

A SPACEWARP CLASSIC...

STF BROADCASTS AGAIN!

This round-robin epic appeared, one chapter at a time, in the Jan, Feb, Mar, Apr, May, Jun, Jul, Aug, Nov and Dec 1949 issues of SPACEWARP. Its title derives from the fact that it was launched as a sequel to "The Great STF Broadcast," a serial featuring the same setting and many of the same characters, which appeared in SPACEWARP during 1948. It is to be followed, real soon now, by "The Great STF Crisis" about which I prudently say no more, since I've not yet received the manuscript from its horde of authors.

Stencilled by Arthur H Rapp

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SEX
for
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IT
UP



NEWARK CLASSIC

THE
CADDIS
FLY

THE CADDIS FLY
IS A VERY COMMON
INSECT WHICH
IS FOUND IN
WATER
AND
ON
LAND



Chapter 1

by Art Rapp

That paunchy magnate of the pulpmags, John Upperberth, scowled thoughtfully at the latest issue of FITS, lying in all its lurid glory on his desk. "Slipping! Slipping! SLIPPING!" The words seemed to din in his ears -- words which had been shouted loud and long by the Board of Directors that morning, when Upperberth had been hard put to explain the declining circulation of Frankly Incredible Tales of Science.

"It's only a temporary slump!" he'd pleaded, cringing before the cold, fishy gazes of his employers. "I'm sure that in another month or two our sales figures will increase."

"I hope so," the Chairman had said. "For the sake of your job, Upperberth, I hope so..."

Upperberth shuddered at the recollection, looked again at the naked femme on the FITS cover, raised one hamlike hand, and brought it down on his interoffice buzzer.

Assistant Editor Glover Mackintosh rushed in from the outer office, hurriedly wiping a smudge of Brenda Starr's lipstick from his cheek. Starr was Upperberth's receptionist, one of those rare girls with a figure like the girl on a stfmag cover, and a face to match.

"You buzzed, Mr. Upperberth?" Mackintosh inquired, his Adam's apple bobbing in agitation.

"I buzzed," Upperberth agreed. He tilted back in his swivelchair and gazed sternly at his gangly assistant. "Mackintosh, we need more readers. How can we get them?"

Instinctively Glover Mackintosh turned to the sign which covered most of one wall. In blazing red letters it proclaimed the formula which had made FITS the leading pulpmag in America:

SEX IT UP !

Mackintosh turned back to Upperberth and raised his eyebrows in mute inquiry. Upperberth shook his head sadly.

"No, not this time, Mackintosh," he said. "FITS is already banned in five cities, and we can't take a chance on losing our second-class-mail privileges. This, Mackintosh, is a crisis!"

"Crisis, schmis, was is los, mein Kamerad?" boomed a gorrillalike voice from the doorway. Mackintosh jumped almost to the ceiling and clutched at his breast. Upperberth paused in mid-gesture to stare at the newcomer.

"Professor von Heine! Don't DO that!" yelled Mackintosh, regaining some of his composure. "You startled me!"

Professor Karl von Heine, illustrious German physicist and stf author, stalked into the inner sanctum of FITS, gazed at Upperberth a moment and banged a fist on the desk.

"Bah!" he yelled. "I haff by der door overheard dot you are in need uff more readers for Frankly Incredible Tales of Science. Und yet you sit here and do nudding! I, me, the great Karl von Heine, vill come to your assistance!"

"You mean -- you have an idea for increasing our circulation?" asked Upperberth hopefully.

"Egg-zaktly!" boomed von Heine, running his fingers through his bushy black beard. "I vill tell you uff it -- but first I must haff beer!"

Upperberth looked at Mackintosh. "You heard the man!" he yelled. "Quick! -- downstairs and bring up a case or two!"

Mackintosh scuttled from the room.

Von Heine perched himself comfortably on a corner of Upperberth's desk, reached over and buzzed the buzzer. Brenda Starr entered.

"Sit down, Fraulein," said von Heine before Upperberth could open his mouth. "It is necezzary dot you should mine idea hear also."

"Now look here, von Heine," interrupted Upperberth, "I don't believe you've got any idea for helping FITS. You admit you just heard of our difficulties when you entered the office a moment ago--"

"Donnervetter! Nonzenze!" Von Heine was affronted. "Am I not a genius? Am I not a former detective story writer? Am I not only a physicist, but a stfan? It iss vot I zee when I diss office enter dot giff me der idea how to solve your problem!"

"I don't understand--" began Upperberth, but von Heine cut him off with a gesture.

"Vot do I zee, you want to know? Vell, first I see Fraulein Starr mit der compact open, putting on mit der lipstick. Und den I see Mackintosh, und I see why iss she needing der lipstick fresh to put on. Und sinze you need more readers, I, Karl von Heine, instantly know how to get them for you!"

"How?" asked Upperberth breathlessly.

"I haff an invention made," said von Heine. "It iss a rocket for to Mars sending. Und since you are mein freund, I vill mine rocket use, FITS to publicize for you und bring you more readers."

"But -- how?" asked Upperberth and Starr together.

"Ve vill der rocket to Mars next week shoot," said von Heine. "Und in it ve vill send to Mars, to write for FITS an eye-witness account of the trip--"

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"WHO?" screamed Upperberth, Starr and Mackintosh simultaneously. Mackintosh had re-entered with the cases of beer just in time to catch the German physicist's explanation.

Von Heine paused, drew himself up to his massive six-foot-three of height, drew a deep breath, thrust out a dramatic pointing finger and boomed:

"YOU!"

There was a moment of dead silence in the office of John Upperberth. Then the light of enthusiasm began to gather in the famous editor's eyes, and an expression of admiration and pride stole over Brenda Starr's face. Together they turned to von Heine, babbling congratulations and compliments on his wonderful publicity scheme.

Petrified by astonishment and horror, silent before the implacably pointing finger of Karl von Heine, only one person in the room failed to share the general enthusiasm.

Glover Mackintosh, the man destined to be the first space-traveler.

Chapter 2

by Art Rapp

Several miles from the building which contained the FITS editorial offices, two people crouched tensely in the dilapidated bedroom of a third-rate hotel. On the bed lay a suitcase, its lid propped open to reveal a tangle of intricate electronic and sub-electronic circuits and a complex control panel. The inside of the suitcase lid was a metallic, mirrorlike substance, and reflected the image of a cathode-ray tube upon which an electron beam was dancing erratically.

The woman shrugged uneasily in her skintight black silk evening gown, removed a long black cigarette holder from between her ripe crimson lips, and snarled impatiently at her companion.

"Fix it, you fool!" She tapped one high-heeled foot to emphasize her words. "We must learn who is to ride the Mars-rocket!"

The burly man fumbling with the control panel did not answer, but snarled a steady flow of non-English profanity. Hulking and bubble-headed he was having a difficult time adjusting the delicate controls with his thick, clumsy fingers.

"Bah, Igor, you are a fool!" screamed the woman, kicking him in the ribs and seizing the controls in her own slim, scarlet-nailed fingers. Grumbling under his breath, Igor moved reluctantly aside.

A moment later the dancing of the scanning-beam slowed, then became a steady horizontal sweeping of the screen. Triumphantly the woman plugged in a connecting jack and a picture began to form.

"See?" snapped the raven-haired, voluptuous female. "It needed but a minor adjustment. Why are you so stupid, Igor?"

Igor did not look at the woman, but bent his sullen gaze on the screen as he replied with a sort of mechanical facility, "All men are stupid beside the wisdom of the Priestess," he muttered.

The two bent closer to the screen, which by now showed clearly the interior of Upperberth's office, and the four people in it.

Fifteen minutes or so had elapsed since von Heine's fateful designation of Glover Mackintosh as the man to ride the Mars-rocket and write the story of the trip for FITS' readers. Mackintosh had passed from dazed horror to vociferous indignation to trembling resignation to determined refusal back to dazed horror.

Starr, her lipstick practically consumed by the frequent necessity for her to distract Mackintosh from contemplation of the fate that awaited him, was now engaged in repairing the damage with the aid of her compact.

Responding nobly to the emergency, von Heine had taken over custody of Glover Mackintosh. The physicist had the gangling, quivering Assistant Editor maneuvered into a corner of the room and was now engaged in pressing bottle after bottle of beer upon him.

At first the going had been rough, but by now Glover Mackintosh was grasping the bottles willingly, nay, even eagerly. Perhaps it was his desperation that fostered such a great thirst, or perhaps he preferred death by drowning in beer to death in the limitless vacuum of upper space. At any rate, he was now evidencing a lamentable tendency to fall flat on his face every time von Heine turned away to open another bottle.

"Steady, Kamerad!" grunted the German physicist, grabbing Mackintosh just in time. "It would be stupid of us to be injured in a minor accident on dis, de eefening of Man's conquest of shpase!"

"Yer-r-r-r pur-r-rfectly r-r-right," agreed Mackintosh, developing for the first time in his life the rolled r's of his Scottish ancestors. "Why, laddie, dinna ye ken that we'r-r-r aboot to make hic, I mean, hic, oops -- hicstory."

"Jawohl!" shouted von Heine, who had been at the beer himself. "Der schip vill through der air go like dis--" and he tossed an empty beer bottle at the ceiling by way of illustration.

With a gasp of horror Mackintosh dodged out of the corner and staggered under the bottle, managing after a precarious fumble to catch it as it fell. Weakly he sat down on the floor and glared up at von Heine. "Guid loosh, mon!" thundered Glover Mackintosh. "Dinna ye ken there's thrippence deposit on each of these?"

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Frowning in perplexity, Igor looked from the spy-ray screen to the woman beside him. "I do not understand," he ventured timidly. "What are they doing?"

"Who knows?" answered the Priestess angrily. "The customs of this land are strange to me as they are to you. Have you gained any information as to who will pilot the space-ship?"

"I do not know," muttered Igor, baffled. "It must be one of them, but how can we find which one?"

6 "Damn it!" hissed the mysterious woman known as the Priestess, stamping her foot petulantly. "Why did the spy-ray have to break

down just when the bearded one was about to reveal the name?"

Igor studied the screen again. Starr was still powdering her nose. Mackintosh was lecturing von Heine on the virtues of thrift. Upperberth, alone of the four, was hard at work. He sat at his desk scribbling furiously, outlining the publicity campaign which would precede the actual launching of the rocket.

"Perhaps it would be simpler to liquidate all four of them?" suggested Igor, fondling a small, sharp dagger.

"Don't be a fool!" snapped the Priestess contemptuously. "Even the stupid police of this land would sense a plot to prevent the flight if all were to die. We will learn who is to pilot the ship -- and then he, and he alone, will die!"

"He?" grunted Igor questioningly. "Perhaps, Priestess, it was the girl who was chosen?" He leered appreciatively at Starr, who was now straightening the seams of her nylons. "I would much enjoy disposing of her," he added.

"Keep your mind on business!" snarled the Priestess, kicking him again. "No, they wouldn't choose the girl. Have you never heard of their quaint concept, 'Chivalry'? Since there is a possibility of danger in this flight, the men would not allow a woman to pilot the ship."

"Incredible!" murmured Igor. "Perhaps it is the fat one, then?" he added, pointing to Upperberth's image.

"Hmmm," mused the Priestess, biting her lips in perplexity. "It must be either him or the bearded one -- they would never pick the small, thin one who jumps at loud noises for such an important enterprise. You notice Igor, the fat one sits with a frown and writes, while the others seem to be merely passing the time in idleness. What does that indicate to you?"

"Please, O Highborn One, I see no meaning in it," said Igor, drawing away in expectation of another kick.

"Stupidity, as usual," commented the Priestess, giving him one in the shin. "He is the one chosen for the flight, of course. Now, realizing that he faces possible death, he writes letters, or perhaps instructions for disposal of his property if he should not return alive."

"Of course!" breathed Igor, looking at the screen with renewed interest. "It is all so simple when you explain it, Priestess."

"Silence, dog! I must plan!" screamed the Priestess, kicking him viciously in the same shin again. Howling in pain, Igor dodged away, but in grasping his injured knee dropped his dagger. Into the spy-ray receiver it plunged.

There was a blinding green flash, a sputter of acrid smoke, and the screen went dark.

Igor dropped to hands and knees and began beating his head on the floor at the woman's feet. She gazed with her flaming green eyes at the ruined transmitter for a long while, then glanced at the terrified slave and said calmly, "If we were in our own land now, Igor, I'd have you played centimeter by centimeter for this. But I can't

dispense with your help just now, even stupid as you are."

"Yes, O Queen of Life and Death!" squeaked Igor between thumps.

"At any rate, we know who the rocket-pilot is," she continued. "Igor, you will dispose of the fat one tonight. And remember," she added, "Not only is your life forfeit for your stupidity of a moment ago, but if you fail me in this task, our whole empire may crash to the dust from which it sprang. Do you understand, stupid one?"

"Yes, O Priestess," said Igor, clambering slowly to his feet. "Shall I bring you the fat one's ears as a token of my success?"

"I need no tokens of your success," snapped the Priestess. "For you will not fail. Not," she added thoughtfully, "if you want to escape that flaying. Perhaps I'll have you sprinkled with salt afterward."

Igor blinked doubtfully.

"Now get out of here, you fool!" The Priestess screamed in sudden rage. "Get to that office before the fat one departs, and follow him until he reaches some lonely place suitable for your work. And then--"

"I know," grinned Igor. "He will cease to think about piloting a space-ship. Then I will return here and we can return to our homeland, O Priestess?"

"Perhaps," the Priestess replied. "But I may not be here when you return. It will do us little good to eliminate the fat one if the bearded one chooses another to replace him. I think I will call upon the bearded one this evening and find out just what his plans are."

Thoughtfully she lifted the cigarette holder to her lips and then puffed a smoke ring that floated lazily above the ruined spy-ray mechanism. Igor stole softly from the room.

The Priestess watched the blue smoke settle softly toward the circuits.

"Besides," she murmured to herself, "Black-bearded men always did fascinate me."

Chapter 3

by Redd Boggs

"But I don't know any long-limbed, golden-skinned, voluptuous, exotic women!" the harried writer was saying. He puffed mournfully at his droop-stem pipe and looked forlornly across the tavern table at Karl von Heine. "Gee whilligers, if I don't know any curvy alien princesses from decadent civilizations, how am I going to write about them?"

Professor von Heine pawed his beard impatiently. "Dummkopf!" he boomed disgustedly. "Der more exotic vimmen in der barroom here are, than on fantasyzine cuffers in der past 25 years haff appeared! Look aboutt you, mein freund!"

He swept his arm to encompass the whole svelte cocktail bar around them. Von Heine was conducting a session of his private writers' school and, as usual, the "class" was being held in von Heine's favorite haunt, the Mirror Room, not far from the FITS offices. Tonight he was tutoring his star pupil, a gifted "amateur writer" whose lessons not only netted von Heine a fat fee once a week but also afforded him a comfortable living through the expedient of selling the "student's" entire output -- all written for "class assignments!" -- to FITS under the famed von Heine byline.

"Der most luffly vimmen in der universe about you iss," the German stf writer went on. "Get acquainted with von of dem, take some notes, und den revise this stingky classic, 'Ghouls of der Goo'. It an exotic female must haff before I can sell it to FITS. I mean," he added hastily, coughing, "so I a passing grade can giff you!"

"Yessir!" said the student writer. His eyes gleamed behind his glasses as he began to carry out orders, searching the cocktail bar eagerly. "Gawsh, look, prof! How about that woman just coming in? Should I approach her? She looks like a Finlay interior without the bubbles. She's a C.L. Moore character, a -- a Brundage nude. Almost. Gawp, I'd like to get her into my, er, story."

Von Heine looked over his shoulder. Gawp was right! he thought. Gliding across the dimly lit room was the paragon of femininity -- the ultimate in alien princesses with tinsel bandageaus and tight, molten skirts that are slit to reveal a long golden leg at every other step. She was -- although von Heine did not know it -- none other than the Priestess!

Von Heine hastily transferred the last of his bock to his stomach. "Nein, nein," he shouted, wiping the foam from his beard, "Go home, mein freund. I haff just decided dot I, von Heine, der segx-interest in your story vill handle. You go home und mit der test-tubes make or sum'dings. Der chemistry in 'Ghouls of der Goo' iss faulty, too, I haff decided. Go, go, mein freund!"

The professor's star pupil somewhat reluctantly picked up his manuscript and his helicopter cap and left the cocktail bar. None too soon! The Priestess was just approaching von Heine's table.

The German writer and physicist rose and bowed in his best Old World manner. "Hiyah, sugar," he addressed her. "Where haff I before seen you? On a Bergey cover? Or on the front of Avon Fantasy Reader #7, no?"

The Priestess surveyed von Heine warmly, then blew a ring of tobacco smoke into his beard and watched it trickle forth like rising fog. "Of course, we have met somewhere," she assured him, and her voice was like Marlene Dietrich's -- husky and with the faintest suggestion of an exciting accent. "You Earthmen always do get around, you know."

"Earthmen?" muttered von Heine thoughtfully. This was a strange term. It sounded almost like the designation an outsider would employ when speaking of Terrans. He dismissed the idea from his mind with a mental "yaaaah!" at its silliness. He had written -- no, his students had written (von Heine was always honest with himself) too much crazy science-fiction! "You a drink will haff...er...fraulein? Beer? Vier Rosen?"

"Call me Priestess. My mother was frightened by a Merrittale," remarked the voluptuous woman, seating herself across from von Heine. "I would like a glass of water, if you please."

"Water?" Von Heine stared as she nodded languidly from her inscrutable haze of tobacco smoke. The Priestess accepted the tumbler that was brought forth after some delay -- water being a scarce commodity in the Mirror Room -- and sniffed it appreciatively. She held it to the light, shook it delicately, and watched it sparkle and glimmer like a sleepy lagoon. "This must be very potent," she said at length. "Please, Professor, you will not let me drink too much."

She took a sip, and nodded like a connoisseur. She chanced another, and another. Suddenly she giggled! Von Heine, who had been shudderingly imagining the horrible taste she was enduring, looked up -- and almost choked on his bock. The Priestess' eyes were growing slightly glassy! And then she hiccupped! Now he had seen everything. Here was a woman -- a woman of the world -- who got drunk on three sips of plain water!

For, verily, the Priestess was drunk. There was no denying it. But she was not too drunk to be unable to take out her compact and retouch her lovely face. Von Heine would have been surprised to see what the Priestess' "compact" really was. In the "mirror" shadowy shapes replaced her tipsy countenance and darkened and dissolved as one tapering, red-nailed finger unobtrusively twisted a dial. Slowly, a picture sharpened into clarity on the tiny screen....

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John Upperberth, merrily vocalizing in his tub at home, did not realize how appropriate it was that he finished off his bellowed rendition of "O Du Mein Holder Abendstern" and essayed Lohengrin's narrative, "In Fernen Land" just when he did. For behind him at that very instant a menacing figure from a distant land stepped through the very wall! Incredible assassin! Igor crouched in the steamy room like a catman out of Flash Gordon, oriented himself. Then abruptly a sharp dagger glittered in his huge hand, and he crept forward...

His foot landed precisely on a wet cake of soap.

Breaking off his lusty aria, Upperberth stared in great astonishment as a man hurtled past him and stumbled headlong into the well-filled tub. Water foamed, churned, splashed, Niagaraed to the tiles in a mighty surge. Then all was quiet except for bubbles rising from the half-stunned man's submerged mouth.

With a shout, Upperberth's reactions evidenced themselves. The surprised editor leaped from the tub and dragged the limp Igor out of the water and let him sag to the floor. He did not see the knife Igor had carried, for that had fallen into the tub.

As Upperberth hastily draped himself with a towel -- as if in deference to The Priestess watching from afar -- Igor propped himself on one elbow and hiccupped. "Shum fun, eh kid?" he asked, grinning blearily.

He hiccupped again. Then he lay down and slept.

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10 With an unEarthly curse The Priestess snapped shut her compact and her black, angry eyes met von Heine's for an instant.

The German's proud beard suddenly and completely lost its curl. Then, mercurially, the woman smiled winningly, knowing what she must do. She stood up and slid into the seat beside von Heine. "You're cute!" she told him, snuggling close and twining her fingers in his beard. "I juss -- I mean just -- love your beard. Hic."

Von Heine contemplatively strained more bock through his beard. He had been trying to forget how fantastically quick The Priestess had been intoxicated by a glass of water. Now he remembered again. "How iss id you drunk on mere vater get?" he asked.

"I come from a place far, far away," explained the Priestess with vauge gestures. "In my land water is never used for drinking -- there is only enough for washing and bathing. Whenever one of my people drinks water, he experiences the sensation which you call intoxication."

"Very strange!" muttered von Heine. He poured down another bock. By now he was so drunk he had lost most of his German accent. "How far away iss this land?"

"What is the farthest place you can imagine?" countered the Priestess.

"Mars!" said von Heine promptly, stifling a hiccup.

A satisfied gleam appeared in the Priestess' glassy green orbs. She congratulated herself on the superb psychological training she had received in preparation for her mission. "So you've invented a ship to fly to Mars, Professor?" she sighed subtly.

He nodded vigorously, his beard tickling her throat. Then cagily he straightened and demanded thickly, "Who says so?"

"You did. Oh, you're so heroic, so clever!"

Von Heine preened his beard. "Of course," he admitted. "Ve Von Heine's are noted for our brains and bravery. Not only did I the spaceship invent, but, caff caff, I can say that I have never flinched at the thought of going to Mars myself."

"Oh, Professor, are you going to pilot the ship?" the Priestess asked, and a light -- perhaps of hero-worship, perhaps not -- was in her dark, unfathomable eyes.

Von Heine managed a deep bow sitting down. "I am," he lied modestly.

And sealed his doom! The Priestess' deadly stilleto flashed forth in the dim light of the almost-empty bar. For a single shattering instant its slender blade, warm from her bosom, braved the free air -- and then drank the hot crimson of von Heine's prevaricating, but gallant, heart!

Chapter 4

by William James

John Upperberth looked down in astonishment at the figure that lay in a pool of soap-suds on the tiles of his bathroom floor. Igor was out -- but completely.

Taking a fresh hitch in the towel that was draped insecurely about his wide middle, Upperberth bent over the man. He grasped Igor by the shoulder and shook him until his teeth rattled.

"Who are you? What is the meaning of this?" roared the editor. "Come, wake up!"

Igor snorted and mumbled. Upperberth shook him again. "Wake up!"

Then, perceiving the impossibility of awakening a man in such an intoxicated condition, Upperberth let him slump back to the floor. Igor snored lustily.

Upperberth pulled the stopper in the bathtub and dried himself vigorously. For a time the only sounds in the bathroom were the musical gurgle of water running down the drain and Igor's thunderous snores. With a final glug the last of the water ran out, and Upperberth, glancing down, let out a yelp of dismay.

Igor's dagger lay clearly exposed in the bottom of the tub!

Clutching the washbasin for support, Upperberth stared down at the weapon. His mind spun madly for a moment; and then, with commendable celerity, his mighty intellect arrived at the horrifying conclusion.

The man had meant to stab him to death!

Upperberth glanced from the dagger to the limp form of Igor, and a monumental shudder shook his frame. It was like Everest quivering in the grip of an earthquake. For a moment his trembling threatened to tear the basin from the wall. Then, taking a deep breath, he got a grip on himself and tottered weakly from the bathroom.

Stopping only to wrap a voluminous bathrobe about himself, Upperberth made straight for the kitchen. This, he thought to himself, called for stimulants -- a lot of them. He paused before the tremendous refrigerator that filled one corner of the room, then opened the door to gaze raptly at the row on row of bottles that were its only contents.

"Beer!" whispered the great editor reverently.

He extracted one of the bottles from the shelf, uncapped it delicately with his teeth, and raised it to his lips. The contents gurgled pleasantly down his throat. When the bottle was empty, Upperberth set it on the table and reached for another.

Five bottles sat empty on the table when Upperberth finally closed the refrigerator door and strode out of the kitchen. Gone was the trembling weakness of fear; courage spread warmly throughout his plump body. He glanced into the bathroom as he passed, to see Igor still snoring peacefully, burped pleasantly, and moved on into the living room. There he picked up the phone and dialed a number.

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Professor Karl von Heine slumped into the corner of the seat with The Priestess' knife deep in his heart. He opened his mouth, fighting for breath, and two great tears welled from his eyes and slowly trickled down his cheeks. The Priestess observed that he

was trying to say something, and leaned close to hear his last words.

"Ach, no more beer!" said von Heine regretfully. And died.

The Priestess wrinkled her brow at these mysterious words, then snapped open a small memo book and hastily wrote them down. They, must, she felt certain, have some deep significance. Then, realizing that to be found with the corpse would prove more than slightly embarrassing, she slid smoothly to her feet and left the tavern.

She had not observed the dark man who had watched the whole performance from his vantage point at one corner of the bar. He waited until The Priestess was out of the door, then dropped a coin on the bar and, with a glance at the slumped form of von Heine, followed.

Outside, he turned left, walked rapidly for two blocks, and entered a small second-class hotel. As he entered his room a second man rose from a chair.

"Well, Vogar?"

"She killed him!"

"What!" exploded the other. "Why didn't you stop her?"

"And give ourselves away? Kola, your stupidity never fails to amaze me."

"We could have used the spy-ray," said Kola sullenly, "for all the good your personal presence did."

"Spy-rays," Vogar pointed out, "are detectable. The Priestess would have known she was under observation."

"The Master will be displeased."

"He'll be more displeased if you don't get busy on the ray and find out where the body is taken!" snapped Vogar.

Mumbling under his breath, Kola turned to the corner where a small case stood open, revealing the complicated electronic mechanism of a spy-ray. He pressed the activating button and slowly twisted a dial. A picture formed on the screen, the tavern that Vogar had left a few minutes before.

The place was in an uproar. Bluecoats were everywhere, and the fat proprietor wandered in distracted circles, wringing his hands. Professor von Heine, the center of attention, was the only one taking no interest in the proceedings -- but that was natural. As Kola watched, two men carrying a long basket entered the room. The men standing about von Heine moved aside, and the body of the professor was dumped unceremoniously into the basket and carried swiftly from the room. Kola twisted the dial to follow them.

Vogar, meanwhile, was busy with another mechanism across the room. This one had a larger screen, that flamed with prismatic colors as he twisted various dials. Slowly a picture formed.

"Vogar 0-22X reporting," he said.

The face that looked out of the screen was darker than his own,

with flaming evil eyes. The thin lips writhed open in a snarl.

"What is your report?"

Vogar quickly described the murder of von Heine, and finished, "Kola is now tracing the destination of the body."

"The Priestess," snarled the voice from the screen, "is a fool! But we shall take care of her later. The important thing now is the body of von Heine. You know what to do?"

"Yes, Master," Vogar nodded.

"Good. Report to me immediately the task is accomplished."

"Yes, Master." Vogar bowed deeply.

The image faded and the screen went dark.

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John Upperberth bent over the figure of Igor -- a now partially sober Igor who lay on the rug in Upperberth's living room, so thoroughly trussed up with strips of torn bed-sheet that he resembled the mummy of a pharaoh just removed from the tomb -- and roared:

"So you won't talk, eh? Well, I'll find a way to make you talk!"

Upperberth raised his hand, as if to strike the cringing Igor -- and the doorbell buzzed. Swearing softly under his breath, Upperberth made his way to the door and opened it.

"Well!" said Brenda Starr; and then, catching sight of Upperberth's bathrobe, she giggled. "My!" she said, "Mr. Upperberth, you didn't by chance call me up here to show me your etchings, did you?"

Upperberth purpled. At that moment the automatic elevator hummed, the door slammed open. Along the corridor ambled the gangling form of Glover Mackintosh.

"Come in here, you two!" said Upperberth, as Mackintosh paused on the threshold and gaped at the weird sight of the bathrobe-clad editor. He closed and locked the door behind them.

"What's that?" said Starr, catching sight of Igor.

"That," said Upperberth, "is the man who tried to stab me to death -- in the bathtub."

"What!" gasped Mackintosh, getting as far from Igor as possible.

"In the bathtub!" said Starr.

Upperberth nodded. "If it wasn't for my quick thinking, I would be dead at this moment." He expanded under the expressions of admiration. "I overpowered him and disarmed him, and tied him up. But I haven't been able to find out why he wanted to kill me. All I can get out of him is that his name is Igor."

"Maybe he's a fan," suggested Starr.

"A fan who won't talk?" he inquired sarcastically.

"Have you tried -- er, persuasion?" asked Mackintosh.

Upperberth shook his head. "Perhaps you have some suggestions."

"How about pulling his toe-nails out with hot pincers?" Starr asked sweetly.

"Or matches under his finger-nails," said Mackintosh, an expression of rabbitlike fierceness on his long face.

"I had thought of a hot poker against the soles of his feet myself," said Upperberth. "But these things strike me as being a bit -- ah, crude. I was hoping you could suggest something more refined."

"Mr. Upperberth," said Mackintosh, "I think I have it!"

"What?" asked Upperberth in alarm, edging away from his assistant. "I hope it isn't contagious."

"Don't be silly," said Starr. "He means he has an idea!"

"Really?" said Upperberth, startled. "I'd never have thought it, after all these years."

Paying no attention to the other two, Glover Mackintosh was looking over the row on row of colorful magazine bindings in the editor's bookcase. These represented the greater part of the contents of the bookcase -- a complete file of FITS.

Suddenly divining his assistant's intention, Upperberth blanched. "Oh, no!" he groaned. "Not that! Not Berzee's cover!"

"You mean," said Starr, her eyes very wide, "the one with the guy, the gal, and the BEM -- the one?"

Upperberth nodded. Starr shuddered.

Igor, who had during the earlier part of this unpleasant conversation maintained a stoic calm, now began to sweat. With wide eyes he watched the tall form of Mackintosh cross the room, bearing in his hands, cover down, a flamboyant pulp magazine. The assistant editor bent slowly over Igor and suddenly let him get a brief glimpse of the cover.

"Enough?" he asked softly.

Starr put her fingers in her ears. Upperberth shuddered and had to sit down. Even Mackintosh turned pale as Igor's agonized screams echoed through the apartment.

His yells finally dropped to a low sobbing. "I'll talk! I'll talk! Oh, please, don't use that on me any more!"

Upperberth sprang to his feet. "Then tell us--" he began, and broke off as the telephone rang.

Swearing softly at the interruption, Upperberth picked up the phone.

"Hello. Yes, Upperberth speaking. What!" Starr and Mackintosh moved closer to the phone, trying to hear the voice on the other end of the line. "Oh, this is terrible," Upperberth continued. "Yes, yes. Right away."

"What it is?" asked Starr and Mackintosh together.

"Professor von Heine has been found murdered!"

* * *

"You understand," said the Police lieutenant, "that this is just a formality. We identified him--" He broke off, staring at something over Upperberth's shoulder.

Upperberth turned around. Behind him stood Starr, dabbing at her eyes with a tiny handkerchief, and beside her, Glover Mackintosh. Upperberth immediately perceived what held the lieutenant's attention. Mackintosh was swallowing nervously, and his highly mobile adam's apple was bobbing up and down his long thin neck like a haywire elevator. To one unused to the sight it was indeed startling.

"Mackintosh!" Upperberth roared.

"Yes sir!" said the gangling assistant with a gulp. The dancing adam's apple did a half-roll and came to a stop.

Upperberth turned back to the police officer. "You were saying, lieutenant?"

"Eh? Oh, yes!" said the lieutenant, blinking. "We identified the body from papers in his pockets, but as a matter of form, we must have some close friend or relative make positive identification. And since it appears Professor von Heine had no relatives, we called on you."

"Yes, I see," said Upperberth. "Well, let us get on with the sad business, then."

"If you will come with me," said the lieutenant.

The morgue held an impression of dank gloom even under the bright glare of the overhead lights. A clicking as of castanets aroused thoughts of skeletons rattling their bones, and Upperberth shuddered. Then, suddenly realizing where the sound was coming from, he turned.

"Mackintosh!" he thundered.

"Yes s-s-sir," said Glover Mackintosh, striving to still the clatter of his teeth.

"Here we are," said the lieutenant, stopping before a great cabinet with tier on tier of huge drawers whose purpose was only too obvious. He nodded to the attendant who had accompanied them, and he laid hold of one of the drawers and dragged it open with a squealing of un-oiled rollers. The group crowded around.

"What--!" gasped the lieutenant.

"But it can't be!" exploded the attendant. "Why, only a few minutes ago--" He broke off, confronted by the mute evidence that the impossible had occurred.

Glover Mackintosh fainted quietly.

Everyone else gaped at the empty drawer. The body of Professor Karl von Heine had vanished!

Chapter 5

by Bill Warren

Completely forgotten by Upperberth, Starr, and Mackintosh in their rush to identify the late, lamented science-fiction writer and scientist, Professor Karl von Heine, Igor lay trussed up on Upperberth's living room floor. His alien eyes stared unblinkingly at the confusion before him. Empty beer bottles littered the carpet, nestling familiarly beside half-smoked cigarette butts and charred matches. The place looked like a pool hall at closing time.

"This is my chance," Igor muttered, mentally oiling his none-too-bright brain. "I must get free now. I must escape now..." Igor's voice trailed off and his rock-like brow furrowed as he tried to think. "How can I do it? HOW?"

Then he came up with an idea. The cigarette butts -- the half-smoked still-smouldering cigarette butts. He would burn his bonds in two!

Igor spied a butt. Sexily smeared with lipstick, the butt lay where Starr had dropped it a moment before. It lay smouldering, mute reminder of the manner in which Starr, herself, could smoulder upon occasion. Igor was highly attracted to this smouldering butt. It intrigued him. It excited him to the point of madness.

Igor wriggled his rear furiously, first this way, then that. No man had ever tried to move so much with so little. His frantic exertions brought perspiration to his craggy brow, pinkish sweat that rivuleted into his eyes, causing them to roll whitely. His body writhed snake-like, and little by little he began to move. With a great effort he rolled over. He rolled over, and.....screamed!

He had rolled over onto the butt. The butt busily smouldered its sexy way through Igor's fleshy jaw. Igor was no longer attracted to Starr's butt.

At this moment, Upperberth's door opened. Igor was so concentrated on trying to get off Starr's butt that he failed to notice it. Only when the lovely gowned figure of a curvy woman towered above him did he pause in his struggles. He recognized the delicately-arched feet beside his nose. He gasped, horrified.

"Priestess!"

"Are you having difficulty, Igor?" her voice was soft, soft as a feather bed. The suggestion of a smile played about her full, red lips.

"Priestess," the alien pleaded, "turn me over! Starr's butt is causing me great pain!"

An eyebrow rose, lips pursed. "Please, Igor -- restrain yourself! Even though I agree the woman should get a new girdle." She shoved a toe under Igor and, with a flash of golden leg, turned him over. "Did you kill Upperberth?"

Igor opened his mouth, gasping like a fish out of water. "I tried, Priestess, I tried. But I slipped and fell in water and became intoxicated and fell asleep and..."

The Priestess screamed with fury. The golden leg flashed forth again, fetching Igor a kick in the side. "You failed!" she snarled. "It was your last chance to escape punishment -- and you failed!"

"Don't have me punished, Priestess!" Igor's face blanched in terror. "Please, Priestess -- I've been a faithful servant to you and to our Master..." his voice trailed off into silence.

"I am truly sorry, Igor," the Priestess said. "As a creation of the Master's mind, you were all but perfect for the job you were to do." Already the Priestess was consigning Igor to the past tense.

"Then you are going to ask the Master to put me out of his mind?"

"I am forced to." She knelt beside him and touched his cheek with her cool hands. "Had the Master only thought you smarter, Igor" -- she sighed -- "Instead of creating you a stupid lout, fit only to follow orders..."

"Why could I not be like you, Priestess -- a real person, instead of only the thought manifestation of the Master?" Igor wailed.

"I was born," the Priestess replied. "I am one of the few living ones left of the tribe of Kartan. To make up for our lack of numbers the Master creates thought manifestations for dangerous work."

"But I have feelings..."

"There will be no pain when the Master ceases to think of you," the Priestess said. "You will just cease to be."

"But--"

"There are no 'buts'" she shrieked. "You failed in your work! I need von Heine's space ship -- but, falling far short of that, you failed to kill Upperberth. Luckily I found that von Heine was going to pilot the ship himself. I killed him, and now when I steal his body the Master can pick his brain for the secret of the space ship's location."

"Be sure you are not beaten to the job," Igor warned.

The Priestess smiled. "Who would beat me? The Thought-Men of Daakta Tribe? Two of them, Vogar and Kola, are on this planet, but they cannot out-think me. I am a real person -- Priestess of Kartan! And when we get the space ship, I will be Queen of the Solar Empire!"

"I am content to cease, knowing this will be," Igor cried, a fanatic light dancing in his eyes.

"Well spoken, Igor!" The Priestess rose. "Prepare yourself -- I go to report to the Master!"

After the Priestess left, the light died in Igor's eyes. His pale face was drawn and tears streamed from his eyes. Igor was afraid.

* * *

Kola looked up as Vogar came in.

"You have acquired the von Heine body as the Master ordered?" Kola asked.

Vogar's face twisted spasmodically. "The body was not there. This cannot be construed a failure, for it was gone when I arrived; and I beat Upperberth to the morgue." Vogar stabbed his finger at Kola viciously. "The Priestess has von Heine's body! There can be no other explanation!"

"But there has to be another explanation, Vogar," Kola protested. "I have had the spy-ray on the Priestess of Kartan constantly. That detestable enemy of glorious Daakta did not go near the morgue."

"WHAT!"

"It is so," Kola declared. "She has been with the stupid Kartan Thought-Man, Igor, the whole time." Kola paused, then added smugly, "Praised be our Master for thinking me smart, instead of dumb like that Igor."

"Yes, Kola," Vogar nodded. "Because of smart Thought-Men like us, Daakta will acquire the knowledge of space flight and conquer not only the yellow-bellied Kartans, but also the Solar System. Then our wonderful Master will be King of the Solar Empire!"

"--If we can find von Heine's body," amended Kola, "so that we can gain the secret of the space ship's hiding place from his dead brain with the Thought Crystal, before decay erases the pattern."

"Yes yes, I know," Vogar mumbled worriedly. "Who could have taken the body? It wasn't the Priestess, it wasn't us, and it wasn't Upperberth. That leaves -- no one!"

"No one -- unless another unknown group is also seeking the space ship!" Kola pounded his fist emphatically on the table.

Comprehension dawned in Vogar's muddy brown eyes. "That must be it," he muttered softly. "Another group! But--" astonishment flooded his face -- "no other inhabitants of this system know about von Heine's invention!"

"This is over our heads, Vogar," Kola whispered. He went to the communication machine. "This must be reported to our Master immediately!"

* * *

Her lovely face set in a mask of determination, the Priestess dialed the communication machine before her. The prismatic colors of the view screen highlighted the beautiful planes of her face with every color of the spectrum.

"Igor fails me," she thought wildly, "and now -- on top of everything -- von Heine's body stolen. What will the Master say?"

The Master said plenty when his dark visage appeared on the screen. "If it were not that you are Priestess of Kartan, I would kill you!" he ranted. "Kartan is close to defeat, and you must do something!"

"I will try," the Priestess murmured, soft lips trembling.

"And quit trying to vamp me!" the Master shouted. "I am one who can take you or leave you!"

"Igor has failed me completely," the Priestess changed the subject. "I ask you to cease thinking him, Master, and manifest in his stead someone who will be especially suited to grope with this new problem and bring about the defeat of hated Daakta."

"I will do it," the Master nodded. "Do you have any special requirements?"

The Priestess dropped her head. "Make him big and handsome, Master -- with a soft, black beard!"

The Master smiled. "I think I know what you want," he shook his head. "But don't forget your mission!"

With that, the Master's face faded from the viewer and the machine went dead. As the Priestess turned around, the door opened and a tall, dark, bearded man came in.

"I der new Igor am!" his baritone voice rumbled pleasantly. "I am to help you, my Priestess, und --" his eyes roved lingeringly over her body -- "I t'ink my work I am going to like! Haff you beer in der cooler, perhaps?"

Fire ran in the Priestess' blood and flamed in her eyes.

"The Master is clever indeed!" she murmured softly, handing Igor a bottle of beer.

* * *

While the Priestess was getting acquainted with her Igor, the people of a pleasant city in the Midwest would have been very interested in a certain black Nash traversing their streets, had they only known what its back seat contained.

One of the two men in front glanced back. There, apparently asleep, lay a German named -- von Heine! The man turned back and gazed in steely silence at the road ahead.

They were passing a particularly modest white house with a big oak in the front yard. And just as the car passed out of sight, a tall, slender fellow with a foul-smelling pipe in his mouth stepped onto the front porch of this house. He squinted his eyes at the sun, and rapped ashes from his pipe against a post.

"Hell, there's only one place that mimeo can be," he murmured disgustedly, "in that damned store-house out back."

It should be mentioned here that this fellow with the pipe is one of the curious breed known as STF fans. He publishes a fanzine, and, as a consequence, has to have some place to shove back issues. Hence the store-house. He has not dared face the place for months. He is afraid of it. He just opens the door a crack and flings stf crud in and does his best to forget about it.

But today he has to face it. He has to go in and hunt a beat-up, broken-down Montgomery-Ward mimeo. His fanzine is behind schedule again.

20 And is he going to be surprised when he finds the mimeo! For there in the dark recesses of this fantasy-frightened shack, nestled beside the mimeo and partially covered with fannish junk, lies a long, low, gleaming object. It is an object of precision and beauty.

a thing to gladden the heart of any fan. It is, in a word, von Heine's space ship.

And who is going to discover this coveted object?

You guessed it. The editor of SPACEWARP -- Arthur H. Rapp!

Chapter 6 by Evan Appelman

"Have a seat," said the short, paunchy man jovially. "Now what's this all about? His two guests seated themselves at his bidding and one of them, a tall, muscularly-built man with a martial air, gestured for his companion to begin the conversation. The latter was a young man of average stature wearing large-lensed glasses.

"Well, Mr. Upperberth," he said, "It began when I looked into my storeroom, hunting for a mimeo, and found a spaceship. I sort of spread the word around fandom, and Evan, here, said he'd heard you lost one. So I figgered maybe--"

"Wait a minute!" shouted Upperberth, leaping up. "You mean you know where von Heine's ship is hidden?

"Why yes," said Art Rapp. "I wuz just telling you, it's in my store-room."

The editor of FITS was not listening. He was pounding his interoffice buzzer, grabbing telephones, bellowing orders at the employees who flocked into the room. "At last!" he said gleefully. "We've been combing the country for weeks, looking for the space ship -- now we can go ahead with the publicity campaign!"

Glover Mackintosh entered the room.

"Mackintosh!" roared Upperberth. "Yessir?" said Mackintosh, gulping.

"The ship's been found, Mackintosh, old man. You leave tomorrow!"

Mackintosh tried to dash from the room, only to find that Starr, at an unobtrusive signal from Upperberth, had locked the door. The lanky Assistant Editor slumped to the floor in a faint.

* * *

The compact trembled ever so slightly in the Priestess' hand. She snapped it open and the face of the Master appeared on the small screen within. "Have you found the body yet?" he asked harshly.

"No, sire."

"I thought as much. Very well, my patience is exhausted. You will return to the spot where the interplanetary thought-field is focussed, and teleport yourself back to this planet. Leave Igor on Earth to handle any loose ends. I will deal with the space ship problem personally. You will be punished for your failure later."

The Priestess grew pale with fear, and teardrops sparkled on her long lashes. "Yes, sire," she whispered tremulously. The screen faded.

"What'll we do?" wailed Upperberth to his employees. "He's in no condition to pilot a delicate and complicated mechanism like a space ship, and we have no one to replace him."

Everyone gazed thoughtfully at Mackintosh's recumbent form, sprawled on the floor of the FITS office.

"Pardon me, Mr. Upperberth," said a new voice. "But perhaps I can help you." It was the fan who had accompanied r-tRapp to the FITS office with news of the ship.

"What could you do?" asked Upperberth skeptically.

"Well," said the fan, "I'm rather an expert at hypnosis, and perhaps if I banished Mr. Mackintosh's terror to his subconscious mind, he'd be willing to pilot the ship."

Upperberth meditated awhile. "It might work, at that," he admitted. "Even if it doesn't, we're no worse off than before. Are you ready? -- he's coming to."

The fan bent over Glover Mackintosh, who was now blinking dazedly. "Look into my eyes," said the fan. "Deeper...deeper. You are conscious of nothing but the sound of my voice."

A weird change came over Glover Mackintosh. His chattering teeth slowed down, his terror-convulsed face relaxed. His voice, in answer to a question from the fan, sounded weak and far-away. "I hear your command; I will obey." In a few brisk sentences the fan implanted in the Assistant Editor's mind the idea that he was a fearless, calm adventurer who could hardly wait to set foot on Mars. And strangely enough, even after a snap of the fingers had released Mackintosh from his hypnotic state, this idea persisted.

"I don't know how to thank you," said Upperberth gratefully, as the two fan prepared to leave the FITS office. Mackintosh had already left, headed for the Planetarium to study orbits and trajectories.

"No trouble at all," the hypnotist assured him. "I only hope that I made the posthypnotic suggestion strong enough to last throughout the flight."

"I hope so too," Upperberth answered. "Although, of course, once he's taken off in the ship, he has to keep going whether he wants to or not."

* * *

In a small room a short, dark-complexioned man turned from a portable video set. "Well, Kola," he said to his companion who was, as if in intentional contrast to his colleague, little more than a tall skeleton with skin draped around it, "I've talked with the Master."

"Oh?" said Kola. "What did he want?"

"He commanded that we return to our home planet, having failed in our mission on Earth." Vogar's voice trembled.

22

Kola blanched. "Then we are doomed! We shall never be able to get into the Master's favor! When we leave Earth, the Priestess will

be free to search for von Heine's body and learn the secret of the ship. And if she does...Vogar -- WE'D BE KILLED!"

"Fool!" replied Vogar scornfully. "Cowardly fool! We aren't removed yet. We must leave Earth, but when we get home we'll see what can be done from there to sabotage the Priestess."

"But..."

"Quiet! Don't you realize she hasn't been any more successful than we? We're right back where we started from before she murdered von Heine."

"Yes, but in the meantime her beastly tribe of yellow-bellied Kartans are slowly winning the war against our beloved Daakta. And if she manages to conquer us..."

"But now we shall see that she never does," hissed Vogar, the light of fanaticism dancing in his yellow-green eyes.

* * *

Half a light-year from Earth, and 36° above the plane of the ecliptic a small metal bubble-craft reached aphelion and began a slow, powerless drift back toward the planets.

* * *

Glover Mackintosh climbed into the cabin of the spaceship, closing the hatch behind him. There was a low hiss as the pressurizing mechanism went into action. He pulled the switch starting the rockets and watched the temperature indicator move. The ship was standing on end in a hastily constructed concrete mounting, but the pilot's seat was swung on gimbals so that he felt no discomfort. Although the acceleration of the spaceship was likely to keep him in his present position for most of the voyage, the oscillation of the craft warranted the free swing. However the seat was often enough in this position to allow the control board to be placed against that part of the cabin which would be considered the "side" were the ship horizontal.

The temperature of the engines had now risen sufficiently for takeoff. Mackintosh waved cheerfully to Upperberth and Starr, who were standing at a safe distance from the ship, and pulled the throttle. A dull roar filtered its way into the cabin and he felt himself pressed down in his seat as if by a giant hand. The seat itself dropped a yard on a powerful shock absorber. The gravity indicator flickered forward. A gray blur streaked past the windows. The blur became dimmer and dimmer until it merged with the blackness of outer space. The ship continued to accelerate.

Now Glover Mackintosh began to feel a strange fear and loneliness, in spite of his hypnotic conditioning. Alone in a small ship streaking thru emptiness -- alone in millions of miles of -- of nothing. What if there had been a miscalculation? A fraction of an inch off in the aiming of the mount would cause him to overshoot Mars. And out he would go -- out into the space beyond. Out until his fuel ran out and then he would stop. Stop and wait to suffocate.

Or what would happen if the distance had been miscalculated? On one hand he would come in too fast, crashing to his death on the surface of an alien planet. Or, on the other hand, he might come to a stop in no man's land, where no body exerted sufficient attraction to draw him to it. That would be even worse, he thought -- to die a slow death so near to Earth, and yet so far. For he could never, in that case, make the necessary calculations to correct his course. Although he had tables

for the purpose, what good would they be if the basic figures were wrong? No, he couldn't escape, but would remain there, drawing ever closer to that boiling inferno that was the sun.

Mackintosh shuddered.

Hours passed. The acceleration caused his muscles to ache and he took a pill to relieve the tension.

The halfway point was reached after about twelve hours of flight. He cut the engines. The acceleration stopped. He almost vomited as every nerve in his body revolted against the sudden change.

It was now necessary to turn the ship around and decelerate in to Mars. Mackintosh turned the rockets on to steering power and, after giving them time to get going, spun the small wheel which would adjust a vane in the jet stream to turn the ship. He glued his eyes on the turn-and-bank indicator. It didn't budge. Frantically he sought the vane position indicator. The vane was perfectly straight. Sudden realization of his predicament came on him and he shut off the jet although he fully knew the futility of the action. He could never decelerate enough in the few short hours remaining before the ship would be caught by Mars' gravitational field.

Mackintosh laughed hideously, laughed in a way that would have made even Upperberth's blood run cold. Here he was plunging toward Mars at a speed of several thousand miles per hour and there was nothing -- absolutely nothing -- that he could possibly do to stop himself.

"Meow," said the mouse sticking its head out from under the control panel.

* * *

In the drifting bubble-ship, a being in glittering uniform watched the radar pips and meter-readings that told of Mackintosh's voyage. He commented in a low voice to a companion now and then. As the breakdown on Mackintosh's ship became apparent to the watchers, they bent forward with sudden interest.

"It looks like their first try at space flight will have an unhappy ending," one remarked.

"It usually does, on these Stage Four planets," the other answered. "Of course this one will fail, but they'll be bound to try again. And those who are trying to prevent the flights can't be successful all the time. But the point that concerns us is that they've gotten a manned ship beyond atmosphere. That makes all planets of this star eligible for contact. So we might as well get going. With nine of 'em, and probably all inhabited -- they usually are -- it will be a long job."

"Okay, that's what we're here for," the second said. "Which do you want to try first? But in spite of that space ship, I maintain none of these planets are ready for contact. Did you see the reports of the latest close-range survey the disc-ships made?"

The leader shrugged his shoulders. "Orders are orders. Let's try the one called 'Earth' first. Technically, it deserves priority anyhow, since the ship came from there." He touched a colored spot on the panel before him and the bubble-ship drifted swiftly toward the green globe of Earth.

* * *

"Meow," said the mouse a second time.

Had his mind been a bit clearer, Mackintosh would probably have ignored the sound. As it was the impulse slid past that barrier intended to filter out ordinary stimuli and brought the pilot to acute awareness of the fact that mice weren't supposed to say "Meow." He spun around.

"Meow?" said the mouse again with a slight hint of indecision that quickly turned to panic. It darted back under the control panel as Mackintosh leaped for it.

Mackintosh brought up sharply against the end of the cabin. For a moment the blow dazed him, then he shook his head dizzily and scrambled to his feet, walking slowly toward the window in which the brown tinted disc of Mars was growing rapidly larger.

* * *

"Whew!" The Master wiped beads of sweat from his brow after pulling hastily out of the mind of the mouse. "That was close! Apparently I did something which made his suspicious. I should have studied these Terrestrial animals a bit more closely -- but how was I to know I'd need to control one in order to sabotage his ship? Why must I do everything myself?"

"At any rate, he'll never be able to turn the ship around for deceleration, and it will be some time before those puny Earthlings try again. We're safe for a while, at least!"

Chapter 7

by Ed Cox

Two figures, sinister and furtive, skulked thru the darkness bearing murder in what passed for their hearts. Kola and Vogar, the two Daaktan Thought-Men, crept closer to the house, ready to plunge inside. To plunge inside -- and kill!

And inside, pale with fear yet proudly arrogant as ever, the golden-skinned Priestess prepared to depart for the interplanetary thought-field and thru it to the Citadel of the Master, and possibly...to her doom.

She was giving last-minute instructions to a black-bearded giant who said little, but whose eyes watched the flow of her golden curves.

"And remember, Igor--" she started, and then broke off as the window shattered inward and two fanatical forms waving glittering knives burst toward her!

"Vas this ist?" roared Igor, and tore into them.

Kola's knife was about to sink into the Priestess' golden breast when suddenly the blade whirled across the room as Igor grabbed the Thought-Man by the shoulder, wrenched and heaved him aloft, and slammed him, screaming, to the floor. Something cracked sickeningly, and Kola's scream cut off abruptly.

Igor roared again, a sulphurous Teutonic oath that would have stunned a Roman legionnaire. The fanatic high-toned screamings of Vogar were quite drowned out. Vogar was attempting to plunge his knife

into the Priestess, but she caught his wrist, and the two locked in struggle for the deadly blade.

Igor reached out a huge paw, caught Vogar by the neck, and pulled him away from the Priestess. He clasped his huge forearms around the Thought-Man's neck, jabbed a knotty knee in the small of his back, and pulled. With a horrible snapping of vertebrae, Vogar died like a rat in a bulldog's jaws. Igor grunted triumphantly, tossed the sickeningly limp body across the room, and swept the trembling Priestess into his arms.

"Ach, what fools, killink mine Priestess to try!" he rumbled, barely winded by the battle.

The Priestess shuddered in remembered terror, and buried her face in his beard. "Th-they were Daaktans!" she quavered, clinging to Igor as if seeking safety within the giant's arms from the evil forces threatening her.

"Vell, dey Daaktans iss no more," he growled, glancing contemptuously at the two corpses. "You mein Priestess ist for always, und..."

"But Igor," she said, drawing back to look up into his blazing eyes. "It cannot be! You forget the Master may kill me and unthink you at any moment! Now I must hurry back to the Master, to plead with him for mercy, to ask him not to unthink you yet. Perhaps..."

But the great guffaws of Igor stopped her ruby lips half open as he roared with some secret amusement.

"Igor!" she snapped, some of her old imperious manner returning. "What's the matter with you? This is no laughing matter!"

"Ach, yes!" he roared. "Der Master can unthink and unthink, but me, he cannot hurt! Not anybody can me, der great Karl von Heine, unthink!"

* * *

John Upperberth stood before a shiny microphone, nervously running his finger around inside his collar and watching the engineers and program directors in the glass-walled control booth. At the other side of the studio stage, a mellow-voiced professional announcer was reading from a script:

"Ladies and gentlemen, from coast to coast, from ocean to ocean, under the co-sponsorship of the National Fantasy Fan Federation and of Frankly Incredible Tales of Science, we bring you the dawn of a new era!"

The velvet tones paused, while a harried-looking sound-effects man held a snarling blowtorch near the mike.

"Ladies and gentlemen-- the roar of rockets! --bringing the dawn of a new age -- and bringing you this afternoon the most stupendous program ever presented. And now to tell you in detail of this triumph of scientific achievement, this colossal advancement of the human race, I give you the editor of Frankly Incredible Tales of Science, Mr. John Upperberth!"

Wave on wave of applause roared from the vast studio audience as it greeted the famous editor.

"Ladies and gentlemen -- and fans -- it is with more pleasure than I can express that I bring you today the story of the last, greatest achievement of that immortal genius, the late Professor Karl von Heine. It is a fitting memorial to him that you shall forever honor him for this splendid achievement. Over many months, he, the thousands of NFFF members throughout the world, and the staff of FITS together labored to perfect von Heine's last invention. On the very eve of success we, like all the world, were shocked by von Heine's untimely and tragic death, a death which left our project uncompleted. But as you all know, this morning saw the fruition of our labors, the launching into interplanetary space of the first successful man-carrying rocket. Since then, I am sure, you have all been anxiously awaiting further news of the historic flight. It is now my honor and privilege to announce..."

CALLING TERRA...CALLING THE PLANET EARTH...CALLING THE WORLD SOL THREE...

The loud but incredibly clear tones of a golden, alien voice burst from every operating loudspeaker on Earth, completely engulfing all other programs on the airwaves. Most of the listeners to the Great STF Broadcast of John Upperberth and the NFFF thought the message was part of the program, perhaps a pickup from the Mars-rocket itself -- but in Washington, in London, in Moscow, in numerous Army and Navy labs, stations and radio posts, as well as in other nations, the radio monitors didn't just listen. Wire recorders were snapped on, radio direction finders began to twist their loop antennae, and the webwork of the continental radar defense system began a frenzied scanning of the sky.

...DO NOT BE ALARMED, SOL THREE...WE ARE HERE FOR PEACEFUL REASONS
...THIS IS NOT AN ATTACK OF ANY SORT...WE ARE A RACE ALIEN TO YOUR SOLAR SYSTEM, AND WISH TO CONTACT YOU FOR THE MOST IMPORTANT EVENT IN THE HISTORY OF YOUR WORLD...

The beings in shining armor, whose bubble-ship was now hovering only a few thousand miles from Terra's surface, had no wish to become victims of some unsuspected defense weapon of a trigger-happy semibarbarian race. Better to risk throwing the whole emotional planet into panic than to be shot first and questioned later.

...WE WISH TO CONFER IMMEDIATELY WITH THE HEADS OF GOVERNMENT OF ALL NATIONS ON EARTH...WE LEAVE IT TO YOU TO SELECT THE SITE AND TO ARRANGE THIS MEETING...CONTACT US WHEN YOU ARE ASSEMBLED...USE ANY WAVELENGTH IN THE AUDIO BAND...

And so sent the voices from out of the night of space, turning the world into a semi-frightened camp of scampering ants. Not a government on Earth really believed the speakers. Obviously it was the ruse of an enemy country -- but their frantic cabinet meetings and military staff conferences could provide no better alternative than to obey the commands while keeping a sharp eye open for the attack which they felt sure was the real reason behind this fantastic tale of a galactic civilization.

* * *

The broadcasting studio, of course, was in chaos. Someone signalled Upperberth that he was off the air, and then switched on a loudspeaker in the studio so that the announcement from space could be heard there.

"What happened? Our broadcast..." gasped Starr, astounded by the frantic scurryings of the technicians in the control booth.

"Plenty!" choked Upperberth, speechless for once in his life. "This is the greatest thing...why, FITS can...the rocket will...but this is greater...poor von Heine, if he had only liv..." He paled.

Starr, following the direction of his bulging eyes, looked at the door of the studio. There, coming thru the bustle and crowd, was a lovely, golden-clad woman, accompanied by a familiar towering figure with a lush black beard.

Upperberth found his voice at last, in a mighty shout. "Great foaming Beer -- it's Professor von Heine!"

* * *

A few minutes before the space-broadcast began, the Master of Kartan crouched over the wide, glittering control board in his mighty Citadel far from Terra. He was frantically calling the Priestess. The outermost of his far-flung observation net had just reported the bubble-ship approaching Earth.

At last contact was made. "Priestess!" he roared.

Her golden face appeared on the screen, worried yet triumphant. "Yes...Master," she replied. Was that mockery in her tone? He couldn't tell.

"Why have you not come to the thought-field as I ordered?" he whipped out. "This delay is dangerous! Unforeseen events are threatening our whole strategic plan and imperiling the very existence of Kartan! Come at once, and hurry!" his now harried voice rattled off.

"I am not coming," responded the Priestess' calm tones.

"Good. Hurry and...WHAT!" For the first time in untold eons, stark astonishment convulsed the Master's features. "Do you dare to defy me...ME, the Master of Kartan?"

"Yes!" she blazed with the full vitality of her being. "No longer shall I be but a clod under your overbearing dominance. What is Kartan, that I should defend it? A senile ruler and a horde of phantoms from his mad brain!"

Her voice dripped scorn. "And Daakta is the same...You and Daakta's ruler can match Thought-Men till the Citadel is dust, for all of me! I stay here on Earth, where the people are real. I stay here -- with Igor!"

His face livid, the Master rose before the screen. "Then you die! And I unthink Igor at this instant...unh...unh...IGOR! WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO IGOR?" he screamed.

"Schweinhund, I am no longer Igor," roared the black-bearded giant, stepping up to the vision-screen. "I am Professor von Heine, der greatest uff der scientists -- for I haff two brains! Venn der Priestess stabbed me, my body died -- but my double mind took over this Igor-body you provided -- and now it iss beyond your power to destroy me!" He flexed mighty muscles in vigorous triumph as his voice roared at the cringing Master.

The Master slammed the visiscreen off. He was shaking with senile rage. "Then..." he grated, "they shall ALL die! The Polarians will never add the Green Planet to their idiotic democracy

...and the Priestess and von Heine shall not live to defy me!"

He hurried to a huge adjoining chamber, where titanic apparatus lay under the dust of centuries -- machinery whose science was eons forgotten yet whose effects were legendary in Kartan.

The Master brushed cobwebs from huge control panels, set certain levers in their slots, turned creaking handwheels and adjusted vernier knobs. And above him, on the surface of the Kartan world, a mountain crumbled away to reveal huge, glittering electrode-like structures.

Gibbering insanely, the Master closed a switch. And then the sky reeled crazily, and waves of sound followed shockwaves; the gloomy land of Kartan was bathed in light, brilliance blazing brighter than the eye could endure. And a ravening bolt of pure energy twisted the very fabric of space itself into a dimension-wrenching helix which slowly, then swiftly and more swiftly, arrowed toward the unsuspecting Earth with its cargo of planet-wide destruction.

Frothing and babbling, the Master of Kartan dropped back into his mighty jewel-studded throne, glazing eyes fixed on the telescreen which mirrored his dying triumph.

* * *

And in a small, rude spacecraft plunging ever nearer to the red-brown disc of Mars, Glover Mackintosh, jarred from his hypnotic trance by the blow on his head, stared unbelievably out the window of the control room at the starry void surrounding the doomed and falling rocket ship.

Chapter 8 by Art Rapp

Dazedly Glover Mackintosh passed a hand over his forehead. His horrified eyes were fixed on the swelling disc of Mars visible through the forward port. The rocket ship seemed deathly silent now that the jets were off -- so silent that the Assistant Editor heard the pounding roar of blood in his temples. A dull ache throbbed in his head where the edge of the control panel had lacerated his scalp.

"It...can't...be!" he muttered. "Tis but a trick of ye're eyes, Glover laddie. Ye've more guid sense than tae risk ye're life awa' from the guid solid Earth."

Dubiously he pinched himself. No -- it hurt -- this wasn't a dream. For one awful moment Glover Mackintosh clung to a stanchion while the Universe reeled, then his gyrating thoughts returned to a phrase he had used but a moment before.

"Sure-r-r-r, it canna be ought but an optical illusion!" he shouted. "That cr-r-rack on my head has mixed things a wee, yet I seem to remember leaving the FITS office for-r-r the Planetarium. Thot's it! This isna real at all -- it's only one of those machines those Pr-r-rofessor laddies use!"

Calmer now, Glover Mackintosh let go of the stanchion and relaxed into the seat facing the control panel. "Now then," he thought, "ye know where ye are, Glover laddie, the question is, whut are ye here for?"

There could be only one logical answer, of course. He must have flatly refused to pilot the von Heine ship, whereupon Upperberth, unwilling to give up the publicity scheme, had assigned Mackintosh the job of taking a "synthetic" trip in the Planetarium machine, and ghostwriting the "eye-witness account" for the FITS readers. True, Mackintosh's memory was so foggy he couldn't be sure of this, but everything fitted -- the nearing globe of Mars, the room full of machinery in which he found himself...and here was the final, confirmatory proof -- Mackintosh spied in a corner under the control panel a familiar battered carrying case. Sure enough, his typewriter!

Humming contentedly, the Assistant Editor hauled out the typer -- discovering in the process a large box thrust in behind it, a box whose contents clinked and gurgled when he moved it.

"Ah, guid, guid!" he exclaimed, opening both cases. "Nae doot Mr. Upperberth provided the beer as a stimulant in case this remarkable illusion, created perhaps by hidden movie projectors, should unsettle my nerves. Come to think of it, they are a bit unsettled."

Uncapping a bottle with the opener provided, Mackintosh settled his nerves, then twirled a sheet of paper into the typewriter and began to write.....

* * *

"...Und den," roared von Heine to Upperberth, "der Master uff Kartan vas so speechless dot he der televisor shut off. Vimmen und Thot-Men he can dominate, but me, der great Karl von Heine -- neffer!"

"Sure sounds like you told him off right," Upperberth replied admiringly. "But from your description, he's not the sort of guy to take an insult like that lying down. Better keep your eyes open."

"Bah!" snorted von Heine. "Id iss a mere trifle. But vat interests me iss how you haff mit mein rocket progressed. Iss id for der flight ready yet?"

"Ready?" exclaimed Upperberth, "It's already in space! -- took off early this morning. Should be nearly to Mars by now." The editor of FITS looked at his wristwatch. "That reminds me, Prof, I'm supposed to call the Observatory -- they're tracking the flight with the big scopes there. C'mon, let's find a phone."

The paunchy publications magnate led the black-bearded German physicist through the crowd in the radio studio. Starr and the Priestess who had just been powdering their noses, returned in time to see the men going out the door, and trailed after, followed by the admiring eye of every adult male in the studio.

"In here," said Upperberth, opening the door of an unoccupied office. While Upperberth got busy on the phone, Starr turned to von Heine.

"It's certainly wonderful to have you back, Professor," she told him. "Especially after that horrible time at the morgue."

"Ach, dot vas too bad," agreed von Heine. "You had to identify me for der police, nein? -- My other body, dot iss?"

"That was the general idea," Starr told him, "except that by the time the police got us down to the morgue, your body had disappeared."

I thought Glover would have kittens right in the middle of the floor -- it was days before his teeth stopped chattering."

Von Heine stroked his beard in perplexity. "Vas ist?" he muttered, "My body disappeared from der morgue?"

"I could have told you that," interrupted the Priestess. "Igor -- the first Igor, that is -- and I thought those Daaktan Thought-Men had kidnapped you, but later we found out they knew no more about it than we. In fact, no one has ever found out what really happened."

"Ach," said von Heine, furrowing his granite brow, "Diss ist sumting I should haff known sooner! It iss an important development, und must mean--"

He never finished the sentence, for just then Upperberth began to shout into the telephone: "WHAT! He's cut off all power? Why didn't you get in touch with me immediately? How long?...well, have you contacted..oh, he will...how soon? Yes, yes, I'll get there as soon as I can...I'm leaving now!"

John Upperberth slammed the telephone into its cradle and faced the group. "The astronomers say Mackintosh has cut all power and is in a free fall toward the surface of Mars," he said heavily.

Starr and the Priestess looked blank, but aporehension swept von Heine's face. "Dot iss bad," he commented. "Sum'ting wrong hass gone, nein?"

"I'm afraid so," Upperberth agreed. "He was to have turned the ship at midflight, but in order to decelerate, the rockets should have been re-started immediately. I'm afraid..."

"Haff dey der trajectory computed?"

"Yes," Upperberth answered. "He'll hit the surface in about an hour at tremendous speed, if the jets remain off."

"Vell," roared the German, bristling his beard, "Vot are ve standing here for? To der Observatory!"

In a pell-mell rush the quartette thundered down the corridor toward the elevators, but in Upperberth's breast was the numbing conviction that Glover Mackintosh was beyond aid. Only too well he remembered the hypnotic conditioning which the lanky Assistant Editor had received -- last ditch effort to avert disaster on the flight, which apparently had not been sufficient. With millions of miles of empty space between Earth and the rocket, with only uncertain radio contact, how could they aid Mackintosh in his fearful plight?

* * *

The glistening bubble-ship of the Galactic Empire drifted its swift orbit around Earth while the glittering beings within it awaited the international meeting they had commanded. Meanwhile the shipboard routine went on -- the taking of never-ending observations, the compiling of data for the titanic integrators back at Galactic Center.

Most of the instruments were automatic -- cameras, audio and RF recorders, barographs and thermographs, and instruments that recorded radiations and field-intensities which no Terran scientist knew existed -- but even automatic machines must be fed new reels of film-tape from time to time, and must be checked to see that they are functioning properly.

Thus it was that a minor jiggle in a stylus-line came to the attention of one being. Deftly he slid the tape from the instrument and replaced it with a fresh reel. Then he slid the old tape into a projector and began reviewing its traces for the past few hours, pausing now and then to consult a bulky handbook.

As the unreeling tape brought one group of pips into view, the being stared with slack jaw and bulging eyes. Mechanically he touched the control that halted the tape, and as if in a daze pressed a crimson tag on the bulkhead.

The harsh clangor of emergency alarms resounded thru the craft.

* * *

"Throw some power into those engines!" screamed the bubble-ship CO to his intercom. He added a string of profanity in the exotic language of Rigel III, with parenthetical bits of Procyon IV's more disreputable dialects.

"But what about Earth?" someone asked. "Shouldn't we at least try to warn them of the energy-bolt?"

"No time!" the CO yelled, watching Sol dwindle on the screens. "We will be lucky to get out of range ourselves -- thank the Galaxy you happened to see that tape when you did. I've seen one of those bolts hit a planet, and believe me, it's worse than a Class VI supernova."

"Well," said the crewman, "At least this way they'll never know what hit 'em -- and if Sol goes nova from the concussion, maybe we can take this tub back to Center and go on furlough."

"Yeah," said the CO without looking around. "That's the one good feature of this mess."

Chapter 9 by Art Rapp

"Professor von Heine! You've got to do something!" wailed Starr. She, von Heine, Upperberth and the Priestess huddled on the observing platform of the giant telescope at the Observatory. Members of the astronomical staff scurried about the shadowy depths below them, feeding problems into electronic computers or comparing data in hushed and troubled tones.

"Patience, Fraulein Starr, patience," muttered the German scientist through his bushy beard, adjusting the ocular of the big refractor. "Ach, zo close he iss to Mars already!"

"Can't you contact him by radio?" asked the Priestess. Upperberth shook his head dismally.

"No," he replied. "The electronic jet controls created so much interference that radio couldn't be used during blasting -- and since we didn't expect the jets to be turned off in space, we figured we'd save weight by not installing radio equipment."

"It vas a terrible oversight," said von Heine. "Negxt time ve know better."

"I don't care about next time!" screamed Starr, her mascara beginning to run. "Poor Mackie's out there all alone, and you've got to save him!" She began sobbing.

"My goodness," said Upperberth in astonishment. "I didn't know you cared so much about Mackintosh, Starr."

"N-n-neither d-did I -- until n-now!" retorted his receptionist tearfully.

An Observatory staff member clattered up the iron-grating stairs with a sheaf of papers. "Here are those trajectory calculations, Professor von Heine," he said.

The German flipped rapidly thru the equations, then shook his head sadly. "It iss as I feared," he announced to the anxious group. "Eefen mit der rockets again going, his velocity iss zo great dot he neffer der ship could stop before he der surface uff Mars hits."

Starr burst into wild sobs and Upperberth patted her shoulder awkwardly, trying to comfort her.

"Mackintosh," said von Heine heavily, "iss beyond human aid."

The Priestess suddenly jumped. "Professor von Heine!" she yelled, "The aliens!"

For a moment, the black-bearded giant gazed blankly at her. Then he galvanized into action. "Ach, vat fools ve ist!" he roared, dashing for the stairway. "Der alien spaceship iss der only possible chance, Mackintosh to rescue!"

At the foot of the stairs he clutched a startled astronomer and demanded the location of the nearest radio station.

"Right down that corridor, Professor," said the scientist. "We have a complete transmitting station here in connection with the Observatory."

The radio room, when von Heine burst in, was a scene of frantic but orderly activity. Engineers huddled over their control boards, fiddling with dials and scanning the cryptic messages of the lights and meters on the panels before them. The crackle of static sounded now and then above the hum of carrier waves amplified to capacity. In one corner a battery of teletypes chattered madly, now and then sounding a bell, at which a technician darted over to rip off a completed message.

"Quick! Der aliens I must contact!" yelled von Heine, grabbing the engineer in charge. "It iss a matter of life und death!"

"I'm sorry, Professor," said the engineer, "That's impossible at the moment."

"Impossible? Impossible? Nutting impossible ist!" roared von Heine.

"Oh yeah?" retorted the engineer. "Well, the alien broadcast just cut off in mid-sentence, and we've tried every waveband in the spectrum since then without getting a peep from 'em."

"Hey, listen to this!" interrupted the man at the teletype, waving a sheet of yellow flimsy. "Continental Defense Headquarters reports

their radar net shows the alien ship headed for Gamma Orionis at terrific acceleration -- that's why the transmission cut off!"

"Der aliens -- dey haff left der Solar System?" asked von Heine slowly, his shoulders suddenly drooping.

"Looks like it," said the engineer.

"Here's some more data," called the teletype operator. "The Army radar is also picking up the Mackintosh space ship -- their plotting checks with our visual observations. But they are getting another pip from some unidentified object in space!"

"What?" said von Heine. He rushed to the teletype and watched the report leap word by word from beneath the clattering keys:

.....TRAJECTORY INDICATES OBJECT LAUNCHED FROM JUPITER WITH EARTH AS DESTINATION...OBJECT MOVING AT MODERATE BUT CONSTANTLY ACCELERATING VELOCITY...VISUAL OBSERVATION RESULTS NEGATIVE...DETERMINATION OF SIZE AND MASS THROUGH RADAR RESULTS NEGATIVE...OBJECT WILL REACH EARTH IN APPROXIMATELY THREE HOURS...ALL MILITARY AND NAVAL INSTALLATIONS WILL REMAIN ON EMERGENCY ALERT UNTIL FURTHER...

"Ach," said Professor von Heine, "Diss iss interesting -- but mit poor Mackintosh aboutt to crash on Mars, I can't concentrate on udder matters." Shaking his head sadly he went gloomily back to the anxious group around the big telescope.

"Did you contact the aliens, Prof?" asked the Priestess anxiously.

"Nein, liebchen," said von Heine sadly. "Dey der System haff left. It vas our last hope. Now all we can do iss to wait..."

* * *

Aboard the Mars-plunging rocketship, Glover Mackintosh, still believing himself in the Planetarium, watched the swelling disc of the Red Planet with interest.

"A vur-r-r-y realistic illusion," he muttered, opening another bottle of beer. "I dinna ken how these scientific laddies manage to accomplish it, but 'tis unco lifelike, noo."

He drained the bottle and returned to his typing of the "eye-witness account."

* * *

Nothing to do but wait, von Heine had said -- but with a friend plunging to doom before their eyes, the group at the Observatory found the seconds agonizingly slow in passing. By some psychological quirk, they began chattering aimlessly of trivial subjects, by common accord skirting the topic foremost in their minds.

"You should have Berzee drive over here and paint the Observatory for FITS," said Starr to Upperberth. "Maybe it would get the fans off your neck for a week or two if you ran a cover like that."

"Don't be silly!" said Upperberth. "Please the fans and lose all the rest of our readers? -- besides, Circulation would veto

the idea before it started."

"Tell me," said von Heine to the Priestess, "Vat iss Mars like, anyway?"

Silence fell over the group. Mars reminded them of Mackintosh.

After a moment the Priestess answered, but in puzzled tones. "Mars? Why, I don't know, Prof. I've never been there."

Professor von Heine looked at her in amazement. "But--but--iss nodd Mars der planet vere der Master liffs?"

"Why no," answered the Priestess. "Kartan and Daakta are on Jupiter, the planet beyond Mars. I thought you knew that..."

"Gott im Himmel!" roared von Heine. "Choopter! Mein Gott, vat idiots ve are! Now I see effrything!"

Everyone looked at the German physicist in blank amazement.

Crisply he described the echo the radar-net had picked up. The Priestess went pale as she listened. "A force-bolt!" she cried. "We have legends in Daakta of their power and irresistibility! It can destroy a planet!"

"No wonder the alien spaceship left so quickly!" commented Upperberth.

But von Heine was not listening. A light seemed to break over his hirsute countenance. "Der aliens -- dey saw der boldt coming vas -- und dey took off!" he muttered. "Dey didt nodd eefen wait, der Earth to warn! Und dot means--"

It was Starr who anticipated even the Professor's high-powered reasoning.

"The men who stole your corpse!" she screamed, grabbing von Heine's sleeve. "They must be aliens, too -- and they're still on Earth!"

"Eggzactly," said von Heine, gazing at her with admiration.

"But then," broke in Upperberth, "there's a chance they can save Mackintosh, don't you think, Prof?"

"Nein," said von Heine thoughtfully. "Idt iss nodd Mackintosh I vas thinking uff. If ve can dese aliens contagt, und if dey believe us ven ve tell dem uff der energy boldt, und if dey haff der zooper-science uff a galactic civilization...nein, dey vill nodd haff time to bother with Mackintosh...buddt perhaps dey can save der Earth!"

"But Professor," said Starr doubtfully. "How are we going to locate these hidden aliens in time?"

Horror descended over the little group, as Professor Karl von Heine, the greatest of the scientists, shook his head to indicate that he did not know.

Chapter 10

by Art Rapp

"Nein," said Professor von Heine sorrowfully. "Der aliens on der Earth iss, ve know -- budt where dey iss hiding, dot iss anudder question."

"How about a radio broadcast appealing to them for help?" suggested Starr, frantically shredding a handkerchief.

"No good," Upperberth commented. "If they were anywhere near a radio they'd have learned of the alien bubble-ship, and would have come out into the open before this."

"QUIET!" shouted the Priestess. Sheer astonished silence dropped over the group in the cavernous Observatory dome. Everyone turned to look at the voluptuous representative of Jupiter's ancient empire. Her lustrous eyes stared straight in front of her, her curvaceous body was rigid with tension, her slim, crimson-nailed fingertips were pressed to her temples.

"Quick, catch her -- she's going to faint!" said Upperberth to von Heine.

But before the bearded scientist could move, the Priestess relaxed, blinked dazedly, and bestowed a dazzling smile upon her companions.

"The aliens are setting to work on the problem of the force-bolt," she announced. "One of them will be here in just a few minutes to check those calculations of yours, Professor von Heine."

Upperberth's jaw dropped, and Starr stared blankly. But comprehension swept over the black-whiskered puss of Karl von Heine.

"Telepathy!" he murmured.

The Priestess took out a compact and began repairing her lipstick. "Of course," she said. "We of Kartan, even those of us who have not the Master's ability to create thought-projections, know much of the powers of the human mind."

Upperberth opened his mouth to say something, but was interrupted by the clatter of feet on the iron Observatory stairs. "Hya, Prof. Hya, Uppie. Now, folks, just relax. Keep your girdles on. We aliens have things well under control."

Professor von Heine choked, sputtered, and grew red in the face. His beard rustled ominously as he glared at the newcomer. Finally he got his voice enough under control to shout:

"Gott im Himmel! YOU! You are an alien?"

"Well natch," said the newcomer, doffing his helicopter cap and bowing graciously to the ladies. "Whyja think I tagged around witcha so much fer, while you were building your rocketship, huh?"

He whistled appreciatively at the Priestess, winked at Starr, grabbed the sheaf of mathematics from von Heine's limp hand, and flipped thru the complex equations as he adjusted the telescope to locate Jupiter.

He was the "student" von Heine had been trying to instruct in the art of writing salable science-fiction.

* * *

"Cruddy rig," commented the alien, delicately moving the vernier traverse screw of the two-million-dollar telescope. "At least three micromicroseconds of backlash in these gears."

He shrugged. As he studied the heavens through the instrument, he continued to address a monologue over his shoulder to the stupified members of the FITS staff surrounding him.

"You Solarians give me a pain. Unpredictable. I'll probably get demoted a grade for this mess. How was I to know that as soon as I take off for a few days' vacation, this nutty dame would slip a shiv into the Prof? No logic to it at all. And then your crude embalming methods that utterly destroy braincell potentials, so I couldn't even determine where von Heine hid his rocketship. Incidentally, Prof, I hear the crate finally took off?"

"Correct," answered the German physicist dazedly. "Glover Mackintosh is piloting it, but it is falling toward Mars out of control. -- Haff you der force-boltd found?" he added.

"Natch," said the alien, abandoning the telescope to scribble intricate but unintelligible equations on a bit of paper. "Hadda check your trajectory figures, though. You humans just aren't reliable in situations like this."

He paused, flicked a glance through his mathematics again, and nodded in evident satisfaction.

"All set," he announced. "Now all of you shuddup a minute till I contact Headquarters and get things moving."

He reached up and shifted the propellor on his cap a bit. Something hummed up the scale of audibility and a single soundless bleep seemed to whisk thru the brains of the watchers. The alien restored the propellor to its original position.

"And that is that!" he remarked smugly. "Incidentally, folks, I'm grateful to you for the tipoff on that force-bolt. The bubble-ship commander should have notified us before leaving. He'll be executed for neglect of duty, of course."

"Did you -- did you stop the bolt?" asked Starr breathlessly.

"Nope. Can't be done. Took the next best way out. Had Headquarters hook up a self-maintaining stasis between the bolt and the nearest planetary mass. Acts like a tractor-beam. Planet will deflect the bolt enough so that it'll miss Earth. Close shave, tho."

"Wonderful!" said Upperberth, wiping his beaded brow in relief. "But now that you've disposed of the immediate menace to Earth, do you suppose...er, that is..."

"Mr Upperberth wonders if you could suggest some way to rescue Glover Mackintosh," the Priestess supplied helpfully.

The alien sniffed contemptuously. "Heh, typical Solarian reaction. No logic. Nibble at the edges of a problem. House on fire, you carry out an armful of furniture instead of grabbing a fire extinguisher. Dopes. Every last one of you."

"You mean--?" said Starr incredulously, clutching his arm.

"Precisely," answered the Alien. "Why make two problems out of one? Hooked the force-bolt to Mars. Mars yanked out of its orbit. Nothing for rocketship to hit, no crash. Simple."

The Alien started down the stairs, then turned, peered up at the little group around the telescope and added, "We're leaving Earth, you know. Utterly unfit for galactic empire as yet. Just as I predicted when Galactic Center sent me here as an observer."

"We'll board that runaway rocket of yours, Prof, and see that the controls are fixed so Mackintosh gets back o.k. Nice guy, Mackintosh. Taught me to play the bagpipes. Magnificent instrument. Nothing like it in the entire Galaxy."

With a cheery farewell wave, the helicopter-hatted, bespectacled alien clattered off, humming "Loch Lomond."

"Now I haff everything seen!" ejaculated Professor Karl von Heine.

"Oh no you haven't!" said Upperberth, waving Starr to follow him.

"Hey, where are you two going?" yelled the Priestess.

"To the FITS office!" called the chubby editor. "Something tells me our fanzine review column for next issue will have to be rewritten after that alien and his headquarters staff leave. Hah, no wonder they always thought it was so funny to call themselves 'slans' and 'star-begotten'!"

* * *

That just about winds things up, you know. Of course, just for the sake of completeness, we might add that Mackintosh's "eye witness" account of the first spaceflight saved FITS' circulation and Upperberth's job.

Mackintosh was quite proud of his article, even though he had to write the return-trip part from sheer imagination. You can't drink beer after beer without a bit of foginess in the cerebral processes.

In fact, keep it up long enuf and you pass out.

But Mackintosh doesn't worry too much about the gap in his memory. After all, he has Starr. And von Heine has the Priestess.

Upperberth?

He has FITS.

- THE END -