



The Beast of Space
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Here the dark cave, along which Nat Starrett had been creeping, broadened into what his powerful searchlight revealed to be a low, wide, smoothly circular room. At his feet lapped black, thick-looking waves of an underground lake, a pool of viscous substance that gave off a penetrating, poignant odor of acid, sweetish and intoxicating, unlike any acid he knew. The smell rolled up in a sickening, sultry cloud that penetrated his helmet, made him cough and choke. Near its center projected from the sticky stuff what appeared to be the nose of a spaceship.

He looked down near his feet at the edge of the pool where thick, slowly-moving tongues of the liquid appeared to reach up toward him, as if intent on pulling him into its depths. As each hungry wave fell back, it left a slimy, snake-like trail behind.

Now came a wave of strange music, music such as he had never heard before. Faintly it had begun some time back, so faintly he was barely aware of it. Now it swelled into a smooth, impelling wail lulling him into drowsiness. He did not wonder why he could hear through the sound-proof space helmet he wore; he ceased to wonder about anything. There was only the strange sweetness of acid and the throbbing music.

Abruptly the spell was broken by something shrilling in his brain, sending little chills racing up and down his spine. Digger! A small, oddly canine-like creature with telepathic powers, a space-dweller which men found when first they came to the asteroids. The relationship between spacehounds and men was much the same as between man and dog in the old, earthbound days. Appropriate name for the beast, Digger. With those large, incredibly hard claws, designed for rooting in the metal make-up of the asteroids for vital elements, the spacehound could easily have shredded the man's spacesuit and helmet, could, at any time, tear huge chunks out of men's fine ships.

The half-conscious man jerked his thin form erect. His mouth, which had gaped loosely, closed with a snap into firm lines.

"She isn't in this hell hole, Digger. You wouldn't expect her to be where we could find her easily."

Scooping the small beast up under his good arm, he quickly climbed the steep, slimy slope of the cave. The other arm in his suit hung empty. That empty arm in the spacesuit told the story of an earthman become voluntary exile, choosing the desolation of space to the companionship of other humans who would deluge him with unwonted sympathy. The spacehound was friendly in its own fashion; fortunately, such complex things as sympathy were apparently outside its abilities. The two could interchange impressions of danger, comfort, pleasure, discomfort, fear,

and appreciation of each other's company, but little more. Whether or not the creature could understand his thoughts, he could not tell.

As he went on, he reviewed, mentally, the events leading up to his landing here. The sudden appearance on his televue screen of the face and slim shoulders of a girl. Her attractiveness plainly distinguishable through her helmet; for a moment he forgot that he disliked women. The call for help, cut short ... but not before he had learned that apparently she was being held prisoner on Asteroid Moira. He knew he'd have to do what he could even if it meant unwonted company for an indefinite length of time. The spell was gone soon after her face vanished; he remembered former experiences with attractive-looking girls. Damn traditions!

A change in his course and a landing on Asteroid Moira. Here he'd found a honeycomb of caves, all leading from one large main tunnel. The cavern walls had been of a translucent, quartz-like substance, ranging in color from yellowish-brown to violet-grey. It looked vaguely familiar, yet he could not place it. There was not time to examine it more carefully.

The room in which he'd found the evil, hungry lake had been the first one to the right. Now he crossed to the opening in the opposite wall. The mouth of this cave was much larger, wider than the other. He stood in the opening, slowly swung the beam of his torch around the smooth walls, still holding Digger, who, by now, was indicating that he'd like to be set down. Nat released him unthinkingly, his mind fully taken up with what the light revealed.

Spaceships! The room was packed with them—all sizes, old and new. A veritable sargasso. At first, he thought they might be craft belonging to nameless inhabitants of this world, but, as he approached them, he recognized Terrestrial identifications.

The first was a scout ship of American Spaceways! Nat recognized the name: *Ceres*, remembered a telecast account of its disappearance in space. There was a neat little reward for information as to its whereabouts. Nat's lips curled in derision: it wouldn't equal the expense of his journey out here. There was a deep groove in the smooth material of the floor where the ship had been dragged through the doorway into the room. What machines could have done this work without leaving their own traces? He went to the other ships: all were small, mostly single or two-passenger craft. The last entry in the logs of many was to the effect

that they were about to land on the Asteroid Moira to rescue a girl held captive there.

None had crashed; all ships were in perfect order. But all were deserted. Two doors were gone from the interior of one of the vessels. They might have been removed for any of a hundred reasons—but why here?

Nat's glance swept the room, came to rest on the figure of a heavy duty robot of familiar design. Semi-human in form, it looked like some misshapen, bent, headless giant. He inspected it: *Meyers Robot, Inc.* Earth designed for mining operations on Mars.

"Well, Digger, I can see now how these ships were brought in here; that robot could move any one of these with ease. But that doesn't explain where the humans have gone. It might be space pirates using this asteroid for a base, or it might be some alien form of life. We're still free. Shall we beat it or stay and try to check this out?"

He did not know how much of this got over to the spacehound, but the impressions he received in answer were those of approving their remaining where they were.

"I suppose the best system is to explore the rest of the caves in order; let's go."

Followed by Digger, he walked quietly toward the next cave on the left, slipped through the doorway, and, standing with his back against the wall, swung the light of his torch in a wide, swift arc about the room. Halfway around, he stopped abruptly; a slim, petite figure appeared clearly in the searchlight's glare. The girl he had seen on the televisor stood in the middle of the room, facing a telecaster, her back toward him. She did not seem aware of him as he moved forward. What could be wrong; surely that light would arouse her.

The figure did not turn as he approached. So near was he now that he could seize her easily, still she made no move. Nat stepped to one side, flashed his torch in her face. Her beautifully-lashed eyes stared straight ahead unblinkingly; the expression on her lovely composed face did not change. A robot! He laughed bitterly. But then, he was not the only one... .

She was an earth product; Nat opened her helmet and found the trademark of *Spurgin's Robots* hung like a necklace about her throat. But whoever had lured him here easily could have removed her from one of the vessels in the front cave. It did not seem like the work of pirates, more likely unknown intelligent beings.

He turned to examine the televisor. It, too, was an earth product. The mechanism was of old design; evidently it had been taken from the first

of the ships to land here. Outside of the telecaster and the solitary robot, there was nothing to be seen in this cave.

A sound behind him. He whirled, heat-rod poised for swift, stabbing action. Nothing—except—small bowling-ball things rolling in through a narrow door. Ridiculous things of the same yellowish-quartz material as composed the cave-walls. At regular intervals a dull, bluish light poured forth from rounded holes in their smooth sides. And issuing forth from within these comic globes was the same weird, compelling music he had heard before. They rolled up to him, brushed against his toes; a shrilling in his brain told him that Digger was aware of them.

"Back, Digger!" he thought as he drew away from the globes. They poured their penetrating blue light over him, inspectingly, while the music from within rose and fell in regular cadences, sweetly impelling and dulling to the senses as strong oriental incense.

But Digger was not soothed. The spacehound lunged at one of the globes; instead of slashing its sides, he found himself sailing through the air toward it. Nat received impressions of irritation combined with astonishment. Within the globes, the music rose to a furious whine while one of the things shot forth long tentacles from the holes in its side. Lightning-swift they shot forth, wrapped themselves about the body of the spacehound, constricting. Digger writhed vainly, his claws powerless to tear at the whip-like tentacles. Nat severed the tentacles at their base with the heat-beam.

He turned, strode toward the door watching the spheres apprehensively out of the corner of his eye, ready to jump aside should they roll toward him suddenly. But they followed at respectful distances, singing softly.

Before he reached the door, he found himself walking in rhythm to the music, his head swaying. It came slowly, insidiously; before he was aware, his body no longer obeyed his will. Muscles refused to move other than in coordination with the music. His arm relaxed, the heat-rod sliding from his grasp.

But Digger! The spacehound sent out a barrage of vibrations that fairly rocked his brain out of his skull. Simultaneously, the beast attacked the nearest globes, tearing fiercely at them. Rapidly the others rolled away, but two lay torn and motionless, the music within them stilled.

Nat reached down, retrieved the heat-rod. "I think we'd better look for a 'squeaker'. Next time they might get you, Digger."

They returned to the room of the spaceships, seeking one of the small, portable radio-amplifiers used for searching out radium. It was known as a "squeaker" because of the constant din it made while in use; the noise would cease only when radium was within a hundred feet of the mechanism. He found one after searching a few of the smaller ships.

With the portable radio strapped to his back, power switched on, he started again down the main tunnel. The globes set up their seductive rhythms as before, but he could not hear them above the discord of his squeaker. Failing to lure him as before, they sought to force him in the direction they desired him to go by darting at him suddenly, lashing him with their tentacles. But it was a simple thing to elude them. Still remained the question: why could they want to lure him into that stinking pool of acid?

He flashed a beam of heat at the nearest of the annoying globes. Under the released energy it glowed, yet did not melt. But the tentacles sheared off and the blue lights faded. The flow of music changed to shrill whines as of pain and its rolling ceased. The others drew back; he turned down another tunnel.

They stopped at the cave beyond the one where he had found the robot-girl. It was sealed by a locked door, one of the airlock-doors from that space vessel, firmly cemented into the natural opening of the cave.

Nat bent forward, listening, his helmeted head pressed against the door. No sound. He was suddenly aware of the dead silence that pressed in on him from all sides now that the globes no longer sang and his "squeaker" had been turned off. The powerful energy of his heat-beam sputtered as it melted the lock into incandescent droplets which sizzled as they trickled down the cold metal of the door. The greasy, quartz-like material at the side of the door glowed in the heat from his rod, but no visible effect upon it could be seen. What was that material? He knew, yes, he knew—but he could not place a mental finger on it.

He thrust the shoulder of his good arm against the heavy door, swung it inwards, stepped inside. The light of his torch pierced the silence, picked out a human skeleton in one corner. He hurried toward it—no, it was not entirely a skeleton as yet. The flesh and bone had been eaten away from the lower part of the body to halfway up the hips, as though from some strong acid. The rest of the large, sturdy frame lay sunken under the remains of a spacesuit which was tied clumsily around the middle to retain all the air possible in the upper half of it. Evidently some acid had eaten away the lower half of the man's body after he had suffocated. The face was that of a Norwegian.

By one outstretched hand a small notebook lay open with the leather back upward. The corners of several pages were turned under carelessly—Nat swung the torch around the room. It was bare. The notebook—quickly he picked it up. The page on which the writing began was dated May 10, 2040. About two months ago.

"Helmar Swenson. My daughter, Helena, aged nineteen, and I were lured into the maw of this hellish monster by a robot calling for help in our television screen. This thing, known to man as Asteroid Moira, is, in actuality, one of the gigantic mineral creatures which inhabited a planet before it exploded, forming the asteroids. Somehow it survived the catastrophe, and, forming a hard, crustaceous shell about itself, has continued to live here in space as an asteroid.

"It is apparently highly intelligent and has acquired an appetite for human flesh. The singing spheres act as its sensory organs, separated from the body and given locomotion. It uses these to lure victims into its stomach in the first cave. I escaped its lure at first because of the 'squeaker' I carried with me. We set up these two doors as a protection from the beast while we stayed here to examine it. But the monster got me when I fell and the 'squeaker' was broken. My daughter rescued me after the acid of the pool had begun eating away my flesh.

"My Helena is locked in the room opposite this one. She has food and water to last until July 8th. Oxygen seeps in there somehow—the beast wants to keep her alive until it can get her out of the room to devour her."

Here the writing became more cramped and difficult to read.

"I have put the key in my mouth to prevent the spheres from opening the door should they force their way into this room. Some one must come to save my Helena. I can't breathe—"

The writing ended in a long scrawl angling off the page. The pencil lay some distance from the body.

July 8th! But that had been almost a week ago!

He unscrewed the man's helmet, tried to pry the jaws open. They would not move; the airless void surrounding the tiny planetoid had frozen the body until now it was as solid as the quartz cave-walls. There was but one thing to do: the other door must be melted down.

He leaped halfway across the room toward the door in the opposite wall. Could it be possible that he was in time? Anxiously he flung a bolt of energy from his heat rod toward the lock, holding a flashlight under

the other stump of an arm. The molten metal flowed to the floor like a rivulet of lava.

The door, hanging off balance, screeched open; air swooshed past him in its sudden escape from the room. He squeezed himself through, peered carefully about to see a slim spacesuit start to crumple floorward in a corner. The girl was alive!

He started toward her; the slim figure pulled itself erect again. He saw a drawn, emaciated face behind the helmet. Then, with a fury that unnerved him, she whipped out a heat rod, shot a searing bolt in his direction. He felt the fierce heat of it as it whizzed past his shoulder; in his brain Digger's thoughts of attack came to him, he flung an arm around the spacehound, dragged it back as he withdrew toward the door. The girl continued to fire bolt after bolt straight ahead, her eyes wide and staring.

They made the door, waited outside while the firing within continued. When at last it was still within, he peered around the corner of the room. She lay in a crumpled heap in the corner; quietly he re-entered, picked her up awkwardly. Through the thin, resistant folds of the spacesuit, he could feel the warmth of her, but could not tell whether the heart still beat or not. They would have to take her to one of the ships.

Her limp form was held tightly under his good arm as Nat hurried down the main tunnel. Digger apparently realized the seriousness of the situation, for he received impressions of "must hurry" from the beast and another creature, looking much like him, surrounded by small creatures of the same type, trapped in a crevice. "Aren't you a bit premature, old fellow," he chided.

Halfway there, the globes met them again. The things were not singing; from their many eyes poured a fierce, angry blue light. They rolled with a determination that frightened him. Yet he strode on, until they were barely a foot away.

"Jump, Digger!"

The spheres stopped short, reversed their direction toward the little group at a furious rate, flinging out long, whip-like tentacles. One wrapped itself around Nat's ankle, drew him down. He shifted the limp form over to his shoulder, slipped out his heat-rod. Quickly the tentacle was severed. But now others took their place; he continued firing at them, making each bolt tell, but the numbers were too great.

Digger sprang into action, rending the globes with those claws that were capable of tearing the hulls of spaceships. But tentacles lashed around him from the rear, snaked about him so that he was helpless.

The girl was slipping off Nat's shoulder. He could not raise the stump of an arm to balance her; it was stiff and useless. He stopped firing long enough to make the shift, even as the spheres attacked again. The bolts had put out the lights in fully half of the marauders but the others came on unafraid.

Nat straddled Digger's writhing body, held the spacehound motionless between his legs. At short range, he seared off the imprisoning tentacles, knowing that it would take far more than a heat-bolt to damage the well-nigh impregnable creature. He swooped the dog up under his good arm and fled from the madly-pursuing spheres, thanking nameless deities that the gravity here permitted such herculean feats. The spheres rolled faster, he soon found, than he could jump; so long as he was above them, all was well, but by the time the weak gravity permitted him to land, they were waiting for him. He tried zig-zagging. Good! It worked. He eluded them up to the mouth of the cave, then jumped for the door of his ship's outer airlock.

Nat placed the girl in his bunk, removed the cumbersome spacesuit. Her eyes blinked faintly, then sprang open. But they did not see him; they were staring straight ahead. Her mouth opened and shut weakly as though she were speaking, but no sound issued from it. He brought her water, but when he returned she had fallen asleep. He returned to the kitchen to prepare some food.

"You're still running around in that pillow case," he remarked to Digger as he extracted the spacehound from it. "Attend me, now. We know why and how those people disappeared. It would take the Space Patrol ship at least a month to arrive here; I don't intend to perch on the back of this devil as long as that. And if we leave, old thing, it'll just lure other chivalrous fools to very unpleasant ends.

"And we've got to get this kid back to civilization. She needs a doctor's care, preferably a doctor with two arms."

Digger's vibrations were one of general approval.

"We could poison it," he went on. "Only I'm not a chemist; even if I knew the compounds contained in that reeking stomach I wouldn't know what would destroy them. Might blow it up, but we haven't enough explosive.

"No, we'll have to get down into the thing's insides again. In fact—" He paused suddenly, mouth open. "Congratulate me, Digger! I have it!"

The smell of burning vegetables cut short his soliloquy. He fed the starved, half-blind girl, then left her sleeping exhaustedly as he squirmed into his suit.

No sooner had he entered the mouth of the cave than a half-dozen of the singing sensory organs rolled quickly, yet not angrily, toward him. The beast was apparently optimistic, for the globes sang in their most soothing, seductive tones. They tried to herd him into the first cave on the right, but he had remembered the *squeaker*; they could not distract him.

Effortlessly he leaped over them toward the mouth of the cave on the left. That was where the spaceships lay, pointing in all directions like a carelessly-dropped handful of rice.

All the ships were in running order. Good; had there been one vessel he could not move, then all was lost. The fuel in several ran low, but after a few moments of punching levers and pulling chokes, the under rockets thundered in the big room.

Taking care not to injure the motor compartments of the other ships, using only the most minute explosion-quantities, he jockeyed each ship around until all their noses pointed in one direction. The exhausts pointed out through the wide doorway. It was well that the beast had formed curved corners in the room, otherwise the scheme would not have worked. The exhausts which did not point toward the door, directly, were toward the curved walls which would deflect the forceful gasses expelled doorward.

When he emerged from the ship, the spheres attacked. He seared off their tentacles throughout what seemed to be eternities. His body was becoming a mass of bruises from the lash of their tentacles. He burned his way through the swarm on to ship after ship.

As he stepped from the last vessel there was a rumbling beneath his feet. Did the monster understand his intent? Was it stirring in its shell? Most of the globes had disappeared; now a nauseatingly sweet odor penetrated the screen in his headpiece, which permitted him to smell without allowing the oxygen to escape. He hurried around to the rear of the ship, an apprehensive, sickening feeling at the pit of his stomach. A thick jelly-like wave of liquid was rolling over the floor—the reeking, deadly juices from the beast's stomach. If the liquid touched him, it would eat through the heavy fabric, exploding the air pressure from around his body. How was he to escape from the cave?

The answer came to him suddenly. Quickly he darted back toward the nearest vessel. Two of the screaming spheres blocked his way; he sent

bolt after searing bolt into them, more of a charge than he had given any of the others. The lights in the globes went out; their voices ceased. And they burst into slowly mounting incandescence. Yet, they were not consumed by their fire, only glowed an intense white light like that of a lighthouse.

"Lighthouse!" The word flashed through his mind clearly, strongly. They glowed like the "zirconia lights" of a lighthouse. Why hadn't he recognized the greasy, quartz-like material before? It was zirconia, a compound of zirconium, of course. A silicate base creature could easily have formed a shell of it about itself.

Zirconia—one of the compounds he'd intended prospecting for on the moons of Saturn. Worth over a hundred dollars per pound. Because of its resistance to heat, it was used to line the tubes of rockets; Terra's supply had long been used up. Here was a fortune all around him; but that fortune was about to be destroyed, he along with it, if he did not hurry.

If he could only reach the timing mechanism to yank from it the wires connecting it to the other ships. It was at the other end of the line. He started in that direction, but a surge of fatal, thick acid rolled before him, reaching for him with hungry, questing tongues.

When it was almost touching his toes, he leaped. As he floated toward the floor, he placed a chair beneath him so that his feet landed on the seat. The legs of the chair sank slowly into the liquid.

Again he leaped, his moment retarded by the fluid which now reached halfway up the chair legs, sucked and clung there. The sweetly-evil smelling stuff was rising rapidly. But the next leap carried him into the main cave. Abandoning the chair, he leaped once more, out through the cave's mouth, pursued by the waving tentacles of the sensory spheres.

He had lost precious minutes eluding that deadly acid. It would take at least five minutes to get his ship away from the asteroid; he must hurry before all those rocket motors were thrown into action, or it would be too late.

Leap and leap again. It seemed ages, but he reached the ship, bolted the door shut. Thumps against the door as the pursuing globes ran up against it. A thought came to him; swiftly he opened the door, permitted a few of them to enter, then slammed it shut. With the heat gun he sheared off their tentacles; he could sell the zirconia in the entities. Then he turned to the controls and the ship zoomed up and out.

Nat had barely raised his ship from the Asteroid Moira when he saw the small planetoid lurch suddenly, bounding off its orbit at almost a

right angle. The sudden combined driving force of all the rockets within the cave had sent it hurtling away like a rocket itself.

The asteroid housing the monster was heading into the Flora group of Asteroids. There the fifty-seven odd solid bodies of that group would grind, crack, and rend that dangerous beast into harmless, dead fragments.

"A good job," said a weak, but softly friendly voice behind him. He whirled. The girl stood in the doorway of the pilot room, supporting herself against the door frame. Digger rubbed thoughtfully against her legs.

"We'll just follow that asteroid, Miss," he said, "and see if we can't pick up some odd fragment of zirconia when it's smashed in the grindstone there. Then we'll light out for Terra."

She smiled. Earth, to him, seemed like a very good place to go as soon as possible.

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