The Affair of the Brains

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About Bates:

Harry Bates (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, October 9, 1900 – September 1981) was an American science fiction editor and writer. He was a pioneering editor and author in the creation and development of twentieth century science fiction. His classic 1940 short story "Farewell to the Master" was the basis of the landmark 1951 science fiction movie The Day the Earth Stood Still, which is widely regarded as the greatest science fiction movie of all-time.

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Chapter 1

Off to the Rendezvous

THOUGH it is seldom nowadays that Earthmen hear mention of Hawk Carse, there are still places in the universe where his name retains all its old magic. These are the lonely outposts of the farthest planets, and here when the outlanders gather to yarn the idle hours away their tales conjure up from the past that raw, lusty period before the patrol-ships came, and the slender adventurer, gray-eyed and with queer bangs of hair obscuring his forehead, whose steely will, phenomenal ray-gun draw and reckless space-ship maneuverings combined to make him the period's most colorful figure. These qualities of his live again in the outlanders' reminiscences and also of course his score of blood-feuds and the one great feud that shook whole worlds in its final terrible settling—the feud of Hawk Carse and Dr. Ku Sui.

Again and again the paths of the adventurer and the sinister, brilliant Eurasian crossed, and each crossing makes a rich tale. Time after time Ku Sui, through his several bands of space-pirates, his individual agents and his ambitious web of power insidiously weaving over the universe, whipped his tentacles after the Hawk, and always the tentacles coiled back, repulsed and bloody. An almost typical episode is in the affair which followed what has been called the Exploit of the Hawk and the Kite.

It will be remembered—as related in "Hawk Carse"[1]—that Dr. Ku laid a most ingenious trap for Carse on the latter's ranch on Iapetus, eighth satellite of Saturn. Judd the Kite, pirate and scavenger, was the Eurasian's tool in this plot, which started with a raid on the ranch. The fracas which followed the Hawk's escape from the trap was bloody and grim enough, and resulted in the erasure of Judd and all his men save one; but the important thing to the following affair was that Judd's ship, the Scorpion, fell into Carse's hands with one prisoner and the ship's log,

1.See the November, 1931, issue of Astounding Stories.

containing the space coordinates for a prearranged assignation of Judd with Ku Sui.

All other projects were postponed by the Hawk at this opportunity to meet Dr. Ku face to face. The trail of the Eurasian was the guiding trail of his life, and swiftly he moved along it.

There was work to be done before he could set out. Three men had emerged alive from the clash between the Hawk and the Kite: Carse himself, Friday, his gigantic negro companion in adventure, and a bearded half-caste called Sako, sole survivor of Judd's crew. Aided sullenly by this man, they first cleaned up the ravaged ranch, burying the bodies of the dead, repairing fences and generally bringing order out of confusion. Then, under Carse's instructions, Friday and the captive brigand tooled the adventurer's own ship, the *Star Devil*, well into the near-by jungle, while the Hawk returned to the*Scorpion*.

He went into her control cabin, opened her log book and once more scanned what interested him there. The notation ran:

> "E.D. (Earth Date) 16 January, E.T. (Earth Time) 2:40 P.M. Meeting ordered by Ku Sui, for purpose of delivering the skeleton and clothing of Carse to him, at N.S. (New System) X-33.7; Y-241.3; Z-92.8 on E.D. 24 January, E.T. 10:20 P.M. Note: the ship is to stand by at complete stop, the radio's receiver open to Ku Sui's private wave (D37, X1293, R3) for further instructions."

He mulled over it, slowly stroking his flaxen bangs. It was a chance, and a good one. Judd's ship would keep that rendezvous, but it would sheathe the talons of the Hawk. This time a trap would be laid for Ku Sui.

THE plan was simple enough, on the face of it, but the Eurasian was a master of cunning as well as a master of science, and high peril attended any matching of wits with him. Carse closed the log, his face bleak, his mind made up. A shuffle of feet brought his gaze up to the port-lock entrance.

Friday, stripped to shorts, a sweat-glistening ebony giant, stood there. Shaking the drops of steaming perspiration from his face, he reported:

"All finished, suh—got the *Star Devil* in the jungle where you said to hide her. An' now what? You still figurin' on keepin' that date with Dr. Ku in this ship?"

Carse nodded, absently.

"Then where'll we pick up a crew, suh? Porno? It's the nearest port, I reckon."

"I'm not taking any crew, Eclipse."

Friday gaped in surprise at his master, then found words:

"No crew, suh? Against Ku Sui? We'll be throwin' our lives——"

"I've lost enough men in the last two days," Carse cut in shortly. "And this meeting with Dr. Ku is a highly personal affair. You and I and Sako can run the ship; we've got to." One of the man's rare smiles relaxed his face. "Of course," he murmured, "I'm risking your life, Eclipse. Perhaps I'd better leave you somewhere?"

"Say!" bellowed the negro indignantly.

The Hawk's smile broadened at the spontaneous exclamation of loyalty.

"Very well, then," he said. "Now send Sako to me, and prepare ship for casting off."

But as Friday went aft on a final thorough inspection of all mechanisms, he muttered over and over, "Two of us—against Ku Sui! Two of us!" and he was still very much disturbed when, after Carse had had a few crisp words with the captive Sako, telling him that he would be free but watched and that it would be wise if he confined himself to his duties, the order came through to the engine room:

"Break ground!"

Gently the brigand ship *Scorpion* stirred. Then, in response to the delicate incline of her space-stick, she lifted sweetly from the crust of Iapetus and at ever-increasing speed burned through the satellite's atmosphere toward the limitless dark leagues beyond.

The Hawk was on the trail!

CARSE took the first watch himself. Except for occasional glances at the banks of instruments, the screens and celestial charts, he spent his time in deep thought, turning over in his mind the several variations of situation his dangerous rendezvous might take.

First, how would Ku Sui contact the *Scorpion*? Any of three ways, he reasoned: come aboard from his own craft accompanied by some of his men; stay behind and send some men over to receive the remains of the Hawk—for either of which variations he was prepared; or, a third, and more dangerous, direct that the remains of Carse be brought over to his ship, without showing himself or any of his crew.

Whatever variations their contacting took, there was another consideration, Carse's celestial charts revealed, and that was the proximity of the

rendezvous to Jupiter's Satellite III, less than three hundred thousand miles. Satellite III harbored Port o' Porno, main refuge and home of the scavengers, the hi-jackers, and out-and-out pirates of space, so many of whom were under Ku Sui's thumb. Several brigand ships were sure to be somewhere in the vicinity, and one might easily intrude, destroying the hairbreadth balance in Carse's favor… .

There was peril on every side. The Hawk considered that it would be wise to make provision against the odds proving too great. So, his gray eyes reflective, he strode to the *Scorpion's* radio panel and a moment later was saying over and over in a toneless voice:

"XX-1 calling XX-2—XX-1 calling XX-2—XX-1 calling XX-2… ."

AFTER a full two minutes there was still no answer from the loudspeaker. He kept calling: "XX-1 calling XX-2—XX-1 calling XX-2—XX-1 calling——"

He broke off as words in English came softly from the loudspeaker:

"XX-2 answering XX-1. Do you hear me?"

"Yes. Give me protected connection. Highly important no outsider overhears."

"All right," the gentle voice answered. "Protected. Go ahead, old man."

The Hawk relaxed and his face softened. "How are you, Eliot?" he asked almost tenderly.

"Just fine, Carse," came in the clear, cultured voice of Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow, probably the greatest scientific mind in the solar system, Ku Sui being the only possible exception. He spoke now from his secret laboratory on Jupiter's Satellite III, near Porno, this transcendent genius who, with Friday, was one of Carse's two trusted comrades-in-arms. "I've been expecting you," he went on. "Has something happened?"

"I'm concerned with Ku Sui again," the Hawk told him swiftly. "Please excuse me; I have to be brief. I can't take any chances of his hearing any of this." He related the events of the last two days: Judd's attack on the Iapetus ranch, the subsequent fight and outcome, and finally his present position and intention of keeping the rendezvous. "The odds are pretty heavily against me, M. S.," he went on. "It would be stupid not to admit that I may not come out of this affair alive—and that's why I'm calling. My affairs, of course, are in your hands. You know where my storerooms and papers are. Sell my trading posts and ranches; Hartz of Newark-on-Venus is the best man to deal through. But I'd advise you to keep for yourself that information on the Pool of Radium. Look into it sometime.

I'm in Judd's ship, the *Scorpion*; our *Star Devil's* on Iapetus, hidden in the jungle near the ranch. That's all, I think."

"Carse, I should be with you!"

"No, M. S.—couldn't risk it. You're too valuable a man. But don't worry, you know my luck. I'll very likely be down to see you after this meeting, and perhaps with a visitor who will enable you once again to return to an honorable position on Earth. Where will you be?"

"In eight Earth days? Let's make it Porno, at the house you know. I'll come in for some supplies and wait for you."

"Good," the Hawk said shortly. "Good-by, M. S."

He paused, his hand on the switch. There came a parting wish:

"Good luck, old fellow. Get him! *Get him!*"

The Master Scientist's voice trembled at the end. Through Ku Sui he had lost honor, position, home—all good things a man on Earth may have; through Ku Sui he, the gentlest of men, was regarded by Earthlings as a black murderer and there was a price on his head. Hawk Carse did not miss the trembling in his voice. As he switched off, the adventurer's eyes went bleak as the loneliest deeps of space… .

Chapter 2

The Coming of Ku Sui

STRAIGHT through the vast cold reaches that stretched between one mighty planet and another the *Scorpion* arrowed, Carse and Friday standing watch and watch, Sako always on duty with the latter. Behind, Saturn's rings melted smaller, and ahead a dusky speck grew against the vault of space until the red belts and one great seething crimson spot that marked it as Jupiter stood out plainly. By degrees, then, the ship's course was altered as Carse checked his calculations and made minor corrections in speed and direction. So they neared the rendezvous. And a puzzled furrow grew on Friday's brow.

What was bothering his master? Instead of becoming more impassive and coldly emotionless as the distance shortened, he showed distinct signs of worry. This might be natural in most men, but it was unusual in the Hawk. Often the negro found him abstractedly smoothing his bangs of hair, pacing the length of the control cabin, glancing, plainly worried, at the visi-screen. What special thing was wrong? Friday wondered again and again—and then, in a flash, he knew.

"Why—how we goin' to *see* Dr. Ku?" he burst out. "Didn't that Judd say somethin'——"

The Hawk nodded. "That's just the problem, Eclipse. For you'll remember Judd said that Ku Sui 'comes out of darkness, out of empty space.' That might mean invisibility or the Fourth Dimension—and God help us if he's solved the problem of dimensional traveling. I don't know—but it's something I can't well prepare against." He fell to musing again, utterly lost in thought.

A DAY and a half later found Friday genuinely worried—an unusual state for the always cheerful black. The laugh wrinkles of his face were re-twisted into lines of anxiety which gave his face a most solemn and lugubrious expression. From time to time he grasped the butt of his ray-gun with a grip that would have pulped an orange;

occasionally his rolling brown eyes sought the gray ones of the Hawk, only to return as by a magnet to the visi-screen, whose five adjoining squares mirrored the whole sweep of space around them.

Jupiter now filled one side of the forward observation window. It was a vast, red-belted disk, an eye-thrilling spectacle at their distance, roughly a million miles. Against it were poised two small pale globes, the larger of which was Satellite III. Several hours before, when they had been closer to the satellite, Carse had scrutinized it through the electelscope and made out above its surface a silver dot which was a spaceship. It was bound inward toward Port o' Porno, and might well have been one of Ku Sui's. But the *Scorpion*, slowing down for her rendezvous, had attracted no attention and had passed undisturbed.

Now she hung motionless—that is, motionless with respect to the sun. Only the whisper of the air-renewing machinery disturbed the tension in her control cabin where the three men stood waiting, glancing back and forth from the visi-screen to the Earth clock and its calendar attachment. The date the clock showed was 24 January, the time, 10:21 P. M. Dr. Ku Sui was one minute late.

Sako, the captive, was sullen and restless, and made furtive glances at the Hawk, who stood detached, arms hanging carelessly at his sides, gray eyes half closed, giving in his attitude no hint of the strain the others were feeling. But his attitude of being relaxed and off his guard was deceptive—as Sako found out. Suddenly his left hand seemed to disappear; there was a hiss, an arrowing streak of spitting orange light; and Sako was gaping foolishly at the arm he had stealthily raised to one of the radio switches. A smoking sear had appeared as if by magic across it.

Hawk Carse sheathed his gun. "I would advise you to try no more obvious tricks," he said coldly. "Cutting in our microphone is too simple a way to give warning to Dr. Ku Sui. Move away from there. And don't forget your lines when Dr. Ku calls. You will never act a part before a more critical and deadly audience."

Sako mumbled something and rubbed his arm. A pitying smile came to Friday's face as he comprehended what had happened. "You damned fool!" he said.

IT was 10:22 P.M. Still, in the visi-screen, no other ship. Nothing but the giant planet, the smaller satellites poised against it, and the deep star-spangled curtain of black space all around.

They had carefully followed the instructions in the log. They were at the exact place noted there: checked and double-checked. The radio

receiver was tuned to the wave-length given in the log. But of Ku Sui, nothing.

And yet, in a way, he was with them. His enigmatic personality, his seldom-seen figure was very present in their minds, and with it were overtones of all the diabolic cunning and suave ironic cruelty that men always associated with him. "He comes out of darkness, out of empty space… ." Friday licked his lips. He was not built for mental strain: his lips kept drying and his tongue was as leather.

A little sputtering sound tingled the nerves of the three waiting men, and as one their eyes went to the radio loudspeaker. A contact question was being asked in the usual way:

"Are you there, Judd? Are you there, Judd? Are you there, Judd?"

The voice was not that of Ku Sui. It was a dead voice, toneless, emotionless, mechanical.

"Are you there, Judd?" it went on, over and over.

"The mike switch, Friday," the Hawk said, and then was at Sako's side, his ray-gun transfixing the man with its threatening angle. "Play your part well," was the whisper from his lips.

The switch went over with a click. Trembling, Sako faced the microphone.

"This is Sako," he said.

"Sako?" the dead voice asked. "I want Judd. Where is Judd?"

"Judd is dead. The trap failed, and there was a fight on Iapetus. Judd was killed by Carse, and most of the others. Only two of us are left, but we have Carse and the negro, prisoners, alive. What are your instructions?"

A half minute went by, and the three men hardly breathed.

"How do we know you are Sako?" said the voice at last. "Give the recognition."

"The insignia of Dr. Ku Sui?"

"Yes. It is——"

Carse's ray-gun prodded the stomach of the sweating Sako.

"An asteroid," he said hastily, "in the center of a circle of the ten planets."

The unseen speaker was quiet. Evidently he was conferring with someone else, probably Ku Sui.

"All right," his toneless voice came back at last. "You will remain motionless in your present position, keeping your radio receiver open for further instructions. We are approaching and will be with you in thirty minutes."

Carse motioned to Friday to switch off the mike. Sako sank limply into a chair, soaked with perspiration.

"Now we must wait again," the Hawk murmured, crossing his arms and scanning the visi-screen.

THEY had heard from Ku Sui, but that had not answered the old tormenting question of how he would come. It was more puzzling than ever. The visi-screen showed nothing, and it should have shown the Eurasian's decelerating ship even at twice thirty minutes' time away. They looked upon the same vista of Jupiter and his satellites, framed in eternal blackness; there was no characteristic steely dot of an approaching ship to give Carse the enemy's position and enable him to shape his plan of reception definitely.

Twenty minutes went by. The strain the Hawk was under showed only in his pulling at the bangs of flaxen hair that covered his forehead as far as the eyebrows. He had, from Judd's words, expected a mystery in Ku Sui's approach. There was nothing to do but wait; he had made what few plans and preparations he could in advance.

Friday broke the tense silence in the control cabin. "He's *got* to be *somewhere*!" he exploded. "It isn't natural for the screen not to show nothin'! Isn't there somethin' we can do?"

The Hawk was surprisingly patient. "I'm afraid not," he said. "It's invisibility he's using, or else the fourth dimension, as Judd said. But we've got one good chance. He'll send more instructions by radio, and surely, after that, his ship will appear——"

A new voice, bland and unctuous, spoke in the control cabin from behind the three men.

"*Not necessarily, my honored friend Carse*," it said. "*You will observe there is no need for a ship to appear*."

Ku Sui had come.

Chapter 3

The Wave of a Handkerchief

HE stood smiling in the door-frame leading aft to the rear entrance port. There was all grace in his posture, in the easy angle at which one arm rested against the side bulkhead, in the casual way in which he held the ray-gun that bored straight at Carse. Height and strength he had, and a perfectly proportioned figure. Beauty, too, of face, with skin of clearest saffron, soft, sensitive mouth and ascetic cheeks. His hair was fine and black, and swept straightly back from the high narrow forehead where lived his tremendous intelligence.

It was his eyes that gave him away, his eyes of rare green that from a distance looked black. Slanting, veiled, unreadable beneath the lowered silky lashes, there was the soul of a tiger in their sinister depths. It was his eyes that his victims remembered… .

"So you have arrived, Dr. Ku," whispered Hawk Carse, and for a second he too smiled, with eyes as bleak and hard as frosty chilled steel. Their glances met and held—the cold, hard, honest rapier; the subtle perfumed poison. The other men in the cabin were forgotten; the feeling was between these two. Strikingly contrasted they stood there: Carse, in rough blue denim trousers, faded work-shirt, open at the neck, old-fashioned rubber shoes and battered skipper's cap askew on his flaxen hair; Ku Sui, suavely impeccable in high-collared green silk blouse, full-length trousers of the same material, and red slippers, to match the wide sash which revealed the slender lines of his waist. A perfume hung about the man, the indescribable odor of tsin-tsin flowers from the humid jungles of Venus.

"You see I meet you halfway, my friend," the Eurasian said with delicate mock courtesy. "A surpassing pleasure I have anticipated for a long time. *No, no!* I see that already I shall have to ask you a small favor. A thousand pardons: it's my deplorable ability to read your mind that requires me to ask it. Your so justly famed speed on the draw might possibly overcome this advantage"—he raised his ray-gun slightly—"and,

though I know you would not kill me—save in the direst emergency, since you wish to take me a living prisoner—I would find it most distressing to have to carry for the rest of my life a flaw on my body. So, may I request you to withdraw your ray-guns with two fingertips and put them on the floor? Observe—your fingertips. Will you be so kind?"

THE Hawk looked at him for a minute. Then silently he obeyed. He knew that the Eurasian would have no compunctions about shooting him down in cold blood; but, on the other hand, even as the man had said, he could not kill Ku Sui, but had to capture him, in order to take him to Earth to confess to crimes now blamed on Eliot Leithgow. "Do as he says, Friday," he instructed the still staring negro; and, like a man in a trance, Friday obeyed.

"Thank you," the Eurasian said. "It was a most friendly thing to do." He paused. "I suppose you are wondering how I arrived here, and why you did not see me come. Well, I shall certainly tell you, in return for your favor. But first—ah, friend Carse—your gesture! A reminder, I assume."

Slowly the Hawk was stroking the bangs of hair which had been trained to obscure his forehead. There was no emotion on his chilly face as he answered, no slightest sign of feeling unless it were a slight trembling of the left eyelid—significant enough to those who could read it.

"Yes," he whispered, "a reminder. I do not like to wear my hair like this, Ku Sui, and I want you to know that I've not forgotten; that, though I'm now in your power, there'll be a day——"

"But you wouldn't threaten your host!" the other said with mock surprise. "And surely you wouldn't threaten me, of all men. Must I point out how useless it has always been for you to match yourself, merely a skilful gunman, against me, against a brain?"

"Usually," the cold whisper came back, "the brain has failed in the traps it has laid for the gunman."

"Only because of the mistakes of its agents. Unfortunately for you, the brain is dealing with you directly this time, my friend. It's quite a different matter. But this small talk—although you honor——"

"Of course you intend to kill me," said the Hawk. "But when?"

Dr. Ku gestured deprecatingly. "You insist on introducing these unpleasant topics! But to relieve your mind, I've not yet decided how I can entertain you most suitably. I have come primarily to ask you one trifling thing."

"And that is?"

"The whereabouts of Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow."

HAWK CARSE smiled. "Your conceit lends you an extraordinary optimism, Dr. Ku."

"Not unfounded, I am sure. I desire very much to meet our old friend Leithgow again: his is the only other brain in this universe at all comparable to mine. And did I tell you that I always get what I desire? Well, will you give me this information? Of course, there are ways… ."

For a moment he waited.

The Hawk only looked at him.

"Always in character," the Eurasian said regretfully. "Very well." He turned his head and took in Friday and Sako, standing near-by. "You are Sako?" he asked the latter. "It is most unfortunate that you had to deceive me a little while ago. We shall have to see what to do about it. Later. For the present, move farther back, out of the way. So. You, black one, next to my friend Carse: we must be moving along. So."

Ku Sui surveyed then with inscrutable eyes. Gracefully, he drew close.

Carse missed not a move. He watched the Eurasian draw, from one of the long sleeves of his blouse, a square of lustrous black silk.

"This bears my personal insignia, you see," he murmured. "You will remember it." And he languidly waved it just under their eyes.

Friday stared at it; Carse too, wonderingly. He saw embroidered in yellow on the black a familiar insignia composed of an asteroid in the circle of ten planets. And then alarm lit his brain and he grimaced. There was a strange odor in his nostrils and it came from the square of silk.

"Characteristic, Dr. Ku," he said. "Quite characteristic."

The Eurasian smiled. An expression of stupid amazement came over Friday's face. The design of asteroid and planets wavered into a blur as the Hawk fought unconsciousness; a short, harsh sound came from his lips; he lurched uncertainly. The negro crumpled up and stretched out on the deck. Carse's desire to sleep grew overpowering. Once more, as from a distance, he glimpsed Ku Sui's smile. He tried to back to the wall; made it; then a heavy thump suggested to his dimming mind that he had collapsed to the deck. He was asleep at once… .

Chapter 4

Soil

HAWK CARSE awoke with a slight feeling of nausea, and the smell of the drug faint in his nostrils. He found he was lying on the floor of a large, square cell whose walls and ceiling were of some burnished brown metal and which was bare of any kind of furnishing. In one wall was a tightly closed door, also of metal and studded by the knob of a lock. Barred slits, high in opposite walls, gave ventilation; a single tube set in the ceiling provided illumination.

He was not bound. He sat up and regarded the outflung figure of Friday, lying to one side. "Something in his look seemed to reach the giant negro, for, as he watched, the man's eyelids flickered, and a sigh escaped his full lips. He stared up at Carse, recognition, followed by gladness, flooding his eyes. The Hawk smiled also. There were close bonds between these two.

"Lord, I'm sure thankful to be with you, suh!" said the negro with relief. His eyes rolled as he took in the cabinlike cell. "Hmff—nice homey little place," he remarked. "Where do you reckon we are, suh?"

"I think we're at last at that place we have searched so long for—Ku Sui's headquarters, his own spaceship."

It will be remembered by those who have read their history that the Eurasian's actual base of operations was for a long time the greatest of the mysteries that enveloped him. Half a dozen times had the Hawk and his comrade in arms, Eliot Leithgow, hunted for it with all their separate skill of adventurer and scientist, and, although they had twice found the man himself, always they had failed to find his actual retreat.

For those who are unacquainted with the histories of that raw period a hundred years ago, it will be impossible to understand the spell of fear which accompanied mention of Dr. Ku throughout the universe—a fear engendered chiefly by the man's unpredictable comings and goings, thanks to his secret hiding place. Those who were as close to him as henchmen could be—which was not very close—only added to the

general mystery of the whereabouts of the base by their sincerely offered but utterly contradictory notions and data. One thing all agreed on: the outlaw's lair was a place most frightening.

Therefore it can be understood why, on hearing the Hawk's opinion, Friday's face fell somewhat.

"Guess that means we're finished, suh," he opined moodily.

CARSE had walked to the lone door and found, as he of course expected, that it was tightly locked. He responded crisply:

"It's not like you to talk that way, Eclipse. We're far from that. We have succeeded in the first step—if, as I suspect, this cell is part of Dr. Ku's real headquarters—and surely before he decides to eliminate us we will be able to learn something of the nature of his space-ship; perhaps how it can be attacked and conquered."

Conversation always cheered the naturally social Friday; he seldom had the opportunity for it with his usually curt master. He objected:

"But what good'll that do us, suh, if we take what we've learned to where it won't help anybody, least of all us? An' what chance we got against Ku Sui now, when we're prisoners? Why, he's a magician; it ain't natural, what he does. Lands in our ship plop right out of empty space! Puts us out with a wave of his handkerchief!" With final misery in his voice he added: "We're sunk, suh. This time we surely are."

Carse smiled at his emotional friend. "All you need is a good fight, Eclipse. It's thinking that disintegrates your morale; you should never try to think. Why—there was an anesthetic on that handkerchief! Simple enough; I might have expected it. As for his getting into our ship, he entered from behind, through the after port-lock, while we were looking for his ship on the visi-screen. I don't understand yet why we could not see his craft. It's too much to suppose he could make it invisible. Paint, perhaps, or camouflage. He might have a way of preventing, from a distance, the registering of his ship on our screen. Oh, he's dangerous, clever, deep—but somewhere, there'll be a loophole. Somewhere. There always is." His tone changed, and he snapped: "Now be quiet. I want to think."

HIS face stiffened into a cold, calm mask, but behind his gray eyes lay anything but calmness. Ku Sui's easy assumption that the information as to Eliot Leithgow's whereabouts would be forthcoming from his lips, puzzled him, brought real anxiety. Torture would probably not be able to force his tongue to betray his friend, but there were

perhaps other means. Of these he had a vague and ominous apprehension. Dr. Ku was preeminently a specialist in the human brain; he had implied his will to have that information. Suppose he should use something it was impossible to fight against?

And he alone, Hawk Carse, brought the responsibility. He had asked Leithgow where he would be, and he remembered well the place agreed upon. He dared not lose the battle of wits he knew was coming!…

His eyes shot to the door. It was opening. In a moment Ku Sui stood revealed there, and behind him, in the corridor, were three other figures, their yellow coolie faces strangely dumb and lifeless above the tasteful gray smocks which extended a little below their belted waists. Each bore embroidered on his chest the planetary insignia of Ku Sui in yellow, and each was armed with two ray-guns.

"I must ask forgiveness, my friend, for these retainers who accompany me," the Eurasian began suavely. "Please don't let them disturb you, however; they are more robots than men, obeying only my words. A little adjustment of the brain, you understand. I have brought them only for your protection; for you would find it would result most unpleasantly to make a break for freedom."

"Of course, *you're* not the one who wants protection!" sneered Friday, with devastating sarcasm. "Or else you'd 'a' brought a whole army!"

But the negro paled a little when the Oriental's green tiger eyes caught him full. It was with a physical shock—such was the power of the man—that he received the soft-spoken reply:

"Yours is a most subtle and entertaining wit, black one; I am overcome with the honor and pleasure of having you for my guest. But perhaps—may I suggest?—that you save your humor for a more suitable occasion. I would like to make the last few hours of your visit as pleasant as possible."

HE turned to Hawk Carse. "I have thought that an inspection of this, my home in space, would intrigue you more than anything else my poor hospitality affords. May I do you the honor, my friend?"

"You are too good to me," the Hawk replied frostily. "I will duplicate your kindness some day."

The Eurasian bowed. "After you," he said, and waited until Friday and the Hawk passed first through the door. Close after them came the three automatons of yellow men.

The passageway was square, plain and bare, and spaced at intervals by other closed doors. "Storerooms in this wing," the Eurasian explained

as they progressed. He stopped in front of one of the doors and pressed a button beside it. It slid noiselessly open, revealing, not another room, but a short metal spider ladder. Up this they climbed, one of the guards going first in the half darkness; then a trap-door above opened to douse them with warm ruddy light. They stepped out.

And the scene that met them took them completely off guard. Friday gasped, and Carse so far lost his habitual poise as to stare in wonder.

Soil! And a great glassy dome!

NOT a space-ship, this realm of Ku Sui. Soil—soil with a whole settlement built upon it! Hard, grayish soil, and on it several buildings of the familiar burnished metal. And overhead, cupping the entire outlay, arched a great hemisphere of what resembled glass, ribbed with silvery supporting beams and struts: an enormous bowl, turned down, and on its other side the glorious vista of space.

Straight above hung the red-belted disk of Jupiter, with the pale globes of Satellites II and III wheeling close, *and all of them were of the same relative size they had appeared when last seen from the Scorpion!*

Dr. Ku smiled unctuously at the puzzlement that showed on the faces of his captives.

"Have you noticed," he asked, "that you are still in the neighborhood of the spot in space where we had our rendezvous? But this isn't another of Jupiter's satellites. Ah, no. This is my own world—my own personally controlled little world!"

"Snakes of the Santo!" Friday gasped, the whites of his eyes showing all around. "Then we must be on an asteroid!"

They were. From the far side of the dome ahead of them the asteroid stretched back hard and sharp in Jupiter's ruddy light against the backdrop of black space. It was a craggy, uneven body, seemingly about twenty miles in length, pinched in the middle and thus shaped roughly like a peanut shell. One end had been leveled off to accommodate the dome with its cradled buildings; outside the dome all was untouched. The landscape was a gargantuan jumble of coarse, hard, sharp rocks which had crystallized into a maze of hollows, crevices, long crazy splits and jagged out-thrusting lumps of boulders. Without an atmosphere, with but the feeblest of gravities and utterly without any form of life—save for that within the dome built upon it—it was simply a typical small asteroid, of which race only the largest are globe-shaped.

"Once," the Eurasian went on softly as they took all this in, "this world of mine circled with its thousands of fellows between Mars and Jupiter. I

picked it from the rest because of certain mineral qualities, and had this air-containing dome constructed on it, and these buildings inside the dome. Then, with batteries of gravity-plates inserted precisely in the asteroid's center of gravity, I nullified the gravital pull of Mars and Jupiter, wrenched it from its age-old orbit and swung it free into space. An achievement that would command the respect even of Eliot Leithgow, I think. So now you see, Carse; now you know. *This*is my secret base, *this* my hidden laboratory. I take it always with me, and I travel where I will."

The Hawk nodded coldly his acceptance of the astounding fact; he was too busy to make comment. He was observing the buildings, the nature of them, the exits from the dome, how they could best be reached.

THEY stood on the roof of the largest and central building, a low metal structure with four wings, crossing at right angles to make the figure of a great plus mark. The hub was probably Dr. Ku's chief laboratory, Carse conjectured. On each side stood other buildings, low, long, like barracks, with figures of coolies moving in and out. Workshops, living quarters, power-rooms, he supposed: power-rooms certainly, for a soft hum filled the air.

There were two great port-locks at ground level in the dome, one on each side, each sizable enough to admit the largest space-ship and each flanked by a smaller, man-sized lock. To reach them… .

"And over there," Dr. Ku's voice broke in, "you see your borrowed ship, the *Scorpion*. But please don't let it tempt you to cut short your visit with me, my friend. It would avail you nothing even if you reached her, for it requires a secret combination to open the port-locks, and my servants' brains have been so altered that they are physically incapable of divulging it to you. And of course I have offensive rays and other devices hidden about—just in case. All rather hopeless, isn't it? But surely interesting.

"Let us go: I have more. Below, in my main laboratory in the center of this building, there's something far more interesting, and it concerns you, Carse, and me, and also Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow." He let the words sink in. "Will you follow me?"

And so they went below again, down the spider ladder into the corridor. There was nothing else to do: the guards, ever watchful, pressed close behind. But a tattoo of alarm was beating in Hawk Carse's brain. Eliot Leithgow again—the hint of something ominous to be aimed at

him, Carse, for the extraction of information he alone possessed: the whereabouts of his elderly friend the Master Scientist.

Chapter 5

The Color-Storm

THE corridor was stopped by a heavy metal door. As the small party approached, it swung inward in two halves, and a figure clad in a white surgeon's smock emerged. He was a white man, tall, with highly intelligent face but eyes strangely dull and lifeless, like those of the coolie-guards. His gaze rested on Ku Sui, and the Eurasian asked him:

"Is it ready?"

"Yes, lord,"—tonelessly.

"Through here, then, my friends." The door opened and closed behind them as they stepped inside. "This is my main laboratory. And there, friend Carse, is the object which is to concern us."

With one glance the adventurer took in the laboratory. It was a great room, a perfect circle in shape, with doors opening into the four wings of the building. The walls were lined with strange, complicated machines, whose purpose he could not even guess at; in one place there was a table strewn with tangled shapes of wire, rows of odd-bulging tubes and other apparatus; and conspicuous by one door was an ordinary operating table, with light dome overhead. A tall wide screen placed a few feet out from the wall hid something bulky from view. Carse noted all these things; then his gaze went back to the object in the middle of the floor which Ku Sui had indicated.

It was, primarily, a chair, within a suspended framework of steely bars, themselves the foundation for a network of fine-drawn colored wires. Shimmering, like the gossamer threads of a spider's spinning, they wove upward, around and over the chair, so that he who sat there would be completely surrounded by the gleaming mesh.

Within the whole hung a plain square boxlike device, attached to the chair and so placed that it would be directly in front of the eyes of anyone sitting there. Ropes were reeved through pulleys in the ceiling, for raising the wire-ball device to permit entrance. And standing ready

around it, were four men in surgeons' smocks—white men with intelligent faces and dull, lifeless eyes.

THE Hawk knew the answer to the question he curtly asked. "Its purpose, Dr. Ku?"

"That," came the suave reply, "it will be your pleasure to discover for yourself. I can promise you some novel sensations. Nothing harmful, though, however much they may tire you. Now!" He gave a sign; one of his assistants touched a switch. The wire ball rose, leaving the central seat free for entrance. "All is ready. May I ask you to enter?"

Hawk Carse faced his old foe. There was stillness in the laboratory then as his bleak gray eyes met and held for long seconds Ku Sui's enigmatic green-black ones.

"If I don't?"

For answer the Eurasian gestured apologetically to his guards.

"I see," Carse whispered. There was nothing to be done. Three coolies, each with ray-guns at the ready; four white assistants… . No hope. No chance for anything. He looked at the negro. "Don't move, Friday," he warned him. "They'll only shoot; it can do no good. Eight to two are big odds when the two are unarmed."

He turned and faced the Eurasian, holding him with his eyes. "Ku Sui," he said, clipping the words, "you have said that this would not permanently harm me, and, although I know you for the most deadly, vicious egomaniac in the solar system, I am believing you. I do not know you for a liar… . I will enter."

The faint smile on the Oriental's face did not alter one bit at this. Carse stepped to the metal seat and sat down.

THE web of shimmering wires descended, cupping him completely. Through them he saw Ku Sui go to a switchboard adjoining and study the indicators, finally placing one hand on a black-knobbed switch and with the other drawing from some recess a little cone, trailing a wire, like a microphone. A breathless silence hung over the laboratory. The white-clad figures stood like statues, dumb, unfeeling, emotionless. The watching negro trembled, his mouth half open, his brow already bedewed with perspiration. But the only sign of strain or tension that showed in the slender flaxen-haired man sitting in the wire ball in the center of the laboratory, came when he licked his dry lips.

Then Dr. Ku Sui pulled the switch down, and there surged out a low-throated murmur of power. And immediately the ball of wire came to

life. The fine, crisscrossing wires disappeared, and in their stead was color, every color in the spectrum. Like waves rhythmically rising and falling, the tinted brilliances dissolved back and forth through each other; and the reflected light, caroming off the surfaces of the instruments and tables and walls, so filled the laboratory that the group of men surrounding the fire-ball were like resplendent figures out of another universe.

Ku Sui pressed a button, and the side of the boxlike device nearest Hawk Carse's eyes assumed transparency and started to glow. Beautiful colors began to float over its face, colors never still but constantly weaving and clouding into an infinity of combinations and designs. Eyes staring wide, as if unable to close them to the brilliant kaleidoscopic procession, the adventurer looked on.

FRIDAY knew that his master at that moment was impotent to move, even to shut his eyes, and, with a wild notion that he was being electrocuted, he made a rash rush to destroy the device and free him. He learned discretion when two ray-streaks pronged before him and forced him back; and thereafter he was given the undivided attention of two guards.

From the outside, through the ball of color, Carse was a ghostlike figure. Rigid and quivering, he sat in the chair and watched the color-maelstrom. His face was contorted; his cheek muscles stood out weltlike in his sweat-glistening skin; his eyes, which he could not close, throbbed with agony. But yet he was conscious; yet he still could will.

He defended his secret as best he could. Obviously this machine was being used to force from his mind the knowledge of Eliot Leithgow's whereabouts, and therefore he attempted to seal his mind. He fastened it on something definite—on Iapetus, satellite of Saturn, and his ranch there—and barred every other thought from his head. Mechanically he repeated to himself: "Iapetus, Iapetus—my ranch on Iapetus—Iapetus, Iapetus." Hundreds of times… . Hours… . Days… .

The blinding waves of color rioted about him, submerged him, fatigued him. He had a strong impulse to sleep, but he resisted it.

Days seemed to pass… . Years… . Eons. All this… . Continued without change… . To the end of the world… .

Dimly he knew that the color-storm was working on him; sensed danger when a great drowsiness stole over him; but he fought it off, his brain beating out hundreds of times more: "Iapetus, Iapetus—I have a ranch there—Iapetus, Iapetus… ."

Then came excruciating pain!

AN electric shock suddenly speared him. His nerves seemed to curl up, and for a second his mind was thoroughly disorganized before it again took up the drone about Iapetus. Recovery … dullness … a kind of peace—and again the shock leaped through him. It was followed by a question from afar off:

"*Where is Eliot Leithgow?*"

Somehow the question meant a great deal and should not be answered… .

Again the stab of agony. Again the voice:

"*Where is Eliot Leithgow?*"

Again the shock, and again the voice. Alternating, over and over. He could brace himself against the shock, but the voice could in no way be avoided. It was everywhere about him, over, around, under him; he began to see it. Desperately he forced his brain on the path it must not leave. He had forgotten years ago why, but knew there must be some good reason.

"Iapetus, Iapetus—I have a ranch there—Iapetus, Iapetus—*Where is Eliot Leithgow?*—Iapetus, Iapetus—I have a ranch there—*Where is Eliot Leithgow*—I have a ranch there—a ranch there—Iapetus, a ranch—*Where is Eliot Leithgow?—Where is Eliot Leithgow?—Where is Eliot Leithgow?*" …

After two hours and ten minutes the Hawk crumpled.

He was quite delirious at the time. The combined effect of the pain, the physical and nervous exhaustion of the shocks and light, the endlessly repeated question, his own close concentration on his Iapetus ranch—these were too much for any human body to stand against. He lost his grip on his mind, lost the fine control that had never been lost before, the control about which he was so vain. And the lump of flesh that was Hawk Carse gave the information that was tearing wildly at its prison.

A stammering voice came from the heart of the color-sphere:

"Port o' Porno, Satellite III—Port o' Porno, Satellite III—Port o' Porno Sat——"

Dr. Ku Sui interrupted him; leaned forward.

"The house is number——?"

"574—574—574——"

"Ah!" breathed the Eurasian. "Port o' Porno! So near!"

Ku Sui returned the switch and pressed one of the buttons. The pool of colors faded; the laboratory returned to comparative dimness. The machine in its center seemed but a great web of wire.

Slumped in the seat within it was a slender figure, his flaxen head bowed over on his chest, his eyes closed, and sweat still trickling down his unconscious brow.

And lying on the floor was another unconscious figure.

Friday had fainted.

Chapter 6

Port o' Porno

THE pirate port of Porno is of course dead now, replaced by the clean lawfulness of Port Midway, but a hundred years ago, in the days before the patrol-ships came, she roared her bawdy song through the farthest reaches of the solar system. For crack merchant ships and dingy space trading tramps alike, she was haven; drink and drugs, women and diversions unspeakable lured to her space ports the cream and scum, adventures and riffraff of half a dozen worlds. Sailors and pirates paid off at her and stayed as long as their wages lasted in the Street of the Sailors; not a few remained permanently, their bodies flung to the beasts of the savage jungle that rimmed the port. There only the cunning and strong could live. Ray-guns were the surest law. Modern scientific progress stood side by side with murderous lawlessness as old as man himself.

The hell town had grown with the strides of a giant, rising rapidly from a muddy street of *tio* shacks to a small cosmetropolis. She was essentially a place of contrasts. Two of the big Earth companies had modern space-ship hangars there, well-lighted, well-equipped, but under their very noses was a festering welter of dark, rutted byways extending all the way to the comparative orderliness of the short, narrow Street of the Merchants, itself flanked by the drunken bedlam of the Street of the Sailors. It can be understood why these men who flew, who needed a whole solar system for elbow room, disdained setting to order the measly few acres of dirt they stopped at, but it is a mystery why, when used to living through vast leagues of space, they endured such narrow streets and cluttered houses. Probably, tired from their long cramped cruises, impatient for their fling, they just didn't care a whoop.

The whole jumble that was this famous space port rested in the heart of Satellite III's primeval jungle.

TALL electric-wired fences girdled Port o' Porno to keep the jungle back. It was equivalent to a death sentence to pass unarmed outside them; the monstrous shapes that lived and fought in the jungle's swampy gloom saw to that. Hideous nightmare shapes they were, some reptilian and comparable only to the giants that roamed Earth in her prehistoric ages. Eating, fighting, breeding in the humid gloominess of the vegetation shrouded swamps, their bellows and roars sometimes at night thundered right through Porno, a reminder of Nature yet untamed. Occasionally, in the berserk ecstasy of the mating season, they hurled their house-high bodies at the guarding fences; and then there was panic in the town, and many lives ripped out before a barrage of rays drove the monsters back.

They were not the only inhabitants native to Satellite III. Deep underground, seldom seen by men, lived a race of man-mole creatures, half human in intelligence, blind from their unlit habitat, but larger than a man and stronger; fiercer, too, when cornered. Their numbers no one knew, but their bored tunnels, it had been found, constituted a lower layer of life over the whole satellite.

Probably more vicious than these native "Three's" of Porno were the visiting bipeds, man himself, who thronged the*kantrans*—which may be defined as dives for the purveying of all entertainments. In them were a score of snares for the buccaneer with money in his pocket and dope in his blood. The open doors on the Street of the Sailors were all loudspeakers of drunken oaths and laughter, pierced now and then by a scream or cry as someone in the sweating press of bodies inside knew rage or fear.

ONE interplanetarily notorious kantran made a feature of swinging its attractions aloft in gilded cages, where all of them, young and old, pale and painted, giant and dwarf, ogled the arrested passers-by and invited sampling of their wares.

Of all kinds and conditions of men were these passers-by. Earthling sailors, white, negro, Chinese and Eurasian, most of them in the drab blue of space-ship crews, but each with a ray-gun strapped to his waist; short, thin-faced Venusians, shifty-eyed, cunning, with the planet's universal weapon, the skewer-blade, sheathed at their sides; tall, sweaty Martians, powerful brutes, wearing the air-rarifying mask that was necessary for them in Satellite III's Earthlike atmosphere. Business men and sight-seers, except the most bold, were apt to stay in their houses after their first visit to the Street of the Sailors. Each face on the street or in the

kantrans that lined it bore the mark of drink, or the contemptuous, insolent expression bred by Porno's favorite drug, isuan.

Around Porno was the constant threat of savage life; below it were half-human savagery and mystery; above, in the very shadow of their mighty engines of space, were the most vicious animals of all—degraded men.

This was the Port o' Porno of a hundred years ago.

This was the Port o' Porno where Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow for very good reasons had told Hawk Carse he would meet him. 574. The house of his friend.

NIGHT descended suddenly on the outlaw space-port that day the elderly exile waited in vain for his comrade in arms Hawk Carse to show up.

There were six hours when the blasting heat received by Satellite III from near-lying Jupiter would be gone, and in its place a warm, cloying tropical darkness, heavy with the odors of town and exotic products and the damp, lush vegetation of the impinging jungle. The night would be given over to carousing; for these six hours the Street of the Sailors came to life. It was a time to keep strictly in hiding.

In the middle of that night, when the pleasures of Porno were in full stride, there emerged suddenly, from one of the dark, crooked byways that angled off the Street of the Sailors, a squad of five men whose disciplined pace and regular formation were in marked contrast to the confusion around them. They were slant-eyed men, with smooth saffron faces, and strongly built, and they were armed, each one, with both a ray-gun and a two-foot black, pointed tube. But it was not their numbers, formation or weapons that caused the carousing crowd to fall silent and hastily get out of their path. It was, rather, the insignia embroidered on the breasts of the gray smocks they wore. The insignia represented an asteroid in a circle of the ten planets, and the Street of Sailors knew that sign and dreaded it.

The squad pressed along rapidly. A still-comely woman, new to Porno, plucked smirking at the leader's sleeve; but his pace did not slacken, and she fell back, puzzled and afraid because of her feeling of something lifeless, dumb, machinelike in the man. Ahead, an isuan-maddened Earthling fell foul of a Venusian; a circle cleared in the mob, a ray-gun spat and missed, and the Venusian closed, the gleam of a skewer-blade playing around him. This was combat; this was interesting; but none of the squad's five men gave the fight a glance, or even turned

his head when, as they passed, the butchered Earthling coughed out his life.

SO they passed, and soon they were gone down another black-throated byway.

They padded noiselessly along in the darkness to turn again presently, pausing finally before a low, steel-walled house, typical of the strongholds of prudent merchants of the port. No lights were visible within it; all seemed asleep.

Silence filled the narrow street, and unrelieved darkness. Occasionally a desultory breeze brought sounds of a burst of revelry from the Street of the Sailors; once the ports of an outbound space-ship flashed overhead for an instant. But there was mainly silence and darkness, and in it the five men, parleying close together in toneless whispers.

After a little they separated. On cat's feet four of them stole around the sides of the house. The fifth, drawing the black, pointed tube from his slash, crept up to the front entrance-port and held the tip to it. Blue light sparkled fantastically, revealing his impassive face, outlining his crouching body. Then, quite suddenly, the port appeared to melt inward, and he disappeared into the blackness of the interior.

Presently there came a stir of movement, a whisper, a rustle from inside. A challenge, shouts volleying forth, a scream, another, and the peculiar rattling sound that comes from a dying man's throat. Then again silence.

Five shadows melted from the front entrance-port. They were carrying something black and still and heavy between them.

The errand was done… .

Chapter 7

The Coming of Leithgow

HAWK Carse awoke to the touch of a hand on his brow. He came very slowly to full consciousness. His pain was great.

His whole body was sore: every joint, every muscle in it ached; his brain was feverish, pumping turmoil. When he at length opened his eyes he found Friday's face bent close down, tender anxiety written large over it.

"You all right, suh? How do you feel now?"

A harsh sound came from the Hawk's throat. He pressed a hand to his throbbing temple and tried to collect his senses. Sitting up helped; he glanced around. They were back in the same cell, and they were alone. Then, shortly, he asked:

"Did I tell him?"

"About Mr. M. S., suh?"

"Of course, I can't quite remember—a bit blurred——"

"I guess you did, suh," Friday answered mournfully. "I didn't hear you, but Ku Sui said you told him where Master Leithgow is. But dog-gone—you couldn't help it!"

Carse forgot his pain as his brain straightened these words out into their overwhelming consequence, and something of its old familiar mold, hard and graven, emotionless, came back to his face. His eyes were bleak as he murmured:

"I couldn't help it—no. I really don't think it was possible. But I could have refused to get into the machine. I thought I could resist it. I took that risk, and failed." He stopped short. His body twitched with uncontrolled emotion, and in decency the negro turned his back on his master's anguish. A broken whisper reached him: "I have betrayed Leithgow."

FOR a short while neither man moved, or made any sound. Friday was a little afraid; he guessed what must be going on in Carse's

mind, and had no idea what to expect. But the Hawk's next move was quite disciplined; he was himself again.

He got up and stretched his body, to limber its muscles. "How long have we been here?" he asked.

"Don't know suh; I was unconscious when they brought me here myself. But I guess not less'n six or eight hours."

"Unconscious?" asked the Hawk, surprised. "You fought, and they knocked you out?"

The big negro looked sheepish and scratched his woolly head.

"Well, no suh," he explained. "I was aimin' to butt in some, but they wouldn't let me."

"Then how did you get unconscious?"

Friday fidgeted. He was acutely embarrassed. "Don't know, suh, Doggone, I just can't figure it, unless I fainted."

"Oh." The Hawk smiled. "Fainted. Well so did I, I guess. I suppose," he went on seriously, "you couldn't tell whether the asteroid moved or not. I mean toward Satellite III."

Friday scratched his head again.

"I guess I can't, suh," he replied. "I haven't felt any movement."

"The door is locked?"

"Oh, yes, suh. Tight."

"Very well. Now please be silent. I want to think."

He went over and leaned against the far wall of the cell. His right hand rose to the bangs of flaxen hair and with a slow regular movement began to smooth them. Lost in thought he stood there, thinking through the situation in which he found himself.

He had expected, of course, to subject himself to great risk in keeping the rendezvous with Dr. Ku Sui, but he had never thought he would be endangering Eliot Leithgow also. It was torture to know he had put the gentle old scientist into the Eurasian's web.

That was it: if he could not somehow shear through that web, he must destroy Leithgow himself, and follow on after. The scientist would prefer it so. For whatever Dr. Ku's exact reason for wanting the Master Scientist was, it was an ugly one: that it was worse than quick death, he knew full well.

Shear through the web. How? Where was the weak strand in Ku Sui's cunningly laid plot? The Hawk visualized all he could of the asteroid's mechanical details, and surveyed them painstakingly. Two great portlocks flanked by little ones; secret opening combinations—not much hope in that avenue. Judd's ship, resting above: could he reach it, and

raise it and douse the buildings with its rays? No; Dr. Ku had spoken of defense rays—they would certainly be far more powerful than the*Scorpion's*. Then, somewhere there were the mighty gravity-plates batteries which motivated the asteroid and held it controlled in space. The dynamos. Two men, working swiftly, might wreak an unholy amount of damage in little time; in the resulting confusion anything might happen. If!

INTO the depths of his concentration came the odor of tsin-tsin flowers, followed by the familiar, silkie voice of his arch-enemy.

"I see you are deep in thought, my friend. I trust it indicates your complete recovery."

Dr. Ku Sui stood smiling in the doorway, his same bodyguard of three armed men behind him. His sardonic words brought no reply. He went on:

"I hope so. I have arranged, thanks to your kindness, a meeting with an old, dear friend of yours. An illustrious friend: he already honors my establishment with his presence. I have come to ask you to join us."

The Hawk's gray eyes turned frigid: a lesser man would have blanched at the threat implied in his answer.

"God help you, Ku Sui."

The Eurasian turned it aside. "Always," he said, "God helps those who help themselves. But come with me, if you'll be so kind. We are expected in the laboratory."

This exchange passed quickly. Friday was still grasping at its underlying meanings as they again filed down the short straight outside corridor. It brought a perverse satisfaction to see the coolie guards bearing their ray-guns unsheathed and ready. Ku Sui's general attitude did not fool him. He knew that the man's suave mockery and flowery courtesy were camouflage for a very real fear of the quick wits and brilliant, pointed action of his famous master, the Hawk.

Carse walked steadily enough, but every step he took beat in his mind like the accents of a dirge. For he had betrayed into the hands of the Eurasian his most loved and loyal friend. Betrayed him! Despicably egotistical he had been in submitting to the chair, in not making one last wild break for freedom at that time. He had thought he could beat Ku Sui at his own game. Ku Sui, of all men!

UNSEEN hands opened from the other side the metal laboratory door, they passed through and the close-fitting halves closed

behind them. Ku Sui went to the main switchboard and Carse glanced rapidly around. Leithgow was not there. The wire-ball device was gone, but otherwise the details of the room were unchanged, even to the four white-clad assistants whose fine heads had eyes so lifeless and faces so expressionless. Emphasized, now, somehow, was the tall screen that hid something on one side of the room, and an intuition told the Hawk that what lay behind the screen was in some way connected with their fate.

He waited stolidly for what he knew was coming.

"Now," Dr. Ku murmured. He smiled at his two prisoners and pressed one of the switchboard's array of buttons. A door opposite them swung open.

"Believe me, this is a pleasure," he said.

Flanked by two impressive slant-eyed guards, a frail figure in a rubber apron stood revealed.

Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow blinked as he looked about the laboratory. Helpless, pitifully alone he looked, with his small, slightly stooped body, his tragedy-aged, deeply-lined face. The blue veins showed under the transparent skin of his forehead; his light-blue eyes, set deep under snow-white eyebrows, darted from side to side, dazed by the light and perhaps still confused by the events which had snatched him so suddenly from his accustomed round and struck him with such numbing force. His years and frailty were obviously fitted rather to some seat of science in a university on Earth than the raw conditions of the frontiers of space.

Hawk Carse found words, but could not control his voice.

"This is the first time I've ever been sorry to see you, M. S.," he said simply.

Chapter 8

Dr. Ku Shows His Claws

THE scientist brushed back his thinning white hair with a trembling hand. He knew that voice. He walked over and put his hands on his friend's shoulders.

"Carse!" he exclaimed. "Thank God, you're alive!"

"And you," said the Hawk.

Ku Sui interrupted.

"I am most glad, honored Master Scientist," he said in the flowery Oriental fashion that he affected in his irony, "to welcome you here. For me it is a memorable occasion. Your presence graces my home, and, however unworthily, distinguishes me, rewarding as it does aspirations which I have long held. I am humbly confident that great achievements will result from your visit——"

Quickly Eliot Leithgow turned and looked squarely at him. There was no bending of spirit in the frail old man. "Yes," he said, "my visit. Your sickening verbal genuflections beautifully evade the details—the house of my friend raided at night; he, himself, unarmed, shot down in cold blood; his house gutted! You are admirably consistent, Dr. Ku. A brilliant stroke, typical of your best!"

Five faint lines appeared across the Eurasian's high, narrow brow. "What?" he exclaimed. "Is this true? My servitors must be reprimanded severely; and meanwhile I beg you not to hold their impetuousness against me."

CARSE could stand it no longer. This suave mockery and the pathetic figure of his friend; the mention of raid and murder——

"It's all my fault," he blurted out. "I told him where you were. I thought——"

"Oh, no!" Dr. Ku broke in, pleasantly protesting. "Captain Carse is gallant, but the responsibility's not his. I have a little machine—a trifle, but

most ingenious at extracting secrets which persons attempt to hold from me. The Captain couldn't help himself, you see——"

"It was not necessary to tell me that," said Leithgow.

"Of course," the Eurasian agreed and for the first time seriously; "but let me suggest that the end justifies the means. And that brings me to my point. Master Scientist, now you may know that I have for some time been working toward a mighty end. This end is now in sight, with you here, the final achievement can be attained. An achievement——" He paused, and the ecstasy of the inspired fanatic came to his eyes. Never before had the three men standing there so seen him. "I will explain."

His eyes changed, and imperiously he gave an order to his assistants. "A chair for Master Leithgow, and one for Carse. Place them there." Then, "Be seated," he invited them with a return of his usual seeming courtesy. "I'm sure you must be tired."

Slowly Eliot Leithgow lowered himself into the metal seat. Friday, ignored, shifted his weight from one foot to the other. The Hawk did not sit down until with old habit he had sized up the whole layout of laboratory, assistants and chances. The two chairs faced toward ward the high screen; to each side stood the five coolie-guards; mechanically alert as always; the four Caucasian assistants made a group of strange statues to the right.

Ku Sui took position, standing before the screen. Seldom did the cold, hard iron of the man show through the velvet of his manner as now.

"Yes," he said, "I will talk to you for a while; give you broad outline of my purpose. And when I have finished you will know why I have wanted you here so badly, Master Leithgow."

HE began, and, as never before, he hid nothing of his monstrous ambition, his extraordinary preparations. With mounting fear his captives listened to his well-modulated voice as it proceeded logically from point to point. He had fine feeling for the dramatic, knew well the value of climax and pause; but his use of them was here unconscious, for he spoke straight from his dark and feline heart.

For the first time in the Affair of the Brains, the tiger was showing his claws.

"For a long time," Ku Sui said, "we four gathered here have fought each other. All over space our conflict has ranged, from Earth to beyond Saturn. I suppose there never have been more bitter enemies; I know there has never been a greater issue. I said we four, but I should have said we *two*, Master Leithgow. Captain Carse has commanded a certain

respect from me, the respect one must show for courage, fine physical coordination and a remarkable instinct and capacity for self-preservation—but, after all, he is primarily only like the black here, Friday, and a much less splendid animal. It is a *brain* that receives my respect! A brain! Genius! I do not fear Carse: he is only an adventurer; but your brain, Master Leithgow, I respect.

"For, naturally, brains will determine the future of these planets around us. The man with the most profound and extensive scientific knowledge united to the greatest audacity—remember, audacity!—can rule them every one!"

He paused and looked into the eyes of the Master Scientist. Pointedly he said:

"You, Master Leithgow, have the brains but not the audacity. I have the audacity *and* the brains—now that you are here."

COLD prickles of fear chased down Carse's and the scientist's spine at this obscure threat. Some of their reaction must have shown in their faces, for the Eurasian permitted himself a brief, triumphant smile and added:

"You shall know just what I mean in but a few minutes. Right now, in this very laboratory, the fate of the planets is being decided!"

Hawk Carse licked his dry lips.

"Big words!" he said.

"Easily proved, Captain Carse, as you'll see. What can restrain the man who can instantly command Earth's master-minds of scientific knowledge, the man who has both a considerable brain of his own to call on and the mightiest brains in existence, all coordinated for perfect, instant effectiveness. Why, with these brains working for him, he can become omnipotent; there can be but feeble resistance to his steps toward universal power! Only chance, unpredictable chance, always at work, always powerful, can defeat him—and my audacity allows me to disregard what I cannot anticipate."

"You talk riddles," answered Leithgow. "You do not explain your intended means. What you imply you can do with brains is utterly impossible."

"Impossible? Ever a foolish word, Master. You know that the brain has always been my special study. As much as ten years ago, I was universally recognized as the greatest expert in my specialty. But I tell you that my knowledge of the subject was as nothing then to what it is now. I have been very busy these last ten years. Look!"

With a graceful sweep of a hand he indicated the four coolie-guards and his four white-smocked assistants.

"These men of mine," he continued, "do they appear normal, would you say? Or, rather, mechanicalized; lacking in certain things and thereby gaining enormously in the values which can make them perfect servitors? I have removed from their minds certain superficial qualities of thought. The four men in white were, a few years ago, highly skilled surgeons, three of them brain specialists and noted for exceptional intellects and bold, pioneering thinking. I needed them and took them, diverting them from their natural state, in which they would have resisted me and refused my commands. Certain complicated adjustments on their brains—and now their brains are mine, all their separate skill at my command alone!"

LEITHGOW sat back suddenly, astonishment and horror on his face. His lips parted as if to speak, then closed tightly together again. At last he uttered one word.

"Murderer!"

Dr. Ku smiled. "In a sense, yes. But let me go on.

"The reshaping of these mentalities and of the mentalities of all my coolies, were achievements, and valuable ones; but I wanted more. I wanted much more. I wanted the great, important part of all Earth's scientific knowledge at my fingertips, under my control. I wanted the exceptional brains of Earth, the brains of rare genius, the brains that lived like lonely stars, infinitely removed from the common herd. And more than that, I wanted them *always*; I wanted them *ageless*. For I had to seal my power!"

The Eurasian's words were coming more rapidly now, though the man's thoughts and tone were still under control; and Carse, sitting there silently, felt that the climax was being reached; that soon something unthinkable, something of dread, would be revealed. The voice went on:

"These brains I wanted were not many—only six in all. Most of them you knew, Master Leithgow, these men who constituted the cream of Earth's scientific ability. Professor Estapp, the good-looking young American; Dr. Swanson, the Swede; Master Scientist Cram—the great English genius Cram, already legendary, the only other of that rank beside yourself; Professor Geinst, the hunchbacked, mysterious German; and Dr. Norman—Dr. Sir Charles Esme Norman, to give him his English title. I wanted these men, and I got them! All except you, the sixth!"

AGAIN Dr. Ku Sui smiled in triumph. To Eliot Leithgow his smile was unspeakable.

"Yes," the elderly scientist cried out, "you got them, you murderer!"

"Oh, no, no, Master Leithgow, you are mistaken. I did not kill them. Why should I be stupid as to do that? To these men I wanted so badly? No, no. Because these five scientists disappeared from Earth suddenly, without trace, without hint of the manner of their going, the stupid Earthlings believe they were killed! Stupid Earthlings! Abducted, of course; but why assume they were killed? And why, of all people, decide that Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow had something to do with their disappearance? I confess to having planted that evidence pointing to you, but if they had the sense of a turnip they would know that you were incapable of squashing a flea, let alone destroying five eminent brothers in science! You, jealous, guilty of five *crimes passionel! Pour le science!* Credulous Earthlings! Incredible Earthlings! And here are you, a hunted man with a price on your head!

"So for ten years you have thought I murdered those five men? No, no. They were very much alive for eight years and very troublesome prisoners. It took me eight years to solve the problem I had set myself.

"You will meet them in a minute—the better part of them. You'll see for yourself that they are very usefully alive. For I succeeded completely with them. *I have sealed my power!*"

His silk pajamalike clothing rustled loud in the strained silence as he turned to the screen behind him. For some obscure reason the perfume about him, flowers of tsin-tsin, seemed to grow in their nostrils.

"Observe!" he said, and lifted it aside. An assistant threw a switch on a nearby panel. The unnatural quiet in the laboratory was resumed.

"The ultimate concentration of scientific knowledge and genius! The gateway to all power!"

Chapter 9

The Brain Speaks

A CASE lay revealed.

At first, while it was unlit, it seemed nothing more than that: a case like those glass-sided and glass-topped ones found in museums, a case perhaps three feet high, three feet deep and five feet in width. Under this glass upper part of the case was an enclosed section a little more than a foot in depth. The whole structure was supported at each corner by short strong metal legs. And that was all.

But, second by second, as the captives took in these details, a change came over the interior. No doubt it was the result of the increasing action of some electrical current loosed by the throwing of the switch; the whole insides of the glass case little by little lightened, until it became apparent it was full of a strange liquid that seemed of itself to have the property of glowing with soft light. As this light increased, a row of five shadowy bulks the size of footballs began to take form between what looked, from where the men sat, like a forest of fibers of silk.

In a few more seconds a miracle of complicated wiring came into visibility. The silk fibers were seen to be wires, threads of silver gossamer that interconnected the five emerging bulks in a maze of ordered complexity. Thousands interlaced the interior; hundreds were gathered in each of five close bunches that sprouted from the floor of the case and then spread, fanwise, to various groupings of delicate liquid-immersed instruments.

In several seconds more Eliot Leithgow and Hawk Carse were staring with horror at what the now brilliantly glowing liquid revealed the five shapes to be. As one man they rose, went to the cabinet and gazed with terrible fascination.

"Brains!" exclaimed Leithgow. "Human brains! But not alive—surely not alive!"

"But yes," contradicted the triumphant Eurasian. "Alive."

FIVE human brains lay all immersed in the glowing case, each resting in a shallow metal pan. There were pulsings in narrow gray tubes which led into their under-sides—theatrical evidence that the brains held imprisoned there were, as the Eurasian had said, alive—most strangely, unnaturally and horribly alive. Stark and cruelly naked they lay there, pulsing with life that should not have been.

"Yes, alive!" repeated Ku Sui. "And never to die while their needs are attended!"

One of his long artistic fingers tapped the glass before the central brain, which was set somewhat lower than the others. "This," he said, "is the master brain. It controls and coordinates the thoughts of the others, avoiding the useless, pursuing the relevant and retaining the valuable. It is by far the most important of the five, and is, of course the superior intellect. It is the keystone of my gateway to all power."

Eliot Leithgow's face was deathly white, but, as one in the grip of some devilish hypnotic fascination, he could not tear his eyes away from the revolting, amazing achievement of his brilliant enemy. The Eurasian with the cruelty of a cat picked that awful moment to add:

"This master brain is all that was best of Master Scientist Cram."

The frail old man took this statement like a blow.

"Oh, dear heaven—not Raymond Cram! Not Cram, the physicist, brought to this! Why, I knew him when——"

Ku Sui smiled and interrupted. "But you speak of him as if he were dead! He's not. He's very much alive, as you shall see. Possibly even happy—who knows? There is no good—— *Keep back, Carse!*"

HIS tiger's eyes had not missed the adventurer's slight crouch in preparation for a shove which might have toppled the case and ended the abominable servitude of its gruesome tenants. The Hawk was caught before he had well started; and had he not stopped his gathering muscles he would have been dead from the coolie-guards' rays by the time he touched the near side of the case.

He took his failure without comment; only stepped back, folded his arms and burned his enemy with the frigid glare of his eyes. The Eurasian continued as if nothing had happened, addressing himself chiefly to Leithgow.

"The others, too, you once knew; you are even charged with their murder. Let me introduce you once more to your old colleagues and friends. There, at the right, is the brain you once compared notes with in the person of Professor Estapp. Next to him is Dr. Swanson. To the left of

Master Scientist Cram, is Professor Geinst, and this last is Dr. Sir Charles Esme Norman. Now think what this group represents!

"Estapp, Chemistry and Bio-Chemistry; Swanson, Psychology; Geinst, Astronomy; Norman, Mathematics. And Cram, the master brain, of course, Physics and Electricity, although his encyclopedic knowledge encompassed every major subject, well fitting his brain for the position it holds. All this, gathered here in one! The five outstanding intellects of Earth, here gathered in one priceless instrument! Here are my advisors; here my trusty, never-tiring assistants. I can have their help toward the solution of any problem; obtain from their individual and combined intelligences even those rare intuitions which I have found almost always precede brilliant discoveries.

"For they not only retain all they ever knew of science, but they can *develop*, even as brains in bodies can develop. Their knowledge does not become outmoded, if they are kept informed of the latest currents of scientific thought. From old knowledge and new they build their structures of logic once my command sets them on. Wills of their own they have none.

"I have not succeeded in all my secondary alterations, however. For one thing, I have been unable to deprive them altogether of the memory of what they formerly were; but it is a subdued memory, to them doubtless like a dream, familiar yet puzzling. Because of this I imagine they hate me—heartily!—yet they lack the will, the egocentricity which would enable them to refuse to answer my questions and do my work.

"Frankly, without them this whole structure"—his hands swept out widely—"my whole asteroidal kingdom, would have been impossible. Most of my problems in constructing it were solved here. And in the future other problems, far greater, will be solved here!"

HAWK CARSE by now understood very well Dr. Ku Sui's purpose in bringing M. S. Leithgow to his laboratory, and was already goading his brain in search of a way out. Death was by all means preferable to what the Eurasian intended—death self-inflicted, and death that mutilated the brain—but there were no present chances that his searching mind could see.

If Leithgow suspected what was in store, his face gave no sign of it. He only said:

"Dr. Ku, of all the things you have ever done, this is the most heartless and most vile. I would have thought there was a limit in you

somewhere, but this—this thing—this horrible life you have condemned these five men to——"

He could not continue. The Eurasian only smiled, and replied, with his always seeming courtesy:

"Your opinion is natural Master: I could expect no other. But when great ends are to be gained, he who would gain them must strip himself of those disturbing atavistic things we call the tender emotions. The pathway to power is not for those who wince at the sight of blood, who weep at the need for death. I hope, for special reasons, that you'll make an effort to understand this before we come to the phase which will follow my demonstration… .

"Now, please allow me to show you my coordinated brains in useful operation. Will you be seated again? You, too, Captain Carse."

IT was Ku Sui's show: there was nothing for the two men but to obey. But they felt, both of them, a great unnaturalness in being seated for the demonstration to come.

"Thank you," the Eurasian said, and went to the panel flanking the case. There, he turned and remarked: "Before we begin, I must ask you to remember that the opinions of my brains may always be accepted as the probable truth, and always, absolutely, are they honest and without prejudice." He threw a small knife switch and again turned. Nothing seemed to happen.

"I have contrived, of course, an artificial way of communicating with my helpers. This inset grille here contains both microphone and speaker—ear and mouth.

"The ear picks up my words and transmits them to every brain. If I have asked a question, it is individually considered and the respective answers sent to the master brain; they are there coordinated and the result spoken to me by means of the mechanical mouth. When the opinions of the individual brains do not agree, the answer is in the form of a poll, often with brief mention of points pro and con. Sometimes their meditations take considerable time; but simple questions always bring a prompt and unanimous answer. Shall we try them now?"

The man's spectators did not answer; even the Hawk was for once in his life too overcome by conflicting feelings of horror and dread, and compelling morbid fascination. Dr. Ku paused dramatically, a slight smile on his enigmatic lips; then turned his head and spoke into the grille.

"Do you hear me?" he asked, easily and confidently.

The silence in the laboratory was for one brief moment almost overpowering. Then, from the grille, came a thin metallic voice. Inhuman, artificial, it sounded in the tense strain of the silent room, voice from the living dead that it was.

"*I do*," were its words.

"Strange," mused the Eurasian, half aloud, "that their collective answer is always given as 'I.' What obscure telescoping of egotisms can be the cause of that… ."

He dropped the mood of wonder at once. "Tell me," he said, looking deliberately at Leithgow: "Would the brain of Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow be more valuable in the position of the master brain than Cram's?"

A horrible eternity passed. Again came the inhuman voice:

"*I have answered that question before. Yes.*"

DR. KU broke the stunned silence that followed this verdict.

"Don't forget that several ray-guns are centered on you, Carse," he remarked casually. "Others, black, are on you. Earthlings would no doubt consider your emotions very creditable; I only suggest that you keep them under control."

But the Hawk had given no slightest intimation that he might attempt anything. He sat quietly, a little tensely, his face an icy mask, only the freezing shock of his steady gray eyes betraying his emotion as they bore straight into those of the Eurasian. No man could meet such eyes for long, and even the tiger ones of Ku Sui the all-powerful went aside at the icy murder that showed there.

Friday still stood in back of the chairs where were seated his two friends. He was scared to death from the thing he had seen. His face was a sickly, ashy gray, and his eyes large round rolling white marbles; but at the slightest sign of a break he would have metamorphosed into a demon of destruction, however hopeless the try, with ray-guns covering him at all times. Such was his love and loyalty for his famous master.

Eliot Leithgow was a man resigned. His head sank down on his chest. Dr. Ku's next words, though aimed at him, did not seem to penetrate his consciousness.

"You see, Master Leithgow, I have no choice. My purposes are all-important; they always come first; they demand this substitution. Were your intellect of lesser stature, I would have no interest in you whatever. But as it is… ." He shrugged.

Hawk Carse stood up.

The Eurasian's voice fell away. The ensuing silence gave an icy, clear-cut sharpness to the whisper that then cut through it from thin lips that barely moved:

"God help you, Ku Sui, if you do it. *God help you.*"

DR. KU SUI smiled deprecatingly and again shrugged.

"I have told you before that God helps those who help themselves. I have always had splendid results from helping myself."

For a moment he looked away as he considered something in his mind. Then to his veiled eyes came the old mocking irony, and he said:

"I think perhaps you'd like to observe the operations, my friend, and I'm going to allow you to. Not here—no. I could never have you interrupting; the series of operations is of infinite delicacy and will require weeks. But I can make other arrangements; I can give you as good as ringside seats for each performance. A small visi-screen might be attached to one wall of your cell to enable you to see every detail of what transpires here." His tone suddenly stiffened. "*I wouldn't, Carse!*"

The Hawk relaxed from the brink on which he had wavered. A sudden mad rush—what else remained? What else? For an instant he had lost his head—one of the several times in his whole life. Just for an instant he had forgotten his phenomenal patience under torture, his own axiom that in every tight place there was a way out.

"That's much safer," said Ku Sui. "Perhaps you and the black had better return to your cell."

Certain little muscles in the Hawk's face were trembling as he turned to go, and his feet would not work well. The ray-guns of the coolie-guards covered his every move. Friday followed just behind.

As the adventurer came to the door he stopped and turned, and his eyes went back to those of the frail, elderly scientist.

The doomed man met the gray eyes and their agony with a smile.

"It's all right, old comrade," he said. "Just remember to destroy this hellish device, if you ever possibly can. My love to Sandra; and to her, and my dear ones on Earth, anything but the truth… . Farewell."

Carse's fingernails bit each one into his palms. He hesitated; tried, but could not speak.

"All right, Carse—you may go."

The feelingless guards nudged white man and black out, and the door swung solidly closed behind them… .

Chapter 10

In the Visi-Screen

THERE were those among the few claiming to have any insight into the real Hawk Carse who declared that a month went out of his life for every minute he spent in the cell then. The story, of course, came trickling out through various unreliable sources; we who delve in the lore of the great adventurer have to thank for our authorities Sewell, the great historian of that generation—who personally traveled several million miles to get what meager facts the Hawk would divulge concerning his life and career—equally with Friday, who shared this particular adventure with him. Friday's emotional eyes no doubt colored his memory of the scenes he passed through, and it is likely that the facts lost nothing in the simple dramatic way he would relate them.

But certainly the black was as fearful of his master during that period in the cell as he was of what he saw acted out on the screen.

We can picture him telling of the ordeal, his big eyes rolling and his deep rich voice trembling with the memories stamped forever in his brain; and picture too the men who, at one time or another, listened to him, fascinated, their mouths agape and a tickling down the length of their spines. It was probably only Friday's genius as a narrator which later caused some of his listeners to swear that new lines were grooved in Carse's face and a few flaxen hairs silvered by the minutes he spent watching Eliot Leithgow strapped down on that operating table, close to the beautiful surgeon fingers of Dr. Ku Sui.

But whether or not that period of torture really pierced through his iron emotional guard and set its mark on him permanently by aging him, it is impossible to say. However, there were deep things in Hawk Carse, and the deepest among them were the ties binding him to his friends; there was also that certain cold vanity; and considering these it is probable that he came very close indeed to the brink of some frightening emotional abyss, before which he had few shreds of mind and body-discipline left… .

HE reentered the cell like a ghost; he stood very still, his hands slowly clenching and unclenching behind his back, and his pale face inclined low, so that the chin rested on his chest. So he stood for some minutes, Friday not daring to disturb him, until the single door that gave entrance clicked in its lock and opened again. At this he raised his head. Five men came in, all coolies, three of whom had ray-guns which they kept scrupulously on the white man and black while the other two rigged up an apparatus well up on one of the cell walls. They remained wholly unaffected the several times their dull eyes met those of the Hawk. Perhaps, being mechanicalized humans, practically robots, they got no reaction from the icy gray eyes in his strained white face.

The device they attached was some two square feet of faintly gleaming screen, rimmed by metal and with little behind it other than two small enclosed tubes, a cuplike projector with wires looping several terminals on its exterior, and a length of black, rubberized cable, which last was passed through one of the five-inch ventilating slits high in the wall. Carse regarded it with his hard stare until the door clicked behind the coolies and they were once more alone. Then his head returned to its bowed position, and Friday approached the apparatus and began to examine it with the curiosity of the born mechanic he was.

"Let it be, Friday," the Hawk ordered tonelessly.

A dozen minutes passed in silence.

The silence was outward: there was no quiet in the adventurer's head. He could not stop the sharp remorseless voice which kept sounding in his brain. Its pitiless words flailed him unceasingly with their stinging taunts. "You—you whom they call the Hawk," it would say; "you, the infallible one—you, so recklessly, egotistically confident—you have brought this to pass! Not only have you allowed yourself to be trapped, but Eliot Leithgow! He is out there now; and soon his brain will be condemned forever to that which you have seen! The brain that trusted you! And you have brought this to pass! Yours the blame, the never-failing Hawk! All yours—yours—yours!"

A voice reached him from far away. A soft negro voice which said, timidly:

"They're beginning, suh. Captain Carse? On the screen, suh; they're beginning."

That was worse. The real ordeal was approaching. True, he might have thrown himself on the coolie-guards who had just left—but his death would not have helped old M. S.

Friday spoke again, and this time his words leaped roaring into Carse's ears. He raised his head and looked.

The tubes behind the screen were crackling, and the screen itself had come to life. He was looking at the laboratory. But the place was changed.

WHAT had before been a wide circular room, with complicated machines and unnamed scientific apparatus following only its walls, so as to leave the center of its floor empty and free from obstructions, was now a place of deep shadow pierced by a broad cone of blinding white light which shafted down from some source overhead and threw into brilliant emphasis only the center of the room.

The light struck straight down upon an operating table. At its head stood a squat metal cylinder sprouting a long flexible tube which ended in a cone—no doubt the anesthetizing apparatus. A stepped-back tier of white metal drawers flanked one side of the table, upon its various upper surfaces an array of gleaming surgeon's tools. In neat squads they lay there: long thin knives with straight and curved cutting edges; handled wires, curved into hooks and eccentric corkscrew shapes; scalpels of different sizes; forceps, clasps, retractors, odd metal claws, circular sawblades and a variety of other unclassified instruments. Sterilizers were convenient to one side, a thin wraith of steam drifting up from them into the source of the light.

Four men worked within the brilliant shaft of illumination—four white-clad figures, hands gloved and faces swathed in surgeons' masks. Only their lifeless eyes were visible, concentrated on their tasks of preparation. Steam rose in increased mists as one figure lifted back the lid of a sterilizer and dropped in some gleaming instruments. The cloud swirled around his masked face and body with devilish infernolike effect.

All this in deadest silence. From the darkness came another figure, tall and commanding, a shape whose black silk garments struck a new note in the dazzling whiteness of the scene. He was pulling on operating gloves. His slanted eyes showed keen and watchful through the eyeholes of the mask he already wore, as he surveyed the preparations. Ominous Ku Sui looked, among his white-clad assistants.

The Eurasian seemed to give an order, and a white figure turned and glanced off into the surrounding darkness, raising one hand. A door showed in faint outline as it opened. Through the door two shadows moved, wheeling something long and flat between them.

They came into the light, two coolies, and wheeled their conveyance alongside the operating table. Then they turned into the darkness and were gone.

"Oh!" gasped Friday. "They've shaved off his head!"

THE frail form of Eliot Leithgow, clad to the neck in loose white garments, showed clearly as he was lifted to the operating table. As Friday said, his hair was all gone—shaved off close—stunning verification of what was to happen. Awfully alone and helpless he looked, yet his face was calm and he lay there composed, watching his soulless inquisitors with keen blue eyes. But his expression altered when Dr. Ku appeared over him and felt and prodded his naked head.

"I can't stand this!"

It was a whisper of agony in the silence of the cell where the two men stood watching, a cry from the fiber of the Hawk's innermost self. The path he left across the frontiers of space was primarily a lonely one; but Friday and Eliot Leithgow and two or three others were friends and very precious to him, and they received all the emotion in his tough, hard soul. Especially Leithgow—old, alone, dishonored on Earth, frail and nearing the end of the long years—he needed protection. He had trusted Carse.

Trusted him! And now this!

Ku Sui's fingers were prodding Leithgow's head like that of any dumb animal chosen as subject for experimentation. Prodding… . Feeling… .

"I can't stand it!" the Hawk whispered again.

The mask on his face, that famous self-imposed mask that hid all emotion, had broken. Lines were there, deep with agony; tiny drops of sweat stood out all over. He saw Ku Sui pick up something and adjust it to his grip while looking down at the man who lay, now strapped on the table. He saw him nod curtly to an assistant; saw the anesthetic cylinder wheeled up a little closer, and the dials on it set to quivering… .

His hands came up and covered his eyes. But only for a moment. He would not be able to keep his sight away. That was the exquisite torture the Eurasian had counted on: he well knew as he had arranged it that the adventurer would not be able to hold his eyes from the screen. Carse had to look!

He took away his hands and raised his eyes.

The screen was blank!

FRIDAY looked up with a grin from where he was kneeling before the knob on the door of the cell. Carse saw that the knob was of metal, centered in an inset square of some dull fibrous composition.

"This door has an electric lock, suh," the negro explained rapidly. "And things worked by electricity can often be short-circuited!"

Quickly and silently he had disconnected from the television projector the wire which led back through the ventilating slit in the wall, and now was holding its end with one hand while with the other he twisted out the screw which held in the knob. "Anyway, won't hurt to try," he said, removing the screw and laying it on the floor. In another second the knob lay beside it, and he was squinting into the hole where it had fitted.

"Be quick!" Carse whispered.

Friday did not answer. He was guessing at the location of the mechanism within, and trying to summon up all the knowledge he had of such things. After a moment he bent one of the live ends of the wire he was holding into a gentle curve and felt his way down within the lock with it, carefully keeping the other end clear of all contacts.

Seconds went by as his fingers delicately worked—seconds that told terribly on Hawk Carse. For the screen was blank and lifeless, and there was no way of knowing how far the work in the laboratory had meanwhile progressed. In his mind remained each detail of the scene as he had viewed it last: the strapped-down figure, the approaching anesthetic cylinder, the knives lying in readiness… . How was he to know if one of those instruments were not already tinged with scarlet?

"Oh, be quick!" he cried again.

"If I can touch a live part of the lock's circuit," grunted Friday, absorbed, "there ought—to—be—trouble."

SUDDENLY currents clashed with a sputtering hiss, and a shower of sparks shot out of the knob-hole and were instantly gone. Short-circuited! It remained to be seen whether it had destroyed the mechanism of the lock. Friday dropped the hot, burned-through wire he was holding and reached for the knob, but the Hawk had leaped into life and was ahead of him.

In a moment the knob was in the door and its holding screw part-way in. Gently the Hawk tried the knob. It turned!

But they did not leave the cell—then. Ku Sui's voice was echoing through the room, more than a trace of irritation in its tone:

"Hawk Carse, you are beginning to annoy me—you and your too-clever black satellite."

Carse's eyes flashed to the ceiling. A small disklike object, almost unnoticeable, lay flat against it in one place.

"Yes," continued Ku Sui, "I can talk to you, hear you and see you. I believe you have succeeded in destroying the lock. So open it and glance into the corridor—and escape, if you still want to. I rather wish you'd try, for I'm extremely busy and must not be disturbed again."

Graven-faced, without comment Carse turned the knob and opened the door an inch. He peeped through, Friday doing so also over his head—peeped right into the muzzles of four ray-guns, held by an equal number of coolie-guards waiting there.

"So that's it," Friday said, dejectedly. "He saw me workin' on the lock an' sent those guards here at once. Or else had them there all the time."

THE Hawk closed the door and considered what to do. Ku Sui's voice returned.

"Yes," it sounded metallically, "I've an assistant posted here who's watching every move you make. Don't, therefore, hope to surprise me by anything you may do.

"Now I am going to resume work. Reconnect the screen: I've had the burned-out fuse replaced. If you won't, I'll have it done for you—and have you so bound that you'll be forced to look at it.

"Don't tamper with any of my hearing and seeing mechanisms again, please. If you do, I will be forced to have you destroyed within five minutes.

"But—if you'd like to leave your cell, you have my full permission. You should find it easy, now that the lock is broken."

The voice said no more. Carse ordered Friday harshly:

"Reconnect the screen."

The negro hastened to obey. His master's gray eyes again fastened on the screen. Fiercely, for a moment, he smoothed his bangs.

The laboratory flashed into clear outline again. There was the shaft of white light; the operating table, full under it; the anesthetic cylinder, the banks of instruments, the sterilizers with their wisps of steam curling ceaselessly up. There were the efficient white-clad assistant-surgeons, their dull eyes showing through the holes in their masks. And there was the black figure of Ku Sui, an ironic smile on his lips, and before him the resigned and helpless form of Eliot Leithgow.

The Eurasian gestured. An assistant found the pulse in Leithgow's wrist, and another bent over him in such fashion that the prisoners could

not see what he was doing. Ku Sui too bent over, something in his hands. The prelude to living death had begun… .

AT that moment Hawk Carse was a different man, recovered from the weakness that had made him cry out at his friend's imminent destruction a short time before. The old characteristic fierceness and recklessness had come back to him; he had decided on action—on probable death. "I've been too cautious!" he exclaimed violently in his thoughts.

"Friday!" he whispered sharply to the negro, going close.

"Yes, suh?"

"Four men outside—a sudden charge through that door when I nod. We'll die, too, by God! Willing?"

Friday was held by the man's iron will to succeed or die. Without hesitation he whispered back:

"Yes, suh!"

Their whispers had been low. Dr. Ku Sui had not been warned, for the screen still showed him bending over his victim.

"You'll open the door; you're nearest. I'll go through first," the Hawk murmured, and smiled at the loyalty behind the promptness of his man's grin of understanding.

Then both smiles faded. The muscles of the negro's huge body bunched in readiness for the signal as tensely he watched the flaxen-haired head close to him.

Suddenly it nodded.

The door swung wide and white man and black went charging out.

And immediately there burst in their ears the furious clanging of a general alarm bell, sounding throughout the whole building!

Chapter 11

Trapped in the Laboratory

IN his carefully welded plot-chain, Ku Sui left one weak link, though he was not aware of it at the time. For it would not appear save by the testing of it, and he had not expected it to be tested. Carse acted recklessly; perhaps, if cold reason be applied to his move, senselessly. Dr. Ku had not thought he would dare make the break he did. But the adventurer did dare, and the loophole, the weak link, was exposed.

The Eurasian had a paranoic's vanity, and with it a lust accumulated over years to exact the most terrible vengeance he could from the adventurer who had frustrated his schemes time and time again. His arrangement for subtly forcing Carse to watch the operation was part of his vengeance; but he planned more. He wanted his old foe, broken by the living death of Eliot Leithgow, to die slowly later; wanted to crumple that will of steel utterly; wanted to watch and pleasantly mock him during the slow death agonies he had contrived for him. Therefore—and here lay the weak link—Dr. Ku left orders for Carse to be kept alive.

If he had not instructed his coolie-guards to wound, and not kill, in case of a break for freedom, Carse and Friday could never possibly have gained the corridor alive. The four waiting ray-guns would have burned out their lives within three seconds. But, as it was, the barrage of shots from the ray-guns was directed at their legs, with the intention of bringing them down—and their legs were moving very rapidly. And so, reckoning up the caliber of the two comrades, their wild fighting start, their fatalistic resolve to get as many as possible of the enemy before they died, the result of that first hectic scramble in the corridor was more or less inevitable.

WITH a savage war-whoop that rose, ear-shattering, above the clanging of the alarm bell, Friday flung his two hundred and twenty pounds of brawn and muscle after Carse into the thick of the guards, taking no more notice of the spitting streaks of orange light that

laced past his legs than if they had been squirts from a water-pistol. The guards had been bunched well together, but they scattered like ten-pins when Carse, followed by the living thunderbolt of fighting negro, crashed into them. In that first charge three of them were knocked flat, their guns either dropping or twisting loose from their hands.

Immediately recovering, the Hawk darted at the fourth with the speed of a striking cobra; his wiry hands closed around the yellow throat: and two seconds later that coolie was no longer connected with the proceedings, a whacking head-thump being his passport into insensibility. Again Friday's exultant war-whoop bellowed out over the scene.

Carse pushed to his feet, his deadly fighting smile on his face, a ray-gun in his hand. He stooped and picked up another.

"Get to the Master!" roared Friday, an ebon god of war between two futilely attacking bodies. "I'm—followin'!"

In those red seconds, ultimate success was still too impossible a thing to even hope for. But they would at least try, then die like the men they were.

Hawk Carse sped on down the corridor, a deadly, smoothly-functioning fighting machine. And after him a few seconds later came leaping the negro, a whooping giant with a ray-gun in each hand and the light of battle flashing in his eyes. As his personal contribution to the fight he was leaving in the rear three sprawled bodies, two knocked cold and the third with a broken neck.

Their triumph had so far been a matter of but sixty seconds. The jangle of the alarm bell continued ominously. It summoned resistance, well-trained resistance; the defenses of the asteroid awoke to action. Doors spacing the corridor behind now began to open, releasing dozens of Orientals. Nor had these men heard Ku Sui's orders. They would shoot to kill!

THREE peering faces suddenly were in Hawk Carse's line of vision ahead: three ray-guns were settling on him. His famous left hand, the gun-hand that was known and dreaded throughout space, moved with the eye-blinding speed that was necessary; his trigger finger bent only three times, but each of the pencil-thin streaks of orange that spat forth brought down a man, and he had struck without slackening his stride for an instant.

Twice more his ray-gun spoke, and then the goal, the entrance to the central laboratory, was just ahead. Carse glanced back.

"Yes, suh!" a fierce voice yelled out to him. "Coming!"

Friday was bringing up the rear as fast as he could. He came sideways in a zigzag course ducking and whirling constantly, and in between firing promptly at any portions of enemy anatomies that dared project into the line of the corridor. The Hawk covered the last few yards of his retreat, and then they were together at the laboratory.

"The knob!" Carse ordered, spraying the corridor in general warning.

Friday tried it, but the door was locked. He hurled himself against it, but it did not budge.

How to get through? On the other side of the door was Leithgow, and probably Ku Sui; on this side they were trapped in a blind end. They could never make it back down that gauntlet and live, and anything like concerted action on the part of the yellows would do for them where they were.

That concerted action came at once. Seventy feet behind, a heavy shot-projector was pushed out on its little rollers from one of the doors. A hand reached out and whirled it so that its muzzle bore straight down the corridor at them. Carse shot at the hand, but the target was too small even for his fine eye, and he missed; Friday silenced an emboldened orange spot of light that was spitting streaks at them.

Hopeless! It looked like the end. Hawk Carse's face was in its old, emotionless mold as he waited, his gun sharp on the spot where the hand must reappear if they would fire the deadly projector. He had to get that hand—and any others that took its place. An almost impossible shot. He couldn't rush it and get it too. Not in time.

A moment passed. The hand flashed out; Carse shot and again missed. Then a narrow cone was along the corridor, a blinding orange streak. Instantly, with a rasp of thunder, it was gone, and the air was stifling.

The Hawk was untouched; Friday, too, he saw. The bolt had been taken by the door—and one of the door's two halves was ajar!

AT once Hawk Carse acted. "Inside!" he yelled, then was through, the negro right behind. Carse's eyes swept the laboratory. It was a place of shadows, the sole light being a faint gleam from a tiny bulb-tipped surgical tool which glimmered weirdly from the bank of instruments waiting by the operating table. Carse saw no one.

"Hold the door!" he ordered. "I don't think it'll lock!"

Friday obeyed. He found the inner bolt melted and the lock inoperative; and, placing his forearms on either side of the middle crack of the door, he stood bracing it.

A furious pounding shook the door. A heavy pressure bent it inward.

"Quick!" the big black gasped. "Somethin' to wedge it!"

"A minute, Friday," the Hawk answered. "Hold it!"

He was already dragging a metal table there; and, upended under the knob, making an angle with the floor, it held stoutly closed the door, now thumping and quivering with blows given it from outside. The panting negro fell back from the door exhausted, but rose to help his master at the need for placing additional barricades.

That finished, the Hawk wheeled, and at once, pantherlike, ray-guns at the ready, stalked the room. There was no sign of the enemy. He approached the operating table.

A great relief flooded his grim face as he sighted Eliot Leithgow lying there, apparently untouched and still conscious. The elderly scientist was strapped down tight, but he was smiling.

"I knew you'd come, Carse, if you could," he said simply.

There was no time for visiting. "Where's Ku Sui?" the adventurer asked.

"Gone," Leithgow answered. "I heard a door open and close—which one I couldn't see. He went as soon as that bell began to ring. The assistants, too."

Through the shouts and batterings at the barricaded door came a new sound—from another direction. Like a streak the Hawk was at one of the three other doors, throwing its inside hand bolt; and by the time he had shot over the second, Friday had taken the cue and secured the remaining one.

The negro let out a vast breath. "Umph!" he said. "I'll tell the universe that was close!"

HAWK CARSE said nothing. With eyes ever-watchful for sign of a trick or a trap in the apparently deserted laboratory, he quickly unbuckled the bands that held Leithgow to the operating table. Friday lifted the scientist to the floor, where he stretched weakly.

The adventurer smiled faintly, then his eyes went cold and serious. Crisply he said:

"We came, yes—but now I think we're trapped. There'll be men outside each of these four doors. The bolts may hold them a while, but eventually they'll get through. We must look for further weapons. If only there were better light! Friday," he ordered, "look for a switch. *Ah!*"

With a thud and a booming reverberation a systematic battering had begun on the metal door through which they had entered. It quivered visibly and rang as the powerful blows from the other side bludgeoned

into it, and evenly spaced, shrewdly delivered at the vital middle point. *Whrang, whrang*—even strokes, ringing throughout the barred laboratory—*whrang … whrang*… .

And then a similar piece settled into clanging routine on another door; then on the remaining two. The bolts holding them jumped with each deafening thud. Friday scowled, forgot to search farther for the switch, took a few short, indecisive steps, and then stood still again, looking questioningly at his master. The Hawk stood silent also, smoothing the bangs of flaxen hair above one temple, his face knit in concentration.

He had been afraid they would use the great projector on the door, and had been somewhat cheered by the reflection that they dared not, for fear of destroying the contents of the laboratory, especially the irreplaceable brains. But this was worse; Ku Sui was without question directing their efforts now. And that being the case, he could expect to see one door after another battered down—and then a concerted, four-point rush which would end everything… .

ELIOT LEITHGOW said the extraordinary thing that pointed a way out. "May I suggest," he said mildly, "that we try to get Dr. Ku Sui's brains to help us?"

"What do you mean?"

The older man smiled, a little sadly. "Those brains—they once were friends of mine. It's possible they'll answer our questions. It won't hurt to try. We'll ask them how it might be possible to get out."

Hawk Carse cried: "Eliot, you've got it! There is a chance!"

But the negro shivered. The brains stood for magic, for ghosts—for awful, unknown things he wanted nothing to do with.

Carse shoved back the screen concealing the infamous device.

"We know where this switch is, at least. If only the current's not been turned off!"

"Probably not," the Master Scientist said, out of his own technical thought-train.

Friday hung back, loath to be concerned. He looked askance at the thing, his open mouth a small round circle.

The Hawk was at the switch, but his hand hesitated. In spite of the emergency at the doors, in spite of his innate promptness of action, he hesitated. This thing he was about to do—this awful human mechanism before him—they were so weird and unnatural… .

Then he heard a faint click inside the laboratory—in a place where no one should be. Instinctively he whirled and crouched—and an orange

ray streaked over his head with its wicked spit of death. At once his own ray-gun was up and answering to the spot where the other bolt had started, and then he was flat on the floor and ceiling toward the wall opposite.

A HIGH wide panel in the wall had slid open, with only the faint noise Carse had heard to mark its movement. For just a few seconds it stayed open. The Hawk covered the last few feet in a desperate rush, but he reached it too late. It clicked shut in his face, and there was no hold for his hands when he tried to force it back.

Only a voice showed that someone was on the other side. In familiar, suave tones it said:

"Carse, I still will take you and Leithgow—alive. It would of course be idle to ask you to surrender, but that's not necessary, for you're trapped and can't possibly last another five minutes. I intrude only to warn you away from my synchronized brains. I will destroy without compunction anyone who meddles with them."

Dr. Ku's voice dropped away; the last words seemed to have come from below. Apparently he was descending by a stairway or hidden elevator.

"Without compunction!" Leithgow echoed with a bitter smile.

Carse ordered Friday curtly to watch the panel, then returned to Leithgow.

"Eliot," he said, "we've got to be quick."

And with his words the delicate, overstrained filament in the tiny instrument bulb gave out, and the laboratory was plunged into ultimate blackness… .

Chapter 12

Out Under the Dome

WITHIN the well of darkness rang the metallic reverberations from the battering on the four doors all around. The fluid nothingness was a place of fear. Its nerve-shattering, mind-confusing bedlam might have come from the fantastic anvils of some giant, malevolent blacksmith.

The Hawk's curt voice cut through imperatively:

"Keep your heads. We'll have a light in a second. Light of a sort."

He threw the switch by the side of the chamber of brains.

Seconds passed, and where was darkness grew a faint glow. The switch had operated; the current, probably from the device's own batteries, was there! Quickly and steadily the liquid within the case took on its self-originating glow, until the midnight laboratory was faintly washed with the delicate rosy light. The wires emerged in their complexity as before, and then the brains, all gruesome and naked in their cradles of unnatural life.

Around the internally-lit case were the three besieged Earthlings, half in blackness, the light from the front making ghastly shadows on their faces. Acolites at some sorcerer's rite they looked, with the long inky patches that left them to dissolve formlessly against the far walls of the room.

Grotesque in the operating garments he wore, his bald head shining in the eery light, Eliot Leithgow approached the microphone Dr. Ku had used to communicate with his pathetic subjects. He looked down at the brains, at the wires which threaded the pans they lay in, at the narrow gray tubes that pulsed with blood—or whatever might be the fluid used in its stead. All mechanical was the apparatus—all of metal and other cunningly fashioned man-made materials—all but the brains… .

TO the old Master Scientist there came a vision of five human figures, rising specterlike from the case they were entombed in;

straight, proud young figures, two of them; two others old, like himself, and the fifth a gnarled hunchback. Very different were they, each from each other, but each face had its mark of genius; and each face, to Eliot Leithgow, was warm and smiling, for these five men were friends… .

So he saw them in vision… .

"Another switch has to be thrown to talk with them, Carse," he said. The Hawk indicated one inquiringly. Leithgow nodded. "Yes. That was it." The switch went over.

He steadied himself and said into the speaking grille:

"I am Eliot Leithgow—Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow. Once you knew me. Professors Geinst, Estapp and Norman, Dr. Swanson and Master Scientist Cram—do you remember me? Do you remember how once we worked together; how, long ago on our Earth, we were friends? Do you remember your old colleague, Leithgow?"

He stopped, deeply shaken. In seconds his mind sped back through the years to those five men as he had last seen them—and to two women he had met, calm-faced as their husband-scientists… . God forbid those women should ever learn of this!

Carse watched his old comrade closely, fearful of the strain this was on him.

Then came a cold, thin, mechanical voice.

"Yes, Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow. I remember you well."

The scientist strove to keep level his voice as he continued:

"Two friends and I are trapped here. Dr. Ku Sui desires my brain. He wishes to add it to——" He stammered, halted; then burst out: "If it would help you in any way, I'd give it gladly! But it couldn't, I know; it would only aid his power-mad schemes. So my friends and I must escape. And we can see now no way!

"You can hear that noise? It's very loud; men are outside each door, battering at them, and soon they must break through. How can we escape? Do you know of a way, out of your knowledge of conditions here? Will you tell me, old colleagues?"

He waited.

FIFTY feet away from this scene, and missing almost all of it, was Friday. From his post at the panel he kept throwing fearful looks at the nearest door, which was shuddering and clanging and threatening any moment to be wrenched off its hinges. A good thing—he was thinking—that the doors were of stout metal. When one did go he would get five or six of the soulless devils before they brought him down.

Carse waited tensely for the response—if one there was to be. His ears were throbbing in unison with the regular crash of rams on metal, but his eyes never left the convoluted mounds of intelligent matter so fantastically featured by the internal radiance of the life-giving liquid. Impossible, it seemed, that thoughts were stirring inside those gruesome things… .

"Please hurry!" he said in a low voice; and Leithgow repeated desperately:

"How can we escape? Please be quick!"

Then the miracle of mechanism and matter functioned and again gave forth the cold voice of the living dead.

"*It is my disposition to help you, Eliot Leithgow. On a shelf under one of the tables in this room you will find a portable heat-ray. Melt a hole in the ceiling and go out through the roof.*"

"Then what can we do?"

"*In lockers behind the table there are space-suits, hanging ready for emergencies. Don them and leave through one of the asteroid's port-locks.*"

"Ask if the ports are sealed," Carse interjected instantly.

Leithgow asked the question.

"*Yes*," replied the unhuman voice. "*But twice four to the right will open any of them.*"

THE Master Scientist wiped his brow. Though trembling under the strain of conversing with this machine on which his life depended, he did not overlook a single point.

"But the asteroid's gravital pull would hold us close to it," he said. "Is there a way of breaking free from it?"

"*You'll find the space-suits are equipped with small generators and gravity-plates which I helped Ku Sui develop. The switch and main control are in the left-hand glove.*"

"Thank you! Oh, thank you! You give us a chance!" exclaimed old Leithgow.

He turned and looked for the Hawk, and found him already in the lockers and pulling out three space-suits. The clumsy, heavy cone of a portable heat-ray lay on the table ready to hand.

They had little time to waste. The torrid temperature of a new smell of burned metal around the door they had just entered told them as well as words that the large projector in the corridor was at last being used to bore a way in.

With surprising strength in one so slender, Carse lifted the ray and pointed it at an angle toward the middle of the ceiling. He pressed the control button, and a blinding stream of violet radiance splashed against the metal above. It hissed and sputtered where it touched; molten drops fell sizzling and splattering to the floor; then suddenly there was a flood of ruddy illumination, and the Hawk dropped the heat-ray, stepped forward and looked up.

UP through a neatly melted round hole, up at the great glasslike dome which arched over the whole settlement—up, past it, into the vast face of Jupiter, hanging out there oppressively near!

Friday, champing for action, left his post by the panel and dragged a long low cabinet to position under the hole. On top of it he placed the operating table, and, after he had tripped the table's small wheels, another table on top of that.

"You first, Eclipse!" his master rapped out as he finished. "I'll pass the suits to you; then swing Leithgow up."

The negro answered by acting. Swiftly he climbed the rude pile, and reached for the edge of the hole. It was still searingly hot, and he gasped with hurt as his palms and fingers clenched over it, but he did not let go. Levering himself rapidly up, he got a leg through and then his body. A second later he peered back in and lowered his hands down.

"No one up here yet!" he reported. "All right for the suits!"

Carse passed the three bulky suits to him, and also two extra ray-guns he had found in the locker.

"Now, Eliot—up!"

With the Hawk's help, Leithgow clambered onto the cabinet. He was just mounting the operating table when, from behind, came a thin, metallic voice:

"*Master Leithgow—Eliot Leithgow—please, a favor?*"

LEITHGOW turned and stared, then understood. It was the coordinated brains. They had forgotten to return the switches. And now the cold voice was speaking of its own accord; and somehow—though it might have been imagination entirely—there seemed to be a tinge of loneliness to the words that sounded from its speaker.

Instantly Leithgow got down and hurried over to the grille. Seconds were precious, but Carse and he were heavily obligated to the brains, and any request in reason had to be fulfilled.

"Yes. What can I possibly do?"

The lower hinge of one side of the barricaded door gave, burned out, and the door wrenched inward at a resumption of the battering. The other hinge still held, but it was bending with each mighty blow. Outwardly calm, Hawk Carse watched the weakening door, a gun in each hand.

"*This*," said the toneless voice: "*Destroy me. Leave no slightest trace. I live in hell, and have no way to move… . There are old memories … things that once were dear … Earth … my homes … my lives there… . Eliot Leithgow, destroy me. But promise, on your honor as a Master Scientist, never to let a single word regarding my fate reach those on Earth who knew me, loved me… .*"

Leithgow looked at the Hawk. The adventurer nodded.

"I'll use the heat-ray," he said, with pity.

He ran and picked it up. But he had taken only one step in return when the second hinge of the yielding door wrenched free. An ear-piercing screech rent the bedlam—and the door fell, half twisting, to lie in the doorway.

As if by a signal the crashing at the other doors stopped. In an extraordinary silence a mob of gray-smocked bodies pressed forward.

Orange streaks laced the dim laboratory. The Hawk shouted, "Up, Eliot! For God's sake, up!" as, with deadly effect, he poured his two ray-guns at the advancing men.

For a second, shaken by the terrible barrage, they fell back, leaving several sprawled bodies on the floor; but they came right back again.

Leithgow got safely to the top of the pile and was snatched out to temporary safety. Frantically Friday called down to his master; he seemed on the point of jumping down into the fight himself. But Hawk Carse had been party to a promise.

He was behind the structure of furniture under the hole he had made in the ceiling. With one gun he spat death at the coolies, while the other he emptied at the case of brains. Two stabbing streams of orange angled from him, one telling with awful effect on the men only two score feet away, and the other absolutely useless. All over the still-glowing case it spat its hits, but the glasslike substance resisted it completely, and remained unscathed.

Carse swore harshly. He hurled one empty gun at the case, turned with a last salvo of shots at the coolies, and then was up on the pile and leaping for Friday's hands.

They caught and gripped his, swung him once—twice—and hauled him swiftly out. But as the Hawk disappeared he shouted down the case:

"I'll be back!"

Chapter 13

The Final Mystery

ON the roof, Carse quickly scanned their situation. They were standing on the hub of the four-winged building. Far to the left was one set of the dome's great and small port-locks; exactly opposite was the other. Near the left hand ports; a little "north," lay the *Scorpion*. The whole area enclosed was a flat plain of gray soil.

Looming over the great transparent dome hung the flaming disk of Jupiter, so oppressively near that it seemed about to crash onto the asteroid. Its rays poured in a ruddy flood over the settlement, clearly illuminating each detail; and comparatively close against the face of the mighty planet they could see the whitish globe of Satellite III. It offered the nearest haven. They might arrive famished, but in the power-equipped space-suits which Friday was lugging they should be able to span the gap.

The Hawk nodded to the port-locks on the left.

"That one," he snapped. "We'll have two chances, the *Scorpion* and the port, but the port's safest; we could never get the whole ship underway and through the lock in time. To prevent pursuit, all we have to do is leave the lock open after us."

They hastened along the roof of the wing that ran that way. As yet there was no outside pursuit; most of the settlement's guards seemed to have been concentrated in the attack on the laboratory. But Carse knew it would only be a matter of seconds before coolies would emerge from half a dozen different points. He was trying to figure out which points they were likely to be when there passed, perilously close, the spit of an orange ray. He glanced back, to see the first of the crowd which had broken into the laboratory come clambering up through the roof. Then, as a second shot sizzled by, they arrived at the end of the wing.

FRIDAY took the fifteen-foot drop without hesitation. Carse lowered Leithgow to him and then swung down himself. They panted forward again, over grayish, glittering soil.

Some three hundred yards of open space lay between them and the port-locks. Friday now led the way, weighted down under the heavy suits; the scientist came next and then the Hawk, his sole remaining gun replying at intervals to the ever-thickening barrage from behind. They had covered perhaps a half of that distance when the negro's steps suddenly faltered and he halted.

"Look there!" he groaned. "Cuttin' us off! We'll never make it, suh!"

Carse looked where he pointed, and saw a squad of half a dozen men emerging from a building well to their left. They were running at full speed for the lock, and, as Friday had said, it was obvious that they would get there first. He glanced quickly around. Pursuit from the laboratory in the rear was hot—and moreover three coolies were angling sharply out on each side, to outflank them! In a minute they would be surrounded! Unable to reach either the port or the ship!

And then came the crowning piece of ill-luck. Suddenly the Hawk winced; staggered; clapped a hand to his shoulder. A lucky shot from an enemy gun had caught him.

"You're hit!" cried Leithgow.

"It's nothing… ."

THE slender adventurer stood very still, thinking. He was trapped. But he was never more dangerous than when he was trapped.

Leithgow timidly ventured a suggestion.

"Why can't we put on our space-suits and rise up in the dome?"

Crisply the answer came back:

"Hard to maneuver laterally. Never get out ports. Sure death… . *I have it!*" he ended.

Tersely he gave the two men orders:

"We've a bare chance—if I'm lucky. Now listen, and obey me exactly. Put on your space-suits. Shut them tight. Lie flat. You, Friday, use your ray-guns *and keep the guards from coming close*. Wait here. Do absolutely nothing save keep them off. And keep your suits intact or you're dead!"

He grabbed one of the suits from Friday and crept toward the *Scorpion* on hands and knees. The three coolies from the pursuit at the rear had already cut him off from the ship. Friday could not control his alarm at this apparently crazy act. He called after:

"But you can't get to the ship through those guards! And if you did, you couldn't run it yourself—and pick us up!"

Carse turned, his face white with cold passion. "When will you learn to obey me implicitly?" he said harshly—and crept on.

Old Leithgow trusted his friend a little more. "Get your suit on, Friday," he said gently, and slipped into his own. The negro, ashamed, followed his example; then both were flat on the ground, back to back, sniping—Leithgow also—as best they could under such conditions at the groups of men who now were bellying ever nearer from three directions.

The Hawk's plan might well have appeared hair-brained to one who did not know the man, and what he was capable of accomplishing under pressure. The very first step in this plan required the destroying of the three outflanking guards between him and the space-ship.

AS so often in the great adventurer's career, he was lucky. The unthinking have always admitted his luck, but never seen that he forced it—forced it by doing the unexpected—attacking when he was attacked. He was doing that now. The three coolie-guards in his way must have known who he was, so their alarm at finding themselves, the attackers, attacked, will account for their making a move of poor strategy. Instead of scattering and defending the open entrance-port of the space-ship from a short distance, they in their alarm made haste to get inside to defend it from there. The interior was the best place to defend the ship—if they had already been inside—for they could lie in the inner darkness and sweep the open port when the Hawk entered.

But to try to pass through the port—that was bad judgment. It was only necessary for Carse to hold bead on it and fire when they passed in line.

This was the present "luck" of the adventurer. He might have sniped the guards anyway, but he had it easier. From fifty yards away, prone and carefully sighting, he took the three lives that had been so viciously, so subversively altered by Ku Sui.

A moment later, the way cleared, he was inside the ship—and his space-suit lay on the ground outside.

RAPIDLY the three groups of guards closed in on Leithgow and Friday. The two men made their advance as uncomfortable as possible, but they could do no accurate shooting at such difficult targets as crawling men, from within the cramped interiors of their cumbrous

suits. Not even Friday, who was a crack shot. They could not hold out long—nor did they expect to.

They had been too occupied to notice what had become of Carse. Within their suits all was silence; they heard neither their friend's shots as he struck down the three coolies nor their own. Quick glances at the ship's open port revealed no one; nothing. Probably, they thought, the Hawk was dead. Even if he were not, they would soon be. A matter of a minute. Maybe two. Their suits were still intact, but they could not remain so much longer. Ku Sui had this time ordered them destroyed.

And now half a dozen coolies were leaving the ring tightening around them and creeping to the *Scorpion* as additional guards… .

It was then, in those last few seconds, with death staring them in the face, that Friday did a magnificent thing. It happened that Carse saw him do it as the adventurer jumped out of the *Scorpion* again and with frantic speed slipped into the space-suit he had left waiting. Friday stood straight up, a hundred feet from the enemy—a great bloated monster in his padded suit—and charged. Leithgow and the Hawk heard, by their suit helmet-radios, his battle yell of defiance, but the coolies did not. All silent, apparently, he rushed them—slowly, because of his hampering suit—his ray-gun spitting orange contempt—and other pencils of fiery death passing him narrowly by.

And then, while he still charged, the rays stopped stabbing past him, and he saw the faces of the coolie-guards turn upward. So surprised was the expression on their faces, that he turned and looked too—and saw the *Scorpion*, her entrance ports still open, forty feet off the ground and rising with swift acceleration.

Faster and faster she rose; all ray-guns were silenced before her astounding ascent. Higher and higher—faster and faster—till with a stunning, ear-deafening crash she struck the great dome and was through.

Then came chaos.

A huge, jagged gash marked the ship's passage, and through this the air inside the dome poured with cyclonic force, snatching into in maelstrom everything unfastened within the dome and hurling it crazily into space. For seconds the flood rushed out, a visible thing, gray from the soil which it scooped up; and while its fury lasted every building on the asteroid quivered and groaned from the terrific strain.

And where, a moment before, men had stood—two white men and a black, and a score of coolie-guards—there was now nothing save the flat rock under the gaping hole. The upper soil had been ripped out and

flung forth like a concealing veil around the bodies that had gone with it… .

FOR an interval Hawk Carse knew nothing. He had ceased to live, it seemed, and was soaring through Eternity. He never knew how much time passed before his numbed senses began to return and he became aware of weight and of a furious roaring in his head.

He was moving forward at blinding speed. Something kept flashing before him—a wide stream of ruddy orange light: his dazed brain could connect it with nothing he had ever known. Soon the orange stream settled into spasmodic bursts, pitch blackness filling the intervals; and when it came more slowly he saw that it was in reality the vast flaming ball of Jupiter, streaking across the line of vision as he tumbled over and over, head over heels—free in space!

The realization helped his return to alertness. As the wild tumbling motion gradually ceased, and Jupiter tended to stay more and more under his feet, he peered around through his face-plate. To one side he glimpsed two grotesque, bulky figures, one half of them limned glaringly against the blackness of space by the near-by planet's light. He saw other figures, too, spread out in a scattered fringe—figures of men in smocks, dead and bloated and white.

They were the coolies, these last, and the other two were of course Leithgow and Friday. But had they survived the outrush of air? Carse felt in his left glove for the suit's gravity control lever; found it and tentatively moved it. His acceleration slowly increased. He brought the lever part-way back. Then, into the microphone encased inside the helmet, he called:

"Leithgow! Leithgow! Can you hear me? Friday!"

The radio broadcast his words. Soon welcome answers came in Eliot Leithgow's tired voice and the negro's emphatic bass.

"Maneuver together," Carse instructed them. "We must lock arms and stay close."

SLOWLY, clumsily, the three monstrous figures made toward each other, and presently they were reunited in a close group. Carse pointed an arm into the face of Jupiter where there hung poised a gleaming globe of white, dappled with dark splotches.

"Satellite III," he said, "—our goal. And we'll get there without interruption now that Ku Sui, his laboratory, his coordinated brains, are destroyed… . You are very quiet, Eliot. Aren't you happy at our success?"

"I am very tired," the old scientist said. "Oh, but we'll sleep and feast and game when we get back to my hidden lab on Three—won't we!"

"Chicken for me!" exclaimed Friday. "Even at twenty dollars a can!"

"Your shoulder, Carse—how is it?" asked the Master Scientist solicitously. "And how did you ever get out of that space-ship in time, after you had given it such an acceleration?"

There was a tired smile in the adventurer's voice when he replied:

"My shoulder—a trifle. I have a dozen such burns. But my feet still hurt from the twenty-foot drop I took out of the*Scorpion*. I had to get out: the shock of the crash would have killed me.

"But I've been looking for the asteroid," he went on—and interrupted himself. "By the horn of the phanti!" he exclaimed in amazement. "Look, Eliot! That explains it all!"

His whole body was tilted back to allow him to look upward. Friday and the Master Scientist followed his startled gaze, and they too gaped in wonder.

For there was nothing above or around them—no dwindling fragment of rock—no sign of any asteroid: only the eternal stars.

"Yes," said Eliot Leithgow slowly, "that explains it all… ."

"It explains what?" asked Friday, staring. "And where is the asteroid?"

"It's up there," the Hawk replied. "Don't you see now, Eclipse, why no one's ever found it; why we could hunt forever for it and hunt in vain? Ku Sui made his whole asteroid invisible!"

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