

Crusaders of Space

by Paul Chadwick

CHAPTER I. A Call from the Master

MARK TRAVERS trembled with suppressed excitement as he read the code message that dropped on his desk from the mouth of the ethergraph. It was from Theobald Zanton, mysterious head of Planetoid Chemicals, Inc., the man who guided the vast organization like an aloof but all-powerful monarch.

Young Travers had visited the company's branch depots on many planets during his five years as an inspector; but he had never seen Zanton. No one with whom he had come in contact had laid eyes on the amazing scientific genius whose ambitious enterprises extended over the whole solar system.

But now came this strange summons, direct from Zanton himself, calling him. It was the most extraordinary thing that had happened to Travers since he had started working for the company. His hands shook as he put his testing instruments away in their leatherette cases and left his office.

When he reached the street and walked toward the huge central vestibule of the Planetoid Building he began whistling to keep up his courage. A stray shaft of sunlight filtered down through the maze of intersecting avenues overhead. It touched his lean, bronzed face. An express on the Interborough Vacuum Monorail disgorged a motley group of passengers. The doors of the glistening tube swished shut. The flexible cars swept on at six

hundred miles an hour toward the green Vermont suburbs.

Travers nervously turned into the Planetoid Building's main concourse and entered one of the great elevators. There was moisture on the palms of his hands now.

The prospect oncoming face to face with Zanton actually unnerved him. What sort of man was Zanton? How would he look and talk and act? What possible reason had he for wanting to interview a mere inspector?

The elevator stopped at the seven hundredth floor of this most modern of skyscrapers. Travers was a little pale now. But he straightened his broad shoulders and walked forward resolutely.

A pretty girl secretary ushered him down a long corridor. There was a small private lift at the end of it which took him up to the tower room seven hundred feet higher.

Then a voice came from a concealed loudspeaker somewhere above the door.

"Mr. Zanton is expecting you. He will see you at once. This way please."

Travers held his breath as he entered Zanton's office six thousand feet above the street. He blinked in the clear light that came unimpeded through the panels, of ultra-and infra-ray glass surrounding the tower room. It was deathly quiet up here. So quiet that the voice of the little man sitting behind the huge metal desk crackled in Travers' ears like static.

"Mr. Travers, I believe. Sit down, please."

Travers was thunderstruck for a moment at the appearance of the great Zanton.

He hadn't known just what to expect. A Callouses of a man perhaps; a personality so imposing that he would feel as though he were in the presence of a god.

Instead, Zanton was below medium height and mild looking. He peered at Travers from behind old-fashioned, gold-rimmed spectacles. There was nothing to indicate his extraordinary character save the bright intelligence of his gray eyes and the dynamic quality of his high-pitched voice.

"You are wondering why I called you here, Mr. Travers. You are wondering whether I'm going to reprimand you about something—perhaps fire you."

Travers nodded and his face flushed; he was embarrassed that Zanton had read his thoughts so easily.

A smile passed over the great scientist's face. Then he sobered.

"People envy me because I'm the head of one of the largest chemical concerns in the universe. They don't even guess at the problems and worries I have. They think I'm as peacefully aloof from life as the stars in the Milky Way."

"Yes, sir," stammered Travers.

"Well, that's not the case at all. I'm a heavily burdened man. My business has become so large, that I have little time for my own researches any more. I have to trust to well-meaning but often incompetent assistants. And now that I've become so successful, the jealousy of certain business rivals has grown almost fanatical. But that isn't all. Right now I have a greater and more personal worry. My son has been stricken ill just as he was on the eve of completing a chemical process, upon which the salvation of the human race may easily depend. He was carrying on his researches at one of our company's frontier experimental stations, where climatic conditions were ideal and where he could work in absolute secrecy."

Zanton stopped speaking and stared

fixedly at Travers.

The young man's blue eyes did not waver.

"Isn't there any one out there to help him?" he asked.

"Yes, he has a small band of faithful technicians with him. But each is a specialist in his own line. There is no one else, outside of my daughter and myself, who fully understands the process. I can't go to him, much as I'd like to. But my daughter has volunteered to make the trip and continue this important work."

Travers nodded. "There shouldn't be any cause for worry in that," he said. "An escort of space patrol ships can accompany her."

Zanton frowned uneasily. "It may not be so simple. The work, as I told you, has been carried on in secrecy. But somehow or other rumors of it have leaked out. There are very few people I can trust. Besides that, any ship I send to the satellite where Harvey is working will be followed. Strategy will have to be used. That's why I need your help."

Travers looked guzzled now. He spoke bluntly.

"What makes you think you can trust me?" he asked.

The gray eyes of Zanton showed a faint gleam of amusement.

"A good question," he said. "You don't know, of course, that all of my employees are put under secret surveillance when they first go on the company's payroll. I have five thousand trained operatives to do that. After a few months the rank and file of the workers are left alone. Those with vicious tendencies are carefully observed, as well as those showing definite promise. I have here a tabulated report of your activities during the last five years. Nothing is left out, even down to your most trifling habits and characteristics. Your honesty is unquestioned. Your bravery was proved by the way you carried on your

work on Mars when that planet was in a state of internecine civil war. You protected the company's interests then, and you have never been known to divulge our affairs to outsiders."

Travers flushed at these compliments. He started to stammer that he didn't deserve them. But Zanton waved him into silence.

"It's merely a scientific chart of human behavior in certain specified environments. What I want to know is whether or not you are willing to help me."

"Certainly," said Travers.

"But you aren't acquainted with the facts yet," answered Zanton. "Have you ever heard of Hulgur?"

Travers nodded quickly.

"One of the barbarous, anthropoid men from Venus—a raider who hides his acts of piracy behind a pretense of peaceable commerce."

"Yes," said Zanton. "The greatest scoundrel in all space. There's nothing so viciously criminal that he will stop at it—though he's always managed to keep out of the clutches of interplanetary law. I'm certain he's preyed upon my merchant fleet again and again. I regard him as a personal enemy, and he has sworn to ruin me. But a bigger issue than that is at stake now. To gain his ends, the sacrifice of a human life means nothing to him. He would gladly commit a million murders to learn the exact nature of the thing my son has been working on. You understand then that his presence in space constitutes a menace, so terrible that it cannot be exaggerated?"

"Yes," said Travers. "I understand you now; but if your daughter isn't afraid to make the trip to the satellite you refer to, I'm not afraid to help you in any way I can."

Zanton smiled again, then suddenly raised his voice. "Do you hear that, Paula?"

There came a low laugh from behind a screen which Travers had noticed when he

first came into the room. The screen moved slightly and one of the most startlingly beautiful girls that Travers had ever seen made her appearance.

She was small and dark, vibrant with intelligence and vitality. Her eyes were like soft shadows reflected in the water of a deep forest pool. They were fringed by long lashes. Masses of wavy hair framed the smooth oval of her face. Her delicate, sensitive mouth held both strength and humor. Her manner as she came forward was friendly and tomboyish.

She smiled and held out her hand. "Pardon me for eavesdropping, but dad asked me to do it. He insists on being thorough about everything. He wanted me to observe you while I was unseen just as I would a specimen under a microscope."

Travers mumbled a conventional phrase. He gripped her small warm hand. He hoped his smile of frank admiration made up for his awkward silence. He would gladly accompany such a girl out into distant space, even if death waited at the end of the voyage.

After they had chatted together for some moments, Zanton asked his daughter if she would mind leaving Travers and him alone for a bit. When Paula had gone, Zanton got up from his desk and came close to Travers. Travers arose also. The great scientist's head did not reach above his shoulder. Zanton's face was working now. He seemed all at once pitifully old, worried and human.

He laid his hand on Travers' arm. His voice was husky when he spoke.

"You've seen Paula, Travers! Her mother was just like her. She means more to me than anything else in the world. More even—though I'm wicked to say it—than this great process that my son is working on. But even scientists are human. I want you to watch over her, Travers. Help her in every way. When you reach the experimental station, you will be able to give great practical scientific

aid, because of your experience at my various depots. But, before that, Paula's very life may be in your hands. You'll learn later exactly what I mean. Promise me you'll do your best."

"I promise," said Travers, his eyes gleaming with a fire of determination that was almost fanatical.

Zanton silently gripped his hand for a moment. Then his voice grew businesslike again.

"Very well," he said. "Be at the company drome at six this evening. Go to hangar No. 7. Ask for Igor Wendel. You will be in charge of the ship while you are on it, but he will be your chief navigator. You will find sealed orders waiting for you in the ship. Paula will be there. Good-by, Travers, and good luck."

CHAPTER II. The Spy Ship

TRAVERS didn't open his orders until the earth was far astern, a beautiful luminous crescent against the cobalt curtain of the ether void. Paula was in the main cabin with him as the great multimotored cruiser hurled itself silently through space. She leaned over his shoulder as he broke the seal on the envelope and looked at the message.

The words were written by Zanton himself. They were terse and to the point.

Dear Travers:

In the keel compartment of the ship you are now on, a small two-place torpedocopter is stowed away. This craft is provisioned and powered for twelve hours flight. A touch of the button release will allow it to slide through the tube into space.

At position AX-2740, on the arc of the coordinates Saturn and Neptune as you are passing the planet Uranus, you and Paula are to leave the mother ship. Head straight for the

satellite Oberon. When you have reached its atmosphere, Paula will direct you to the experimental station.

The large ship will continue on its way to Neptune. In this way I believe it will be possible for you and Paula to land unobserved and unmolested on Oberon. As a precaution, however, I have equipped the torpedocopter with a light automatic ray gun. I advise also that you carry small arms with you.

Travers eyes were snapping with excitement as he looked up. The secret orders and the care with which Zanton had arranged for the landing on Oberon, one of the four satellites of the planet Uranus, appealed to his sense of the dramatic.

"Your father never misses a trick, does he?" he said.

Paula smiled. "Not very often—and this time he certainly can't afford to. The thing that my brother has been working on is too frightfully important. Didn't Dad tell you about it?"

"He didn't mention any details," said Travers. He was curious, but didn't intend to question the girl. It was for her to speak first.

"There's no reason why you shouldn't know now," she said. "Dad and Harvey are trying to save the human race from the slow starvation threatened by the increasing scarcity of vitamin A. A cheap and plentiful source must soon be found or the situation will be too terrible to think about. My brother has almost perfected an extraction process, which Dad started five years ago. He plans to build factories on every planet and put the new product on the market next spring within the reach of all."

Travers nodded. He'd heard startling rumors of the crisis which humanity was approaching. It threatened to be the greatest catastrophe the human race had ever experienced—even greater than the Comet Gas Disaster of 2045

"I see," he said. "No wonder your father is willing to run the risk of sending you to Oberon. No wonder he's taken such pains. Imagine what would happen if the formula were stolen and exploited by some unscrupulous profiteer!"

The girl clenched her hands fiercely. "Yes," she said, "and that's just what Hulgur would like to do. It would soon make him the virtual ruler of the universe. He could starve whole peoples into submission. He could sell the product at prices that would put the gold of all the planets into his hands. He's worse than the selfish grafters who almost wrecked earth, way back in the early 20th century."

She got up and paced the cabin, swinging her lithe, slim body from side to side with quick, excited steps.

"Don't worry," said Travers, "your father seems to have prepared for every emergency. We'll get to Oberon safely and finish up your brother's work."

At that moment the door of the corridor leading to the control room opened. A slight, gray-haired man stood in the threshold. It was Igor Wendel, chief navigating officer. His face was grave now. He saluted respectfully and came forward.

"There's another ship behind us, sir. She's following directly on our course. We sighted her a few minutes ago. I thought you'd want to know."

"Yes," said Travers. "Thanks, Wendel."

He shot a glance at Paula and saw the look of worry in her eyes.

"Don't be alarmed," he said. "Your father anticipated this and has prepared for it."

But he had a sense of uneasiness himself as he followed Wendel into the control room.

The micro lens of the radio-vision instrument was set in position. Travers looked into the eyepiece and frowned. The oval, iridescent dot of the strange ship was plainly

visible. It was still so far distant that he couldn't make out any surface details. But the stationary appearance of the craft proved that it was traveling their own route without any deviation.

There was no doubt in his mind that it was the ship of Hulgur, or one of his hirelings, spying on their movements. He saw the wisdom of Zanton's plan now. At the distance apart the two ships were traveling it would hardly be possible for Hulgur to see the torpedocopter when it left the mother craft—unless Hulgur had a radio-vision device more powerful than any Travers knew about. That was what worried him.

"Would you like me to speed up?" asked Wendel as he saw Travers' growing anxiety.

"No, not yet. Wait till we approach the point where Miss Zanton and I are to take off. Then give the ship all the speed she's got. We'll see if we can't shake that infernal spy out there."

Travers paced the floor of the control room. He came back again and again to stare into the eyepiece of the radio-vision mechanism. The strange craft was still there, exactly the same distance away, as the delicate measuring lines on the eye lens showed. The unknown ovoid, glowing against the darkness of interplanetary space, took on a sinister aspect to Travers. He remembered what Zanton had said—that human life meant nothing to Hulgur.

An hour passed with no change in their relative positions. The point AX-2740 was only two terrestrial hours, away. Paula came up and joined Travers and Wendel. She, too, looked into the eyepiece. She said little, but Travers could see that she was worried.

He went down into the keel compartment after a time and examined the torpedocopter, familiarizing himself with the controls.

It was a beautiful little machine of the

most advanced type, with a gravity-regulator box, as compact and delicate as a watch. The ray gun was almost concealed ID the streamlined hood so as to add as little as possible to etheric resistance. The two seats for Paula and himself were deeply cushioned and comfortable.

Ordinarily, it would have been a pleasure to operate such a craft, but now Travers was speculating only on its efficiency. He knew that, deadly as it was, the small-calibre automatic ray gun would be as useless as a toy pistol when pitted against the big weapons carried on a full-sized space ship. It would be false security to depend on it. Their only chance of reaching Oberon safely in the torpedocopter would be through strategy.

A cold sweat broke out on his forehead when he considered the responsibility that rested on his shoulders. He was not only to guard and pilot the most charming girl he had ever met, but he was an important link in the chain of events that might save or destroy vast numbers of the human race.

He went to the control cabin again as the hour for their take-off approached. Wendel looked at him soberly.

"she's still hanging onto our tail, sir," he said,

Travers stared at his watch, then nodded.

"Now's the time to see if we can't outdistance them," he said. "Full speed ahead, Wendel."

The veteran navigating officer slowly slid the barium control lever on the gravity box forward to the quadrant stop. The only indication of their increased speed was a vaguely sensed pulsation through the whole metal body of the ship. But Travers knew that they had jumped ahead five hundred miles in the space of a second.

He went to the radio-vision eyepiece again, hoping that the strange ship had shrunk to some extent. Then he muttered fiercely. It,

too, had speeded up, proving that Hulgar had held power in reserve all the time.

He watched anxiously as they approached AX-2740. The great sphere of Uranus was visible now off to their left. The four satellites looked like golden fruit floating in space. Yet still the strange ship kept pace with them.

Travers felt sure now that Hulgar had them under observation in a radio-vision device that might even detect the fishlike form of the torpedocopter dropping from its tube.

He looked at his watch once more. His face was as bleak as a piece of granite when he turned back to Wendel.

"There's only one thing we can do," he said. "Turn on the G valve, Wendel. We'll take off in a dust screen."

Wendel's expert hand instantly responded. He touched a small valve at the extreme left of the complex instrument board. There came a hissing sound. Travers bent over the radio-vision eyepiece and saw the strange ship suddenly disappear from sight behind a cloud of dancing, whirling phosphorescent particles.

Their own craft had emitted millions of atoms charged with alpha rays. It had concealed itself like a giant squid throwing out a trail of dark liquid to hide it from its enemies. Travers knew that Hulgar couldn't see their outline now. It would be a miracle if he saw the torpedocopter speed out of that dust cloud which was already a hundred miles in circumference. And yet Travers had his misgivings. The cloud of alpha charged particles was a dead giveaway. It told that they had cause for wishing to remain hidden.

But there was no time for worry. The big moment was at hand. He spoke quietly to Paula. Wendel heard and drew himself up to a smart salute.

"Good luck to both of you," he said. "Give my regards to your brother, Miss Zanton."

A look of fear came into Paula's eyes for a moment. Then she left the control room, walking by Travers' side down to the keel compartment of the big ship.

There was a brave smile on her lips as she stepped into the tiny interior of the torpedocopter.

Travers saw that she was comfortable, then got in himself and closed the circular airtight door. He watched his dials for a moment to see that the oxygen mixture they were breathing was just right. Then he put his hand on the control bar and touched the button release.

There came the sharp hiss of compressed air, and their tiny craft shot out into space—shot through the whirling cyclone of alpha particles surrounding the big ship.

For a full two seconds they plunged madly on through the blinding hail of atomic dust, to burst at last into the clarity of space with a million stars gleaming and the great sphere of Uranus glowing near by like a jewel.

Travers stared back through the small ports and saw the dust cloud surrounding their own mother ship receding till it was no more than a speck. They were out alone in the great sea of ether.

But his delicate man-made instruments enabled him to steer as well and accurately as did ancient navigators on some terrestrial ocean of the dim past.

The yellowish disk of Oberon crawled across his finder screen and came into the exact center between the crossed hair lines. Travers breathed freely again as he held the control bar steady.

Then he felt a hand on his shoulder and heard Paula's voice speaking in his ear.

"Look—what's that out there?" she said.

Travers turned his head and stared in the direction she was pointing. A chill ran up his back. He was oppressed with a sudden sense of catastrophe.

A tiny, glowing pinpoint of light showed off to their left. It was coming nearer and nearer. Another ship!

The one which had followed them all the way had been only a blind then—only one of a pair of spy craft. And this one, flying parallel with them all the time, had seen the torpedocopter emerge from the screen of atomic dust.

Travers' fingers whitened on the control bar as his muscles tensed. And at that precise moment a thing happened which made him cry out. The disk of Oberon on the screen before him began to spiral around. It moved toward the lower corner of the screen, and the ghastly truth dawned on him that their space craft was out of control.

At first he thought there was something radically wrong with the internal mechanism. But as the nose of the machine turned slowly, he understood.

A pinpoint of light replaced the sphere of Oberon on the finder screen. It moved toward the center. Hulgur was drawing them off their course, was forcing them toward his own ship by means of some sort of hellish magnetic ray. They were virtually his prisoners, already.

CHAPTER III.

Among The Ape-men

TRAVERS fought the controls every foot of the way. He struggled till beads of perspiration gathered on his forehead and his eyes ached from watching the dancing pinpoint of light on the finder screen.

He tuned in on gravitational cross-currents from Uranus, Neptune and Jupiter, and he managed once to change his direction until Hulgur's ship showed down in the lower left corner of the screen. But the power unit of the torpedocopter was not equal to the task of

combating the terrible pull of the magnetic ray.

Steadily, relentlessly, the nose swung round again and the image of Hulgur's ship grew larger and larger. It increased in size till it burned in the center of the screen like the baleful eye of some cyclopean giant.

Travers turned and looked at Paula. Her face was white and set; yet she said nothing, gave him no advice and expressed no fear. She seemed to trust implicitly to his operation of the tiny craft.

But the force of the magnetic ray increased until the controls froze in Travers' hands. The pull was so great that they sped toward Hulgur's ship until it seemed that they would be dashed to pieces against its metal sides.

At the last minute, however, the power of the ray decreased. They floated up to the cruiser and touched it with a clang of metal.

Instantly a huge connecting arm reached out and clamped down upon them. It was followed by a flexible tube seven feet in diameter, composed of hundreds of interlocking concentric sections. The mouth of this pressed against the circular exit of the torpedo type craft. It was all done with uncompromising quickness and precision.

Travers' face was pale with fury. His tense fingers went instinctively toward the ray gun at his hip. But Paula touched his arm.

"Don't," she said. "It's no use. Hulgur has all the advantage on his side."

A voice reached them from outside, substantiating what she had said. The words were spoken in Ranko, the universal language of the interplanetary traffic, but they had a thick unhuman quality.

"Will you come aboard quietly—or shall we fill you with gas?"

"We surrender," said Travers hoarsely. "What do you want?"

He unsnapped the exit cover and blinked at the bright lights inside the boarding

tube. Two members of Hulgur's crew were there. Paula gave a gasp of horror when she saw them. They were large, broad-shouldered, brutish-looking men, of a type far different from the Inhabitants of earth. Their legs were bowed, their skin matted with coarse hair, and their faces more like those of anthropoid apes than of men. Yet they had enormously high foreheads such as no ape ever possessed.

Travers knew that they were of a paradoxical breed whose mental development paralleled that of Homo Sapiens, but whose instincts and emotions were cruelly barbarous and anti-social.

One held a ray-gun in his hand. The other had a wicked looking drilling device with a gas outlet at its end. Hulgur carried on his interplanetary commerce with criminal weapons.

Travers could have killed both of these beast-men; but he saw the folly of it. Others would swarm into the tube. Paula's life would be endangered in the melee.

"Hands up," said the one with the ray gun gruffly. Travers obeyed while the creature reached forward and disarmed him. "Now come into the ship. Hulgur demands your presence."

Travers followed Paula through the boarding tube and into the body of the huge space-cruiser. It was ostensibly a cargo ship; but he saw that its interior was largely given over to warlike devices.

They were led along a corridor to a cabin aft. An anthropoid man with a heavy, bestial face sat at a table. He did not rise at Paula's entrance. Instead, his ape-like eyes, shadowed by unhealthy looking pouches of loose flesh, fixed themselves upon her covetously. He lifted one hand and scratched the top of his head in a peculiarly simian gesture.

"Hulgur," said Paula furiously. "You've gone too far for once. The interplanetary code carries penalties for such

acts as this.”

Hulgar’s lips came back from his long teeth. He chuckled until his flabby cheeks shook like jelly. He did not take his eyes off her.

“I am a sportsman,” he said in a rumbling, guttural voice. “For high stakes I am willing to take long chances. A lovely creature like you, for instance, is a prize worth having—even if I get nothing else.”

Travers, pale and trembling, stepped forward. He glared into the ape-man’s obese, repulsive face.

“You are a fool as well as a criminal, Hulgar. You can’t get away with this. The patrol ships will blast you to pieces.”

The sky pirate’s eyes swiveled toward him for a moment. They were filled with cold ferocity and disapproval.

“We don’t need this young man with us,” he said. “He’s nothing but the woman’s pilot. Destroy the control box on his torpedo ship and put him back into it. He’ll have a good time drifting through space until he dies of starvation.”

Two of Hulgar’s crew stepped up to carry out his order; but Paula spoke coolly.

“You’re wrong, Hulgar. Travers is an expert scientific worker. He was on his way to help my brother when you forced us off our course.”

Hulgar laughed again.

“That’s a good story, pretty one. If it’s true, he can stay with us. If you are lying, we can dispose of him later.”

“And what are you going to do with me?” asked the girl with a tremor in her voice.

“You and I are destined to become better acquainted,” said Hulgar. “I have long hoped to find an earth woman worthy to enter the seraglio of the great Hulgar. The fantastic emotions of your type amuse me. But right now I am more interested in what your brother is doing. You were headed for Oberon. We’ll continue there and you can introduce me to

him. I want to talk business with him—and business always comes before pleasure in this mercenary age.”

Paula’s eyes snapped. Her voice was coldly scornful.

“You know I’ll never introduce you to my brother,” she said. “No matter what you do to me. His work is more important than my life.”

Hulgar clapped his huge paws together delightedly. “You show excellent spirit,” he said. “It is just what I expected. But your brother will have something to say on the matter; he may be more ‘human,’ as you call it.”

His tone suddenly became hard. He turned and snapped orders to the loathsome crew around him.

“Bring in the radio-vision transmission outfit and the ethergraph,” he said. “Get in touch with OBX-922.”

Travers saw that this horrible ape-like creature’s skull housed as fine a scientific brain as any on earth. It made the whole thing seem like a ghastly nightmare.

There came the sharp buzz of machinery in motion. Men entered carrying a box-like object with coils of flexible cable trailing from it. They snapped the ends of the cable into sockets along the cabin walls.

A voice suddenly sounded from an overhead speaker.

“This is OBX-922. What do you want, and who are you?”

The ape-man at the table took up his desk microphone.

“Hulgar speaking. We have intercepted Paula Zanton on her way to your research station. I have her on my ship now. I demand an interview with her brother.”

“He is ill,” came the answer.

“Not too ill to see me. Let me speak to him.” A moment of silence followed, then a hoarse, worried voice sounded.

“Hulgar, what’s this? What did you

say!"

"That's Harvey!" cried Paula hysterically. "Don't answer, Harvey—it's a trap." She tried to run forward and snatch the microphone from Hulgur's hand, realizing that it was a directional instrument and that her warning had not reached her brother's ears. But two of the Ape-men caught her.

Hulgur laughed and repeated his message.

"I don't believe you have my sister," came Harvey Zanton's excited voice. "You're a criminal and a liar, Hulgur. I'll see that you're exiled to the outer frontiers for this."

"All right—look!" Hulgur's tone was coldly cruel.

He leaped from his table desk, pointed the directional microphone toward Paula, and snapped his fingers in some sort of signal. The cry of warning that rose to her lips was stifled in a shrill scream of pain as the two Ape-men holding her twisted her arms savagely. At the same instant another one of Hulgur's creatures pointed the lens of the radio-vision instrument at her. The scene was reproduced thousands of miles away in the sickroom where her brother was.

Young Zanton's voice sounded a moment later. It had a broken, beaten note.

"All right, Hulgur. I'll see you if you come alone. But if you hurt Paula any more, I'll dedicate the rest of my life to running you down and killing you."

"Switch off communication at once," ordered Hulgur. "Head for Oberon. We land there within the hour."

He was grinning triumphantly, and leering at Paula like a malicious satyr.

"You coward," hissed Paula. "You don't dare attack the station. You're afraid of their ray defenses."

"That isn't entirely correct," said Hulgur. "I have no doubt I could force them into submission; but in doing so, I might destroy your brother's excellent work. It's that

I'm interested in. Therefore I'm going alone to interview him. I expect to find him in a very reasonable mood. He'll be worrying about his little sister's safety. You know I have a bad reputation with women."

"And you'll bargain with him?"

"Yes—in my own way," said Hulgur softly.

A look of terror came into Paula's face. She swayed for a moment as though she were going to faint. Travers knew that she suspected treachery.

Then he saw Hulgur reach out and grab the girl, taking advantage of her momentary collapse, and press a kiss on her provocative lips. The ape-man was grinning wantonly.

A mist of red seemed to drop before Travers' eyes then. A surge of such fierce hatred swept over him that he threw caution to the winds. In a sudden burst of energy he tore loose from the two men holding him and leaped forward. He was intent on one thing only—to crash his knotted fist against Hulgur's gross, simian face.

There was a sharp crack as his knuckles flattened flabby flesh against bone. For an instant he saw the startled expression in Hulgur's eyes, as his head snapped sidewise under the terrific impact of the blow.

Then something struck Travers from behind with a force that nearly broke his neck. He had a sensation of snipping over and over and sinking into a quicksand of darkness. All thought and feeling left him and he passed into a void of unconsciousness as deep as that of the space through which the ship was traveling.

CHAPTER IV. Green Menace

WHEN Travers awoke, there was a roaring sound in his ears and his body

was bathed in sweat. At first he thought both phenomena were caused by the blow on the head he had received. Then he grasped their true significance. External pressure had heated up the cruiser's hull, making the temperature rise within. The noise was wind howling outside, augmented by the sound of laboring machinery. The space ship had entered Oberon's atmosphere.

The fact that he could hear the ship's mechanism so plainly made Travers suddenly alert. He discovered he was not tied, and got up. Close to his eyes was what appeared to be the small ventilator grating of a door. He stooped and looked through this.

Then he saw that he was in a small closet just off the cruiser's power room.

The huge gravity power units were suddenly shut off. There came the high, complaining whine of an auxiliary atomic turbine. This meant that the cruiser had penetrated far into the satellite's atmosphere and was now reconnoitering at less than one hundredth its former speed.

It meant that Hulgur would soon be carrying out whatever treacherous thing it was, which he planned against Paula and her brother. It meant that in a short time he would be master of all humanity.

Travers felt himself trembling with an emotion more powerful than any he had ever known. It was a mixture of anger, hurt pride, and a great fear that it was too late to save the universe from the dictator-ship of this gross ape-like creature. The fate awaiting Paula was almost too sickening to speculate upon. That she would become Hulgur's plaything, until he tired of her, there could be little doubt.

Travers pressed against the door, and found, as he had expected, that it was locked. But it seemed to be frailly built, not intended for use on a prison room. Hulgur must have thought so little of his prisoner's strength and initiative, that he had let them stick him in this metal closet among the greasy rags and old oil

cans. Travers ground his teeth in sudden fury.

Then he began groping in the semi-darkness until his fingers closed over metal. It was a chisel-like tool of some one sort.

He stuck the end of this forcibly in between the frame and the edge of the door near the lock. Then, believing that the noise of the turbine would drown whatever sounds he might make, he pushed with all his strength against the door and pulled back on the handle of the tool. He heard the sharp snap of the breaking lock as the door flew open.

The back of the man-ape operating the turbine was turned. With no one watching him, Travers was able to slip out into the corridor.

Throwing personal safety to the winds, he made his way back toward the section where he believed Hulgur's cabin to be. His face was as bleak as granite. He still clutched the chisel-like tool. The crew must be at their various stations, now that a landing was soon to be made. This would account for the emptiness of the corridors. He wondered where Paula was.

Then he saw a strip of light in front of him which did not come from the tubular illuminating system overhead. It issued from the crack of a door standing ajar.

Travers' movements became as cautious as those of a stalking panther. He seemed to freeze in his tracks when he had come near enough to the door to look in. The room was the ship's laboratory.

Hulgur was there and another man-ape—a wizened, gnome-like creature, with a neckless head resting directly on narrow shoulders. He wore thick-lensed glasses, which gave his eyes a monstrous appearance. His face was as simian and loathsomely evil as Hulgur's own.

Before them on a small enameled table was several glass vials and syringes. Hulgur had the sleeve of one arm rolled up. As Travers watched the wizened man-ape lifted a

delicate hypodermic syringe and thrust its needle-point into Hulgur's hairy flesh. He pressed the plunger home.

Was the sky-pilot a drug addict, Travers wondered? If so, he would surely use some method more modern than this. The needle syringe as a medium, for administering drugs was practically obsolete, though it was still used for serum and vaccine injections. Perhaps Hulgur feared some sort of infection on this little-known satellite.

But the actions of the two beings in the room made Travers wonder still more. He stared fascinated while the wizened gnome laid down the syringe, walked to a cabinet standing against the wall, and took out a square metal box. He placed it on the table, reached in with one claw-like hand, and drew out a black cylinder about five inches long. This he held up for Hulgur's inspection, while his lips moved like a professor in a lecture room.

Travers could hear little of what was being said; but he saw the uneasy look on Hulgur's flabby face. The man-ape reached out and took the cylinder. The grin that spread his thick lips seemed like an assumed one with an undercurrent of fear behind it.

Then they both turned and came towards the door where Travers stood. He backed away but not before he had heard a snatch of their conversation more clearly.

"Better than lethal gas," the wizened ape-man was saying. "You will have no trouble leaving it. When the fools learn of its existence, it will be too late. And have no fears if any accident should occur. The injection has made you immune. There will be only the discomfort."

Travers started to raise his wrench with the desperate intention of attacking Hulgur as he came through the door. But at that instant there was a movement at the far end of the corridor. A member of the ship's crew was approaching. Travers ducked into a

branch corridor. He could take no chance now of being caught again—not until he had learned the secret of that black tube in Hulgur's hand and discovered for what devilish purpose it was meant.

When Hulgur and the member of the crew had both disappeared, Travers went back to the door of the laboratory room. The gnomelike ape-man was still inside. Without hesitation Travers entered.

The wizened one whirled. When he saw Travers, his hand reached toward a sharp-pointed pair of scissors lying on the table. He brought them up like a weapon. There was a snarl on his lips.

But Travers was too quick. He battered them from the creature's hand and knocked him down with a single blow. The ape-man crumbled into a corner. Travers approached the black metal box cautiously. He lifted the lid and saw two other cylinders like the one Hulgur had taken.

He picked one of them up and examined it. There was a screw cap at one end with a hole to one side of the center, like that of a closed pepper can. The hole could obviously be opened by turning the screw cap.

As he held the cylinder close to his face, Travers became aware of a faint noise inside. He put the tube to his ear, and could hear the sound plainly. It was a soft rustling, as though myriads of tiny feet were moving restlessly over the inner surface of the tube. His fingers toyed experimentally with the screw cap, while an inner sense warned him that he was in the shadow of some ghastly danger.

Then a choking voice spoke from the floor. The wizened man had regained his senses and was staring up at Travers with horror-filled eyes.

"Don't open it," he said hoarsely.

"Tell me what it is or I will," answered Travers. "Quick—or I'll turn the cap." His fingers moved as though to carry out the

threat.

The ape-man on the floor gave a squeak like a terrified rat.

“Fool,” he said, “it is filled with Mortifer beetles—thousands of them. One bite and you are dead, with their vile eggs hatching in your flesh. If you open the hole they will bore through the membrane at the end in less than two minutes and kill us all.”

Travers understood now. Mortifer beetles came from the equatorial jungles of Venus. He had heard of them before, heard that their ferocity in attacking human beings was only equaled by the deadliness of the poison they carried. Hardly larger than the head of a pin, each secreted an amount of venom equal to the virus of a million pneumonia bacilli. He understood, too, the awfulness of Hulgur’s plan, why he wanted to interview Harvey Zanton.

He stared down at the tube in his hand as though hypnotized, thinking of the havoc that this small cylinder could cause.

A movement glimpsed from the corner of his eye aroused him from his unpleasant reverie. There was a flash of sharp metal through the air, a snarl of bared teeth. Hulgur’s wizened aide had taken advantage of Travers’ momentary preoccupation to launch another murderous attack.

The ape-man had regained the scissors. Travers moved just in time.

His face showed no emotion now. He was filled with a cold determination to destroy this gnomelike creature, who dealt in the deadliest of poisons and who had no more right to live than had a vicious reptile.

His fist swung up for the second time. The inhuman monster struck out savagely. But Travers’ blow was quicker. It caught Hulgur’s aide on the side of his simian head, spinning him off his feet. He crashed against the metal wall of the room and there was a sound like a breaking egg as his skull crunched against the unyielding steel. Travers stared down at him

for a moment, then slipped the tube of Mortifer beetles into his pocket and turned toward the enameled table.

The syringe that the evil technician had used on Hulgur was still there. But it was partially empty now. There were several bottles of colorless liquid on the table top, yet Travers couldn’t be sure which was the right one. A vague plan was forming in his mind; but he had to think of Paula. Her safety must be assured first of all.

He spent some moments trying to ascertain which bottle corresponded to the anti-venom in the syringe. Without a careful laboratory analysis it seemed almost impossible to tell.

Finally he took a chance and filled the syringe up from one of the bottles which was partially filled; but his former plan now seemed too risky to undertake.

He slipped the syringe into his pocket, then went to the door of the corridor and stuck his head out. There was no one in sight; but the sound of the distant atomic turbine had suddenly changed. Its shrill whine had increased to an even higher pitch. Travers recognized it as the note made when such a power unit is pulling sharply against gravitational force. The cruiser was landing.

This was verified a moment later by the sudden vibration which shook the whole ship followed by a slight jarring shock. Then there was silence except for the movement of feet along the metal corridors.

Travers crept out of the laboratory door and moved along the corridor. If he could only locate Paula!

But he heard the sound of approaching footsteps. He was forced to duck into the shadow of a metal bracing stanchion. To be caught now would rob him of his only possible chance to outwit Hulgur.

He spent five minutes playing hide and seek along the corridors before he realized the hopelessness of his idea of locating Paula. She

might be locked in any one of a hundred rooms on this huge cruiser. Even if he found her prison chamber, what chance had he of getting her out?

Then came the thought of that greater cause he was serving, the cause of humanity itself against the bestial Hulgur, would-be dictator of the Universe. He must warn Harvey Zanton against Hulgur's demoniac plan. A wild hope arose within him that this might still be possible.

He crept forward cautiously, straight toward the center of the cruiser where the cargo hatches were, until he saw light streaming through an open port. It was the daylight of Oberon, and he got a glimpse of sunshine and thick, green vegetation beyond.

But he also heard the sound of voices. Members of the crew were outside, sunning themselves after the long trip. He looked out and saw them squatting on their heels in a semicircle close to the hatchways. It would be impossible to get by their spitting ray guns.

Travers turned quickly and walked the breadth of the ship. He approached the closed ports on the opposite side. No one was in sight here. With swift, sure fingers he opened one of the ports and slipped out. The cruiser was now between him and the crew. He moved along its side toward the bow and saw in the distance, above the green of the thick forest, the tops of several domelike buildings—the Zanton Experimental Station.

When he had walked cautiously to the bow, he made out a flat, even roadway leading from the landing space to the buildings. A hundred yards along it was a figure—Hulgur, carrying the deadly Mortifer beetles, and on his way to interview young Zanton.

There was only one thought in Travers' mind now—to overtake the man before his terrible plan could be put into effect. But he knew that Hulgur was armed. To run along the open road after him would be fatal. He would be seen by both Hulgur and

his crew and would be pierced by a death ray before he had gone fifty feet. The only other way was to run through the forest.

Travers did this at once, gliding into the thick canopy of leaves. Then he struck out parallel with the road and ran as he had never run before—ran until his breath came in gasps and his lungs pained him in Oberon's humid air.

The trunks of trees seemed to come toward him at express-train speed. He dodged in and out and kept on, knowing that he would soon be ahead of Hulgur. When he caught up with the ape-man, he planned a stealthy maneuver toward the edge of the road where he could lie in wait with his wrench.

The vegetation around him was strange; foliage of grotesque shape, odd-looking cork-like bark on the trees, queer plants and flowers under foot. But the ground was even and firm. He had no trouble in his desperate race to overtake Hulgur—not until some sort of growth caught his toe and suddenly tripped him. He lay for an instant gasping for breath, then started to pick himself up.

But he discovered that something had hold of one foot. He looked down. The green tendril of a plant had become twisted around his ankle. He reached out to free himself; but, to his amazement, another green, twining creeper curled itself around his arm.

He twisted his torso erect then, a sudden fear dilating his eyes. All around him he saw more snake-like tendrils pointing in his direction. Those farthest away were bending and twisting like serpents. The nearest ones were fastening themselves upon his legs, curling over and around, reaching hungrily for the upper part of his body.

The ghastly realization dawned upon him that he had come into contact with some sort of horrible man-eating plant, that in a minute or two he would be hopelessly trapped like a small animal in a snare.

CHAPTER V.
Hulgar's Handiwork

HE began tugging till the veins in his forehead stood out. He tried to wrench his right arm free, at the same time holding his left high, so that the half-dozen sinuous creepers reaching for it would have no chance to get a grip.

But the tendrils of this rapacious plant were composed of tough, elastic fiber. They possessed prehensile nerves and something more—the ability to sense the presence of their prey even at a distance. He had fallen directly into the center of a circular bed of them. He could not doubt the strange sixth sense they had when he saw the sea of waving tendrils on all sides of him.

The creepers around his left arm stretched, but would not give up their grip. When he clutched at them involuntarily with his left hand, he narrowly missed having that caught, too.

He could hear an uncanny, horrible rustling whisper all around him as the plants moved and strained on their stems. They must have been in repose when he stumbled into them. Now they were alert and hungry for prey.

Sweat streamed from his face. He had all he could do to keep himself from shouting for help; though Hulgar and his men were the only ones who would hear, and if he fell into their hands his death would be just as inevitable.

In sheer panic he reached across with his left hand, made dive into his right pocket and gripped the chisel-like tool. It was the only metal cutting edge he had, the only thing with which to attack the sinister plant save his bare hands.

And he knew now that he was being slowly drawn down as more and more creepers added their weight and strength to those which already had hold of him.

He struck down with the blade of the chisel, not with any clear notion that it would help him, but because he felt he must do something to fight back.

Then a sudden surge of hope flared up within him. When the chisel came in contact with one of the tough green creepers, the tendril relaxed and drew back, curling up as a sensitive plant on earth would do.

He began striking right and left with a fury that nearly exhausted him. A score of tendrils withdrew from him; but fresh ones took their places. At the end of ten minutes' battle, he was hardly better off than before.

Now he tried desperately to get control of his own emotions; to reason this thing out. An icy calm took the place of the rage and fear that had gripped him. He saved his strength and began raining blows on the creepers more systematically. At length he freed his right arm, but it was almost paralyzed, and he couldn't hold the chisel in his right hand for some minutes.

The slow battle continued. He struck at the creepers until he had cleared a circle around him and almost freed his legs. Those that he had hit were curled up. It seemed almost that they were nursing their wounds and glaring at him in sullen hatred.

But he knew they had no eyes. It was through a sense of odor or vibration that they were aware of his presence.

At last he stood up, trembling, and weak in the knees. Through a tangle of stems he now saw something white gleaming against the livid green of the verdure. The sweat broke out afresh on his forehead.

The white object was the bone of some large animal. He saw others, too, a femur and a grinning skull—the bones of creatures that had been slain and consumed by this bed of horrible, carnivorous vegetation.

The sight made him realize that he was still trapped, that now, with every plant in the bed alert and waiting for him, he might never

escape. The clear floor of the forest fifty feet away looked like some promised land that he would never reach.

He lost all truck of time as he slowly beat at the creepers in front of him. Once a feeling of dizziness overtook him. He almost fell, and knew that if he did so, his bones would be added to the others there among the poisonous-looking green stems.

Foot by foot he drove the tendrils back. His chisel bruised the pulpy fiber. Like the heads of long retracting snakes, the tendrils quivered and curled up. He had hopes of clearing a path to safety. And yet it could hardly be called that. The plants in his wake soon recovered. His victory over them was short-lived. But the cleared circle at least changed its location. It was creeping nearer to the edge of the bed.

The knowledge that he would now be too late to warn Harvey Zanton nearly made him lose his head again. He stepped too close to the edge of his safety circle and a long lithe creeper curled around his leg. He struck at the plant as he would have struck at the head of a cobra.

He never knew how he kept up that apparently end-less battle. It seemed to him that he fought the green tendrils through an eternity of suffering and mental agony. It seemed that he would never break through. And when at last he did come to the end of the bed; when there were no more creepers before him, he collapsed in a dead faint of exhaustion on the forest floor.

The cool of the evening was upon him before he managed to pull his senses together. He staggered to his feet, feeling bruised and sore in every joint.

His teeth started chattering as he remembered the nightmare he had come through. His eyes looked sunken and feverish. But he remembered Paula and the horrible plan of Hulgur. He groaned aloud when he realized he had been unable to stop it.

In a faltering, zig-zag course he moved toward the roadway. But he kept his eyes open for more of the man-eating plants. Once he saw a bed of them, awake now that night was almost here, their creepers erect and swaying like a nest of evil, green snakes.

Then he came to the road and moved along its edge till he was close to the buildings of the experimental station.

In a cleared space behind the station some men were working. He rubbed his eyes and came nearer before he saw they were Hulgur's bestial creatures. Then he saw what they were doing—filling up freshly dug graves. Even as he watched, a limp body was dumped unceremoniously into the last one. Hulgur's plan had worked. He had ruthlessly murdered young Zanton and his aides, and now his vicious crew were disposing of the victim's bodies.

Travers, standing there with hollow eyes and torn clothing, raised his fist and shook it at those unseeing, beast creatures. For a moment a feverish madness gripped him and he mumbled terrible curses. Then his lips ceased moving, his arms dropped to his sides. He waited, crouching and watching, until the gruesome task had been finished, and Hulgur's henchmen had moved back into the buildings of the research Station.

He had no doubt that Hulgur had cleared the Mortifer beetles out with some sort of fumigating gas, or perhaps the beetles died after biting their victims and laying their eggs. He wasn't sure enough of their habits to say. He was only certain that they had served Hulgur's satanic purpose.

Oberon's short day had fled. It was nearly night now. The shadows were deep, and Travers moved up to the wall of the first building. It was made of metal with a rounded domelike roof above. No doubt defensive ray guns were housed in this and others like it; but they had done Harvey Zanton and his men no good. The deadly insects had penetrated to

every nook and cranny.

One door was open, showing that Hulgar felt safe now he had cleared the station of all human life.

Travers' weakened body trembled when he made the discovery. His eyes glowed as he entered the building.

There came the sound of footsteps. An aid of Hulgar's appeared, strolling along the entrance hallway. Travers pressed himself against the wall, close to a vertical pipe. His fingers tightened over the chisel handle till the fingernails went white.

At the last instant, Hulgar's ape-man saw him. He went for the ray gun bolstered at his side. But it was too late. Travers was upon him. He brought the chisel down with a sickening crack. The man dropped, and his ray gun clattered harmlessly to the floor.

Travers snatched it up, his face working. He had one deadly weapon now. He was still at a pitiful disadvantage, still hopelessly outnumbered and certain to fail. But he had intended attacking Hulgar with the wench alone. Now, with the ray gun in his hand, he felt as strong as ten men.

But caution was still necessary. He must find Hulgar, and find out what had become of Paula, whether she was here now, or still on the ship.

Sounds of revelry reached his ears. He walked forward until he came to a large central chamber. This was the station's recreation room, with musical instruments and books for the technicians when they were off duty. Hulgar's men had found the depot's store of medicinal liquor and were drinking, dancing and roaring out obscene songs. They were all brutal, ape-like creatures with unshaven faces; a hideous pirate crew, but there was none there more wicked and cunning than their leader.

Their drunken state made Travers suddenly half sick with fear. What of Paula? Was she with Hulgar now? Was he in the

same orgiastic state as his men?

A sudden cry in a girl's voice answered his questions. It was followed by a piercing, terrified scream, which made the muscles in Travers' face contract and send him forward on the run.

CHAPTER VI. Winged Death

THE scream was repeated. It guided Travers' feet down a branch corridor with several doorways opening on either side. He heard exultant cries from the recreation room behind it. Hulgar's ape-men had heard the scream, too, and were expressing their approval of their leader's conduct. There came sounds of a struggle close at hand now, then another cry, more frantic than either of the others. There was a sobbing note in it. Travers flung the door of the room open and stepped in.

What he saw was not unexpected; but it made him draw his breath in with a fierce hiss.

Hulgar had his arms around Paula Zanton. He was trying to press hungry kisses on her mouth, while she, with head thrown back and fists clenched, was striking at his ugly, leering face, now unwholesomely mottled from the liquor he had drunk.

Paula's own face had a marble whiteness, showing the strain she had been under. There was an inflamed spot on her right arm close to the wrist where Hulgar's fingers had dug into her.

They both turned as Travers entered.

Paula's eyes grew bright with sudden hope. Hulgar's neck muscles swelled in fury. His gaze darted to the ray gun in Travers' hand. Suddenly he pivoted the girl about and held her in front of him as a shield.

It was a craven act, but showed fox-

like cunning. As he held the girl easily with one hairy arm, Hulgur's other hand now crept toward the weapon at his own side.

Travers stood as if frozen, unable to act even though he knew that a spitting death ray would strike him down in the space of a few seconds. His body was weak from the ordeal he'd been through. Little of Hulgur was visible behind Paula's figure, for the ape-man was crouching down behind his human shield. Travers dared not risk a shot that would strike Paula. Yet the thought came that she would be better off dead than left to this creature.

He was brought to his senses by the upward flash of Hulgur's ray gun. For the fraction of a second the gun was trained upon him. He braced his body for the death-dealing shock of the ray. Then, at the moment the gun flashed violet light, Paula's hand swept up. The gun was elevated. The hissing ray passed over Travers' left shoulder, searing through the panel of the door behind him.

Hulgur swore profanely. Paula squirmed and lurched to one aide.

In that instant, faster than human eye could follow, Travers' right arm whipped out. He had been a dead shot in the service. He had never let his marksmanship deteriorate. And now his weapon hissed with deadly surety.

A spot of livid blue appeared over Hulgur's right eyebrow. His eyes seemed to bulge from their sockets. His unshaven jaw sagged open. He looked as though someone had just told him a staggering bit of news.

Then his gun dropped from lifeless fingers and he crashed over backwards, falling against a table littered with bottles and specimen cases. The table tipped over, the glassware fell to the floor in a shattering cacophony of sound that echoed through the corridors outside.

The silence that followed lasted for a moment only.

The sounds of revelry from the central chamber had ceased abruptly. Now cries of

excitement broke out. A stampede of running feet followed. Hulgur's murderous crew were coming to investigate the cause of the noise.

Travers' eyes swept the room for a possible place of concealment for Paula and himself, but could find none.

Then he rushed to the door. But the sea of bobbing, unkempt heads was already in sight. There was a strong animal odor in the air. He and Paula were trapped, at the mercy of a band of inhuman devils, who would literally tear them to pieces when they found that their leader had been slain. Travers' ray gun would take toll of some; but with it he could not hope to stem the avalanche of destruction that was sweeping upon them.

He shut the door and shot home the small bolt that would hold for a few moments only. With his face white and set, he walked over to Paula.

She was smoothing the hair from her forehead with one shaking hand. Her eyes met his bravely. There was even a faint smile on her pale lips. For a moment her fingers rested on his arm and he felt a great surge of emotion within him—the old atavistic instinct to protect and cherish a weaker being of the opposite sex. He kissed her lightly on the lips once.

She too heard the approaching stampede of Hulgur's crew. She seemed, to realize that there was nothing to be done, that she and Travers must go to their deaths together. But her voice did not falter when she spoke.

"It is for a good cause, Mark."

He thrilled at that. It was the first time she had use his given name.

He did not answer; but his tense fingers darted into his coat pocket. They came out holding a metal syringe. She looked at it uncomprehendingly at first, then nodded.

"It is better than being torn to pieces by those devils," she said huskily.

He understood what she meant. She

thought he was offering her a painless way of escape through self-destruction. He shook his head.

“Not that, Paula. This may mean life for us. I don’t know—but I have a terrible plan—our only chance.”

Still unaware of his meaning, she nevertheless held her arm out with the trustfulness of a child. He jabbed the needle into her soft flesh, pushing the plunger halfway down the barrel. He withdrew it and jabbed it into his own arm. He wasn’t sure that this was the right vaccine.

Voices sounded directly outside the door now. Hulgar’s name was shouted several times. The cries became more insistent. Then, when there was no answer, some member of the crew caught hold of the doorknob and shook it.

“Anything wrong, master?” asked a hoarse voice.

Travers did not answer. He shifted his ray gun to his left hand. His right plunged into his coat pocket.

“The Earth girl has killed him,” said another voice. “Come on—let us go in and get her.”

Something struck the door then. The metal panel shook, the bolt bent. Another blow like that and it would open. The raving horde would be upon them.

Travers withdrew his right hand from his pocket now. It clutched a black tube five inches long. His face was as expressionless as a mask. Deliberately he turned the knurled cap at the end. Just as deliberately he pressed the end of his fingernail through the brown membrane that showed there, then threw the tube down on the floor.

His action was timed to the precise moment that the door burst inward. A dozen evil, ape-like faces widened at the sight of Hulgar’s prone figure and the unexpected presence of Travers. Animal snarls came from their hairy throats. Hands flashed downward

to holstered ray-guns.

“Drop!” hissed Travers, at the same time giving Paula a shove. She sank to the floor. He himself leaped aside as four streaks of shimmering violet light crackled through the air.

His own gun spoke. Three figures in the doorway tumbled backwards; but more took their places. In the pace of a second the doorway was alive with heads and bristling with armament like a redoubt.

But, over and above the shouting of the ape-men and the hissing crackle of the ray guns, there was an increasing, high-pitched whine—the whine of myriad insect wings. Tiny, darting shapes filled the air.

A figure in the doorway suddenly screamed and collapsed. Others clapped their hands to their faces and necks. One spun around and fell forward into the room.

Travers heard Paula give a little scream of pain and fright. He stood frozen in his tracks as two of the winged killers bit his cheek.

For a moment he had an appalling sensation of dizziness. He looked at Paula. She was drooping as though on the verge of fainting. Then she slowly raised her head. His own feeling of illness passed.

The corridor outside was a shambles now. He hoped that Paula wasn’t looking. The terrible scene might remain with her all her young life. But these murderous creatures deserved the fate that was overtaking them. They and their leader had slain thousands in their day.

They were aware now of the awful thing that was happening. There was a general turning away from the door, a stampeding down the corridors of the building. But the winged death pursued them. The ape-men fell where they had been bitten, fell as quickly as though a bolt a lightning had struck them. They crumpled up and lay still, slain, ironically enough, by the very same agent

their leader had employed to betray Harvey Zanton.

Paula and Travers looked at each other. The Zanton formula had been saved at a terrible price. Young Zanton and his staff were dead. The crew of bestial pirates who had tried to get it that they might become dictators of all humanity had met the same awful fate.

But, in comparison to the lives of the teeming millions out there on those planets, swimming through space, it seemed to Travers

that the sacrifice was a worthwhile one. He told Paula so later.

And the girl, resting her head on his shoulder, nodded and gripped his hand in hers. A sense of great peace filled Travers. He had not failed Zanton after all. A patrol ship would land shortly in answer to the ethergram he had sent from the station's transmission set. The secret for which young Zanton had lived and died was safe in the hands of those who revered the great cause for which it was meant.