

STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS—

# PLANET stories

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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 THE FLIGHT OF  
THE EAGLE \*\*\*

# **The Flight of the Eagle**



## By SOL GALAXAN

*It was a new and mysterious plant. It could make its own weather; it was sentient, and it prospered on Venus. But Earth needed it desperately. And Bat Kendo, the radar-mutant, was told to bring it in.*

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Humans are a strange breed. Forgetful. They grow accustomed to the wonders they live among so easily that they never really figure up the cost. A little time passes and the bright memories tarnish and are covered over with newer ones. And the men who picked up the check and maybe paid with their lives? Forgotten.

For example, when you're sitting comfortably in the New York to San Francisco stratojet, and you take the trouble to look down at the lush verdure of the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada, do you ever remember that a few short years back that lovely fertile parkland was a rocky, barren waste? Or when you taste the delicious tropical fruits that are brought to your table from the Mojave Basin, do you think of Bat Kendo, the man who made all that possible? Like fun you do! I'll give you ten to one you never heard of Bat Kendo. Maybe you don't even know that the reason those once sterile wastelands are now the larders of the North American continent is ... weather-plant. And I'll give eight to five you don't even know where that weather-plant came from, or how it got here, or what it cost. Not in money ... in lives.

Well, I know, and for once I'd like to have someone stand still long enough so I could tell the story. The minute anyone sees an old spaceman like me coming, they jet the hell out of there fast. "Old Captain Morley's got another shaggy dog to comb out!" they say, and beat it. My stories, it seems, are too old fashioned for this modern age. Just because I, and a lot of others like me—only maybe not so lucky—spent our lives opening up the spaceways instead of sitting home on

our venturiis, we're "odd characters" and "old space-hacks," and our stories are tall tales—yarns to be avoided, or laughed at if it's not possible to avoid them.

Okay, I expect that. But I still want to tell how that weather-plant came to be where it is now, and what Bat Kendo had to do with it. He was my shipmate on the R. S. *Eagle*, and I think he's got a little credit coming to him.

The history books will tell you that during the last few years of the 20th Century the population of North America increased by something like 600 per cent. They might even tell you that this put such a load on the continental resources—food, mainly—that famine became a possibility for the first time in the history of the continent. Things were pretty tight. People were actually starving amid the technological wonders of the time. Hydroponics were tried, but they fizzled badly.

The only answer seemed to be complete utilization of all available land area for food production. And that meant that a lot of land that couldn't grow weeds had to produce edible crops. That's the way things stood back in '02, just after the William Robert Holcomb Foundation's R. S. *Explorer* returned from Venus with what the botanists thought might be an answer.

Of course, the Earth-Luna System was well traveled even then, but it took the big money of the Holcomb Foundation plus a whopping World Federal Government grant to make a deep space mission feasible.

It was a Holcomb Foundation metallurgist's synthesis of impervium that made deep space navigable. Before this time all ships were chemical-fuelled because the weight of lead needed to shield atomics would nail any spacer built to terra firma ... but good. Chemical ships could make Luna, but no farther. Lucky to get that far with the pumps feeding the jets a stream of monoatomic hydrogen as thick as your arm. A ship could carry about enough juice to get up the necessary seven-a-second with maybe enough for landing ... maybe. Even then plenty of ships that carried a pound or two of mass too much arced back to Earth and splashed themselves all over the ground. Others got up escape-velocity only to run dry trying to land on Luna. Their metal bones are still up there; if you care to look for them.

Impervium changed all that. Here was a metal that was easily worked, as light as a good quality aluminum-magnesium alloy, and strong as steel. And it was impervious to everything except neutrino bombardment. That was the ticket to

deep space. Atomics were in and chemicals out. I might add that none of us were sorry to see them go, either.

Luna remained the jumping-off place. And Foy City was the staging area for trips to ... UP. Before the successful flight of the *Explorer*, Foy had been just a combination mining and scientific camp. After the *Explorer* returned from Venus, spacemen began to pour up from Earth, and Foy City became one of the rowdiest places under Sol. Jetmen and pilots, tubemen and ABs, all the restless flotsam of humanity flowed up to Luna in a steady stream to mingle with the miners from the Diggings and the longhairs from the Cosmiray Labs and the big dome of Starview.

Mars was reached and colonization began. And men set up a settlement on Venus. The Holcomb Foundation was convinced that they had the answer to the critical food shortage on Earth. Weather-plant. The one useful thing that stinking Venus produces.

Weather-plant is a moss-like plant that will grow almost anywhere. The Foundation botanists found that it gathered nitrogen and water in some inexplicable way, and they became interested in its possibilities. Something had to be done about soil reclamation back on Earth, or starvation would strangle the race. Weather-plant looked like the answer. What the smart boys couldn't have guessed was that in addition to its other strange properties, weather-plant was intelligent—sentient, at least. And they didn't know that it liked its wet, foggy environment very, very much.

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I hit Foy City with a mammoth thirst and very little spending money. A bad combination. I had a Pilot's rating and a brand-new Second Officer's ticket, and I needed a job.

I'd been handling a regular chemical flight out of Foy to Montevideo for a one horse concern that was still trying to make the low grade uranium ore found on the Moon pay off. When I came down onto the great pumice plain of Mare Imbrium that served Foy as a spaceport, the patched-up blow-torch I was jockeying blew a venturi and buried herself under twenty feet of pumice. If it had happened on Earth, we'd have been cooked, but Luna's one-sixth gravity saved our hides. Those were the days before tractor-pressor beam landings, you see. Back then you landed a can by balancing her on her tail-flare like a ball on a water snout. And that was a rough go anyway you want to look at it.

Anyway, after the pileup I quit. There was some difference of opinion on that particular point between the company and me. They claimed I was fired.

Quit or fired, however, I didn't get paid, and that led me to seek solace in the local pubs. That, in turn, led me to the city drunk-tank for the night, and that's where I ran into Bat Kendo....

Bat was Chief Tubeman on the R. S. *Eagle*. He was also a mutation. Not that he wasn't human or anything like that. And he certainly wasn't the much kicked around "homo superior." He merely had an extra sense. We all have it dormant. Bat had it well developed. That's why he was called Bat. People thought he could see in the dark. It wasn't that. Try closing your eyes and moving your head slowly toward an obstruction. If you are very careful and very alert, you'll be able to sense the obstruction before you touch it. Well, Bat could "see" things that way ... perfectly. He even used to pick up beer money by getting into the ring blindfolded and letting pugs throw punches at him. They hit him, but not often. And when they did connect it wasn't because he didn't sense the blows coming; it was because he was slow on his feet and generally three quarters drunk.

Bat's father, Nakano Kendo, had grown up in Nagasaki. He'd been exposed to radiation by the second atom blast there. Bat had befuddled the geneticists by showing up a mutation one generation before he was supposed to. He used to laugh about that.

His mother had been Russian. Certainly you couldn't tell his nationality by looking at him. His face held a suggestion of the Asiatic, but trying to place him anthropologically would have been as difficult as finding a pure Anglo-Saxon, whatever that is.

Bat was just the product of an insane age. A child of a man whose germ plasm had been dosed with radiation. But for all of that Bat Kendo was normal. Two arms, two legs, two eyes. Only his built-in radar marked him as different. That, and his terrific taste for booze. I never saw him sober. Yet to see him, you'd never guess he was perpetually saturated. There may have been bigger drunks in space, but I never knew one.

As a tubeman, he never had an equal. As an all around right guy, he never will have.



It was Bat that talked me into signing on the *Eagle*. They needed a Pilot, and where a better place to find one than in the Foy City drunk tank? I knew the *Eagle*, of course. Everyone in the Luna-Earth System did. She was a five hundred tonner, newly converted to atomics and fitting in the Foundation yards for a flight to Venusberg.

She was going to pick up a full cargo of weather-plant from the settlement. A hundred tons of it. And brother, that's a lot of weather-plant.

This was to be the first quantity shipment of the stuff. The "pilot-shipment." The botanists suspected a lot and had great hopes. But it was up to the *Eagle* to get the stuff to Earth. She was the only ship available for the trip with enough storage space for the plant, and when I listened to Bat talk about it, the flight began to take on the aspect of a mercy mission.

I knew people were going hungry back Earthside, and old Bat was really steamed up about it. I dare say if it hadn't been for his pep talk I'd never have signed on. Deep space was still new, and I liked living. But Bat talked me into it, and as soon as the turnkey shook us out of the sack and shooed us out, Bat and I headed for the Foundation yards and the *Eagle*.

My first view of the ship didn't do much to make me happy about the trip. She looked old and scabrous standing tall on her tail fins out on the flat, glaring plain of Mare Imbrium. Her hull was meteor-scarred and eroded by atmospheric friction, and there seemed to be an abundance of patch-welds on her.

Her tubes, however, were spanking brand new, and after I had inspected her control-tube-pile system—as all prospective pilots have a right to do—in company with Bat and Captain Reynard, I signed.

Reynard was a decent enough skipper. He wasn't much of a disciplinarian, but the boat only carried a crew of twenty, so that was no problem. As an astrogator, he had quite a reputation, and he'd been out to Venus before on one of the ships that lugged the settlers and scientific personnel out there.

There wasn't much fanfare when the time came for our departure. Ships were lifting every day for Mars just then, and the departure of one for Venus didn't seem important. Before we left though, a Holcomb Foundation man came aboard and spoke to us about the importance of our trip. He said that if we didn't bring

back the weather-plant in good shape, things might turn nasty on Earth. It would be another year and a half before Venus and Earth came into conjunction again, and by that time it might be too late for the thousands who were going hungry back home. It gave us a sense of responsibility, all right. And it particularly had an effect on Bat.

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We lifted from Mare Imbrium on 11/9/02 Earth Date. I recall that I gave her 2G, easing her up to 6G and holding that acceleration for sixty hours. By that time our speed in MPH wouldn't have made sense. I revelled in the power under my hands, and the feeling that I could actually waste an erg or two without having to worry myself bald about landing. The *Eagle* carried fifty pounds of ingot thorium as fuel, and with our new atomics, that would have taken us to Centaurus, if we'd had the time. It was wonderful to be able to keep the boat under a steady 1G all the way to turn-over instead of having to endure the endless nausea of free-fall. Even seasoned spacemen never got used to free-fall, and atomics eliminated it, thank God!

The sunward flight was something to remember for sheer beauty. Earth and Luna faded astern until they were just a bright point of light. The sun blazed like a ball of white fire ahead of us, and Venus grew brighter and brighter against the breath-taking backdrop of the Milky Way. It was a gorgeous sight—but frightening, too. I had the feeling that I was terribly exposed, as though I were standing balanced atop the spire of the Holcomb Tower, five hundred stories above the teeming streets of New York. Agoraphobia, I think the psychs call it. The others felt it too. In fact one of the jetmen went slightly off his rocker and had to be jugged. But most of the men came through the first fear of deep space well enough, and as an astrogator Captain Reynard was strictly one hundred per cent.

I didn't see much of Bat on the trip, since he was down in the heavily sheathed tuberoom with his "black-gang." But I could tell whenever he was on watch, because if I turned the interphone on without warning, I could almost invariably hear his beery baritone singing the praises of:

"That Lulu! Belle of ol' Foy City  
Who wears two hammocks...."

Bat was something of a poet, in his lighter moments—though most of his stuff was lamentably unprintable.

I did get in on one little session with him and about a dozen of the crew. That was down in the forecastle where he was entertaining the off-watches by letting them blindfold him and then try to hide a bottle of the tetrant alky we called our "rations." Naturally, he always found it, and naturally he always drank it. It took them most of the sunward trip to wise up to the fact that he was a mutation with his own detecting system already built-in—courtesy of the Manhattan Project and Nakano Kendo's irradiated gametes. The crew lost most of its alky rations that way, and old Bat soaked the stuff up like a sponge.

We passed turn-over point and then the long fall down to Venus began—three weeks of it.

Contact was established with the settlement while we were still above the stratosphere, and our Ultra-wave-radar went into action, the endless scanning that is absolutely essential to the landing of spacecraft through cloud layers.

I don't mind admitting that there was a cold sweat on my brow when I started down through the soup. The reports from UVR indicated plenty of clearance from the mountains, but I was still leery. Some of those peaks are reported to be as high as 200,000 feet. The *Eagle's* gyros were screaming and the muffled thunder of the jets filtered through every plate of her. I'd let her slide a bit and then snatch her up with a blast of the jets. Each time I touched the firing consoles, I could hear the moan of the blasted atomic particles rushing through the venturiis, and I could see the glitter of the cloud moisture that hugged the ports as it absorbed lethal radiations from the tail-flare.

Then the clouds began to thin and I could make out the pattern of the spaceport beneath us through the billowing formaldehyde mists that serve Venus for an atmosphere.

I was a wreck by the time the *Eagle's* fins touched the ground and the dancing fire of the tubes flickered and died. I felt her sag as she sank slightly into the mushy soil, and then I was cutting the power switches and listening to the slowly descending whine of the gyros as they coasted silkily to a halt.

I looked out of the ports at the miasmic swamp that surrounded us, at the fifty foot ferns in ghastly colors, at the alien, repellent trees that grew pulpy and squat all around the settlement. This was Venus....

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Venusberg wasn't the great domed city then that it is now. Back in '02 it was just a group of pressurized Quonset huts. There were about sixty men there, mostly maintenance workers and horticulturalists, and five women. Four women were scientists, the fifth Bat Kendo spent his planet-leave with.

The settlers were very cordial with us. I guess we must have been like a breath of the home world to these poor characters who lived there.

I accompanied Captain Reynard on a tour of the cultivated areas and the settlement itself. We were shown how the weather-plant was cultivated and how it gathered nitrogen and water out of the fetid air to deposit it in the soil. We saw how there were always banks of mist over the rows of plants. It gave me quite a shock when I reached down to touch some and the stuff actually shied away from my pressure-suit glove.

"We suspect that the stuff might actually be sentient," the settlement botanist told us.

"You mean the stuff *thinks*?" Captain Reynard demanded.

The botanist laughed. "Oh, no. It's just that when there is a considerable amount of the stuff about it reacts peculiarly. As soon as this ship load of yours gets to Earth, the Foundation staff can really get to work with it and see just what all it can do. We've great hopes for it. It may be the answer to starvation back home."

I looked out over the neat rows of tiny plants that vanished in the misty distance, and I looked too, at the pressing jungle. I began to get a queasy feeling in my stomach. This was alien life. Life that had never been meant for Earth's clean soil. There was no telling what the stuff might do away from here.

"We suspect," the botanist was saying, "that the high formaldehyde content of Venus' atmosphere has an inhibiting effect on the action of the plant. We have isolated small amounts in formaldehyde-free air, and gotten some interesting results. Freed of its native ecology, we believe the stuff can actually create its own weather."

His voice faded away as far as I was concerned. Somewhere in my head a bell was trying to ring. There was something here that was escaping this botanist and Captain Reynard. I couldn't put my finger on it. I had the crazy feeling that

something, like the Purloined Letter, was hidden here. Something obvious, something that could be, under the proper circumstances, dangerous.

But I didn't figure it out. Not just then. Not until it was too late. All the clues were there; the plant and the way it could gather water vapor and nitrogen, the threat of taking it from its native ecology. Everything. But I didn't tumble. Not until it was too late and the obvious had taken a toll. In lives....

On 23/35/02 Venus Date the *Eagle* was fully loaded and ready for the long haul back up to Earth. The colonists gathered to bid us farewell, and the party was a corker. Bat did his human radar act somewhere along about the time the fifteenth libation was poured. He was at his extra-normal best, telling astounded colonists just what they were doing with their pinkies at ranges up to three hundred yards in pitch darkness. I could have told them that he was almost as good as UVR, but that might have spoiled the effect.

Three hours later we had bid an enthusiastic good-bye to that mushy ball of swamp and stench those poor colonials called home, and the valves sighed shut in the *Eagle's* flanks. The loading cranes pulled away and our own were retracted. The ramp was cleared and the lift-ship alarm blared through the *Eagle*.

The gyros reached operating RPM and I let my hands play over the consoles. The boat shuddered and lifted slowly on a tail of fire. I fed her more power and the accelerometer moved up to 2G. I held her there until we broke out of the clouds and into the crystalline cobalt of the ionosphere. I swung the power lever over and the *Eagle* leaped upward, her needle-nose pointed for home.

We were well past turn-over, in fact just about nineteen hours from Earth when things began happening.

Bat called Control, his voice tense with excitement. "Morley! There's something coming ... fast! I can feel it!"

I started to ask him what was coming in fast, and whether or not he could "see" it clearly through the metal of the ship, but I never finished. UVR flashed a red alert warning on my control panel ... and it was the last warning it ever gave.

The panel screeched: "METEOR SWARM!" and went dead. The lights flickered and went out as the *Eagle* bucked and roared in protest. The sound of tearing metal knifed through the hull, and then the whooshing sound of escaping air.

Alarm bells clattered futilely—bulkheads slammed. The ship's self-sealing mesoderm saved most of the air, but not before the pressure in the boat dropped from 14.7 down to 6 lbs. per square inch in about two seconds and doubled me up in an agony of aero-embolism. For a long while there was silence, and I fought the glittering knives of pain that seemed to be cutting me into hamburger. Then the lights came back on, dimly. There was still life in the old *Eagle*.

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I staggered to my feet and rang the tuberoom. A pilot's first instinct is to check the power. No matter what has happened to his ship, if there's power there's hope.

"Morley...!" It was Bat calling back through the interphone. "We've had it down here! The sheathing is gone and I've got three men killed!" I could hear the sound of metal sizzling in the background as Bat looked about for more dope to pass on. As it was it looked bad enough. If the sheathing was shot, that meant that he was taking lethal doses of radiation even as he spoke to me.

"Bat!" I shouted, "Bat, you crazy fool! If that place is hot, get out of there!"

I got no reply.

"Bat! That's an order! Put the pile on automatic and get the hell out!"

"No soap, Morley...." Bat's voice seemed edged with pain. "You know the autos won't last for more than thirty minutes. Strictly ... emergency stuff...." And then his voice grew even tighter. "The storage, Morley! Those stinking ... rocks ... took ... out ... the storage! All the thorium went out ... the side ... they hit ... the storage bunker!"

That tore it. Without thorium ... without even an extra gram ... the best we could hope for was making it to Earth. Luna and its lovely one-sixth gravity for a crash landing was out.

I tried to get Captain Reynard on the phone, but there was no answer from his quarters. I didn't need a diagram to figure out that he was either dead or so tied up with bends that he couldn't reach the phone.

I started the compressors and the pressure began to build up, but the mesoderm



I started the compressors and the pressure began to build up, but the mesoderm patches wouldn't stand more than 9 lbs. Well, it had to do.

The griping pains eased a bit inside me and I tried to take stock of the situation. Station by station, I called the crew and assessed the damage. It was plenty.

The whole communications deck was gone and the only radio on board that worked was the tiny panel set in control. The UVR was mangled and so was its crew of four men. Three tubemen had died in the tuberoom and I didn't know how badly Bat might be hurt. No one could enter because the place was hot. The thorium was gone and the sheathing on the pile too. I looked in on the Captain and scratched him off the list. Death from bends is not a pleasant thing to see. The *Eagle* was my command now. As pilot and Second Officer, I took over, for better or worse.

I returned to Control and gave the crew a quick rundown on the situation. Work parties were made up and the wreckage cleared away. The dead—the ones we could find—were wrapped in celoflex and consigned to space. I mumbled a prayer over them as they slipped out into the void. They weren't all Christians, but somehow I had a feeling that they wouldn't mind too much. There's something about the immensity of the cosmos that makes men relinquish their petty prejudices. And when I got back into Control and watched the tell-tales on the Geiger-Muller Counters down in the tuberoom, I said another prayer—for Bat Kendo.

I kept wondering why we had hit that meteor swarm. The normal chances of such an encounter are in the vicinity of a thousand to one. Bits of memory kept tugging at me, but I couldn't get things properly trimmed up until a call from Bat in the tuberoom furnished the key.

"Morley, there's a piece of those damned rocks down here ... and it's melting!"

Ice! Water! Weather-plant! The pieces of the puzzle began to fit now. The swarm was ice ... superhard ice ... tempered by the awful cold of the void. And the weather-plant in the hold—one hundred tons of it—had attracted it hungrily! The plant had more than just an affinity for water! It acted like a magnet! There had probably been nitrogen dissolved in the water, too, and that had added to the plant's attraction!

A sick feeling moved into the pit of my stomach and stayed right there. There was no way of jettisoning the cargo, and there wasn't enough fuel for a try at

was no way of jettisoning the cargo, and there wasn't enough fuel for a try at airless Luna! That meant....

I could hear the Venusian botanist's words echo mockingly in my ears. "... we suspect it can create its own weather!"

I knew real fear then. I looked at the great greenish globe of Earth that grew hourly larger beneath us, and shuddered....

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Seventeen hours later we were into the ionosphere. My instruments warned that I had just enough thorium left in the pile to keep the *Eagle* up for another hour and ten minutes. The radar was gone, but the weather-plant was fat and healthy.

I tried to pick up a good spot for the landing. The Mojave Desert. Chances for clear weather were better there than anywhere else, though I could guess even then what our chances were.

The *Eagle* shuddered to a vibrating halt, balancing on her tail-flare at about twenty five miles. The gyros were climbing the sonic scale, sending their shrieking whine through every deck of the crippled ship. I looked outside, and cold sweat beaded my face. Even at this height, a fine mist was forming around the *Eagle*.

Freed of Venus' formaldehyde atmosphere, our tons of weather-plant were happily doing their job. Drawing water vapor out of Earth's air. It liked fog. *And it could make its own weather!*

I looked at the chronometer. I had just one hour now to get this ship down through this soup that clung to us—without UVR. I had one hour to do the job or gravity would do it for me.

I let her slip down to fifteen miles and held there, gyros protesting. The mist thickened. I rang the crash alarm, sending all hands who were not actually engaged in the running of the ship to their quarters and the crash-hammocks. My hands were icy cold.

The *Eagle* sank slowly down to five miles and hung there like a ball bouncing on a jet of water. The mist billowed about us, turning radioactive from the vicious lashing of the tail-flare.

I knew that the weather was perfectly clear perhaps two hundred yards away from the ship, but the weather-plant was creating the soggy weather it liked and I was being effectively blindfolded by the—

Blindfolded!

I grabbed for the interphone. "Bat!" I yelled, "Bat! Can you see anything below?"

Old Bat knew right away what I wanted, but his answer wasn't what I wanted to hear. "Too much metal under me, Morley ... too much metal." His voice was unsteady and seamed with pain.

I glanced at the chronometer. Thirty seven minutes left. And the fog clung to the ports.

"Morley," Bat sounded something like himself for just a minute. "I've got a notion. Maybe ... maybe it will work. Break out a pressure-suit and get the craneman on the ball. And Morley...." Here I could imagine that he was smiling. "... break out a bottle of the skipper's bonded stuff, will you?"

"What are you dreaming up?" I demanded anxiously.

"We have to get this cargo down," Bat said thinly. "You remember what the Foundation man said before we left ... people need food, Morley...."

"What are you thinking about?" I asked again, and then as realization came, I added angrily: "Never mind that! I know what you're planning Bat, and you can forget it! I'll get this can down all right!"

The voice from the interphone was dry as dust. "Like hell you will. Who are you kidding?"

I had no answer there. Without UVR to guide me, I was blind. I didn't have a chance to get the *Eagle* down, and we both knew it.

"I'm coming up," Bat said, "The automatics can take care of things down here now."

I glanced at the chronometer. Twenty-two minutes to go. Bat was right. The autos could carry on in the tuberoom now. I felt them cut into the circuit.

My heart was heavy as I called a craneman into control to handle the equipment. Together we unlimbered a pressure-suit from the locker. Then I found the skipper's rations and uncorked a bottle. In a moment Bat was in Control. When I saw him my stomach muscles tightened. He looked as though he'd been broiled. His face was a swollen mass of angry flesh and his clothes were seared into his hide. Every movement must have been sheer hell for him, but he staggered into the suit and made himself fast to the Control crane.

Before calling for the steelglas helmet, he reached thirstily for the skipper's bottle and took a long pull.

"Ahhh," he breathed, "That's fine stuff ... real fine." He offered me the bottle, grinning painfully. "Have one on me, Morley...."

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I let the fiery liquor drive down the lump that was sticking in my throat and handed Bat the bottle. He finished it in two swallows, looked at it regretfully, and tossed it aside. It landed in the corner of Control where it lay, rocking senselessly back and forth with the jolting movements of the boat.

Bat fastened his helmet on and started for the valve. I wanted to reach out and stop him, but I couldn't. I wanted to say something to him ... but what? How do you thank a man for buying your life with his own? What do you say to pay a man for his pain and his torture?

That's right. You don't say anything. And neither did I. You just stand there and watch, with your heart a lump of lead inside you. I did that, and no more.

He turned toward me just as the inner valve closed on him and the cable he dragged behind him. "See ya," he said with a clumsy wave. And then he was outside in that radioactive mist of death, riding the crane out and down. Hanging by a thin cable in that stinking fog and using his useless mutational powers to save the hides of his ship and shipmates ... *and* the load of weather-plant that meant food to the stay-at-homes.

The mass-ratio altimeter gave its last reading—four miles—and then it was through, its sensitive coils thrown out of phase by the mass of the planetary globe under us. Here, now, was where UVR should have taken over.

But there was no UVR. Only a man hanging at the end of a cable in a glowing mist that was burning his last chance of life out of him.

I heard his instructions clearly over the small panel set. "About three miles up now."

I let the *Eagle* down slowly. Two miles. One. Hold. Three thousand feet. Two. One. Hold. Five hundred feet. Hold. Mojave Desert right under us. Baldy off to the right. Lancaster about twenty miles north. Down easy....

The tail-flare was splashing against the desert beneath now, turning the clinging mist into a ruddy shroud. A glance at the chronometer showed about three minutes fuel.

"Let ... her ... down ... slow." Bat's voice was fading fast as the terrific heat seared him and the radiation burned deep.

The fuel should be gone now. No time left. Two hundred feet, one hundred, fifty, thirty....

I heard Bat's voice sob just once through the radio. "Oh ... dear God...!" And that was all.

No time. No fuel.

Silence!

The thunder of the jets stopped abruptly, leaving a frightening void. The *Eagle* slewed about sickeningly and dropped the remaining thirty feet like so much lead. There was a rending crash as her tail section crumpled, battered plates sinking into the sand, and then she settled wearily to a halt amid the bubbling magma of atomized earth....

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So the pilot-shipment of weather-plant got here all right, and it exceeded the Holcomb Foundation's fondest hopes. It brought fertility where there had been only barrenness. Long rows of it still bring richness and life to the soil and the danger of famine is gone forever.

Just remember now, the next time you take the Pacific stratojet. Look under you at that garden of plenty. See the rows upon rows of richly bearing plants. Look

at that garden of plenty. See the rows upon rows of heavy bearing plants. Look too at the interstices where a tiny Venusian moss called "weather-plant" makes it all possible.

Bat Kendo? He died. He died doing what he wanted to do, and that's something. The others maybe weren't so lucky. Of course you never heard of Bat, or of the *Eagle* for that matter. All this happened a long, long time ago, and the old memories tarnish. Now people take their lives pretty much as they find it, and they never wonder about the guys who made it what it is.

Yes, humans are a strange breed. Like I say ... forgetful. Very forgetful.

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE FLIGHT OF THE EAGLE \*\*\*

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