

STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS—

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Space travel was dead. Verboten. Then a few mad, fleeing star-pilgrims stole

THE ARK OF MARS

a novel of infinite worlds by LEIGH BRACKETT,
also ROBT. MOORE WILLIAMS - JAMES McKIMMEY - HAYDEN HOWARD

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PREVIEW OF PERIL

PREVIEW OF PERIL

By ALFRED COPPEL, Jr.

Like shadows, the four ships of Flotilla Blue Three slipped through the patrol cordon of the powerful Martian Space Force. Only the crazy luck of their mad, medal-bedecked Commodore would ever get them out again.

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The Second Martian War was three weeks old when the officers of the Terran destroyer *Darkside* found themselves assembled in Control and glumly aware that the Flotilla Commodore was sizing them up. It was hard to tell just what he was thinking, but whatever it was they had made up their minds to return it doubled in spades.

Having a Flotilla Commodore on board was actually a hardship, particularly if as in the case of the *Darkside*—the ship elected was unsuitable for a flagship. The Commodore needed cabin space for himself and for his staff, and that meant that five of the *Darkside's* nine officers would have to double up on what space was left. On board a destroyer that meant a good deal. But more important yet was the moral effect on the ship's company.

With a flag officer on board the easy life of an informal vessel would vanish and something of the formality of a big ship would take its place. The officers and crew would feel themselves under the scrutiny of higher authority no matter how hard the Commodore tried not to interfere with the working of the ship. And it naturally followed that the ship's commander would lose some of the joy in his independent command. Thus a happy ship would become a tight one ... QED. It was a situation as old as ships and men.

So there was little joy to be seen in the faces of Commander Scott and his officers when Commodore Hartnett stepped through the valve followed by his staff. Nor was there anything about Hartnett's appearance to suggest that they had

been anything but right about the manner in which Flotilla Blue Three would be handled throughout the coming patrol. The Commodore was a model of military correctness, a martinet moulded in two Martian Wars and twenty years in space to a steely hardness that was disconcerting.

They saw a lean, leathery man in his late forties, dressed in immaculate Greys that sported an appalling amount of silver braid. Four stripes were rare aboard destroyers. Eyes that matched the hard grey of the uniform glittered in a spaceburned face, shaded by heavy black brows. Young Ensign Blake's heart sank as he took in the set of the shoulders and the smooth fit of the blouse. He made a mental note of the fact that from now on there would be no more standing watches in sweatshirt and sneakers. He also reflected sadly on the many pleasure jaunts that Scott was wont to let him make in the *Darkside's* skeeter-boat, and bade a mental farewell to those happy moments. The set of the Commodore's long jaw instilled more respect for Space Force Regs in the young reservist than all the ten orientation lectures he had received at Hamilton Spaceport. Plainly there was a new era beginning for the TRS *Darkside*!

There wasn't a man on board who hadn't heard of Hartnett, of course. A gambler in combat, he had always managed to come out ahead of the game. His record was the record of practically every major achievement of the Force. Most of it could be read from the four rows of ribbons under his Command Pilot's sunburst.

There was the pale blue of the Terran Honor Medal that he'd won by ramming a Martian dreadnaught of the Diemos class with his crippled corvette off Io in the first Cat war. There was the red bar of the DSM received for leading the first deep-space expedition to reach Ariel and Oberon in the Uranian system ... that, before Blake had been born. And the rainbow colored ribbon of the old UN patrol, the First Martian Victory Medal, the Venerian Exploratory Medal, the Spatial Cross; four rows of them ending up with the General Service and Martian Occupation Ribbon.

To say, that it impressed the *Darkside's* green personnel would be an understatement. The decorations showed Hartnett to be the gambler ... the lucky gambler ... that he was said to be.

All the way out to Luna Base from Hamilton Spaceport, the crew of the flagship had been muttering about the "damned brass-hat" who was going to disrupt the pleasant life of their beloved ship with his unwanted, high-ranking, stinking, presence, but the iron-hard reality of the man and the aura of confidence that

emanated from him as he stood on the steel deck of the Control, spiked their guns too quickly. From the moments Hartnett stepped aboard, reflected Commander Scott bitterly, the ship tightened up. From here on in it was Hartnett's ship and there wasn't a damn thing anyone could do about it.

Introductions were short and to the point. Most of the ship's officers had met Hartnett's staff at the Base Officer's Club after the Captain's Council, where the commanders of the four ships that made up Flotilla Blue Three had met their Commodore for the first time. Scott sighed as he thought of the evident relief on Lieutenant Morrow's face when he had found that the flagship was to be the *Darkside* and not his own ship, the *Lysander*.

"That Hartnett will take over your ship, Scott," Morrow had told him. "He can't help it. From the moment he steps aboard, it'll be his baby." And Hartnett was a gambler....

Scott presented his officers to the Commodore almost jealously, starting with the Executive, Lieutenant Commander Chavez and Lieutenant Horowitz, the Tactical Physicist; and ending up with Ensign Blake, the Junior Gunnery Officer, who was startled from his nervous fidgeting by the sound of his name.

"A reservist," was Hartnett's only comment, and though it was said in a friendly tone, Blake flushed furiously and wondered if it stuck like straw out of his ears.

"Mr. Blake is the Charles Blake who won the New York to Ley City amateur skeeter-boat race last year, Sir," explained Scott.

The Commodore nodded vaguely, his eyes wandering over the burnished chrome and steel of the Control panels. "Good sport, small ship racing, Mr. Blake," he commented.

Blake's cherubic face burst into smiles. "The best sir!"

Hartnett's men were presented to the ship's commander more as a formality than anything else, as he had met them before. Thorne, a full Commander, was Flotilla Astrogator, Wilson and Orsov, Lieutenants, were Flotilla Gunnery Officers, James, a jaygee, was Flotilla Signals Officer, and Ensign Ward, a thin boy about Blake's age, was the Commodore's Aide. He sported his single silver augilette proudly.

They didn't seem a bad lot, reflected Scott grudgingly. Maybe they wouldn't get in the way too much.

"We can lift ship as soon as convenient, Mr. Scott," said Hartnett, issuing his first order.

"Aye, sir."

Hartnett turned to his staff. "Get yourselves below and sort yourselves out. Try not to take up too much room." As they vanished down the ramp, he turned to take a seat at the visiplates.

Scott was taking a time check from the Tower Control, and the signalmen were relaying the lift-ship order to the three other ships of Blue Three. Outside on the airless field, the amber warning lights were spinning on the Tower mast, warning the spacesuited maintenance crews away from the blast pits.

Chavez was snapping orders into the intercom and the *Darkside* was awaking to activity smoothly. Five shielded decks below Control, Chief Jetman Collins and the black-gang were busily removing the seals from the cadmium dampers in the blast chambers. The "three-minutes-to-lift-ship" alarm blared and the lights dimmed, leaving Control lighted only by the reflected glow of the panel lights. On the visiplate screen, the slender shapes of the *Lysander*, the *Argus* and the fat, ungainly silhouette of the ironically named *Artemis* showed clearly in the earthlight.

The *Artemis*, thought Hartnett, was the only weak link in his command. The other three ships were modern, but the *Artemis* was an ancient alcohol burner, converted to atomics and pressed into service by the exigencies of an undeclared and treacherous war.

At best, she could stand no more than 5 Terran Gs and the rest of the Flotilla would be forced to keep to her reduced speed throughout the cruise. Her armament was lighter and her armor thinner than it should be. In fact, she was strictly Cat meat if she should ever be forced to stand and fight. And if they intercepted any Cats, that is exactly what she would have to do, since she was the only ship of Blue Three that could not outrun any comparable Martian ship.

Scott was giving his orders now, eyes fastened on the master chronometer. Hartnett was pleased to see that he did so without a sidelong look at his superior.

He knew his business and did it. Good. Then Hartnett could stick to handling Blue Three and worrying about the *Artemis* without thought of how the ship under him was being managed.

He slipped into his G-Suit and plugged the lines into an outlet on the side of his chair. The second hand swept up the face of the dial, and Scott hit the firing studs. Far below, Jetman Collins removed the dampers from the main blast chambers.

The takeoff was strictly routine for the Luna Base personnel. The four ships of the Flotilla rose from the pits on their long tails of radioactive flame, setting the outside Geiger counters to clucking wildly and outlining in vivid relief the three dreadnaughts that lay in their careening berths and the dozen or so smaller ships on the line. Under 3 Terran Gs of acceleration, Flotilla Blue Three was soon lost in the ebony sky. For just an instant there was the vaguest suggestion of four racing shadows on the blue-green disk of the gibbous Terra that hung low in the heavens, and then nothing. The airless silence of Luna Base continued unbroken.

In the sheathed Control Tower, the Operations Officer made ready to go off watch. He was thinking of a few drinks and a girl and maybe a thick steak down in Ley City. Wonderful place, Ley City ... even in wartime.

The door burst open, but it was not his relief. It was a breathless yeoman of signals. He held a sheaf of papers in his hand.

"Has Blue Three lifted, sir? Cryptographing sent me with this."

"Damn! They're well out by this time Reilly." He indicated the radar screen that showed four rapidly moving pips already heading into deep space.

The yeoman handed him the papers without a word.

"What kept you?" The officer demanded angrily.

Reilly looked at his superior reproachfully. "I made it from Crypto in forty seconds flat, sir. Couldn't come any faster!"

"Dammit! Now we'll have to put this on tight beam and scramble it. Intelligence suspects the Cats have cracked our cipher!"

He sat down at the scrambler and began to type.

"COMMODORE CLARE HARTNETT: ABOARD TRS DARKSIDE FLOTILLA BLUE THREE. PRIORITY MISSION. REPEAT. PRIORITY MISSION. SPATIAL INTELLIGENCE REPORTS LARGE QUANTITY ISOTOPE X-R REFERENCE 6589-3 CODE BOOK IN DANGER OF CAPTURE AT METALLURGICAL STATION 9 CHART REFERENCE A-5. PREVENT AT ALL COSTS. LARGE CONCENTRATION MARTIAN PHOBOS CLASS CRUISERS AND POSSIBLE SUPERDREADNAUGHT ARMED WITH CYCLOTRONICS IN VICINITY SEARCHING FOR STATION 9. REPEAT. X-R MUST NOT FALL INTO MARTIAN HANDS. DESTROY IF NECESSARY. FOR YOUR INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE INTELLIGENCE SUSPECTS CIPHER TWO HAS BEEN CRACKED BY MARTIAN CRYPTO. LUCK. DO NOT ACKNOWLEDGE. SIGNED: TORAN LONG, CAPTAIN, SENIOR CONTROL, LUNA BASE. END MESSAGE."

Rising, he detached the roll of perforated tape from the scrambler and fed it into the tight beam transmitter. When the roll was consumed, Long dropped sullenly into a chair. His relief arrived, but all desire to partake of the joys of Ley City was gone. Like most of the old timers he admired Hartnett immensely, and he could not rid himself of the feeling that he was in some way responsible for sending the fabulous spaceman into sure destruction.

Against the ten known cruisers and the suspected superdreadnaught that were searching that quadrant for the illusive Station 9, the strength of Flotilla Blue Three was sadly inadequate.

If the message had arrived earlier, a dreadnaught or at least a couple of cruisers could have been despatched with Hartnett's force. But the impossibility of a rendezvous in space made it strictly the Commodore's baby now. Besides, Terra had no ships to spare. Hartnett would have to rescue the three technicians at the Station and destroy the Isotope X-R with no help.

The Cats didn't know what X-R was, but they wanted to find out awfully badly if their concentration of strength in the Uranus quadrant was any indication. And it wouldn't be very long before they found that the mysterious Station 9 was on Oberon, either. With more than eleven ships prowling around, they wouldn't miss such an obvious bet for very much longer. All Hartnett had to do now was sneak through their screen, land a ship on Oberon, take the technicians off,

destroy the X-R, and get away again without being seen because the *Artemis* couldn't fight! Long groaned. That's all!

Oh, why, he wondered, wouldn't Terrans learn? An ancient leader of Terra's nationalist era had said it perfectly for them. Speak softly, he had said, but carry a big stick! Why wouldn't they listen?

He shook his head and left the Control Tower wearily.

"What's eating him?" asked the relief.

"He's just sent Blue Three into the Uranus quadrant," replied Reilly.

The relief gave a low whistle and turned to look out over the earthlit moonscape. "Too bad."

Hartnett caught the Commander's eye as he worked at the control board.

"Sorry to crowd you like this, Mr. Scott," he said.

"It's nothing at all, sir. It's a pleasure to have you aboard." Even as he said it, Scott realized how stupid it must sound. Of course it crowded him to have Hartnett aboard and it annoyed him being the second ranking officer on his own ship.

Commodore Hartnett smiled at the Commander's words. There was hardly anything else he could say, poor devil. Rank has its privileges, he thought. But he said: "Glad you feel that way," and fell silent watching Scott and the Quartermaster guide the ship through the first stages of acceleration.

Scott felt he should say something more, but he wasn't at all sure just what. Finally he said, "We've only an hour or so more of acceleration, sir. If there's anything you want tied down in your cabin, you'd best notify Mr. Ward. The *Darkside* has no gravitators."

"The cabin will be in order, Mr. Scott," replied Hartnett casually, "My staff and I are all destroyer men."

Scott cursed himself for an idiot and mumbled an apology, but the Commodore had let the incident pass with a half hidden smile and was inspecting the orbital

calculators at the far wing of the Control panel.

The voice of Lieutenant Morse, Astrogation Officer, saved Scott any further embarrassment. The communicator buzzed and Scott closed the switch.

"Control here!" he snapped, a bit too crisply.

"Astrogation. We'll be at the boundary of our inner patrol zone at 2335 Sidereal, sir."

Scott looked over at Hartnett. "Any orders, sir?"

The Commodore shook his head. "Just have the other ships maintain visual contact. Particularly the *Artemis*. The *Lysander* can take the rear position. Have me called in my cabin if anything comes up before then. See you in the wardroom at dinner. Carry on, Mr. Scott."

He left Scott feeling sorry for his friend, Tom Drew, who commanded Blue Three's lame duck, the beloved *Artemis*.

Striding down the ramp, the Commodore came to the main gun-deck and headed aft, past the banks of five inchers and torpedo tubes that lined the inner shell. The gun crews stood respectfully as he walked past them and returned young Blake's sharp salute. Hartnett restrained a smile and continued down to the cabin deck.

Ensign Ward was unpacking his gear as he came through the valve, and listening to a commercial broadcast on short wave that crackled and faded with the vagaries of Terra's faraway heavyside layer. The reports, pieced together, gave a fairly comprehensive picture of the fighting that was going on in the Uranian quadrant.

"I don't like the way things are going, sir," said Ward.

Hartnett didn't either, but he could see no point in saying so. Besides, the Flotilla's patrol area was on the other side of the sun from Uranus, and the news there was bad enough to give him food for thought.

"I won't need you for a bit, Ward. Take off and get yourself settled," he

suggested.

The aide saluted and left. Hartnett stripped off his blouse and shirt and settled himself comfortably on the acceleration bunk. He switched on the bank of solar lamps and let the warm rays sooth and relax his tired muscles. The tension of many harrowing days in the Pentagon began to leave him, and he felt a great pity for the desk-bound VIP who could not know the joy of a ship under them in deep space. Thank God he got past the last physical. They were getting tougher every patrol!

The radio was still on and as the news reports came in, his restless mind turned to consider the unfortunate tactical situation in which the Terran Space Force now found itself.

It was the old democratic failing. God Bless it! As old as Terra's history. Ship for ship and man for man the Terran Forces were better than the Martian. Terrans shot faster and straighter. Terran ships flew farther and faster. And Terra, for all its failings, was a free world fighting for a free space. But the Cats had more ships and a hell of a lot less reluctance about using them to enslave everybody in sight.

The first Martian war had ended the squabbling confederation of sovereign states that had been the UN. And the Martian war had brought about in five short years the advancement of space-flight that might otherwise have taken decades. It was ironic that the peace-loving peoples of the Universe always seemed to produce better under the harsh goad of war. The nastier the war the more magnificent the achievements. Hartnett wondered if that were not a very significant commentary on the true nature of the human organism.

But in the first Cat war the Solar System had been faced with the unfortunate situation of two races developing interplanetary flight within a decade of each other ... and both starting out to proselytize their own peculiar institutions among the outposts of the System. A clash was inevitable ... and Terra won the narrow margin of victory by a more comprehensive understanding of material science. While the war had begun with chemical fueled ships and bombs, it had ended up with atomic powered ships and proton cannon.

The primitive ships of the war's beginning were still vivid memories to Hartnett. He had spent many months in them, suffering the effects of free-fall for weeks

while they coasted in half-computed orbits around the sun. The people of Terra had long had atomics, but it was not until the third year of war that a method had been found to utilize the power of the atom for a space drive. In those days a ship did not dare even a perihelion passage, for fear the terrible heat of the sun would detonate their precious reserves of fuel. Things were different now.

Ward reentered the room abruptly. "Message from Luna Control, sir," he said, passing over the note. "Came on tight beam, coded, and scrambled," he added unnecessarily.

The Commodore read it over slowly and pursed his lips. He swung his legs over the side of the bunk and reached for the intercom. "Control."

"Control here," came the reply.

"Stand by for a change of course. Be with you in a moment."

There was a moment of surprised silence, and then: "Aye, sir."

Hartnett turned to his aide. "Reach me that space-bag, will you Ward? That's the one. Fish out Code Book 6589 and the A chart. That's the deal."

Hartnett's staff and all of the *Darkside's* officers not actually on watch assembled in the wardroom on the Commodore's orders. The Flotilla had already come about and was heading sunward, its steady acceleration of 3 Gs aided by gravity. Already, Greys had been packed away in deference to the rising temperature, and all hands were clad in fiberglass shorts and jumpers.

The assembled officers rose when the Commodore entered the room and he waved them back to their seats, taking a chair at the head of the mess table.

"Mr. Scott," he began without preamble, "What do you know about the new Cat superdreadnaughts?"

"Very little, sir. I have heard that they are the biggest thing in space ... although I don't believe they have more than one in service right now. The other two of that class were photographed by a photo-recon skeeter out of the *Gorgon* a week before we lifted ship. I saw the prints."

"What about armament?" asked the Flotilla Gunnery Officer, Wilson.

Scott shrugged. "We know very little about that. Mr. Horowitz could tell you more. I understand they mount some kind of new cyclotronic rifles."

"That's correct, sir," replied Horowitz. "I don't know exactly how the things work, but I could guess that they detonate the heavy metals used for fuel in atomic powered vessels."

"Range?" asked Lieutenant Orsov laconically.

"No information ... but I would be willing to guess that it is not more than fifty miles no matter how tight their beam. There would be far too great a voltage loss."

"Mr. Blake," said Hartnett, "How good are you on the skeeter-boat?"

Blake looked perplexed, but he answered with some pride that he was considered quite passable.

"I'll bear that out, sir," said Scott drily. "Mr. Blake is something of a hotshot pilot."

"Good enough," returned Hartnett. "We'll see when we near Station 9." He looked over at Blake. "Do you think you can land a skeeter there and take off three passengers without arousing the Cats?"

"A skeeter is only meant for three people, sir, and four would be quite an overload," protested Blake.

"It will have to be done. If we try to land a ship there, every Cat in the quadrant will be on our necks. It's either the skeeter, or ..." he shrugged expressively.

"If we strip the boat down and remove all unnecessary mass it should do," suggested Orsov. "What do you think, Blake?"

Blake gulped. To strip the skeeter would mean removing all armor and guns. "I ... uh..." He squared his shoulders and grinned sheepishly. "It would," he declared finally.

"Good," said the Commodore.

"Just where is this Station 9, sir?" asked Morse.

Hartnett ignored the question, but by way of answer, he turned to his Flotilla Astrogator, Thorne and asked: "Do you remember the analysis of Oberon's surface, Thorne?"

"Vaguely. All four of the Uranian satellites are composed mainly of pitchblende and similar ores. Heavy metals. Very dense. I happen to remember because it's one of the coincidences of astronomy that the planet itself was given the name Uranus before the discovery that the whole of its system was lousy with uranium ores."

"What else can you tell us about it?"

"Well, Oberon is small ... about 800 miles in diameter. Ariel and Titania are about 1,000 and 600 respectively, and Umbriel is the baby at about 400 miles. Much of Terra's uranium was brought in from Titania back in the days of U-235 bombs and so forth. They are abandoned now."

"Gentlemen," said Hartnett, facing the others seriously. "There are ten Martian cruisers and a superdreadnaught in the vicinity of Oberon and Ariel ... you may have guessed by this time that our mysterious Station 9 is on Oberon. My orders are to rescue the three technicians and destroy their samples of Isotope X-R, which is, I understand, a very unstable Isotope of plutonium.

"If we could ... in some way ... destroy the bulk of the Cat strength in the Uranus system, it would be a great step forward toward the successful conclusion of this war that is still young enough to have killed relatively few people."

Scott looked around at his officers and read plain astonishment on their faces. To talk of destroying such a Martian fleet with four tiny ships was madness!

"The rescue of the Station personnel will be handled by Mr. Blake and the skeeter-boat. And ... if the plan I have works out properly, the destruction of the enemy fleet will be handled by ... one ship alone." He looked around the table with the vaguest suggestion of a grin on his leathery face. He nodded his head at Scott. "You're quite right, Mr. Scott, the *Artemis*."

Scott paced furiously up and down the steel deck of the dark Control. Chavez sat

before the panels, his saturnine face wreathed in demon-like curls of blue smoke from the short, black, Mexican cheroot he smoked so lovingly.

"You should have heard him!" exclaimed Scott, "Standing there and calmly telling us that we are going to destroy the Cat fleet with the *Artemis*! Booby trap 'em, he says! Chav, I tell you he's gone looney!"

Chavez shrugged and smoothed his hairline moustache. "Quien sabe?"

"What the hell do you mean 'Quien sabe!' Are you trying to tell me you're thinking he can do it?"

The Latin smiled, showing animal white teeth. "I understand he's done a lot of things that people said weren't possible. Personally, I should be very glad if he did what he says so we could all get back to Ley City. Amigo, I have a little friend back on Luna that is." He smiled dreamily and kissed his fingertips.

"I think you're all going crazy. It's just having that man aboard."

"Ah, Ah!" cautioned Chavez, "Remember all those beautiful silver stripes."

"Well, damn the lot of you. I just hope we get the *Darkside* back to Luna Base and your little...." He made an angry parody of Chavez's romantic gesture.

"We'll get back, I think, Mr. Scott," said a casual voice from the Valve. The Commodore was standing in the arch, outlined against the ramp light. He stepped into Control and took a seat beside Chavez at the panels.

Scott and Chavez maintained an embarrassed silence. Hartnett looked up to study the now receding solar disk through the tinted visiplat. The Flotilla was now heading once again for deep space.

It was a few moments before Hartnett spoke. When he did, it was a command directed at Scott.

"Mr. Scott, the Flotilla will land for certain necessary readjustments on Hyperion. See that the other vessels are properly notified." Then he rose and left the Control.

Scott dropped unhappily into a chair. He looked at Chavez. "Well, Mr. Chavez. How do you think you will enjoy command of the *Darkside*?"

Chavez laid a friendly hand on his commander's sleeve. "I don't think he'd take your ship from you just because...."

"Skip it, Chav!" snapped Scott and he left the Control in peevish silence.

Sixty hours later Blue Three lay grounded in a jagged little valley on airless Hyperion. Spacesuited figures swarmed about the clustered ships transferring personnel from the *Artemis* to the other ships, and rigging special television, remote control, and other apparatus in the *Artemis*.

Hartnett stood beneath the *Darkside's* ventral valve on the metallic soil of the little moon with Chavez and Orsov watching the progress of the work. Lieutenant Morrow of the *Lysander* and Lieutenant Griggs of the *Argus* joined them and stood in silence while the last of the *Artemis'* personnel was transferred into the *Darkside*. Tom Drew, the commander of the *Artemis* stood sadly apart watching the spacemen make a ghost ship of his command.

On the eastern horizon, Saturn was rising into a black sky studded with points of fiery brilliance. Quickly the ringed planet climbed into the sky and flooded the tortured landscape of Hyperion with light. The men at the *Darkside's* valve stood watching the show of celestial grandeur in awe. Orsov, for all his deep-space experience, could not help but feel a twinge of vertigo as he looked up into the haloed face of the heavenly giant that filled a quarter of the inverted bowl of ebony that the heavens had become.

Everyone was relieved to lift ship, however, for the thought of being caught grounded by any roving Martian spaceship was not pleasant to contemplate. Atomic bombs had long been obsolete, but one such would certainly suffice to exterminate four grounded spacecraft. Then too, they were all glad to get away from the glaring spectre that so eerily filled too much of the sky ... the ringed Saturn had a hypnotic effect that left a man shaken.

In the Control of the *Darkside* Chavez whispered to Scott: "We were thinking that you were going to lose the *Darky* ... and it turns out that poor old Drew is the one who lost his command."

"He should be glad to get rid of it."

"But what," asked Chavez, "is the old man going to do with her?"

Scott shrugged and spoke succinctly. "Bait." His spirits had risen considerably when Hartnett had left him in command of the *Darkside*, contrary to his expectations. He reflected somewhat ruefully that it did a man good to have a scare thrown into him from time to time. Even now, rapidly approaching a quadrant heavy with Cat warships, he could feel contented in merely feeling his beloved tin can responding under his hands on the control panels.

A thousand yards behind and astern, the unmanned *Artemis* followed the *Darkside* like a dog on a leash, its myriad functions controlled by an invisible chain of subetheric impulses from jerry-rigged remote controls on the *Darkside's* gun-deck.

In the faint light of the faraway sun, where the irrepressible Blake had sloshed paint on her flank, gleamed the legend: BOOBY TRAP.

Like shadows, the four ships of Flotilla Blue Three slipped through the patrol cordons of the Martian Space Force. In the infinite vastnesses of the interplanetary deeps they were unnoticed. Blast tubes silent, guided only by the ever increasing gravitational attraction of mammoth Uranus, and the reaction of whining gyroscopes.

Beneath them, its greenish disk ever increasing, lay Uranus ... cold, harsh, forbidding. The thick atmosphere of methane and ammonia lay in great turbulent belts, whipped to maniacal fury by the eternal storms that swept the unguessable surface of the ghastly planet.

Blake shivered slightly as the skeeter-valve of the *Darkside* closed soundlessly behind him and the blackness of the void closed in about the tiny boat. For just an instant, the familiar shape of the destroyer loomed comfortingly in the faint light of the dwarfed sun, and then it was gone, and he was falling away towards the mystery shrouded world that lay beneath him. The very size of the disk was frightening. A huge swirling mass 30,000 miles across seemed to be drawing him inexorably into its gassy body.

With an effort he settled himself down in the control chair and patted the tattered pin-up picture on the panel before him. It was a bit of Terra far from home, and the simple act gave him courage. This was certainly different from the Terra-Luna flights he had so often made alone ... this was different. He grinned to

himself and spoke aloud the phrase made famous by ten thousand generations of actors and hacks. This, he declaimed, is *it!*

Quickly now, he set up the constants for Oberon and pressed the firing stud. There was a sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach as the skeeter came alive and the vast disk of Uranus vanished from the forward vision ports. Speed was essential now. His trail would not mark the place of the Flotilla, but it surely would arouse the sharp eyes of the Cats who must be nearby. He pressed the second stud and the skeeter leaped ahead. The accelerometer stood at 7 Terran Gs. By long practice he could stand 11 ... and the skeeter ... stripped and souped up ... could produce 20. Far too many.

He set the seat to prone position. Maybe he could squeeze an extra one out of it now. 12 G! He gave the skeeter more power and the stars seemed to go into a crazy dance as his vision started to fail. Enough.

Thirty minutes of terrific speed and still no sign of the Cats. The tiny, dark disc of Oberon grew with alarming rapidity in the port. He began to decelerate so fast that he nearly blacked out again. Damn! Below him the tiny moon lay barren and bizarre in the greenish glow of its huge primary.

The mushroom shaped huts of the metallurgical station were directly below him and he swung the skeeter into a wild approach that would have given his rocket instructor heart failure, but the boat held together and settled to the surface of the tiny spaceport with a crunch. Without waiting even for the surrounding soil to cool, Blake was out of the ship and clumping clumsily toward the distant huts. The terrific density of Oberon made the gravity almost normal. Three suited figures appeared from the valves and began to run grotesquely toward him. He waved them back and began shouting instructions at them on the photophone. The infrared lamps on the top of the helmets blinked eagerly in answer. Then quickly the four men vanished into the storage hut and set feverishly to work.

Control was lit only by the red battle lamps. Lines were strung along the walls and through the valves, and Scott, Chavez, and the Quartermaster sat strapped at the panels. The ship was in a free falling orbit around Uranus, its sister ships and the ghost ship, *Artemis*, following her lead like huge beads on an invisible string. The orbit could not be broken until Blake returned with the Station technicians. All hands sat in nervous silence at GQ while the Flotilla hung dead in space.

Commodore Hartnett came through the valve from the gun-deck. There was a flimsy in his hand and he pulled himself along the guide-line with some difficulty.

"Mr. Scott," he rapped out. The waiting was taking its toll of his nerves as well as the other's. "Mr. Scott. You will break radio silence and transmit this message immediately. Unscrambled and in Code Two."

The men at the panels stiffened in surprise. So far they had managed to avoid arousing the prowling Cats ... but now this!

"Sir," protested Scott, "You surely can't mean to break radio silence with young Blake down there!"

It was hard for a man to look dignified floating in midair ... but somehow Hartnett managed it. "It's an order, Mr. Scott."

Scott flushed angrily. A gambler! Damn you, he thought! But he bit his lip and reached for the message. "Yes, sir."

Hartnett remained behind him as he rang for communications.

"Communications here!"

"Stand by to transmit."

"Spread beam," ordered Hartnett.

Scott cursed silently. "Spread beam."

"Aye, aye, Sir...." The voice of the radioman sounded strangled.

Scott read from the flimsy in a flat voice, a note of astonishment creeping in as he finished the message.

"TORAN LONG, SENIOR CONTROL, LUNA BASE. AM STANDING BY OFF OBERON READY TO LOAD ISOTOPE X-R ON BOARD DESTROYER "ARTEMIS" HAVE NOT MET THE ENEMY AND HAVE SUFFERED NO CASUALTIES. ONE AUXILIARY TUBE ON THE "ORION" HAS BLOWN BUT THE "JOVE" AND "MINERVA" ARE STANDING BY TO EFFECT EMERGENCY REPAIRS. HAVE DOCK SPACE AVAILABLE FOR REPAIR

OF "ORION" L PLUS 21 2235 SIDEREAL. SIGNED C. HARTNETT
COMMODORE RED SIX. END MESSAGE."

Scott wondered wildly if Hartnett had not suddenly lost his mind. Red Six was the Code name for the Task Force that included five Terran dreadnaughts, and the part about the blown tube and the repairs added up to just so much lunacy. The Cats had the cipher ... there wasn't much doubt of that, and had Hartnett invited every Martian captain in the quadrant to come blasting down on them with all tubes blowing, he couldn't have phrased it better!

Leaving the stunned Scott to ponder his strange madness, Commodore Hartnett hurried down into the cluttered gun-deck. Drew, at the remote controls of the *Artemis*, was ready for action when he arrived. Time was important now, thought Hartnett.

"Now get that can down there ... and fast!"

Drew and his men went into action, and the *Artemis* vanished from the string of beads and plunged toward Oberon ... an empty and forlorn bait for a trap whose jaws were beginning to close as from all over the quadrant, Cat warships converged on Oberon ... their vaunted superdreadnaught in the lead.

Twenty minutes after *Artemis* left the Flotilla, the radioactive streaks of the first Martian cruisers showed in the sky 15,000 miles away.

Blake and the three technicians from Station 9 huddled in the careening skeeter-boat. They were almost on top of the Martian superdreadnaught before they saw it. For just a fleeting instant it seemed to fill all of space, and then it was gone. The Cats on board paid no attention to a tiny boat that they imagined to be the survivor of the battle that must have already begun off Oberon. But Blake paled at the very size and might of the craft. From what he had seen of it it would take much heavier stuff than the *Darkside* carried to dent that monster!

Then they were nearing the *Darkside* and Blake had his hands full threading the skeeter back into the valve that yawned black as he drew near. Once aboard, he slipped through the sighing valves and into the boat deck. A steward came to take charge of the passengers, and Blake hurried up to the gun-deck that had been transformed into the extra-corporeal brain of the doomed *Artemis*.

Hartnett looked up from his work to grunt at him: "Did you do what I told you to do?"

Blake grinned, "Yes, sir. All the stuff is buried in the storage chambers directly under the pits ... the ones that are used to store the coolants."

"Good enough." He rang for Control. "Have we been sighted yet?"

"No, sir," came Chavez' voice. "But the Cats are gathering thick and fast."

Blake told Hartnett about the mammoth superdreadnaught, and the older man smiled. "We'll see if we can't give them something for their trouble." He turned back to the communicator. "Chavez, see to it that we maintain a mean distance from Oberon of at least 25,000 miles. And have all the screens in place."

"Aye, Sir."

"*Artemis* is down, Sir," reported Drew.

Hartnett turned to look into the visiplates. The derelict ship had landed nicely on the spaceport near the metallurgical station. He nodded with satisfaction. At least the blast of her tubes hadn't detonated the pile. He looked into a sky plate and saw that she had not landed a minute too soon.

Two Martian cruisers, their black shapes dark against the starry sky, were hanging low over her. Others circled behind them, and higher than all the others, Hartnett could make out the huge shape of the superdreadnaught that Blake had seen. That was the one he wanted!

For perhaps twenty minutes the Martians hung suspiciously over the still landscape of Oberon. Then a cruiser detached itself and began to sink down towards the spaceport on a long, slowly diminishing column of flame.



Hartnett swore. They were going to try and land! That wouldn't do at all. He had to goad them into attacking. He snapped an order to Drew. Only one of the *Artemis'* proton cannon was connected with the remote control apparatus in the *Darkside* but Hartnett hoped it would be enough. It had to be.

Taking the gun control himself, he swung the sight so that it pointed at the lowest cruiser. A flash of energy sizzled from the projector, and spattered on the exposed flank of the Cat cruiser throwing sparks wildly like the glitter of a child's Fourth of July sparkler. The ship shuddered under the impact and glowed white hot along the scarred beam.

Like a speeded up motion picture shot, the Cat ship leaped away from the spaceport, leveling its own guns at the recumbent *Artemis*. The men in the *Darkside* caught a glimpse of the other ships bearing their projectors, and far above, Hartnett was elated to see that the superdreadnaught had extended the muzzles of its massive cyclotronic rifles.

The cruisers fired first, and the screens went blank, so the Terrans never saw the rest of it. But up in the darkened Control Chavez and Scott were witnesses to one of the greatest cataclysms men have ever seen.

The tiny disk of Oberon seemed to light up with a white fire; swelling like a glowing balloon and then shattering with a violence that left them speechless. The very atmosphere of Uranus under the low swinging moonlet boiled and billowed with a frightful incandescence, great prominences of radioactivated methane spouting high into the air as the very internal balance of the great planet teetered.

A shock-wave of corruscating fire shot out from the blazing surface of Oberon, engulfing the Martian warships in a sea of spinning, scintillating destruction. Like a tiny nova, the satellite flared in the black silence of deep space, vaporizing everything within ten thousand miles of it; churning the very vacuum into a hell of hard radiation.

Scott stared at the outside Geiger counters as they chattered their story of charged ions and electrons battering, even at this distance, at sheathing in the destroyer's hull.

Hartnett's shouted order to "... get the hell out of here!" was strictly unnecessary. By the time he had issued it, the remaining three ships of Blue Three were piling on Gs in the direction of Terra.

Though no one stayed to look at it, the sight of the remnants of Oberon forming into a thin ring around the grumbling Uranus must have been quite impressive.

Ten hours from Luna Base, Flotilla Blue Three's officers had assembled for a victory dinner in the wardroom. The last course was cleared away, and Chavez passed a quantity of his precious cheroots around.

He settled himself down beside Scott and dragged happily at his smoke.

It was Blake who burst out with the question that was on everyone's mind.

Commodore Hartnett smiled. "It was Horowitz who really doped the thing out, gentlemen. I just put the plan into operation. You see, plutonium can be used as a sort of booster charge in a chain reaction explosion ... you all know that. You, yourself, Blake, and you men from the station moved the stuff into a spot that would be directly under the poor old *Artemis* when the shooting started.

"You youngsters don't remember much about land warfare, so it was up to me to rig the trap. The bait was *Artemis*. The teaser was the spread-beam radio message about the three dreadnaughts that we aren't.... Remember that, Mr. Scott?"

Scott blushed furiously and nodded.

"Well," continued Hartnett, "It was something of a gamble, I suppose. But the odds were long and the chances weren't too bad.

"You all know how anxious the Cats are to try something new. Those cyclotronic rifles must have been literally burning a hole in their pockets ... and the range was short ... they couldn't resist the temptation to try them. If they had stuck to proton guns they would have melted *Artemis* down and that would have been the end of it ... they would have had the X-R to do with as they pleased. But they got itchy fingers with the new stuff ... as I prayed they would. Curiosity, I suppose. The feline instinct. Have you ever seen a cat trying to open a package? Same kind of people.

"The rest was just a repetition of the atom blasts of the first Martian War and the earlier wars on Terra. The only difference was the size of the bomb. The cyclotrons set off the chain reaction in the plutonium ... the plutonium set off the reaction in the U-235 ... common enough on a world made practically all of pitchblende and other Uranium compounds. The same thing could happen to ... say Terra ... if we ever started a chain reaction in one of the commoner elements such as iron, or carbon. Or even one of the commoner gases. Anyway there are

only three satellites in the Uranian System now ... and eight less Cat cruisers and one less superdreadnaught. I suspect the Cats can hardly afford to lose them, too. Wouldn't surprise me to hear that Mars has been feeling around for an armistice even by the time we get home. The very fact that they have no idea how their fleet was destroyed will tickle them in the right place, I suppose."

Scott spoke in surprised tones. "So they blew themselves up with their own fancy cannon."

Hartnett nodded reflectively. "Um ... that's about it. Of course we had to set up the proper conditions." He grinned at the younger man. "Or, you might say, the 'Booby Trap'...."

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