



A DIG ALLEN SPACE EXPLORER ADVENTURE

Captives In Space



By Joseph Greene

Illustrated by Herb Mott



GOLDEN PRESS NEW YORK

Dig Allen— Captives In Space

By Joseph Greene

Book 2 In The Dig Allen
Space Explorer Series

With Illustrations By Herb Mott

© COPYRIGHT 1960 BY GOLDEN PRESS, INC. ALL
RIGHTS RESERVED. DESIGNED AND PRODUCED BY
ARTISTS AND WRITERS PRESS, INC.

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A. BY
WESTERN PRINTING AND LITHOGRAPHING COMPANY.

PUBLISHED BY GOLDEN PRESS, INC.,
ROCKEFELLER CENTER, NEW YORK 20, N. Y.

To
Bella

CONTENTS

CHAPTERS

1.	Young Space Explorers	7
2.	The Death Ship	15
3.	The Mysterious Cargo	22
4.	Ghost Voices	29
5.	The Secrets of Mars	36
6.	The Wise Old Man	43
7.	The Strange Castaways	49
8.	The Clue of Con Krags	56
9.	Souvenirs for Sale	63
10.	The Last Chance	70
11.	Journey to Eros	78
12.	Treasures of the Asteroid	85
13.	The New Danger	93
14.	A Tale of Treachery	101
15.	The Unknown World	107
16.	First from the Sun	114
17.	Desperate Odds	122
18.	The Slave Dealers	129
19.	The Cruel Captain	136
20.	Crash Landing	144
21.	Race For Life	151
22.	Final Choice	159

1 Young Space Explorers

Seated in the pilot's cabin of the Explorer Ship *Starover*, Ken Barry stared in amazement through the curved viewport. A moment before he had been looking at black space. It was a quiet, peaceful scene with the bright pinpoints of light from distant stars scattered over the spaceways.

Now, with sudden fear. Ken watched the stars disappear and the dark of space turn into a turmoil of flaring light. And for a minute the boy was too stunned to move!

A strange ball of light heaved and ballooned and rolled outward from what appeared to be a tiny spark. With startling speed it spread over a vast area of space. It glowed and boiled furiously for a brief time, a mass of pure light... and suddenly vanished!

Ken blinked his eyes, unbelievably. Once again he looked. Now the blackness of space spread out before him, peaceful again, empty and lifeless. Steady in the distance were the sharp pinpoints of light from the far-away stars.

Then dismay and horror swept over the boy. Instinct told him that he had just witnessed some great disaster. Beneath his blond, close-cropped hair, his face turned pale. He reached out a shaky hand and pressed a red button on the instrument panel.

The intercom system throughout the great spaceship came to life as a sharp, shrill whistle broke the silence.

It was the signal for emergency action!

Red-haired Digby Allen heard the signal in the spaceship's engine room. The handsome boy of seventeen with the slightly upturned nose and freckled face was inspecting the steelite casing that covered the ship's atomic pile.

He raised his head, and his calm, gray eyes flicked toward the instrument panel on the wall. A flashing red light indicated that the signal came from the control

deck.

Dig pushed himself away from the machinery and floated across the room. Without gravity to hold him down, his lithe, slim body moved through the air with the quick grace of a cat.

As he reached the instrument panel, Dig placed his finger on a toggle switch and waited for the signal to stop.

Several decks above the engine room Jim Barry lay in his bunk, fast asleep. The noise nagged persistently at his sleepy mind. Slowly he stirred. The sound continued. Jim opened his eyes and listened.

The sharp whistle came from the loudspeaker grid in the wall of the cabin. Instantly Jim recognized the alert. He rolled over and sat up.

Jim was the oldest of the three young Space Explorers, tall and quick-tempered and impetuous. He had long brown hair that fell loosely over his forehead. Waiting uneasily for the alert signal to stop, he brushed his hair back with a nervous sweep of his hand.

His eyes still clouded by sleep, he glanced at the chronometer. He still had four hours of rest before his turn on duty.

Abruptly the signal cut off, and Ken Barry's voice came over the loudspeaker. Jim tensed as he heard a quaver of fear beneath his brother's calm voice.

"Attention! Attention! Stand by for emergency operations! Repeat, emergency! Report in to control deck at once!"

Jim reached for the toggle switch on the instrument panel over his bunk. Before he could flip it on, he heard the click of another microphone cutting into the ship's communication system.

Dig Allen's voice came from the loudspeaker. "This is Dig, reporting from the engine room. What's the matter, Ken?"

"I think I sighted a spaceship on fire!"

Jim gasped in horror. Fire in the vacuum of space!

That meant a ship's oxygen and hydrogen tanks had exploded, sure and swift death for all on board.

In the long history of space travel, only once had such an accident occurred. Some twenty years before a meteorite struck the tanks of the S.S. Adonis. The freak fire that swept through the ship had left passengers and crew dead in an instant.

And now, another disaster! Questions whirled through Jim's mind. Was it a passenger ship? Were there survivors?

Dig's voice was very calm as it came over the loudspeaker.

"Where was it?"

"Twenty degrees off our forward vector. Distance fifty thousand miles, or just about that."

"What's our speed?"

"Coasting at thirty."

"Increase speed," Dig ordered. "Correct course and head for the position of the ship in distress!"

"Aye, aye, sir!"

It was natural for Dig Allen to take command in an emergency. From childhood he had lived and traveled in space with his Space Explorer father, Captain Boyd Allen. Even grizzled old veterans of the mighty spaceways respected young Dig Allen for his spacemanship.

Although they were Dig's equals in rank as Space Explorers, Jim and Ken Barry turned instinctively to their friend for leadership. Only a short six months before, the two brothers had been awkward Earthlings on their first space trip.

The Barry boys had been journeying to the Moon to Join their parents, Their father, Dr. Keith Barry, was a great astrophysicist and the director of the Space Research Department of the World Council.

A fateful meeting with Dig Allen on that first trip into space had pulled the brothers into a series of amazing adventures that ended with one of the greatest

discoveries in the history of space exploration.

The courage and intelligence of the three boys helped solve the baffling mystery of *The Forgotten Star*. As a result, the boys had won an opportunity to enlist in the exclusive Space Explorer Corps.

Now, after an intensive course of study on Earth, the three young Space Explorers had their own ship, the *Starover*, newest and mightiest of the Space Explorer fleet.

The *Starover* was on its first space flight when Ken sighted the mysterious disaster. Fear still tightened his throat when he reported over the loudspeaker, "Course corrected and speed increased to high acceleration. We should reach the spacewreck in twenty minutes, plus or minus one."

"Good. Keep checking our approach," Dig said.

"Do you... do you think there's any chance of finding survivors?"

"Not much," Dig replied frankly. "Maybe some were lucky enough to get out in spacesuits. We'll soon know."

"I... I wish we could do something."

"We're doing all we can," Dig said. "Now stand by the radarscope. If you can make contact with the ship in distress, tell them we're coming to help. Give our position and time of arrival."

"Aye, aye, sir." Ken acknowledged the command with the strict discipline of an experienced spaceman.

Jim pulled on his spaceboots, tucked the bottoms of his trousers inside and tightened the boot straps. He slipped into his blue shirt and hurriedly buttoned the sleeves at the wrists. Embroidered on his left shoulder was the triangular insignia of the Space Explorer Corps, with golden lightning bolts crossing it.

As he snapped on his utility belt of leatherex, Jim heard Dig's voice over the intercom.

"Did Jim report in to control, Ken? Where is he?"

"Probably asleep in his bunk. He used most of his rest period studying," Ken answered.

Flipping on the switch, Jim spoke into the wall microphone.

“I’m awake and heard everything. I just didn’t want to interrupt.”

“Report to the control deck for immediate duty. See if you can sight the spacewreck on the magnascope,” Dig ordered in a calm, but firm voice.

“Aye, aye, sir.”

“I’ll Join you in a few minutes. I’m almost through with ship’s inspection.”

Jim closed the switch and hurried out of his cabin. The long passageway had the clean smell of fresh leadium paint and the shiny neatness of a new ship. Knees slightly bent, the magnetic pads on the toes of his spaceboots clicking and scraping against the metal deck, he shuffled forward with the quick, cat-like movement of a spaceman.

Ken was bent over the instrument panel when Jim entered the pilot’s cabin. The blond, broad-shouldered boy was busy at the radarscope. About him curved the control board, shaped like a horseshoe and filled with a confusing array of instruments, blinking lights, gauges, meters and dials. Ken’s fingers moved familiarly over the rows of buttons and switches as he directed the radarscope beam toward the spacewreck.

“Explorer Ship *Starover* calling ship in distress! *Starover* to ship in distress! Can you hear us? We are close, approaching your position. Will stand by for rescue operations in fifteen minutes. *Starover* to ship in distress—reply, please!”

“Any luck?”

Ken swiveled his seat around and waited. No sound came from the loudspeaker. There was a slight crackle of static, nothing more. The younger boy sighed, shook his head, then turned back to the radarscope microphone and began to repeat his call.

Jim swung himself into the co-pilot’s seat. A flick of his finger on a switch opened the magnascope. The powerful telescope lens probed spaceward, reflecting

the view on a screen.

“Where’s the spacewreck?” Jim called out.

“Directly ahead. You can see a faint glow of light.”

“How come there’s a light from it if the ship had a flash fire?” Jim asked.

Ken did not answer.

Finding the glowing spot, Jim centered the cross-hair sight on it and began to magnify the image. Gradually the glowing shape of a spaceship became clear. It was squat, bulging in the middle, and lacking the trim, graceful lines of the large passenger ships.

“A spacefreighter,” Jim said. “No passengers and a small crew.”

The freighter, Jim saw, had been hit by a meteorite just forward of the engine compartment in the stern. The meteorite had ripped through almost the entire width of the ship, leaving the tail assembly hanging to the rest of the hull by a narrow, jagged piece of metal.

A dull glow of orange light coming from the smashed engine room was reflected by the silvery hull, giving the spaceship a weird, fiery appearance.

“Pretty badly smashed up,” Jim remarked just as Dig Allen came into the room.

The red-haired boy looked past Jim’s shoulder at the magnascope screen and drew in his breath in amazement.

“What’s the matter, Dig?”

“An old spacefreighter,” Dig said after a while, ignoring Jim’s question. “This class of spaceship has been condemned as unsafe for years. I didn’t know any of them were still blasting through the spaceways.”

“That’s not what surprised you, Dig,” Jim said quietly. “What was it?”

“The orange glow,” Dig answered.

“What about it?”

“It’s from the ship’s atomic pile. The collision must have cracked the protective casing!”

Jim stared at his friend. Their eyes met. “So that’s it, is it?”

“Aye! We’re looking at a huge atomic bomb!”

At that moment a great flash of light burst from the twisted engine room, swept over them and on into space. So intense was the light that the stars disappeared. The *Starover* seemed to hang motionless and silent in a bowl of golden light.

“That’s what I saw from a distance!” Ken cried when the light suddenly vanished and the darkness of space returned. “There couldn’t be two flash fires...”

“No,” Dig said. “We just saw a carbolead damper rod vaporize from the heat of the atomic pile.”

“But carbolead rods are supposed to control the atomic pile!” Ken cried, whirling about to face his friend.

“That atomic pile is out of control,” Dig said. “It may blow up any second! Or it may be contained for a while, depending on how many carbolead rods are still working.”

“What’s the limit of safety?” Ken asked. He glanced at the distance indicator. “We’re less than two hundred miles from it now.”

“When the atomic pile blows up, everything within a thousand miles will go with it. That includes us!”

“What are they waiting for?” Ken cried in despair. “Why don’t they answer us?” He looked at Dig wildly. “I know! They have no power! The engine room is cut off...”

“The emergency batteries take over the moment the engine room fails.” Dig shook his head. “The crew on that ship must be dead, or they’d answer our call.”

“Can’t we do something?” Jim asked.

“Yes! Get away from here. Blast away. Ken.”

The *Starover* had been closing the gap steadily. Now the two ships were less than a mile apart. Ken reached for the power release, but stopped suddenly as his eyes caught a slight movement on the side of the wreck.

The three boys peered through the viewport. A freight hatch was slowly swinging open. At first they saw only the dark interior of the hold. Then the squat shape of a space lifeboat emerged.

“The crew is alive!” Ken shouted joyfully. He leaned over the radarscope microphone and began to call, “*Starover* to lifeboat! Standing by to pick up survivors. Reply, please!”

Instead of replying, the lifeboat’s rockets suddenly exploded. The little ship leaped away into space.

“Go after them,” Dig ordered. “We’ll pick them up at a safe distance.”

“Aye, aye, sir!” Ken again reached for the power release. And again he stopped.

This time it was the sound of voices coming over the loudspeaker that startled him. Dumbly he stared at the direction indicator.

“The voices are coming from the spacewreck,” Jim said, “not from the lifeboat!”

“I don’t understand,” Ken said.

“What’s there to understand?” Jim cried angrily. “There re still people on the wreck! They’re captives—captives in space! They’ll die when the atomic pile blows up!”

“But the lifeboat!” Ken said.

“The men in the lifeboat deserted their spacemates!” Dig lid, his eyes narrowing into angry slits.

2 The Death Ship

In the code of spacemen there is no greater crime than that of desertion in time of danger. The young Space Explorers were shocked by the treachery they were witnessing. With growing anger they watched the lifeboat speeding away.

“We’re going to save the men marooned on the wreck, Ken said in a voice choked with indignation. “Then we’ll go get that lifeboat!” He began to maneuver the *Starover* closer to the drifting freighter.

“Jim, bring out two spacesuits,” Dig ordered quietly. “You and I will board the ship.”

“Aye, aye, sir!” Jim left the control room.

“Fire a signal flare after the lifeboat. Ken. The accident may have wrecked their equipment. But they’ll see the flare. If they ignore it, we’ll be sure that they knew they were leaving their spacemates to die.”

“Aye, aye, sir!” Ken answered immediately.

Dig turned and hurried to the airlock. Jim was waiting for him there with two spacesuits checked and ready for use. The boys dressed quickly, then stepped into the airlock. In less than a minute the atmosmeter indicated that the air had been pumped out of the lock. Dig opened the outer hatch and the two boys crawled out on the hull of the ship.

Around them was the endless, stomach-twisting emptiness of space, lightless and motionless. The eerie stillness was frightening. Jim’s heart pounded wildly as the sensation of falling swept over him.

The sound of Dig’s voice over the radicom earphones calmed him.

“Dig calling Ken at control. Can you hear me?”

“Loud and clear.” Ken replied.

“We’re going to space-jump now. We’ll report from the freighter.”

“Aye, aye! Standing by!”

Ken had brought the two ships close together. Dig pointed to the freighter.

"I'll go first, Jim," he said. "Hook your safety line to me."

"Aye, aye, sir." Jim released the clip of his safety line and snapped it to the back of Dig's belt. "Safety line hooked as ordered."

Dig studied the position of the wrecked ship for a moment, then dived headfirst into space. In his bright yellow spacesuit. Dig seemed to float easily, the momentum carrying him across. He brought his knees up to his chin slowly as he came closer to the hull of the freighter. In a weird movement, his body began to roll over backward. Then, when his feet pointed at the freighter, he straightened out his body. A second later the magnetoes on his spaceboots touched the metal hull and gripped solidly.

He was standing with his head toward Jim as he called, "All right here. Pull yourself across, Jim."

While Jim hauled on the safety line, Dig called the ship.

"We're going inside. Ken, so you won't hear from us for a few minutes. Keep a sharp lookout."

"How long have we got before... before the atomic pile..."

"No way of knowing. Ken. Depends on the carbolead rods and how many are left." Then quickly changing the subject, he asked, "What about the lifeboat?"

"The flare caught up with them and released its comet tail signal. The lifeboat ignored it. If anything, I think they began to accelerate!"

"Keep a check on its direction."

"Aye, aye!"

As soon as Jim landed, the two boys shuffled forward to the freighter's airlock. It was closed, but opened easily when Dig pulled the release lever.

Inside everything worked normally. As soon as the air pressure reached the correct level, they opened the

inner hatch and stepped into the passageway.

“We can take off our spacehelmets,” Dig called over the radicom.

The air in the ship had a stale odor. The passageway was empty. They moved forward to the control deck, searching every room and freight hold on the way.

There was an accumulation of dirt everywhere they looked, empty plastubes, plastirags and even red Martian dust. In one of the freight compartments the boys found empty animal cages. Another was filled with smashed up

crates and boxes.

It was an old ship, and showed it in the rust spots and peeling leadium paint.

The control room, when the boys entered it, was deserted. The radarscope microphone switch had been left open, but the screen and scanner were shut off. A hurried examination showed that all the instruments were in working order.

Dig leaned over the microphone and called the *Starover*.

“I hear you loud and clear,” Ken answered. “Direction indicator shows the voices came from that microphone.”

“Well, there’s no one here now,” Dig said.

Jim pushed past his friend and looked into the forward nose compartment. It was a small room used mostly for storage. It was empty and he returned, shaking his head at Dig.

“Nothing there, either,” Jim said, “I just don’t understand it. We heard someone. And there’s no one here!”

“Let’s go back, Jim,” Dig said. “We’ll go after the lifeboat. Perhaps they can clear it up.”

“Hurry up!” Ken said over the loudspeaker. “You’ve been there too long already. The ship might blow up any minute. Another damper rod went off while you were inside.”

“Coming.” Dig led the way back to the airlock.

“I felt as if someone were watching me,” Jim muttered.

“I felt it, too,” Dig said. “Back there in the control room.”

Before putting on his spacehelmet, Jim looked about and shouted, “Ahoy! Any one on board?”

His voice echoed through the deserted ship. No one answered; nothing moved. It was a dead ship and the two boys shuddered at the ghostly silence.

“I don’t like it, walking around inside an atomic bomb!” Dig said. “Let’s go.”

They locked on their spacehelmets and went into the airlock. Minutes later they were floating back toward the *Starover*. Landing on the hull, Jim paused to call his brother.

“When was the last time you heard the voices, Ken?”

“A few seconds after you landed on the freighter. I... Hey! Wait a minute!” Ken stopped suddenly and for several seconds there was silence on the earphones. Then, “The voices are on again!”

“You sure?”

“Yes, Jim, I’m sure! Two voices, very low, whispering. Can’t make out what they’re saying.”

Jim turned to look back at the drifting spacewreck, puzzled and uneasy.

“There’s something there...” he started to say.

Dig pulled him inside the airlock and shut the outer hatch. “We can’t take a chance on going back.” He started the motors working. “We’ve got to be a thousand miles away before she blows up!”

They waited in the cramped airlock while the pumps filled it with air. Then Dig opened the inner hatch and, stepping into the passageway, began to strip off his spacesuit.

“Put these away in the locker,” he said, handing Jim his equipment. “I’ll go forward and get Ken to start

blasting out of here.”

Dig hurried forward to the control cabin. Ken was studying the Solar System chart. He pointed to a place on the star map as the red-headed boy came in.

“This is our position. The lifeboat appears to be heading toward Mars.”

Dig glanced at the chart. They were roughly in the area of Earth’s orbit around the Sun. The Earth was somewhere on the other side of the Sun and the planet Venus was just slipping out of sight behind the flaming clouds of atomic fire which shot up from the Sun’s surface.

“You may be right. Earth and Venus are too far away,” Dig said. “Mercury is almost on a direct line with us on the Sunward side, Mars in similar position on our outward side. We’re between them.”

“I’ll blast toward Mars and try to cut off the lifeboat!”

“Good idea. There’s nothing on Mercury, so they must be going to Mars.”

“Can they make it?” asked Ken.

“With extra fuel and food supplies, yes. But get going. We’re wasting time.” Dig looked around. “Where’s Jim?”

“Wasn’t he with you?” Ken asked in surprise. “I want him on the magnascope...” Suddenly Dig stopped. “Put on the radicom beam!” he cried. “I think that spacefool has gone back to the freighter!”

Ken signaled quickly. “*Starover* to Jim! *Starover* to Jim! Where are you?” He looked at his friend. “What makes you think Jim would do a fool thing like going back?” Before Dig could reply, there was a crackle of static on the loudspeaker, then Jim’s voice came in.

“I was just going to call you,” he said. “I’ve space-jumped back to the freighter. I’m going inside again to look for the survivors. I’m sure they’re here somewhere. Maybe hurt...”

“Come back!” Ken shouted angrily. “Come back before you get us all blasted to atoms!”

“Don’t worry about me,” Jim called back. “You and Dig take the *Starover* to a safe distance and wait there for me. I’ll call you to pick me up later.”

“I’m ordering you back,” Dig said grimly. “The atomic pile can blow up any minute.”

As if to emphasize the warning, another damper rod flared. The massive ball of light swept over them, blanking out radio Communication with a shell of electrons speeding outward.

It lasted only a minute, but Jim was already inside the wrecked ship when Ken tried to contact him again.

“He’s gone!” the blond boy cried in dismay. “What shall we do, Dig? We can’t stay... and we can’t leave him!”

Dig’s keen eyes were fixed on the spacewreck hanging motionless less than a hundred yards away. A plan was rapidly taking shape in his mind.

“I’m going spaceside,” he finally said. “That engine room is the danger, and it’s held to the rest of the ship by just a few feet of metal. I’ll try to cut it away.”

“With a cutting torch?” Ken asked. “Will it work?”

“Aye! If we have time!”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Throw a magnetic grapppler to the nose of the freighter,” Dig explained carefully. “Then take up a circular course. The freighter will be swinging behind us like a ball on the end of a string. When I cut the engine room away, it will fly off in a straight line!”

“Aye, aye! I understand,” Ken said, hope rising in his voice.

Dig hurried off to the tool locker. He picked out a cutting torch and a tank of acetylene gas. With these under his arms, he sped to the airlock where he slipped into his spacesuit. He strapped the acetylene tank on his back beside the oxytank which supplied him with oxygen.

Another damper rod was flaring up as he came through the outer airlock hatch. Paying no attention to the blazing light, Dig shuffled along the hull until he was

facing the spacewreck. Then he dived across, just as the light vanished.

Once on the freighter, he hooked his safety line to a ring bolt and moved cautiously to the stern. The metal of the hull was thick, but not nearly as hard as the material with which new spaceships were made.

He pressed the starter of the cutting torch and a thin, hot flame shot out of the nozzle. A mass of sparks streamed around him as the fire bit into the twisted metal and began to cut through.

Another ball of light ballooned over him but Dig held the cutting torch steady. The damper rods were going faster, he realized. How many were left? Time was growing short.

Inch by inch the torch cut through the metal. Another rod atomized. Some minutes later, with more than half the metal cut away, another rod went, followed quickly by a second one.

Now Dig was two-thirds through. And now, only a few feet were left to cut! The crackle of static in his earphones died away; no more rods exploded and the electron blanket disappeared into space. He called Ken.

“Only a little more to cut through,” he said. “Build up all the speed you can get out of the rocketubes. When you see the engine room flying off, change course at a sharp 90 degree angle!”

“Aye, aye!”

“Another minute, or less! Stand by! And may the luck of space be with us!”

Suddenly Dig became aware of the fact that no more “damper rods had flared in the last few minutes. He glanced toward the engine room uneasily. There was an ominous quiet. Now only inches of metal held the deadly atomic pile to the rest of the ship.

Would the damper rods hold back the wild fury of the atomic fire?

The cutting torch bit into the last inch of steelite.

It was a race against death!

3 The Mysterious Cargo

Alone in the control cabin of the spaceship, Ken waited. A feeling of doom began to creep over him. It was one of the few times in his life that the husky, blond boy knew real fear. But he was not thinking of his own safety.

Jim was somewhere inside the old spacefreighter... Dig was clinging to the hull of the wreck, desperately cutting away at the torn and twisted metal. And all of them were practically sitting on a live atom bomb!

Ken finally forced himself to turn to the work at hand. Pushed by short bursts of power from the nose rockets, the *Starover* was swinging away from the wrecked freighter.

Ken watched the videoscreen as the stern scanner gradually brought the image of the freighter into view, directly behind the *Starover's* tail fins. Then he pressed the release button on his instrument panel.

From a tube in one of the great fins, a round magnetic disc shot out. It sailed lazily through space, trailing a thin, steelite towing cable. It finally struck the nose of the freighter and the powerful magnet stuck to the hull.

Ken began to release short blasts from the stem rockets. As the ship moved, he let the towing cable out a good length before he set the grapples to a holding position, making sure that the jet flames would not wash over the spacewreck. Then he began to blast on the main rockets.

The needle on the speedometer began to move upward. The ship trembled as the mighty jets began to roar. As the ship began to pick up speed. Ken blasted the steering nose rockets and guided the *Starover* into a great, circular course.

He could do nothing now but let the rockets accelerate the ship's speed, and watch and wait. Beads of perspiration gathered on his forehead as he watched Dig's figure through the stem scanner.

The speedometer needle continued to move. Soon it

passed the one-hundred-thousand-miles-per-hour mark. He watched, fascinated, as the needle reached two hundred thousand miles, and still kept moving.

The *Starover* continued to pick up speed, racing around and around in a five-hundred-mile-wide circle, like a crazed dog chasing its own tail.

Three hundred thousand miles per hour... and suddenly the stream of sparks from the cutting torch stopped. The rear part of the freighter began to drift away.

Dig had cut through!

With a cry of triumph. Ken threw open the emergency power lever. They were clear of the engine room with its deadly atomic pile! The *Starover* fairly leaped through space.

He blasted the nose steering rockets and the ship made a sharp turn that almost hurled him out of his seat. The stem section of the spacewreck with its deadly engine room was hurled in the opposite direction.

“How fast are we moving away from each other?” Ken thought. “Will we make it before the atomic pile blows up?”

The *Starover* was moving through space at more than eighty miles a second! The speed of the engine room was about the same! Added up, they were separating by more than one hundred and sixty miles each second.

“Seven or eight seconds! That’s all we need!” Ken shouted into the microphone, hoping that Dig would hear him. “Seven or eight seconds to safety!”

Faintly, mixed with static, came Dig’s reply.

“I’m hanging on, Ken!”

Wide-eyed, Ken stared at the chronometer. How slowly the hand seemed to move! Three seconds... four... five... six... seven... eight... nine! They were safe!

With a sigh of relief. Ken looked at the stern scanner screen. Even as his eyes found the faint glow that came from the engine room, it seemed to leap outward and

expand with the speed of light. A ball of orange flame a thousand miles across was hanging in space like a miniature Sun!

Ken could not tear his gaze from the amazing sight. Then he closed his eyes and fell back exhausted into the soft foampad cushions of the pilot's seat.

A moment later he roused himself and tried to call Dig over the radarscope. But the atomic explosion had hurled a great cloud of electrons into space and radio communication was blotted out.

He set the controls on automatic and left the cabin. At the airlock, he dressed in his spacesuit and opened the inner hatch.

When he came out on the hull of the ship, the atomic bomb was still glowing. But it was rapidly shrinking.

Was some magnetic force squeezing it back into a smaller and smaller ball? Ken asked himself. He turned and looked at the distant Sun.

It, too, was a great atomic bomb. Why didn't it suddenly fly apart, expanding swiftly until it covered the farthest planet of the Solar System? Perhaps there was some magnetic force in space that contained the mighty forces in the Sun like a giant, invisible bottle.

He moved carefully toward the stem of the *Starover*. Beyond it was the spacewreck, hanging silent and still in space. He saw Dig in his yellow spacesuit move slowly toward the freighter's airlock.

For a moment. Ken stood poised on the edge of a giant tail fin, then he leaped for the towing cable. His gloved hand caught the steelite wire and he began to pull himself across.

Dig met him as he reached the hull of the freighter. Through the noise of the static still around them, he heard his friend's voice.

"Everything under control?"

"Aye," Ken replied. "I put the *Starover* on automatic."

A slight chuckle in his voice, Dig asked, "Is that why

you came over? To tell me?”

“No! I came to pin Jim’s ears back!”

Ken was angry. He did not lose his temper often or easily. But when he did, he was not quick to forgive and to forget, though in the end he always did.

The two boys went inside the freighter and, in the passageway, stripped off their spacesuits.

Ken looked up and down the passageway.

“Ahoy! Jim!” he shouted. “Where are you?”

From a nearby doorway came the startled reply. “Right here!” A moment later Jim poked his head out, amazement on his face. “What... what are you doing here?”

Ken glared at his older brother. “You’ve got a nerve asking us that!”

Jim turned to the red-headed boy, puzzled. “What’s he angry at me for?”

“Because you risked your own life, mine, and Ken’s, as well as the safety of our ship!” Dig snapped at him. “We’ll talk about it later... at a court-martial! Right now I want to call the Space Guard!”

He brushed Jim aside and went striding toward the control deck. Ken followed him. Jim looked after them, running his fingers through his ruffled hair.

“You should be a thousand miles from here,” he said lamely. “What happened to the atomic pile? I don’t...”

Ken’s withering look silenced Jim, and he followed his companions quietly.

Dig sat down at the control board, activated the radarscope and beamed toward Mars.

“Explorer Ship *Starover* calling Space Guard headquarters at Marsport! *Starover* to Marsport Space Guards!”

The lines on the videoscreen wavered, then cleared, and the face of a young Guardsman appeared.

“Space Guard control to *Starover*. Contact made!”

“Sergeant Brool, please. Urgent!”

“Sergeant Brool is on emergency duty on the asteroid Eros,” the Guardsman replied. “Corporal Jon May is in temporary command here.”

“May we speak with him, sir?” Dig requested.

“Aye, aye! One moment, please.” The Guardsman glanced at the Space Explorer uniforms the boys were wearing. He nodded and switched off.

A moment later the face of Corporal Jon May appeared on the screen. They had met before and the young corporal instantly recognized the boys.

“Hello!” he greeted them cheerfully. “How’s your new ship?”

“Perfect,” Dig replied. “But we’re calling from an old spacefreighter. I want to give you a full report. Record please.”

The corporal nodded and flipped a switch on his desk.

Dig quickly narrated their adventure. The corporal listened with growing concern.

“We lost track of the lifeboat while cutting the engine room away,” Dig finished. “Last position we have, it was heading for Mars.”

“We’ll keep a sharp lookout for it,” the corporal promised. “Bring the wreck to the Mars station. I’ll have our laboratory give it a thorough check. Perhaps we’ll learn something about its crew and owners.”

“Aye, aye, sir. By the way, is Sergeant Brool coming back to Marsport?”

“No, Dig. He’s going to stay on the asteroid Eros. Something very hush-hush is going on there.”

“Any idea what it is?” Jim asked. k- The corporal shook his head. “No, but your Dad stopped off here two weeks ago. Mrs. Barry was with him. I think Eros is now the headquarters of Space Research.”

“That means the asteroid will be our home! Mom and Dad will be living there all the time!” Ken exclaimed happily.

“Well, I didn’t care much for the Moon as our home

base,” Jim laughed. “Too close to Earth.”

“See you on Mars!” The corporal broke the connection.

“Aye, aye, sir!” Dig closed the switch and turned to Jim. “Now, what did you find out about those mysterious voices?”

“Nothing,” Jim answered. “The place was empty. All I found was a crate of toys in one of the freight holds.”

“Toys?” Ken asked. “Who’d be fool enough to waste valuable cargo space for toys?”

“Well, these toys are different,” Jim said. “I opened one of the crates and.... Well, suppose you see for yourselves!”

Jim led the way to one of the compartments near the airlock. Inside, the deck was littered with smashed pieces of wooden crates. Other crates, still unopened, stood piled against one wall.

Dig picked up a piece of wood and examined it curiously. “I’ve never seen material like this,” he said.

“You wouldn’t, living in space most of your life,” Jim said. “That happens to be wood.”

“Wood? Real wood that comes from trees?”

“Yes, Dig. Like the kind that comes from trees,” Jim laughed.

“Why use this weak stuff when there’s plenty of plastic for crates?” the red-haired boy asked.

“That’s part of the mystery,” Jim told him. “Now look in the crate.”

On a wooden shelf stood two tractors, each securely fastened to the sides of the crate by tiny metal coils. The toys were about ten inches high and perhaps twelve inches long. One glance was enough to impress the boys with the expert workmanship that had gone into the manufacture of the toys. The metal was smooth, as though it had been cast in one perfect piece. Each link on the caterpillar treads, each lever inside the driver’s cab, each nut and bolt seemed to be fitted with amazing skill.

Ken reached into the crate and released the spring

coils that held the toys.

“It’s a lot heavier than it looks,” he said, lifting one of the little tractors out. “And look, there’s grease here on the hub.”

“It’ll work, too,” Jim said. “Push one of the levers.” Ken did, and the tractor began to move forward, the treads turning smoothly. Ken tried some of the other levers and found that the tractor could turn, reverse, move in a circle.

“We can play with the toys later,” Jim said. “Come with me. I’ve got something else to show you.”

The older boy took his companions into the next room. Facing the doorway, lined up against the wall, was a row of animal cages.

“Look them over very carefully,” Jim suggested.

All the cages were open, their gates unlocked. Apparently, small animals had been kept in them for they stood only about two feet high. Tiny slivers of something that looked like straw lay scattered on the floor. Fastened into a corner of each cage was a tiny barrel. Water dripped slowly from one of them.

“Notice the little cups hanging beside each barrel?” Jim said, pointing. “Ever hear of an animal that used a drinking cup?”

Each cup, the size of a thimble, had two tiny horizontal handles set in the side.

“Take a look at this cage,” Jim said, leading them to the last one in the row.

The door of the cage was locked. But in the rear, four bars had been neatly cut, leaving an opening some six inches wide and eight inches high. The metal rods were lying on the deck beside the cage.

Ken picked up one of them and examined the edge.

“Cut by a sharp instrument,” he said. “A file or a hacksaw.”

“Ever hear of animals that escaped from a cage by cutting the bars?” Jim asked.

4 Ghost Voices

The young Space Explorers studied the empty cages for a long time. Then, uneasily, their eyes moved about the room. Not a sound disturbed the silence around them. Ken shivered suddenly without being aware of it. "It's... it's weird," he said in a low, tense voice.

An aura of doom seemed to be hanging over the spacefreighter, some strange, forbidding mystery. The boys sensed it.

"There's probably a simple explanation for all this," Dig said. He spoke confidently, but there was a waver of doubt in his voice.

"Sure," Jim said. "An explanation like what?"

"Well, maybe the crew lost the key to that cage," Dig suggested, "and had to cut the bars to rescue the animals."

"Nice try, Dig, but it doesn't explain the drinking cups."

Dig looked away. "All right, Jim. I won't argue about it. Let's take some of the toys..."

"If they are toys," Jim broke in.

"...and go back to the ship. We won't find any answers standing around here gaping at each other."

They returned to the room with the crates. Using a crowbar he found lying on the deck, Jim pried open one side of a crate. Wooden shelves separated it into four sections. The toy tractors were on the uppermost shelf. Below were two toy excavators, also fastened by the thin metal coils.

Ken took out one of the toy excavators and placed it on the deck.

"Let's see how it works," Jim said.

Ken flicked the lever inside the tiny cab. The crane rose from the center of the little machine and moved forward. A scooper at the end opened its sharp jaws, then dropped to the metal deck. It scratched and

scraped, clamped shut its jaws, rose again, turned slowly to one side and stopped.

“It works,” Jim said. “Just like an old-fashioned excavator back on Earth.”

They examined the toys in the third section. These resembled flat-bottomed boats, equipped with skis. But the strangest of the toys they found on the bottom of the crate. They were little cabins, each set on six spindly metal legs, looking very much like spiders.

“There’s an unearthly something about these toys,” Ken said. “Let’s get out of here.”

“All right,” Jim agreed. He picked up two of them and started out of the room. “Grab a couple,” he called over his shoulder. “We’ll look them over later.”

Ken and Dig each picked up one of the toys and followed Jim to the airlock. Nothing more was said until they had stored their spacesuits in the locker on the *Starover*.

“You play around with the toys, Jim,” Dig grinned. “I’ll set course for Mars.”

In the control cabin Jim and Ken placed the toys on the chart table and began to examine them while Dig recorded the course for Mars on the gyrobot tapes.

“I’d like to take one apart,” Jim said. “There’s no key to wind up the motors. I wonder how they keep on running.”

“We have something more important to do first,” Ken said when Dig finished his work at the instrument panel.

“We have?” Jim looked at his brother.

“A court-martial!” Ken snapped. “We’re spacemen, Jim. Discipline is a matter of life and death for all of us.” He glanced at Dig. Their eyes met for an instant. “Will you act as chairman?”

The red-headed boy nodded. “Do you agree, Jim?”

“I agree.”

“You may speak in your own defense,” Dig said.

“I have no defense,” Jim said. “I was sure that someone was left on board the wreck and just couldn’t leave. That’s all. I wanted you to take the *Starover* to a safe distance so that all of us wouldn’t be in danger. I couldn’t desert hem...”

“But you wanted us to desert you!” Ken accused. “That would have been all right, I suppose,” he added bitterly. “I was wrong. I’m sorry! How many times do you want me say it? I was wrong!” Jim looked down. His face was flushed with anger and shame.

“All right,” Dig said. “What’s the punishment?”

“Take two hours away from his study period,” Ken proposed.

“I’m against that,” Dig said. “If Jim doesn’t study to be a better spaceman and scientist, our whole team suffers.”

“I didn’t think of that. Sorry.”

“How about extra clean-up duties for me?” Jim suggested. “I’ll prepare all meals, make the bunks...”

After a short discussion they agreed on Jim’s proposal. The extra duties were to continue until they reached Mars.

“I might as well start now,” Jim said, feeling better. “I’m hungry and I think you two are.”

He left the control room and headed for the ship’s galley.

Dig turned back to the astronavigation chart, studied their position, then fed the figures he had jotted down into the ship’s computer. Each new spaceship was now equipped with one of the thinking machines, the popular name for the computers. They were complicated and expensive pieces of equipment, consisting of thousands of tiny wires and circuits connecting tubes and transistors, diodes and triodes and thermo-couples.

Within seconds Dig had his answer. The electronic brain solved the problem and clicked out the information.

“We continue to accelerate for six hours, fourteen minutes,” Dig read. “Coast nine hours, then begin to decelerate for landing on Mars. Time for the trip, 18 hours.”

Ken whistled softly. “That’s hitting a speed of almost two million miles per hour!”

“The *Starover* can go faster if we have to push it,” Dig said proudly. “We don’t know yet what the top speed is.”

Ken took over the controls and adjusted the power release according to the computer’s directions. He had just finished when Jim came in carrying a tray loaded with plastubes of hot protein-rich soup, sandwich concentrates and chocomilk.

“Come and get it!” Jim announced cheerfully.

“Ummm... I like the service here,” Ken laughed. “Why don’t you break ship’s discipline more often, huh?”

“Tomorrow, after my rest period,” Dig said slowly, a grin on his face, “I want breakfast in bed, Jim.”

Jim smiled at the good-natured ribbing and reached for a plastube of soup.

His hand stopped in mid-air.

The sound of a sharp click came over the loudspeaker. “There it is again!” Jim whispered.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Dig assured him. “A space pebble probably bounced off...” he too stopped, his mouth open, surprise on his face.

A voice, clear and distinct, came from the loudspeaker. A second later another voice replied. Two people were talking to each other, unaware that the radarscope microphone was open. The direction indicator pointed to the spacewrecked freighter as the source of the beam.

It was a strange language, one the young explorers had never heard before. But in the tone and rhythm they sensed fear and despair.

“There’s no one on board the freighter!” Jim said in a

husky voice. "I know! I searched it thoroughly!"

"We'll go look again," Dig said. "Jim, get the spacesuits ready and meet me at the airlock!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" Jim hurried out.

"Stand by the controls. Ken. Record the voices on tape."

"Aye, aye, sir!"

The red-headed boy followed Jim out of the cabin. Ken, alone, switched on the tape recorder. The conversation between the two voices continued for some time, then stopped abruptly. A few minutes later, Jim and Dig called from the control room of the spacefreighter.

"Dig to *Starover*! Can you hear me, Ken?"

"As clearly as I heard the two voices," Ken replied.

"Do you hear the voices now?"

"No. They cut off about a minute ago."

"There's no one here. Absolutely no one!" Dig said, in an awed tone of voice. "We're going to search this ship from top to bottom. Stand by."

"Leave the mike open, Dig," Ken called.

"Aye, aye, sir!" Dig replied.

Ken heard their footsteps scraping and clicking against the metal deck as the two boys moved through the freighter's passageway. After a while, there was silence.

Ken saw the grave look on their faces when they returned to the *Starover* some time later, and he knew at once that their search had been unsuccessful. But ten minutes after they had settled down in the control cabin, the strange voices were again heard from the loudspeaker.

"Remember what Woody Weston said about the wrecked ships in the Graveyard of Space on the Moon?" Jim asked.

"You mean that the ghosts of spacemen lost in the deeps come back to haunt their old ships?" Ken shook

his head. "Don't tell me you're starting to believe that nonsense!"

"Let's get back to spaceflight routine," Dig suggested. "Ken, stand by the controls. Jim, we'll get some sleep, eh?"

"Aye, aye, sir," Jim replied. Then, with a stealthy glance at the loudspeaker, he added, "If I can get any sleep with that going on!"

It was a trio of tired and nerve-racked Space Explorers who brought the *Starover* into orbit around Mars. For most of the eighteen hours of the journey the boys had been haunted by the ghostly voices. Twice they had searched the old freighter, and found nothing.

Now, thoroughly mystified, they stood by the viewport and gazed down at the round, reddish surface of Mars. The sunlight was bright on the great stretches of rock and sand. Along the networks of canals the green Martian bush grew lush and thick.

Above them was the deep, star-sprinkled blackness of space.

Jim said quietly, "Space Guard patrol cruiser coming up to meet us. Must be Corporal May."

"I'll be glad when he takes that old spacewreck off our hands," Ken said, sighing wearily.

Some ten minutes later, the squat patrol cruiser passed the *Starover*. A figure dressed in the bright orange of the Space Guards dived across to the Space Explorers' ship. The patrol cruiser continued until it was alongside the wreck. Then it moved in slowly and the two ships touched, magnetic grapplers holding them together.

"You can drop the tow cable," Corporal May said as he came into the control room. "Anything new?"

The boys told him about the mysterious voices they had recorded. The corporal took the reel of tape from Jim and said, "I'll play it later and see what I can make out of these voices."

The corporal was a tall, young man with a ruddy face and straight, black hair.

Dig looked up at him. “Any news of the space lifeboat?”

“Aye,” said the corporal. “We found one deserted in the North desert. Probably abandoned by smugglers. We’ll know if it’s the one from the freighter after my men run tests on it.” He glanced at the freighter through the viewport. “The crew is boarding her now.”

“We’ll be in Marsport, sir,” Dig said, “in case you need us.” The Guardsman nodded and put on his spacehelmet. The boys waited until he had gone through the airlock and was jetting across to his ship. Then Dig released the power lever and the *Starover* began to drop toward the surface of Mars.

“How long will we stay here?” Jim asked. “I was hoping blast off for home. Mom and Dad are on Eros...”

“I don’t know how long we’ll be here,” Dig replied grimly. “We’re going to Spaceman’s Roost.”

“Spaceman’s Roost!” Ken gasped. “We should stay out of that place! We were lucky to come out alive the last time we went there!”

“I know,” Dig said. “But we’ve got to talk to Old Dorkas. If there’s anyone who can help us solve the mystery of the little toys... and the ghost voices, he can!”

“So we go into Spaceman’s Roost and take a chance on having our throats cut!” Ken muttered. “I don’t like it!”

5 Secrets of Mars

In the pale blue sky of Mars, the hull of the spacewreck glittered with silvery light. Beside it hovered the chunky shape of the Space Guard patrol cruiser. Both ships were shrinking with startling speed as the *Starover* dropped away like a stone. Through the rear scanner, the three boys watched the ground rushing up toward them.

“Funny how a few seconds ago we were in space with nothing but darkness around us,” Jim said. “Now we’re in daylight and there’s a blue sky above.”

“The atmosphere on Mars is a lot thinner than Earth’s,” Dig said. “But there’s enough air to give us a regular sky.”

“I never thought I’d feel this way,” Ken remarked slowly, a touch of sadness in his voice. “I feel homesick for Earth.”

Dig said with a short, sharp laugh, “Not me! I always feel like a stranger on Earth.”

“Well, there’s a lot you miss,” Ken said.

“Lots of spacemen dream of saving their money and someday settling on a little farm on Earth. They can have it. I’ll stay in space. That’s home to me.”

The rocketubes began to shake as the ship started to slow its descent. A raging stream of jet flames poured out of her stem, hit the launching pad of the spacefield and cushioned the landing of the great spaceship. The tail fins touched the ground gently. The firing tubes cut out and the ship was still.

Dig shut off the motors and set the instruments on neutral. “We’ll take the little toys with us,” he said, rising from the pilot’s seat. “Jim, wrap them up in some plasticloth.”

The *Starover*, pointing its graceful bow toward the Martian sky, seemed transformed into another ship. What had been the wall of the cabin while in space was now its deck. The oval-shaped doorway was a hatch in

the floor, leading downward. The passageway became a long shaft that ran through the center of the ship.

The boys, taking the carefully wrapped toys with them, descended through the shaft by means of cleats in the wall. Inside the airlock. Dig adjusted the controls so that their bodies would become accustomed to the light atmospheric pressure of Mars.

Several minutes later the air had been thinned and the boys felt comfortable in it. Dig opened the outer hatch and tossed out the wire ladder.

They climbed down to the field slowly. A robot jeep was speeding toward them. Dig waved his hand and called out to it. The electric eye of the jeep picked up the movement of his hand and the sensitive microphone heard his voice. The robot jeep swerved and pulled up in front of them.

They jumped in and Dig gave the order for the jeep to go. It raced across the field toward the gate.

It was midday on Mars, as warm as a fresh spring day on a mountain top on Earth. Main Street, which began at the gates of the spaceport and cut through the thriving city of Marsport, was noisy and crowded.

As the three boys marched down the sidewalk, people turned to stare at them. The sight of a Space Explorer walking through the streets was a rare event. But here were three of them!

A mile or so ahead was the Main Canal, and just over the bridge was Spaceman's Roost. Actually, the canal was not one of the main waterways of Mars, not even an important one, for it was less than an eighth of a mile across. Some of the big canals were thirty miles across.

The original camp of the first men to reach Mars was established at this canal. For many years it was the main camp on the planet, and the canal became known as the Main Canal. The camp itself was intended only as a temporary shelter while the city of Marsport was being built on the other side of the canal. Shacks, huts and warehouses 'were hurriedly thrown up without plan.

But as the permanent settlers moved across into new

quarters in the city, transients began to fill the vacant shacks. Soon Marsport became two cities. The temporary camp became a permanent, crowded slum with dark, narrow and twisting streets. Amidst the dirt and refuse moved the shadowy inhabitants. Spaceman's Roost had become the last refuge for the old, forgotten spacemen who refused to believe their days of glory were over. Penniless asteroid prospectors waited here for a turn of luck. Space outlaws, tramps, smugglers, and drifters, all somehow crowded into Spaceman's Roost and lost themselves in its sinister gloom. It was a strange and frightening world.

The three boys, proud in their blue Space Explorer uniforms, crossed the bridge into Spaceman's Roost. Almost at once they knew they had entered a different world. Official uniforms were never welcomed in the crime-infested neighborhood. The boys felt hostile eyes peering at them from dark doorways and half-shuttered windows.

"I don't like this place," Ken muttered, glancing about uneasily.

"It's daylight and we're only at the edge of the place, anyway. No one's going to start any trouble with us," Jim said.

"I wish I were as sure as you are," Ken muttered.

Dig said nothing. He jerked his head in the direction of a small restaurant not far down the street which ran along the side of the canal.

"Rufe's Cafe?" Jim asked.

Dig nodded and led the way. It was a small, dark place. A bar ran along the wall on one side of the gloomy room. On the opposite side were several tables, partly hidden in shadows.

A burly man looked up from behind the bar as the three boys entered. Wiping a glass with a dirty plastowel, he moved toward them.

"What would ye be wanting here?" he asked suspiciously, in the rhythmic speech of the old-time spacemen who lived in Spaceman's Roost.

“Hello, Rufe,” Dig greeted him. “Remember us?”

From beneath a pair of bushy eyebrows the man peered at the boys. “Aye,” he said after a while. “Ye be the son of Captain Boyd Allen.” He turned from Dig and looked at the two brothers. “And these be your spacemates, eh?”

“That’s right,” Dig said. “We’re looking for Old Dorkas.”

Rufe snorted. “So be the Space Guards.”

“Can you help us reach him?” Dig said. “We’re friends of his. You know that.”

Aye,” Rufe shook his shoulders. “The Guardsmen be very strict now, since Sergeant Brool has gone away and left that young corporal in charge. Aye, that young one takes his duties a bit too seriously.”

“The Sarge has a lot of respect for Old Dorkas,” Jim said. I don’t think he really wanted to take the old man back to Earth.”

“Aye, that’s so,” said Rufe. “The Sarge was all right. Mind ye, none of the Space Guards be any good. But some is worse than others!”

“What about Old Dorkas?” Dig asked.

“A friend will take ye,” Rufe whispered. “I’ll give him the sign. When he goes out, ye follow. Understand?”

Rufe moved away, wiping the bar with a careless sweep of the dirty towel. The boys watched him, but did not catch any signal. Still, a moment later, a short, skinny man rose from his seat in a dark corner and shuffled toward the door.

As he passed by the young Space Explorers, he threw a quick glance at them, then walked on. He had a tired, wrinkled old face and a pair of keen, restless eyes.

The boys followed him outside. The street was empty. The man shuffled slowly toward the corner of the street, then turned into a narrow alley.

The houses on both sides of the winding alley were silent, the windows shut tightly, the doorways hidden by shadows. The boys followed the strange little man for

several minutes. At the end of the street, he stopped and waited for them.

Without looking at them, the man said, "Turn left and go ye ahead. Wait at the next corner."

They walked by. At the corner, the old man caught up with them.

"I had to make sure no one be following us," he said. "Come ye along now."

He shuffled forward at a quick pace, plunging from one dark alley into the next, turning comers and doubling back from time to time. Before long the boys were confused and lost. Even Dig, whose sense of direction was perfect, knew only that the Main Canal was somewhere off to their left. They seemed to have reached the thickest section of Spaceman's Roost.

And strangely, the alleys were still deserted and quiet. Only rarely did they see anyone else in the streets, and these were vague, slinking figures that disappeared quickly into doorways.

Finally the man stopped. He glanced up and down the street furtively. Then he opened a small door hidden in deep shadows and slipped inside.

"Come!" he cried. "Get in! Step lively!"

The boys followed him inside and found themselves in complete darkness the moment the man shut the door.

"Stand where ye be!"

Sounds of the man's shuffling filled the darkness. The boys waited. Abruptly, light flooded the room as the man opened a door at the far end.

"This way."

The boys found themselves at the head of a narrow flight of steps. The man did not hesitate. He plunged down and the boys followed. They came to a low passageway at the foot of the stairs. The man pushed his hand against the wall and a block of the plastone moved inward. He motioned for the boys to go through.

They were standing in a long tunnel with a light

brown floor and ceiling. The walls glowed faintly, enough for them to see that the tunnel stretched into the far distance.

Without a word, the wizened old man started down the tunnel. He moved with a quick, nervous gait, his head down, his body thrust slightly forward.

“What is this place?” Dig asked after they had walked for several minutes. “I never knew there were tunnels like this on Mars.”

The man chuckled softly. “Aye, and neither do the Space Guards, nor all yer scientists. But a few of us know of this and it be our secret!”

“Who made them?”

“Ye may ask that, lad. I know not. They’ve been here long before we Earthlings arrived!”

“You mean these are ancient Martian tunnels?” Dig asked in amazement.

“I mean I know not who made them, lad!” the man said. “But they be here and they make fine secret hiding places for some of us.”

They had been moving at a fast pace through the tunnels, turning off into side branches now and then. Finally the old man stopped before a blank wall. Again the man pushed at the plastone and an opening appeared. Beyond it was a small, empty room. When they were inside, the man closed the opening and pointed to a door in the opposite wall.

“He be in there.”

The boys hesitated. Old Captain Dorkas was a legend among spacemen. He had blasted across the spaceways further and for more years than any man who ever sailed the mighty deeps of space. More practical knowledge of the Solar System was stored in his keen mind than in many a science academy on Earth.

But Dorkas was now old and blind and useless as a spaceman. The World Council had voted him a medal and a pension and invited him to live out his remaining years in comfort. But, stubbornly, the old man refused to return to Earth.

“I’ve lived me life in space,” he had once told a reporter from Solar Videonews. “And when I die, I’ll die in space!”

Shortly after the interview Old Dorkas had disappeared. His many friends and spacemates hid and protected him with a fierce loyalty. And finally, the Space Guards had stopped hunting him in earnest. It was somehow understandable, even to them, that Old Dorkas would rather die in space than in a rest home on Earth.

“Go in, lads, go in,” the man urged. “Do not keep the Old Man waiting.”

“Aye,” Dig whispered, and crossed the room to the door. Jim and Ken followed, walking quietly.

Dig opened the door and the three boys went in. They saw a tall, thin man standing beside a table, his arms folded across his chest. His face was framed by a mass of snow white hair that fell to his shoulders.

At once the boys recognized the one man they were sure could help them. They were face to face with Old Dorkas!

6 The Wise Old Man

“The luck of space be with ye, lads,” Old Dorkas said, a smile softening his hard, leathery face. “Come, set ye down.”

The old man stepped around the table and sat down. With a wave of his hand he indicated several nearby chairs.

“Captain Dorkas,” Dig began.

“Aye, lad, I remember you. Ye be the son of Boyd Allen!”

Aye, sir.

“And yer spacemates?” The blind man turned his face to the Barry brothers.

“Jim and Ken Barry, sir,” Jim replied.

“Aye, I remember you lads, too. Ye were with Digby when he came to me before.”

“Aye, sir,” Ken said.

The old man turned his head slightly and called, “Chips? Old spacemate, me bones be dry!”

“Aye,” the man replied. He shuffled to a wall cabinet and filled a glass with Martian water. It was a bitter tasting, slightly carbonated drink taken out of ancient Martian springs. Chips placed the glass before the old man who quickly drank half of it.

Wiping his lips with the back of his hand, he turned his sightless eyes to the boys. “And now, lads, what do ye want of Dorkas?”

The boys placed their packages on the table. While Jim unwrapped them, Dig told the old man the story of their adventure on the deserted spacefreighter.

“A plucky thing it was, lads, cutting away that atomic pile!” Dorkas said after he had heard the story. “Now where be the little toys?”

Jim pushed the toy tractor across the table toward the blind man. With his long, sensitive fingers Dorkas examined the toys, touching the smooth metal, testing

the levers and the moving parts. A frown gathered on his forehead as he finished.

For a moment he was silent. He picked up his glass and drank slowly. Then he held it out for Chips to refill. He waited until the full glass was placed in front of him before he spoke.

“This be a tractor to push or pull,” he said, placing his finger on the toy. “And this,” he indicated the excavator, “is a machine for digging. This be some kind of water sled or snow sled,” he continued, touching another toy. Then he paused as his finger rested on the machine with spidery legs. “And this I know not, unless it be to travel through swamp lands or the lava of a hot volcano.”

“But are they real or... or just toys?” Jim asked.

The old man smiled slowly. “You know, lads, there’s many a man that says Old Dorkas be foolish,” he said. “They say space radiation has weakened his brain—made him spacecrazy.”

Chips, standing behind the blind spaceman grinned. “Aye, they do say that, Captain. But they be the foolish ones!”

“These lads may agree with them,” Old Dorkas said, “once they know what I think of these toys.”

“Tell us, sir!” Jim pleaded.

The blind spaceman placed his finger on one of the toys and said slowly, “These be not toys!”

“You mean... they’re real machines?” Ken exclaimed.

“Aye!”

“But they’re so small! Who or what...” Ken stopped in confusion, glancing almost wildly at Jim and Dig.

“Aye, they be for creatures about so high!” Dorkas held his hand about six inches above the table.

“They would have to be intelligent and highly civilized,” Dig said. “These machines were made by competent mechanists, and engineers.”

“Aye,” Dorkas agreed. “So they be!”

“There is no such life on Earth or Mars or Venus or anywhere in our Solar System!” Ken insisted. “We’d know about it if there were!”

“Would we?” Old Dorkas chuckled. “Know ye how little We really know? Aye, there’s life everywhere! Different, strange, and wonderful! How many different kinds of insects are there on Earth, lad? Know ye there’s more than 500,000? And how many different kinds of fish in the oceans, lakes and streams? And how many different kinds of animals? And plants and weeds and bacteria and germs? They be swimming and crawling in the ocean deeps and in the mud of river bottoms and swamps. Aye, look through a microscope and ye’ll see a thousand new and different and strange living things!”

“That’s on Earth,” Dig said. “What about space and the planets?”

“We know even less of life on them,” the blind man replied.

“One thing, though,” Ken said. “All living things must have oxygen and sunlight...”

“Do they?” Old Dorkas laughed. “On Earth there’s a strange bacteria, lad, anaerobe it’s called. It lives without free oxygen! And there be sulphur bacteria that live without oxygen or sunlight! They’re real, lad! They’re alive!”

“Could these...” Ken indicated the toys on the table. “Could these come from some cold, empty planet?”

“No need to argue, lad. Ye asked me and I told ye what I thought. If ye would want to prove me right, there’s a way of doing so!”

“How, sir?” Jim asked.

“The ghost voices, lad. Solve that, and ye’ll have the answer to the toys!”

Dig rose to his feet. “We’re going back to the spacefreighter,” he said. “It’s probably drifting in orbit until the Space Guards haul it off to the Graveyard of Space.”

“All right,” Ken said. “But I don’t agree with Captain Dorkas.”

The old man chuckled and picked up his glass. "Leave the toys here, lads. Ye'll be back!"

He was finishing his glass of Martian water as the boys left, guided by Chips. The strange old man brought them out of the tunnels into the dark alleys of Spaceman's Roost. Presently they arrived at the Main Canal.

"Ye can find yer way back from here," Chips said. "I'll be at Rufe's Cafe should ye be wanting to see Captain Dorkas again." Without another word, the shadowy man disappeared into a dark alley.

The boys hurried across the bridge and up Main Street to the Spaceport. At the administration building they picked up a robot jeep which took them across the field to the *Starover*. Once inside, Dig took the controls and called the control tower for blast-off clearance.

"All clear, Space Explorer," the man on duty told him. "There's a message for you here. Call Corporal May at Space Guard control."

"Thank you, sir," Dig replied, and broke off the connection. Then he turned to Jim. "Stand by the radar scanner!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" Jim took his position at the instrument panel.

"Check clearance!"

Jim glanced at the screen. There were no spaceships in the sky above them.

"Blast-off vector all clear, sir! Up and away!"

"Blast-off in five seconds! Four... three... two... one... zero!"

The flames that roared out of the stem rocketubes shook the great ship. The jetstreams pounded and pressed against the launching pad. Slowly the *Starover* began to rise on its fiery tail. Less than a minute later they were far above the ground and Mars turned slowly below them.

"Stand by for a sight of the spacefreighter," Dig ordered. "I'm going to call Corporal May."

“Aye, aye, sir!” Jim replied.

Ken moved closer to the red-headed boy while contact was being made with Space Guard control. It was a puzzled Guardsman who stared at the boys from the radarscope screen.

“What did you find out about the spacefreighter, sir?” Dig asked.

“The spacefreighter was owned by the Mars Computer Company,” the Guardsman said. “But they sold it for junk months ago. We checked with the junk dealer and he sold the ship less than two hours after he got it. A couple of space prospectors bought it.”

“Who were they, sir?” Dig asked, watching the Guardsman’s face on the screen.

The corporal frowned. “They gave false names. That’s not unusual, though. Lots of them have false passports.”

“So the trail ends there?” Dig said. “What about the Mars Computer Company?”

“It’s a new company here on Mars. Just started in business and hired the best engineers and mechanics they could find on Mars. They’re building a big plant about thirty miles south of Marsport. I spacegrammed Earth for more information about them.”

“The mystery of the little machines—and the voices—remains,” Ken said, shaking his head in disappointment.

“Got one answer, though,” the corporal said. “That lifeboat did come from the freighter. Samples of leadium paint from the wreck were on it. My guess is that you ran into a band of space smugglers.”

“And the ghost voices?” Dig asked.

“Didn’t hear a thing while we were there. Are you sure you really heard them?”

“Aye, sir. We gave you the tape recordings.”

“I know, Dig. But the tape recordings don’t show from what direction the sounds came.”

“Well, we’re going to the freighter to have another look around,” Dig said.

“You won’t find anything there. We brought all the toys and the wood from the crates here. Lab is running tests on everything. And by the way,” the Guardsman continued, “we found a lot of toy clothing, dishes, furniture, beds; in fact, anything you might need to start a colony! Even seeds for planting!” With a laugh, he added, “A toy colony, that is!” He winked at the boys and closed the connection.

Dig turned to Jim. “Sight the wreck yet?”

“Aye, I’ve had it on the scanner for some time,” Jim said. “She’s straight ahead.”

Dig turned back to the instrument panel and began to maneuver the *Starover* toward the wreck. Jim waited until the two ships were floating in orbit side by side.

“I’ve got a plan,” he said. “This time we’ll find out what’s making the ghost voices!”

“Corporal May is right,” Ken said. “We’re wasting our time here.”

“Then let’s waste a little more of our time,” Jim snapped at his brother.

“What’s the plan?” Dig asked.

“You and I will go aboard the freighter. After a while, you come back alone.”

“And you?”

“I’ll remain, and wait.”

“Wait for what?” Ken asked.

“For some very clever little creatures!”

Ken turned to Dig and tapped his forehead with a finger. “Jim’s as nutty as a Martian hare!”

7 The Strange Castaways

Jim glared at his brother.

“You should hear my reasons first!” he snapped angrily.

“All right,” Ken laughed. “I was only kidding you!”

“All right!” Jim smiled. His brother, he saw, was keenly interested. “Up to now we’ve been searching for people like us...”

“That’s true,” Dig nodded thoughtfully.

“But I believe Old Dorkas is right! We should look for someone not much bigger than my hand. Maybe six or seven inches tall. Someone—or something—that small could easily hide. We’d look until the stars bum out and never find them.”

“What makes you think you can this time?” asked Ken.

“Because I’m not going to look!” Jim replied, his eyes flashing with excitement. “I’ll hide, and wait for it or them to come out!”

“Let’s get our spacesuits,” Dig said. “I like the plan!”

“What about me?” Ken asked. “I want to go, too!”

“Sorry, Ken, but someone’s got to stay. Keep in contact with me over the radicom,” Jim told his brother.

It was strangely peaceful in space when Jim and Dig came out of the airlock and gazed about them. Night was crawling slowly across the red surface of Mars. Both Phobos and Deimos, the two little moons, were sweeping along their orbits around the planet.

Dig signaled, pointing to the hull of the freighter. A moment later he was floating through space, turning over slowly to land on his feet. Jim followed, and when both boys were standing on the wrecked freighter, they heard Ken’s voice over the radicom.

“You know, I haven’t heard anything of the ghost voices.”

“The Space Guards probably shut off the radarscope

mike,” Dig said. “You know how they are, neat and everything done according to regulations. Stand by, we’re going in.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

Dig opened the airlock and they went inside. Once they were in the passageway, Jim began to take off his spacesuit. He pulled the radicom communication system out of the helmet, clipped the battery to his belt and slipped the tiny microphone and earphones over his head.

“Now make as much noise as you can,” he called to Dig over the radicom. “Then go back to the ship and wait until you hear from me.”

“Aye, aye, sir!” Dig replied. He stumped up and down the passageway for several minutes, then went into the airlock and closed the hatch with a loud bang.

Jim pulled off his spaceboots. In his stocking feet, he waited until he heard the thump of Dig’s spaceboots on the hull of the ship. When the sound suddenly stopped, Jim knew that his friend was floating through space back to the *Starover*.

He was alone now on the deserted wreck. He switched on his radicom and called his brother.

“Dig is on his way back...”

“He just landed.”

“All right. I’m going to creep up to the control cabin. Tell Dig to stay in his spacesuit. I might need him in a hurry.”

“Aye, aye, sir!” Then he added softly, “Jim?”

“Yes?”

“Take care of yourself, will you?”

“Don’t worry. Ken. I will.”

He moved slowly along the passageway, alert to any sound or movement that might disturb the ship. At the door of the control cabin he paused and peeked inside. Nothing there.

He was about to step in when his ears picked up the

faint click of a latch being opened. He stopped and waited.

From inside the room came a scraping, muffled sound. And then, with a sudden shock, he heard a voice.

“Borin!”

Jim held his breath.

“Genang?” It was a second voice calling, thin and childlike, and frightened.

The two voices began to talk to each other in a strange language. Slowly Jim raised his head and looked into the cabin. At first he saw nothing. Then a slight movement caught his eye.

Jim looked closely, and barely held back a cry of amazement!

A little man was bending over the edge of the control board shelf, reaching down with one hand. Just below, a similar figure was leaning out of an open panel in the side of the control board.

The two little men clasped hands. With a quick movement the one on top pulled his companion to the control board. A moment later the two little men were standing side by side, looking about them with quick, bird-like movements.

Jim pushed away from the doorway and let his body float backward down the passageway. By the time the slight gravity of the ship brought him down to the deck, he was a safe distance away. He pressed the microphone of the radicom close to his lips.

“Ken? Dig?” he called in a whisper.

“Yes, Jim?”

“I found them!” It was with a great effort that he was able to keep his voice calm. “I found them!”

“What are they?”

“Get over here quickly—both of you—and see for yourselves!”

“Aye, aye, sir!” Ken answered quickly. He could not keep back his excitement.

Silently Jim crawled back to the door and looked in. The two little men stood close to the viewport, looking out and talking in low tones.

Jim studied their appearance. They were small, about six or seven inches in height, with thick, heavy bodies and sturdy legs.

Their faces were human in all respects except for the ears, which were long and slightly pointed at the tips. The sight gave Jim the curious feeling that he was looking at two creatures from some weird and distant world.

Even their clothes strengthened this feeling. They were dressed in suits of shiny brown material with tight breeches and loose blouses gathered in at the waist by a leather belt. On their feet they wore leather boots that came halfway up to their knees. The tips of the boots were pointed and tipped with wicked-looking spikes.

As Jim watched, one of the little men gestured toward the viewport. With a shock, Jim noticed that the arm moved with a quick, loose flick, like a whip. On each hand were ten fingers, long and flexible, like the tentacles of an octopus.

He was so intent on watching the little men that he failed to hear Dig and Ken land on the hull. The little men heard the sound of metal magnetoës clicking against the side of the ship. They leaped to the edge of the control board and, grasping hands, began to lower themselves to the open panel below.

Jim realized it would be difficult to find them once they were inside the mass of equipment beneath the control board.

“Wait!” Jim cried and stepped into the cabin. He knew his words would be as strange to them as theirs were to him, but he hoped the tone of his voice would reassure them.

He held up his hands, showing that he carried no weapons. The empty hands seemed to have some meaning for the little men. They stopped and looked at him. Then they drew back, crouched, and pulled shiny daggers from their belts.

Jim called over the radicom. “Ken? Dig? Can you hear me?” He smiled as he spoke, and tried to make his voice friendly. The little men were listening intently.

“We hear you,” came the reply over the earphones. “We’re coming through the airlock.”

“I don’t want to frighten them,” Jim said. “They’re looking at me and I’m looking at them.”

“What’s up?”

“Take off your spacesuits. One of you bring a bowl of water, the other some food...”

“What kind of food?” Ken asked.

“Any kind, Just so they know it’s food!” Jim snapped impatiently. “Bring it here!”

“Aye, aye, sir!” Ken answered quickly.

Silence settled over the room. The little men seemed at a loss as to what to do. They waited, and Jim noticed the very human expression of fear and despair on their little faces. “Human beings haven’t been kind to you,” he said softly. “You must have a good reason for being afraid.”

The creatures did not understand, but some of the fear seemed to leave them as they listened to his gentle voice. They tensed again at the sound of footsteps.

Jim moved aside and slowly pointed to the door. The little men turned to look. Ken entered, holding a bar of food concentrate in his hand.

“Show them it’s food,” Jim said.

Ken smiled and bit off a piece of the bar which he then chewed with a great show of enjoyment. Dig came in carrying a bowl of water. He marched straight to the control board and placed it near the little men. As he stepped back, Ken placed the bar of food beside the bowl.

The little men understood the friendly offering. They put away their knives and held up their hands, waving their tentacle fingers slowly back and forth.

The three boys stepped back to the doorway and the little men moved toward the water. They began to drink

greedily.

“The Space Guards took the water barrels from the cages,” Dig told Jim in a whisper. “That’s why they’re so thirsty.”

“Lucky for us,” Jim whispered back. “It helps us to show we’re friendly.”

The boys waited patiently while the little men drank and then ate pieces of the food concentrate. When they were finished, one of them stepped forward and raised his whip-like arm. One of the fingers flicked out and touched his chest.

“Borin,” he said in a thin, pleasant voice. A second finger flicked and pointed to his companion. “Genang!”

“Borin and Genang!” Jim repeated, pointing first to the one, then the other. He tapped his own chest. “Jim!” he said. In turn he named Ken and Dig.

“They’re clever and friendly,” Dig remarked. “I think they know we’re not the same people who deserted them.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Ken said cautiously. “They know they’re trapped here and may try anything to break away. Or catch us off guard.”

“I think you’re wrong,” Jim said. He stepped closer to Borin, held up two fingers, then looked about the room as though searching for something. “I want to know if there are more of them,” Jim explained.

Borin stared at him for a moment, then nodded and motioned to Jim to come closer. When the boy did so, the little man suddenly leaped to his arm, then clambered up to his shoulder. His tentacle fingers whipped swiftly around Jim’s neck and held tightly.

Jim started in surprise, but quickly controlled himself. “Easy, don’t make a move,” he called to his companions. “Let’s see what he wants!”

Borin raised one hand and waved it in front of Jim’s face. One finger whipped out to point to Genang. A second finger curved sideways and touched Jim’s other shoulder. The meaning was clear.

Jim stretched out his arm toward Genang. The little man ran up to his shoulder.

Again Borin's finger moved. This time he pointed to the door. With the two little men sitting on each shoulder, Jim stepped out into the passageway. Borin was still pointing, his finger directed toward the compartment in which the boys had found the animal cages, and Jim headed that way.

Uneasily, Ken and Dig followed a pace behind.

When they reached the door of the freight room, the little man motioned for Jim to go on. Jim went in and stopped before the row of empty cages.

Both Borin and Genang began to speak, waving their fingers excitedly and pointing to the cages. Anger showed in the little men's faces.

Jim, not understanding them, shook his head. Genang stopped and pointed to the last cage in the row. Suddenly he pulled the knife from his belt. It was as long as a pin, but broad, and appeared to be wickedly sharp. He made a cutting motion with the knife, then stopped and looked at Jim.

Again Jim shook his head, not understanding the little man's gestures. He dared make no other move. He stood still and beads of perspiration slowly began to gather on his forehead.

"What shall we do?" Ken asked in a whisper. "Looks like they've caught us off guard!"

Helplessly he turned to Dig, but the red-headed boy shook his head.

"Do nothing," he said. "The knife is too close to Jim's throat!"

8 The Clue of Con Krags

The two little men continued to wave their hands, pouring out a stream of strange words. Dig and Ken moved carefully to Jim's side.

"Easy, Jim," Dig whispered. "We're right beside you."

"We'll make a grab at them," Ken whispered. "Stand still!"

"No!" Jim cried quickly. "Wait!"

"For what?" Ken retorted.

"I think they're trying to tell us something."

Borin became quiet suddenly, as though he was thinking of some way to make the boys understand him. Then gently he raised his hand and pushed at the back of Jim's head. With his other hand he pointed downward, toward the nearest cage.

"There's something he wants me to see," Jim exclaimed triumphantly, looking down.

But there was nothing in the cage except the tiny bits of straw. Jim went down to his knees and peered closer. The little men scurried along his arms to the deck.

Borin seized a bar of the cage with one hand, with the other he drew his knife and began to cut the metal.

"He's showing us that they were kept prisoners in these cages—and how they escaped!" Dig suddenly exclaimed. "They were captives!"

Jim nodded quickly and pointed to the cut bars of the last cage in the row. Borin smiled up at him and replaced the knife in his belt.

Genang began to walk from cage to cage. At one he held up five tentacled fingers, at another two. The boys began to count the fingers as he moved slowly down the row.

"He's showing us how many more little people were held a the cages," Ken said thoughtfully. "I counted twenty-eight."

Genang raised his hands over his head and let them

drop slowly to his sides. The helplessness of the gesture and the worried, questioning expression on his face made it plain that he was trying to find out what had happened to his people.

Understanding, Jim shook his head slowly and also dropped his hands helplessly to his sides.

“That’s the story!” said Dig. “Borin and Genang escaped. The others must have been taken away—as captives. All these people were held on this ship against their will, that’s certain. It was done secretly—probably by smugglers. And for no good purpose, I’m sure. But why?”

“It explains why the crew didn’t leave the ship at once,” Ken mused. “They were looking for these two. And also why the lifeboat ran away rather than let us pick them up.”

“The missing ones must be on Mars,” Jim said. “The lifeboat landed there.”

“Sure, but how are we going to find them?”

“Perhaps Old Dorkas has some ideas,” said Dig.

“Then let’s head back to Mars.” Jim studied the two little men. “They’re small enough to get inside our spacehelmets. I’ll take one and Ken can take the other.”

“Let’s go!” Dig led the way back to the airlock.

The little men fitted easily into the round, glassteel spacehelmets. At first they were uneasy, but seeing the friendly faces of the boys they settled down quietly. The little men twined their tentacle fingers about the radicom earphones and wires and held on tightly as the young Space Explorers Jumped back to the *Starover*.

Jim went to the instrument panel immediately.

“I’ll bring her down,” he said, feeding landing tapes into the gyrobot.

Once the tapes were set, Jim released the power lever. The *Starover* began to drop toward the planet. The gyroscope balanced the ship, and photoelectric cells searched the surface for the spaceport as the automatic instruments began landing operations.

Jim shuffled over to Ken and Dig, who were showing a picture of the Solar System to the two little men.

“What planet do they come from?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Dig replied. “It’s strange—they don’t seem to recognize the Solar System.”

The little men were standing on the astro-chart table, staring at the picture as Dig pointed first to the Sun, then to the nearest planet from the Sun, Mercury.

The little men shook their heads and Dig moved his finger to the next planet, Venus. Again they shook their heads. Silently the red-headed boy pointed to every planet in the Solar System, and then to the larger asteroids. Each time Borin and Genang shook their heads.

“They must be from some other star system,” Ken said, looking at the little men with awe.

“The nearest star to our Sun is Alpha Centauri, and that’s four and a half years away if you travel with the speed of light!” Dig said.

“Besides,” he added slowly, “they don’t seem to recognize the Sun or the planets. If they came from outer space, they’d be familiar with our Solar System. Or at least show us in some way that they come from another part of space. My guess is that they know nothing about astronomy.”

“Well, maybe Dad’s finished making the language computer,” Ken said. “If he has, we can use it to translate their language.”

“The Langivac, huh?” Jim said. “Good idea. When we know their language, they can tell us where they come from.”

“First we’re going to see Old Dorkas,” Dig said. “There are twenty-eight little ones missing. If they landed on Mars, Old Dorkas is sure to have heard something about it.”

The spaceship began to shake violently as the rockets roared out a powerful stream of fire. The two little men crouched, fearfully. But a few seconds later silence came over the ship. The tail fins touched the ground and the

engines were switched off automatically.

Jim opened the front pouch in his utility belt and, picking Borin up very gently, placed him inside.

“He can hide here,” Jim said. “And we can take him with us.”

Ken took Genang into his belt pouch and the three boys climbed down the shaft to the airlock. Dig set the atmosphere adjuster to reduce the air pressure so that their bodies would become used to the thinner air of Mars.

A robot Jeep was racing across the field toward them as they stepped off the wire ladder. With a screech of brakes the vehicle came to a sudden stop. An angry Corporal May leaped out and glared at the three boys.

“You met Old Dorkas!” the Guardsman roared. “You know Space Guards are looking for him, but you didn’t report his hiding place to me.”

“Aye, that’s so,” Dig answered calmly. “We were taken to him. But even if we had known his hiding place, sir, we still wouldn’t have told you.”

“What? I order you to tell me at once!”

“Sorry, sir,” Jim said, his eyes twinkling. “We’re Space Explorers. Begging your pardon, sir, but Space Explorers cannot be given orders, not even by the Space Guard.”

Their calm manner seemed to further infuriate the Corporal. His face turned red, and for a moment he was speechless with anger.

And then Borin raised the flap of the belt pouch and peered out at the Guardsman.

Corporal May’s face quickly changed from red to a pale greenish color. He opened his mouth, but no sound emerged as he pointed to Jim’s side.

“What’s the matter, sir?” Jim asked mischievously. “You look as though you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I... I saw a little face!” the Guardsman gasped.

“Oh, that? Why, sir, it is a ghost!” Dig said, grinning so hard that the freckles fairly danced on his nose. “One

of the ghost voices we heard on the spacefreighter, sir.”

“Borin? Genang?” As Ken called them, the little men popped their heads out.

Ken then told the Guardsman about their discovery and of the twenty-eight missing little people.

“But how did you know what to look for?” the Guardsman asked when Ken had finished.

“Old Dorkas, sir,” Dig replied. “It was the clue he gave us.”

“Old Dorkas, eh?” the Corporal said. For several minutes he studied the little men, saying nothing. “Well, the old man may be of some use out here after all.”

“Aye, sir,” Dig said. “He’s helped us before. He knows more about the spaceways than any man alive. And he understands space, too.”

“Want a lift to the gate?” the corporal said. There was a faint smile on his face as he stepped into the robot jeep.

“Aye, sir!”

The boys got in and the Jeep swept around and raced for the main gate. The corporal turned a dial and slowed the Jeep.

“I have some information for you,” he said. “The Mars Computer Company is owned by a man named Jason Coromay. He has a good reputation as an engineer. In fact, he claims to have discovered a new process for making computers, cutting production time down from one year to just a couple of weeks!”

“Is that how long it usually takes to make a computer?” asked Dig. “A year?”

“Well, it can be done in six months if you work day and night,” the Guardsman said. “Computer machines have thousands of electrical circuits that have to be wired. Just the wiring alone takes months.”

“I never realized how complicated those thinking machines were,” Dig admitted slowly. “On a spaceship, I just use them.”

“His new way of making the computers is worth a

fortune,” the Guardsman said. “So we can forget him. He wouldn’t bother with smuggling.”

The Guardsman let the boys off at the gate, then sent the Jeep back to the parking lot on automatic controls. The boys watched him stride to the Administration Building and disappear inside.

“Let’s head for Rufe’s Cafe,” Dig said quietly. Then he called to Borin and Genang. When the little men poked their heads out, the boy warned them by placing a finger over his lips. The little men understood. They crouched inside the pouches and pulled the flaps over their heads.

Wizened old Chips was waiting for them, sitting in a dark corner of the restaurant. He rose as the boys stepped inside and motioned them toward the back door.

They followed the old man through a littered backyard and into a dark alley.

“Got word ye landed, lads,” Chips told them as they caught up to him. “Been waiting for ye. Captain Dorkas has news.”

He did not speak again until he had brought the boys through the maze of tunnels to the hiding place. Then he pointed to the door.

“Go in, lads,” he said simply.

Old Dorkas was sitting at the table, a toy machine before him. As the boys entered, the blind spaceman waved them to chairs. Quietly the boys waited while the old man turned his attention back to the little machine.

It was one they had not seen before, and they wondered how Dorkas had obtained it. The old spaceman said nothing. His fingers examined the machine carefully.

It was a simple machine: two wheels, about eight inches across, with a cabin slung midway between them. Old Dorkas reached in with his finger and pushed a lever. The wheels rolled across the table. The cabin swung lightly, but remained level with the table top.

“Chips bought it from a dealer in stolen goods, who sells souvenirs as a cover,” Dorkas said. “It be of the

same make as your little machines.”

“Who is this man?” asked Jim.

“Con Krag,” the blind, old spaceman said, frowning.

“The name means nothing to us,” Dig said.

“Aye, that’s because ye lads are not of Spaceman’s Roost,” Dorkas nodded. “But he be a man feared by many. A dangerous man at times, a dealer in secrets.”

“Does he have more of the machines?”

“Aye, Digby, he has. Several cases.”

“How did he get them?”

“After they were smuggled to Mars, the cargo was hidden in his place, but not for long.” Dorkas turned his head to Chips. “Me bones is dry, mate.”

“Aye, Captain.” Chips brought a glass of Martian fizz.

“An hour after the goods were landed in the lifeboat, a tractor truck came and took most of the cargo away. The rest Con Krag is selling.”

“Then he knows who the smugglers are!” Dig cried.

“Aye, he knows!”

“He’s our clue!” Jim said. “We’ve got to see him!”

“And get blasted to atoms by Con Krag?” Chips said with a grim expression on his face. “What foolish thing are ye lads thinking of doing, eh? He be a dangerous man.”

“We’ve got to risk it,” Dig insisted.

Suddenly Old Dorkas brought his hand down on the table with a resounding slap.

Inside the pouches, Borin and Genang squirmed fearfully at the loud noise.

“Ye’ll not go!” Dorkas roared. “I’ll not let ye!”

Anger blazed in the old man’s sightless eyes.

9 Souvenirs For Sale

The old spaceman's anger so stunned the three boys that they remained silent for several minutes. Old Dorkas lowered his head. His hand found the glass on the table and he raised it to his lips slowly. He drank, then silently handed the glass to Chips who went to the cabinet to refill it.

"I'm sorry, lads. I meant not to lose my temper," he said gently. "But ye must know that this Con Kraggs is a dangerous rogue. Smuggled cargo—even though it be of strange machines—is not worth the trouble for ye to be risking your lives."

"It is, sir," Ken insisted. "You see, it's not just the cargo. There are lives involved, and they may be in danger!"

"Eh?" The blind spaceman raised his head alertly. "So ye found the ghost voices."

"Aye, sir," Dig replied.

He called to Borin and Cenang and the two little men poked their heads out of the pouches. A low cry escaped from Chips. He moved quickly to stand beside Old Dorkas.

Jim and Ken extended their hands to the table. The two little men climbed out of the pouches and scrambled over their arms. A moment later they were standing on the table top looking up at Dorkas fearlessly. Their hands rested on their hips, the fingers whipped around their waists. There was an air of pride and confidence about them.

Dorkas smiled in his slow and gentle way. His keen ears caught the slightest movement. His mind quickly understood the meaning of each sound. He extended his hand, laying it palm up on the table.

Borin and Genang approached the old man's hand. They touched it with their tentacle fingers. After a while, they permitted the spaceman to touch them.

The boys watched in amazed silence.

Finally Old Dorkas chuckled. "We be friends," he said. He turned his face to the boys. "So this was part of the cargo, eh?"

"Aye, sir," Dig replied. "Besides Borin and Genang, there were twenty-eight others."

"The part taken away from Con Krag's house!" Chips said.

"Aye," Old Dorkas agreed. "And it be the really valuable part!"

"Why should these little people be so valuable?" Jim asked.

"I know not, lad. But by the rings of Saturn, I am sure they are!"

"They're not worth much as freaks in a circus," Jim remarked. "Besides, the Space Guards would start asking questions." He rose and began to pace the floor nervously. "If they are to be used for something, it must be in secret!"

"The crime of kidnaping intelligent creatures from their home planet be very great," Dorkas said. "So, lads, the rewards must be great for the criminals. Indeed, it must be a fortune!"

"More reason why we must find Con Krag and get what information we can from him!" Ken insisted.

The old man leaned back in his chair. For a long time he sat without moving, his face a hard, craggy mask that hid his thoughts. Then he turned to his spacemate.

"What think you, Chips?"

"They be stubborn lads. Captain."

"Aye." The old man turned to the boys. "Go then to Con Krag!" he said. "Chips, take them there and stay close to see that no harm comes to them!"

"Aye, aye, sir!"

"These machines," Dorkas waved his hand. "I'll send them to your ship, lads. They'll be stowed away on board when ye get there."

"Thank you, Captain."

“And lads, Con Krag’s be a strange man,” Old Dorkas said quietly. “There be good and evil in him. Be careful, lads. Rouse not the bad in him, and ye will get along with Con Krag’s.”

The old man lowered his head in silence. Borin and Genang touched his hand gently, then scrambled into the pouches held open for them by Ken and Jim.

Chips led the way through the tunnels. They did not have far to go. Soon the wizened little man stopped before a dark stairway.

“I’ll be staying out of sight, lads,” he said. “If ye need help, sing out loud and clear. Understand?”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

“There be an alley at the top of these steps. Right across the way be Con Krag’s house. Walk ye right in and be not afraid. Say Chips sent ye to buy some souvenirs. But be right careful!”

They left Chips standing at the bottom of the stairs. Dig, leading the way, reached the top first. He opened the doorway and looked out.

The alley was dark and deserted. Sharp gusts of wind swirled pieces of paper and dust about. The windows of the old warehouse across the way were boarded up with rough strips of plasteel. The door, partly open, had a battered sign nailed to it.

Souvenirs From Space the sign read.

Dig grinned, pointing to it. “I can just see tourists coming down here to buy souvenirs!”

They crossed the alley and entered the warehouse. The hallway was empty and dark. The floors creaked under their feet. A streak of light showed through a crack in a door just ahead and Dig, with a quick nod to his friends, pushed it open.

From floor to ceiling the room was packed with a weird collection of goods. Old furniture—desks, tables, chairs, beds, cots—were piled one on top of another, most of them broken. Strange boxes with old clothes spilling out of them formed a huge mound that blocked off half the room. All kinds of space equipment was

scattered about, torn spacesuits, cracked helmets, broken and smashed oxytanks, dials and meters and electronic tubes and coils.

One narrow aisle led from the room, circling about and through the confusion of goods. A warm, stuffy odor filled the place.

The boys paused for a moment, looking about, then cautiously made their way through the room. On the other side of the mounds of goods they found a cleared space. A table with several chairs around it, an unmade bed and a shelf of food concentrates were the only furnishings in this part of the room. At the far end was a large, thick curtain, cutting off one corner of the room. Dirty plastiglass dishes were on the table and used plastubes lay scattered about the floor.

“Ahoy! Con Krag!” Dig called out. “Is anyone here?”

There was a moment of silence, then the sound of shuffling feet came from behind the curtain. A moment later a huge hand thrust the curtain aside.

Con Krag stood looking down at the three boys.

In size. Con Krag was a giant of a man, standing at least six feet six inches tall and weighing close to three hundred pounds. His head was completely bald, his eyebrows bushy and black. He stood still, holding back the curtain.

His face slowly broke into a smile and there was a shrewd twinkle in his eyes.

“Welcome, lads, welcome!” he said in a deep, pleasant voice. “Space Explorers are you, eh? Well, you’ve come to the right place!” He waved his powerful arm at the piles of articles and laughed. “There’s many a thing for you to explore in here. I’ve things from far-off places and things from old Martian graves that even the best museums don’t have!”

“We know exactly what we’re looking for. Con Krag,” said Dig. “And we know you have it.”

“Aye, I have it, lad. Souvenirs from space—that’s my business. That’s what I sell!” He let the curtain drop behind him and stepped closer to the boys, a wary glint

in his eyes. “And what is it you lads want? If I don’t have it, I’ll arrange to get it for you.”

“We want a little machine. It looks like a toy... but it isn’t.” Dig watched the big man’s face closely to see what effect his words would have.

The pleasant smile dropped from the face of Con Krag as though it had been a mask. Anger crept into his eyes.

In a voice turned suddenly harsh, he asked, “What makes you think I have it?”

“Chips bought one from you,” Jim said. “Have you any more?”

“Chips sent you here, eh?”

“Yes,” Ken said.

The man smiled again, sighed, and shrugged his massive shoulders. “I be not angry with you, boys. You see, now Chips will be wanting a bit of money for sending me such good customers as you.”

“Have you any more of those machines?” Jim asked impatiently.

“Aye. Just one left. Just one. The price is high.”

“Let s see it.”

“Aye, I’ll get it.” He disappeared behind the curtain. A moment later he returned carrying a square metal box which he placed on the table.

“What is that?” asked Ken.

“A little oven,” Con Krag said. He opened several tiny doors on one side of the box and pushed a small button.

The boys looked into the small compartments. At first they saw only the smooth, black metal sides. Then the little walls began to glow. They felt the heat on their faces.

“Aye,” Con Krag said. “It be so real that it cooks or bakes, as you wish!”

The boys looked at each other. Then Dig turned to the big man, shaking his head.

“We’d like to have something that moves,” he said. “A wagon or tractor or excavator. Something like that.”

Con Kraggs scratched his bald head. “Come to think of it, lads, I do have another one of the machines. A spidery thing it is, moving about on long legs. But I meant to be keeping it for myself.” He smiled at them in a friendly way, and added, “Well, since you be Space Explorers, I’ll sell it to you.”

“Show it,” Dig said.

There was a shrewd glint in his eyes as he said slyly, “It will be costing more, lads.”

“Bring it and let’s see what it looks like.”

“Aye, lads, I’ll get it.” Again Con Kraggs slipped behind the curtain.

As soon as he was gone, the boys put their heads together.

“How long are we going to play this game with him?” Jim whispered.

“We’re feeling our way,” Dig said. “Wait until he gives himself away.”

“He won’t. He’s too shrewd.”

“What do you suggest, Jim?” asked Ken.

“Demand he tell us what he knows about the smugglers. He’s working with them.”

“And if he refuses?” Dig asked.

“We’ll report him to the Space Guards!”

“He’s not afraid of the Space Guards,” Dig said. “He’s been up against them before. Besides, what makes you think he’ll let us get out of here alive?”

“There are three of us!”

“Sure! And a lot of help that is. He’s big enough to take care of all three of us,” Ken warned.

The boys looked up as the sound of splintering wood came from behind the curtain.

“He’s opening a crate,” Jim whispered hoarsely. “We’ve got to act now!”

He leaped for the curtain. Seizing it, he tore it away to reveal Con Kraggs crouching beside an open crate. The man had his back to the boys, but at the sound he whirled about to face them.

There were several other crates there. The boys recognized them as the same kind they had seen on the spacefreighter.

Con Kraggs was on his feet in a second. With a furious roar, he charged at the boys. His mighty arms were outstretched as if he wanted to hide the crates from them.

Jim was startled at the speed with which the big man moved. Before he could step aside, he felt the hard muscles of the man's arms smash across his chest. The next instant he felt himself flying through the air.

He landed hard on his shoulders. For a moment he lay stunned. Then he looked about and found Dig and Ken sprawled on the floor beside him.

Con Kraggs towered over them. His face was twisted with rage as he drew a stunray pistol from his belt pouch.

“So you came to buy little toys, eh?” the man roared. “Snooping, you were! I’ll get the truth out of you!”

He aimed his gun at the boys. His finger tightened on the trigger.

“Who sent you here? Answer! Or I’ll blast you into atoms!”

10 The Last Chance

With a great effort, Con Kraggs controlled his anger. He did not press the trigger of the stunray pistol. Instead, he stepped up to the boys and poked at them with his foot.

“Get on your feet,” he said roughly.

The young Space Explorers rose slowly, brushing the dust from their clothes.

“You must know something,” he growled. “Tell me! Con Kraggs is not a man to fool around with !”

“What do you want to know?” Dig asked with a careless shrug of his shoulders.

“Did Chips really send you here?”

“He did,” Dig replied. “And if anything happens to us, you’ll have to answer to Chips for it.”

“Chips?” Con Kraggs sneered. “I fear him not! It’s Old Dorkas who’s behind this! Aye, him I won’t meddle with!”

“All right, it’s Old Dorkas,” Dig said. “We’re friends of his.”

Con Kraggs thought this over for a moment. “How much do you know?”

“We know the little machines are real and not toys,” Dig told the man. “And we know how you got them.”

“Ah!” Con Kraggs let out a deep breath. “What else?”

“We know it’s stolen property.”

“Aye! So ye know that, eh?” The big man began to laugh, shaking his huge shoulders. “You lads are too smart for old Con Kraggs! Well, I be honest with you. I risked me life to earn these little toys, I did. Got them fair and square!”

“By helping smugglers and thieves?” Jim snapped. “Is that what you call fair and square?”

Con Kraggs stuck his stunray gun into his belt. “I’ll return the goods to the rightful owners,” he said,

chuckling. "If you lads tell me where they be, I'll prove my words!"

"That's nice of you," Jim smiled.

"I be a nice man when you get to know me," Con Kraggs replied. "Now perhaps you do know who the owners be? Tell me where I can find them, eh? You do know, don't you?"

The towering man leaned forward to look into the faces of the boys, his eyes bright with excitement.

"Oh, we know where the owners are," Jim said, a faint smile on his lips. "They're right here before you!"

"Not yourselves, lads. You be not the rightful owners. And if you say you are, why old Con Kraggs knows that you be lying!"

"You know what the owners of the machines look like?" Ken asked quietly.

Con Kraggs glanced at him. "You be a right smart lad, eh? But you've no need to trick me. I'll tell you in a friendly way. Aye, I know what they look like."

"Then meet them again," Jim cried. "Borin! Genang!"

The little men stuck their heads out of the pouches. They looked at the huge man, their faces cold and unfriendly. Inside their hiding places, they had felt the force that hurled the boys to the floor. And afterward they had listened to the angry words of Con Kraggs.

But there was no recognition on their faces. The boys saw at once that Con Kraggs had not been one of the crew on the wrecked freighter.

The big man paid no attention to the boys. He stared at the little men without any surprise on his face.

His voice hoarse with excitement. Con Kraggs muttered, "A fortune! The biggest fortune I've ever had a chance to grab! And it's here!"

"What fortune are you talking about?" Ken asked. His eyes still fixed on Borin and Genang, Con Kraggs replied, "That man! He'd pay a fortune for a shipload of these little creatures!"

"What man?" Dig asked.

“Him that was the leader of the smugglers,” Con Krag said. He turned to the boys. “He gave the orders, aye! But he was not one of the smugglers. Not one of them, and I be a spaceman that knows what he is talking about!”

“Well, I can’t say that I know what you’re talking about,” Jim snapped. “Who is the man who was the leader of the smugglers and yet wasn’t one of them?”

“He was not a spaceman,” Con Krag explained. “The others? They were space drifters, tramps... of no account! You’ll find them everywhere in Spaceman’s Roost, or in the swamp towns of Venus. But not him! He was an educated man, he was. And wearing the finest clothes of plastasilk.”

“How did you meet him?” Jim continued to question the man.

Con Krag wiped his bald head and hitched up his trousers. He began to pace the floor, his hands behind his back, his head bent down.

“They came to me for help,” he said. “An easy job it be—to bring down a spaceship with smuggled goods on board. There’s none in the spaceways that can do it better than old Con Krag! Aye, I’m a thief and a smuggler! And I know the ways of space and of landing secret cargoes on the sands of Mars.”

“So you helped them land the crates from the space lifeboat,” Dig said.

“Aye! They be new men here, strangers in Spaceman’s Roost. So I helped for a share of the loot.”

“These crates,” Dig gestured with his hand toward the rear of the room. “These crates were your share?”

“Aye, but they cheated me of the best part of the cargo,” Con Krag grumbled.

“What was that?”

Con Krag looked at Dig, then glanced at the two little men in the belt pouches.

“Them little ones,” he said. “Oh, they didn’t fool me! I saw what they took away right after I brought the

cargo here. Crates of the little ones! And the leader said they be worth a thousand times and more than all the little machines put together!”

“Why? Why were the little people so valuable to him?” Dig asked, excitement in his voice.

“Now that I know not,” Con Kraggs answered. “But I be sure they’re valuable!”

“Can you at least tell us this man’s name?” Jim interrupted. “Do you know him?”

“By name? No. Where he be hiding? No. But I’d know him and the smugglers if I ever saw them again!”

“Are they on Mars?” Ken asked.

Con Kraggs shrugged his shoulder. “I know not that. But I overheard them talking about setting out on another trip. They wanted more of the little ones.”

Unable to hide his disappointment. Ken turned away. “There goes our last clue,” he said.

Con Kraggs stared at him. “What do you mean, lad? I’ve been honest with you. I’ve told you all I know. Fair play is fair two ways, lads. Now tell me where these little people come from. Where be their home planet?”

“We were hoping you’d be able to tell us,” Ken said. “We wanted to return the little people there.”

“Return them!” Con Kraggs exclaimed in surprise. Quickly he hid the glint of greed that had appeared in his eyes. He became friendly as he looked at the boys. “Aye, return them! Of course! I wish I could be helping you, lads. If only you knew the place where the little ones come from!”

“Well, what do we do now?” Jim asked in a tired voice, turning to his friends. “Every clue we had turned out to lead nowhere !”

“There’s one more chance,” Dig said. “Perhaps our last chance!”

“What are you talking about?” Jim asked.

“The Langivac!”

“What be that?” Con Kraggs asked drawing closer to

the three boys. "We be good spacemates, lads. We can work together to return these poor little ones to their homes, eh?"

"The Langivac is a computer," Ken told the man.

"One of those thinking machines? All wires and tubes and things?"

"Yes, that's it," Ken said. "Only the Langivac works with languages and words instead of numbers."

"And you would be using it to learn the language of the little ones, eh?" Con Krag asked. When Ken nodded, he continued, "Then you could be asking them where their home may be?"

"That's the idea," Jim said, turning away from the man. "I'm for blasting off to Eros as soon as possible."

"And a grand idea it is, lads," Con Krag said. "You can count on me to help you."

The boys turned to the big man, puzzled.

"Help us?"

"Aye! I know the smugglers, don't I? And I know the leader! Take me along, lads. I'll help you in many ways. There's none who know the ways of space thieves like I be knowing them."

"I'm sorry," Dig shook his head.

"But you would not be going after them by yourselves!"

"Why not?" asked Dig.

"They be dangerous men!" Con Krag warned. "You'd have no chance against their treacherous ways! Con Krag is the man to point them out and help you!"

The boys looked at Con Krag suspiciously. "Why do you want to go with us? What's your motive?" Jim asked at last.

"I've met many a dangerous man, lads. That leader of the smugglers be the worst I've seen! He'd kill anyone who got in his way!"

"Are you afraid of him?" Dig asked suddenly.

"Aye," Con Krag replied, looking away from the boy.

“I’ve talked too much. And if he finds out...” the man shrugged his great shoulders.

Dig glanced at his two spacemates. “What do you say?”

“He has a pretty convincing reason for wanting to come with us,” Jim said. “And it would certainly help to have someone along who could recognize the smugglers...”

Ken nodded quickly.

“All right,” Dig said. “You’ll come with us.”

“Thank you, lads! Thank you! It will give me a chance to make up for the wrong I did the little people when I helped to smuggle them to Mars!”

“Meet us on board the *Starover* in an hour,” Dig said. “Now how do we get back to the Main Canal?”

“Why, just turn right as you step out the door,” Con Krag said. “Then follow the alley. You’ll get to the Main Canal. I’ll pack a few things and be on board in time for blast-off!”

The boys left the man and, following his instructions, soon reached the Main Canal. Ken was worried as they crossed the bridge.

“I’m wondering if we’re doing the right thing, taking Con Krag with us,” he said.

“He’s afraid of the smugglers,” Jim said. “And as a witness, he might have his throat cut.”

“Yes, if the smugglers are as dangerous as he says, I can see them making sure there are no witnesses against them,” Dig said. “But I had a better reason for taking him along.”

“What?”

“I don’t want him to warn the smugglers about us!”

“I didn’t think of that,” Ken chuckled. “That’s the best reason of all!”

Corporal May met the boys at the Spaceport gate. Noting the bulging belt pouches, he smiled and said, “I see our little friends are safe and sound! How do they

like Mars?”

“Didn’t ask them,” Jim replied. “But that’s because we don’t know their language.”

“What were you doing in Spaceman’s Roost?”

“Looking for souvenirs,” said Dig.

“I see,” the Guardsman said, raising his eyebrows in surprise. “Souvenirs in Spaceman’s Roost? That would be Con Krag! And what does he know of the little machines?” Dig bit his lip, realizing that he had carelessly let out information which the Guardsman would be sure to follow up. Dig smiled weakly, but said nothing.

“I wish that giant did know something that would help,” Jim said. “Still, he didn’t sell us anything.”

“Good! That means he didn’t rob you.” The Guardsman started to turn away, then stopped suddenly. “By the way, don’t go wandering about the Roost too often. Next time, don’t go further than Rufe’s Cafe.”

“Rufe’s Cafe!” Ken gasped.

The Guardsman laughed, turned quickly, and walked away.

“He knows!” Jim whispered tensely. “We should warn Dorkas!”

“Don’t get excited, Jim!” Dig grinned. “That was the corporal’s way of telling us not to worry about Old Dorkas!”

“Isn’t he after him any more?”

“Looks like that, Jim.”

“Only good news we’ve had today,” Ken muttered as the boys walked through the spaceport gate.

Meanwhile, in Spaceman’s Roost, Con Krag was making his final preparations for the journey. His clothes, and an extra-large spacesuit, he stuffed hurriedly into a duffel bag. Then, rubbing his hand over his bald head, he looked about him.

He remained standing for a while, then shuffled to a

nearby closet and brought out a battered, old banjo case. Opening it slowly, he picked up the ancient musical instrument. He plucked the strings and listened to the tone. Satisfied with the sound, he put the banjo aside and picked up the false bottom of the case.

Two stunray pistols were fastened inside. Beside them were several extra clips of ammunition. He chuckled softly, covered them up, replaced the banjo and shut the case.

“Aye,” he said to himself. “Now I be ready for the trip.”

11 Journey To Eros

Ken was watching at the viewport when he saw a robot jeep pull away from the Administration Building and speed across the field toward the *Starover*. A tall, heavy-set man in a Postal Inspector's uniform sat in the front seat of the little car.

Puzzled by something familiar about the man, Ken looked on as the jeep stopped at the base of the spaceship. The man stepped out casually. Before sending the jeep back, he pulled out a large duffel bag from the rear seat which he hoisted to his shoulder. The man slipped several other packages under his arm, then turned to the wire ladder leading up to the airlock hatch.

"More packages coming aboard," Ken said.

"More?" Jim looked up from the corner of the cabin where he was unwrapping the little machines returned by Old Dorkas. Bonn and Genang were on the deck, helping him.

"We're ready to blast-off," Dig said. "If Con Krag doesn't show up soon, we'll have to leave without him."

"Do you think he went to warn the smugglers?" Ken asked uneasily.

Dig shrugged. "I hope not. He seemed very anxious to come with us."

The red light on the instrument panel flashed, indicating that the airlock hatch had been opened. A moment later the boys heard the click of metal on the wall ladder as someone climbed up to the control cabin.

The Postal Inspector poked his head through the hatch. He was a blond, young man with a light mustache.

"What have you got for us, sir?" Ken asked as the man pulled the duffel bag and packages up into the cabin.

Bonn and Genang hid behind the little machines. Cautiously they peered at the man.

“Well! All ready to blast-off?” he suddenly asked in a booming voice.

With a quick movement of his hand, the man pulled off the plastic mask that covered his face. Gone were the youthful face, the mustache, and the blond hair. The boys suddenly found themselves facing a man with bushy black eyebrows and a shiny bald head—Con Kraggs!

The transformation was instant and startling and the big man laughed heartily at the astonishment on the boys’ faces.

“Con Kraggs!” they gasped in one voice.

“Aye, lads!” the man laughed. “Think you I could get by the guards at the spaceport as Con Kraggs? Besides, I had to make sure none in Spaceman’s Roost knew I slipped away.”

“All right,” Dig said crisply. “We’re blasting off!”

Genang and Borin were placed in the soft foam-pad of the co-pilot’s seat. Ken stood by the radarscanner.

“Check clearance!” Dig called from the pilot’s seat.

Ken studied the radar screen.

“Blast-off vector all clear, sir! Up and away!”

“Blast-off in five seconds! Four! Three! Two! One! Zero!” Dig counted, watching the chronometer. On the last count, he pulled back the power release.

Far below, the rockettubes came alive with a roar that shook the hull of the ship. Jet flames poured with furious force against the launching pad. The ship began to rise on the pressure of a fiery tail that spilled and bounced off the hard ground.

There was silence in the cabin as each one waited for the pressure of the take-off to ease up. The graceful nose cone of the spaceship cut through the atmosphere of Mars and into the black vacuum of space.

Suddenly the pull of gravity was gone. The *Starover* was orbiting freely in space. Mars, red and round like an orange, was rapidly falling away. The spaceship was turning outward, pointing toward the distant Asteroid

Belt.

Dig placed the controls on automatic and swung about in the pilot's seat.

"We'll take up our regular space watch schedule," he said. "I'll stand by now. Ken will follow, and Jim, you'll have the third watch."

"What about me, lad?" Con Krag asked. "I be as good a spaceman as you'll find anywhere. I can turn my trick at the controls."

"You're a passenger, Con," Dig said. "A guest this time."

The big man was disappointed, but quickly hid his feelings with a laugh. "Oh, well! A passenger's life be an easy one."

He opened his duffel bag and brought out the battered banjo case. Opening it, he took out the instrument and began to pick the strings.

"Didn't know you went in for music," Jim remarked. "Can you really play that old banjo?"

"Aye," Con Krag replied. "A lonely life I lead, mates. A touch of music cheers me up. You wouldn't be laughing at me for it, would you?"

"Of course not!" Ken said.

"Tell you what," Dig suggested. "You can pay for your passage with a few songs."

"Would you really like to hear me sing?" Con Krag looked at the boys with bright, sparkling eyes.

"Sure, Con! Give us a song!" Jim cried, and Ken joined him in the request.

"That I will! And gladly!"

As Con Krag began to tune the strings, Borin and Genang cocked their heads, listening. The sounds pleased them and they waved their fingers over their heads like streamers in a breeze.

Dig nudged Ken, and indicated the little men with a nod of his head. "I guess they like it, too!"

"This be an old, old tune, lads. No one remembers

now who wrote the words. The music is hundreds of years old.”

Con Krag began to strum the strings, tapping his magnetoes on the metal deck in time to the music. He sang with a deep, pleasant voice.

Oh, I ride the fiery rockets Through the mighty deeps of space, And I carry on my shoulders The hopes of the human race!

Oh, you Earthlings, Now don't you cry for me! I sail the empty spaceways With a banjo on my knee!

The boys greeted the song with enthusiastic cheers. Borin and Genang were on their feet, waving their fingers and smiling.

“More!” Jim cried enthusiastically.

And Con Krag, pleased at the response, stuck out his huge chest and began another song. When he had finished the second song, he went on to a third. He seemed tireless. The concert lasted for more than an hour until Dig, with a glance at the chronometer, called a halt.

“We've a long trip ahead and we'll have more of Con Krag's singing,” he said. “It's time now to start ship inspection, Ken. You'll be going on watch soon.”

“Aye, aye, sir!” Reluctantly, Ken left the cabin.

Twice every twenty-four hours, the spaceship had to be examined from nose to stern. Minute punctures caused by meteorites had to be repaired at once and all machinery checked to make sure no serious trouble developed.

“Jim, fix a bunk for Con Krag,” Dig continued, turning to the tall boy. “And get some rest.”

“Aye, aye, sir!” Jim replied. “Come on, Con.”

Con Krag picked up his things and followed Jim out of the cabin.

Borin and Genang lay down on the deck near the little machines and went to sleep.

Dig remained seated before the curved control board and stared through the viewport at the endless black of

space. The lights from the distant stars were sharp and bright and coldly clear. Closer was the giant planet, Jupiter. And looking at the largest planet in the Solar System, Dig thought of his father.

When he had last heard from him. Captain Boyd Allen was planning an expedition to Jupiter.

“Dad must be there now,” Dig murmured softly. He wondered on which of Jupiter’s moons his father would land. Thinking of the vast distance that separated them, Dig shuddered, and a feeling of loneliness came over him.

Then he thought of Jim and Ken Barry. No spaceman ever had two better friends to share his dangers with. And Keith and Jane Barry were on the asteroid Eros, ready to welcome him into their home as one of the family.

Busy with his thoughts, Dig did not notice how quickly the time passed. It was Ken’s entrance into the control room that seemed to awaken him.

“What’s up?” the red-headed boy asked.

“Time for me to take over the watch,” Ken replied. “What’s the matter? Day dreaming?”

Dig grinned. “I guess so,” he said, and left the cabin.

Proud, shining silvery with the Sun’s light, the *Starover* hurtled toward the Asteroid Belt at fantastic speed. The watches passed quickly for the boys, busy with their regular study hours and the many shipboard duties.

After their meals. Con Kraggs would bring out his banJo and sing. But there were times when the man held the instrument in his huge hands and stared out of the viewport.

“I’ve no heart in me to sing this night,” he would say. He’d talk about his past, his many adventures in space, and once, as they approached the Asteroid Belt, he told them his plans for the future.

“When I make my fortune, lads, I’m going to settle down on Earth.”

“What will you do there?” Jim asked.

“I’ll buy a piece of land! Good, clean land—back on Earth! And I’ll grow green things on it. Peas and beans and grass and trees! Flowers, too, lads! Aye, that’s what I want.”

“Black space and gray rocks and the glare of the Sun,” Ken said softly. “A spaceman can get tired of it.”

“I’ll have no more to do with thieving and the ways of Spaceman’s Roost! Just let me get my hands on a fortune!” He shook his mighty fists, then stopped abruptly. “I’m going aft to my bunk, mates.”

The big man shuffled down the passageway with bent head and stooping shoulders.

After a while Jim said, “I’m getting to like him. Can’t believe that he’s die same man everyone in Spaceman’s Roost fears.”

“Maybe there he has to be hard and cruel,” Ken said. “Here, with us for friends, he’s different.”

“Friends do make a difference,” Dig said. He leaned over the instrument panel and opened the radarscope switch.

“Going to call Eros?” Jim asked.

“Yes, we’re close enough to get landing clearance.”

“Explorer Ship *Starover* calling Eros! *Starover* calling Eros!”

For several moments the loudspeaker remained silent. Then a voice replied.

“Eros Space Guard Control to *Starover*. Receiving your call!”

Wavy lines appeared on the radarscope screen, jumbled for an instant, then cleared into focus.

The dark, lean face of Sergeant Brool appeared on the screen. He stared at the boys with his piercing black eyes.

“Hi, Sarge,” Dig greeted him cheerfully.

The answer came slowly, after the sergeant had looked about the cabin behind the boys. “I’ve been

waiting for your call,” he said. “Where is Con Kraggs?”

“Asleep in his bunk,” Dig replied. “How did you know he was with us?”

“I received a call from Corporal Jon May on Mars,” the Guardsman replied.

“From Corporal May? But he didn’t know!” Jim cried.

“Old Dorkas, it seems, sent him a message. It was a warning.”

“Well, Old Dorkas is wrong about Con Kraggs,” Jim said.

“Right or wrong,” the sergeant replied, “I’m taking charge of Con Kraggs the moment he lands here!”

“You’re putting him under arrest?” Jim asked. “Why?”

“I wish I could arrest him. Unfortunately, I can’t prove any of the crimes I know he’s committed.”

“Then why?” Ken said.

“Eros is now restricted,” the sergeant said. “Only people with special permission may land here.”

“What’s happened, Sarge?” Dig asked. He had been watching the Guardsman closely and noticed the tense, worried expression on the man’s face.

“You’ll know after you land here,” Sergeant Brool said. “Follow regular landing procedures.”

“Aye, aye, sir!”

“And no tricks,” the Guardsman said. “There is too much at stake here to take chances. I’ll be waiting for you. Con Kraggs will be confined to special quarters.”

The Guardsman flipped the switch on his instrument panel and the screen went blank. The last thing the boys saw was the weary look in the Guardsman’s eyes.

12 Treasures of the Asteroid

The *Starover* cautiously poked its way through the outer edge of the Asteroid Belt. Streaks of space dust in queer, dense formations swept past the viewport as the ship moved steadily ahead. Lone pebbles bounced off the hard steelite hull from time to time.

Inside the control cabin there was silence as Dig sat at the controls, steering the ship. Passage through the rock-strewn Asteroid Belt was always dangerous. Some of the planetoids were as big as great mountains, others were sharp, Jagged and big as boulders. Collision would bring instant disaster.

It was a weird experience to watch the masses of rocks scattered over thousands of miles, hanging silently in space.

Jim, probing the way ahead with the magnascope, finally called out, "Eros ahead! Ten degrees to port and close enough for direct observation."

Instantly the eyes of Dig, Ken and Con Kraggs turned in that direction.

"I see it!" Dig reported.

"Eros," Ken breathed softly. "Our home now!"

"So that be the famous asteroid, eh?" Con Kraggs remarked. "They be saying it's a treasure house of science."

"Yes, when Dad and his staff solve the language of the Asterians who made the asteroid into a spaceship," Ken said. "As soon as they translate their ancient records, we'll know more about science than we've ever learned on our own!"

Con Kraggs looked at the asteroid with new interest. It was twenty miles long and five miles wide, its odd shape suggesting that of a long spaceship.

Dig swung the *Starover* about and, firing low pressure blasts from the nose rockets, backed the spaceship toward the asteroid. The contact of the tail fins with the surface was so gentle they hardly felt the

impact.

Immediately Dig released the anchor spikes. They hit and dug into the ground. Without these, the light gravity of the asteroid could not hold the spaceship to the surface.

The engines set at neutral, they began to get into their spacesuits. The little machines were packed together and Con Kraggs tossed them to his shoulder.

“I’ll take them, mates,” he said with a laugh. “They be as light as feathers here.”

Borin and Genang went into the spacehelmets of Ken and Jim. Dig led the way, and they crowded into the airlock. Outside, they shuffled cautiously along the surface to the asterian airlock, a round metal plate set firmly into the hard rock.

Dig pressed the starting button and the metal plate began to turn slowly, rising above their heads on a corkscrew shaft. When it stopped, the four space-suited figures stepped under the round plate onto a platform. Again Dig pressed a black spot, and the silent engines started. The platform sank slowly into the ground. The walls began to glow with a faint light. Overhead the plate came down, closing the shaft like a cork fitting into the neck of a bottle.

For a long time the platform continued to move downward. When it stopped, a part of the solid metal wall before them suddenly swung inward and a doorway appeared. They stepped into a square, empty room.

On one wall was a line of black spots, and Dig reached out and placed his finger on the highest one.

“We’ll go to the top level of the asteroid,” he said.

“I only know what I been hearing about this asteroid,” Con Kraggs said, looking at the black spots. “The asteroid has floors cut into it, eh? And this be an elevator?”

“Yes,” Dig replied. “By the way, there’s an atmosphere now. We can take off our spacehelmets.”

They loosened the clamps and took off their clumsy helmets. Borin and Genang perched on Jim’s and Ken’s

shoulders, their eyes wide with wonder at the strange new world. The elevator stopped. A door swung open and they stepped out into a long, cool corridor.

Waiting at the door was Sergeant Brool. His hands clasped behind his back, a frown on his face, he watched them as they came out of the elevator.

He remained silent while they stored their spacesuits in a nearby locker. Then the sergeant turned to Con Krag, ignoring the boys and their strange companions.

“You will be confined to quarters,” he said.

The big man was startled by the Guardsman’s hostile tone. “I be with my mates,” he began to say.

Sergeant Brool’s hand dropped to his side. For the first time they noticed that he wore his stunray pistol.

“Wait a minute, Sarge,” Jim said, stepping forward. “Con Krag has done nothing to deserve such treatment. We brought him with us—and as far as we’re concerned, we have no complaints. As a matter of fact, he’s our friend!”

“He will be confined to quarters,” the sergeant snapped. “Or all of you will have to turn right around and blast out of here.”

“Hold your temper, lad,” Con Krag said, placing his big hand gently on Jim’s shoulder. “I’ve no wish to bring you trouble. You be good friends with the Sarge and I’ll not be coming between you.” He turned to the Guardsman. “Lead me to the quarters, sir. I’ll stay there until you give me permission to leave.”

Sergeant Brool turned on his heel and began to stride down the corridor. The boys followed, a gloomy silence coming over them.

The Guardsman stopped before an open door and motioned toward it.

“These will be your quarters,” he said.

“Aye, aye, sir!” Con Krag replied. He paused in the doorway and smiled at the boys. “Don’t you be worried about me, mates. I be all right. Just tend to the job you’ve got at hand.”

He pointed his thick finger at Bonn and Genang, then turned and disappeared into the room. Sergeant Brool pressed the black circle on the wall and the door slid shut.

“Now,” the sergeant said, turning to the boys. “Let me hear what’s been happening to you! Corporal May appeared to be worried about something.”

“Smuggling, sir! And the kidnaping of these little people,” Dig said. “That’s what it’s all about, sir.”

The sergeant looked at Borin and Genang sitting on the shoulders of the two Barry boys. “You’ve no idea where they come from?”

“None, sir,” Dig said. As they walked along the corridor, he told the Guardsman the story of their discovery on the wrecked spacefreighter and the search for a clue on Mars.

“Well, I’d like to help you boys,” the sergeant said when Dig finished. “But right now I’ve got my hands full!”

“What’s been happening here, sir?” Jim asked. “You look tired and worried.”

“I am,” the sergeant replied. “Your father has finally finished the Langivac. That computer is a wonderful machine. It’s solved the riddle of the Asterian language and is beginning to translate some of their records!”

“So that’s it!” Ken exclaimed. He glanced at the holster strapped to the Guardsman’s side. “But why the stunray gun?”

“This asteroid is the most valuable piece of rock in all of space right now,” the sergeant replied. “I don’t know how many fortunes in science there are here, but enough to tempt every spacethief from the swamps of Venus to the hiding holes of the Asteroid Belt!”

“That’s why you were angry with us for bringing Con Krag here,” Dig said.

“Aye! I’m one man, alone. And I have to guard this place.”

“But Con Krag...”

“Con Krag’s can smell treasures! Let him find his way about this asteroid and he’ll be sending armies of thieves here! I’m taking no chances with him!”

“I’m... we’re sorry for adding to your worries, sir,” Jim said.

For the first time a smile appeared on the lean face of the Guardsman. It was a tired smile, but it was enough to bring a feeling of pleasure to the three boys.

“I’ll see you boys later,” Sergeant Brool said. “And I’m certainly interested in knowing more about these strange people,” he gestured toward Borin and Genang. “Now you boys run along. Mrs. Barry is waiting for you. Do you know the apartment?”

“No, sir,” Jim said.

“Straight down this corridor to the rotunda...”

“The circular hall just before the Asterian Observatory?”

“Aye, Jim. You ought to know the place,” the sergeant laughed. “You were here before me! The first door on the right.”

“We know the place, sir!” Dig said.

“Blast off then!”

The sergeant remained in the corridor, looking after the three boys who hurried on ahead. After a while, he turned on his heel and went back to the elevator.

Jane Barry was waiting for the boys when they came to the series of rooms which served as home for the family. She was a slender, energetic woman. Her light brown hair had a slight touch of gray in it. Her eyes were bright and her pretty face all smiles as she embraced the three boys.

“It’s been so long!” she said. “And I’ve missed you boys.”

“It’s good to be home. Mom,” Jim said. Dig and Ken agreed with him.

Then, with a startled cry, Mrs. Barry saw the two little men. Clinging to the shoulders of Jim and Ken, Borin and Genang calmly looked at her.

Jane Barry gasped and stepped back. For a moment she was speechless.

“What... what... who are they?” she finally stammered, looking into the grinning faces of the three boys.

“Our friends, Borin and Genang,” Jim said.

“I’m pleased to meet you,” his mother said, doubtfully. “Do they understand?”

“Not your words. Mom,” Ken said. “But they’ll understand the tone of your voice.”

A little flustered, Mrs. Barry smiled at the little men, then turned away. “I’ll set places for them at the table.”

A buzzer sounded at that moment. Before they could call out, the door slid open. A tall stick of a boy with a wild, bushy mop of hair on his head rushed in.

“Woody!” Jim cried out. “Woody Weston!”

“Jim! Dig! Ken!”

The next instant the four boys were in the center of the room, hugging each other, laughing, all talking at the same time.

“Are you going to live on Eros, Woody?”

“When did you leave the Moon?”

“Is Dr. Weston here now?”

Smiling, Mrs. Barry looked on and shook her head. “If you boys would calm down, you might hear each other,” she said.

“Mom’s right,” Jim laughed, stepping back.

“As always,” Dig agreed.

Woody held up his hand for silence. “Dad sent me,” he said. “Important! The Sarge told him about the little men.”

“Here they are,” Jim said, pointing to Borin on his shoulder. “This is Borin. Genang is on Ken.”

“And a wonder it is they didn’t get knocked off and hurt, the way you boys have been jumping around,” Mrs. Barry remarked as she went to the table.

“They’ve got powerful grips. Mom,” Ken called to her. “Don’t worry about them.”

Woody became serious. “Dad wants to give them a medical test,” he said. “New form of life! You know how it is! Very important for Space Medicine.”

“Sure,” Dig said. “When does he want to do it?”

“Now! Right away. He sent me to ask you.”

As ever, Woody found it hard to remain long in one place. He moved all around the boys as he spoke.

“All right, Woody. We’ll go along and see what your father finds out,” Dig said.

“No, you won’t!” Mrs. Barry spoke up. “You’ve had a long trip. You boys need a rest before dinner.”

“But, Mom...” Jim began.

“I’m sure Dr. Weston won’t need your assistance!”

With a sigh, Jim placed Borin on Woody’s shoulder. Ken did the same with Genang.

“I’ll take good care of them,” Woody promised.

“They’re smart and learn quickly. You’ll have no trouble making them understand you,” Jim told the tall, skinny boy.

With long, quick steps, Woody reached the door and was through it and gone before the boys realized it.

“Now you boys get some rest,” Mrs. Barry said firmly.

“We’re not tired. Mom,” Jim said. “Not really...”

“There’s your room,” Mrs. Barry pointed toward an inner door. “I’ll call you when father comes.”

“No arguing with Mom,” Dig grinned. “Come on.”

Three beds were prepared in the room set aside for the boys. They undressed slowly, unexpectedly finding the foampad softness of the mattresses very welcome. The smell of clean, fresh sheets and woolex blankets was pleasant. The moment their heads touched the pillows, the three boys were asleep.

How long they slept they did not know. But they awoke suddenly as a light flicked on in the room.

Woody was standing in the doorway. His face was pale.

“Jim! Dig! Ken!” he cried as they sat up. “You’ve got to come with me! Get dressed. Hurry!”

“What’s the matter?” Dig asked.

“It’s Borin and Genang.”

“What about them?” Jim demanded.

“They’re going to die!”

13 The New Danger

Woody's announcement shocked the boys into instant activity. Without waiting for explanations, they leaped out of bed and began to dress hurriedly.

Nervously Woody shifted from foot to foot. For once, he remained silent. As he pulled on his spaceboots, Dig looked up at Ins friend.

"At least tell us what happened while we're dressing."

"There's nothing I can tell you. Dad gave the little men a medic exam and found something that scared him. He told me to get you fellows as fast as I could."

"Scared Dr. Weston?" Jim asked. "Your father doesn't scare easily!"

"Not for himself," Woody replied. "It was about Borin and Genang."

"Can't you tell us what it is?" Ken asked.

"He'll tell you himself. Come on! You can button your shirts on the way."

The Space Explorers, puzzled and worried, followed Woody out into the long, silent corridor. The gangling boy took the lead, running with an awkward gait, his big head wobbling on his scrawny neck.

The uppermost level of the asteroid served as the main quarters of the Earth people. Below, the numerous floors of the asteroid were left for the use of the native Asterians, the strange race which had lived inside the asteroid for thousands of years, unknown to mankind until discovered by the Space Explorers.

The top level contained most of the libraries and laboratories of the ancient race. Here, too, was the amazing astral observatory. Space Medicine, headed by Dr. Weston, occupied quarters along one of the smaller passages. As he reached the laboratory. Woody came to an abrupt halt.

"In here." He opened the door and pushed his friends inside.

Dr. Weston, a frown on his face, was waiting in the center of the room. Beside him, standing on the white examination couch, were Borin and Genang. Seeing the boys come in, they waved their many-fingered hands in greeting.

Dig looked closely at the little men. "They seem all right to me," he murmured in a puzzled way. He glanced at the physician. "What's wrong. Dr. Weston? Woody said Borin and Genang were dying!"

"And so they are," the doctor replied gravely. "Starving to death!"

"But that's impossible!" Jim exploded. "They like our food and eat plenty of it!"

"I gave them a very thorough examination," Dr. Weston said, picking up several loose pages of notes. "With a few differences, their bodies are very much like ours. Their fingers and arms are without bones, just plain, powerful muscles, like tentacles. Their size... but such differences are not very important. One difference, however, is..."

Dig kept his eyes fixed on the doctor, attentively weighing every word that came from the man.

"They have an extra lung that seems to absorb special gases into their bodies. The atmosphere on their planet must contain small quantities of sulfur, bromine, iodine and other gases. They need these gases the way our bodies need vitamins. Without them, they'll starve, just as we would without vitamins."

"Can't you do something for them?" Jim asked.

"Perhaps, but it will take months to discover what they need and how much of it," Dr. Weston replied. "If you want to save their lives, you must return them to their home planet at once."

"At once?" Jim cried. "How much time do we have?"

"Two weeks, three at the very most!"

"We don't know where they come from!" Jim groaned and turned away.

"I can tell you something about the kind of world

they come from, if that will help.”

“Please do, sir,” Dig asked in a quiet, calm voice.

“A windy world, for one thing,” the doctor said. He pointed to the little men who, not aware of the danger threatening them, looked up at him trustfully. “Notice their heavy bodies, the thick legs, the arms and fingers which can whip around something and hold on? There is as much strength in their fingers and arms as in yours!”

“A world with great winds,” Dig murmured, frowning as he tried to think of such a planet. He gave up and turned to the doctor. “What else, sir?”

“A world with continuous daylight. Notice their eyes.”

Ken leaned over and stared into the faces of the little men.

“Our eyes have pupils,” Dr. Weston went on. “They grow larger when there is not enough light, smaller when there is too much light.”

“They have no pupils,” Ken said. “Just round, bright, black... like marbles!”

“Can they live on Mars? I mean the atmosphere there...” Jim asked.

“Just as deadly as ours,” the doctor said.

“There are twenty-eight others like Borin and Genang,” Jim said sadly. “They’re somewhere on Mars, or were recently.”

“Unless they are returned to their own world, they will all die. I’m sorry.” The doctor turned away, then added with an overwhelming helplessness, “There’s just nothing I can do now.”

“Two weeks!” Jim cried angrily. “Only two weeks!”

“Let’s go have a talk with your father, Jim,” Dig said, touching his friend on the arm. “Getting angry isn’t going to help.

Jim nodded. He reached out and let Borin and Genang climb to his shoulders. “I know,” he sighed. “The Langivac is Just about our only hope!”

It took the boys only a few minutes to return to the central hall, then turn into the third branch corridor. Keith Barry's office was far down the passage, close to the observatory.

The director of Space Research was sitting at his desk, poring over a pile of reports before him when the boys entered. He looked up, smiling. Then, recognizing the three boys with Woody, he rose quickly to his feet and came round the desk.

"Jim! Ken! Digby!" he cried.

He shook hands with the boys, gave each of them a quick, hearty hug, then gazed into their worried faces.

Keith Barry was past middle age, a tall, youthful man with the trim, hard body of an athlete. In spite of his fame as one of the greatest of scientists, and the responsibility of directing all space research, he was a quiet, modest man.

Seeing the looks on the boys' faces, he sensed immediately that something was wrong. But he did not press them to confide in him. He knew that they would tell him what was on their minds in their own time, and he waited.

"Mother told me you boys were resting," he said, a gentle smile on his face. "She ordered me not to disturb you until meal time."

"We're sorry to break in on you like this, Dad. But we have to talk to you..." Ken began. "You know about Borin and Genang?"

His father chuckled. "I've read all the reports about your adventure with that spacefreighter," he said. Then, with a nod toward Borin and Genang, he added, "And I met our little friends in Dr. Weston's laboratory."

"Do you know about the medical examination. Dad?" Jim asked. When his father shook his head, the boy quickly informed him of the danger threatening the little people.

Even as Jim finished speaking, his father understood the problem.

"Of course you can use the Langivac," he told the

boys. He flicked the switch on his intercom and said, "Connect me with Ben Kane."

A man's voice replied almost immediately. "Ben Kane speaking. What's up, Chief?"

"I'm sending the Space Explorers to you," Keith Barry said. "Put the Langivac at their service. And Ben, I'd like to have you personally help them."

"All right. Chief."

The scientist turned to the boys. "I'll call mother and tell her we won't have that family dinner for a while. See you boys later."

Ben Kane was sitting at the great computer, feeding in fresh reels of tape, when the boys came into the room.

"Got clean tapes in the Langivac," he said. "Ready to go to work?"

Woody introduced the young Space Explorers to the engineer and they shook hands. Ben Kane was a tall young man with a bright, cheerful manner.

"What's the problem?" he asked. "Whatever it is, the Langivac will solve it. So wipe those frowns off!"

In spite of themselves, the boys dropped the gloomy expressions from their faces. Ben whistled thoughtfully when he learned what the Space Explorers wanted.

"It'll do it," he said, patting the machine.

"How long will it take for the computer to learn the language and then teach it to us?" Dig asked.

"Six or seven hours at least, if you work without stopping."

"We're ready," Dig announced.

"Sit here."

Ben seated Dig before the Langivac, facing a small microphone. Borin was placed on a table edge near him.

"Now," Ben explained. "Everything you and Borin say will be recorded on videotape, together with whatever you're showing or pointing to."

"I understand," Dig nodded.

“The machine will match every word, picture, sound, and syllable of their language to ours. You’ve got to make Borin understand what you want so that he can name it in his language. Clear?”

Dig nodded and turned to the little man who was watching him with his quick, black eyes. The others drew back. The room became quiet.

Pointing to himself, Dig said, slowly and carefully, “I am Digby Allen.”

Borin stared at him, puzzled. He cocked his head from side to side and looked about the room. Then thoughtfully he pointed to himself and said, “Borin.”

Dig pointed to his eyes, named them. Then, in turn, to his mouth, nose, ears, hair, and named them, speaking clearly and distinctly. Frowning, the little man did the same. Then suddenly his face brightened.

“He understands what we’re trying to do,” Jim exclaimed.

Ben Kane threw a quick, warning glance at him, and placed a finger over his lips.

“Floor... ceiling... chair... desk... door...” Dig named every object in the room and Borin gave him his own word for it, acting as though it was some exciting game.

Woody slipped quietly out of the room and returned with a large tray of food. Dig pounced on it.

“Sandwich... tray... cup... saucer...” he called off.

The hours slipped by. Soon Dig was looking about desperately, searching for objects to name. Ben Kane turned to Woody.

“Get the picture encyclopedia from our library.”

Woody nodded and left the room. Presently he brought in a pile of books which he handed to Dig.

And the work went on. More hours passed. Dig became tired and Jim took his place. Then Genang replaced Borin. Finally Ken relieved his brother. The translations continued and the hours slipped away.

Finally Ben Kane called a halt. He set the tape reels to rewind.

“Langivac has enough,” he said after checking some of the dials. “Are you ready to let it go to work on you?”

“Yes,” Dig replied, stepping forward. “Start with me.”

“All right.” Ben turned to Woody. “Get three cots. Woody.”

“Aye, aye!” Woody left on the errand.

Ben explained how the Langivac worked. “You’ll fall into a hypnotic sleep,” he said. “While you’re sleeping, everything the computer has learned about the language will be impressed on your mind. It takes about ten minutes, but you’ll sleep for half an hour after the machine is through.”

He went to a closet and brought out a black plastic helmet with several wires protruding from it. These he plugged into the Langivac. He motioned Dig to a seat before the machine.

“Ready?”

“Aye!”

“Put this on.”

Dig placed the helmet over his head and sat back in the chair, relaxed. Jim and Ken moved up to stand close beside him. Ben pressed several buttons, adjusted a dial, then threw a switch.

Inside the computer the reels of tape began to turn slowly. From time to time, lights blinked on and off, on and off.

Woody came in with three folding cots which the two brothers helped him set up. Then they stood back and waited.

With a faint sound of a bell, the Langivac came to a stop. Ben flicked a switch, then took the helmet off Dig’s head.

“Give me a hand,” he said.

They carried the sleeping form of the red-headed boy to one of the cots and laid him there.

“Who’s next?”

“Me!” Jim took his place before the Langivac.

The black helmet was slipped over his head. Once more the engineer started the language machine going.

“After you,” Ben said to Ken as the helmet was being placed over his head, “I’m going to teach the little ones our language.”

“Wonderful!” Ken answered.

Tense with excitement. Ken closed his eyes as the helmet came over his head. When he opened them again, he saw nothing but solid black. In a way it was like being in space, so hard was the blackness and the silence.

And then he heard a sound, a faint whispering of a distant voice, warm and gentle and soothing. He listened, trying to understand the words it murmured into his ears. But it seemed far, far away and he strained desperately to catch the words... the sentences... the meaning...

It was coming closer and closer... very near now... Just a little more... and then came sleep.

14 A Tale Of Treachery

Ken opened his eyes to find himself staring up into his father's face. He grinned in recognition and the anxious look vanished from the scientist's eyes.

"How are you feeling, son?"

"Fine, Dad. A little sleepy, but all right."

Ken realized he was lying on one of the cots. He turned his head and found Dr. Weston beside him, holding a plastube of warm chocomilk.

"Drink this, Ken. You'll feel better in a minute."

"Thank you, sir."

He took the tube and squeezed some of the sweet liquid into his mouth. The drowsiness was almost gone. He lay back and rested.

Keith Barry rose to his feet. "He's all right," he said.

"Fine," Ben called from across the room.

Woody came and sat beside him on the cot, saying nothing. Ken closed his eyes and listened to a strange voice.

"We know you are not like those others," the voice said. "They made false promises, but you have not. They treated us cruelly, and you have been good to us."

There was something familiar about the voice. It was thin, like a child's, and gentle. Suddenly Ken sat upright.

"Borin!" he cried.

"It is I," the voice replied.

Ken turned. Sitting on a nearby cot with Jim and Dig were the two little men.

"I can understand you!" Ken exclaimed.

"Yes, and we understand you," Genang said, waving his fingers in a friendly way. "We know your language and you know ours."

Ken swung his feet to the floor.

"Well," Dig grinned. "How do you like it? The

Langivac, I mean.”

“Gosh,” Ken laughed. “I wish we had that machine in school. It would have been a pleasure learning languages.”

“Come on, sleeping beauty,” Jim said. “Get over here and let’s start working. We’re trying to find out everything we can about Borin and Genang.”

“We have been trying to understand what ‘criminal’ means,” Borin said. “In our world, we do not have men like that.”

“Let’s say there are good people and bad people,” Ken suggested. “Criminals are bad people.”

“Ah, like the men who took us away from our homes,” Bonn said. “We understand that.”

“Where is your home?” Dig asked.

“In a far away land,” Genang replied.

“But on what planet is it?” Jim asked.

Both Borin and Genang were puzzled. “We don’t know anything about such things as planets. Or stars,” they replied. “In our world we cannot see anything but the sky, and the winds blowing the clouds.”

“We’ll get nowhere this way,” Dig said. “Tell us what happened to you and how you came to be on the spaceship where we found you. Speak in our language so we’ll all understand.”

“The sky and the stars and the things we saw from the window of your ship were all new to us,” Borin said. “We had never seen such things, and they frightened us at first.”

“How did you get on that ship?” Dr. Barry asked, joining the group. Behind him Woody, Dr. Weston and Ben Kane listened curiously.

“We were told of a beautiful place in which we could live, and the great ship was to take us there,” Borin began. “We could build homes and receive all the land we wanted. In return, we were to help the man make things.”

“What kind of things?” Jim asked.

“I do not know, just things,” Borin said.

“Better let them tell their story in their own way,” Keith Barry advised. “Try not to interrupt them.”

“We took our tools and machines and many things we would need in our new home and went on board the ship,” Genang said. “But they put us into cages like animals and treated us badly.”

“How did the men find you?”

“They came to our world,” Borin picked up the tale. “One day a great fireball fell from the sky. It landed and exploded. We rushed to see what it was. It was what you call a spaceship. It was smashed up. Inside it we found a man, hurt and burned. To us he was a giant. But we pulled him out and brought our wise men to him.”

“Your wise men?” asked Ken.

“What you call a doctor,” Borin said. He pointed to Dr. Weston. “In our land we would call him a wise man.”

“What did they do?” asked Dr. Weston. “Were they able to save him?”

“Yes. Our wise men know how to cure people who have been burned badly,” Borin explained, “for there is a place of danger in our land where we get burned and die if we go into it. This man was saved by our wise men. They healed his wounds and he was well after a time.”

“What sort of place is this dangerous part of your world?” Keith Barry asked.

“It is a place of heat and of fire. It is so terrible that even the rocks flow like water...”

“Lava!” the scientist exclaimed. “Does it shoot molten rock into the air? Is it like a mountain?”

“No, it’s flat like a lake.”

“Not a volcano,” Keith Barry murmured thoughtfully. “Please go on with your story.”

“This stranger started to work on the machines in the spaceship. With our help, some of the machines were repaired. We put the wires together the way he told us, for we are very skilled in such matters.”

“Then what did the man do?” asked Ken.

“He used the machinery to call another spaceship to come for him,” Genang told them. “When it came, he promised he would return, and that he would do something for us then.”

“And did he?” Jim asked.

“Yes, a long time later he came in another ship. He said he had a land without dangers for us to live in. He would give us all the things we wanted and we would help him make things. His spaceship would take us there.”

“And you accepted, Borin?” Jim said.

“Yes. We always wished for a land without dangers. In our world there are two terrible places. The land of fire and the land without light. This is a cold place of snow and death. So thirty of us decided to go with the man and find out about the new land. We loaded our things on the spaceship and then... then we found that the man had made false promises to us.”

“The rest of our story you already know,” Genang said. “You found us on the ship after the man and our people were gone.”

“And you have no idea of where your land is?” Jim asked in despair.

The little men shook their heads. The boys questioned them for some time but discovered no further clues.

“We’ve shown them maps of the Solar System and that didn’t work,” Jim said. “Now we know their language, and still we can’t find out where they come from. We’ve got two weeks to save them!”

For several minutes, there was complete silence in the room. Finally Keith Barry spoke up.

“This looks like an impossible situation,” he said. “They know nothing of astronomy or the stars... nothing about space travel. They must be from our Solar System, yet they don’t recognize any of the planets, or even the Sun!”

All eyes were on the scientist as he began to pace the floor.

“We know something of the condition of their planet,” he said. “And we’re sure there’s no such place! A place which has no Sun but has light! And a sky from which one of our spaceships can crash!” He stopped and stared at the group around him. “So it seems as if we face an impossible situation! But we know that there is no such thing, as an impossible situation in nature!”

“Then the answer must be somewhere here... in the facts we have!” said Dig.

“Yes!”

“Then what do you suggest, sir?” asked Dig.

The scientist was thoughtful for a moment, then smiled gently.

“I suggest we have a rest. Eat. Get some sleep. And we’ll be able to think a little more clearly afterwards.”

Reluctantly they agreed with him. Woody and his father went to their quarters. Ben Kane pulled up one of the cots and lay down on it.

“I’ll take a nap right here. Chief,” he said. “I’ve got to start translating that Asterian book on atomics soon.”

“All right, Ben.” The scientist turned to the boys. “Let’s get home.”

Jim and Ken picked up Borin and Genang and they filed out of the room.

No one spoke on the way to the Barry apartment. The scientist walked a little ahead of the others, engrossed in his thoughts. The boys were too discouraged to talk.

Jane Barry saw the glum expressions on their faces as they came in and said nothing. Quietly she slipped into the little galley to prepare their meal. She touched a series of black buttons on the wall, and within seconds the food slid through an opening. She placed the plastiglass dishes on a tray and brought them to the table.

“Some food should make you feel better,” she said to them. When no one replied or made a move toward the

table, she raised her voice. "I want no nonsense from any of you! Now get to the table and eat."

Silently they sat down and began to pick at the food. Only Borin and Genang, sitting cross-legged on the table, ate heartily.

"There can be no impossible situation!" Keith Barry suddenly exclaimed. "Not in nature!"

"Well, then, how can there be a world without a Sun, yet with light?" Jim said.

"If you want to turn this into a riddle," Ken added, "consider that the world is half-frozen and half so hot the rocks melt. My answer is, there's no such place. Not if there's life on it!"

"And yet such a world does exist," Genang said. "For Borin and I were born there. And our people still live there!"

"There is such a world and I know it!" Keith Barry cried, suddenly leaping up.

"You know. Dad?" Jim asked, staring in amazement at his father.

"Come along," the scientist said. Then, turning to his wife, he added, "Sorry, dear, we've got to rush off."

Jan Barry laughed. "It's good to see that gleam in your eyes again," she said. "Go on. I know, you've got work to do." She turned to the boys. "You, too! Go!"

The scientist did not wait. He made for the door at a quick, bouncy stride. "Bring Borin and Genang, and come along!"

The boys followed breathlessly as the scientist turned from the rotunda into the middle branch corridor.

"Where are we going, Dad?" Jim called after him.

"To the Asterian Observatory," his father replied without looking back.

"The Observatory? What for?"

"To show you the planet from which the little people came!"

15 The Unknown World

The place called the Asterian Observatory was a large, semi-dark room. One wall was straight, and solid black in color; the rest of the room was round. Along the circular wall ran a strange strip of glowing plastic set with countless instruments, dials, measuring devices and many-colored lights which flashed on and off.

In the center of the floor stood a pedestal. On it was a small telescope pointing directly at the black wall. On the flat top of the pedestal, close to the base of the telescope, were several rows of black spots and a black square. These were, in fact, the means of operating the telescope.

Dr. Barry took his place beside the pedestal and waited until the boys gathered about him. He placed Borin and Genang close to him, near the telescope, before he spoke.

“Now, we want a planet which is very hot on one side and very cold on the other. Such a planet would have to be close to the Sun, and it would have to keep the same side to the Sun the way the Moon keeps one side facing the Earth. Does that sound familiar?”

“Of course,” Dig cried suddenly. “Mercury!”

“Mercury,” Dr. Barry repeated. “Now, think back to the time you found the wrecked spacefreighter. What planets were in sight?”

“Mars on our outward side. Mercury toward the Sun!” Ken said. “I know. I checked our position.”

“Again Mercury,” his father said. “The smugglers headed toward Mars, where they eventually landed. From what planet, then, could they have come? Earth and Venus were beyond the Sun...”

“Mercury!” Jim said. “Everything points to it.”

“Sure, but we know there’s no life on Mercury,” Ken said, shaking his head.

“Do we?” His father turned his keen eyes on the boy. “We’ve never explored that planet. We took it for

granted that life didn't exist there. And since we had so many other places to explore, we didn't bother about that little planet."

"That's true, but..." Ken began.

"There couldn't be a sharp boundary between the hot side and the cold side," Dr. Barry said thoughtfully. "It would have to be a gradual change. Somewhere between the two extremes there must be a twilight zone—neither too hot nor too cold."

"And life might develop there," Dig said.

"Not might develop, Dig. It did develop there! Borin and Genang prove it."

"If I remember rightly," Dig said hopefully, "Mercury's year is equal to 88 days on Earth. The Mercury day is just as long. It rotates once in 88 days, and so it always keeps the same side to the Sun!" He looked at the scientist. "How wide do you suppose the strip between the hot and the cold parts is, sir?"

"Two hundred miles, perhaps three hundred," Dr. Barry replied.

"To the little people that could be as much as a thousand miles would be to us," Dig said.

"What about air? They need oxygen as much as we do," Ken reminded them. "Mercury is too small to hold on to its atmosphere."

"How did Earth get its atmosphere? A large part of our oxygen came from the rocks as they broke up. That's happening on Mercury all the time. On the hot side, oxygen is released by the boiling and breaking of the rocks and minerals. And the great winds carry it over the rest of the planet. Besides, a planet loses its atmosphere slowly, atom by atom, and it takes millions of years."

"But the air must escape into space," Ken insisted.

"Yes, but it's constantly replaced from the hot side!"

"It sounds right," Jim agreed with his father. "Ken is always kind of cautious. Dad. Is there a way we can convince even him?"

“There is,” the scientist said, placing his hand on the telescope. “Remember how this works?”

The boys remembered it well from their first adventure on the asteroid. In some mysterious way, the telescope cast any desired view of space on the huge black wall.

“We’ll use it now,” Dr. Barry said.

He dropped his hand to the series of black spots and pressed one of them. Instantly the black wall became alive with the lights of thousands of stars. In the center, the Solar System appeared as it would from beyond the farthest planet.

It was a grand, awe-inspiring scene. They felt as though they were standing at the viewport of some huge spaceship which was relentlessly hurtling forward.

The planets became larger as Dr. Barry moved his fingers over the control spots. They felt they were speeding toward the Sun. They flashed by the larger, outer planets, then plunged through the Asteroid Belt and past Mars. Ahead was emptiness, for Earth and Venus were beyond the Sun. Mercury, a tiny disc, was outlined against the blazing Sun.

They moved swiftly toward the little planet. And presently they were close to it.

“I’m going to swing the telescope so that the Sun is hidden by Mercury, just enough to give us a sort of twilight.”

The bulk of the planet, now large on the wall screen, began to move up, gradually blocking the view of the Sun. As the last of the Sun disappeared behind the planet, Dr. Barry stopped the movement of the telescope and stepped back to look at the two little men.

Borin and Genang had been watching the changing scene on the wall with excitement. Now, as they stared at the clean, soft light, they became tense. They leaned forward, breathing with difficulty, choked by powerful emotion.

For a long time no one moved, no one spoke. Then, unexpectedly, Borin and Genang raised their hands and

covered their faces.

"It is like the sky of our land that this strange machine shows us," Borin sobbed, turning away.

"We did not want to upset you," Dr. Barry said as he shut off the telescope, "but we had to find your home so we could help you return. You know that your life depends on it."

"And you have found it?" asked Genang, his voice hoarse.

"We have found it," Dr. Barry replied very gently. "Your home is on the planet Mercury, first from the Sun."

"And you're Mercurians," Jim said, in high spirits again.

"Can we call them Merks for short?" he asked, turning to the others.

Ken shrugged indifferently. He raised Borin and Genang to his shoulders. They left the observatory and walked slowly down the corridor toward the central rotunda.

"We should start for Mercury as quickly as possible," Dig said. "But what can we do about the others?"

"The twenty-eight?" Jim asked, the smile suddenly leaving his lips. "I forgot about them. They're still prisoners on Mars."

"Even that isn't sure," Ken said. "We only know they landed there. Maybe they've been taken somewhere else."

"That's possible. And if we go to Mercury we might find out where they are," Dig said.

"How?" Keith Barry asked.

"Con Kraggs gave us a clue," Dig explained. "He said the smugglers were planning to leave on another expedition back to Mercury, I'm sure. Well, the pieces of our mystery puzzle are beginning to fit into place. We can learn where the missing twenty-eight Mercurians are from the smugglers—when we capture them!"

Jim whistled under his breath. "Well do it!"

Ken disagreed. "I think we ought to get the Space Guards on this. We'd be taking on a mighty big job, capturing a whole crew of smugglers."

"We can do it!" Jim replied heatedly.

"I think Ken is right," Dr. Barry said quietly. "At least, let's call Sergeant Brool and talk it over with him."

Jim agreed reluctantly.

"I don't know how to treat you boys," his father said as they returned to the Barry apartment, "as Space Explorers or as my sons." There was a twinkle in his eyes as he opened the door. "Perhaps a little of both would be the best way."

His words eased the tension which had gripped the three boys. The hard, drawn expressions on their faces softened a little. Only the weariness remained. And the thought of twenty-eight little Mercurians in deadly danger continued to haunt them.

Jane Barry noticed the mixed feelings reflected on their faces as they came in.

"That problem didn't take you long to solve," she said kindly. "But you all look so worried..."

Dig told her, then, the whole story. Dr. Barry, in the meantime, went to another room and called Sergeant Brool.

"He's coming over right away," he told them when he came back.

"You're all so tired," Mrs. Barry said. "Why don't you take a rest? I'll call you as soon as the sergeant gets here." The boys refused.

"Eat something, then," Jane Barry insisted. They drifted to the table without enthusiasm, one by one, and tried to eat. But they found it almost impossible to swallow any food. Their thoughts were with the missing little people and the certain death that threatened them if they weren't returned to their planet in time.

Sergeant Brool, when he had been informed of everything, strongly opposed letting the Space Explorers leave for Mercury alone.

“I know I can’t order you boys not to go,” he said. “You are Space Explorers. I don’t think even your father, who is, after all, the director of all Space Research, can stop you. But I can and do advise you to wait.”

“Wait? For how long? And for what?” Jim asked.

“Until I can come with you.”

“And when will that be?”

“A few days, Jim. I’m not really sure how long,” the sergeant said. “Until reinforcements arrive I must stay here to guard the asteroid and its science treasures.”

“And in the meantime, the Mercurians will die!” Jim said bitterly.

“We’d have to take that chance,” Sergeant Brool replied.

“Then we must take a chance with our three lives—to save twenty-eight others!” Dig said. “Besides, we’ll have Con Kraggs to help us.”

“I consider him an added danger!” the sergeant snapped. He turned to Dr. Barry who had been listening quietly. “What do you think, sir?”

“Because they are my boys, I don’t want them to go,” the scientist said. “But because they are Space Explorers, I will let them decide. Whatever they do, I’ll stand behind them.”

“I vote we go!” Jim cried.

“Ken?” Dig asked.

The boy nodded silently. Dig turned to Dr. Barry. “We go.”

“When?” asked the scientist.

“At once.”

Dr. Barry bit his lip and nodded. There was no need for further discussion. All of them understood that the young Space Explorers had undertaken a deadly and desperate race to save the lives of twenty-eight Mercurians—perhaps at the expense of their own. Two weeks, perhaps three but not more, remained in which the missing little people had to be found, freed and

returned to their home atmosphere.

None of them thought it unusual that the three boys should risk their own lives to save a group of foreign people, a strange race from a strange planet. Only Dr. Keith Barry was fully aware of this.

It gave him a warm glow of pride as he watched the boys prepare for the journey.

16 First from the Sun

The farewells were brief. Sergeant Brool solemnly shook hands with the young Space Explorers and touched Borin and Genang with his finger. Then he hustled Con Kraggs on board the *Starover* without ceremony.

Woody murmured to his friends, "Gosh! I wish I could go with you."

Keith and Jane Barry hugged the boys. The scientist stepped back as his wife kissed each boy quickly on the cheek. As they went into the elevator, she turned her face aside to hide the tears in her eyes.

Now the *Starover* was in flight, a gloomy, silent ship. Dig, at the controls, set the power dial for maximum and continuous acceleration. The speed indicator was already at the two-hundred-thousand-miles-an-hour mark, and rising steadily.

Only Con Kraggs, moving about restlessly, could not understand the sober mood around him. Finally he could stand it no longer.

"What's eating you, mates?" he asked, facing the silent group. "Even the little ones be gloomy! What's up, lads? Can't you tell your old spacemate?"

"It's nothing," Ken told him.

"Nothing? And you with faces so long they be scraping the deck! Come, lads, tell Con Kraggs. I don't even know where we be going."

"To Mercury," Dig said.

"So that be their planet, eh?" Con Kraggs murmured, his little eyes shifting to look at Borin and Genang. "And you know their language, lads?"

"Aye," Dig replied. "And they know ours."

"Then why so sad, mates? We're on our way to their homeland, eh?"

"We'd rather not talk about it. Con Kraggs," Dig snapped.

"Aye, if that be the way you feel about it!" The big

man shrugged his shoulders and left the control cabin.

“Now you’ve got him angry,” Jim said, looking after the huge figure of Con Kraggs shuffling down the passageway.

“We’ve got a long trip ahead,” Dig retorted. “And none of us is feeling very happy about the way things have turned out. Two weeks isn’t a long time, remember that.”

“Still, you don’t need to snap at everyone,” Jim answered.

“Jim, you’ll take the next watch. Suppose you start inspecting the ship?” Dig changed the subject.

“Aye, aye, sir,” Jim said. He looked at his friend for a moment, then turned and left the cabin.

“And you can go to your cabin and get some rest.” Dig turned to Ken. “I can stand my watch alone.”

Without a word. Ken left the control deck.

“I don’t know what’s the matter with me,” Dig said to Bonn and Genang. “I’m growling at my best friends.”

The two Mercurians approached the boy. They stopped at his feet and looked up at him.

“You are more experienced and wiser in the ways of space travel than are your friends,” Borin said. “Perhaps you understand the dangers ahead more than they do.”

“In a way, yes,” Dig said. “This is not an easy trip to chart. We’ll be closer to the Sun than I’ve ever been before. The Sun is big. Its gravity is very great. If we get too close to it, it can pull us in and we’ll burn up.”

“You are worried because you might make a mistake?”

“Yes. Mercury is too close to the Sun for comfort!”

“You won’t make any mistakes,” the little man said.

“I wish I were as sure as you are,” Dig smiled. He turned to the computer and began to check and recheck his figures. When he was finally satisfied, he recorded the course on tape and fed the reel into the gyrobot.

Two days later the *Starover* began to brake its speed.

They were moving at almost two million miles an hour at the time, and Dig's calculations would bring them down to cruising speed in another two days.

But each tick of the chronometer increased the tension in the ship. For the first time since they had become inseparable spacemates, the three boys were quick-tempered and ready to quarrel with each other at the slightest excuse.

Con Kraggs shrewdly kept out of their way. Once he had brought out his banjo, but the Space Explorers were in no mood for singing. After that, the big man spent most of his time in the study cabin, or with Borin and Genang.

The Mercurians had opened the covering of the little excavator and shown him the engine.

"All our motors run on springs," Borin explained in Con Kraggs' language. "The main spring turns a gear which increases the strength of the next spring."

"Aye, a clever arrangement," Con Kraggs said, sprawled out on the deck with his face close to the machine. "And don't the springs ever need rewinding?"

Dig, who had been watching and listening. Joined the conversation. "We have ancient clocks on Earth that run for as much as ten days with just one winding."

"We have a weight inside," Borin pointed out. "As it comes down, it rewinds the spring coil, and this gives power to the other springs."

"The motors can run for a very long time," Genang added. "And when the power is gone, we open the engine and pull the weight up again. Then the coil spring pulls another spring, and that turns a wheel which winds another spring, and so on."

Dig grinned. "I get the general idea of how your engines are powered," he said. "But there are so many springs that I'm afraid I could never really work it out myself."

"We are very skilled in such matters," Borin said.

After that the tension somehow relaxed on board the spaceship. Jim and Ken, too, began to show an interest

in the little machines. They almost forgot the pressure of time until they sighted Mercury by direct observation through the viewport.

Four days had passed now, since they left Eros.

The *Starover* approached the little planet slowly, keeping well within its shadow. Already the sunpower accumulators were working continuously, absorbing the heat from the Sun and distributing it around the spaceship. Some of the power the photo-cells of the accumulator had stored in the batteries, but these were by now fully recharged.

The dark side of Mercury was covered by huge, pointed mountains of snow and ice, reaching for miles into the air.

For Borin and Genang it was an awe-inspiring sight. They were the only Mercurians ever to see this part of their world.

Gradually, the *Starover* passed over the great mountains, moving steadily toward the distant horizon where a faint glow of light appeared.

The ground beneath changed to craggy hills of ice, and then to a gently rolling plain covered with snow. Rivulets of water seemed to stream down the sides of the hills, but it was still too dark to see these clearly.

Later, as they passed over areas of bare rock with only patches of snow and ice, they saw many streams. Here and there were clumps of low bushes and dark areas of moss.

As the light increased, they found small, stunted trees below them. These soon gave way to taller trees, all strangely leaning toward the lighter side of the planet. Their branches seemed to have been whipped back as though they were bucking a continuous wind.

“We will soon see our home!” Borin and Genang cried out again and again as they began to recognize the landscape. “We shall soon walk under the great trees!”

Dig handled the controls manually, watching his instruments and glancing out of the viewport from time to time.

“Where shall we land?” Dig asked.

“You can land close to our town,” Borin said. “I will point out the place.”

“I want to land among the trees,” Dig told him. “Tall ones, so that the ship would be hidden as much as possible.”

Borin waved his hand, his long fingers flicking out in every direction at the same time. “The trees are everywhere,” he said. “From here to the place of great heat, on the other side of the world.”

They were drifting at the edge of the atmosphere. Below them the heavy growth of trees formed a dark green carpet, cut here and there by meandering streams and rivers.

Genang was peering through the viewport. Suddenly he cried out, pointing into the distance.

“It is there! We are near our home!”

Con Krag and the boys crowded forward to stare through the viewport. But their eyes were not as keen as those of the little men.

“All I see is clouds and the green forest,” Ken said.

“Do you see a black spot, a dark cloud rising from the ground?” Genang asked.

“Yes... like a smoke cloud?” Ken asked.

“Our home is near there,” Genang said.

Dig turned to Jim. “Check distance in ten-mile units.”

“Aye, aye, sir!” Jim dialed the setting on the distance indicator and read off the marks. “Forty, sir!”

“We’ll land five miles from the town,” Dig announced. “If the smugglers are anywhere about, we want to stay out of sight.”

“Thirty miles, sir!” Jim called out.

Dig fired the steering rockets, turning the great ship slowly so that it began to drop gradually, tail fins pointing to the ground.

“Twenty miles, sir!”

Dig ran the automatic landing tapes into the gyrobot. Then he released the power lever.

“Ten miles, sir!”

“That’s it,” he said as the ship began to descend toward the ground.

“Any sign of a spaceship sticking up above the trees?” Ken asked.

“Too cloudy to see, mate,” Con Kraggs said.

“Well, it’ll cover us, too.” Dig stood up. “Jim and Ken will go landside with me. Con...”

“Aye?”

“You’ll stay on board and guard the ship.”

“Aye, aye, sir. Have you a stunray gun for me, mate?”

“We only have three, and we’re taking them with us,” Dig replied.

The rockets began to fire rapidly. The flames vaporized the trees beneath them, burning away a circular clearing. Fires began to flare all around them. Black smoke rose skyward.

“Say, this is black smoke...” Ken started to say.

Dig pressed a button on the control board. A blanket of thick carbon dioxide gas squirted out of tiny openings in the great tail fins. It quickly smothered the flames.

“That’s taken care of,” Dig laughed. “Don’t worry about forest fires now, Ken.”

“I wasn’t thinking of that at all,” the blond boy replied. “I was thinking of the black cloud Genang pointed out to us!”

“The smugglers!” Jim cried.

“It could be,” Dig said. He turned to the Mercurians. “Do you often see black clouds like the one you showed us?”

“No,” Genang said. “Only when something burns. I don’t understand why it hasn’t stopped.” Suddenly his eyes became alert and a little frown creased his forehead. “Let us hurry,” he said.

“Take over, Con,” Dig said. He lowered himself through the hatch and began to climb down to the airlock.

Ken took Borin, and Jim, Genang. They followed Dig down to the airlock, stopping for a moment at Dig’s cabin to get the stunray pistols.

“Do you think it’s wise leaving Con Krag alone with the ship?” Ken asked.

“We have no choice,” Dig replied. “I’d rather leave him here than have him with us when we face the smugglers.”

In the airlock, they clipped the holsters to their utility belts, checked to see that they had emergency supplies, then opened the outer hatch and dropped the wire ladder.

Mercury was smaller than Mars, and the gravity weaker. The boys found moving around easy and pleasant. The air, which the atmometer indicated was almost as dense as the Earth’s, had a surprisingly clean, fresh smell.

They dropped to the ground burned bare by the rocket flames and looked around.

Borin waved a finger, pointing. “That way,” he said.

“Ken, you and Borin lead the way,” Dig said. “We’ll walk a few paces behind you.”

“Aye, aye!” Ken stepped out and found he could move with great strides, covering the ground swiftly.

There was plenty of room between the trees as they entered the forest. The springy, grass-like moss spread like a thick carpet beneath their feet.

“What about the winds?” Ken asked. “Doesn’t seem too bad.”

“It is not the season,” Borin explained. “When the winds come we stay in our houses.”

A quick ten minute march brought them to a paved road, about three feet in width. Ken found walking on it easier and increased his pace.

“This is our highway,” Borin said. “It will lead us

straight into our town.”

“Is the town far?”

“No, just beyond the turn in the road,” Borin pointed.

The sky overhead was growing darker. The black smoke cloud streaked over the tree tops as the winds swept it away.

“There must be a fire ahead,” Ken said.

“It is strange,” Borin said. “My people would put the fire out. Why don’t they do it?”

A sudden fear came over Ken and he broke into a run. “What’s the matter?” Dig called after him.

“Something’s wrong!” Ken replied, and ran faster. As he reached the turn in the road, he stopped abruptly. Before him spread a little town, a toy town of breathtaking beauty. But Ken had no time to admire it.

From windows and roofs flames were shooting up. Thick black smoke rose skyward and was swept away by the wind. The whole town was burning!

17 Desperate Odds

Stunned by the devastation before him, Ken could only stare. Dig and Jim came up to him silently. Some of the little houses were crumbling into piles of smoldering rubble.

“The smugglers must have done this,” Ken muttered fiercely. “They can’t be far away.”

“The fire has been burning a long time,” Genang said sadly. “Here in our world things do not bum quickly. Much time has passed since this fire began.”

They walked slowly toward the ruins of the town. The streets were deserted. Except for the crackling of the flames and the soft whistling of a rising wind, there was no sound.

The Space Explorers stopped again at the edge of the town and stared down at it.

Jim pointed to a row of houses knocked flat. “They used a stunray gun on that,” he said.

“Where are the people?” asked Dig with a quick glance at Bonn’s grim face.

“I don’t know.”

Jim opened one of his belt pouches and took out a small cartridge of carbon dioxide. He squirted it over a building and the gas quickly smothered the flames. Dig and Ken joined him in putting out the fires. Within a few minutes only scattered curls of smoke rose from the town.

“What do we do now?” Jim asked.

Dig let his eyes wander in a circle around the town, watching the edge of the forest.

“Borin, if any of your people ran away, would they be hiding in the forest?”

“Yes. It is possible.”

“They might be watching us?”

“Yes.”

“Then let’s get closer to the forest so that they can see you and Genang.”

The three boys left the road and cut across the fields toward the trees. When they reached the edge of the wood, they lowered the two Mercurians to the ground.

“Try to find someone,” Dig directed the little men. “Well wait here.”

Without a word, Borin and Genang scurried away and vanished among the trees. Dig and Ken dropped to the ground, but Jim remained standing, his eyes fixed watchfully on the woods.

Presently, Jim called, “Someone coming.”

Ken and Dig scrambled to their feet. From the edge of the wood, Borin emerged. Two Mercurians followed.

Borin brought the two strangers to the boys. He waved his fingers at them. “They are friends from my town,” he said.

The boys looked at the Mercurians. Their clothes were similar to those worn by Borin. In their hands they held weapons which resembled cross-bows powered by tiny, coiled springs.

“Where is Genang?” asked Dig.

“He has gone ahead to get news of the ones who have burned our homes.”

“Let’s go after them!” Jim cried.

“Easy,” Dig said quietly. Then, turning to Borin, he asked, “Does anyone know where the smugglers are now?”

“My people have been following them and watching from the forest,” Borin answered. “They are at the next town.”

“Jim, I think we should wait until Genang returns with news,” Dig said, looking at the two brothers. He sat down on the ground and crossed his legs. “I can’t understand it. Why would the smugglers bum a town?”

Ken sat down next to Dig, but Jim began to pace up and down, as if to release some of his anger. From time to time he stopped and looked at the ruins of the little

town.

“Such stupid cruelty,” he muttered.

Dig turned to the two strange Mercurians and spoke in their language. “Tell us what you know about the bad people.”

“I am Mitufi,” one of them said. “This was my home.” He waved his fingers toward the ruins. “The bad ones came and said they wanted fifty of our best engineers to go with them. But we wanted to know what happened to our friends who had gone with them before. They would not tell us. They said if some of us did not go into their ship, they would destroy our town. We fled and hid in the forests. They came back later—and you see what they have done!”

He waved his fingers at the town and became silent. The second man stepped forward.

“I am Wiwalo,” he said. “The bad people went to another town near by and demanded the same thing of them, saying they would do to their homes what they had done to ours if they did not agree to go. This time the people did not run to the forest. They had seen the smoke from our town and they had heard the news. Fifty of their engineers volunteered and went inside the great ship of the bad people. And this happened at other villages, too. Many men volunteered to go with the bad men—to save their towns. Ours was the only town burned.”

He stepped back as he finished and became silent, watching the faces of the Space Explorers closely with his little black eyes.

“How many of your people are already inside the ship?” Dig asked.

“They have taken people from five villages. Two hundred and fifty,” Mitufi replied. “They are at the sixth village now.”

“Let’s go and meet Genang,” Jim insisted. “We can’t just stand around waiting while this is going on!”

Ken rose slowly to his feet. His face was pale with anger. “I agree with Jim,” he said.

“All right,” Dig said, standing up. “Which way, Borin?”

The little man pointed toward the forest. Dig lifted him to his shoulder.

Jim and Ken raised the other two Mercurians to their shoulders and they started for the woods at a quick trot. Between the trees the grass grew so thickly they ran without a sound.

They had been running steadily for ten minutes when they heard a low moaning sound through the woods. The three boys stopped and looked around.

“What is it?” Dig whispered to Borin. The little man shook his head and looked puzzled.

Suddenly there was a sharp call from close at hand.

Borin pointed. From behind the trunk of a nearby tree a little figure emerged and waved his many-fingered hand at them.

“Genang!” Borin said.

The boys approached him quickly.

“What have you found out?” Dig asked, dropping to his knees.

“Listen!” Genang said.

The moaning sound was drawing closer. For a moment Dig thought it was the wind through the trees.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I will show you. Make no sound.”

“Aye,” Dig said. He passed the warning to Jim and Ken and the three boys crept along the ground after Genang.

They moved stealthily from tree to tree until they reached another stretch of paved roadway. Genang stopped them. The road was straight at this point and they could see a long way.

“There!” Genang said, pointing.

Less than half a mile away, four men and a crowd of the little people were barely visible. One of the men marched in the lead, three others were in the rear,

driving the Mercurians before them like a flock of sheep.

Jim's hand dropped to his holster. He flipped it open and drew out his stunray pistol.

"How many of them are there?" he asked.

Mitufi, still seated on his shoulder, answered. "These four go from town to town. One guards their ship."

Jim turned to Dig. "What do you say? Shall we take these four and then go for the last one?"

Dig agreed. "You stay here, Jim. Ken and I will go up the road. As soon as the three in the rear get close to us, we'll jump them. Meanwhile, you cover the man in the lead. But don't do anything until we come into the open!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" Now that they were to go into action, Jim's spirits suddenly revived.

Ken, too, was anxious to come to grips with the smugglers. Slow and cautious as he was, he moved fast once a course of action had been decided upon.

"Come on, Ken." Dig nudged the blond boy and crawled away on hands and knees.

Borin and the other Mercurians scrambled down to the ground and took up positions behind the trees.

Twenty yards up the road, Dig stopped. He glanced back, judged that they were about the right distance ahead of Jim, then pulled out his stunray pistol.

The two boys lay flat on the ground, careful to stay out of sight. The moaning sound became louder.

Ken whispered, "It gives me the creeps! What's making it?"

Dig pointed at the approaching group. "The Mercurians. They're singing some kind of sad song."

The two boys lowered their heads and waited as the smugglers and their victims drew closer. The man in the lead had just passed their hiding place when suddenly he stopped and stared ahead.

After a moment, he signaled a halt. The caravan of Mercurians stopped. So did the moaning song. The lead

man drew his stunray pistol, then motioned to the men in the rear. Two of them drew their guns and ran to join the leader. The third one remained behind to guard the prisoners.

“What’s up, Mazee?” one of the men asked as he came up.

The man called Mazee pointed in the direction of the town.

“Wasn’t that place burning when we went by this way, Jack?” he asked.

“Aye!” said Jack, running his hand across his forehead.

“It’s not burning now,” Mazee announced.

“Maybe the Mercurians put the fires out,” Jack said.

“Don’t be a fool!” Mazee said. “The little ones haven’t that much water handy! Besides, the whole town was burning. Do you think such a fire could be put out quickly?”

“No,” Jack replied. “What do you make of it?”

Mazee shook his head. “I don’t know. I wish the Captain were here!”

“I don’t like it,” the third man said.

“Jack and I will go in the lead,” Mazee said to him. “Guard the Mercurians, and keep a sharp lookout! Be ready to shoot at anything that moves!”

“Aye, aye!”

Guns ready, the men looked cautiously about them. At a signal from Mazee, they resumed their march along the road.

The plan to catch them by surprise had failed. Down the roadway, Jim would have to face three armed and desperate men. The odds were too great.

Dig rolled over and placed his lips close to Ken’s ear. “We’ll have to let them go this time. Maybe we can cut through the woods and get ahead of them.”

Bitterly disappointed, Ken buried his face in the soft grass. They waited for the procession to pass.

Suddenly there was a shout from the roadway. The two boys raised their heads in amazement.

Jim had leaped out of his hiding place.

“Drop your guns!” he shouted. “Drop them!”

“No, lad! You drop yours!” Mazee cried as he aimed his stunray pistol. “Drop it, or one of us will drop you!”

18 The Slave Dealers

Dig had no time to think. Instinctively he leaped to help his friend.

“Take the man in the rear!” he cried to Ken.

In two strides, Dig was on the roadway, his pistol leveled at the three men who covered Jim with their guns.

“You’re surrounded, Mazee!” Dig shouted.

With a furious oath, Mazee whirled about. Instantly his gun pointed at Dig. But instead of pressing the trigger, he suddenly screamed with pain. His stunray dropped to the ground and he staggered forward, turning and reaching for his shoulder at the same time.

“Now drop your guns!” Jim cried.

The remaining two men dropped their pistols and raised their hands.

“Don’t shoot!” they pleaded. “Please don’t shoot!”

They were staring with horror at Mazee who continued to turn around and around, trying to reach his shoulder.

“Ken?” Dig called, dropping to one knee and turning around, his stunray raised and ready to fire.

“I’m all right,” Ken called. “There’s no fight in this one...”

“Bring him up here!”

“Aye, aye, sir!” Ken prodded the man in the back. “March!”

Within a few minutes the four criminals were lined up and thoroughly searched. Finding no more weapons on them, the Space Explorers permitted the men to lower their hands.

Borin and his companions came out of the woods.

Laughing, Borin announced, “Wiwalo is the best marksman in our town!”

“Did he make Mazee drop the gun?” Dig asked in

surprise. “He saved us...”

Borin pointed to Maze’s shoulder. A sliver of metal the size of a pin was sticking out. Ken went over to the groaning man and pulled out the tiny dart. He covered the wound with a salve from his medikit.

“You’ll be all right,” he told the man.

Maze said nothing. He glared at the boy, then turned his face away.

On the road, the long line of prisoners had remained standing quietly. They were volunteers who had offered their lives to save the people of their towns. Escape was the last thing in their minds.

“Tell them they are free, Borin,” Dig said, bending down to the little man.

Borin nodded and went among the little people. They gathered in groups discussing the turn of events. After a while, they waved their fingers to the Space Explorers and slipped into the woods in small groups.

Wiwalo and Mitufi looked up at the boys. “We are needed at home. You do not need us now.”

“All right,” Dig nodded, and the Mercurians slipped away.

Keeping a careful watch on the prisoners, the Space Explorers huddled together for a quick discussion.

“We’ll have to go after the Captain right away,” Jim said in a low voice.

“What about these men?”

“We’ll take them to the *Starover* and lock them in the spare cabin,” Dig suggested. “We’ll have to let Con Krag guard them—but we won’t give him any weapons.”

That sounded like the best plan and Jim and Ken readily agreed.

With Borin and Genang perched on their shoulders, the boys marched their prisoners along the roadway.

They saw the *Starover* above the treetops half an hour later. As they approached through the clearing, they noticed Con Krag standing in the open airlock. He

had drawn up the ladder, but seeing the group emerge from the woods, the big man dropped it to the ground.

When the prisoners were securely locked inside the spare cabin, the three boys met with Con Kraggs.

“You’ll remain here to guard the prisoners,” Dig said. “We’re going after the last of them, the Captain.”

“Aye,” Con Kraggs smiled. “Keeping an eye on them will be a pleasure.”

“Just be careful. Con,” Jim cautioned. “Don’t give them a chance to jump you!”

The powerful man laughed. “Fear not, mates!” He held up his huge fist. “I’d like to see these space rogues grab me!” Then he scratched his bald head and looked at the boys. “Aye, lads, have you got a stunray gun for me now? Maybe one that belonged to the smugglers?”

“They’re on the roadway where the men dropped them,” Ken told him. “We forgot to bring them along.”

“Ah! That’s too bad. I’d feel much better with one of them things in my hand, I would!”

“Don’t worry, the prisoners are safely locked up,” Dig said. He turned to Jim and Ken. “Come on.”

Borin and Genang were waiting for the Space Explorers at the base of the ship. They climbed to the boys’ shoulders and the group started off for the woods at a run.

“Well, so far Con Kraggs has shown us we can trust him,” Jim said. “Let’s hope it’s not a mistake.”

“If it is, it’s going to be a big one!” Ken said.

Con Kraggs remained standing in the airlock. There was a smile on his lips. After a while, he pulled up the ladder and shut the outer hatch.

Inside, the big man slowly climbed to his cabin. There he opened his banjo case and pulled up the false bottom. He picked up the two stunray pistols and stuck one of them inside his belt.

Then he went down to the cabin where the prisoners were held. He unlocked it, and stepped inside.

The four men looked at him. Seeing the stunray gun in the big man's hand, they remained quiet.

"Aye, mates, we meet again," Con Kraggs said in a booming voice.

"So we do," Mazee replied. "I didn't think you'd ever be working for the law!"

"For the law? Not Con Kraggs! I be working for myself!"

"You gave us away," Mazee said bitterly.

"Be not a fool!" Con Kraggs roared. "The lads brought me here. I stayed with them so I'd get the chance to help you! And now's the time for me to act! I can set you free," Con Kraggs said casually, a smile on his lips.

The smugglers sat up quickly, their eyes suddenly alert.

They stared at the big man silently. Then Jack leaned forward.

"And will you set us free?"

"Aye," Con Kraggs replied. "For a price!"

"What do you want?" asked Mazee suspiciously.

"Take me in with you. An equal share for me of what the man on Mars pays for the little ones."

"All right," Mazee said. "But the Captain has to agree."

"He will," Con Kraggs said. He pulled the stunray pistol from his belt and handed it to Mazee. "We've got to hurry now. Be ye quick."

"What for? Let's wait here for the young heroes to return." Con Kraggs smiled, scratched his bald head and said, "We've got to rescue the Captain, mates."

"Do you think the boys will get him?"

"Aye, they will! They be three smart lads! Come on!" The four smugglers followed Con Kraggs to the airlock.

He opened the hatch, threw the wire ladder over and climbed out. One by one, they left the ship.

The smugglers' ship was old, a freighter that should

have been banned from the spaceways years ago. It stood on patched tail fins, pointing silently toward the sky.

The Space Explorers peered from the edge of the wood. The airlock was open but the wire ladder had been drawn up.

“We could use our magnetoetes to climb up the hull,” Ken said.

“And make enough noise for the Captain to hear us long before we get to the airlock.”

“A merry time he’d have, too, blasting us off the sides like flies!” Jim said.

“We can’t stay here too long,” Ken warned. “Pretty soon he’s going to start wondering what’s happened to his men.”

“If only the ladder were down!” Jim bit his lip.

“We can lower it for you,” Borin said.

The boys put the little men on the ground. “Go ahead!” Dig said.

Borin and Genang ran across the burned field. Their brown clothes merged with the color of the scorched soil, making them almost invisible.

From the base of the spaceship, Borin looked up. The ship towered far above him. The little man spread out his arms and gripped one of the tail fins with his tentacle fingers. For the first time the boys realized the great strength in those tiny arms and fingers. Borin was able to hold himself against the smooth steelite hull. Genang followed his example and soon the two Mercurians were creeping like flies toward the airlock of the ship.

It took them a long time to reach the airlock. As soon as they were inside, the three boys crouched and raced across the field toward the spaceship.

They reached the base of the ship Just as the ladder touched the ground, Dig leaped for it and began to climb.

“The man is in the room where our people are kept in

cages,” Genang whispered when Dig reached him. “Borin is watching him.”

Silently Dig crept to the main shaft, his stunray pistol in his hand. Borin was clinging to a cleat beside a nearby door.

He pointed to the room with a flick of his finger.

Dig glanced inside. A man was filling the tiny ban-els in the cages from a large plastibag of water. He had his back to the door.

Motioning Jim to follow, Dig leaped into the room.

“Stand still!” the red-headed boy cried. “I’ve got a stunray aimed at you!”

The man straightened up in surprise, but did not turn.

“Now put the bag down slowly and raise your hands.”

The man did as he was told.

“Jim!” Dig called. “Take his stunray!”

Jim, who had stopped at the doorway, moved in and quickly disarmed the man.

“What do you want?” the man asked coldly.

“First of all, you can start opening those cages. Captain!”

Without a word, the man took a key and began to unlock the little gates. In the language of the Mercurians, Dig told the little people to leave the ship.

“You are free now.”

When all the cages were empty, Dig ordered the Captain up to the control deck. There Borin and Genang joined the boys.

“All our people have gone back to their homes,” Genang reported. “There is but one thing more to do.”

“Aye,” Dig said. He turned to the Captain. “We want to know where the twenty-eight Mercurians you landed on Mars are now.”

The Captain stared at Dig coldly. He was a hard-faced, elderly man, short and thin, but wiry. There was a cold, almost inhuman expression in his gray eyes. Scars

covered his forehead and face, as well as parts of his hands.

Without being told, the boys knew that this was the man who had first come to Mercury—and betrayed the little people as a reward for their having saved his life.

“So you are the man!” Jim said. “I think you’re a man without a heart.”

The Captain did not reply. The expression on his face remained unchanged, stony.

“We want to know where those little people are, Captain!” Dig repeated.

The man replied calmly. “They are on Mars.”

“Captain, the little people will die unless we bring them back to Mercury,” Jim said. He went on to tell the man about the medical examination and what it had disclosed. “You’ve got to tell us exactly where on Mars they are—and quickly!”

“There are many more of them here,” the Captain replied indifferently.

“Who bought them, Captain? Where are they?” Ken pleaded. “Please tell us!”

“No!”

They tried to question him for several more minutes, but he refused to speak. Cold, aloof, without expression on his face, the man remained silent.

“Let’s take him to the *Starover*, and blast off for Mars,” Jim finally said. “Maybe the Space Guards can make him talk.”

“On your feet, Captain,” Dig ordered.

Suddenly a voice said, “Ye need not bother. Captain. Just sit there and be comfortable.”

It was the voice of Con Krag!

The boys whirled toward the hatch. Con Krag and Maze had their heads through the opening. And both were aiming stunray pistols at the boys.

19 The Cruel Captain

The moment the three Space Explorers turned toward the hatch, the Captain leaped to his feet in one swift and silent movement. His fist flashed, catching Dig Allen on the arm.

With a startled cry the boy dropped his stunray pistol. Instantly the Captain pounced on the weapon.

“Drop your guns!”

Jim and Ken obeyed. Their stunray pistols clattered to the deck. Mazee picked them up and stuck them into his belt.

“Mazee, there’s rope in the storage locker. Get it!” the Captain ordered.

“Aye, aye, sir.” The man crossed the room to the locker and brought out a coil of plastic rope.

“Tie them up!”

The three boys were forced to lie face down on the deck. Mazee bound their hands securely behind their backs.

“Now,” the Captain turned to Con Krag and poked his gun into the big man’s stomach. “You’re the man from Spaceman’s Roost. What are you doing here? And how did you find out we were on Mercury?”

Con Krag seemed to cringe as he replied. “I didn’t, sir. I mean, the Space Explorers be the ones who found out it was Mercury. I came pretending to be their friend, sir, and I be waiting for a chance to help you.”

“Why?”

“For a share of the loot. Captain,” Con Krag said eagerly. “Me and Mazee made a bargain, sir. That is, if you be willing to stand by it.”

The Captain turned to Mazee. “What bargain?”

Mazee smiled. “An equal share, sir. Same as I get.”

The Captain studied Con Krag with his keen, cold eyes. “All right. You’ll get the same as the others.”

“And the man on Mars, sir? Him that buys the little ones. Will it be all right with him?”

“I am the man on Mars,” the Captain replied. He touched the scars on his face. “I cover these with plastiskin when I’m there. Look closely at me.”

Con Kraggs leaned forward and peered into the man’s face. “Aye! You be the same man that gave the orders!”

“Yes, and remember, I’m the one who will always give the orders!”

“Aye, aye. Captain. That be all right with me!”

“Mazee,” the Captain turned. “Take the men and start rounding up Mercurians. Unload the cages from this ship and put them on the Space Explorer ship.”

“Aye, aye, sir!” Mazee dropped through the hatch opening and started to climb down.

The Captain turned to Con Kraggs. “Go with him.”

“The boys. Captain. What would you be doing with them?”

“We don’t need this old freighter,” the Captain said. He looked down at the boys lying on the deck. “I think I’ll give it to them in exchange for theirs.”

“They be good lads, after all,” the big man said. “Would ye be harming them?”

The Captain eyed him coldly, “I’m going to get rid of them!” He raised his pistol. “Do you obey my orders, or do you want to go along with them?”

Con Kraggs looked down at his feet. “Aye, sir. I’ll obey your orders,” he muttered.

“Good. Now go and join Mazee. I’m going to blast off in this ship. I’ll return in the space lifeboat after I’ve taken care of the boys.”

Without another word, Con Kraggs left the cabin. He was careful not to look at the three boys watching him leave. His face was pale, his lips tight.

When he was gone, Dig rolled over to look at the Captain. The man was sitting in the pilot seat, his hands on the instruments as he activated the ship’s engines.

“What are you going to do?” Dig asked.

“Blast this ship into the Sun,” the Captain replied without turning around.

“Into the Sun!” There was horror in Dig’s voice. “Why... we’ll be burned! Vaporized into atoms!”

From below came Maze’s voice. “The cages are unloaded, Captain.”

“Close the hatch and get clear. I’m blasting off!”

“Aye, aye, sir!”

The Captain waited a few minutes, then released the power lever. The rocket fire shook the old freighter and she began to rise clumsily. It took the ship a long time to clear the atmosphere of Mercury. Finally they were in space.

The Captain put the freighter into an easy orbit around the planet. When the nose of the ship pointed over the curve of Mercury into the Sun, he pushed the power setting higher and blasted to pick up speed.

“Who are you?” Ken asked. He had never met a man of such cold cruelty before.

“No reason why you shouldn’t know who I am—now,” the Captain replied. “My name is Coromay.”

“Coromay of the Mars Computer Company!” Jim exclaimed. “That explains a lot of tilings.”

“Does it?”

“The Mercurians are your secret way of budding computers! That’s how you can do in weeks what takes a year for other companies to do!”

“Yes,” Coromay replied. “And soon I will be the man who controls the manufacture of all computers. Without these machines, there can be no space travel... no new colonies on the planets. When I control the computers, I will control all who depend on the machines!”

“The twenty-eight missing Mercurians must be at your plant on Mars!” Dig said.

“And working very well,” Coromay told the boys. “I discovered their amazing ability with wires when I

crashed here. The Mercurians helped me rebuild the radarscope on the wrecked ship. The way they worked with wires! Ten fingers... and each a sensitive tentacle. Each finger works faster and better than any human hand. They feel and connect wires and circuits so small we'd need a microscope just to see them!"

"You must be mad to think you can escape the Space Guards!" Jim said. "They'll see our ship—and recognize it."

"Yes, they'll see it... as it explodes over Mars! Just like the spacefreighter. I'll land in the lifeboat, safe with my cargo, just as I did before."

"Some day, your men will betray you..." Jim began.

The Captain shook his head. "This time, they are going to be inside the ship when it explodes!" For the first time there was a slight change in the man's cold, hard face. The bare suggestion of a smile curled at his lips as he said, "I promised Con Kraggs the same pay the others will get. He won't like his share, I'm afraid."

The Captain took an iron bar from the locker and started to smash all the equipment. He worked with cool efficiency, ripping apart the control board cabinet, tearing the tangle of wires, then breaking every bit of the electronic equipment.

When he was finished, he tossed the bar aside. "That'll do," he said. "You won't be able to stop this ship even if you untie your hands. When I return to Mars, I will be the only one to know the secret of my computer company..."

"Space Research knows..." Jim said.

"Knows about Mercury? That doesn't matter. With my plastiskin disguise, no one will connect me with these expeditions!"

Without another word, the Captain disappeared down the passageway. A few minutes later the boys heard the rumble of the space lifeboat as it slipped out through the freight hatch of the ship.

They were alone.

Tired and heavy-hearted the boys lay on the deck,

each absorbed in his own thoughts. Dig was thinking of his father somewhere on one of the moons of Jupiter. Jim and Ken remembered their childhood on Earth and their new home on Eros.

They lay silently for a long time. Suddenly, a small voice broke in on their thoughts. "Ken? Dig? Jim?"

Amazed, the Space Explorers turned as one towards the doorway. Borin and Genang poked their heads into the cabin.

"We were hiding until the evil man went away," the two Mercurians explained as they began to untie the boys.

In a matter of seconds, the quick tentacle fingers of the little men had the ropes off the boys. Jim pushed against the deck, floated up, then twisted so that his magnetoes could grip the metal deck. He looked out of the viewport.

Dig and Ken Joined him silently. The Sun was ahead, still millions of miles away but already so huge that it filled a large part of the space before them.

For a moment they stared at the thick, bubbling surface. Here and there were huge black spots on the boiling surface. So big were these spots that Earth and all the planets would be no bigger than little peas within them. Clouds of flame shot upward into space for a hundred thousand miles.

Long before the ship would reach the surface, the intense heat would melt them into atoms! The boys turned away, shuddering.

As he turned, Dig's eyes fell on the wire conduit. This was a steelite pipe into which all the ship's wiring was gathered and brought up to be connected to the instruments in the control board.

For a moment, Dig stared at the wires. Then he went down to his knees and began to clear away the wreckage.

"What's the matter?" Ken asked, joining his friend on the deck.

"We have a chance to save ourselves," Dig explained

quickly. "Help me clear this junk away!"

The deck was cleared around the wire conduit in a few seconds.

"What's your plan?" Jim asked.

"To make an emergency switch and connect the wires which control rocket fire to it. Then we can turn the ship about and blast away from here!"

The wire conduit was over a foot in width. Packed into it were several thousand different wires leading to every piece of equipment on board the spaceship. Jim pointed to it.

"How are we going to find twelve rocket wires in that mess?" he asked. "It would take us a week!"

"For us, yes," Dig replied. "But Coromay told us something... the Mercurians could do the same job in minutes or hours! Borin and Genang will do it!"

"Tell us what you want," Genang said, coming forward.

"We are skilled in such matters," Borin added.

"These wires have color markings on them. Some have rows of red dots, others circles. Some blue, some green, some yellow. Most of them have two and three and four colors... circles, dots, squares, stars, numbers..."

"Which ones do you want to find?" Borin asked.

"The rocket firing wires will have a red circle, four green dots and a number 010 in blue," Dig explained. "Like this."

He traced the symbols on the deck with his finger while the Mercurians stared thoughtfully.

"It is the standard code for rocket wiring," the red-headed boy said. "There are twelve such wires."

"We shall find them," Borin promised.

The two Mercurians set to work, their fingers moving with astonishing rapidity. Each tentacle finger picked out a separate wire, freed it and held it up for the little men to see. It was as if each little man had twenty

hands. The wires seemed to flow in a continuous stream past eyes which quickly read the wire code symbols.

While Jim and Ken watched them, Dig began to make an emergency switch. This was a simple task. He fastened twelve lengths of wire to a piece of plastiboard which he broke off the control board. The ends of the wires he connected to the power outlet.

By the time he had finished, Bonn and Genang had found nine of the twelve rocket wires. Dig connected them to his crude switch.

“This should be enough to turn the ship around,” he said.

Jim and Ken watched as their friend began to fire the rockets. The first three rockets began to swing the stern of the ship sideways. Slowly the nose turned; the frightening surface of the Sun moved downward.

When the view of the Sun was gone and the black of space filled the viewport, Dig fired the rest of the rockets. The steelite beams of the ship groaned under the strain.

“The meter of the sunpower accumulator is still working, Jim,” Dig called out. “Take a look at the reading.”

“Aye, aye, sir!” There was hope in the boy’s voice as he floated across to the wall of the cabin. He stared for a moment at the glassite box, watching the needle wavering across a series of numbers. Then he called out, “Reading 88 in thousand units.”

“Keep an eye on it. It’s the only way we have of knowing if we’re getting away or...” Dig’s voice drifted off.

“Or dropping toward the Sun,” Jim finished for him. “If the reading goes low, we’re safe. If it goes up, we’re doomed!”

Bonn and Genang held up the last three wires to Dig.

“We have found all of them,” the Mercurians announced.

Dig immediately connected the wires and fired the

rockets. He waited for a few minutes and then called, "What's the reading, Jim?"

"The reading," Jim announced with a break in his voice, "the reading is still 88 in thousand units!"

For a moment there was silence, then Dig said softly, "We're in the grip of the Sun's gravity! We can't escape!"

20 Crash Landing

Hope had for a moment revived the spirit of the three boys. And now the disappointment was doubly hard to bear. They were doomed to hang helpless over the raging fires of the Sun until the spaceship's machinery broke down... and then they would drop to a fiery death!

Dig lay down on the metal deck and closed his eyes. A hopeless weariness came over him.

"I'm too tired to think," he said.

At the viewport, Ken stood looking out at the distant stars. "How cold they are, and far away," he thought.

Jim ran his fingers nervously through his tousled hair. He stared at the sunpower meter and tried to think of something cheerful to say.

"At least we're not falling into the Sun yet," he finally said. "The reading is steady at 88."

"How long can we hang on here?" Ken asked.

Dig sighed. "Coromay planned to return to Mars on this ship, so there must be plenty of fuel. We can be here a long time, if the machinery doesn't break down."

"Funny, isn't it? We've solved the mystery of the little captives in space. We know the master criminal, where the missing Mercurians are held prisoner, and why... and we can't do anything about it." Then Ken added under his breath, "We can't even save ourselves."

Borin and Genang walked up to Dig. They could reach Ins face as he lay on the deck. For a moment the two little men looked at his tired, freckled face. Then they reached out and touched his cheek with their long, gentle fingers.

"We are sorry we could not help," Borin said as Dig opened his eyes and looked at the little Mercurians. "We wanted to save you the way you saved us on that old spacefreighter..."

"The way we saved you was Just lucky... it can't always work that way," Dig replied. Suddenly a thought came into his mind and he sat up. "Why not? Why can't

it work again?”

Ken turned from the viewport to look at his friend.

Dig leaped to his feet, his eyes bright with excitement. To Borin he said, “Maybe you have saved us!” Then, turning to Ken, he asked, “What’s a spaceship?”

Puzzled, Ken started to answer, “Well...”

“It’s an air-tight box with rockets to push it through space!”

“Sure, Dig. But what if the rockets aren’t strong enough to push you away from the Sun’s gravity?”

“Then we make the spaceship lighter!”

Ken started to argue, but his brother stopped him. “Dig has a good idea! How can we do it?”

“Cut the engine room away from the rest of the ship—just what we did with the spacefreighter! But this time we’ll keep the stem section, and let the forward section pitch into the Sun.”

“Without the weight of the rest of the ship, the rockets will be strong enough to get us out of here!” Jim cried with growing enthusiasm. “Let’s get to work!”

The brothers gathered around Dig. Borin and Genang kicked against the deck and floated upward until they could reach Dig’s shoulders.

“This is what we do,” Dig explained quickly. “Cut out a closet and weld it over the stern engine room door. Any storage locker will do. The little room will serve as an emergency airlock.”

“Ken and I will do that.”

“Borin and Genang will rewire the rockets to the power outlet in the engine room...”

“We have seen how it is done,” Borin said. “We can do it.”

“We are very skilled in such matters,” Genang added.

“I’ll start cutting the steelite girders inside—working out—so the ship will break in two when the outside hull is cut,” Dig continued. “All three of us will put on

spacesuits and go out to cut the hull—just above the storage tanks.”

They scattered to carry out their tasks. Borin and Genang hopped and floated through the passageway to the engine room. Dig opened the locker and began to carry out spacesuits and spare oxy tanks. Jim and Ken hurried to the tool compartment and brought out cutting torches and acetylene fuel tanks, then the welding equipment.

When he had dumped the supplies in the engine room, Dig picked up one of the cutting torches.

Above the fuel tanks the spaceship had no cabins. Except for the central shaft which served as a passageway through the entire length of the ship, only the steelite framework held this section of the ship together.

Dig cut through the passageway quickly, then kicked and floated out among the massive girders of the framework. The steelite beams were the skeleton of the spaceship. In line with the cut in the passageway. Dig began to work on the girders.

Meanwhile, Jim and Ken cut around a storage locker and had freed it from the wall. It was simply a door hinged on two walls and open at the back.

Without gravity, the two boys had no trouble pushing it through the passageway to the engine room door. By the time they had welded it on, Dig was finished cutting the inside framework of the ship.

“Now comes the hardest job of all,” Dig announced. “Put on your spacesuits.”

Borin and Genang had already pulled out the rocket wires and connected them to an emergency switch.

“Break the connection to the control deck and start using this switch,” Dig told them.

The little men worked swiftly, but for some seconds the rocket blasting was stopped. Dig glanced at the sunpower meter in the wall of the engine room.

They had dropped closer to the Sun! The reading now stood at 91!

“The gravity of the Sun is greater now,” Dig said. “Let’s hope it isn’t too great!”

“We’re still holding our own,” Jim said, pointing to the reading. “Steady now at 91!”

The three boys got into their spacesuits and strapped on the fuel gas tanks. They went through the emergency airlock into the passageway, then to the old airlock and out on the hull of the spaceship.

The Sun was huge behind their backs, a silent, furious ball of boiling atoms. The leadium coating on the material of their spacesuits protected the boys from the deadly rays. Tiny photoelectric cells absorbed the heat and turned some of it into energy which was stored in their batteries. The rest of the heat was distributed to the part of their spacesuits in shadow.

Dig paced off the distance on the hull and indicated the place where they were to begin cutting. They could barely hear each other through the static that came over the radicom earphones.

“Start here,” Dig pointed to the hull. “Work away from each other around the ship. I’ll be on the other side.”

With a wave of his hand, Dig shuffled over the curved side of the ship and disappeared. Jim and Ken triggered their torches and applied the intense flame to the hull.

Sparks cascaded over them as the torch bit into the metal. Little by little the two brothers began to move away from each other. The gash in the hull grew longer.

They were not aware of the passage of time until Jim looked up to see Dig’s figure some ten feet away. He called over the radicom.

“We’re getting close, Dig! I can see you.”

His friend looked up. “I’ll start cutting the other way, toward Ken. You finish up over here.”

Dig disappeared over the round hull and Jim continued to press the searing flame of his cutting torch to the metal.

He had only ten minutes of air left in his oxytank

when he cut through the last bit of metal separating him from the cut made by Dig.

“How are you doing?” he called out. “I’m finished.”

“Another foot or so,” Dig called back. “Come over here.”

Keeping his safety line clear, Jim moved over the side to join the other boys. He was standing beside them when they made the final cut in the hull.

“How are we going to get inside?” Jim asked. “We can’t use the old airlock. It’s in the forward part, and if it starts falling into the Sun, we’ll be trapped inside. And we can’t use the improvised one we made until the pieces separate!”

“We wait here,” Dig said.

For some minutes, nothing happened. Though the ship was cut in two, the stern, with the rockets blasting, pressed against the forward section and the two parts held together.

“After all our work, we’re no better off!” Ken said, discouraged. “The ship is holding together.”

“If we could only unbalance the forward part,” Jim said.

“I’ve got an idea. Give me your fuel gas tank!” Dig said.

Jim pushed it toward the boy. Dig tied it to his own with the tubing. Then he crawled out toward the nose of the ship and fastened the tanks to a ringbolt on one side. He opened the valves and the gas rushed out like a rocket jet.

“Pull me back!” Dig called over the radicom. At the same time he grabbed his safety line and leaped off the hull.

Hand over hand, the brothers pulled their friend back. Even as they did so, the nose of the freighter began to shift sideways. It moved slowly at first, then faster. Suddenly the front section separated from the stern and hurtled past them.

They stared in awe as it dropped swiftly toward the Sun.

“No human being has ever been closer to the Sun,” Dig said. “It’s something to see... but we’ve got to get going. Our oxytanks are almost empty.”

“All right,” Jim said, turning away from the Sun.

They crawled over the jagged edge of the hull into the improvised airlock, closing the outer door carefully.

A few minutes later the boys had stripped off their spacesuits and were sitting in the engine room drinking chocomilk.

“Now what?” Jim asked.

“We watch the reading on the sunpower meter,” Dig said.

It was dropping slowly to 81, then to the 79 mark, and then to 78.

“We’re breaking away from the Sun’s gravity!” Dig said. “Our speed should pick up. Later, I’ll chart a course back to Mercury.”

“Back to Mercury!” Ken cried. “How can we land there in this pile of junk? We’ll be smashed to pieces!”

“I’ll pick a soft spot,” Dig laughed. “Now you and Jim get some sleep. I’ll wake you in time for the landing.”

“You need rest as much as we do,” Jim objected. “Wake me in two hours and I’ll relieve you.”

He stretched out on the deck beside his brother and the two exhausted boys were soon fast asleep.

“Wake up!”

Dig was shaking Jim by the shoulder.

“Huh? Already? How long have I been sleeping?”

Dig grinned at him. “Get into your spacesuit,” he said as he moved over to wake Ken.

“Let him sleep,” Jim said, yawning. “I’ll relieve you...”

“We’re close to Mercury,” Dig told them. “Prepare for landing! You’ve been sleeping for hours and hours...”

“You’ve had no rest, Dig!”

“I’m all right.”

The three boys put on their spacesuits. Borin went into Jim's helmet, Genang into Ken's.

"We're going to land at the edge of the snow field," Dig said over the radicom. "The spacesuits will keep us from freezing when we get outside."

"If we get outside in one piece," Ken said.

Dig turned to Jim. "I'll hang on outside and give directions while you handle the rocket switch."

Dig went to the door and stopped.

"This is the time for spaceluck to ride on our shoulders," he said, then opened the door and went out.

A few minutes later they heard him call from outside.

"We're approaching the atmosphere, Jim. Cut two rockets so that the ship will turn and come in on its tail fins!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" Jim obeyed quickly and disconnected two wires.

Inside the ship, they felt nothing. But presently Dig's voice came over the earphones.

"Fire all rockets, we're coming in fast!"

Again Jim obeyed, and waited.

"Ship braking speed, but we're still coming in too fast!"

"Nothing I can do, Dig!"

"I know. We're going to crash land! Don't cut the rockets until the last second!"

"Aye, aye, sir!"

A long, tense silence followed. Then Dig's voice called over the radicom.

"We've slowed down a lot... get ready to cut all rockets at once! Tear the wires out..."

"Aye, aye, sir!" Jim grabbed the wires in his hand.

"Hold tight... wait... wait... Now!"

Jim ripped the wires away from the power outlet. At the same instant the engine room seemed to tilt sideways. The impact jarred his magneto loose from the metal deck and he felt himself flying through the air.

21 Race for Life

Jim landed on his side and was surprised to find himself unhurt. Not far from him Ken was holding tightly to the guard rail around the atomic pile.

“Are you all right, Jim?”

“Fine! How’s Genang?”

“I expected a big crash,” the little Mercurian said. “Why didn’t it happen?”

“The snow must have cushioned our crash,” Jim said. Then he called over the radicom, “Dig? Can you hear me? Reply, please.”

“I hear you,” Dig’s voice came over the radicom.

“Where are you?”

“In a hole somewhere. We landed in the snow.”

“We’re coming out. Sit tight.”

“Nothing else I can do!”

The engine room had plowed through a deep layer of snow before it hit the hard, rocky ground underneath. When Jim and Ken crawled through the airlock, they found themselves at the bottom of a dark, deep crater of snow. The heat of the rocketubes had melted the snow but the intense cold was already freezing the moisture into solid, glassy ice.

“We’ll cut steps in the side of the crater,” Jim said.

He went back to the engine room and returned with the cutting torch. It was dark around them. Overhead they saw the stars in the sky.

While Jim cut steps, Ken pointed to the stars and said to Genang, “Take a good look up there. Stars. Something you can’t see from your side of the planet.”

Jim worked quickly, moving upward as he did so. A few minutes later they reached the top. A flat, empty plain of snow surrounded them. On the distant horizon there was a faint glow of light. A cold, steady wind tore at them.

They searched the surface with their flashlight until they found a round hole. Jim leaned over to look down but it was too dark and deep to see if Dig was in there. He called his friend over the radicom.

“Yes, I’m here,” the boy replied. “And you’re blocking my view. I could see the stars...”

“I’m dropping my safety line,” Jim called.

Dig caught the line and tied it around his waist. “Haul away!” he called.

Jim and Ken pulled him up.

“Any broken bones?” Dig chuckled as he stood beside his friends.

“Everybody fine,” Ken said. “But where are we?”

“On Mercury,” Dig laughed. He looked around him. “Let’s go back to our ship,” he said. “The engine room, I mean.” Dig took the cutting torch from Jim and climbed down to the ship. He came back ten minutes later, carrying long slats of steelite.

“What’s that for?” Jim asked.

“Skis,” Dig replied. “Lay them on the snow. Step in the middle of them. The magnetoes will hold your boots to the metal.”

Jim and Ken did so. Dig handed them two thin pieces of plastick.

“Push yourself along as you walk, and slide,” Dig explained. “It’s a way of traveling over snow, once used by Earthmen. It’s called skiing.”

The boys tried it and moved slowly, slipping and stumbling awkwardly.

“We can go faster walking,” Ken said.

“Keep practicing,” Dig answered.

In single file, they started across the field of snow, leaning against the wind. The spacesuits kept them warm but there was no way for them to satisfy the thirst and hunger that began to torture them after several hours.

By the time the air in their oxytanks had been

exhausted, they were moving expertly on their makeshift skis. Each carried an extra oxytank, and when they threw away the empty one, the going became easier.

Mile after mile they dragged themselves ahead. The snow underfoot became thinner, the light overhead improved. Patches of bare rock began to appear. Soon they had to discard the skis.

From time to time they stopped to rest. Once Jim dozed off and his brother dragged him to his feet and forced him to go on.

They left the snow fields behind; the ground became hard. The second oxytank was used up and thrown away. They had to take off their spacehelmets.

“We can rest a bit,” Dig said.

They ate emergency rations and drank chocomilk warmed by tiny chemical heaters.

The light around them became stronger as they continued on then- way. They saw thick carpets of moss growing everywhere. A little later on they came across the first low bushes.

“We’ll rest,” Dig gasped.

The three boys dropped to the ground and slept for several hours. They were cold and chilled when they awoke. They ate and went on.

There was no day or night and they had no way of telling time. None of them bothered to take his chronometer from his spacebelt pouch. They wanted to see the line of trees ahead and pushed on hour after hour, with minds numb with exhaustion, their eyes bleary from lack of sleep.

But eventually they realized they were walking on soft grass and passing lone trees from time to time. The air felt warmer.

Again they dropped to the ground and slept. When they roused themselves, they took off the cumbersome spacesuits and continued on at a faster pace.

They were walking through the forests when Borin

and Genang began to direct their steps.

“There is a highway near here,” Borin said. “And a town where we can rest and find news.”

The town was burning when they reached it, the people gone. They passed small, neat farms about a mile beyond the highway, and near the edge of the forest, tiny animals grazing.

Rising above the trees in the distance they saw the smoke of other burning towns.

“We can’t be far from the *Starover*,” Dig said, looking about tiredly.

“It is beyond the next town,” Bonn said. “We shall soon see it.”

Half an hour later they saw the silvery nose of their ship poking above the treetops. They slipped into the woods and made the rest of the way at a run. At the edge of the burned out clearing they stopped and peered at the graceful spaceship.

The airlock hatch was open and the wire ladder hanging down.

“Either they’re all inside,” Dig muttered, “or they’re very sure of themselves.”

“They’re in a hurry to round up the Mercurians,” Jim said. “From the number of burning towns we’ve seen, I think the Merks are putting up quite a fight this time.”

“That is so,” Bonn agreed. “Our people must be fighting back.” Then he motioned to Genang, and said, “Put us down and we’ll go on board the ship and see what the evil men are doing.”

The little Mercurians scurried across the field while the three boys remained hidden in the woods.

A few minutes after they had climbed up the ladder, Bonn appeared in the open hatch and waved his hands.

“All clear!”

Crouching, Dig led the way as the boys ran to the spaceship and climbed up the wire ladder.

Cages filled with Mercurians were in several cabins.

The space lifeboat which Coromay had used to escape from the doomed freighter was stored in the main supply hold,

Borin and Genang immediately began to free the prisoners, who quickly scrambled down the ladder and scattered through the woods.

When the last of them was gone, Jim pulled up the wire ladder and shut the hatch.

“Now we’ll see how Coromay and his gang like being marooned on Mercury!” Jim said, managing a tired smile.

The three boys climbed up to the control deck. Dig took the controls and activated the engines.

“I’m going to call Space Guard headquarters,” he said.

The moment the boy started the radarscope, they heard a steady beep signal. Someone had set an automatic call for them.

Dig matched the radarscope beam to the signal. Then, opening the microphone, called, “Explorer Ship *Starover* replying to call signal. *Starover* to call signal. Come in, please!”

The anxious face of Sergeant Brool appeared on the radarscope screen. The boys saw at once that he was in his spaceship. Behind him they recognized the control cabin of the Patrol Cruiser Galahad.

“Where in space have you been?” the Guardsman asked, staring at their worn and tired faces. “And what’s happened to you?”

“We’ve been a little busy, sir,” Dig replied.

“A little busy?” the sergeant cried. “I’ve been calling you for four days!”

“Four days!” Jim gasped. “Is that how long it’s been?”

“Look, Sarge, there’s no time to explain. Where are you now?” Dig asked.

“On my way to look for you, Dig! Just passed Mars.”

“Turn around and land on Mars, sir! The twenty-eight missing Mercurians have been working at the Mars Computer Company! Coromay is behind this whole thing!”

The sergeant stared at the speaker. “Dig, he’s an important man. Are you sure of your facts? I don’t want to raid the plant...”

“I’m sure, sir. Coromay is here on Mercury right now!”

“All right!”

“And call our folks on Eros, Sarge,” Ken said. “Tell them we’re all doing fine.”

The sergeant nodded and shut off the radarscope. Dig flipped over the switch on the control board and turned to his friends.

“Now we wait for Coromay,” he said. “One stands watch, two will get some sleep. I’m ready to drop.”

“I’ll watch,” Jim said.

“No,” Bonn said, “Genang and I will watch. You can all rest.”

The little Mercurian took up his position before the viewport, turning his back to the boys to avoid any argument.

The light touch of fingers on their faces woke the boys.

“We have guests outside,” Borin announced.

They scrambled down to the airlock and opened the hatch. Six men stood below, staring up silently. It was obvious that they had been surprised by the closed hatch.

A startled cry escaped Con Krag when he saw the redheaded Dig Allen peer down at him. Coromay’s eyes widened in amazement, but he remained silent. His hand dropped casually to his belt where it rested on the butt of his stunray pistol.

Con Krag stepped forward. “Is it really you, lad?” he cried. “I be happy to see you safe! And Jim and Ken? How be they?”

“We’re both fine,” Jim said, moving to Dig’s side. “I can’t say the same for you!”

“Why, lad, we be friends and spacemates! I would not be harming a hair of your head! Not I!”

“You betrayed us,” Jim retorted.

“You be cruel to say such a thing to me,” Con Krag insisted. “I only pretended to be joining the Captain to find out where the missing Mercurians be... so we could return to Mars and save them!”

“We’re blasting off for Mars in a few minutes,” Dig said.

“We’re leaving you here as guests of the Mercurians!”

“They be hating us,” Con Krag said. “Do not leave us behind!”

Suddenly Coromay’s hand darted up with the stunray pistol. Before Jim or Dig could move, it was pointed at their heads.

But Con Krag moved as quickly as the Captain. His massive hand swung backward and caught the man across the face. The gun dropped to the ground and he flew over backwards to land heavily on his shoulders.

“You see, lads? I be a friend!” Con Krag said. “Give me a chance. Do not leave me behind.”

The other four men dropped their guns to the ground. Mazee called up, “Take us with you and hand us over to the Space Guards. We’ve no chance against the Mercurians now!”

“Try making up for the damage you’ve done,” Dig called down. Then, addressing Con Krag, he added, “Bring the Captain up here.”

“Aye, aye! Gladly!” Con Krag slung the limp body of the Captain over his shoulder and climbed up to the airlock.

“Hand over your stunray,” Dig said. “We’ll need it to guard the Captain.”

The big man did so, then heaved his shoulder and dumped the unconscious man to the deck.

“Start climbing down. Con,” Dig said calmly, pointing the stunray at him. “The Captain is the real criminal; we’ll take him back with us. You and the others are getting a chance to reform. If you help the Mercurians, and they forgive you by the time we return, I’m sure the Space Guards will too.”

“You be not taking me back?” Con Krag asked, surprised.

Dig shook his head silently. The big man glared at him, then turned and climbed down.

Jim and Ken dragged Coromay to a spare cabin and locked him inside. They then joined Dig in the control cabin.

“I’ve been figuring the days,” Dig said when they came in. “Eight since we left Eros, eleven by the time we reach Mars and pick up the Mercurians. And three more to get back here... it may be too late!”

“There’s nothing else we can do,” Ken said. “We’ve got to race for Mars and return as fast as we can!”

In the co-pilot’s seat, Borin and Genang nodded solemnly. They knew it was a race for life... and that the outcome would be very close!

22 Final Choice

With rockettubes pouring out a fierce stream of flaming gas, the Explorer Ship *Starover* approached Mars. For most of the journey, the great spaceship raced at more than three million miles an hour, faster than any ship had traveled before.

Now, to save time, Dig Allen turned the *Starover* about and used the mighty stem rockets to brake the ship's speed.

The maneuver made every steelite beam in the ship groan under the strain. Still, the *Starover* had covered the distance between Mercury and Mars in less than two days.

Inside the cabin hope ran high. The boys were sure now that they could return the Mercurians to their home atmosphere in time.

"It would be a good idea to find out how they are," Jim suggested. "Why don't you call the Sarge, Dig?"

The red-headed boy fed the taped landing directions into the gyrobot, then glanced at the round, reddish ball that was Mars through the viewport.

Dig sighed and switched on the radarscope. "We might as well find out," he said.

When Sergeant Brool's face appeared on the screen, they immediately asked him about the twenty-eight Mercurians. The Guardsman shook his head. A worried look appeared on his face as he answered.

"If we only knew more about this... this sickness," he said slowly. "They seem to be all right, but very weak."

"We'll have them back on Mercury in two days, sir," Dig promised. '

"I hope it will be in time." The sergeant threw a keen, quick glance at the three boys and at Borin and Genang, standing on the control board. "What about Coromay and his men?"

"We've got Coromay locked up on board," Jim said. "The others we left on Mercury."

“We thought we’d give them a chance to do something for the Mercurians,” Ken added. “To make up for the damage they did.”

The sergeant smiled. “You boys wouldn’t consider switching over to the Space Guards, would you? We can use you.”

“No, thanks, Sarge,” the Space Explorers replied, laughing.

“You’d make good Guardsmen, Glad you left the others on Mercury. Maybe they’ll learn to be honest men. Curing a criminal is better than punishing him. That way there’s one criminal less, and one honest man more!”

Ken called out, “Indicator shows landing speed reached!”

“See you soon, Sarge,” Dig said. He cut out the radarscope before the Guardsman could reply. Then he pulled the power release lever.

The nose of the spaceship began to swing over until it pointed outward into space. At the same time, the rear scanner threw an image of the planet on the screen.

The *Starover* began to drop toward the surface of Mars. Some minutes later, as her huge tail fins came to rest on the land, several robot jeeps shot away from the Administration Building and sped toward the ship.

“Here they come,” Jim called from the viewport.

Ken hoisted Borin and Genang to his shoulders and the Space Explorers climbed down to the airlock.

Inside the airlock, Ken adjusted his body to Martian air pressure, then opened the outer hatch and dropped the ladder,

Below, there was a scrambling and scurrying as the jeeps came to a stop. Sergeant Brool and Corporal May led the way up. The Mercurians were brought on board and installed comfortably in one of the cabins, with Borin and Genang taking charge of them.

Coromay, silent and sullen, was handed over to Corporal May.

“I’m leaving with the Space Explorers at once,” Sergeant Brool instructed his assistant. “You will follow in your ship as soon as you’ve handed the prisoner over to the authorities.”

“Aye, aye, sir!” Corporal May saluted smartly. Then turning to Coromay, he hustled him into the airlock.

When they were gone, the Guardsman turned to Dig. “Ready to blast off?”

The boy nodded and scrambled up the cleats to the control cabin. By the time the others joined him, Dig was already feeding the automatic blast-off tapes into the instrument panel.

“Get ready for blast off!” he called out. “You take the scanner, Jim.”

“Aye, aye, sir!” Jim replied cheerfully. “Get set for a record run to Mercury, Sarge!”

“Aye,” the sergeant replied. “And don’t spare the rockets!” They blasted off. The course had already been prepared and Dig lost no time setting the power control to maximum acceleration.

The *Starover* shot towards her destination at fantastic speed. The return trip was made in record time, for with the pull of the Sun’s gravity, it was like racing downhill.

Again Dig braked the ship by turning her about. Guided by Borin and Genang, they found a place to land close to the little people’s home town.

The twenty-eight began to revive as soon as the air of the planet was sucked into the spaceship by the powerful ventilating pumps.

“Their atmosphere doesn’t harm us at all,” Dig said. “And the sooner they start breathing their own air, the better.”

The airlock hatches were opened wide. Soon the little people began to descend. Each waved his fingers in solemn thanks as he passed the young Space Explorers and made for the ladder.

By the time they had disembarked, a great crowd of

their friends had poured out of the little town and gathered in the clearing at the base of the spaceship.

An ocean of raised hands and waving tentacle fingers greeted the three boys when they climbed out of the ship.

Sergeant Brool watched the warm welcome the boys received, then turned to them.

“Aye, lads, you’ve done a good job here!”

“It isn’t finished yet,” Jim replied, looking about. “I was hoping some others would be here.”

“Con Krag?” asked the sergeant softly. “You boys still have a soft spot for him in your hearts, eh?”

Jim poked his fingers through his unruly hair and smiled self-consciously. “I guess we do, Sarge,” he admitted.

“Well,” the Guardsman looked squinting at the woods. “He’s probably hiding somewhere out there. As soon as Corporal May arrives, we’ll round them all up.”

Jim dropped to his knees and called one of the Mercurians. The little man looked up into the boy’s face.

“What of the bad men?” Jim asked. “The ones we left here?”

The little man replied, “They were not so bad, after all. They cut down trees for us and helped repair our houses.”

“Do you still fear them?”

“No,” the Mercurian said.

Jim glanced up at the Guardsman. “Hear that, Sarge?”

“Aye, but I don’t understand their language, Jim.”

“I forgot, Sarge,” Jim laughed. He then told him what the Mercurian had said. “I think Con Krag has learned his lesson at last.”

“Where are they?” asked Ken, again turning to the little Mercurian.

“They live in the forest now,” the little man said. “That way.” He pointed out the direction with a flick of

his tentacle finger.

“If you’re thinking of going to see them,” the Guardsman said, “better take your stunray pistols.”

“We won’t need them,” Dig said. He called Borin and Genang to him. “Borin, we would like to visit Con Kraggs and the others.”

The little man nodded. “I will find Mitufi to guide us.”

He left and Dig turned to Genang. “Will you help Sergeant Brool? He can’t understand your language and he’d like to know more about your world and your people.”

“Gladly,” Genang agreed.

When Borin returned with Mitufi, they set out across the clearing and were soon in the forest. The Guardsman shook his head as he stared after the three boys.

“Con Kraggs is a dangerous man,” he said. “I don’t like to see them go into the woods alone.”

“Do not fear, sir,” Genang assured the Space Guard. “They will be all right. My people say the bad men have done much good here. They are bad men no more.”

Meanwhile the three Space Explorers walked leisurely through the woods, following the gay Mitufi who ran ahead of them. Although they looked forward to seeing Con Kraggs, inwardly the boys were worried about the reception they would get from the man.

They had gone some distance when they saw a clearing through the trees. Beyond the edge of the woods was a large, rough cabin. They heard singing as they approached and recognized Con Kraggs’ voice at once.

“He can’t still be angry if he’s singing,” Ken said, looking at his companions.

At the door, they called to Con Kraggs. The music stopped and the big man came tumbling out of the door.

“Ahoy, lads!” he cried, genuinely happy to see them. “Me eyes are glad to sight you!” He turned to the door

and called, "Mazee! Jack! All of you! Come out, you spacedogs! The boys are back!"

Four men came out of the cabin. They crowded about the astonished boys and shook their hands and slapped them on the back.

"Hey!" Dig cried, grinning so hard that his freckles seemed to skip around on his nose and cheeks. "We thought you'd all be mad at us for marooning you on Mercury."

"Mad? Not us, mattes!" Mazee cried. "We be happy here—and that's the honest truth."

"Then you don't want to go back?" Ken asked in surprise.

"Go back to what?" Jack asked angrily. Then answered his own question. "To Spaceman's Roost? Or to the swamp towns of Venus? Not us!"

"This is the greatest planet in the Solar System!" Mazee boasted. "Except for Earth itself! Aye, we'll start the first colony here!"

"Aye, Mazee speaks for us!" the former smugglers agreed, each nodding vigorously.

"There'll be a spaceport here soon," Mazee said. "And tourists coming to spend vacations on Mercury! Aye, lads! We'll be fine here!"

"That's great!" Jim said. He turned to Con Krag and asked, "What about you?"

"I've wanted a little farm to retire to on Earth, mate! I robbed and smuggled and lied and cheated to make a fortune. And I never got that farm. Well, Jim, I've got it now! I'll grow green things here!" He waved his huge hand in a great circle around him. "Aye, this be my farm!"

"You're sure you don't want to go back?" Dig asked.

"Aye, lads! I've made me choice!" He suddenly held up a finger. "Wait here!" Then he turned and hurried into the cabin.

"What's he up to?" Dig asked.

Con Krag returned almost immediately, bringing his banjo with him.

“I made up a song about me choice,” the big man said. “I’ll sing it for you, if ye be not laughing at me!”

“Aye, Con, sing!” Dig cried enthusiastically. “We’ve missed your songs.”

Con Krag plucked the strings of his banjo and started singing. Borin and Mitufi dropped to the ground and began to wave their tentacle fingers in time to the music.

I’ve wandered o’er the planets And I’ve sailed the mighty deeps, But I’ll blast through space no more, my lads, I’m staying here for keeps!

Oh, you Earthlings... Now don’t you cry for me! I’ll never wander off again... With a banjo on my knee!

Neither the singer nor his audience noticed the three young Space Explorers slip silently away. They crossed the clearing and disappeared among the trees.

Arm in arm, the three boys walked through the woods. Ahead of them, poking its silvery nose above the trees, was the mighty *Starover*. Behind them, carried on the persistent breeze, was the voice of Con Krag.

I’ll never wander off again... With a banjo on my knee!

“Where do we go from here?” Jim asked after a while.

“Beyond the asteroids, maybe,” Dig replied thoughtfully. “To Jupiter?”

Ken announced, “As long as we’re spaceward bound, exploring new worlds, it’s all right with me!”

THE END.