he got in close, weapons would be useless and even if he couldn't take out an opponent completely, he could at least grapple one into uselessness and make the odds a little better for his Blue-jacket comrades.

Captain Brass dodged a hastily aimed punch from the still-dazed lead guard then moved in with a powerful chop. Meanwhile, Cutter Morse gathered up the weapon he'd liberated and turned about, ready to deliver electrical vengeance on their captors. The guard he'd disarmed was moving directly at him. Cutter aimed, pulled the trigger and felt an unexpected kick from the rifle as it discharged a slug from its barrel. He dropped and covered himself but it wasn't in time. The explosive projectiles weren't meant to be used at such close range, and when it impacted with the guard and detonated, Cutter was hit by the blast. It knocked him hard, singeing his hair and uniform, but he rolled with the force of the explosion, and ended his somersault in a combat stance.

It became immediately apparent that the explosion had proven fortuitous: the guard he'd momentarily disabled with the throat jab had been hit full in the face by the blast and was sprawled out, unconscious, next to the debris composed of the guard he'd disarmed.

A few yards away, Doc Murray was struggling with another guard, while nearby, the one who had been leading the entourage was dealing with Digsy and Captain Brass. With one hand, he was holding a clearly weakened Digsy at bay, while with the other, he had a hold of the Captain by the shirt collar and had the Patrolman lifted right off his feet.

Unfettered, the Captain punched at his assailant's head, swinging first with his left fist then his right then with the left again. He landed repeated blows, none of which loosened the guard's grip, but a final massive smack managed to dislodge the scarf and goggles that concealed his face. Now lay revealed: the guard's mouth was stitched shut, from one corner a rubber tube extended and curled down to disappear under his collar; his eyes were empty of all colour save the tiny black dots of his pupils, and they were fixed on the Captain in an expression of pure hate and anger.

But Cutter Morse saw none of this. He'd scanned about with his weapon to find the five remaining guards and realized with dismay that they were ignoring their prisoners, and had instead set up a

perimeter around the fracas; their weapons were pointed outward and beyond them, the denizens of the square had gathered. About fifty of the robed figures were already stalking about them, and many more were drawing closer. Cutter could hear them hissing and speaking in whispers — the language wasn't one he recognized — and though their faces were shadowed under hoods, he could see that they were looking past the guards and gazing in at the Bluejackets. They wanted something, that much Cutter knew, and while he couldn't figure the specifics, he suspected it wasn't anything savoury.

A space-second ago, their odds of escape, while slim, looked considerably better than now.

He turned back from this in time to see Captain Brass get thrown to the ground, the lead guard having as much trouble discarding the muscular Patrolman as he would shucking off a wet blanket. He then kicked Digsy's feet out from under him, drew his voltic rifle and held the muzzle at the back of the navigator's head.

As he stared directly at Captain Brass a yell of anger surged up from within him and dashed itself against his sealed lips. Though muffled, the sound carried far, it's meaning undeniable: the fight was over. The black robed figures heard it, and while they didn't disperse, they did back up a few yards and drew silent.

Captain Brass raised his hands to signal surrender.

Doc Murray and the guard he was wrestling stopped struggling.

Cutter Morse dropped his rifle.

"Alright," said Captain Brass. "You win for now."

It took only a moment for the lead guard to reassure control over the situation. It was as though his anger was now as naked as his face, and when he turned his gaze upon the black robed crowd, they slunk away, many leaving the square entirely — it was now emptier than it had been when the prisoners had entered.

Meanwhile, Cutter went over and helped Digsy to his feet. The beating the navigator had taken, while brief, had been thorough as he'd endured the full strength of the lead guard's fury. A few yards away, Captain Brass offered Doc Murray a hand up. But Cutter, who's senses were nearly as fine as the captain's, noted something sly in this gesture: the doctor passed an object to his commanding officer then whispered as he rose: "Got it off his belt. You take it. 'Til I get my glasses back, I can't throw worth a damn."

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They crossed the rest of the square now without incident. And shortly, it became clear which building they were headed towards: a mammoth stepped pyramid, half-again as tall as the next largest structure in sight; its flattened top was surmounted with a broad dome of glass. On the street in front of it,

there stood a row of gas lamps — the only artificial illumination anywhere in the square — that cast a yellow glow on the building, lighting it more brightly than either the Devil's Squall or the eclipse corona.

Into the middle third of the structure were built two stone slopes; their bases were separated by a few dozen yards and they angled into each other, joining up underneath a twenty foot wide circle near the pyramid's summit; most of its top left quadrant was taken up by an oval divot which appeared as a dark splotch from the ground. In his mind, Digsy overlaid this sculpture upon what he knew of the local geography and realized that it was a depiction of this planet from space, the divot corresponding to the black spot formed by the eclipse.

As they drew closer, he realized this sculpture was much more elaborate than he'd noticed from afar. Around the edge of the stone disk were arranged a series of gargoyles. They were too far away and the light too weak for him to make them out in any detail, but they were vaguely bat-like in shape and appeared to be holding the disk in place.

Moreover, he could also see that hieroglyphs had been carved into the two stone slopes. They depicted alien creatures wielding wicked instruments war among human figures in various poses of menace and agony.

They passed under the arc formed by the two slopes and entered the pyramid, went up a stairwell and down a long hallway. In here, there were no flickering electric lights; instead, built right into the walls, there were regularly spaced gas lamps similar to the posts out front. They were made of wrought iron and beautiful in a jagged, weaponish sort of way. More hieroglyphs were scribed in rows upon the walls. Though the specific figures depicted were unfamiliar to him, Digsy recognized something Egyptian in the way they were composed. With a couple months and a well-stocked library at his disposal, he reckoned he could probably decipher something from them. But in passing, he noted how grotesque these images appeared. The scribes of the Nile composed pictograms with dignity and grace even when using them to describe acts of war or villainy. Here, the hieroglyphs themselves were perverted and debased. The humanoid figures depicted were deformed, their postures ranging from predatory to crippled; other symbols resembled instruments of torture; and the most abstract sigils looked like tumorous growths. It was as though this alphabet were taken from a madman's parody of the Rosetta Stone.

The hall ended in a vaulted ante chamber; guards — these wearing cloaks like the inhabitants of the square — flanked a pair of tall, narrow iron doors set into the opposite wall. As the entourage approached, they snapped to attention, slung their weapons across their backs and heaved the doors inward.

The Bluejackets were ushered into the room beyond. It was a vast circular chamber that lay be-

neath pyramid's dome. Into the stone walls were dug recessed shelves crammed full with what appeared from a distance to be human — or humanoid — skulls. Arrayed about the room, more skulls were piled up into bell-shaped mounds more than a man and a half tall. The glass dome high above was smoked and nearly opaque, the light in the room provided by a circle of lanterns on posts in the centre of the room; they were hooded, the flickering light of their oil flames reflected in toward the centre of the room where a table sat.

There were more guards here, ten of them wielding tar-gas guns, and they were arranged against the walls. The Bluejackets were left in their care as their original escort retreated back down the hallway. The doors swung shut without making a noise.

An especially tall guard stepped forward and led the Bluejackets into the circle of lights, gesturing for them to be seated in the metal chairs that ringed it. The guard disappeared into the darkness and the Bluejackets discovered the arrangement of the lanterns was strategic. They sat in a bubble of light and no matter where they turned their eyes, they were struck by the brightness of the lanterns. It made the larger room invisible to them and left them with a feeling of simultaneous enclosure and exposure.

"How are you doing, Digsy?" asked Captain Brass.

The navigator was slouching in his seat, still breathing heavily. "Pretty tender. But I'll be alright. Doc says I might've a cracked rib."

"I checked his side," said the doctor, "and nothing seems broken. But he'll need an x-ray when we get back to the Hellcat."

The four men spoke in whispers, speculating upon what they were waiting for, and shortly, they heard the sound of approaching footsteps. From the darkness, came a sonorous voice: "Welcome, my friends."

Long fingers grasped the back of the last empty chair at the table and drew it back. A figure stepped into the circle of light. "You may call me Lord Gloam, your host on this planet. Escape, as you have by now surmised, is quite impossible," he said as he took his seat. "The guards in this room are much faster and much, much stronger than any of you. And they are well armed." Though his English was perfect, cultured, it carried the hint of an accent none of the Bluejackets could recognize. Physically, he was like all the strange inhabitants of this planet: same sickly gray skin and bald pate, and like the guard Captain Brass had unmasked, he had white eyes pricked by spots of black. His face was long and sharp, a wedge of evil intent, and as he spoke he revealed teeth the colour of damp wood, the front two of which protruded like a rat's but were tapered to points. "And even if you were to get free of them, the citizens of our dark city would tear you to pieces. What you did not seem to comprehend during the march to this palace is that the guards who brought you here were escorting you for your own protection. Despite that, I am told you contested with them

and managed to kill one?"

Cutter Morse spoke up: "It was self defence and my responsibility alone."

"Tch, tch," said Gloam. "Noble of you to confess, but think nothing of it. To me, it means one less mouth to feed. Moreover, I am told that in the course of your capture, two of your crewmen were killed as well." He drew back his lips in an approximation of a smile, his fore-fangs making his grin more ghastly than kind. "We can call it even then?"

"Not even by half," said Captain Brass through gritted teeth. "Static and Hocks were more than just members of my crew, they were trusted friends. Nothing will balance their deaths. Loyalty between crew and commander cuts both ways. If you were human, you'd understand that."

"Oh, but I have a human heart, Captain. It doesn't beat but it's right here," said Gloam, patting his chest. "You will find this hard to believe, but we're kin, you and I, after a fashion."

"What are you talking about?"



Long fingers grasped the back of the last empty chair at the table and drew it back. A figure stepped into the circle of light.

“Hasn’t your pride-of-Rocket-Patrol brain figured it out yet, Captain Brass? We’re vampires. From earth.”

“Vampires are myth. A fairy tale to frighten children.”

“Perhaps, but ask your archaeology expert, he’ll tell you. Behind every myth lies a kernel of truth.”

“Just a kernel, Captain,” offered Digsy. “Every culture has stories of bloodsucking monsters. The chupacabra, the wendigo. The nosferatu. But science has chalked that coincidence up to a rare form of hemoglobin deficiency some people suffer from. Primitive cultures mistake it for something supernatural. But that’s all there is to the story.”

“Ah yes. The human ability to cling to dull reason when they fear something distasteful lurks in the shadows,” said Gloam with a derisive snicker that sounded much like a wheeze. “No, the truth is more fantastic than you ever imagined. Fifty thousand years before your kind spoke in more than grunts, vampires ruled an empire that spanned the galaxy. We traveled where we would. Built cities. Enslaved lesser beings and feasted on the liquid of life. We ruled with an iron fist secure in the knowledge that our technology was supreme.

“We had weaknesses of course,” he continued. “Every species does. Foremost among ours was a sensitivity to light. In fact, as your legends tell, the direct light of a sun is fatal to us and because of this we were forced to live underground for generations. But even that obstacle was surmounted. Our engineers designed planets to suit us. Planets of shadow. You thought this moon that hangs unmoving in the sky was an accident? Not at all. It was placed there so that the sun could warm the surface enough so we would not freeze, while at the same time casting a circle of darkness upon the surface in which we could build this city. Even the nebula you name the Devil’s Squall is our doing. It hid this outpost from the eyes of our enemies while brightening the surface with a harmless glow. It is the perfect planet for our kind.”

“If your culture is so advanced, then, why does this city seem to be in such disrepair?” asked Captain Brass.

“The result of another of our weaknesses,” replied Gloam. “As our empire aged, we grew decadent, complacent. More and more we let our minions handle the running of our affairs while we reveled in the luxuries we had won ourselves. Nowhere was this more true than on Earth. It was one of our last colonies, taken when our empire was at the height of its powers, and at the peak of its corruption. In stone temples that shielded us from the sun and amplified our magnificence, we supped on the blood of our slaves, grew fat and lazy and over time we slowly lost contact with the wider empire. Meanwhile, outside our palaces in the daylight, our slaves handled our affairs too well, learned from us too quickly, and they finally revolted. The tale of that war is lost in

your prehistory, but you humans rose up and dragged us into the sun. Hundreds of thousands of us were reduced to ashes. Indeed the strongest and oldest of our kind, the ones who knew first hand the glories of the Vampire Empire, were the first to be destroyed. In time, only a handful of us remained and we were driven into hiding. We attempted to contact our kin on other worlds only to discover that they had faced a similar fate almost a century before.

“For centuries, miserable, feral and forgotten, we eked out an existence by feeding in secret and cowering in the sewers and alleyways of the cities we taught you how to build. And in time, our detachment from our former technical supremacy, which began the day we let our minions take care of the running of our cities for us, became complete. The oldest of us dead, our technical marvels destroyed in the war, the few vampires who remained had little knowledge of the sciences, and living as animals, always moving to avoid being found, we became stupid. We dimly remembered our Ether Skiffs, our Sense Factories and Hypno Works, but none of us had the skill to restore these devices.

“So it was that we fell from godhood and became mere monsters. Then an amazing thing happened: our former slaves built space ships and began to ply the same space lanes that we once ruled. We knew that in this we could find an opportunity to leave the planet of our misery, and find other survivors of the Vampire Empire, and with them restore it to its glory. We knew the location of the nearest empire outpost, and almost from the beginning of the rocket age, we began stowing away on departing ships, hijacking them and piloting them to here. A convenient side benefit of this is that the ships we capture come filled with our favourite food source: humans. Once the rocket has been secured, we shut off the life-support — heat, oxygen, all of it — as we do not need these things ourselves to survive, but the cold vacuum of space perfectly preserves our captives for us. Once they have been delivered we can thaw them as they’re needed.

“And that is, in short, the secret history of the Vampire Empire. What else you need to know of us has been preserved in your legends. We drink blood to survive and a small number of those we feed off of return from death and become one of us. It is how we reproduce.

“Then you’re saying Hocks... when I saw him on the plain...” Captain Brass began, his fury barely concealed.

“Was that one of your crewmen who died?” quizzed Gloam. “I’m afraid yes. If he was drained by a vampire and was of an extremely strong constitution, then his body would have returned to life as one of us. Don’t worry though. The crewman you remember was gone. His corpse may have resurrected but it was dead tissue quickened by the essence of a new born vampire. He would have been quite mind-

less for decades, a creature motivated solely by a lust for blood. It takes time for our young to become sentient in the way you understand it.”

“The people who attacked us were nothing like you,” said the Captain.

“Not yet,” replied Gloam. “Vampirism works certain changes. My body, for instance, was like yours once. I was human long before you were born. But this body is just necrotic tissue, a vessel for a life force far beyond your instrument’s ability to register. I do not breathe. Muscles don’t move my limbs. Electricity doesn’t flow through my brain. I am animated by an energy you cannot comprehend.”

“What he’s saying is nonsense,” interrupted Doctor Murray. “It defies science and logic.”

“Grain of salt taken, doctor,” said Captain Brass. “I am not about to take your word for this, Gloam. Prove it.”

“You could check my pulse, Captain. I don’t have one,” said Gloam.

“We have a life sign detector in our gear,” said the Captain.

“Fine,” said Gloam. He barked out an order in a strange language. In a moment, a guard appeared with a knapsack. Gloam passed it to the doctor. “My guards are watching you closely. If you draw something that looks remotely like a weapon from this pack, they will be upon you before you can use it.”

Doctor Murray rummaged through his equipment and drew out a metal device. He extended an antenna from it and directed it at Gloam. He adjusted several dials, manipulated a series of switches, and squinted at a meter on it. After a few seconds he leaned back and grunted. His fingers flickered through a series of motions. Captain Brass nodded.

“There’s nothing there,” said Doctor Murray. “All my readings are flatlining. I’ve examined thousands of life forms, Captain, and I’ve never witnessed anything like him.”

“Then you’re some kind of alien we’ve never encountered,” said Captain Brass to Gloam. “Some kind of parasite, maybe.”

“Such a harsh word, Captain,” said Gloam.

“If the shoe fits,” said Captain Brass. “But it seems awfully convenient that you’d stumble upon a life form on Earth that’s compatible with your needs.”

“Convenience?” said Gloam. “Precisely. But ours, not yours. When we first traveled to your planet it was ruled by stupid lizard creatures that were utterly useless to us. But there were also primitive mammals in which we saw great promise. So we remade the planet.” He paused a moment, then: “Do you begin to understand, gentlemen? We bred you. You were our cattle. But we didn’t just want a food source. We wanted semi-intelligent slaves. We were, unfortunately, too successful on that score and made you perhaps a little too intelligent. The excellence of our science was ultimately our undoing.”

“This is ridiculous,” said Digsy. “There’s nothing

in the archaeological record to hint at any of this.”

“There is no evidence,” said Gloam, “because it was all destroyed or hidden by your ancestors. But as thorough as they were, clues were left behind. I have heard tell that there are those within the upper echelons of Rocket Patrol who have begun to suspect our existence. I am surprised that Captain Brass, favourite son of the Patrol has heard nothing.”

“Captain?” asked Doctor Murray.

“There are rumors among some in the Sciences Division that there may have been some ancient alien influence on human culture,” said Captain Brass. “But anything else is considered old spacer superstition. Nothing more.”

“Well I’m an old spacer,” said the doctor, “and I’ve heard nothing like this. Space vampires that created the human race? It’s absurd. What’s more, it’s offensive.”

“Why are you telling us all this?” interrupted Cutter Morse. “I see no tactical advantage in it. You should have killed us outright. Unless you want something from us.”

“What do I want?” asked Gloam. “To demoralize you. It amuses me. But yes, there is more. As I alluded earlier, food is in short supply here. As our numbers increase, the passengers aboard the rockets we hijack aren’t lasting us as long. We have instituted severe rationing, but the citizens of this city are starving and are less able to control their impulses now. That is why we have to go to the extreme of stitching shut the mouths of the guards we sent to fetch you. And that is why we leave the vampires we’ve spawned on this planet to roam the plains. We can’t afford to feed them, and we’ve known for some time that Rocket Patrol would eventually send troops to recover the ships they’ve lost. The hungry creatures we’ve left among the wreckage make for excellent shock troops.

“But we cannot go on like this much longer. We need to hunt, but to do that we need a rocket of our own. You see, we vampires learn slowly, and thus we have little skill with your technology. Guiding a rocket along a path through space is straightforward enough. But landing a rocket is another thing entirely. It takes years of training in Rocket Patrol to master this skill and none of us possesses it. That is why we amassed such a collection of useless wreckage at the edge of our city.

“With what little we have learned, we have managed to cobble together what we believe is a functioning vessel from parts we have scrounged on the plain. But we have yet to test it. And even if it can take some of us off the planet, it would be far too slow and would be captured easily if it were spotted by a Rocket Patrol ship.

“But today, one of the Patrol’s mightiest rockets has landed on our doorstep. Already it has been secured by my vampire guards. All we need now is to learn how to operate it. And that, my friends is why

you are still alive. So that I can bargain with you. You can teach us how to fly the Hellcat and live out your days here in relative comfort. Or you can die.”

“Never,” said Captain Brass, rising from his seat. “A Rocket Patrol officer would rather die than let a ship like the Hellcat fall into your hands.”

Lord Gloam croaked out another command to his guards, then said: “I thought you might say that. So I made sure that I had another bargaining chip.”

A guard stepped into the circle of light, dragging behind him a clearly frightened-looking Cadet Pep. Lord Gloam put a hand around the boy’s neck and drew him close as the guard retreated.

“Sorry Captain,” said Cadet Pep. “I never saw them coming.”

“It’s okay,” said the Captain. “Don’t worry. We’ll get you out of this.”

“I don’t think you will,” said Lord Gloam. “Now, here is how this is going to work. You will tell us what we need to know so that we can operate the Hellcat, or I will kill this child. Slowly. Then I will do what I can to ensure that he comes back as one of us. Then I will let his mindless corpse feed on the blood of your crew, one by one. Well, Captain Brass, I will let you have a few moments to think it over.”

“Actually, I think our time has already run out,” said Captain Brass.

At that moment, there was a tremendous crashing noise as the dome above them smashed inward. Glass shards rained onto the floor followed by a rocket, about six yards long, that shot into the room.

“Everybody down!” shouted the Captain. The room was filled with heat and light from the rocket’s jets. And the guards, visible now, heeded Captain Brass’ shout. They ducked out of the room or hid under pieces of furniture, fearing an explosion was imminent. Even Lord Gloam grabbed up Cadet Pep and stumbled away from the table, seeking safety.

But the Bluejackets didn’t dive for cover at all. They had expected this interruption and were ready to spring into action. The rocket was not an explosive missile, but rather an emergency transport — a “remote rescue rocket” — launched from the Hellcat.

It fired a series of retro-rockets to slow its descent, then four pontoon jets ignited in a low burn so it could hover a few feet above the floor. A glassteel bubble on its top retracted and seconds later, just as the vampire guards were beginning to realize they had been bamboozled, Digsy and Doc Murray were seated in the vessel. Cutter Morse was not far behind, having taken a moment to disable a guard and take his tar-gas gun.

Digsy took control of the vessel and began swinging the controls. The rocket’s tail swung a wide arc around the room, the flame of its rear jet now a weapon, driving their vampire enemies into hiding or setting afire those that stood their ground to fight.

Meanwhile, Captain Brass dashed across the room in pursuit of Lord Gloam who held Cadet Pep in a fierce clutch. The boy fought valiantly, tearing at the hand that held his throat while using his legs to batter his captor. But the vampire’s strength was too great for him, and he couldn’t get free, only slow Gloam’s flight.

Lord Gloam shouted in his strange language, and finally his guards overcame their fear of the rescue rocket and came to his aid. A vampire guard, much larger and more muscular than Gloam, leapt from the shadows and picked up the cadet, knocking the lad unconscious with a swift smack to the back of his head. And from the cockpit of the rescue rocket, Digsy looked on in horror as — *Paff!* — a cloud of black smoke exploded around Captain Brass and immediately solidified into a glassy prison.

* * * * *

Bedlam had invaded the main hall of the last palace of the Vampire Empire. In the centre, a small rocket-powered vessel wrecked havoc, spreading fire about the room like a rampaging dragon. Vampire soldiers had to flee or were set alight. Ancient artifacts, carried across space leagues, were turned to ash. But out of this chaos, Lord Gloam reveled in the fact that at least he had thwarted Captain Brass’ escape attempt. The patrolman’s companions might yet be able to escape this city. But Captain Brass, the greatest soldier in Rocket Patrol, lay encased, from tip to tail, in solidified tar gas.

It would only be a matter of minutes before this legendary man suffocated. And though it would be simple thing for the vampire, with his enormous strength, to tear enough of the crystalline substance away so that the trapped man could breathe, he decided he much rather wait for the tar gas to dissipate on its own, and then he would mummify Captain Brass’ corpse and keep as he remains nearby. Just to remind himself of this victory.

He strode forward oblivious to the pandemonium around him and looked down at the trapped man. This was a moment to be savoured. He relished the way in which the Captain had crouched at the moment the tar-gas enveloped him. How he was balled up and facing away.

And what was this? There: suspended in the tar gas, just barely visible through the gray semi-opaqueness, was a spherical object suspended in the substance. A little red light on it was blinking.

Too late, Lord Gloam realized it was a grenade.

* * * * *

The concussion grenade exploded and split the tar gas slab into a thousand fragments. A block slammed into Gloam’s chest, knocking him to the ground. The rest scattered across the floor and Captain Brass, released from the substance, was propelled forward, somersaulting across the room. He

came to a stop on his toes, fists out ready to pummel anyone who came near. He turned and saw that Lord Gloam and the guard who'd snatched up Cadet Pep had disappeared.

He could hear the roar of the rescue rocket behind him and over it the yells of his officers.

Captain Brass spun about and raced over shattered glass and the charred bodies of vampires — still alive but horribly damaged by the flame of the jet, their limbs dragging uselessly at the ground. He leapt onto the pontoon of the rocket and scrambled into a seat.

Cutter Morse pulled the glassteel dome closed as Digsy wheeled the controls, and directed the ship back out through the hole in the ceiling.

Captain Brass slammed a fist onto the arm rest of his seat. "Get us to the Hellcat," he growled.

"And the Cadet?" asked Doc Murray.

"Time is precious," said the Captain.

* * * * *

Cutter Morse was awake and alert the entire trip back to the Hellcat.

They were alive because they were lucky. And because the nearsighted doctor had exploited a couple openings. He'd been the one to slip the Captain the stolen grenade that'd saved him from death by tar gas. And he'd been the one to gamble that the vampires wouldn't know the difference between a lifesigns meter and a remote-rocket call box.

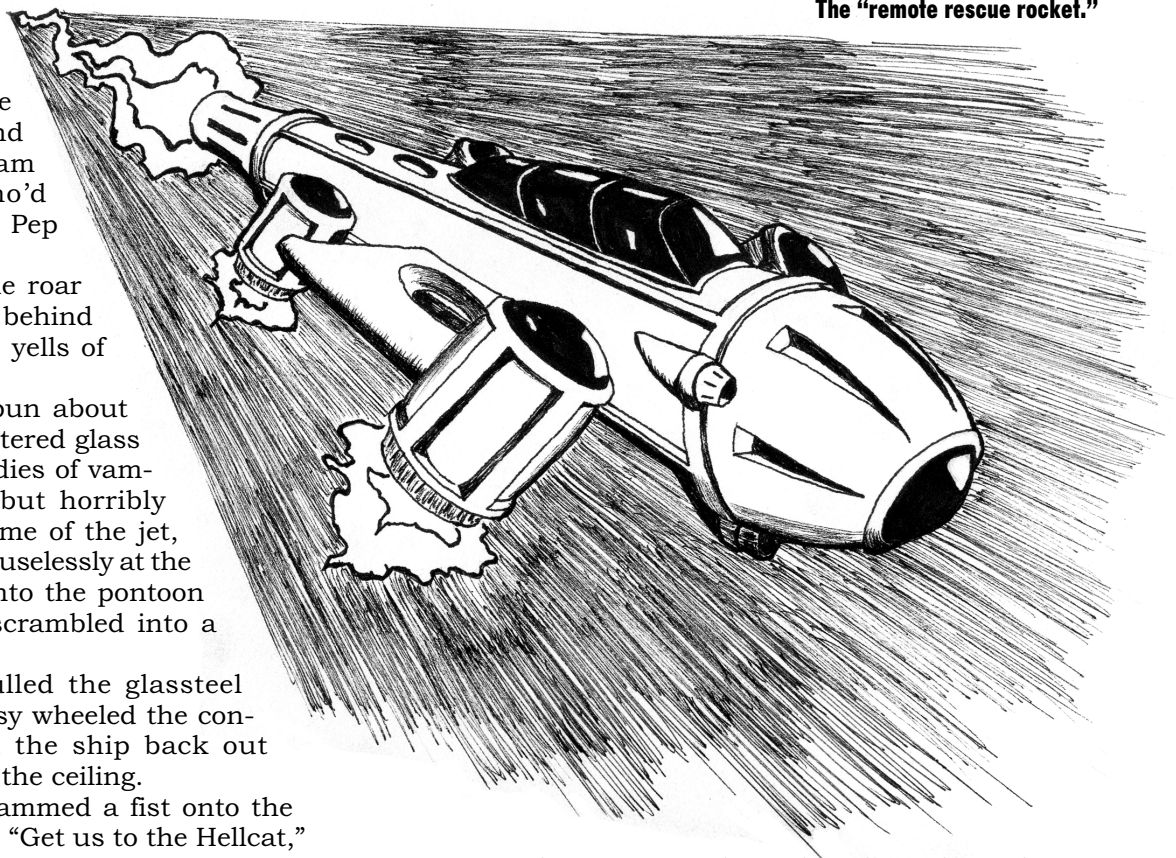
Cutter doubted they'd get any more opportunities like those.

The odds of escape were getting low. The odds of rescuing Cadet Pep and anyone else taken prisoner and then escaping were lower still.

In their favour, they had a rescue rocket with all of about three hours worth of fuel. It was intended for quick in-and-out trips, so it didn't have any mounted guns. But there was a fire rifle and a full complement of electropistols on board. And they had the tar-gas gun he'd stolen as they fled.

Stacked up against them: They were outnumbered. Their enemy was stronger and faster than they were, and almost invulnerable. Voltic rifles only slowed them. Electro pistols were next to useless. And even the blast of a rocket jet couldn't kill them, only weaken them severely.

What's more, the vampires held better tactical



ground no matter where the Bluejackets chose to fight. The Hellcat was likely teaming with their guards, and the wilds were overrun by Rocket Patrol officers and space tourists resurrected as mindless, bloodsucking monsters. The entire planet was designed for the comfort of these creatures, and he suspected they knew every inch of the terrain for miles around.

Old Scratch is loose alright.

What was it the boar had asked? Something about trading five years of his life, or nonsense to that effect.

Cutter Morse pondered in silence a moment. On the horizon, the vast mesa they'd landed on came into view. It rose up, a mountain hacked clean at the knees, its top flat and gravelly. And as they flew over it and the Hellcat came into view, Cutter spoke up: "Captain, I think I have a plan."

* * * * *

Digsy struggled with the controls of the rescue rocket. They were getting dangerously close to the Hellcat now: well within firing range of the vampire guards below. Fortunately they were poor marksmen at this distance. The slugs from their voltic rifles exploded around the rocket, knocking it about, but so far Digsy had been able to avoid taking a hit.

Adding to the drag on the small ship: They were flying with the glassteel dome over the cockpit drawn back so Digsy could hear instructions from Captain Brass, who was outside, clinging to the starboard maneuvering pontoon with his bare hands. Cutter

Morse was tethered to the port pontoon and had a bulky fire-rifle rig strapped onto his back so he could lay down a covering fire. Though the molten-adamant projectiles he was peppering the ground with must be making swiss cheese of the vampire troops and burning them up from the inside, their ground-to-air assault didn't seem to let up for even a second.

The Hellcat was below them now, the huge rocket ungainly and top-heavy on the ground: landing seemed an afterthought in its design. It rested on its tail fins, its nosecone aimed skyward.

"Still too far," shouted Captain Brass. Even yelling at the top of his lungs, he was hard to hear over the roar of the engines, the explosions of hostile fire. "Bring her it in closer."

Keeping the rescue rocket horizontal, Digsy cut the rear jet to nothing and dropped the thrust on the pontoon jets. The ship sank toward the Hellcat's nose cone.

"I want to say again Captain," yelled Doc Murray, "that I think this plan is absolutely insane."

"Agreed," came the Captain's hollered reply. "But it's the best one we've got. Alright, Digsy!" He worked himself into a crouching stance. "I'm gone!"

* * * * *

Captain Brass launched himself from the pontoon, hands outstretched for the nose of the Hellcat. He sailed through the air and landed flat out. His fingertips gripped a reinforced seam between two plates on the hull and held him there. He shuffled to his right a few feet until he was beside the outline of a sealed hatchway. It was only about four feet wide as it was the aperture through which the radio antenna could be extended. In his belt he'd crammed a pair of electropistols and an array of tools. He let go with his right hand — the tendons on his left arm popped out with the strain of holding him in place — and took out a spanner. He went to work on the bolts around the hatch.

Explosions went off in the air around him. But fortunately, thanks to the curvature of the fuselage, the vampires on the ground would have difficulty seeing him. And they couldn't aim too close to the ship for fear of damaging the fuselage. They clearly needed this rocket and he guessed they'd be sore pressed to want to scratch before they even knew how to start it up.

He had the first bolt free and set to work on the one next to it. It'd take him about a minute to get the hatch open this way. Then he'd be able to shimmy into the antenna tube and with a portable acetylene cutter, he'd be able to get into the machinery under the rocket's bridge. In there, assuming the vampires aboard the Hellcat weren't mucking about in the labyrinth of maintenance crawlspaces, he'd be free to put Cutter's plan into action.

He'd captained this ship for over four years now, and by dint of this experience, he knew it better than

the engineers who'd designed it. Still, in all that time he'd never tried to take over the navigation controls while scrambling about in the guts of the ship. It'd put all his skills and training as a Rocket Patrol officer to the test. And Captain Zack Brass liked challenges.

* * * * *

Captain Brass leapt from the starboard pontoon, and with his weight gone, the rocket started to tip over. But Cutter was well tethered to the opposite pontoon, and Digsy fired up the rear jet the second the Captain jumped. He let the rocket roll 180 degrees as it shot forward, then he stabilized it horizontally, and brought the ship around in a wide arc so that Cutter could scatter shots at the troops below and draw their attention away from the Captain's position on the Hellcat.

"Doc. Hand me the tar-gas gun!" Cutter shouted as he jammed the fire-rifle in its sheath. Doc Murray leaned out over the lip of the cockpit with the bulky weapon and Cutter twisted around, grabbed it from him and armed it.

Digsy angled the rocket into a sharp descent and aimed it on a course that cut right in front of the Hellcat's main entry hatch.

With even the fire-rifle proving to have little effect against the vampires, the tar-gas gun's immobilizing power seemed the most likely to slow them down. The problem was its range was limited and it didn't carry much in the way of ammo. They'd have to get in close to be sure they wouldn't waste any shots. But the first order of business was to make sure the vampires on the Hellcat stayed on the Hellcat. They had enough of a crowd to deal with.

When they reached the bottom of the rescue rocket's arc, Cutter took careful aim and slammed the trigger twice. Black clouds erupted in the Hellcat's entryway and immediately solidified, plugging it up completely.

"Hang tight!" shouted Digsy as he manipulated the controls.

The rescue rocket cartwheeled over the heads of the vampires, it's course too erratic for it to be much of a target, the pontoon jets spun madly on their pivots, the rear jet cut out, and Digsy lit up the retro rockets. The ship shot skyward upside down, corkscrewing as it flew.

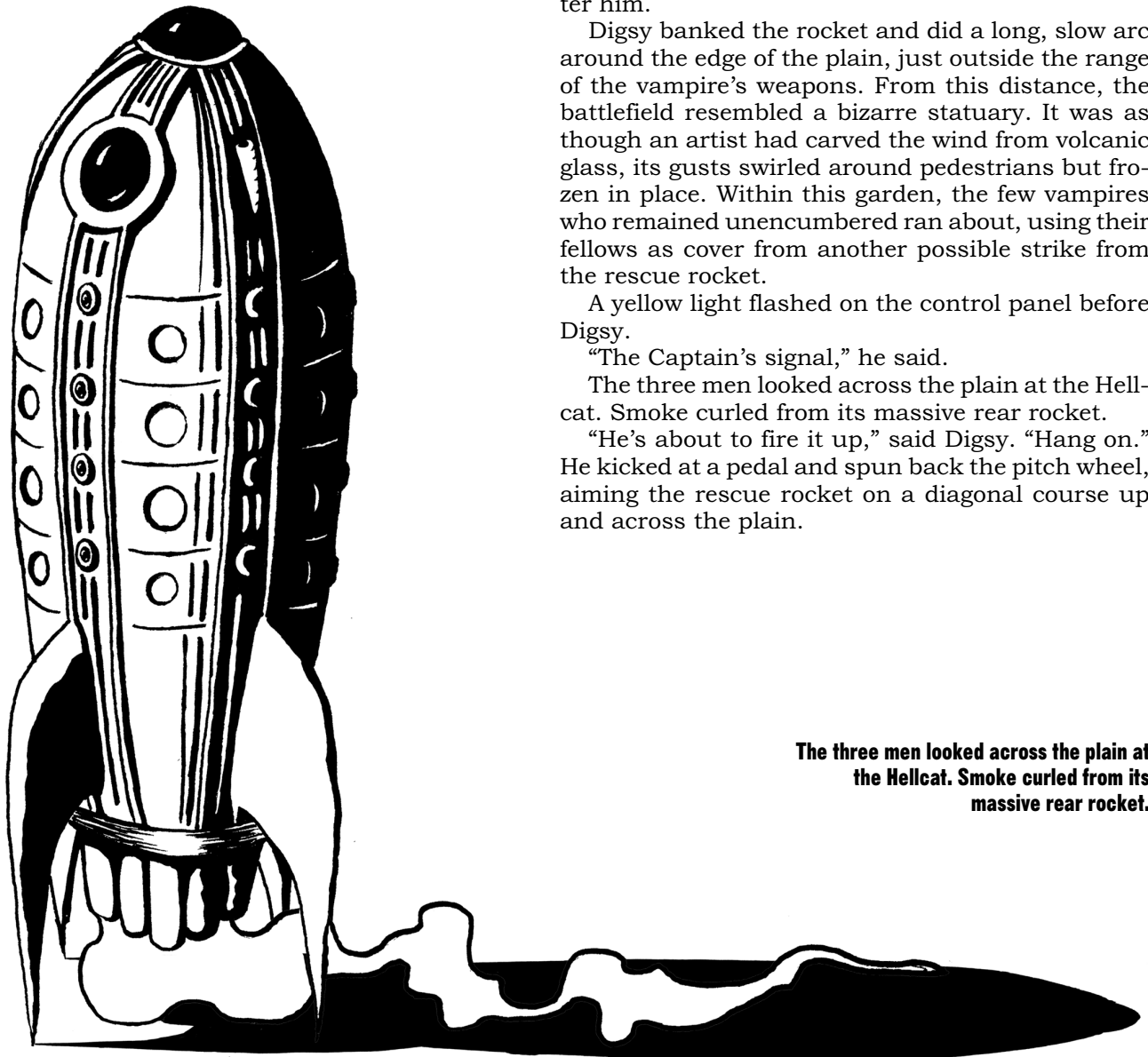
Cutter fired four more shots. The vampires attempted to dodge the slow moving tar-gas pellets, but the blast from the rocket had stirred up quite the wind, spreading the ensnaring fog about the battle field. The vampires found themselves grabbed up by tendrils of the chemical or the works of their weapons jammed. None of it enough to stop them utterly, but it did leave them stymied for a time as they had to apply their strength to freeing themselves.

Digsy kicked at a pedal and wrenched back a lever. The retros cut, the rear jet roared to life, and he

plunged earthward at top speed. He spun the pitch wheel as they neared the surface, pulling the ship out of its dive, and he sped the ship, just a few feet off the ground, into the midst of the vampire combatants.

He cranked a series of wheels, jammed at a series of four switches, and all of the rockets jets blazed to life, each angling its flame about as though it were guided by a separate mind. The ship stayed horizontal but wheeled about the battlefield like a spinning top set on fire.

A calm washed over Cutter Morse as his warrior brain sank into the deep meditative state of a supreme predator. Time slowed and he let his dream self take over. He pulled the trigger almost casually, but wherever the pellets exploded the smoke trails seized groups of vampires and held them immobile. *"If I had claws and fangs,"* he thought. *"If I had claws and fangs..."*



In their rocket, the Bluejackets spun through their enemies and became a fiend of the rocket age, an apparition of fire, noise and steel and the vampires, monsters of a darker age, knew fear.

After sweeping across the plain, Digsy yanked back on a lever and spun the pitch wheel. The rocket straightened out and shot skyward.

"Please don't do that again," said Doc Murray, his face green. "I never trained to handle that kind of flying."

"How're you doing out there, Cutter?" shouted Digsy.

Cutter let go of the tar-gas gun. It dropped to the ground far below and shattered. "Out of ammo," he replied.

Digsy slowed the rocket until it came to a stop and hung there, 500 feet up, hovering. "Come on back in."

Cutter untethered himself and crawled back into the cockpit. Doc Murray dragged the dome shut after him.

Digsy banked the rocket and did a long, slow arc around the edge of the plain, just outside the range of the vampire's weapons. From this distance, the battlefield resembled a bizarre statuary. It was as though an artist had carved the wind from volcanic glass, its gusts swirled around pedestrians but frozen in place. Within this garden, the few vampires who remained unencumbered ran about, using their fellows as cover from another possible strike from the rescue rocket.

A yellow light flashed on the control panel before Digsy.

"The Captain's signal," he said.

The three men looked across the plain at the Hellcat. Smoke curled from its massive rear rocket.

"He's about to fire it up," said Digsy. "Hang on." He kicked at a pedal and spun back the pitch wheel, aiming the rescue rocket on a diagonal course up and across the plain.

The three men looked across the plain at the Hellcat. Smoke curled from its massive rear rocket.

The Hellcat's engines fired and a massive gout of flame burst from its tail. The enormous ship lumbered skyward. It's infernum-fueled drive was many times more powerful than the tiny rescue rocket, and it only took seconds before it was a thousand yards higher in the sky.

They were sailing upward, directly behind the tail of the Hellcat. They could feel the heat blasting down at them as Digsy pressed the little rocket to the limits of its speed.

Cutter drew a pair of binoculars from an equipment locker, and leaned over Digsy's shoulder to watch the skies ahead of them. "I don't see anything yet."

"We can't reach escape velocity in this," said Doc Murray. "You're going to have to cut the engines soon or we'll be ripped apart."

"I know," said Digsy.

"There!" shouted Cutter. "Four degrees port. He's used a portable jet pack to propel himself clear of the rear flame."

Digsy adjusted their course.

"Air's too thin up here," said Doc Murray. "He'll be unconscious in seconds."

"I know," said Digsy. "Shhhh..." The word problem he was solving in his head had a solution that was pages long. Above them, the Hellcat was now little more than a speck against the shifting gray-green of the Devil's Squall. Then, a small figure could be seen dropping towards them.

Digsy began counting down from three and as he did so, he set a series of timer dials on the control panel. When he reached zero, he slammed his left fist onto a large red button and with his right he yanked back on a lever. The rear jet cut out instantly. Cutter Morse slammed into the back of Digsy's seat then fell backward onto the cabin floor.

The pontoon jets fired in a complex, programmed sequence: they flipped the rescue rocket horizontal, then pivoted upside down; flame burst from them for a fraction of a second, then they cut out completely and pivoted back around. Digsy took control of the rocket again and let them fall, only firing the jets enough to keep them level.

Below, the ground was rushing towards them at an alarming rate. But directly above them, Captain Brass was falling less than a foot per second faster than they were.

Cutter Morse clipped a safety strap onto his belt then scrolled back the glassteel dome. He stood up on his seat and reached up to grab the falling Captain.

"We've got less than a minute before we're tasting dirt," shouted Digsy.

"I know," said Cutter.

Seconds past as the Captain gained on the rescue rocket and as soon as he was within reach, Cutter grabbed him and gathered him gently into the rocket.

Doc Murray slid the dome shut. "Go!" he shouted.

Digsy kicked the pontoon jets to full, halting the rocket's fall, then lit up the rear jet and banked the ship into a corkscrewing path toward the ground.

"How does he look?" he asked.

"Unconscious," said Doc Murray. "But his burns are minor. Just singed. He'll be fine when he comes to."

A klaxon went off and a red light on the instrument panel started to flash.

Digsy checked the fuel gauge. The rescue rocket hadn't been designed to take this kind of punishment. And what's more, they'd managed in the last twenty minutes to use up three hours worth of fuel. That was bad. The rocket was about as aerodynamic as a stick and without at least four of its five main jets firing, it'd drop like one. "Strap in," he said. "This won't be gentle." He cranked off the rear jet and dialed down the stabilizer jets on the pontoons. The nose dipped sharply and the rocket began a steep dive toward the ground. They were aimed for a spot on the plain just under a mile from where the Hellcat had launched.

"Face first?" shouted Doc Murray. "That's not a rough landing. It's suicide."

"I'm conserving fuel," Digsy shouted back. "Bringing us in on a parabolic descent."

"Can you set us down somewhere clear of those vampires?" asked Cutter.

"Not far enough, I fear," said Digsy as he flipped off the low-fuel klaxon.

As the ground loomed up closer, their velocity increasing by the second, he gradually boosted the thrust from the pontoon jets, and the rocket began to arc gently. By the time they were at the bottom of the curve, he'd leveled off the rocket, had all four pontoon jets firing at full to hold off gravity, and they were skimming across the plain a few yards off the ground. Half a mile ahead of them, the plain dropped away, sharply as the edge of the mesa was coming up fast.

The needle on the fuel gauge plunged. The rocket sank suddenly as the jets began to fizzle.

"Hang on," said Digsy. He jammed at a row of switches, cutting all the jets. The rocket smacked into the ground belly first and skidded across the plain but it was so heavy and had so much momentum behind it that the pebbles and sand barely slowed it — there definitely wasn't enough friction to stop them before they went over the mesa's edge. It was a drop of over a hundred feet and they didn't have enough fuel to break that kind of a fall.

Digsy reached under the control panel and ripped free one end of a cord, wrapped it around his hand and yanked back on it: the last of their fuel vented directly into the retro rockets and ignited in a final, explosive burst.

The rescue craft came to a sudden and complete stop.

Cutter snapped off his safety harness and rolled back the glassteel dome. He scanned the plain be-

hind them through binoculars.

"They've sussed that we're out of fuel," he said. "Whole mess of vampires coming this way. Fast."

The three men salvaged what equipment they could and hauled Captain Brass' still-unconscious form from the rocket. Using a pontoon as cover, Cutter strapped into the fire-rifle kit and began peppering the approaching hoard with molten shot.

Doc Murray had Captain Brass lain out in the sand and was checking his vitals. Digsy was crouched nearby, arming an electropistol.

"We can't carry him off the mesa," he said. "They'll be on us before...."

"Then I suggest you help Cutter hold them off," said Doc Murray.

A strong hand grasped the doctor's arm; Captain Brass was coming around.

"Cap!" said Digsy.

The Captain's lips began to move but, still groggy, he could do little more than whisper. Doc Murray leaned in to listen.

"He's counting," he reported. "Five... four... three... two...."

"One..." said Digsy.

* * * * *

The sky turned white.

All across the mesa, silence reigned as high above, the black orb that was the ecliptic moon had become a ball of infernum fire. The Hellcat had landed — nose first and at speed — its entire supply of oxygen shunting directly into its fuel tanks: a masterwork of jury-rigging considering how quickly Captain Brass had to put it together.

Seconds ticked off. No one moved. Then, the lunar flames subsided once the last of the infernum molecules shivered into light and rage, and revealed a globe fractured into a million million pieces. Sun light filtered through, drove the shadows into hiding.

A terrified howl went up on the mesa as the vampiric host felt the warming touch of sunlight for the first time. Some dropped their weapons and ran about searching in vain for cover. The less fortunate — those imprisoned in tar-gas shapes — could only watch helplessly as their shielding moon had become a sieve. The liquid in their bodies boiled. Their skin bloated, their tongues swelled, their eyes exploded, and in seconds where there were vampires there was only quivering mounds of cadaverous tissue — the quickening spirit within fled or destroyed, this once-human gore putrefied and stank with the odor of decades — even centuries — worth of accumulated rot.

* * * * *

Captain Brass was up on his elbows now. The Bluejackets stood around him, shielding their eyes from the glare of the sun.

"It worked," he croaked.

"We'll have to find shelter," said Doc Murray. "The sun's going to heat this place up fast. And there'll be debris falling soon enough."

Digsy grabbed the binoculars and broke off to go survey the damage around them.

"Most of it'll burn up in the atmosphere," said Cutter.

"We've got a lot of work to do," said Captain Brass. "First we have to get back to the city and rescue Pep. Whatever vampires are left will make for easy hunting. We have the high ground now. And then once we find that rocket they've been building, we get it ship shape — we've an entire scrap yard to pick over — then we can get out of here. We don't need anything fast. Just enough to get us into a space lane."

"Ah... Captain," called Digsy. "You should see this."

Captain Brass struggled to his feet and joined Digsy. He was standing at the edge of the mesa and as the Captain approached, he handed off the binoculars.

From where they were standing they could look down upon a stretch of rolling desert hills beyond which was the rocket graveyard, and beyond that, on a high amplification setting, they could even see the vampire city in the distance.

But beyond that, at the edge of the binocular's range, a stream of smoke pointed skyward, at the top of which was the tiny silhouette of a makeshift rocket. It was slowly climbing skyward, escaping from the vampire planet.

Captain Brass lowered the binoculars then growled: "Hell and damnation."

* * * * *

In an office in Rocket Patrol's secret base on Pluto's moon, Charon, a man looked out a window made of inches thick glassteel. Charon was as round and unremarkable as a cue ball. A perfect sphere of ice. Even the sky was a letdown: slate black. The moon's surface was polished so smooth that it reflected an entire galaxy worth of starlight and thus the surface glowed like a city. Anything beyond it was invisible. An office with a window was a worthless perk.

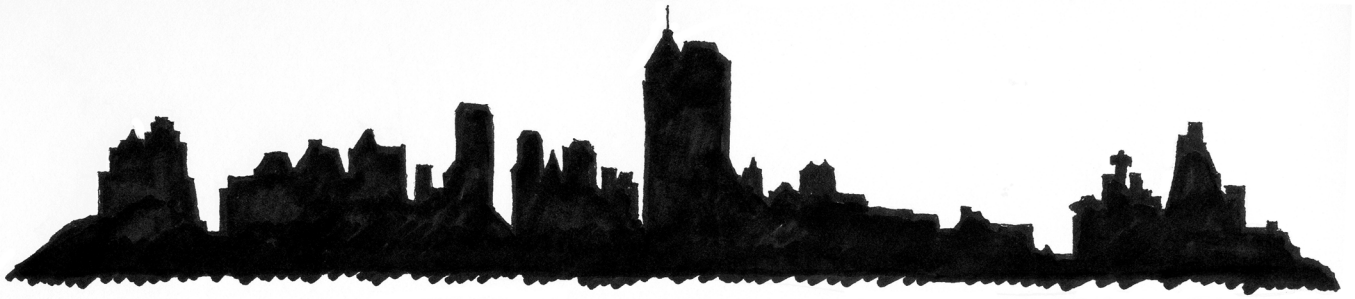
There was a knock at the door behind him.

"Enter," he said.

"Commander," said a young man, his insignia indicating he was a lieutenant. "The last of the scouts have reported in. A negative from all sectors."

The commander nodded as he walked over to a star chart that occupied the better part of one wall. He plucked a red pushpin from a green-tinted blob on the map.

"It's been six months," he said. "We can assume the Hellcat is lost. Send out a memorandum. Security class omega. Rocket traffic through the Devil's Squall is forbidden. The nebula is quarantined. Effective immediately." ☠



The Stock Market Enigma

a One-Page Mystery

by Jack Draper

On Halloween of 1929, an umbrella in the financial district of Manhattan would have provided scant protection as that morning, just two days after Black Tuesday, it was, quite literally, raining captains of industry. Dawn had brought the realization that there would be no stock market recovery, and as despair overwhelmed these erstwhile tycoons, they leapt by the thousands from the aeries of capitalism, plummeting like their fortunes to meet their doom on the concrete below. So numerous were the falling financiers, that one New Yorker was reported to have famously remarked: "At times the sun was blotted out by pin stripes."

Thus it is that some will follow the credo "Death before dishonor" to the letter, and sad as their tragedy may be, there was at least one man who went to a much greater extreme to cheat financial ruin.

He was named, elaborately, Horace Hieronymous Potter and thanks to years of playing the bull-market of the '20s, he'd amassed quite a tidy fortune. He had a tasteful if not large home on Long Island, a well-regarded if not elite gentleman's club in The Arms, an efficient if not English butler named Arthur, and a faithful terrier named Tip if not a doting wife. All in all, he was very happy.

As is often the case when one fears that their good fortune is more the result of luck than effort, Horace became prone to superstition. He worried constantly that he would inadvertantly upset whatever cosmic balance permitted his affluence. Consequently, he never deviated from an established routine and became known for being ridiculously predictable in his habits. At 6:12 every morning he would read the Wall Street Journal. At 9:17, without fail, he walked Tip, clockwise, twice around the block. On Sundays between 8pm and midnight, he could be found at his club discussing business and playing bridge. And whenever he wished to shuffle his investments, he would travel to the Wall Street office of his broker, Jack Dibney, give his instructions in person and afterwards cross the street to the Palimino Diner, sit in his favorite booth, and order a three-egg break-

fast from Agnes Newburn who'd worked the 6 am to 2pm shift every weekday for 25 years.

Such was the life of Horace Hieronymous Potter. That is, until his September 19th, 1929 visit to his broker at which he liquidated his portfolio and rolled every penny of it into a company named Wellmade Enterprises. A risky venture, to be sure, but Horace knew a bullish market rewards such fiscal derring-do, and in this case, he was certain he had a sure bet. The Sunday previous, a close associate and trusted bridge partner at The Arms — one who was in a position to be an authority on such matters — had assured him that Wellmade was on the verge of a very advantageous stock split. Anyone who invested right away would shortly turn a small fortune into a very large one. The temptation was simply too much for him.

Had the stock market remained stable, perhaps this gamble would have paid off. But, as we now know, of Black Tuesday's casualties, Wellmade Enterprises was one of its most spectacular. Its lawyers would eventually concede, it never really deserved the moniker "well-made."

Many a bridge player from The Arms lost their shirt thanks to that company, and Horace would have numbered among them had he not, just one hour later, returned to his broker's office to change his mind. Not only did he sell everything he'd so recently invested in Wellmade, he went on to put together an admirably diversified portfolio that more than weathering the crash actually thrived as a result of it.

A pity he never got to enjoy the fruits of his labor, for after this enormously fortuitous reversal, Horace Hieronymous Potter, as was his want, crossed the street to the Palimino Diner, ordered a three-egg breakfast and was never seen again.

The reward for his safe return offered by his next-of-kin is as yet unclaimed. The only question is, can *you* figure out where he is?

solution on page 50

SOLUTION TO 4,000 MILES STRAIGHT DOWN (FROM PAGE 8)

Even a reader whose brains are addled by opium or a public-school education should realize that the Miracle Mole did not tunnel to the centre of the Earth. The Earth's core is not cold at all. It's quite warm. And inhabited by lizard creatures leftover from the Jurassic period. No, the truth is, thanks in no small part to the fact that Lord Wilstonshire's crew lacked a geologist, seismologist, or indeed, anyone with any kind of scientific background whatsoever, the iron tunneller was off course almost from the get-go. Thus, it didn't bore towards the Earth's centre, but instead at an angle away from it, and emerged in the middle of the night, in the middle of winter, in the high arctic of the Dominion of Canada... which, just as the *Eskimo* elder had said, is already part of the British Empire!

SOLUTION TO THAT BLOODY MOON (FROM PAGE 16)

Ernest leapt to the very same, perfectly logical conclusion that you surely have: that he, Ernest Tidyman, was a werewolf. The paw prints, the murders, his inability to stay awake, all made sudden sense. At long last, he'd an explanation for why animals hated him so. They caught a whiff of the unnatural about him. No wonder then, as the coroner attested, that Ernest took the reasonable precaution of doing himself in with a silver bullet.

Of course, readers not blinded by inane superstition know that there are no such things as werewolves. Ernest couldn't stay awake on nights the murders took place because he was just one of those people who couldn't stay up late. As for the mysterious paw prints, they were left by Rex, a German shepherd from a neighboring farm. Like all animals, Rex had a powerful hate on for Ernest. It was an irrational animus, but animals are by definition irrational and thus, of Rex, all that can be said for certain is that on nights

brightened by the full moon, the dog would screw up his courage and wander beyond his master's fence in the hopes of finding — then biting — Ernest Tidyman. Failing that, he knew he could always find something worth eating outside the man's door. And as for the murders, they are very likely a lunatic's work, as they did not stop once Ernest Tidyman died. In fact, they continue to this day, and the people of Waktmapaw County still live in fear of the Full-Moon Killer.

SOLUTION TO THE STOCK MARKET ENIGMA (FROM PAGE 49)

The answer, dear reader, is simplicity itself: Horace Hieronymous Potter was a time traveller. Ruined and humiliated by the collapse of Wellmade Enterprises, he waited patiently and saved his pennies for decades, then used the stupendously advanced technology of 1970 to travel back in time to restore the cosmic balance he'd upset with his ill-advised gamble.

Imagine the scene, if you will: His task complete, his fortune and his future secure, an older if not necessarily wiser Horace Hieronymous Potter steps into the Palimino diner. A flood of memories hits him as he recalls this place where he spent so many happy days in the flush of youth. A tear forms in the corner of one eye. Then he notes that someone else is sitting in his favourite booth. Ever polite, but not wanting to jinx himself again by sitting anywhere but his usual seat, he walks over to ask the fellow if he wouldn't mind moving to another table. Meanwhile, the 1929 Horace Hieronymous Potter sits in the Palimino Diner finishing his three-egg breakfast blithely unaware of the arrival of his 1970 self. He feels a tap on his shoulder and as every grade-schooler knows, one cannot come into contact with one's doppelganger without catastrophic results — the universe does not truck with such paradoxes. And so it is that before the words, "Excuse me, chum," can even be uttered, Horace Hieronymous Potter — past, present and future — winks into oblivion.

