

PLANET STORIES

20c

STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS—THE UNIVERSE OF FUTURE CENTURIES

CITADEL OF LOST SHIPS
A Novel of Space Rovers
by LEIGH BRACKETT



SLAVES OF THE NINTH MOON

by
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HASSE & DE PIMA



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Project Gutenberg's The Sword of Johnny Damokles, by Hugh Frazier Parker

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THE SWORD OF JOHNNY DAMOKLES

By HUGH FRAZIER PARKER

The mad dreams of a crazed dictator had reached from the past and taken root in the dread Tsom Clan on Neptune, threatening the peaceful existence of a dozen worlds. There was little Timmy Gordon and Johnny Damokles could do—for they were prisoners of the Tsom, working on the monster bomb that was to signal the invasion.

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A cloudlet of dust whirled across Spaceport X and rose in the thin Callistonian air to beat against the window. The sound was gritty, abrasive. It hadn't rained for weeks, and the sky, clear of clouds, hovered blacker than Holofernes' soul. Jupiter touched the horizon. And far away, Neptune's pale blue light glowed softly.

Timmy Gordon walked to the window. "I've never seen old Neptune so clear before," he said. "And say, Johnny, where'd they ever get a name like that for a planet? Neptune! What's it mean?"

Johnny Damokles laid one fat, hairy hand on the bar. He wiped a glass with his apron and smiled. "Sure, boss," he said. "All the time you talking space, eating space. What's a good if you don't know why planets get name?"

"Do you, chum?"

"Sure t'ing, boss. Greeks are all knowings about Neptune."

"Well?"

"She's this way. Neptune are a old Greek god, and he are importants for rule the ocean. So what happens?"

"I'll hite Johnny "

TIMMY, JOHNNY.

"A fellows finds it this planet. She ain't got a names and deesa fellows t'ink she's all watery. So they name her for Mister Neptune. Dem times long ago ... two t'ousand year ... t'ree t'ousand. What them hells!"

"Aw for cripe's sake shut up! You dam' Greeks!"

Timmy and Damokles turned. Shelton Thurner, head pilot of the Jup-Cal Line was sitting alone at a side table. He was drunk, very drunk, and a wisp of black hair hung over his forehead. "Shut up!" he screamed, "talkin' about the past! Dam' dumb Greek dishwasher! Neptune was discovered 900 years ago, aroun' 1830 ... and who in hell cares what it's named ... excep' a Greek." Thurner staggered to his feet. Liquor spilled.

For a little man, Johnny Damokles was both fat and fast. One hand hit the bar, he vaulted it, and faced Thurner. "What's for you cuss Greek? She are good braves people..."

"I told you to shut up," said Thurner. He planted a big hand in Johnny Damokles' face and shoved. Johnny fell, and Thurner kicked him brutally in the side.

Then the room hit Thurner smack on the jaw.

"Want some more?" asked Timmy. He stared down at the hulking pilot, as Thurner rolled over and rubbed his face. "Want another?" Timmy repeated.

The door opened, and the Director of Spaceport Operations stood framed in its classic Callistonian marble columns.

"I want the two of you in my office. Special job for T-Three."

Timmy snapped to attention. T-3 was the one military department which took immediate command of any pilot under any circumstances. Obedience to T-3 was unquestioning and immediate. Even Thurner assumed a semblance of military bearing and shook his head to clear the cobwebs. He fell in beside Timmy and, scowling, followed the Director out. Johnny Damokles watched them, wiping greasy glasses on a greasier apron almost automatically.

The Office of the Director of Operations, shared by the Port Captain, had been designed in 2475 by Anton Sestrovic.

Stars and planets moved silently across the ceiling in an endless procession, while glowing dots, marking the positions of spaceships in transit, crawled in well-defined lanes. Timmy shuffled his feet on the carpet and waited for the Director to seat himself at his plexi-glass desk. Thurner threw himself into a chair.

"Well?" grunted the big pilot, "what's T-Three after now? The feathers from an angel's backside?"

The Director looked at him coldly, "No," he said. "Something a little more dangerous to procure. Information is what they want."

"Why in hell don't they ask the Greek in the bar? He knows everything! Ask his side-kick here."

Timmy flushed and knotted his fist. "You ask me ... later," he grunted.

"I can't. I'm on the Jupiter run in an hour."

"No," corrected the Director, "you're not on the Jupiter run. You're heading for Neptune with Mister Gordon ... in his ship."

"Why pick on me?" interrupted Timmy. "I'm not fussy about whom I share space with ... but I just cleaned ship ... and I don't like this lug."

"Sorry," said the Director. "Yours is the only ship in the Four Planets fast enough to make the trip in time, but you're not licensed for flight beyond Jupiter."

"How about another pilot?" Timmy pulled no punches in letting the Director know how he, personally, felt about Mr. Shelton Thurner.

"I haven't another," the Director paused. "But you can take a third man as super-cargo, Gordon. It might quiet down the Kilkenny-cat action."

A slow smile rolled over Timmy's face. "Okay," he said. "I'll take Johnny Damokles."

Thurner leaped to his feet. "That dam' Greek dishwasher!" he exploded. "What use is he in space?"

"He can sing ... and read Aristotle in the original Greek ... whoever Aristotle was."

"Blast the whole job! I won't go!"

"Yes you will, Thurner," said the Director. "Report to Gordon's ship in half an hour ... or turn in your license."

Thurner stomped out of the room. A slightly vulgar noise, issuing through Timmy's pursed lips, was the last sound the big pilot heard.

"What's next?" asked Timmy. He turned to the Director as he spoke. "What's it all about?"

"See those dots on the space map?" The Director pointed ceilingward to a spot where a cluster of red spots moved on a common center.

"Yes."

"This is a wild hunch. But I suspect them to be Neptunian ships ... unlisted in our clearance papers."

"You think they're a menace?"

"Definitely!"

"Why?"

Instead of answering the question, the Director rose and walked across the room to a row of hermetically sealed cases. Like the display units in small and dusty museums, these held a few yellowed books, chunks of unclassified rock, and an occasional fossil. But one of them was broken.

"This case," said the Director, "once held an obscure book by a Twentieth Century warlord. Know the period?"

"I'm a mechanic," said Timmy.

"Most of us are these days. It's something of a pity. But in the middle Twentieth Century, historians tell us of a semi-civilized chieftain named Hetlir, or

Schicklegrub, who managed to control the mass of Europa through an intelligent but utterly unscrupulous plan. The seeds of that plan lie in a book called *Mein Kampf* ... and this case once held a copy."

"I see," said Timmy, but he didn't.

"Two years ago," continued the Director, "I entertained a leader of the Neptunian Tsom clan. When he left, the book went with him."

"How can a book affect us?"

"Easily. Our only defense against the powerful semi-humans of Neptune has been their own inability to organize any planetary unity. They trade with us on a basis of toleration ... but they're not friends."

"Why haven't they attacked before?"

"Their clan system, and their wars at home."

"I see," said Tim, and this time he really did. "Then, you figure that if one clan could dominate Neptune, they'd strike?"

"Yes. And Hetlir's plan calls for precisely the sort of planetary organization that would suit the Neptunians. A master-race dominates ... and on Neptune ... that master-race would probably be the Tsom clan. *They* have a copy of *Mein Kampf*."

"You believe they've done it?"

"I see no other reason why ships should hover near our Callistonian frontier for five days."

"Then, I'll go investigate in the *Solabor*."

"Not the ships, Timmy. I want you to check on Neptune from the dark side. Look for two things. Are there any Neptunian cruisers massing? Have the planetary wars ended?"

Timmy sprawled back in his chair. "The answers to those questions," he said, "will tell us our next step."

"Exactly."

"I can leave in twenty minutes."

"Then," said the Director, "hop to it son. And I hope good luck goes with you." On the ceiling, the ominous dots seemed to grow more clear as their new significance thrust itself on Timmy. He grasped the Director's hand, shook it briefly, and walked out.

Downstairs, in the Space Bar, Johnny Damokles sweated over some unsavory concoction, and swore in six planetary languages, plus old Greek and a frenzied form of English. His apron strings hung loose, three knives and a toasting fork peeked out of his pockets.

"What's cookin'?" hailed Timmy.

The little Greek turned around. "West'in on'let," he blurted. "An' this dam' blast Callisto garlic ... she are not fit for cooking dog meat!"

"A clear and sensible opinion," said Tim, "neatly expressed." He leaned over the counter, tilted Johnny's frying pan to the floor, grabbed the Greek's apron and whipped it loose. "Come on, chum," he said. "You've just resigned."

Johnny looked sadly at the mess on the floor. "What's a matter of you, dam' idiot? Who are resigned?"

"You did, Johnny. You're going out into space with me as cook ... and I need somebody to prepare rat poison for my pilot." He stopped, and watched Damokles' chin drop. "Come on," he repeated, "we're going places."

"Crazies places?"

"Nope! Space."

Johnny Damokles' face lighted up with something of the glow his ancestors must have shown at Thermopylae and Salamis. "No kid? You take me? Oh, Meester Timmy Gordon ... you is a dam sweet feller." His cap went sailing skyward. His apron followed suit, and he grabbed a twisted necktie from beneath the counter. "Hey, boy!" he shouted to an open-mouthed waiter. "I is resigned. Tell her to the boss. Goom hval!"

BOSS. GOODBYE.

"Look—" the waiter began.

"You look!" Timmy said, grinning.

Johnny grabbed a handful of tattered books from under the counter, picked up his toasting fork and knives, slapped a checkered cap on his head and dashed for the door as Timmy burst out laughing.

"Whassamatter, Meester Tims. You go crazies?"

"Not me ... but you. Come on, Space-hawk. Let's hit the hangar."

Hangar 6, block 8, where Timmy kept the *Solabor*, was one of the smaller impervium shanties built to accommodate just such independents as himself. It lay at the end of the field, sheltered from the major launching-cradle by a thick growth of scrub hedge. Timmy whistled as he walked toward it, and Johnny Damokles picked up the tune. "Where we go, Tim?" asked the Greek, and waved his fork in circles. "Maybe go Jupiters?"

"Nope. Can't tell you till we're aboard ship." The hangar lay just ahead. The *Solabor* was ready. Timmy grinned.

And then he stopped.

No, that statement is incorrect. *Timmy was stopped*. His feet dangled stiffly in air, as steel-strong hands, powerful as an atomic lift, closed hard on his throat ... and lifted. His shout of warning was a muttered croak. Then the world faded away in a purplish-gray haze. The only sensation as darkness fell was a refrigerant chill biting at his neck. Blackness.



Steel-strong hands closed about Timmy's throat.

"Whassamatter, Timmy ... you no sing?" asked the little Greek. He turned around. His chin dropped with an almost audible thud on his chest. And then, Johnny Damokles moved forward, blindly, heroically, a 28th Century Leonidas

armed with a toasting fork.

II

Timmy Gordon awakened to find his immediate world in a chill of killing frost. Cold water ran down his brow. Johnny Damokles' muttered curses penetrated his consciousness. "What ... hap ... happened?"

"Don't speaks ... you almost go for rides with Father Charon on one-way ferryboat. Look!" Johnny turned Tim's head tenderly to one side, and the young flyer gasped.

"Great flying dragons!"

Timmy's eyes traveled over the squat bulk of a figure clad from head to foot in heavy synthi-leather. "A Neptunian," he blurted, "but dead. How? Who did it?"

"I did it ... with toastings fork!"

"What?" Timmy's head went round in circles, "You killed one ton of concentrated Neptunian-venom with a toasting fork?"

"Sure things, boss. I stick heavy fellers with fork. He go hiss. Then bad smells. Then fall down ... *woosh!*" Damokles gave a graphic description in pantomime, and Timmy understood how this seeming miracle had happened. A Neptunian, accustomed to a mass of seventeen times that of Earth normal, a normal temperature at minus-180 Centigrade, and a methane plus solid oxygen atmosphere, would need some insulating, restricting suit to move about on frail Callisto. Apparently Johnny's fork had struck a weak spot in the refrigerant-suit, and a mild Callistonian climate had literally boiled the Neptunian to death.

Timmy staggered to his feet and tramped through the artificial frost to the Neptunian's side. A tiny mark, distinctive and simple, was branded on his assailant's collar. "The Tsom clan," said Timmy to himself. "The Director was right ... but why did he attack me in particular?"

Johnny Damokles pointed, "Look!" he said.

A bulky figure broke from the bushes and darted toward Hangar 6, but in that darkness it was unrecognizable. "Get him!" barked Timmy, and raced down the

darkness, it was unrecognizable. Get him. Barked Timmy, and raced down the path.

The figure, whoever and whatever it was, had disappeared by the time Timmy Gordon reached his ship. A quick inspection showed nothing in the hangar, and he climbed aboard the *Solabor*.

"About time you came," grumbled Shelton Thurner. He threw an empty bottle through the door and climbed from his seat in the back of the ship. "You ready to go?"

Gordon disregarded the question. "You see anyone come down here?"

"No. Been all alone."

"A Neptunian attacked me back in the bushes. Look," he showed Thurner the frost-bitten bruises on his throat. "Whoever set the Neptunian on me came this way ... *fast!*" He moved forward, seized Thurner by the shoulder, and laid his hand on the pilot's heavily-muscled chest. If Thurner had been the man, speedy running would have resulted in irregular breathing and heart-action. But the pilot's breathing was calm and normal. With an angry snarl he seized Timmy's wrist and flung him backward.

"Keep your hands to yourself, Gordon!" Thurner hissed.

"Sorry." Timmy's eyes squinted into slits, "I was just proving you innocent ... to my own satisfaction." He turned, climbed out of the ship, and hurriedly called the Director to report what had occurred. "Shall I stay on," he asked, "and help investigate?"

"No. We'll clean up the mess. Blast off as soon as possible, and get back here sooner!"

"QX, sir," said Tim, and hoisted himself aboard ship. "All set?"

"Been ready for twenty minutes."

"Yowsah, boss!" chimed Johnny Damokles.

There was utter silence, but in the midst of it, Callisto vanished. Seconds later

Jupiter's bulk faded redly from the sky to become a dot silhouetted sunward. And all in silence.

"Lord, man!" Thurner looked at Timmy with a hint of surprise veiling his usual antagonism. "How in hell does this thing work?"

"Search me," shrugged Timmy. "I worked it out on a sensitizing principle. My impervium hull was supposed to reject light as a mirror would, and so throw itself forward like a beam of light. The thing works, too."

"She sure do," chuckled the delighted Greek. He looked through the sunward port and watched Jupiter diminishing. "Great Scotts!" he yelled. "This ships are fast like Greek god, Mercury!"

"And just as inexplicable."

"Why, man?" asked Thurner, "You've told us how she worked."

"You mean ... how I *thought* she would work. Unfortunately, I tried the same principle on more impervium ... and not another ship has flown like this one. My math was wrong, but my mechanics worked. Just once."

"So I'm supposed to operate a fluke to Neptune?"

"Don't worry about it, Thurner. She's dependable and her controls are exactly like those in an ordinary planetary-liner. Watch." Timmy threw the wheel down, and the *Solabor* tipped into a wide curve. Jupiter vanished. Dotted pinpoints of stars prickled the black of inter-world space.

"Looks easy," grunted the pilot. He slipped over into the wheelman's chair, and fiddled experimentally with gadgets. "Okay," he said, "after four or five minutes I'll be able to handle her."

"QX," said Timmy. "There's a copy of Maconachy's book on Supra-solar Navigation behind you. Great book, Maconachy, wouldn't want to be in space without it to lean on." Thurner grunted again.

"Yeah. Good stuff for you practical astrogators. Put it over there in reach. And listen...." Thurner's voice lost some of its begrudging tone. "We're on this trip together. Let's make it peaceable." He stretched out a broad paw, and Timmy shook. Thurner, for all his slyness and for all the ease with which Tim had

knocked him down back there in the Space Bar, was a powerful man. Tim wondered why he hadn't fought back.

"All right!" he said, "We're together ... for the duration."

"It's a bargain. Now ... tell me more about how she operates. This ship's *actually faster* than light?"

"Yep! Warps across a light beam just the way a sailboat can exceed the speed of wind on a certain tacks. Look back at the sun."

Turner turned his head. "I'll be damned. A Doppler effect!"

"We're exceeding the speed of light ... right now!"

"And you're sure this principle of yours won't work on any other ship. Was there anything mixed with the impervium?"

"Central labs checked it," Timmy replied. "It was pure impervium."

"Where'd you get it?"

"By *coincidence* ... from Neptune."

Turner's face went red. "Look, guy," he said, "The war's off, and I don't like being played for a fool. There's no impervium on Neptune."

"Sorry, Turner. This metal did come from Neptune. I bought the back fin of the old XC-34 ... it was towed in from Nep back in '67."

"I see." Turner's brows knitted, and he muttered an apology. Then, turning away, he ran through the logarithms in Maconachy, made a few quick checks, shifted dials coolly and competently, and leaned back. "I'll take her in from here," he said.

"From the dark side," cautioned Tim.

"Okay. I'll drive part way to Pluto ... then swing back."

"QX," said Gordon. He spun about and walked to the back of the little ship. "How do you like it, Johnny?" he asked, and Damokles' face lighted up.

"She's one dam' fine ship ... go like go-to-hell fireball ... but look it here, Meester Timmy."

"Yes?"

"Why you say she won't work for any other ships?"

"Just won't. That's all."

"Maybe this planets Neptune do it."

"How, Johnny? We tested the impervium from every angle, and found it nothing but pure metal."

"Maybe is so. Dam' gods, Neptune, are funny feller. Sometimes he look like friend ... sometimes he are foe. Sometimes just do nothing ... but plenty happen just because Neptune are there. See?"

Tim whistled. "I see what you mean. Like a catalytic agent. You can't detect it. You don't test it ... *but it does something.*"

"Who's the difference? Call her cataltickic agents ... call her fool gods Neptune. What them hells!" The little Greek shrugged his shoulders and was silent.

Up in the *Solabor's* bow, later, Thurner spun the dials on the automatic calculator. Timmy watched him idly, then, moving away from the window, fell asleep. Johnny Damokles hummed an old tune, and lost himself in reveries on Greece. It was strange that so intense a national feeling could survive the melting pot of world assimilation. Yet the Greek national feeling had survived unchanged for more than three thousand years. The greasy old suit which Johnny Damokles wore, remained almost unchanged from the 20th Century attire which his ancestors had worn at Crete and in the long, bloody fight down through the mountains from Olympus. Alone amongst all the people of the 28th Century, the Greeks remembered their past glory, and the bloody history which had split them as a nation, yet welded the iron of heroism into their souls.

Only the Greeks, in a world of mechanics and science, were still concerned with events now dead and gone. Small nations may live ... in tradition.

Johnny Damokles let his gaze slowly fall from that wild pattern of unvisited universes which spread before him in the *Solabor's* ports ... and slowly turned the pages of his beloved Aristotle. An essay on the nature of the order of things caught his attention, but reading was no pleasant occupation inside the *Solabor's* stuffy little cabin. Johnny's head nodded. His eyes fluttered. He fell asleep.

Timmy Gordon's return from slumber was rather like the awakening of a city-dweller whose ear is annoyed by a sudden onslaught of silence. Accustomed by now to the sensation of motion, immobility woke him up.

"Stopped?" he yawned. "Why?" The cabin was dark, and in that velvety obscurity, Timmy could barely see the recumbent sleeping form of Johnny Damokles. He leaped to his feet. Strange, his body felt heavy, leaden, drugged.

A faint bluish light, barely enough to weaken the black of night, pushed its way through the window. Timmy staggered forward to the control bench. Shelton Thurner was gone!

But where? How? Where were they?

Timmy reached for the starting button to test his motors, but the panel had been stripped. Bare.

The answer came swiftly. To the accompaniment of a blast of noisome gas, the door swung open. Two figures entered. The door thumped shut.

"Thurner!" gasped Timmy. "But what? Where've you been?" His questions were interrupted, sharply. Behind Shelton Thurner, and barely visible, stood the hulking figure of a Neptunian.

Thurner's hand shot out and clamped on Tim Gordon's arm, "Bow!" he said. "You're on Neptune now ... you swine."

Timmy's fist shot out with the speed of a striking cobra, and a solid blow bounced off the renegade pilot's jaw. Nothing happened. Thurner grinned. His evil gapped-teeth gleamed. He raised his hand and brought it down with a flat *thwack* on the young Earthman's cheek. Timmy felt as though a sharpened file had hit him. Warm blood ran down his chin, and dripped floorward.

"Things are different now," said Thurner. "I don't have to take anything from

Things are different now, said Thurner. I don't have to take anything from you pigs." He drew back his hand for a second blow, but the figure behind him stepped forward.

"No!" it ordered. "Not now. There'll be time ... yet."

"What's all this?" snapped Timmy.

Thurner smirked, "You're on Neptune ... and are ... shall we say ... a guest of the Tsom Clan."

"Distinctly," hissed the semi-human figure behind Thurner. "Oh most distinctly ... a guest."

"And this ... renegade?"

"You allude to Shelton Thurner?"

"Yes!"

The Neptunian looked from Timmy to the big pilot. "I do not believe," he said, "that you will understand this easily. But you do your late associate an injustice. He is no renegade ... but a leader of the Tsom Clan."

"A Neptunian? Impossible!"

"Not at all my dear sir. We Neptunians have science. Given the proper materials, our surgeons can duplicate the ... rather ... loathesome appearance of you humans."

"You can make men out of a semi-human?"

"We are adaptable, my dear sir." The creature's nictitating membrane drew up over his eyeballs and gave him a deceptively sleepy appearance.

"But what about the temperature? How could Thurner stand Callistonian heat and gravity, when built for that of Neptune?"

"Enough of this foolish questioning!" barked Thurner, "Take the fools outside."

The creature at his side raised a leather-clad hand in a peaceful, gentle gesture.

"Patience, friend," he said, "We owe our *guest* much. For he has much to give us."

"I have!" blurted Timmy.

"Yes!" the Neptunian's manner was calm and unruffled. "You, a skilled practical mechanic, can contribute to a glorious Neptunian victory."

"And you think I will?"

"I know you will. No human-being has the nerve structure to stand up under our harsher persuasive methods. It is quite important for us to learn your method of treating impervium for these faster-than-light ships."

"But my method doesn't work."

"That's true," interjected Thurner. "We talked about it on the way out."

"Most regrettable!" Again that unpleasant, half-dead membrane flashed across the Neptunian's eyes. He seemed to sleep. Minutes passed before he looked up again. "In that event," he said, "you must suffer for the good of Neptune. Follow me." He waited while Timmy climbed into a heated, anti-gravitational space suit.

Thurner cuffed Johnny Damokles to his feet and motioned for him to put on a space suit. Then completely in command of the situation, the Neptunians led Tim and Johnny out into the blue cold of a monster and horrible world. They paused long enough for Thurner and his companion to remove the space suits they'd worn in the heated cabin of the *Solabor*, and when Thurner seemed to peel his very skin from his body, Timmy understood the miracle by which the pilot had posed as a Callistonian.

III

The pilot was actually a Neptunian. But a beautifully made synthetic skin served him as an undetectable protection against both heat and gravity ... made him, to all appearances, an Inner-Worldian. Timmy was amazed. These Neptunians were *surgeons* ... and thermal engineers.

"This way," motioned the Neptunian, and drew in a vast breath of Neptune's methane atmosphere. His chest swelled until its minute scales seemed on the

mediate atmosphere. His chest swelled and its minute scales seemed on the verge of separating. Man-like in height and size, his adaptation to a terrible gravity had made him a creature of steel-hard sinew and muscle. Thurner, or whatever his proper name might be, was almost as solid and several inches taller. No wonder he could consume Callistonian whisky by the quart and still navigate a ship successfully.

They walked across the plain, dropped downward into a slit-like canyon. Ahead of them lay a fortress whose only decoration was the simple symbol of the Tsom clan. Its walls bristled with blast guns, but closer examination showed Timmy that they were all of an obsolete pattern. Methane had clogged their rifling and made them utterly useless.

"These aren't used," said their guide. "Just there to frighten away lower forms of life. Watch!" He flicked a switch, and the wall's outer surface raised to reveal a vast network of grids. "Heat grids," he explained. "Perfect defense against the other clans."

"But we don't need defence," added Thurner. "Neptune is a united planet now."

The gates swung wide, and Timmy, with an empty feeling, walked in. Johnny Damokles followed. His antiquarian interests still shielding him from the horror of their situation.

The council chamber, holy-of-holies, audience room, or whatever the Neptunians called it, was perhaps the most impressive place either Timmy Gordon or Johnny Damokles had ever entered.

Black rock lined the walls and seemed one with the primeval essence of absolute cold. Atmosphere, at 17 G's, pressed hard against them, barely repelled by their space suits. The Neptunian turned. "If this," he said, "were a nightmare, I'd order you to kneel and worship at the feet of the Clan Tsom's god."

"Why not?" Timmy's belligerent Irish chin thrust out.

"Because, my dear guests, we have advanced considerably beyond such idle superstitions. Neptune, and the Tsoms, are the perfection of true civilization. We *know* there are no gods. We are neither concerned with ritual nor rank. Here, all are equal, under my *leadership*."

"Interesting," commented Timmy. "I seem to have heard it before."

Johnny Damokles nodded. "She are wonderfuls idea ... but gods is dam' important fellers. So is old time's history."

The Neptunian looked at him. "What," he asked Thurner, "is this? Some primitive?"

"A Greek," the pilot explained. "Sticks to the old beliefs and the old ways of Terra."

Those nictitating lids nicked up. "Then ... he's of no use to us."

"He'll do for raw material." Thurner shoved the little Greek to the floor, "Use him for Extract 47-a. Humanizing fluid."

The Neptunian shuddered. "The thought," he said, "of treating another of our people with that semi-humanizing element is repulsive. But sacrifice in the interest of conquest is needed. We must have more Neptunians capable of resisting higher temperatures and lower gravities."

Thurner grinned. "Precisely," he said. He turned to Timmy, and judged him as a man might judge a Percheron stallion. "This one is too lean."

The Leader nodded. "Our dear guest will be of use in research and mechanics. We might even grant him certain liberties."

Timmy glared at the monster, hating that assumed tolerance, then spat with deliberation on the floor. "Try to use me," he grunted.

"A challenge?" The Leader pressed a button. A bell rang, and two squat Neptunians glided into the chamber. There was a burble and a hissed command. The Neptunians retreated, then returned dragging a small box behind them. Its wires were a tangle maze of tentacles. Icy cold exuded from it, to chill the two Callistonians even through their heavily-heated space suits. The Leader barked an order. Timmy found himself flat on his back with a Neptunian servant pressing the face-plate of his suit down hard. There was a little whirl of power. Agonies unimaginable shot through every nerve of his skull. He screamed. Restraint was impossible. The pain eased.

"You feel" said the Neptunian "that treatment does no harm to nerves or tissues"

You see: said the Neptunian, that treatment does no harm to nerves or tissues, and actually prolongs life."

Timmy looked past the grinning faces of his tormenters and fixed his glare on the reptilian Leader. "Try again," he said. "I'm still tough."

The pain came back. It spun through skull and brain like a biting buzz-saw. Timmy gritted his teeth, then again came the inevitable scream. He wanted to faint. He prayed for death. But that buzzing pain was an elixir ... a stimulating and eternal torment. Timmy's hands thumped hard against the floor. His feet jerked, his spine arched, and he screamed again and again in a great crescendo. The pain eased.

"Could you stand that," said the grinning Neptunian, "for a lifetime?"

"No!"

"Then I warn you, the next time we apply it, you'll be alone in a dark room ... with a time clock on the door set for a one-week period. No one will enter. No one can stop the *treatment*. Will you cooperate?"

"Within limits."

"That's for me to judge. Give me the figures on how you managed to create that ship of yours."

"That's agreeable. You could take them anyhow." Timmy reached into a pocket of his space suit. He pulled out a bundle of papers and handed them to the Leader. "I warn you," he added, "they won't work." Then he swore at himself for saying that. If, by ingenuity, he could manage to convince the Neptunians that his ship would work, he might waste a lot of their time in research and give the Inner Worlds time to find out what was happening. "I might manage to make one work at that," he added swiftly.

The Neptunian scanned the papers. "No," he said, "this report of your scientific laboratories is definitely conclusive. I can see that you've done everything possible. The ship you have, or *had*, is a freak. But you're an expert in mechanics and photography. We'll put you in the research labs. Your friend can go with you until we need him."

The Neptunian cast one final look at the two captives, smiled, and walked away.

Turner jerked his head at an inner door. "Come on," he ordered. "Your quarters will be near the labs." He led them down a succession of corridors to a room where temperature and gravity stood at Earth-norm, and Callisto constant. "You can do without those suits," he said, and shut the door.

Timmy and Damokles looked around. The room was lighted quite brightly. A window gave onto the plain. Above them, Triton whirled its endless mad dance, speeding across the sky in the opposite direction of the planet's rotation. Timmy watched it. Here and there in the dark sky, synthetic power-moons hovered to steal energy from the cosmos.

"They gonna feed us, anyhow," said Johnny Damokles, and turned on the faucet of a food conveyor. Hot, spicy-scented edibles poured forth, but Timmy wasn't interested. Not far from them, half-lost in the gray light, two giant semi-globes towered heavenwards. Tim stared at them. Apparently the Neptunians were building another power-moon to add to that whirling band above. He watched as squat figures moved up and down its side, then walked from the window in a fog. Damokles tried to engage him in conversation, but Timmy was too defeated. He fell asleep.

Morning dawned swiftly because of the giant planet's rapid rotation. Seven hours of total blackness were then followed by a *day* ... but a day in name only. The sun out here had only one one-thousandth of its Earthian strength. For human purposes, it was useless. Timmy was standing by the window when the door swung open. Turner stood on the threshold.

"Come on," he ordered, "your job is ready." He looked at Johnny Damokles. "Might as well use you, too. Get into your space suit." The little Greek obeyed.

The next seven hours passed as a nightmare for Timmy. For Johnny, working outside as a slave on the power-moon, they must have been pure hell.

Timmy returned to their room that evening to find a tired little Greek sprawled on the couch. "Work you hard, chum?"

Damokles groaned. A livid weal ran down the side of his face, where a blow had slammed his head about in his helmet. "We get these Neptune bums ... Timmy," he said.

"Sure thing, pal. But how?"

The Greek shrugged his shoulders. "They guards you close?"

"No ... but we couldn't get away without the ship."

"Yeah." Damokles' chin dropped on his chest. "I guess we gives up." But despite the Greek's apparent despair, he had an idea of some sort. Timmy Gordon knew it, but he also knew that Johnny was afraid to talk about it in a room where sound detectors might pick up any hint of escape. "Let's go to sleep, Johnny," he said.

"Yeah ... you stay your side of bed, too. Last night you kick me blacks and blue in rib."

Which was distinctly untrue.

But if that was the way Johnny wanted things ... it was distinctly QX with Timmy Gordon. He stretched himself on the narrow couch beside Johnny. For twenty minutes he seemed to doze, then began kicking about fretfully, and muttering as though in the clutch of a nightmare.

"That's right, Timmy," the little Greek whispered. "Keep her going. You kicks hard ... yells ... them spies are too busy watching you. I can talks."

Timmy's reply was another boot to Johnny's shin. "Go on," he whispered, then kicked again.

"Remember what I say to you in ships?"

"About what?"

"About fool gods Neptune ... cataltickic agents ... Aristotle."

"Yes."

"Maybe I are right."

"So what?"

"Maybe if impervium get soaked on Neptune long enough ... then maybes it

behave like metal in your ship?"

"Go on." Timmy groaned, thrashed about. Threw a fist that thudded into Johnny's ribs. The Greek grunted, and resumed his whispering.

"They puts me working on power-moons outside."

"Yes?"

"She are mades from metal of wrecked space-liner. I see one plate who say XC-34 on her."

"Great Jupiter, Johnny! That's the liner I got the metal for my ship from ... just one fin was all I had to work with."

"Shut up! Dam' fools. Want him Neptune stinkers hear you?"

Instead of answering, Timmy grunted in his supposed sleep. Damokles whispered on: "They don't guards me! They make me be dam' fool clowns for Neptuners to laugh at. 'Get sky hook! Get bucket steam-ice!' That's what them lizards-men holler at me."

"Yes?"

"Then ... *cracks!* Hit Greek with fist. Don't like."

"Skip it, Johnny. What's your idea?"

"I hear them say ... artificial power moon ain't gonna be that at all. Gonna be giant bomb. Gonna load with tons an' tons an' tons of *dynotron*. Shoot him to Jupiter ... blow all air off everythings!"

"Good lord! Dynotron would do just that ... and then they'll repeat the procedure."

"Is right! I hear lizard-pig say just that!"

"How do you figure on stopping 'em, Johnny?"

Damokles wriggled, poked Timmy hard with his elbow. "Lay still!" he shouted. "I can no sleeps!" He butted up against Timmy, and began to whisper in fast

chaotic broken murmurs. "I got a long story to tell you, Timmy. All about powerful old Greeks' king."

For half an hour they trashed about, while Damokles unfolded his plan. At last, Timmy grunted. "QX," he said. "Can do!" He rolled over and fell into an extremely troubled sleep.

IV

The next day, at Neptune's dawn, Johnny Damokles was led back to his work on the *dynotron* bomb. Timmy, sleepy-eyed and wavering, followed his captors to a place in the mech lab. He worked quietly for half an hour, then beckoned to his overseer.

"Yes?" hissed the Neptunian.

"I want to see your leader."

"Why?"

"None of your blasted business. Just do what you're told, or be mighty blasted sorry."

The Neptunian scratched an itching neck flange. "All right," he said, "but you'd better have something to make this worth while." He shoved Timmy forward, released a door catch, and led him down the hall. Three staccato raps opened another door, and Timmy again stood in the presence of Neptune's Leader.

"Yes?" the Leader's voice was suave, but flat. "Oh, it's you ... you've something important?"

"I want to work in the photo-lab."

"Something to do with your way of sensitizing impervium?"

"That's right."

"Utterly useless. We've checked the figures of your own labs and find that they are completely accurate. That ship of yours is a freak ... and we can see no reason as to *why* it works."

"I still have an idea."

The Neptunian glared at him, and again that dead-alive membrane concealed all key to his thoughts. "You're not trying to convince me you're willing to join us, are you?"

"Nope," Timmy's Irish jaw shot out belligerently, "I just figure it'll be easy to escape from there."

A hiss was apparently the Outer-worldian's manner of laughing, for the hiss he emitted was as jovial a sound as Timmy had heard since landing on the planet. "I mean it!" Timmy finished, "and I warn you to watch me."

"Your spirit," the Neptune said, "is admirable." He scrawled a few notes, handed them to Timmy. "Here," he said, "is an order to work in the photo-labs. I shall watch your struggles with great pleasure." His hand closed on Timmy's shoulder and Timmy gritted his teeth, shook his way loose, and walked to the door.

Mockingly, the Leader laughed.

That night, when Timmy returned to their room, he found the little Greek seated, eyes blazing, on the bed. "S'matter, chum?"

"Dam-blasted Shelton Thurner ... chase me all over hell for sky-hook. Don't like it!"

"Forget it. You're tired and so am I. Grab off a mouthful of that synthi-food and let's hit the hay." He turned on the faucet, drew a cup of steaming brew and handed it to the Greek.

"I got the mixture," he whispered between gulps. "Did you get the metal?" The Greek nodded. "Yep," he replied, then in a louder tone. "Let's get to bed, Timmy."

Lights were quickly extinguished, and the two, with much moaning and groaning, crawled under the covers. But tonight there was need for action, not talk. Timmy pushed the blankets up to make a low tent, and handed Johnny a torch he'd stolen. Improvised though it was, their bed made a flawless, light-tight darkroom. Timmy climbed out to make sure no ray escaped, then plunged into bed again.

Deu again.

"The metal!" he grunted. Johnny Damokles handed him a tiny piece of impervium. It was, approximately, three inches square.

"Swell," said Tim. "Now hold this light." He dug deep into his pockets and pulled forth a bottle of stolen liquid. "As nearly as I can tell, this is the same mixture I used in making my other ship." He dipped the square of impervium in it, then waited. Dry at last, he wiped the metal square until it shone, and grinned as the first reactions started. "It works!" he nearly shouted. But that was neither the time nor the place for shouting. "Watch!" he whispered. Taking the torch from Johnny Damokles, he held it close against his treated impervium. The little square darted away so swiftly that it nearly tore loose from his hand. It did pull him a foot or so toward the edge of the bed before he switched off his light. There was no doubt about it. Impervium, when exposed to some unknown Neptunian radiation, underwent an untestable change and behaved precisely as had the metal of his ship.

"Hallelujahs!" burbled Damokles beneath his breath. "Now we fix up dam' fool Shelton Thurners."

"Maybe?" said Tim with unexpected pessimism. "I've stolen enough fluid for feet on that dam' bomb." He paused, "Are you sure the whole thing's impervium?"

"Yep! But how I gonna rub this stuff on ship?"

"Don't rub it. Pour this bottle on a high perpendicular point and let it run down the sides. We'll take a chance that the dim light here on Nep will prevent our process from knocking your bomb over ahead of time."

"Yeah. Then you get more solutions. We pour her on ... an' dam' bomb go sail away fast as hell!"

Timmy grinned. "Not quite, pal," he said, "I'm figuring on something just a little more effective." He took a piece of paper and made a few hasty sketches. Johnny Damokles watched with interest. Then he broke into a smile.

"I see," nodded the Greek. "She are just like story I tell you about old Greek king."

"Exactly.... And now, let me have time enough to get rid of our scrap of test metal and we'll turn in."

"No," protested Damokles. "Give me this piece impervium. I got good idea. Secret."

Timmy, without further question, handed Johnny the bit of treated impervium and added to it his bottle of stolen liquid. "Good night, chum," he mumbled, and rolled over to sleep.

Ten days and ten nights passed in that way. Each night Timmy had another flask of his sensitizer to give Johnny. And each night Damokles reported another successful application of the fluid. Miraculous that the two of them could so successfully hoodwink their captors? Yes. But then the Neptunians thought of the two as members of a lesser race, and gave them almost complete freedom of movement ... within limits. Timmy blessed the arrogance from which this stemmed. From the photo-labs he stole his sensitizer. In the mech labs he succeeded in removing and assembling certain vital cogs and rheostats. Put together they would give him control of Neptune's gigantic *dynotron* bomb. And Timmy Gordon was the man to put any machinery together. He did it on the tenth day. That same day, he stole a length of steel chain and a sharpened metal hook. Why he stole them, Timmy Gordon didn't know. But Damokles had asked him to, and he'd given his promise.

"Here you are," he said when he reached their room that night. He slipped the hook and chain to Johnny beneath the covers of their bed. "Goin' fishin' with it, chum?"

"You bet your dam' boots. I catch fat fish, too."

Timmy smiled. Then, quietly, he showed Johnny Damokles the piece of apparatus he'd constructed. It looked somewhat like the primitive 20th Century radio sets one saw in museums, but its purpose, as Tim explained, was more important. Compact, weighing no more than fifty or sixty grams, it gave him complete radio control of anything treated with his sensitizing fluid. What was more important, it took its power from almost any faint source of light, and should be effective up to two or three thousand miles.

"She work?" asked Damokles.

"She will if static doesn't cut me out too much."

"Dam' good," grunted the Greek. "Now we show them dam-blast Neptuners what good Old Greek History are."

"Correct, chum. When will the bomb be ready?"

"She are ready now."

"Swell! I might as well blast her off."

"No!" Johnny Damokles' tone was urgent, pleading. "You wait ... do him tomorrow when Neptune fellers can see."

Morning dawned with its usual dim lessening of the Neptunian murk. A methane breeze rolled down from some distant mountain range and swirled in noxious vapors across the plain. Two Neptunian guardsmen saw a flicker of movement in a nearby sandheap and cut loose with the fullest fury of their heat-grids. There was a crackle. An unassimilated tribesman rolled over, kicked a spurred foot in the air, arched his haunches and died.

The little tragedy, repeated time and again on that ruthless planet, was no more than window-dressing for more significant events. The crackling, burning grids were crackling arcs of doom. Like Gabriel's trumpet, they served to awaken Tim and Johnny Damokles.

"What's dam' noise?" grunted the Greek.

"Target practice." Timmy was about to deliver further comments, but a rap at the door cut him loose. "Come in!" he barked. The door opened. The Leader entered.

"Ahhhh. Good morning, my dear guests." He rubbed his hands in a gesture that grated scales together. "We've a special *treat* for you this morning. And perhaps, since you've displayed certain interests in *history*, you'd enjoy sharing in the history of the future."

"Would we?" queried Timmy.

"Belligerence is an ill-fitting trait of yours, Mister Gordon," said the Neptunian. "An inadequate one, I'll add."

"We're wasting time," interrupted Tim. "Get on with it!"

"Impetuous? You've a right to be. Get into your space suits and come outside. We're launching a special present for the Jovian System ... and feel that you gentlemen would enjoy it."

"I know," muttered Timmy.

"Of course, you do." The Leader was grinning as he spoke. "We've given your companion full opportunity to tell you about it. But come along ... unless you prefer a few rather ... delicate ... adjustments of the nervous system."

Johnny Damokles laughed. But beyond that, neither he nor Tim had anything further to say. They climbed into their space clothes and followed the Leader out into the Neptunian twilight.

V

In a natural amphitheater, walled in at one side by the cliff of the ravine and sheltered from the methane wind by the parapets of the Tsom fortress, stood the gigantic Neptunian bomb. Its impervium walls glowed with a faint, cold light. Regularly, down its sides from ten points, uneven streaks marked the course of Timmy's sensitizing fluid. Their exact placement was coincidentally fortunate. Each served to counteract the other, though the inward pressure they exerted must have been tremendous indeed.

The Leader was laughing in a repulsively reptilian way as he ascended his rostrum. Timmy and Damokles followed. "Observe," said the Leader, "the ingenious controls by which I guide the rocket-blasts from this remote station." He pointed to his control board, motioned Timmy and Johnny to stay away from it, and chuckled as they obeyed. Then, for a full hour, he delivered an impassioned and almost insane address to his followers.

As near as Timmy could judge, the Leader's address was a skilful bit of vituperation against the injustices done Neptune. But it was effective. A frenzied circle of lizard-men howled as he finished speaking. "And now," said the Leader, "we send our little present on his way."

He reached for the control board. The bomb shot heavenward.

Yes, it shot heavenward.

But the Leader *hadn't touched* the controls.

Timmy's fingers anticipated him. A flick on his own secret control board had shot the bomb silently out toward the void. The Leader's finger froze in mid-air. His jaw dropped. He followed the bomb in its flight, and every muscle tightened, when it stopped dead at a point half a mile above Neptune. There the bomb hovered, unmoving. Its orbit, if an orbit you could call it, held it exactly above the center of the Tsom fortress. The Leader's finger jammed down on his control button.

Flames blasted from the bomb's jets. It whirled crazily on its own axis ... but was otherwise immovable.

"Interesting, isn't it?" said Timmy mockingly.

The Leader looked at him. "You've done this?" His tone was most incredulous. He darted toward Timmy.

"Don't move," ordered the Earthman. He flicked a button and the great bomb dropped silently. The Leader stopped. There was utter silence as every creature in the amphitheater realized what was happening.

"Well," said the Leader at last, "it's an impasse, isn't it."

"No ... it's check ... and check-mate."

"Yes," chuckled Johnny Damokles, "she are old Greeks' gambit."

The Leader darted back to his control board. Again and again he shot every ounce of power into the bomb's blasts. Nothing happened. It spun about at that same tantalizing half-mile above their heads.

"Most ingenious," said the Leader. "You falsified those papers on how your principle worked?"

"Believe that if you want," said Timmy with a shrug. "And now ... I'm taking over."

The Leader bowed.

But Johnny Damokles stepped into the picture.

"I take over first," he said. "I gots present for dam' blast Shelton Thurner." He leaned over the front of the rostrum and caught the big Neptunian spy by the coat collar. Timmy, guarding against any treacherous assault, kept his eyes on the Leader and the bomb.

"Holla, Meester Shelton Thurner," greeted the Greek, "You ask Johnny Damokles dam' fool question. You want sky-hook? Good! I gots sky-hook." From a capacious pocket of his space britches he drew a hook and a dangling length of chain. He tightened the collar and jabbed the hook through it. "Goombye, Meester No-goods!" he chortled. He jerked the rest of the chain from his pocket. A few scraps of treated impervium were hitched to its end. Light hit them. They shot aloft, dragging Thurner behind them like the tail of a crazy kite, and dangled high above the plain.

"How you like sky-hooks?" yelled the Greek.

Timmy laughed.

"I regret," said the Leader in a suavely courteous tone, "the loss of an aide. But tell me, how did you evolve this ingenious plan? Am I over-inquisitive?"

"The plan ... belongs to Johnny Damokles."

"Sure Mikes!" blurted the Greek. "She are old Greeks' story. You tell her, Timmy. My talk all mixed with sky-hooks!"

Timmy fingered his control board. "Long ago," he said, "a Greek king acquired excessive power through force. As a symbol of that force ... a sword dangled always above his head. By a hair. The king's name ... like that of my friend ... was Damocles. They call the story, *The Sword of Damocles*."

Above their heads hovered that menacing ball of *dynotron*, enough to blast all life from Neptune. The Neptunian leader watched it.

"I believe ... that I understand." He turned away, then swung back again. "One must accept facts intelligently. Viseinhope your Terrestrial diplomats, Neptune

must accept facts intelligently. I wish you terrestrial diplomats. Neptune will accept any reasonable terms."

Overhead, the sword of Johnny Damokles glowed faintly.

"The Greeks," Johnny Damokles said softly to nobody in particular, "have a word for it. *Freedom!*" He smiled. "Let'sa call home, Tims. I'm cold!"

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