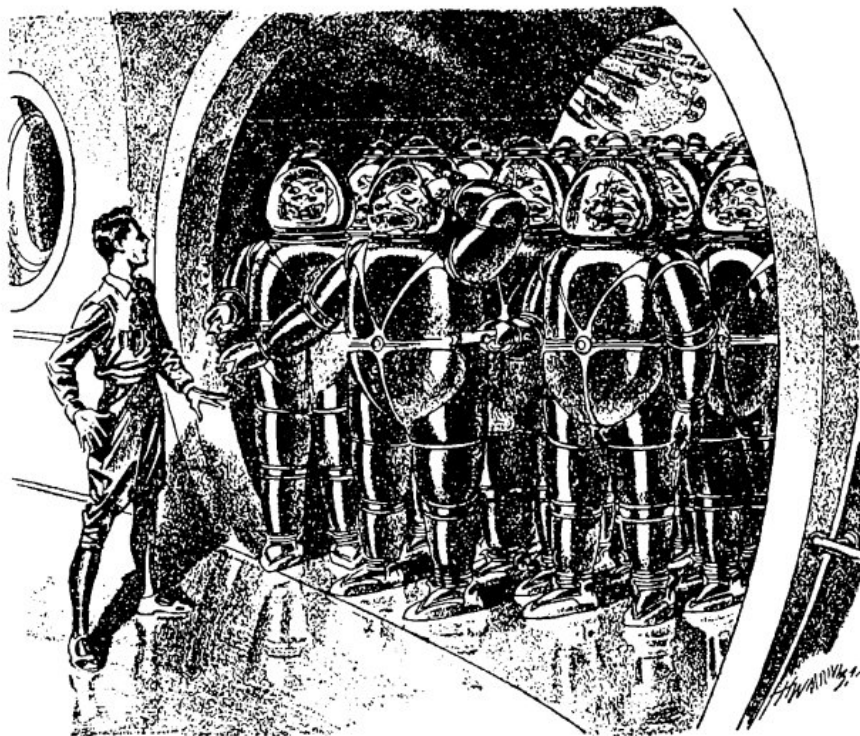


Dark Sun

by Raymond Z. Gallun

Alone on a Dead Star an Earthman Faces the Terror of Extinction—but Scientific Strategy Saves Him!



Twenty bulky figures clad in armor, confronted him.

NORBERT PONS did not like to be alone here. Always, in the gleam of instruments, and in the smells and sounds, and other details of his environment, there was a suggestion of ever pending menace.

He would try to relax in his quarters, which were quite as comfortably appointed as if he were at home on Earth. He would try to read or sleep, but sooner or later dread, and the memory of his responsibility, would drive him out into the halls and chambers where complex elements were refined, and where machines hummed with quiet efficiency,

keeping fearful natural forces at bay.

He would look at the tremendous pillars that supported the roof of the refining plant; and he would wonder what would happen to them, and to himself, if something chanced to go wrong with the gravity reduction system.

“Those pillars would break like dry twigs!” he’d tell himself. “A man would flatten out like a rotten fruit that a dinosaur had stepped on! A dark star is no place for a human being to be! Mass makes gravity, and the mass of Khoraba is countless millions of times greater than that of Earth. Why, if the

gravity reducers weren't busy, I'd weigh something over a hundred tons!"

For many minutes at a time, Norbert Pons would stand at some high-placed window of the plant and stare, gaunt-faced and haggard-eyed, out over the awesome and almost featureless terrain of Khoraba, where natural law itself seemed curiously warped and hostile.

There was starlight here, as at home. The Pleiades were all about this monster sun that had blazed gloriously during another era of cosmic history. But the nearest of those Pleiades was still several light years away. They gleamed with harsh brilliance in a black sky, for there was very little atmosphere here. It had not been dissipated by molecular leakage into space; rather, its own weight had forced it into the substance of the dense, black rock of Khoraba's surface.

Only a tenuous and shallow layer of hydrogen, lightest of elements, remained of a once mighty blanket of gas. Clinging close to the ground, it glowed with a faint phosphorescence induced by electrical emanations coming up from Khoraba's still tremendously heated interior.

The expanse of the dark star's surface was utterly level. No mountain or hill could have lifted its crest against the drag of the gravity. There was little to break the drab monotony of that limitless plain except patches of glowing, dusky red, which marked the positions of hot lava pools.

SUCH was Khoraba, named after some horror of Martian myth. On the desolate immensity of its outer shell, the refining plant, which had been assembled in space ten years ago and lowered into position with its gravity reducers functioning, was like a button carelessly dropped on the Sahara.

Norbert Pons wasn't a coward—at least not in most ways. Death had threatened him often during the interplanetary war in

which Mars and Earth had defeated the Venus-Ganymede-Europa coalition. But those hectic moments of struggle seemed child's play to being the only man on Gargantuan Khoraba. There had been gay moments of relief, then, with his comrades, and when death came it was swift. Demolition beams dissolved matter instantly, no gruesome remnants remained, and the feeling experienced by the survivors was more a feeling of vague surprise than of horror.

Pons had never seen a man crushed in the inconceivable grip of a dark sun, yet his fancy could fill in the knowledge gaps with ghastly vividness. There'd be a wide blot, irregular in shape like a bloodstain, with maybe a white fragment of bone projecting up from it here and there. In Khoraba's pull, most organic solids would act like liquids.

It was not a pretty picture to hold crystallized in one's mind, particularly when one knew that he must stay here alone for a long time. Old Hans Epstein, veteran guardian of the refinery, had died of a heart attack. Pons, his youthful assistant, but recently introduced to the mysteries of Khoraba, and by no means accustomed to his surroundings as yet, must carry on until another expert was brought from Earth.

Khoraba's titanic gravity made it the source of substances which could not have come into being on any sphere of much smaller mass and density. Only the terrifying pressures existing within Khoraba could have produced elements as dense and complex as those numbered 205 to 221 of the Periodic Table. These heavy, tremendously hard and refractory materials were now vital to the sciences and industries of civilization.

Pons' position would not have been so bad if there had been sufficient work to do, or if he had had human companionship. But with Hans Epstein dead, both of these things were denied him. All the machinery was automatic and almost perfect. It needed supervision only

because no mechanism can quite be trusted.

During the first month after Epstein's death, Pons' existence was one of growing tension, that mounted rapidly toward nightmare pitch. His constant worry about the functioning of the gravity reduction system's power units might have done irreparable harm to his mind, had not reason told him that he must find a way to relieve the tension. And so he began to build a small remote control apparatus, operated by radio.

This apparatus was not difficult to construct. Within a week it was completed. It consisted of two small black boxes.

One of these was located inconspicuously in the rear of the switchboard that stood in the power chamber of the gravity reducers. Its operation disturbed not at all the normal action of the various devices on the switchboard. The meters there could still be read accurately, and the levers and dials could be worked there, just as before.

THE other box was portable. Pons could keep it with him at all times, no matter where he was, if he so desired. Its meters and gauges could tell him at a glance just how well every part of the gravity reduction system was operating. It also had duplicate controls with which readjustments could be made, just as if he were actually in the power chamber.

Now that he was thus equipped, Norbert Pons' nervous dread was less acute. He ate and slept somewhat better. Fundamentally, however, Khoraba seemed just as terrible as it had before. Grimly, the youth awaited the arrival of the freight ships from Earth.

At last, far out in the star-sprinkled void, there was a flicker of rocket tubes. A dozen vessels had crossed the transdimensional passage from the Solar System. Pons watched their approach from a window of his quarters. Their repulsion plates glowing incandescent in their tremendous

battle with the pull of the dark sun, they slanted grandly toward the landing stage. The atomic energy of many pounds, Earth weight, of uranium, was freed in the task of bringing them to rest.

Norbert Pons was almost choked with relief as he rushed through passages and rooms, arriving at last before the great entrance airlock. For a little while now, he would be able to talk with people from home. Clumsy with haste, he worked the valves of the airlock.

"Hello there!" he called cheerily, as the inner portal of the lock opened.

His happy smile of greeting did not change for a second. Then, gradually, the expression on his face became one of idiotic surprise. Twenty bulky figures, clad in space armor, confronted him. A half dozen demolition tubes were pointed menacingly at his breast. Pons saw the icy glitter of cruel reptilian eyes behind the glazed fronts of oxygen helmets. He saw the hobgoblin grins of fanged mouths, and the iridescent sheen of reptilian scales that reflected the glow of illuminators.

Norbert Pons recovered quickly from his consternation. He knew that he faced merciless enemies, but he had faced their kind before. Helplessness he felt, but the acute danger of these animate foes was not as fearsome as the constant, brooding threat of Khoraba.

"Well?" he questioned coldly.

One of the intruders opened the face panel of his armor. Guttural English, thick and blurred, issued from the broad, troll-like mouth.

"We of Venus are never truly conquered, Earth scum," he said. "You know why we are here. We shall take over the plant. The loot of Khoraba shall make us strong. We shall build new fleets, and new engines of destruction. Our work shall go on until every Terrestrial and Martian has ceased to be! Now

my faithful ones shall confine you to your lair until I determine what end is most appropriate for you!”

Pons was unarmed, and either protest or resistance could have had but one result— instant death. Presently he was a prisoner in the room where he slept. A guard stood in the passage before the door. The latter was locked, but it was provided with a small, round window through which the guard could peer. The place had been carefully searched, for weapons. Escape from the thick, metal strengthened windows was definitely impossible.

Still, Pons should scarcely have been helpless. Circumstances had combined to give him an opportunity the like of which few captives have ever enjoyed. Resting on a stout metal table was a little black box, whose simple capacities could now be used to accomplish a grim purpose. The Venusians, recognizing it as a crude radio device of some kind, but not studying it closely enough to determine its true purpose, had not troubled to remove it.

BEYOND the windows of the room were visible the grey, rakish forms of the war vessels. The majority of the Venusians who composed their crews were still aboard them, and would probably so remain until the party of twenty had completed the investigation of the plant. By now the repulsion plates of the ships, working on the same principle as the gravity reducers here, would be completely shut off.

Inevitably and automatically, Norbert Pons' attention was drawn to the black box. His personal risk in what he contemplated doing, would be small. If everything went as it should, the reducer plates here would continue to work as usual. The gravity reduction system of the entire plant was divided into twelve sections, each of which could be operated separately. One of these sections was under

the floors of Pons' living quarters alone. The activity of the other sections could be decreased as much as desired.

Now the Earthman strode toward the box. His hands reached out. Then, oddly, his movements were checked. A flood of cold horror welled up from the deeper recesses of his mind. His cheeks whitened, and he began to tremble. He could not force his fingers into contact with the dial that must be turned if the Venus fleet was to be destroyed. To shut off any portion of the gravity reduction system seemed more terrible to him now than suicide by leaping into a white-hot furnace would have been.

The science of psychiatry records many strange and similar cases. People who live normal lives are seldom subject to such quirks. But to a person living in the malefic environment of Khoraba, life is automatically abnormal.

Brave men, even on Earth, have learned to feel terror for things far less dangerous than the gravity of a dark star. Reason frequently tells them that their fears are magnified, but emotionally they cannot accept the truth.

Norbert Pons had stayed too long on Khoraba, the inconceivable giant of the void. By slow stages it had thrown its morbid spell over his nervous system. He could not grasp all the causes for his fear yet, for those causes thrust their roots deep into the shadowy regions of his mind. Only accident might bring him better understanding.

Roaring, snapping sounds reverberated thunderously in his thoughts. They were like the sounds of the collapse of rigid metal, suddenly too heavy to bear its own weight. He pictured men reduced to bloody slime, and the horror of the vision was too unnaturally clear for his self-control to master. He who had gone calmly through an interplanetary war, moved backward away from the box, and threw himself, face downward, upon his bunk.

A dry sob rattled in his throat. Norbert Pons' dread was beyond mere personal danger now.

For an hour or more he lay cursing himself, and fighting his useless inner battle. He could still hear the steady drone of machinery, and now and then guttural Venusian voices, conversing in low tones.

Then a key grated in the lock of the door beyond which the guard was stationed. The guard entered, followed by the hideous leader, who had ordered Pons' temporary incarceration.

The Venusian aristocrat spoke his thick, blurred English, coming swiftly to the point:

"I have arrived at a decision, Earthman," he said. "The gravity of Khoraba offers me an opportunity to get rid of you in a unique and interesting manner. I am going to expose you, unprotected, to that gravity, Earthman. I wish that I could do the same to your entire race."

NORBERT PONS was sitting up on the edge of his bunk, now. His eyes and face went dazed and blank as he listened to the sentence. His consciousness heard it and grasped it. Yet, curiously, the overwhelming wave of utter emotional collapse, which logic told him should result at once, failed to come. Rather, the sentence brought to him a curious sense of relief.

Pons was far more than merely puzzled. How could anyone explain his strange, paradoxical reaction? It was just this sort of death that he was most afraid of, wasn't it? Or was it?

His knowledge of psychology was scant. He did not see at once the difference between fear born out of long and morbid brooding, and the fear that comes from a sudden and not altogether expected danger. The latter can be far less damaging. It is not the actual clash of battle that does so much to ruin morale; it is the monotony of waiting for

a catastrophe that can happen within the next second or the next hour or the next week.

The young Earthman did not immediately realize this truth, but after a moment the core of his fear arose into his conscious mind.

Uncertainty had become grim fact now. There was no reason to suppose that the Venusian leader had lied when he had pronounced sentence. But it was not fact that Norbert Pons had dreaded so much, but uncertainty—the knowledge that there was danger, and the endless suspense of waiting for it to strike. Out of this suspense had come his morbid visions.

This uncertainty was over now, and so there was a faint spark of relief glowing within Norbert Pons. The check on his natural courage was relieved. He looked straight into the cruel, reptilian eyes of the commander of the Venusians.

"Mind if I have a cigarette before you take me out?" he asked quietly.

The Venusian bowed with facetious grandiloquence.

"Certainly that is a small favor to grant to one so soon to perish," he replied. "Ooboh, give the Earthling a cigarette, and light it for him."

Ooboh, the guard, responded quickly to the commands of his master, but took the precaution of keeping his demolition tube trained on the captive.

"Thanks," Pons murmured.

For a minute he sat smoking and planning. He did not look at the black box, which rested out of reach on the table, for he did not wish the attention of the Venusians to be drawn to it.

Presently he evolved a simple scheme. There was danger in it, but he was reasonably sure that at least part of it would work—if the awful terror that had gripped him before did not return.

When his cigarette was half smoked he

arose very slowly from the bunk, his eyes turned toward the Venusian leader who stood close at hand.

“Well,” he said in a mild tone. “Let’s be getting along. I dislike waiting.”

At his first move, Ooboh, the guard, had leaped to the door, his demolition tube ready, but Pons seemed not to notice. His every act and gesture was calculated to check any hint of suspicion.

“So be it,” said the Venusian leader.

With slow, listless, but precisely premeditated steps, Pons walked toward the door. Beside the stout metal table he paused, as if gripped by a momentary absent-mindedness, which, under the circumstances, could not have seemed odd. Idly his fingers began to fumble with the litter on the tabletop—papers, pencils, books, pipes. Many of these things might have been the relics of fond memories, to which he, a condemned man, might now be saying farewell.

THE Venusian aristocrat behind him did not hinder, though Pons could guess that his cold eyes were watching him closely, and that there was a demolition tube pointed straight at his own back. Gradually the Earthman turned his attention to the black box. The dozen dials on its top were within reach now. Each of those dials controlled one of the twelve sections of the gravity reduction system.

Now was the moment to act, if there ever was to be such a moment. Pons felt keyed up, as with a touch of stage fright. There was suspense in this situation too, but it was not the product of a long period of morbid brooding, which was now ended. It was the simple, thrilling suspense of a man, fighting the enemies of his race.

Still moving his hand slowly, he reached for the number 3 dial, which controlled the gravity reducers under the landing stage. As if to do so were only a bit of idle fumbling, he twisted the dial to the zero

point. The landing stage was now receiving the full weight of Khoraba’s pull. There was no audible sign of any result, for what atmosphere there was, beyond the walls of the plant, was too thin to transmit sound. The eyes of the Venusian remained fixed on their captive, and so they were not warned.

Pons felt a wave of fierce exultation. He had surmounted his ghastly fear, and he had accomplished his main objective. But he did not look through the windows toward the landing stage now, for he did not want to betray himself to his watchful captors.

His fingers moved to dial 1, which controlled the reducers directly beneath the floor on which he stood. He leaned forward a little, against the edge of the table. Then he turned dial 1 a tiny bit toward zero.

The result, however, seemed quite out of proportion to the minuteness of the turn. Norbert Pons, yanked by the sudden magnification of his bodyweight, pitched forward to the top of the sturdy table. He heard a grunt behind him, and then a clang of metal as a demolition tube, weighing many times more than it should have, was torn from the grasp of the Venusian leader and jerked to the floor.

Both of the Venusians were taken completely by surprise. Neither had known what was about to happen, as Pons had. Ooboh, who stood by the door, dropped his weapon a split second after his master had done so. Then he crumpled up like a thing of jelly, and lay pinned to the floor by a tiny fraction of Khoraba’s gravity. A heavy thud told Pons that the Venusian aristocrat behind him had fallen too. Now the Earthman heard the rasping sighs of labored breathing. Pons was sprawled on his stomach on the tabletop. His heart and lungs were toiling painfully. Blood was being literally pulled from his brain, making his consciousness vague and dim. Yet he was surprised that the sensations he was experiencing were not as

terrible as he had once anticipated.

With ponderous effort he turned his eyes toward a window. The shapes of the vessels on the landing stage were changing slowly as the materials from which they were made yielded to the full strength of Khoraba's attraction. They were flattening out like lumps of soft mud set on a board. By now, every Venusian inside them was dead. There had been no time to put the repulsion plates in operation.

From beyond the door of the room, Pons heard excited mutterings, which reminded his hazy consciousness that there were things yet to be done. He gasped for breath. Then his hand, which seemed to weigh a hundred pounds, groped toward the black box a few inches away. He gave each of the ten dials which he had not previously touched a quarter turn toward zero—enough to kill, but not enough to damage seriously any machinery. There were peculiar, heavy sounds, and the excited mutterings ceased.

THEN, once more, he groped for the number 1 dial. He turned it a very little more, gradually, so that the further increase in his weight would not overstep the ultimate limit of his endurance. At first every fiber of his body shrieked a protest of agony, then numbness began to set in. Pons' act was dreadful self torture, but it had a purpose. Venusians were accustomed to a slightly feebler gravity than Earthmen; hence, logically, a Venusian's endurance to the pull

of Khoraba should be slightly inferior to that of an Earthman.

He waited until he knew that his consciousness had almost reached its limit. Then, slowly once more, to avoid the danger of any sudden change, he returned the dial to its normal position. Once more his body was approximately Earth weight.

After a few moments he was able to stand on his feet again, Ooboh and his master were inert but still alive. Pons left them where they were until he had readjusted all the dials. Then he dragged them to a small closet, and locked them inside.

Before beginning a tour of inspection through the plant, he stood for a minute before one of the windows which afforded a view of the landing stage and the wreckage upon it, and the black plain beyond. His head ached furiously, and his flesh was damp with sweat, but within him there was a strange, refreshing lightness, and a sense of freedom from an elusive and terrible burden.

There was a new and unaccustomed friendliness in the aspect of the dark star now. Even the thin, glowing atmosphere, and the Pleiades above, seemed to smile. The forces of this dying colossus of space had yielded to his will and had fought in his favor. Though they might threaten, he would, never fear them again. He knew that the wait for the freighters from Earth, would not seem so painful now, or so long.

"Khoraba, old girl," he muttered gently, and then he laughed.