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"... And then his skeleton appeared!"

HAWK CARSE
An Exploit of the Greatest of Interplanetary Adventurers
By ANTHONY GILMORE

RAIDERS INVISIBLE
By D. W. HALL

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The Hawk stood there, both arms hanging easily at his sides.
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Hawk Carse

A Complete Novelette

By Anthony Gilmore

CHAPTER I

The Swoop of the Hawk

One of the spectacular exploits of Hawk Carse, greatest of space adventurers.

H

Hawk Carse came to the frontiers of space when Saturn was the frontier planet, which was years before the swift Patrol ships brought Earth's law and order to those vast regions. A casual glance at his slender figure made it seem impossible that he was to rise to be the greatest adventurer in space, that his name was to carry such deadly connotation in later years. But on closer inspection, a number of little things became evident: the steadiness of his light gray eyes; the marvelously strong-fingered hands; the wiry build of his splendidly proportioned body. Summing these things up and adding the brilliant resourcefulness of the man, the complete ignorance of fear, one could perhaps understand why even his blood enemy, the impassive Ku Sui, a man otherwise devoid of every human trait, could not face Carse unmoved in his moments of cold fury.

His name, we know, enters most histories of the period 2117-2148 A. D., for he has at last been recognized as the one who probably did most—unofficially, and not with the authority of the Earth Government—to shape the raw frontiers of space, to push them outward and to lay the foundations of the present tremendous commerce between Earth, Vulcan, Pluto, Neptune, Uranus, Saturn and Jupiter. But, little of his fascinating character may be gleaned from the dry words of history; and it is Hawk Carse the adventurer, he of the spitting ray-gun and the phenomenal draw, of the reckless space ship maneuverings, of the queer bangs of flaxen hair that from a certain year hid his forehead, of the score of blood feuds and the one great feud that jarred nations in its final terrible settling—it is with that man we are concerned here.

A number of his exploits never recorded are still among the favorite yarns spun by lonely outlanders in the scattered trading posts of the planets, and among them is that of his final encounter with Judd the Kite. It shows typically the cold deadliness, the prompt repaying of a blood debt, the nerveless daring that were the outstanding qualities of this almost legendary figure.

It began one crisp, early morning on Iapetus, and it ended on Iapetus, with the streaks of ray-guns searing the air; and it explains why there are two square mounds of soil on Iapetus, eighth satellite of Saturn.

C

Carse pioneered Iapetus and considered its product his by right of prior exploration. One or two men had landed there before he came to the frontiers of space and reported the satellite habitable, possessed of gravital force only slightly under Earth's, despite its twelve-hundred-mile diameter, and of an atmosphere merely a trifle rarer; but they had gone no further. They had noticed the forms of certain strange animals flitting through the satellite's jungles, but had not investigated. It was Carse who captured one of the creatures and saw the commercial possibilities of the pointed seven-inch horn that grew on its head, and who named it phanti, after the now extinct Venusian bird-mammal.

There were great herds of them, and they constituted Iapetus' highest form of life. The space trader cut off a few of their opalescent and green-veined horns and sent them as samples to Earth; and, upon their being valued highly, he two months later established his ranch on Iapetus, and thus laid the foundation for the grim business that men sometimes call the Exploit of the Hawk and the Kite.

No doubt Carse expected trouble over the ranch. To protect the valuable twice-yearly harvest of horn from Ku Sui's several bands of pirates, and other semi-piratical traders who roamed space, he built a formidable ranch-house with generators for powerful offensive rays and a strong defensive ray-web, and manned it with six competent men. Moreover, he came personally twice a year to transport the cargo of horn, and let it be known throughout the frontiers that the sign of the Hawk was on that portion of Iapetus, and that all who trespassed would have to answer to him. This should have been, ordinarily, enough. But there was always the sinister, brilliant Dr. Ku Sui, plotting against him and his belongings, and reckless others to whom the ranch might look like easy pickings. From these Carse had long anticipated a raid on Iapetus.

A

nd now he was worried. Clad as usual in a faded blue tunic, open at the neck, soft blue trousers and old-fashioned rubber soled shoes, he showed it by pulling occasionally at the bangs of flaxen hair that had been trained to hang down his forehead to the thick, straw-colored eyebrows. In his new cruiser, the *Star Devil*, he was within an hour's time of Iapetus, which lay before the bow observation ports of the control cabin like a giant buff-tinted orange, dark-splotched by seas and jungles, on the third of his semi-annual voyages for the harvest of horn. Away to the left, scintillating and flaming in the blackness of space, whirled Saturn, his rings clear-cut and brilliant, his hard light filling the control cabin. Carse was staring unseeingly at the magnificent spectacle when the giant negro standing nearby at the space-stick rumbled:

"Well, suh, Ah cain't think they's anything wrong—no, suh. They's nobody'd *dare* touch that ranch! No, suh—not Hawk Carse's ranch."

This was "Friday," the herculean black Earthling whom Carse had rescued years before from one of the Venusian slave-ships, and now a member of that strange trio of totally dissimilar comrades, the third of whom was Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow, now absent and at work in his secret laboratory. Friday thought the Hawk just about the greatest man in the Solar System, and many times already had he given proof of his devotion.

Carse looked full at him. "You're a good mechanic, Eclipse," he said, "but in some ways very innocent. Crane hasn't replied to us for seventy minutes. He knows we're coming and he should be on duty. That cargo's valuable, and it's all ready and packed."

"Hmff," Friday grunted. "But who you think'd dare try an' swipe it when we're so close? One o' Ku Sui's gang, maybe?"

"Perhaps. I haven't heard anything of Ku Sui for some time, and he's never more dangerous than when he keeps silent," said the Hawk thoughtfully. "But Crane might be sick. Or his radio might have broken down temporarily. Still—"

It was then that the third man in the cabin, Harkness, the navigator, straightened abruptly and put a sharp end to the trader's last word by calling out:

"Radio, sir!"

A

red dot of light was winking on a switchboard. Friday watched the Hawk move in his quick, effortless way to it and pull a lever down, all in the same motion, and then the negro's neck muscles corded as he listened to the sounds that came, choking and barely intelligible, from a loudspeaker:

"Carse—Hawk Carse—Crane speaking from the ranch. We're besieged—pirate ship—outnumbered—can't hold out much longer. We got most of the cargo inside here, but our generators—they're weakening—and I'm fading, I guess, and the others that're left are wounded. Carse—hurry—hurry..."

Five words went back into the microphone before the receiver went dead.

"I'm coming, Crane! Hold on!"

Friday had seen the Hawk in such moments before, and he knew the sight; but the navigator, Harkness, had not been with Carse very long, and now he stood silent, motionless, while despite himself a shiver ran down his spine as he stared at the tight-pressed bloodless lips and the gray eyes, cold now as space. He started nervously when the Hawk turned and looked him in the eye.

"I want speed," came his quiet, soft, deceptive voice. "I want that hour's running time sliced by a third. Streak through that atmosphere."

"Yes, suh!" answered Friday.

"And you"—to Harkness—"be very sure you get out every ounce she's got. Tell the engineer personally."

"Full speed. Yes, sir," said the navigator, and felt relieved when Carse turned his eyes away. For the Hawk, as always when he learned that property had been ravaged and his friends shot down, seemed less human than the Indrots at the far end of the frigid deeps of space he roamed. His face was mask-like, graven, totally expressionless: blood had been shed, and for each ounce another had to be spilled to balance the scales. At a speaking tube that reached aft to the three other members

of the crew, he whispered: "Fighting posts. Arm and be ready for action. Pirates are attacking ranch," and then went noiselessly to the forward electelscope. Meanwhile Friday kept his eyes strictly on the dials before him and held the space-stick rigid, while aft, in the ship's other compartments, three men strapped on ray-gun belts and wondered who was doomed to be caught in the swoop of the Hawk.

C

arse himself wondered that. The raider so far showed as a newcomer to the frontiers of space; he was one who as yet had never faced the Hawk, one to whom the tales that were told of him seemed laughable, to whom the rich consignment of horn looked like a gift. Certainly such an open attack did not resemble Ku Sui's subtle methods, or those of his several henchmen, pirates of space all; they, rather, struck behind his back, and then only when the infamous Eurasian had prepared what seemed an escape-proof trap.

"Foolish to raid when I'm so close!" he murmured as he trained the electelscope and peered into its eye-piece. "Stupid! Unless ..."

Friday, at the space-stick, mopped the trickles of sweat from his brow and with a vast sigh shifted his bulk. The job of speeding into an atmospheric pressure was always ticklish, and it was with some relief that he reported "Into th' atmosphere, suh," according to routine. He waited for the usual acknowledgment, and when it did not come repeated his observation in a louder voice. Two full minutes of silence passed. Then, finally, Hawk Carse turned from the electelscope, and even the negro shivered at sight of the deadly mask that was his face.

For the ranch-house in its clearing had dimly appeared in the electelscope just as Friday had spoken.

Carse spoke.

"More speed, if it burns us up," came his almost whispered words. "I want much more speed."

Harkness gulped. "Yes, sir," he said, and, moistening his lips, he returned to the engine-room. The frigid gray eyes swung back to the sight that was revealed on Iapetus.

The long, lean shape of a rakish space ship was resting on the soil some three hundred yards from the ranch-house, and between were the hazy figures of six men, busily dragging as many boxes towards their craft. The boxes contained the whole half-year's harvest of phanti horns, and had obviously been looted from the house. The resistance had been overcome; the pirate raid had succeeded. The trim, gray-painted ranch-house was lifeless....

T

he Hawk switched off the electelscope. His colorless lips were compressed very tightly. "I'll take the helm," he said curtly to Friday. "Turn on the defensive web, and prepare all ray batteries."

"Yes, suh!" The negro's big, yellow-palmed hands worked dexterously among the instruments to his right; then, amidships, grew a shrill whine which keened upward in pitch. A few sparks raced by the *Star Devil's* after ports, quickly to disappear after they left the almost invisible envelope of delicate bluish light that entirely wrapped her hull.

She was making dangerous speed. The wind screamed as she streaked through the satellite's atmosphere, and the great friction of her passage raised her outer shell to a perilous glow. The altitude dial's finger almost jumped from forty thousand to thirty-five.

"Ready for bow-ray salvo."

"Aye, sir!" replied Harkness, and a moment later repeated crisply: "All ready for bow-ray salvo, sir!" His voice showed no sign of the fear within him—fear that the *Star Devil's* outer hull would reach the melting point—but his lips fell apart and his face lost its discipline when the Hawk next spoke and acted.

"Steady," came the low whisper to his ears—and he saw the controlling space-stick being shoved down as far as it would go.

CHAPTER II

Pursuit

T

That was the Hawk's method, and it had given him the name which he had made famous. It was characteristic of the man that he preferred to strike at an enemy ship in a wild, breath-taking swoop, even as the fierce hawk plummets from high heaven to sink its talons deep into the flesh of its more sluggish prey. Nerves were uncomfortable things to have on such occasions, and Harkness had them, and accordingly he felt his heart hammer and something tight seemed to bind his throat. He tried to assume the unshakable calmness of the motionless figure at the stick, but could not, for his body was only flesh and blood—and Hawk Carse was tempered, frosty, steel. Through staring eyes the navigator watched the surface of Iapetus rushing into the bow ports, watched it spread accelerating outward, until he could plainly see the pirate ship lying there, and the nearby figures of men tugging at the heavy boxes of horns.

His eyes were on those figures when they broke. First they teetered hesitantly a moment, glancing wildly around and up at the vision of death that was coming like a silver comet from the skies, and then they melted apart. Three scrambled towards the rim of jungle foliage close at hand, while their fellows leaped in the other direction, trying to make an open port in their craft. Harkness saw them tumble headlong through it and slam it shut. Then a web of blue streaks appeared around the ship, and softened until her hull was bathed in ghostly bluish light.

"Their defensive ray-web's on, sir!" he managed to gasp. Carse, though close, might not have heard, so intently was he watching. The altitude dial's pointer reached for one thousand and slid past. Harkness's face was pale and drawn; his tight-gripped fingers and clenched teeth showed that he expected to crash into the ground in a molten, shapeless tomb of steel. But Friday was grinning, his teeth a slash of white.

"Stand by bow projectors," sounded the Hawk's clipped voice. The negro extended his hands and rumbled:

"Ready, suh."

"Fire."

"Fire!" Friday roared.

His rich laugh rang out and he whirled the wheels over. With a hissing as of a hundred snakes, the rays struck.

W

Well aimed, the bolt speared straight and true. The distance was short, and it came from generators that were perhaps not equaled in space; no ordinary ship's defensive web could resist its vicious thrust. From the streak of silver that represented the Hawk's swoop, a stream of orange cut a swathe through the air ahead, holding accurately on the brigand ship. For just a tick of time there was a turmoil of color as offensive ray met defensive web; then the air cleared again—and the pirate was unmarked!

By rights she should have been split in two; and, though his face did not show it, it must have been surprising to Carse that she wasn't. With one flick of the wrist he wrenched the *Star Devil* out of her plunge and sent her scudding, a hundred feet up, over the jungle rim. Friday was gaping. Harkness, still numb from the dive, foolishly staring; and then the brigand bared her fangs in return.

Orange light winked from her stern, and the Hawk's ship was bathed in a streak of color. But the bolt caromed harmlessly off the side of the arcing *Star Devil!* and the next instant the pirate's lean bulk swayed, lifted a little and zoomed up into the heavens, abandoning the boxes of horn without further fight.

"Runnin' foh it! Scared stiff!" muttered Friday, unholy joy in his gleaming eyes. He looked at the figure at the stick. "Follow 'em now, suh, an' wear out their projectors?"

Carse thoughtfully smoothed his bangs with his free hand. "Plenty of time for that," he said patiently. "Some of the men on the ranch may still be alive: we must care for them. I'm going to land. Tell the engineer to keep watch through the electroscope on that ship. I'll start overtaking it shortly."

"Funny our rays didn't ha'm 'em," Friday ruminated aloud. "Ain't no ordinary craft, that. No, suh, they's more in this heah business than hits yo' eyes!"

"Now you're getting cynical, Eclipse," the Hawk said dryly.

A

quarter-mile-square block of land had been fenced off as a corral for the ninety-head herd of bull phantis Carse kept on Iapetus. These creatures resembled mostly the old ostrich of Earth, but grew no feathers. The neck, however was shorter than the ostrich's; the leathery skin of a drab gray color; the powerful hind feet, on which they stood erect, prehensile and armed with short stabbing spurs; the forearms short and used for plucking the delicate shoots and young leaves on which they lived. There was a dim flicker of rudimentary intelligence inside the bullet heads; they recognized men as their enemies, and hated them. And therefore they necessitated careful handling, for, even without the valuable head-horns, their sharp-spurred feet could rip a human being into shreds in seconds.

They were clustered now behind the wire corral-fence, electrified to prevent them from breaking through. They bellowed angrily and shoved each other about as their wicked little blood-shot eyes caught sight of the *Star Devil* as she came dropping gently down.

At the electroscope of the descending craft was the ship's engineer. He had just centered the instrument on the fleeing pirate craft that by now was leaving the satellite's atmosphere, and the image was large on the screen above the bow windows, where he kept a steady eye on it. The inner door of the port-lock swung open, the outer door down, and Carse walked through, followed by Friday and Harkness.

An ugly scene lay spread out before them in the glaring daylight. The trader had only gone a few paces when he paused and looked down at an outsprawled thing that had once been a man. Stooping, he very gently turned the mess of charred flesh over and peered at what was left of the face. There were small, burnt holes in it, and the flesh surrounding them looked as though it had been suspended for some time over a slow fire....

Carse rose and stared into space.

"Ruthers, a guard," he said softly, as if speaking to himself. He walked on.

Another heap of flesh was pitched before the front wall of the ranch-house. The man it had been a little while before had evidently been running for the door when the deadly rays had got him. His ray-gun was lying a few feet away. Again Carse stooped and again very gently pulled the ragged thing over.

"By God!" stammered Harkness suddenly, staring, his face white, "that—that's Jack O'Fallon—old Jack O'Fallon! Why, we went to navigation school together! We—"

"Yes," said the Hawk, "O'Fallon, overseer." He stepped into the house. Friday, impassive and grim, pulled Harkness away from the distorted body.

T

Three more were tumbled together behind a splintered table in the main room. The rays had done their work well. Three were welded, it seemed, into one.... It was some time before the Hawk's frigid whisper came.

"Martin ... Olafson ... and this—Antil ... Antil was the only Venusian I ever liked...."

The chairs and tables in the room were overturned, most of them bore the seared scars of ray-guns, which showed plainly enough that there had been a desperate last minute hand-to-hand struggle there, after the defensive ray-web had failed and the pirates rushed the building. The radio alcove was choked with seared, cracked wreckage. Crane, the operator, still sat in his seat, but he was slumped over forward, and his head and chest were pitted with slanting ray holes. One hand had been reaching for a dial. The other was twisted and charred.

"And Crane, the last," said Hawk Carse, and for some moments he stood there, his face cold and unmoving save for the tiny twitching of the left eyelid. Utter silence rested over the bitter three—a silence broken only by the occasional roar of an angry phanti bull outside in the enclosure.

Finally Carse took a deep breath and turned to Friday.

"You'll see to their burying," he ordered quietly. "Get the power ray from the ship and burn out two big pits on that knoll off the corner of the corral."

Friday looked at him in puzzlement. "Two, suh?" he repeated. "Why two? Why not put 'em all in one?"

"You will put all my men in one. I'll need the other later... You," he went on, to Harkness, "get the cargo of horns aboard. We can't leave it out there, for three of those pirates fled into the jungle. I haven't time to find them, and they'd come out and bury the horns if we left them. I'll be with you soon. We take off in ten minutes."

"Yes, sir," answered the navigator, and he and the negro went out.

F

or a little while Carse stayed in the cubby. As he softly stroked the flaxen bangs of hair over his brow, he visualized what had happened inside that house of death, piecing a number of things together and forming a whole. On the surface it seemed plain enough, and yet there were one or two points.... His face showed a trace of puzzlement. He shook his head slightly; then he stooped and picked up the radio operator's body with an ease that might have seemed surprising from such a slender man, and walked out of the house.

Beyond one corner of the corral, upon a slight rise in the ground, Friday was melting out the second grave with the ship's great portable ray-gun. Carse laid Crane's body gently down in the first grave, then went to where Harkness, with the *Star Devil's* radio-man and cook, was loading the cargo of horns aboard. The trader opened several of the boxes, glanced at the upper layers to inspect the quality, and, satisfied, closed them again. All the boxes were trundled soon into the craft's open port and aft to her cargo hold.

The engineer on watch at the electroscope and visi-screen felt a hand on his shoulder and looked around to find his captain standing by him. He pointed up at the screen: on it, the brigand ship was a mere four inches in size, and bearing straight out on an unwavering course. "I reckoned their speed to be about ten thousand an hour, a minute ago, sir," he reported. "Now about five thousand miles away."

"How soon," Carse asked, "do you think we could overhaul them?"

The other grinned. "If you're in a hurry, sir, about two hours and a half."

"I am in a hurry. I want all the speed you can muster."

"Yes, sir. Might be able to get it down, to two."

The Hawk nodded. "Try. Return to your post."

Outside, through the port, he saw Friday smoothing over the grave, the burying finished, and he beckoned him in. At that second Harkness reported the cargo all fastened down. Carse snapped out his orders.

"Harkness," he said shortly, "you and Friday with me in the control cabin. Sparks, you can get an hour's sleep, but leave the radio receiver open. Cook, an hour's rest if you want it—and I think you'd better want it. There's war ahead. Close port!"

The inner and outer doors nestled snugly, one after the other, into place with a hiss; the rows of gravity plates in the ship's belly angled ever so slightly. She quivered, then, in a surge of power, lifted straight up and poised; then, answering the touch of space-stick and accelerator, she went streaking through the atmosphere on the trail of the distant craft that had left its mark of blood on Iapetus and provoked the vengeance of the Hawk....

CHAPTER III

Death Rides the Star Devil

U

sually, when pursuing an enemy, Hawk Carse was impassive and grim, apparently emotionless, icy. But now he seemed somehow disturbed.

He fidgeted around, glancing occasionally at the visi-screen to make sure his quarry was not changing course, now watching Friday juggle through the skin of atmosphere into outer space, and now standing apart, silent and solitary, brooding.

There was something about the affair he didn't like. Something that was deeply hidden, that could not be grasped clearly; that might, on the other hand, be pure imagination. And yet, why—

Why, for instance, had the brigands taken to their heels with just the barest semblance of fight? Why, with their defensive ray-web proof for some time at least against his offensive rays, had they left without more of a struggle for the horn? Why were they so willing to flee, knowing as they must that he, the Hawk, would follow? Did they not know he had—thanks to Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow—the fastest ship in space, and would inevitably overtake them?

Were they Ku Sui's men? It seemed so, certainly, from the great strength of their defensive ray-web. No other ships that he knew of in space save Ku Sui's possessed such power. But—it wasn't the brilliant Eurasian's customary style. It was too simple for him.

Carse stroked his bangs. The factors were all mixed up. He didn't like it.

Iapetus' atmosphere was left behind; in minutes the light blue wash of her sky changed to the hard, frigid blackness of lifeless space. The *Star Devil's* lighting tubes glowed softly, though Saturn's rays, coming through the wide bow windows, still lit every object in the control cabin with hard and dazzling brilliancy. Inside, light and color, life and action; outside, the eternal, sable void, sprinkled with its millions of sparkling motes of worlds. And ahead—shown now on the visa-screen only by the light dots of its ports—was the brigand craft.

The *Star Devil* was smoothly building up the speed that would eventually bring her up to the craft of the enemy. Carse's Earth-watch told him that an hour and a half had passed. A vague anxiety oppressed him, but he shook it off with the thought that soon the time for accounting would arrive. Only forty minutes more; probably less. His fears—foolish. He was getting too suspicious....

T

hen came the voice.

It pierced through the control cabin from the loudspeaker cone above the radio switchboard. It was rough and mocking. It said:

"Hawk Carse? Hawk Carse? You hear me?" Many times it repeated this. "Yes? You hear me, Hawk Carse? I've a joke I want you to hear—a very funny joke. You'll enjoy it!" There interrupted the staccato sounds of an irrepressible amusement.

Carse froze. His fingers by habit fluttered over his ray-gun butt as he wheeled and looked into the loudspeaker. Friday, at the space-stick, stared at him; Harkness's face was puzzled as he peered at the loudspeaker and then turned and gazed at his captain.

"But where," he asked, "—where does the voice come from? Who is it?"

As if thinking aloud, Carse whispered:

"From that ship ahead. I half expected ... I know it well, that voice. Very well. It's the voice of ... of ... I can't quite place it.... In a minute.... The voice of—"

The chuckling ceased, and again the voice spoke.

"Yes—a very funny joke! I can't share it all with you, Carse, because you'd spoil it. But do you remember, some years ago, five men—and another who lay before them? Do you remember how this last man said: 'Each one of you will die for what you've done to me?' That man didn't wear bangs over his forehead then. Remember? Well, I'm one of the five the mighty Hawk Carse swore he would kill!"

Again the voice broke into a chuckle.

But it ended suddenly. The tone it changed into was entirely different, was cruel with a taunting sneer.

"Bah! The avenging Hawk! The mighty Hawk! Well, in minutes, you'll be dead. You'll be dead! The mighty Sparrow Carse will be dead!"

A brief eternity went by. Carse remembered, and the glint in his gray eyes grew colder.

"Judd the Kite," he whispered.

Friday's lips formed the words.

And even Harkness, new to the frontiers of space, knew the name and echoed it haltingly.

"Judd the Kite...."

O

f all the henchmen Dr. Ku Sui had gathered about him and banded against Earth, and against Carse, and against all peaceful traders and merchant-ships, Judd was perhaps the most cruel and relentless.

The Kite he was called—though only behind his back—yet it might better have been Vulture. Big and gross, with thick unstable lips and stubby, hairy fingers, more than once he and his motley gang of hi-jackers had painted a crimson splash across the far corners of the frontiers, and daubed it to the tortured groans of the crews of honest trading ships. Often they had plunged on isolated trading posts and left their factors wallowing in their life blood. And more....

There are things that cannot be set down in print, that the carefully edited history books only hint at, and into this class fell many of the Kite's deeds. He was a master of the Venusian tortures. He and his band during the unspeakable debauches which always followed a successful raid would amuse themselves by practising certain of these tortures on the day's captives; and his victims, both men and women, would see and feel indescribable things, and Death would be kept most carefully away until the last ounce of life and pain had been squeezed quite dry.

"Judd the Kite," Carse repeated in a hardly audible whisper. "Judd the Kite ... one of the five...." Slowly his left hand rose and smoothed his long bangs of flaxen hair. "I have been looking for him."

"Will you reply to him, sir?" asked Harkness.

"What use? His trap—Ku Sui's trap, of course—has already been set." His brain raced. "What could it be?" he whispered slowly.

F

riday was scratching his woolly hair, his smooth face puzzled, when Carse, with the crisp decisiveness that always came to him when in action, looked up at the visi-screen. The brigand was still clinging to a straight course, and being overhauled rapidly. Another thirty minutes and they would be within striking distance. He said tersely:

"Set up the defensive web. Spiral and zig-zag the ship all you dare, altering the period of the swing each time. Harkness, you and I are going to make an inspection tour. General alarm if Judd's course changes, Friday."

"Yes, suh." The negro, frowning, gave his undivided attention to his instruments as the Hawk and Harkness went aft into the next compartment, the engine room.

It looked quite normal. The great dynamos were humming smoothly; the air-renewing machine was functioning steadily; the gauge hands all slept or quivered in their usual places. Nothing uneven in the slight vibration of the ship; nothing that might possibly forbode trouble. Up on his perch, the engineer peered down curiously and asked:

"Anything wrong, sir?"

"Not yet," Carse answered shortly. "You're sure everything is regular here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. But check every vital spot at once—and quickly. Then keep alert."

They passed on into the following compartment, the mess-room and sleeping quarters for the crew. Solid, rhythmical snores were issuing from the cook's open mouth as he lay sprawled out on his bunk; the smell of coffee hovered in the air; the cabin was quiet and comfortable with an atmosphere of sleep and rest. The radio-man, reading in his bunk, looked over and, seeing it was Carse, sat up.

"Notice anything wrong?" he was asked.

"Wrong? What—Why, no, sir. You want me for duty?"

"Yes. Stay here and keep your eyes open for signs of trouble. I'm expecting some. General alarm if the slightest thing happens." And Carse went noiselessly into the last division of the ship.

This was the cargo hold. The boxes of phanti horns were neatly stacked in precise rows; the dim tube burning overhead showed nothing that gave the smallest cause for alarm. The Hawk's narrowed eyes swept walls, deck and ceiling in a search for signs of strain or buckling, but found none.

T

hen he let himself down into the ship's belly, in the three-foot-high space between the deck and the bottom outer hull. He found the three rows of delicately adjusted gravity plates in good order. Harkness joined him.

Their hand-flashes scanned every inch of the narrow compartment as they made the under-deck passage from stem to bow and up through the forward trap-door into the control cabin. They found nothing abnormal. The water and fuel tanks, built in the space between the inner and outer shells above the living quarters, also yielded nothing; likewise the storeroom.

Nothing. Nothing at all. The whole ship was in excellent condition. Everything was working as it should. Carse went forward again with Harkness; turned and faced him with puzzled eyes.

"I can't understand it," he said. "Why that threat, when everything seems all right? How can Judd reach me to kill me? And in minutes?"

The navigator shook his head. "It's beyond me, sir."

The Hawk shrugged his shoulders. "Well, we'll see. It might be something altogether new. You report to the engine-room and keep on watch there. Any sound or sign, give the general alarm."

"Yes, sir," he said, and left.

"He talkin' foolish, that Judd," grumbled Friday, seeing that the search had been fruitless. "He think maybe he can bust through our ray-web? Hmff!"

His master said nothing. He was standing motionless in the center of the cabin, waiting—waiting for he knew not what.

Then it came.

A preparatory sputter from the loudspeaker that spun Friday around. Hawk looked up, tensed. Again sounded the hard, sneering voice of Judd the Kite.

"We're ready now, Carse: there was a little delay. I'll give you, say, five seconds. Yes—one for each of the five men you did *not* kill. Shall I count them off? All right. You have till the fifth.

"One."

Friday's big eyes rolled nervously; he wiped a drop of sweat from his brow and cursed.

"Two."

H

e glanced at the Hawk, and tried himself to assume the unshakable steely calm of the great

adventurer. But his fists would clench and unclench as he stared up at the visi-screen. No change! The brigand was running straight ahead as ever, apparently fleeing.

"Three."

The negro's breath came more quickly; the tendons of his neck stood sharply out, and his powerful arms twitched nervously. "What's he goin' to do, suh? What's he goin' to do?" he asked hoarsely. "What's he goin' to do?"

"Four."

"Change course—a-starboard!" Carse rapped. The space-stick moved a little, all Friday dared, at their speed; the position dials swung; the dot of a fixed star that had been visible a moment before through the bow windows was now gone. Till the fifth, Judd had said.

"Five!"

The two men in the control cabin of the *Star Devil* peered at each other. One of them licked his lips and wiped the sweat from his brow. But there was nothing. No sound, no change. No general alarm bell. No offensive ray spearing across the reaches of space; no slightest change in the brigand's course. He who had mopped the sweat away laughed loud and long in overwhelming relief.

"All foolishment!" he gurgled. "That Judd, he crazy. Try to scare us, I guess—huh! Try to—"

"*What's that?*" whispered Hawk Carse.

A sudden faint rustle of noise, of movement, had breathed through the ship.

At first it was hardly discernible; but it grew. It grew with paralyzing rapidity into a low but steady murmur, blended soon with voices raised in quick cries. There was one piercing, ragged shriek, and all the time an undertone of the indefinite, peculiar sound of something rustling, creeping, growing.

T

hen came the harsh jangle of the general alarm bell.

"Space-suits!" Carse snapped. The alarm was the signal to put them on; it was a safeguard from a possible breach in the ship's walls. Against such an emergency they had drilled often, and all over the ship the crew would be springing rapidly into space-suits hanging ready.

The space-stick automatically locked as Friday, eyes rolling, leaped with his master to the nearby locker. The shriek from aft had quickly died, the alarm bell had snapped off; but now there came a frantic rush of feet, and a man tumbled through into the control cabin, his face white, his eyes stark with horror, his breath coming in gasps and the sweat of fear on his brow.

It was Harkness.

He slammed the door tight shut behind him and stumbled to the suit locker; and as his fingers fumbled at his suit with the clumsiness of panic, he stammered:

"The cargo—the boxes of horn—it came from aft! Fungus! Planted in the horn! It's filling the ship! Got all the others and grew—*grew* on them! Dead already. There—look, look!"

Carse and Friday, grotesque giants in the bulky sheathings of stiff, many-ply fabric, turned as one and peered through their quartzite face shields to where the navigator's bulging eyes directed them.

It was the door between control cabin and engine room—the door he had just slammed shut. At first nothing was visible; then they saw the van of the enemy that had swarmed through the ship.

A thin line of bright yellow color had appeared along the under crack of the door. A second later the door was rimmed on all sides with it. It grew; reached out. Energy flowed through it: fingers of dusty yellow pronged out from the cracks where the door fitted, hung wavering for a moment, melted together, then slumped to the floor to more quickly continue the advance. It increased marvelously, in minor jerks of speed. It was delicate in texture, mold-like. The more there became, the faster it grew: in seconds shreds of it had darted out from the main mass and affixed themselves to the walls and ceiling of the cabin, there to accelerate the horrible filling process.

A

It happened more quickly than it can be related. Within ten seconds most of the cabin was coated by the yellow stuff; grotesquely formed clumps and feathers hung from the ceiling; fern-like fingers kept spurting everywhere. Friday stepped back, before the advance, but not the Hawk. Useless to try and evade the stuff, he knew, and he was fairly positive that there was no immediate danger: the tough fabric of the suits should resist it. A pseudopod-like surge flicked to his leg; crept up; cloaked the suit in patches of yellow; thickened and enveloped him. But it could not pierce through.

"Cap'n Carse! Look heah!"

He turned to the alarmed voice, brushing light, feathery particles of yellow from his face shield, and found the bulky giant that was Friday a few steps behind him, and pointing mutely at Harkness.

The young officer was slumped limply down against a wall, his legs sprawled and body twisted unnaturally. His suit was covered with the yellow, and he had fallen, silently, while they were watching the advance of the fungus and checking the fastenings of their suits.

Carse reached him in three steps, stooped, brushed the fungus off the face-shield and peered through. Friday looked over his shoulder. The yellow enemy had laid its deadly fingers on Harkness's fine pale face. Sprouts of yellow trailed from the nostrils; the mouth was a clump of it; tendrils of spongy substance had climbed out the ears and were still threading rapidly over the head, even as the Hawk and Friday watched.

"That's how the others died," the adventurer said slowly. "Harkness must have carried a bit of the stuff from aft. It was on him when he put on his suit. At least I hope so. If it can get into these suits...." He left the thought unfinished.

"You mean, suh," asked Friday haltingly, "you mean that maybe—maybe it'll get in our suits too?"

"Maybe," said Carse without emotion.

They waited.

CHAPTER IV

The Hawk Prepares a Surprise

H

awk Carse's icy poise in times of emotional stress never failed to amaze friends and enemies alike. Most of them swore he had no nerves, and that in that way he was not human. This estimate, of course, is foolish; Carse was perhaps too human, as was proved by the all-consuming object of his life. It was rather, probably, an inward vanity that made him stand composed as a statue while death was gnawing near; that had, once, led him actually to file his nails when apparently trapped and hotly besieged, with the wicked hiss of ray-guns all around.

And so he stood within his suit now—calm, quite collected, his face graven, while the yellow tendrils carpeted the whole cabin, penetrated between the twin banks of instruments on each side and clouded the bow windows, visi-screen and positionals until the two living men aboard that ship of death were completely shut off from outside vision. Friday, his large white eyes never for a moment still, and waiting as the Hawk was waiting to find whether or not their suits, too, harbored the fungus, could quite easily have been scared into a state of panic; but the sight of the steely figure near him eased his nerves and brought a vague kind of reassurance.

Minutes went by. Presently the Hawk said softly into his microphone:

"We're safe, now, I think. You'd better go aft and see what state the ship's in. Come right back." And as Friday left, wading through the clinging growth, the trader went to the eye-piece of the electelscope.

He brushed the puffy covering of yellow silt away and adjusted the instrument's controls as best he could, centering it on where Judd's craft had last been. Then he peered through—and saw that which made him start.

The *Star Devil* was rolling round and round, like a ball!

C

arse looked out on a star-studded panorama that was sweeping crazily by. Now the cloudy globe of Iapetus, which had just before lain far behind, came swinging into view, sliding rapidly from the bottom of his field of view to the top, and so out of sight again, to quickly give place to the flaming, ringed sphere of Saturn, which in turn passed away and left the star-spangled blackness of space. Then Iapetus once more. He snapped the electelscope off abruptly, and turned from it to see Friday come clumping back.

"Swept everything clean, suh," the negro reported gloomily. "That fungus's thick; cain't even see the men's bodies, it's so deep. It's that way, all over."

"It's down in the gravity propulsion plates too," Carse said shortly. "Their adjustment's been ruined by it, and we're out of control, turning over and over. I couldn't possibly see Judd. Well, we've got to go down to the plates and try and clean them."

It was a weird scene that faced him in the engine room. The complex instruments and machinery were draped with straggling ferns of yellow; up above, a solid clump some ten feet thick hung on the platform where the engineer usually stood—a living tomb. The usual purr of the mechanisms was muffled and hushed. So fecund was the fungus that the path Friday had cleared in his passage aft was already filled, and Carse had to clear a new one. The growth was deep there, but still deeper in the next compartment.

It was practically a solid mass of yellow, for in it their invader had found food. It had fed well on the lockers of supplies and devoured all but the bones and clothing of the two men whom it had caught—radio-operator and cook. Carse fought on through this tough, clinging sea and came at last to the cargo hold, where, in the deck, was the man-hole that gave passage down to the 'tween-decks compartment where the rows of gravity propulsion plates were located.

F

riday raised the cover with a wrench: then, preceded by the rays of their hand-flashes, they climbed down and wormed forward as best they could in their hampering suits, to the plates. They found they had lost their customary glitter beneath powdery coatings of yellow, sufficient to disturb their faint electric currents and microscopically adjusted angles. On hands and knees—for the compartment, though as wide as the ship's inner shell, was only three feet in height—the Hawk

stopped and said:

"We might be able to get some use out of these plates if we can keep the fungus brushed off. It's thin: let's try it."

But the yellow growth's vitality balked them. Sweating from their awkward exertions inside the hot space-suits, they again and again brushed clean the plates with pieces of waste—only to see the feathery particles regather as quickly as they were cleared away. There wasn't more than an inch of the fungus, but that inch stuck. There was no removing it.

"No use, boss," gasped the negro, pausing breathless. "Cain't do it. Nothin' to do, I guess, but wait an' see what de Kite does. He'll sure want this ship and the horn."

"I know," his captain answered slowly. "He'll want this ship, for it's the fastest in space—but I can't understand how he'll board us. I'm going up and see what I can find out. You stay here. Try cleaning the plates again."

Up through the man-hole he went, and forward to the control cabin. And, as before, the electroscope's eye-piece held a surprise for him.

Somehow, the *Star Devil's* speed of wild tumbling had lessened. A moment later the reason appeared. As her bow dipped down and down, there slid across the field of view, about a mile away, the lighted ports of another ship; and, from this other ship's nose there winked a spot of green, the beginning of a ray-stream which stabbed across the gulf to impinge on the *Star Devil's* bow. Carse could feel his craft steady as it struck. It was a gravital ray, with strong magnetic properties, which Judd was using to stop her turnings so he and his men could board!

A

gain and again the beam flashed across the Hawk's field of view, and he knew it was raying its mark neatly each time her bow swung abeam, for soon she was hardly turning at all. Then Judd evidently was satisfied. The port-lights of his ship veered aside; drew to a position abreast of the other. The two cold gray eyes that watched saw the outer port-lock door of the pirate open, revealing six figures, clad in space-suits and connected by a rope, that stepped out, pushed, and came floating towards the *Star Devil*.

Swiftly Carse moved. For many reasons it was useless, he rapidly decided, to try and surprise them as they boarded; there was a better and surer way. And, as always, he attended to every little detail—details that to others might have seemed trivial—of this preferred way.

With quick, strong fingers he removed the fungus-choked body of Harkness from its space-suit, and threw the suit into a nearby locker. From another locker he selected a loop of yellow-encrusted rope. Holding this over one arm, he made his way back rapidly to the aft man-hole, closed it carefully behind him and crept forward to the anxious negro who was still futilely dusting the plates. He told what he had seen, but nothing else.

Friday noted the rope, and he twisted his whole body to get a sight of Carse's gray eyes, through the face-shield.

"What we do, then, suh?" he asked. "Try an surprise 'em?"

"Can't do that; we'd still be helpless, without a way to remove this fungus. They probably know how to do it, and we've got to give them a chance."

Puzzlement pricked the negro. "Then what you goin' to do with that rope?"

"You'll soon see," snapped Hawk Carse.

T

hey waited.

It was hot and stuffy down in the belly of the ship, and also utterly black, for the trader had flicked off his hand-flash. Friday was unhappily possessed of an active curiosity; he wanted terribly to go on with his questions and ask Carse what his plan was; but he did not dare, for he knew very well from past experience that the Hawk was impatient of detailing his schemes in advance. So he sat in silence, and sweated, and stared gloomily into the darkness, thinking uneasy thoughts.

True, he thought, Judd the Kite did not know that Carse and he were still alive; on the contrary, he was probably convinced that they were dead; but what good did that do? Surely it would have been better to have surprised the brigands when boarding, but Captain Carse was against that. And they were hopelessly outnumbered.

Friday remembered a tale told him once by a survivor of a trading ship Judd the Kite had destroyed. It wasn't a nice tale. The Kite, so the report ran, was diabolically ingenious with a long peeling knife, and could improvise with it for hours. Friday pursued the tack of thought, and then suddenly began to sweat in earnest. He recalled—horrible!—that Judd possessed a special dislike for colored gentlemen!...

"Oh, Lawd!" he groaned, unconsciously—to have a cold voice ring in his earphones.

"Quiet!" it snapped. "They're entering."

The negro threw a switch on his helmet so he could catch outside noises. His body tensed. From above, unmistakably, had come the hiss of the inner port-lock door opening. And again, moments later, the hiss echoed. Twice! The lock could hold three men at a time. That probably meant that all six had boarded. Friday turned in the darkness and peered at Carse.

The adventurer without warning flicked on his hand-flash. The beam fell on the parallel planes of the yellow-covered gravity plates. The negro, every nerve in him jumping from impatience and suspense, gazed at them, and suddenly straightened. The mold-like fungus which had prevented them from getting the ship into control was slowly melting away. It was dwindling into fine dust!

"Gas," came a soft whisper to him. "As I expected, Judd's cleaning it out with some sort of gas. But the plates won't work yet—not until they're polished bright." Unthinking, Friday raised his hand to his helmet fastenings. "Keep your face-shield shut!" he was ordered crisply. "The gas would be as fatal as the fungus."

S

ilence rested tensely over the two men, to be broken at last by the clump of feet proceeding aft on the deck above.

Carse switched off the light. His voice was but faintly audible.

"Coming down to clean off the dust. He'll have a flash. Hide behind the truss-work at your side, and when he gets here seize him by the neck. I'll be with you right away. I want no noise."

Friday saw a great light, and grinned in the confidence it brought him. Of course! That explained the rope. The plan was so simple it had escaped him. Already he felt cheerful. It was only mental worries, and never physical hazards, that unsettled him. He angled around the truss-work and shrank into as small a space as possible—which wasn't very small, as he still wore his bulky, clumsy suit.

The clump-clump of feet had died: now there came the sound of the man-hole aft being raised. A white beam pronged down into the darkness, felt around and flicked off. Boots clanged on the connecting ladder; reached the bottom. The light appeared again, lower now, and came slowly forward. Limned faintly against the reflected light was the outline of a crouching man's body.

He went to hands and knees and progressed carefully, his flash darting to left and right. Suddenly, in a certain light, the two who awaited his coming saw a swarthy, black-stubbled face in profile. He wore no space-suit! That meant, Friday reflected, that the brigands had cleared the ship of the gas in some way. It meant that they could get out of their own suits.

But they could not possibly do so at the moment. They heard the nearby pirate's breathing, a harsh oath as he stubbed a toe. The negro tightened his giant arms and held himself ready, his eyes steady on the black outline which signified his quarry. Then the pirate was close enough.

It was over in seconds. Rounding the truss, Friday caught the man in the armored crook of his arm. A startled croak precluded the thump of two bodies on the hull; there was the tinkle of a falling hand-flash and a slight squirming which was quickly stopped by a belting punch.

T

hen Carse was there in the darkness, looping his rope around the pirate's arms and legs—a difficult

job when wearing a bulky space-suit in such cramped quarters. He used a bunch of waste for a gag and then hauled the captive to a girder farther forward and bound him sitting to it. By the time he had finished, Friday was out of his space-suit and asking:

"Shall I rub him out, suh? Best make sure of him."

"Never in cold blood," said the Hawk acidly. "You should know that well enough by now!"

"Now, there should be five left above, and I think they'll send another down. We must get him, too. Get back where you were."

He took off his space-suit also: then, after minutes of silence, they heard voices upraised in argument coming from the control cabin. Once more came the sound of feet overhead; another flash bit down through the man-hole, and another man wriggled into the compartment. He was obviously uneasy and suspicious. He called:

"Jake! Hey, Jake! You there? Where the hell are you?"

Mumbling oaths, he advanced, his light ray weaving over every inch before him.

"What you doing, Jake? Where are you?"

Friday gathered his muscles, unhampered now by the restricting suit. But light must have been reflected by the round whites of his eyes, for the pirate suddenly stopped and called in sharp alarm:

"What's that? What's that there? You, Jake? Hey! I'll ray you—"

And that was all he said. Friday was too far away to reach him in time, but the Hawk was closer; he approached behind the brigand, crouched on silent cat's feet. Two powerful arms reached out and tightened in a strangle hold—and two minutes later the second man was bound and gagged.

Carse loosened his ray-gun in its holster.

"Now we attack," he whispered. "Four to two are fair odds, I think. You go aft and wait by the man-hole; wait till you hear me call. Don't be seen—wait. And when I call, come at once."

"Yes, suh. You goin' forward 'tween the hulls?"

A curt nod answered him.

"Then up through that—"

"Don't ask so many questions!" the Hawk rasped crisply.

They separated.

CHAPTER V

The Hawk and the Kite

I

n the deck of the control cabin, between a bank of instruments and the starboard wall, was another man-hole that gave entrance from the 'tween hulls compartment to the cabin.

Only two men besides Carse knew of its existence. The adventurer for good reasons of his own had it built in; and so cunningly was its cover fitted on that its outlines were not visible.

Beneath it, now, on the three-rung ladder that led up from the lower shell, Hawk Carse waited.

He could hear quite clearly the angry, snarling voice of Judd the Kite, haranguing his men.

"Rinker, you go down and see what's wrong. Just because Jake and Sako don't come back right away, you guys seem to think the ship's haunted! Haunted! By Betelguese! A sweet bunch of white-livered cowards I've got for a crew—"

"Ah, lay off!" growled a deep, sullen voice. "I ain't scared, but this looks fishy to me. Something's wrong down there 'tween the hulls—damn wrong, I tell you. We only found four skeletons, an' four, ain't the full crew for a ship like this. There oughta to be a couple more somewhere. Carse, blast him! he's got nine lives. How do we know he was one of the four?"

Another spoke up, as Rinker evidently hesitated. "I say we all go down and investigate together."

"Stow it!" thundered Judd. "They didn't get their space-suits out, did they? Why, they hadn't a chance to escape—none of 'em. They were killed, every one, quick! And four's plenty to work this ship. Carse is dead, see, dead! This was one trick he didn't know—one time he couldn't worm out. He was clever, all right, but he couldn't quite stack up against me. I swore I'd get him and I did. He's dead!"

"Judd," said a low, clear voice.

T

he Kite whirled around. He stared. The hand-flash he was holding dropped to the deck with a clang. His hands went limp, and his voice was suddenly weak and dazed.

"My God—Carse! Hawk Carse!"

"Yes," a whisper answered. "Hawk Carse. And not dead."

It was a scene that might have puzzled a newcomer to the frontiers of space. Certainly there seemed to be nothing menacing about the slender figure that stood by the now open man-hole, both arms hanging easily at his sides; the advantage, on the contrary, appeared to be all with the men whom he confronted. All but one was big, and each was fully armed with a brace of ray-guns and knives.

But, though there were four guns to one, they made no attempt to draw. For it was the Hawk they faced, the fastest, most accurate shot in all those millions of leagues of space, and in his two icy eyes was a menace that filled the control cabin with fine-drawn silence.

At last Judd the Kite opened his lips and wetted them.

"Where did you come from?" he stammered.

"No matter," came the answer from the thinly smiling mouth. "Friday!"

"Yes, suh!" boomed the big black's distant voice.

Judd's three men turned their heads and saw Carse's famous satellite step into the control cabin, a ray-gun in each capacious hand. He was all flashing white teeth, so wide was his grin.

"Well, well!" he chuckled. "Ain't this the pleasure! Certainly am pleased to meet old friends like this—yes, suh! Jus' drop in?"

But the Kite's head had not turned; he seemed not to hear Friday's words; his eyes were held fascinated by Carse's. The attention of everyone came back to the two leaders.

"Ku Sui is in back of this?" asked the Hawk.

Judd licked his lips again. He had to spar for time: to divert for a while the vengeance he knew possessed the other's mind, so that he might find some chance, some loop-hole.

"That's right," he began eagerly, "it was Ku Sui. I had to do this, Carse: I hadn't any choice. He's got something on me: I had to go through with it. Had to!"

T

he Hawk's eyes were glacial; the ghost of a smile hovered once more around the corners of his lips.

"Go on," he said. "What was that fungus?"

"I don't know. Ku Sui developed it in his laboratory. He just gave me a sealed cartridge of the spores with instructions to raid your ranch, as you saw, and plant them in a drilled-out phanti horn. There was a simple mechanism in the cartridge that allowed us to release the spores by a radio wave from our ship. When I wanted them to grow I simply—"

"I see. A clever scheme," Carse said. "Quite up to Ku Sui's standard. The idea of those three men running for the jungle when I came down on Iapetus was to insure my taking the horn cargo aboard, of course. The raid was only incidental to your scheme to get me. And Crane, the radio operator, was dead when I received that S.O.S. It was faked, to bring me quickly for your schedule."

Judd stared at him. "How in hell did you know that? Damn you, Carse, you're—"

"Where," interrupted the adventurer coldly, "is Ku Sui?"

The pirate's eyes shifted nervously. "I don't know," he muttered.

"Where," came the steady question again, "is Ku Sui?"

The other licked his lips. His fingers clenched, unclenched, gripped tight. "I don't know!" he protested. His eyes widened as he saw the Hawk's left hand stir slightly, and he started as he heard the whip-like word:

"Talk!"

"Carse. I swear it! No one knows where he is. When he wants to see me personally, he comes out of darkness—out of empty space. I don't know whether it's done by invisibility or the fourth dimension, but one moment his ship's not there; the next it is; I don't know where his base is; and if he knew I'd told you what I have, he'd—"

"How do you arrange your meetings, then?"

"They're always in a different place. The next is in seven days. I don't remember the figures: they're in the log of my ship."

Carse nodded. "All right. I believe you. And now—there are a few accounts to be settled."

D

uring the few minutes the Hawk had questioned Judd, the brigand crew in the cabin had stood silent, their breath bated, their eyes watching fascinated. But now they started, and shifted uneasily. They suspected what was coming. The inexorable, seemingly inhuman adventurer went on emotionlessly:

"Six of my men were killed on Iapetus, treacherously, without a chance. Four more were slaughtered by the fungus. That's ten. Back up to your men, Judd."

Judd knew all too well what that order portended. He could not move. His cunning eyes protruded with fear as they shifted down and riveted on the shabby holster that hung on Carse's left side. His breath came unevenly, in short, ragged gasps through parted lips.

"Back, Judd!"

The stinging, icy force of the voice jolted him back despite his will. One short retreating step after another he took, until at length he was standing with his three men against the side wall of the cabin, the dividing line between it and the engine room. Friday's guns were still covering the pirates.

"You goin' to shoot us down in cold blood?" one of them asked hoarsely.

The Hawk surveyed the speaker until the man shivered. Beneath their coldness, his gray eyes were faintly contemptuous.

"No—I leave that for yellow-streaked hi-jacking rats such as you. I'm going to give you a chance: more than a chance. Friday," he called.

"Yes, suh?"

"Do you want to come in on this?"

Without the slightest hesitation the negro answered, grinning:

"Yes, suh!"

"I thought you would. Come here alongside me, then sheathe your guns."

Friday did so. He stood in position beside his master, just in front of the opening that led below. The four brigands were some fifteen feet away. The two groups faced each other squarely.

"Good," whispered Carse.

T

hey stood there, four men to two, deadly enemies; yet not one hand moved toward a ray-gun. Again, an outsider would have marveled why Judd, the numbers on his side did not draw and fire; why he waited; why his face was pale, his eyes nervous. But he knew too well what the least sign of a draw on his part would entail; he preferred to wait, to receive the advantage of the cold vanity in Carse which demanded, in gun-play, that the odds of numbers be against him. Perhaps this time that vanity would lead the Hawk a little too far. Perhaps even yet a loop-hole for strategy might appear.

So the Kite waited, but fear was strong within him.

"A little earlier," the Hawk's frigid voice went on, "there was some counting. To the number five. Remember, Judd? Well, since you managed so poorly before, perhaps you'll count again."

"You mean to count to five?"

"Yes. And on the fifth count, we draw and fire."

Judd's eyes narrowed, shifted, while thoughts clashed and meshed in his brain. Hawk Carse smiled icily.

"Is that clear?" he asked.

Judd said after a while:

"All right."

Friday noted one of the pirates: a brawny, black-browed giant almost as large as himself, and decided to go for him when the time came. He whispered this to Carse; then, keeping his gaze on the man, he stood ready.

"Begin, I'm waiting," reminded Hawk Carse.

T

he Kite crouched, drew a deep breath—but before his lips could form the first count there was a quick, sharp stir of movement from the brigand to his right; Carse's left hand seemed to vanish; a hiss followed, a streak of wicked blue light. Friday grunted, not yet quite realizing what had happened; Judd, gaped at Carse's lowering weapon, then turned his eyes to the right—and choked out an oath.

The brawny giant by his side was standing, but his face was creased and puzzled. One hand was at a holster; the other grasped a gun—unfired. Accurate to an inch, between his eyebrows there had appeared is if by magic a neatly seared, round hole.

His knees crumpled. His gun clanged to the deck. His head bowed; he bent; he pitched forward, sprawled face downward. Then he quivered and lay still. A burnt odor was in the air....

"I'm still waiting, Judd," came an ironic whisper.

"My God!" stammered one of the pirate chief's two remaining men. "He's a devil. Fast as light!"

Judd's eyes had returned to the Hawk, and they still showed some of his reaction of surprise to what had happened, when a peculiar thing occurred. For a split second his gaze shot past Carse, took in something, then switched back again. And when he had done so his face showed a faint but unmistakable feeling of relief.

This was old stuff to the Hawk, but he could not afford to take chances. Instantly he rapped:

"Look behind. Friday! Quick!"

The negro jerked his head around. He was too late. He had a glimpse of a man standing in the man-hole behind—a glimpse of a short steel bar that flashed to Carse's head in a vicious arc, and again to his own. He was rocked by pain as blackness came across his vision; and together, white man and black crumpled to the deck....

CHAPTER VI

Back to Iapetus

A

n indefinite time later Carse awoke to a trip-hammer of pain thudding through his head. He groaned a little, and tried to turn over in an effort to ease it. He found he could not. Then his eyes opened and he blinked up.

He found himself lying on the deck of the control cabin, near the after wall, and bound hand and foot with tightly strapped rope. Over him, looking down, was Judd the Kite, hands on his hips, a gloating smile on his coarse lips, and in his eyes a look of taunting, exultant triumph. He drew back his foot and kicked the netted Hawk in the ribs. The trader made no sound; his pale face did not change, except to set a trifle more rigidly.

"Pretty easy the way my men got you, Carse," said Judd. "Seems to me you're just a damned fool with a big rep you don't deserve. You're too careless. You ought to know by now not to leave bound men in reach of high-powered cable. It cuts as good as an electric knife. Does your head hurt where you were hit?" Deliberately, still smiling, he rapped his foot brutally against Carse's head.

The trader said nothing. He glanced around, to get the situation clearly. Friday, he saw, was in the control cabin too, lying stretched out and bound as he was, but evidently still unconscious from the ugly, bloody welt on his head. One of Judd's men was at the ship's space-stick, another stood by her dials, occasionally glancing back at the prisoners and grinning; the two remaining pirates were apparently aft. The body of the one whom Carse had killed had been removed.

Through the port bow window, far out, he noticed a small spot, half black and half brilliant with the reflected light of Saturn: that would be the other space ship, the Kite's, on the same course as they. And ahead was the large-looming sphere of Iapetus. The pirate was returning, then, to the ranch, probably to pick up his three men, and perhaps to leave a small crew to work it.

"Yes. I'm afraid this is the end of the Sparrow Hawk!" Judd sneered the name and laughed harshly. "A lot of people will be glad to hear it. There'll be a big reward for me, too, from Ku Sui. Head still bad?" And again he swung his leg and drove its heavy shoe into his captive's head.

C

arse's lips compressed till they were colorless. He looked steadily at Judd's eyes and asked:

"What are you going to do with Friday and me?"

"Well," grinned the pirate, "I can't tell you definitely, but it's sure to be interesting. It'd suit me best if I could teach you a few little tricks with a peeling knife—the Venusians have some very neat ones, you know—and then perhaps burn you full of holes. Little holes, done with a mild needle-ray. But unfortunately I can't kill you personally, for Ku Sui will want to do that himself. You're worth a hell of a lot of money alive."

"I go to Ku Sui, then?"

"That's right. I'll hand you over when I have my rendezvous with him, seven days from now. Clever man, Ku Sui! Half Chinese, you know. He'll be tickled to get you alive."

A muscle in the Hawk's cheek quivered. Then he asked:

"And Friday?"

Judd laughed. "Oh, I don't much care; he's not worth anything. I'll throw him in with you for good measure, probably. How's the head?" Once more the foot swung.

Carse's gray eyes were as frigid as the snow caps of Mars. The left eyelid was twitching a little; otherwise his pale face was as if graven from stone.

"Judd," he whispered, so softly that his voice was almost inaudible. "I shall kill you very soon. I shall make it a point to. Very soon. Judd...."

The Kite stared at the pallid gray eyes. His lips parted slightly. And then he remembered that his captive was bound, helpless. He spat.

"Bah!" he snarled. "Just your old stuff, Carse. It's all over with you now. You'll be screaming to me to

kill you when Ku Sui begins to touch you up!" He guffawed, again kicked the man at his feet, and turned away.

Hawk Carse watched him walk to the forward end of the cabin; and, after a little while, he sighed. He could be patient. He was still alive, and he would stay alive, he felt. A chance would come—he did not know how or when; it perhaps would not be soon; it might not come until he had been delivered to Ku Sui, but it would arrive. And then....

Then there would be a reckoning!

The deceptively mild gray eyes of the Hawk were veiled by their lids.

N

ight had settled over the ranch by the time the *Star Devil* and Judd's accompanying ship were in the satellite's atmosphere. It was the rare, deep, moonless night of Iapetus, when the only light came from the far, cold, distant stars that hung faintly twinkling in the great void above. Occasionally, the tiny world was lit clearly at night by the rays of Saturn, reflected from one of the eight other satellites; and occasionally, too, there was no night, the central sun of the solar universe sending its distance-weakened shafts of fire to light one side of the globe while ringed Saturn gilded the other.

But this season was the one of dark, full-bodied nights; and it was into the hush of their blackness that the *Star Devil* and her attendant brigand ship glided.

Below, on the surface of the Satellite, glowed the pin-prick of a camp-fire. When the ships were some fifteen thousand feet up, Judd's orders caused long light-rays to shaft out from the *Star Devil* and finger the ground. They rested on the ranch house and then passed on to douse with white the figures of three men standing by the fire. Through the electroscope the pirate chief saw them wave their arms in greeting.

Ten minutes later the two ships nestled down close together a hundred yards or more from the ranch clearing, and Judd said to his mate, standing next to him:

"We'll have a little celebration to-night. Break out a few cases of alkite and send three of the boys to the ranch's storeroom after meat for the cook to barbecue."

"What you goin' to do with them two?" the other asked.

"Carse and the nig? Keep them here in the control cabin; I'll detail a couple of men to guard them. I'm taking no chances: they must be in sight every minute. Carse is too damned dangerous." He peered back at the captives. The trader's eyes were shut; Friday still appeared unconscious from the brutal blow on his head. "Asleep. Well, they'd better sleep—while they have eyelid's to close!" Judd said mockingly, and his mate laughed in appreciation of his wit.

But neither the Hawk or Friday was asleep. Nor was the negro unconscious. Carse had ascertained this some time before by cautious signals.

A little stir had come within him when he heard Judd say there would be a celebration, for a celebration, to these men, meant a debauch and relaxed discipline, and relaxed discipline meant—a chance. First, however, there were the tight bonds of rope; they were expertly tied, and strong. But the Hawk was not particularly concerned about them.

He had dismissed them as a problem after a few minutes of consideration, and his mind ran farther ahead, planning coldly, mechanically, the payment of his blood debts....

A

ll in all, Judd was to blame for what happened that night on Iapetus. He was an old hand and a capable one, and certainly he should have known that extraordinary measures had to be adopted when Hawk Carse became his prisoner. By rights, he should have killed Friday immediately, and steered straight for his rendezvous with Ku Sui, keeping his eye on Carse all the time. He would have had to loaf on his way to the rendezvous, of course, for it needed but five days to get there, and he had seven; and he would also have had to pick up his three marooned men later. But that was what he should have done.

Yet, when one regards the personal angles, it is necessary to divide Judd's responsibility for succeeding events. He felt like having a celebration, and certainly he and his men had earned one.

He had captured the man who had stood, more than anyone else, in his and in Ku Sui's way for years; the man who had quashed any number of their outlaw schemes, and who had given more trouble to them than all the forces of law and order on Earth and the patrol ships in space. More, he had captured him alive, and that meant a much fatter reward from Ku Sui. He possessed the valuable cargo of phanti horn; he had taken a brand new ship, alone worth millions, besides being the fastest in space. Judd was naturally elated; he had two nights and a day to spare; he felt expansive, and ordered a celebration.

Such decisions—trivial when seen from the eminence of a hundred years—have directed the tide of history more than once.

There were thirteen men left of Judd's crew, including the three posted on Iapetus; these three and the six who manned the pirate's own craft came running to the *Star Devil* and piled into her open port-lock. They milled around in the control cabin, shouting in high spirits, swearing, throwing clumsy jests at the two silent figures on the deck; and Judd joined with them. There was much loot to be split, and the Hawk was snared at last! Their chief stilled them for a moment and said:

"Well, I guess we deserve a little jamboree. I'm breaking out some alkite and meat; make a big fire outside and dig some barbecue pits. Go ahead—out of here! But wait: you, Sharkey, and you, Keyger."

These last two men, more husky and alert than most of their fellows, he detailed for guard duty ever Carse and Friday. They were much cast down at the job, but he premised them a larger slice of the loot for recompense, and then stalked out after the other men.

The two guards stuck a brace of ray-guns in their belts and looked over the captives. Angry at missing the carousal, the man called Keyger kicked Friday, whose eyelids did not budge and whose body did not quiver, and then, more gingerly, kicked Carse and swore at him—but he turned somewhat hastily when the mild gray eyes slowly opened and stared up into his.

Then the two guards pulled out chairs and placed them by the open port-lock, where they could command a view of the celebration. They drew one ray-gun each, laid them ready, close by, and sat down.

CHAPTER VII

Jamboree

T

Two hours later their eyes were taking in a fantastic, mad scene, one that in some ways might have occurred in the days when buccaneers roamed the Spanish Main of Earth.

A little over a hundred yards away, straight before them, was the corral of the phantis: far behind it encroached the shadowy fringe of the jungle: to their right, closer to the corral than to the space ships, was the ranch house, lonely now and silent. But these objects were only the background for what had grown in front of the corral wire.

It was the roaring mass of the monster fire that had been lit, a splash of fierce, leaping flames in the velvety cool of the night. Black shapes were clustered around it; bottles were raised and drained; and a frieze of shadows, staggered and jumped and danced around the ruddy pile of fire. The carousel was in full swing; a chorus of wild song rose noisily into the night; more cases were smashed open and more alkite drawn out. The carcasses of three animals taken from the ranch's storehouse sizzled on the barbecue pits, to be ripped apart and the rich, dripping meat torn at, tooth and claw. Ever higher pierced the shrieks and oaths, till the calm night was distorted and crazy.

Other heavier sounds accompanied the bedlam of human noise: deep snortings and roarings and the scraping of scores of horn-shod feet. Behind their wired electric fence was clustered the herd of phantis, staring with their evil, red-shot little eyes at the flames and the shapes of the hated men. The big bulls were bellowing, bucking their heads angrily, churning up the soft soil with their strong, dagger-spurred feet: the welter of noise and the sight of so many men had wrought them up into a vicious and dangerous state.

Judd the Kite, a bottle in one hand and in the other a huge joint of meat which he was tearing at with his teeth, suddenly paused with mouth crammed full and stared over through the flickering light at the phanti corral. A cruel light gleamed in his eyes: he gulped down the meat and then turned to the shapes staggering around him. He yelled:

"Hey, there—let's get out the nigger! A little entertainment, fellows! Bring him out; but don't touch Carse: he's Ku Sui's. Douse him with water if he's unconscious."

T

They yelled in drunken delight at his words, and half of them reeled off towards the *Star Devil*. Judd, lips up-curved in a smile, drew his ray-gun and set the lever over for the low-power, continuous ray-stream. These guns, unlike our present weapons, could shoot in two ways: they could spit about twenty high-power discharges, a fraction of a second each in duration and easily sufficient to burn a man's head through; or they could deliver a long-lasting low-power stream, just strong enough to sear and crisp a human skin. For the entertainment Judd had in mind he needed low power.

The men sent to the *Star Devil* shoved past the guards on watch near the port-lock and over to the prisoners. They found them lying, very close together near the after wall.

"Gonna have some fun with the black, Judd's orders," they explained to the guards. "Still unconscious?"

Certainly Friday looked unconscious, his eyes closed, his full lips slightly parted, showing the powerful white teeth.

"I'll give him a shot of the ray," another brigand cut in. "That'll bring him to. Be ready to grab him."

They got an unpleasant shock when the low-power stream flicked the negro's leg. With a gigantic bellow that rang throughout the ship, Friday resisted.

It was like seeing a dead man come to life, and it startled them. Bound as he was, Friday made things unhealthy for his would-be captors; he shunted his legs up and down and squirmed mightily, and once his gleaming teeth snapped into an arm, bringing a howl of pain and several minutes of cursing. The unexpected resistance, once the surprise was over, infuriated the rum-sodden men. One of them yelled: "Sock him; Shorty!" A ray-gun's butt was slapped down on Friday's head; the negro rolled over, stunned. Then he was picked up without resistance and borne out into the night, where fantastic figures cavorted around the towering fire.

"The black devil was faking all the time!" one of the guards said amazedly. "He wasn't unconscious. What in hell did he do that for?"

"Dunno," snarled the other, rubbing a bruised leg. "Must have suspected what he's gonna get. Wish we was over there."

"Well, we can watch from here," grumbled his companion, and returned to the seats by the port-lock.

They both sat down, their backs half turned to the figure still lying on the deck.

C

arse had said nothing, made no protest, had not even moved when Friday struggled in fierce resistance. He could have done much more, but it would have been useless. Long before, he had seen the negro's opening eyes and signaled him to feign unconsciousness thus deflecting attention and making him appear harmless. He had also broached his plan for escape to Friday. He had not, however, reckoned on Judd's desire to torture: he would, he now saw, have to act with his greatest speed to save his mate from as much pain as possible.

And he began to act.

The control cabin was streaked with patches of shadow and light, made vague by pools of darkness thrown by the banks of instruments. Only one lighting tube was dimly burning. In this indefinite half-light the Hawk set about stalking his prey.

With eyes narrowed and steady on the two guards who were completely absorbed in the happenings outside, he drew his hands from beneath him. They were no longer bound. The rope knotted around them had been gnawed through strand by strand—sliced by the strong white teeth of a negro....

Cautiously, without a whisper of sound, Carse reached towards the bonds on his legs. The lean fingers worked rapidly. Quickly the knots, yielded and the rope was unwound. The legs were free. For a moment Hawk Carse, ever with careful calculation of time, stretched his cramped muscles, limbering them for action.

A mutter came from the port-lock. He froze. But it was only:

"Look at 'im! This is goin' to be good! Judd gets some damn clever ideas!"

They were utterly wrapped up in the scene outside, and unconscious of the low blot that moved with steely purpose behind them.

T

he Hawk got to hands and knees; moved forward, the ghost of a shadow. The two men who were his quarry were sitting close together, hunched a little forward in their eagerness not to miss a single detail. Their heads were not a foot apart. Each wore a ray-gun and had another lying on the deck at his side.

Carse came near to their backs. He paused, imperceptibly tensed, judged the distance carefully. Then in a sudden, snake-like movement, he sprang.

A forearm of steel clamped around the back of each guard's head and jerked it sharply into the other's. There was a quick crack; then, dazed, only half-conscious, the two men toppled off their seats and fell to the deck.

"Quiet!" warned an icy whisper. They stared, gaping, then staggered up to their feet.

A ray-gun that just before had been lying on the deck was leveled steadily at them, held in the hand of a gray-eyed man whose fine features were as if graven from stone and on whose wrists were deep blue lines that showed where ropes had pressed. The guards' faces whitened as realization came. One of them choked:

"It's him!"

"Yes," whispered the Hawk dryly. He took a few steps backward, eyes not moving. "Go to that locker," he said to the shorter of the men, indicating with a curt nod the place where space suits were stowed. "First draw your gun and lay it on that table. Hurry!"

The man hastily complied. Anything else was unthinkable; meant quick and lonely and useless death. Shouts and laughter and drunken shrieks were echoing from outside. No one would have ears for him.

When he had stepped into the locker, Carse closed and sealed the door.

"What you goin' to do with me?" croaked the remaining guard. He was big and burly and he towered inches over the figure facing him, but his lips were trembling and his eyes wild with fear.

"You," whispered the Hawk frigidly, "kicked me when I was bound." He sheathed his ray-gun in his holster, then spoke again. "Go for your gun."

The pirate trembled all over. His mouth fell open, and his eyes stuck on Carse's shabby holster. He seemed half hypnotized.

"Draw."

The other's swarthy brow beaded with sudden-starting sweat. His hands hung limp, twitching at the finger-tips. He watched death stare him in the face.

"Damn you, Carse!" he burst out and suddenly went for his ray.

C

arse deliberately let him get the gun out. Not until then did his left hand move. But even with such a head-start, so bewildering was the adventurer's speed that only one streak of orange light made a flash in the cabin, and that streak was the Hawk's. The brigand quivered, his face still contorted with his last desperate emotion; then he fell slowly forward and thudded into the deck. His body twitched a little, and in a spasm rolled over. Square between the eyes was a crisp, smooth-burned hole.

Hawk Carse gave the body not a glance, but sheathed his ray-gun, picked up the three others, stuck them in his belt, and glided to the port-lock. There, he peered outside.

His face hardened.

Blobs of flame that flared from wood torches were clustered about the nearest side of the phanti corral. A dark blur of figures were ringed in a half-circle, and from it came yells of delight and almost hysterical laughter. The Hawk's eyes were chilling to look at when he saw, through gaps in the circle of black shapes, the figure of a huge negro, standing with his back almost touching the wire fence of the corral. The actions of Friday gave the clue to what was happening.

He was caught in a broad ray of orange light, and in it he shuddered and hopped grotesquely from

one leg to the other in an agony of pain, his lips drawn back taut over the gleaming teeth, his face flexed and the whites of his eyes showing as the eyeballs rolled. The glow that in part hung around him streamed from a ray-gun that was held in the right hand of Judd the Kite. Heat! Friday was being slowly crisped alive; seared on his feet in a furnace of heat: and the men who ringed him were yelling advice at him between their laughter. Carse strained his ears. In a jumble, he caught:

"Jump over"—"Nah, he'd have to climb"—"Climb! The juice's cut!"—"Into the corral!"—"Climb over, you black buzzard"—"Hoowee!"

A

bout a foot behind Friday was the wire fence, behind which the phantis, their snouts converged towards the pirates, their red-shot eyes glaring, their powerful hind feet clawing at the ground, were bellowing in wild and ferocious excitement. Sudden, awful death waited on the other side of the fence; slow death by burning on this side. Yet Friday still hoped, still had faith in his master, for he did not put a quick end to his living death by rushing the devilish circle or clambering over into the thick of the sharp stabbing spurs.

Carse's brain moved with the swiftness of light. He could not rush the group: the odds were too great, and besides, Judd's gun was already out. Nor could he dive at them with the *Star Devil* itself, or ray them from above: that would mean Friday's death too. It would have to be something else—and in a moment he had it. Carefully he examined all variations and checked the scheme back: it promised to be the final move, engendering the final meeting, and there must be no slip.

First, the Hawk slipped shadow-like to the entrance port of the other space ship, lying a few hundred feet away, shrouded in darkness. He had to know if anyone were aboard.

Gruffly he called inside:

"Judd! Hey, Judd! You there?"

There was no answer. Again he called, but the gloomy interior's silence was not broken. Satisfied that it was empty, he doubled back with noiseless speed, skirted round the *Star Devil* and arrived like a wind-carried wraith at the rear wall of the ranch house.

A short leap and his hands closed on the copper drain. The muscles of his wiry arms flexed, and the lean figure raised himself foot by foot to the eaves, where a pull and press up brought him over the edge. Stooping, he padded to the side which faced on the clearing and the corral.

And then the ray-gun was drawn from its holster.

For seconds the cold gray eyes reckoned the shooting distance and the angle. The weapon came up and rested at arm's length. The first finger of the deadly left hand began to squeeze back.

A pencil-thin streak of orange light speared the air!

CHAPTER VIII

Stampede

J

udd the Kite was enjoying himself hugely. His bestial sense of humor was tickled. It was very funny, the contortions of the negro in the orange ray-stream!

"Climb over!" he suggested, amid roars of laughter from the circle of men. "Climb over, why don't you? I've turned off the current. There's no electricity in the fence. You won't be hurt. Why don't you climb over?"

Friday did not, could not answer. His lips were sucked tight together now in wordless agony; the cheek muscles, strained taut, stood out like welts of flesh; the huge body, bathed always in that steady glow of orange, was slightly livid in patches. He hopped mechanically, changing from one aching leg to the other; his eyes were closed half the time, his whole being one dumb agony. He did not know when it would end, but he still had faith.

Overhead, the flames of four tarred wood torches bobbed and reeled as the men who held them reeled; seemed to shake in the gusts of laughter and yells and oaths that came ceaselessly from the onlookers. And in this distorted light the half-shadowed snouts and bodies of the phantis, clustered behind their nine-foot-high fence, looked indeed diabolical. The fence was high, for the creatures possessed surprising jumping powers; it was composed of eight strands of wire, running parallel a foot apart from each other, with inter-crossing supports. The electric current, now turned off, always kept the phantis from crashing through.

Judd smiled more widely. "I guess I'll increase the power," his coarse lips pronounced. "We'll see how you can duck a strong thin beam. I'll give you about five minutes to climb over. After that you'll be burned down slowly to a cinder. Now—will you climb? See—I'm moving the lever over. Watch, now, and feel—"

S

uddenly his voice broke off short. There had been a hiss—a *spang*—a slight whip of sound. He glanced around swiftly. No, his men had not noticed it. They were still laughing, roaring, swaying in drunken merriment. The Kite's lips curved upward again. He continued:

"Feel the heat increase. It's stronger, now, and—"

Again the *spang*, the whip, the streak of something swift. The men noticed his expression and quieted somewhat. Judd was looking around him, and even as he saw what it was there came a cry from a pirate nearby.

"Look! The fence!"

Judd's eyes widened; his lips slackened and lost their smile. The noise, the laughs, the shouts, screams and oaths died into the night; frightened silence fell over the group, and all that was left were the concerted bellowings and snortings from the enraged herd of beasts just beyond.

All—except for another *spang* that sounded as a streak of orange light arrowed from somewhere through the flickering torchlight. And with its coming the third parallel strand of the corral-fence whipped apart with a little singing swish, shot neatly through, as were the two below it. Ten feet of fence on each side slumped visibly.

"Someone's shooting it through!" came a scared whisper. Yet still the brigands, held fascinated by fear and puzzlement, stared at the fence and at the surging crowd of stampede-crazy animals beyond.

Another *spang*, another streak of light! With deadly accuracy the shot clove the fourth strand. The lower half of a whole section of fence was gone. Behind it the bucking, red-eyed phantis inched forward, still afraid of the electric shock they thought was somewhere there, but drawn to the opening by their hatred of the two-legged creatures so near. Closer, closer! Then the befuddled pirates found their senses. Even as the fifth arrow of light came from the invisible marksman and snapped the fifth strand, a concerted cry of fear of the advancing beasts went up from the crowd of men.

"Run! Run! They're coming! They're coming out!"

They turned, panic-stricken; the torches fell flaring to the ground, to lie there in pools of flame; the brigands ran for the nearest shelter, the dark bulk of the ranch house close by. They ran, fear tingling their spines, in their ears the sound of the maddened phantis.

F

From his vantage point on the roof of the ranch house, the Hawk confirmed his quick decision that this was the only way.

Rapidly, as was his custom, he had reckoned the problem out minutely and carefully; had considered and checked every possibility. He had to shoot the fence, not the brigands. For he couldn't hope to get more than a couple of them: a pirate toppling over dead would jar the others into instant action; they would scatter in the darkness, leaving the odds too great. And leaving, besides, small chance of wiping out every one of the pirates.

As for Friday, he had to take his chance. There was, this way, a good chance, if he used his brain. For, to the left, as close as the ranch house to the corral, were the grave-pits he himself had dug some hours before, and one was still empty, waiting to be filled. It offered shelter, a good chance—if he used his brain. He, Carse, would do all he could to protect him from the stampeding beasts while he ran.

Some of the pirates would be snared by the rush of phantis. Four or five would probably reach the ranch house. That was what he wanted.

And that was what he got. His fifth shot fired, straight and true from the ray-gun of the most accurate marksman of space, the Hawk lowered the weapon and gazed at the scene resulting, a ghost of a smile on his lips.

He saw the mob of creatures, in a bedlam of noise, sweep under the fence that had for so long kept them back. Bellowing their hatred, their cruel spurs eager for blood, they charged. Before them fled the thin fringe of men, Friday on one flank. A man went down with a scream; a half-grown horn knifed into him; he was trampled, gored, spurred, and left a bloody welter of death in seconds. Another, hearing the loud thud of feet just behind, turned with desperate eyes, dodged, tripped, shrieked and was caught and ripped. Another and another. In the dancing, flickering half-light of the flames of fire and torches, a hellish scene of devastation and death spun out.

C

Carse was shooting again, with the cold mechanical precision of a machine. There was Friday to be guarded. He was now separated from the other men—cut off and edging to one side—to the side where was the grave-pit! Dodging, wildly twisting and turning, he several times barely escaped three or four phantis that thundered after him. The leader took perhaps ten steps: then its body quivered and it tumbled over and flopped on the ground, a little wisp of smoke curling from its body. The other two went down in swift succession. But there were many, and even as Friday melted into the shadows, a group of several beasts detached themselves and roared after him. The deadly ray-gun on the roof wrought swift slaughter amongst them, but some got into the darkness beyond vision of the icy gray eyes.

Carse lowered his weapon. His face was very hard and very set. Would they catch the negro? Tumble down on him if he made the pit? Well, there was no helping it....

But the reckoning would soon be finished; the time was at hand. Cold as the deeps of space despite the awful havoc he had just created, totally without visible emotion, he drew the last unused ray-gun from his belt and put it in the shabby holster. One would be enough.

Shadow-like, noiseless and swift, he moved towards the far end of the roof.

CHAPTER IX

The Hawk Strikes

H

is face red, his breath coming in hoarse gasps, Judd the Kite stumbled through the house's door on the heels of four of his men. He swung rapidly and flung his weight against the door: locked and double-locked it. A second later fists pounded on the outer panel, and a voice, racked with fear and terror, screamed:

"Let me in! Let me in! Oh, God, let me in! Judd!"

Then there was the thud of drumming feet, and one awful shriek from the man who had found the door locked against him.

But the Kite was not listening. A measure of courage returning to him with the building's protection, he snapped:

"Get those other doors locked quick! And lights. Then search the house."

The lighting tubes glowed, filling the room with soft radiance. Judd survey his position.

He saw that it could have been far worse. But his men needed courage.

The rapid change from orgy to deadly peril had sobered them completely. And they were frightened; nor was it fear of the beasts. They came treading silently back from their inspection of the house, reporting it empty; but their eyes kept shifting, their ray-guns ready in hand. Each one knew, deep within him, who had fired the shots that collapsed the fence. They had taken two captives; Friday had been under their eyes; there was only one other, and he was—the Hawk.

Hawk Carse! The four men were nervous. More than a few lonely spots in the countless leagues of space had seen his vengeance: and they—they had killed his guards and his overseer, his radio-man, and, with the fungus, his ship's crew; they had tortured Friday. They were now marks for the fatal left hand: fugitives from gray, icy eyes. The Hawk was loose!

J

udd saw the fear gnawing at their vitals. He felt it too. But there seemed no immediate danger, so, with a ray-gun in each hand, he summoned a blustering courage and said to the others, harshly:

"Yes, it was that damned Carse! He must have got loose in some way. But pull yourselves together: we're safe here. He's somewhere outside."

He reasoned it out for them.

"He couldn't have done that shooting from the *Star Devil*; it's too far away. And he's not in it now or he'd be using it to try and find that black of his—if the black's still alive. No, he's not in the ship, and he's not in this house. He's somewhere outside, and he can't reach us here while the phantis have the place surrounded. We can shoot them down from the attic, and they'll soon beat it for the jungle. When that happens we'll rush to the ships, and before Carse knows what it's all about we'll be up and away and he'll be marooned. Then we'll get him later."

His words brought a return of confidence. It was true, the others thought: the Hawk could not reach them as long as the phantis were around the house; and when they were driven away, the ships were near at hand and empty. All they had to do was get to the ships before Carse. The adventurer certainly was not then in one of the craft, or he would be wasting no time hunting for Friday—and raying their stronghold. No doubt he was up a tree somewhere; perhaps gored and dead.

One of the men snickered, and Judd smiled at the sound. Their confidence in him was encouraging.

"Get to the windows of the attic," he ordered. "Some of those crazy brutes are horning at the house. We've got to shoot them and get out of here, quick!"

T

here were two rooms in the attic; the large one, used as a storeroom for staple foods, had five

windows, long, sloping affairs, three in front and one in each side wall. The second room was small and at the rear, and was used to store tools and spare technical apparatus. It had one little window, set high up, and connected with the larger room by a door set in the middle of the partition.

Judd placed one of his pirates at each of the windows of the large room, taking himself the center one.

Around the house milled dozens of animal bodies, snorting, bellowing and roaring, their little red eyes flashing, claws tearing the soil in futile rage at the men they knew to be safely within. A babel of brutish sounds rose from them. Two of the bulls fell foul of each other and fought in fury, to suddenly turn and hurl their weight against a ground floor door, quivering it. But their rashness was answered by a streak of light from an attic window, and as one toppled back, its body burnt through, the sights of the destroying ray-gun were already on its fellow.

The huge fire the brigands had laid was dying, and night was seeping ever thickening darkness over the scene. Glinting very slightly in the starlight were the black shapes of the two silent space ships.

Then Judd the Kite, as he aimed and shot and aimed and shot again, was suddenly struck by a disturbing idea. From where had Carse fired at the corral fence? What was the logical vantage point for him?

A shiver trembled down his spine. He saw suddenly with terrible clearness where that vantage point was—and it had not been searched. The roof!

He turned swiftly, his lips opening to give orders.

And there, standing on the threshold of the door to the smaller adjoining room, stood the figure of a man whose eyes were cold with the absolute cold of space, and whose left hand held a steady-leveled ray-gun that pointed as straight as his eyes at Judd!

"Hawk—Carse!"

"Judd," said the quiet, icy voice.

T

he Kite went white as a sheet. His men turned slowly as one. One of them gasped at what he saw; another cursed; the other two simply stared with fear-flooded eyes; only one thing flamed in every mind—the never-failing vengeance of the Hawk.

"Carse!" repeated Judd stupidly. "You—again!"

"Yes," whispered the trader. "And for the last time. We settle now. There are a few debts—a few lives—a few blows and kicks—and a matter of some torture to be paid for. The accounts must be squared, Judd."

And slowly he raised his right hand to the queer bangs of flaxen hair which hung down over his forehead. He stroked them gently. Judd's eyes, dry, hot, held fascinated on the hand. He shuddered.

"It's not pleasant," came the whisper, "to always have to wear my hair like this. That's another debt—the largest of all—I have to settle. *Sheathe your guns!*"

The voice cracked like a whip. They obeyed without sound, though they read death in the frigid gray eyes. As their guns went into holsters, Carse's followed suit; he stood then with both hands hanging at his sides. And he said, in the whisper that carried more weight to them than the trumpets of a host:

"Once before we were interrupted. This time we won't be. This time we will see certainly for whom the number five brings death. Count, Judd."

With a jerk, the Kite regained some control over himself. The odds were five to one. Five guns to one gun. Carse was a great shot, but such odds were surely too great. Perhaps—perhaps there might be a chance. He said in a strained voice to his men:

"Shoot when I reach five."

Then he swallowed and counted:

"One."

Aside from the tiny flickering of the left eyelid, the Hawk was graven, motionless, apparently

without feeling. Judd, he knew, was just fairly fast; as for the others—

"Two."

—they were unknown quantities, except for one, the man called Jake. He had the reputation of possessing a lightning draw; his eyes were narrowed, his hands steady, and the body crouched, a sure sign of—

"Three."

—a gunman who knew his business, who was fast. His hip holsters were not really worn on the hips, but in front, very close together; that meant—

"Four."

—that he would probably draw both guns. So Judd must wait; the other three, being unknowns, disposed of in the order in which they were standing; but Jake must be—

"Five!"

—first!

O

ne second there was nothing; the next, wicked pencils of orange light were snaking across the attic! And then two guns clanged on the floor, unfired, and the man called Jake staggered forward, crumpled and fell, a puzzled look on his face and accurately between his eyes a little round neat hole that had come as if by magic. Two others, similarly stricken, toppled down, their fingers still tensed on ray-gun triggers; the fourth pirate, his heart drilled, went back from the force of it and crashed into the wall, slithering down slowly into a limp heap. But Judd the Kite was still on his feet.

His lips were twisted in a snarl; his hands seemed locked. His eyes met the two cold gray ones across the room—and then his coarse face contorted, and he croaked:

"Damn you, Carse! Damn you—"

His body spun around and flattened out on the floor with arms and legs flung wide. A tiny black hole was visible through his shirt. He had been last, and the Hawk had struck him less accurately than his fellows.

The trader was unwounded. He stood there for several minutes, surveying what lay before him. He looked at each body in turn, and his eyes were calm and clear and mild, his face devoid of expression. Silence hung over the attic, for the bellowings and snortings of the beasts outside had died into faint murmurings as they straggled off for their jungle home. The single living man of the six who had lived and breathed there minutes before holstered his still warm ray-gun; and then the sound of a step on the stairs leading from the rooms below made him look up.

A man stood in the doorway of the attic.

H

e was big and brawny; but, though his arms and bare torso were streaked with blood, and his trousers torn into shreds, and his legs crisscrossed with cuts, there was broad grin on his face—a grin that widened as his rolling white eyes took in what lay on the attic floor.

Neither said anything for a moment. Then the Hawk smiled, and there was all friendliness and affection in his face.

"You made the pit, Eclipse?" he asked, softly.

Friday nodded, and chuckled. "Yes, suh! But only just. If Ah'd bin a leap an' a skip slower Ah'd bin a *tee-total* eclipse!"

Dancing lights of laughter came to the Hawk's eyes.

"Still feeling chipper," he said, "—in spite of your burns. Well, good for you. But I guess you've had enough of Ku Sui for a little while!"

The negro grunted indignantly. "You surely don't imply Ah'm *sca'ed* of that yellow Chink? Hell, no!

Why—"

Carse chuckled and cut him off.

"I see. Well, then, drag these carrion out to your pit. And then—"

There was something in the air, something big. Friday listened eagerly. "Yes, suh?" he reminded his master after a pause.

"Judd," said Hawk Carse softly, "was to have had a rendezvous with Dr. Ku Sui in seven days. The place of the rendezvous is entered in the log of his ship. I've got the last of Judd's crew a captive on the *Star Devil*...."

The adventurer paused a moment in thought, and when he resumed his words came clipped and decisive.

"I myself am going to keep that rendezvous with Ku Sui. I want to see him very badly."

Friday looked at the man's gray eyes, his icy graven face, the bangs of flaxen hair which obscured his forehead. He understood.

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