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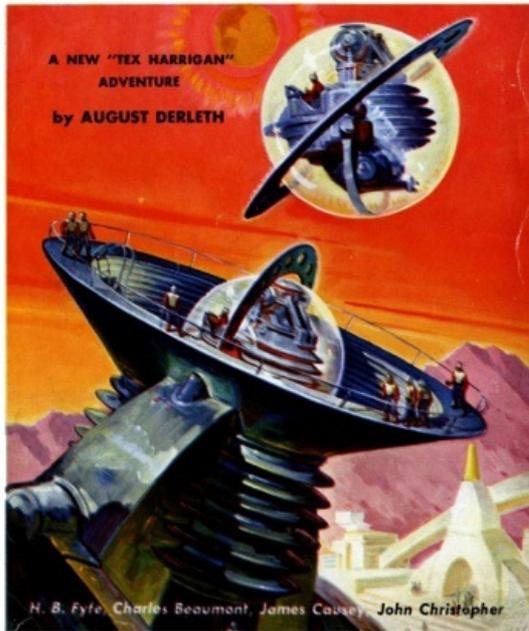
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A NEW "TEX HARRIGAN"  
ADVENTURE  
by AUGUST DERLETH

H. B. Fyfe, Charles Beaumont, James Causey, John Christopher

The Project Gutenberg EBook of The Butterfly Kiss, by Arthur Dekker Savage

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# The BUTTERFLY KISS

## by Arthur Dekker Savage

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THE WAR WAS ON, THE FINAL CATAclySM HAD BEGUN. THOUSANDS WOULD DIE, EONS OF HUMAN HISTORY WOULD BE WIPED OUT, CENTURIES OF CULTURE BE DESTROYED ... UNLESS ONE MAN COULD CARRY OUT HIS PLAN.

When Sykin Supcel was kidnaped, no one on Earth was less surprised than Dr. Horace Wilton, Chief Military Psychologist of the Solar Navy. And since he had been Sy's mentor, and obviously responsible for his safety, Dr. Wilton was the first high official sought by representatives of the news syndicates.

"It has become increasingly difficult," said the psychologist carefully to the group sitting in his office, "to ignore such actions by the Sur-Malic." He gazed through an open window-wall to where the newsmen's tiny jet-copters glinted beneath a summer sun at the forest's edge. "Of course, I might have predicted it; Sy insisted upon browsing through old city ruins for relaxation, and he seemed to delight in eluding his guard escort."

A reporter with the long nose and narrow head of a Venusian—or, for that matter, a Sur-Malic—raised his voice. "Y'mean he was all alone when he was snatched?"

The doctor rested one hip on the edge of a gleaming alloy desk. Military specifications, like civilian preference, demanded that every artifact possible be of enduring, stainless metal. "I am afraid so," he answered slowly.

"Then how," demanded the reporter, "d'you know it was the Sur-Malic that got him?"

"Simple logic. The Sur-Malic have been sporadically making off with first-class Earth scientists for a century—and Sy had recently developed an important improvement in our so-called cosmic ray engine. If he is forced to divulge the information, there may be tragic repercussions to the Interstellar League." Pencils raced eagerly across note pads. "Furthermore, Sy was well equipped to handle any ordinary emergency. Nor would a League world commit such an act, while any member of the Radical Alliance other than the Sur-Malic would be incapable of it."

A stocky brown Martian glowered. "Why the hell, sir, don't we wipe out the Sur-Malic? We all know they're straining every seam to get a war fleet built on Pronuleon II, and that their attack's only a matter of time. If we hit them where they are, they'd never recover—but if we wait for them to strike first...."

Dr. Wilton held up his hand to stem the torrent. "I can't speak for the government, young man, but I might point out that it has never been our policy to foment war. We are making such preparations as allotted funds permit, and the combined Solar Fleet is on the alert. Also, *knowing* that the Sur-Malic stole our laboratory speci—er—Unique, and being able to *prove* it are two different matters."

"Excuse me, doctor." A keen-eyed Earth reporter stood up. "You started to say 'specimen'. How about that? Are Sy and the other Uniques in the special lab groups actually some kind of humanoid robots or something? I know it's top-drawer stuff, but are these Uniques actually people? Do you make 'em, or are they born, or what? What are they for, and why their odd names?" He resumed his seat. The others maintained an expectant silence. It was not often they found themselves in the tropical, trackless forest area of the American Great Lakes region, which was almost invisibly dotted with naval installations, and personal interviews with military psychologists were rare events; but data pertaining to the almost fabulous Uniques would take news precedence on every video screen of the meadow, valley and woodland homes of Earth.

Dr. Wilton neatly snipped the legal filter from a cigarette, evoking sympathetic grins from his audience. Many took immediate advantage of the tacit permission to smoke. "I can answer those questions safely, I am sure. First," he smiled, "your shrewd observation of the term 'specimen': in some respects the Uniques are specimens—but only to the extent that in childhood some of them underwent certain surgical operations, mainly brain and glandular.

All were kept on special diets during their early youth, and were meticulously trained by special instructors and psychologists. Other than having exceptional attributes in one or more designated fields, they are as normal as you and I—if you will pardon my hopeful attitude about myself."

There was a ripple of subdued laughter. The doctor cleared his throat and shifted his position. "They are the children of normal Earth parents, and are selected quietly, with parental approval, when certain combinations of factors appear on their school entrance examination records. They are naturally gifted; we try to encourage and improve these gifts, so that when they reach adulthood they will have a particular skill or skills to employ in the research and developmental laboratories. They are citizens, of course—and extremely valuable ones; they receive salaries commensurate with their military rank; they are free to travel, but we try to guard them against accident and mishap. Their real names are not revealed for security reasons; their laboratory names, such as Sykin Supcel AA-87, are a sort of code which designates their capabilities to their instructors and teammates."

He pressed a button on his desk. "To establish their complete normalcy, you might like to meet Arna Matt A-94, who happens to be waiting in the next room."

A door opened. A girl stopped on the threshold, a picture of poised surprise. The men looked at her appreciatively.

"Come in, my dear."

She moved to the doctor's side, lithely and with an easy grace. The shining metallic cloth of her brief uniform rustled in the silence. Many breaths were expelled at the same time, and she repressed a smile.

Dr. Wilton introduced her. "You will notice—" he coughed "—you have noticed," he continued broadly, "that Arna possesses several attributes." There were low murmurings. "But the single A in her number indicates that she ranks at the top of one field, and the number itself means that she is the ninety-fourth to become a trainee in the program which develops these unique humans; her code name reveals that she possesses Awareness in Mathematics—which is to say that she somehow immediately knows the answer to any mathematical problem presented, without having to consciously calculate or even think about it. Her particular gift was known on Earth as far back as the Seventeenth Century, but it has always been extremely rare and relatively undeveloped."

"Can she talk?" questioned a voice good-humoredly.

The psychologist chuckled. "Say something for the boys, Arna," he invited.

With the timing of a video star the girl parted her lips provocatively, leaned slightly forward and then, when expectancy was at its height, said "Boo!"

Friendly laughter echoed through the paneled room, coming from all but the Venusian. He rose stiffly. "This is all very well, but we're here t'get *all* the dope on Sykin Supcel. Aren't you holding out something?"

Dr. Wilton looked at the man squarely. "Yes," he said softly. "Yes, I am." His gaze swept the others. "The interview is terminated, gentlemen—I hope your news stories will be sufficiently popular to make your trip worthwhile. Your lapel cameras and their eyepieces will be returned as you enter your 'copters."

The Venusian was the first to voice his thanks, with a ring of sincerity as true as in the others' polite speeches.

Alone with Arna, Dr. Wilton punched several buttons on the desk, consulted a memo and spoke briskly to a blank video screen. "Start—all—in. Step seven two eight of Operation Catskin successful. Sur-Malic spy among reporters, as predicted by eighty-two point six probability. Lor'lsoon, posing as Venusian, exposed by his inadequate training—probability about sixty; his unconscious belligerency—probability about ninety. He is to be undisturbed for forty-eight hours, then detained after an apparently routine round-up. Any contacts he may reveal during the next two days are to be observed but not disturbed. End—all—out."

Arna leaned over the desk and kissed him lightly. "Nice work, Dad." Then she went on, tensely: "Any word from Sy—or is he supposed to make contact later?"

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It was by merest chance that Sykin Supcel happened to be at the military spaceport of Dirik when the prisoner was made to land—and he had brought along an alibi to prove it. A year after his capture and removal to the key city of Pronuleon II, he had successfully convinced the Sur-Malic High Command that he would have been a willing traitor even without the rank and gold and promises. "Damned, dirty Earth lice," he had been wont to growl—at precisely propitious moments—"murdered my folks and stuck me in a stinking lab and cut up my insides—can't even be comfortable in a room with regular people because my temperature's too high. I'll wreck the whole League for that!" And he would angrily swipe at a perspiring brow.

It was easily established that his normal body temperature stayed about two degrees above average; he early established his need for long, cooling outdoor walks through the semi-tropical city and surrounding countryside. He had become the most trusted of all renegade aliens after voluntarily becoming a Sur-Malic citizen of Pronuleon II.

This afternoon he had insisted that Commander Rilth, his immediate superior in war fleet construction, walk with him in one of his restless moods. They had left the mighty hangars where Sy was supervising experimental work with the Earth-developed cosmic ray engines, and were lounging on a stone bench at the edge of the field, shaded from blazing yellow Pronuleon by a huge tree.

"It's the theoretical math, Rilth," complained Sy. "We just haven't got the calculators that Earth has. Slows things no end."

The thin, grim commandant turned to him. "Cursed theory is always a problem to a Sur-Malic. We hoped that your weak genius would be of avail!"

"Well, it's availing, isn't it?" Sy demanded gruffly. "If I had assistants that were anything but idiots, the job would be done!" In the cruel, ruthless culture of the Sur-Malic, this was no argument, but an accepted form of discussion, without rancor.

When Rilth did not answer, Sy gloomily watched the prisoner being escorted across the field. Suddenly he stood up and squinted at the group in the distance. "Say—who's that they're bringing in?"

Rilth strained to see. "Some rotten Earthling or Aldeberanian, no doubt. They look alike to me—and both are Leaguers."

Sy tugged at the other's arm excitedly. "Come on—let's get over to Detention Headquarters. If that's who I think it is, we'll have our new engines—installed—in three months!"

The Sur-Malic jerked free of Sy's hand, but matched his trot across the field. Although he moved carefully, it seemed that whenever he glanced away from the ground, small stones somehow managed to be under the edges of his soles, causing him to lurch, stumble and curse.

"You'll have to quit soaking up that cheap stuff, Rilth," taunted Sy. "You're clumsy as a bovine!" He dropped slightly to the rear, his loose, raw-boned frame jogging along without effort, his eyes darting ahead at the terrain.

Rilth looked at him with a snarl, uttered a stream of invectives. But as one foot landed on the end of a small branch the opposite end whipped up and blocked his other ankle. He sprawled in the dirt.

"Slimy beast!" he raged. He drew away from Sy's mocking offer of assistance. "It seems that in your vile presence all things go wrong!"

Inside the grey stone Detention building, Sy became suddenly exuberant. He made for the prisoner eagerly. Guards, in deference to his uniform insignia, stood aside at his approach.

"Arna!" He folded the girl in his arms, burying his face in the long waves beneath her trim headgear. "Love me," he whispered quickly. "Hate Earth—weak will—faint."

The girl looked at him. Her expression, which could be interpreted as surprise either on the basis of recognition or of a stranger's unexpected actions, changed to one of adoration. "Darling!" she gasped. She tried to embrace him, but apparently the strain of her past few hours had been too great; she slumped in his arms.

"Get a doctor!" Sy shouted to evoke maximum confusion. He lowered Arna to the floor as

though her weight were too much to hold; a living pretense of physical weakness had served well to counteract envy. He made no attempt to cover her long, smooth thigh when it became exposed at the action—effectively diverting the guards' thoughts and eradicating any suspicion they might have felt at his behavior. He appealed to Rilth with his eyes. "She must be sick! Damn it, man, get a doctor!"

The commandant regarded him narrowly. "Anyone with the mind of a worm could see she has only fainted. She will revive shortly."

Arna did recover as predicted, coincident with the arrival of Lord Krut of the High Command. Sy pleaded his case artfully. "It was the work of genius, Your Lordship, to find Arna Matt—the one person in space who can hasten our plans! As you know, she is a human calculator, as well as—well—we were just about to escape the Earth laboratories and get married when you found me and brought me here."

Lord Krut glowered. He pondered before answering. "We neither planned her capture nor knew her qualities, High Technician Supcel," he said heavily. "Our scout-ships noticed her craft near Aldebaran, marked with the League military insignia. Following our policy of harassment, the scouts destroyed her escort ships. She," he gestured, "surrendered." His eyes raked slyly over the seemingly bewildered girl's body. "If we can use her talents, the Great Mokaine himself will be pleased. In view of your relationship, is it your opinion that she will not require indoctrination other than your efforts?"

"Hell, yes, Your Lordship. Why, they *tortured* her in the labs. If anything she hates the League worse than I do!" He placed an arm about the girl. "How about it, honey?"

Arna looked at Lord Krut with wide eyes. "Damn right," she said uncertainly. And then she asked meekly, "Could I have a drink of water, please?"

Sy seemed in no hurry to leave Detention Headquarters, even after Arna had been given over officially into his care with a token military rank. She had not batted an eyelash when Sy had explained to Rilth, with a leer, that his quarters would suffice for them both; she had even managed to simper a bit.

But, alone with Sy in his ample, almost luxurious apartment, with her personal gear from the *Needle* stacked in the main room, she placed both hands on her hips and stared at him questioningly.

"Big stakes," said Sy with meaning. He rattled on with a patter of propaganda tailored for possible ears in the walls. He grinned at her obvious relief when he silently indicated a comfortable room for her private bedchamber. When at last they were outdoors, Sy ignored the ground vehicle at his disposal and led Arna along a winding, tree-lined roadway which led to the cavernous hangars. Once out of earshot of the buildings, he spoke abruptly: "They kill your escort?"

Arna looked surprised, then laughed throatily. "Poor Sy—always worrying about our personnel!" Her voice was soothing and melodious. "The other ships were dummies; Mek Enj rigged up a neat little auto-tronic device, tuned to the *Needle's* controls. After your message for aid came to young Tel, I played meteor through half the galaxy, trying to get picked up!" She smiled at him. "Anyway, here I am. Have you run into trouble?"

He slipped an arm about her waist. "Sure have. I missed you like the devil."

Arna's smile faded. She slipped out of his embrace. "Sy! Do you mean to say you risked exposure of the only Sur-Malic-type telepath that young Tel can receive, when you didn't need help?"

Sy evaded the question. "Tomorrow we can shoot over to Haldane," he suggested. "There's an old Earth clergyman there who got stranded when the Alliance broke off chummy relations with Leaguers."

Arna eyed him icily. "And why should we visit this clergyman?"

"Well," said Sy innocently, "the old guy's almost two hundred now, which is crowding the limit for his generation. And you know the Sur-Malic don't have any marriage cere—"

"Oh, you knobhead! Here you have the most critical job of anyone in the League, and—and—who said I was going to marry you, anyway?"

"I did," returned Sy promptly. "Remember? I've been telling you that since we were kids—and you never once denied it."

Arna made a sound that was partly a sob and partly a laugh. She shook her head unbelievably. "With the fate of a galaxy depending on your abilities and judgment, you drag me across a thousand million miles of space to prate about marriage."

"Yes," admitted Sy, "but think of how far it might have been. If spatial distances were actually as great as the old astronomers used to think, before they learned that light slows down after it travels—"

There was no slightest chance that Arna's small hand would actually strike Sy. She knew the attempt was futile, but she tried her best—and uttered a rueful sound when the blow seemed to pass right through his cheek, while he apparently stood still, grinning. "Some day," she promised, "I'm going to shoot you in the back—just to see what happens."

"That sounds more like my cheerful little calc-bird," he said. "But let's wait till after we're married, huh?" They continued along the unpaved road.

"I think," Arna said levelly, "there will be no marriage. There will certainly be none for me until the completion of the unimportant, completely insignificant Operation Catskin—or," she finished sweetly, "have you given that any thought lately?"

Sy frowned. A small stone in the road suddenly sped along the ground and cracked against another; the other snapped away, rolled, slowed, reversed, shot backward and hit the first one. He spoke thoughtfully. "Yes, I've given it a great deal of thought. And there's going to be—uh—a slight change of plan. That's really why I needed you here, Arna."

The girl stared. "Sy! Have you shorted a circuit? For heaven's sake, don't you realize this thing has been planned, and calculated, and re-arranged bit by bit for twenty years? That each of us is merely a small—no matter how important—cog in a far-reaching activity of infinite complexity? Don't you understand that everything is in a state of delicate, constantly shifting balance, with ambassadors, scientists and agents making each tiny move with precise timing and skill throughout a hundred worlds? And you want to change things!" Her voice softened, and she laid a hand on his arm. "Sy," she pleaded, "if you've run into some insurmountable obstacle, let's report it and try to ease out without upsetting everything. That's happened three times before, you know, and it's no disgrace if you can't—"

"Hell!" said Sy bitterly. "I can do it—I think. And if I can do it at all, I can go one step better. But I need help."

"But can't you see, Sy, that you can't change the plans now? Why, no one even knows what you have in mind—and I won't have anything to do with it!"

The hangars loomed not far ahead. Sy spoke patiently. "Look. As it stands, Operation Catskin now boils down to installing new engines in the Sur-Malic fleet, slipping gimmicks into the stabilizer works and controlling the gimmicks psychokinetically when the League and Alliance fleets meet for battle. If the Alliance ships operate erratically, they can't bring their guns to bear, and the League will mop up—even with our pint-sized fleet and inferior armament. Check?"

"Of course. That's what—"

"Okay. Now suppose we can rig a deal so it won't be necessary to shoot up the Alliance boats nor kill the poor deluded devils in them? The League wins the war, gets a brand-new, superior fleet, and hardly anyone gets smeared."

Arna sighed. "Let's be practical, Sy. All you know about engineering has been implanted hypnotically just for this job; all I can do is answer questions of pure math. I wouldn't know how to devise any gadgetry, and you're in no position to waste time trying—and in war some must be destroyed that others may survive."

"But suppose I've just about got the thing whipped already? I've learned enough, since I've been here, to rate Mech C even home."

"Sy, I just won't be a party to anything that might possibly upset League plans!"

Sy's chest heaved resignedly. "Will you help me with the computational math needed to finish Operation Catskin?"

"That's better!" Arna squeezed his arm happily. "Of course I will, you big, bony, restless idealist!"

He smiled fondly at her—at her answer, her young beauty and her nearness.

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The weeks passed swiftly—weeks in which the swarming Sur-Malic workmen ripped from their foundations the massive, cumbersome atomic converters of the mighty space fleet and replaced them with light, radically designed engines which would feed eternally upon the all-pervading cosmic emanations that streaked the universe.

Sy and Arna had worked furiously. Surrounded by a corps of physicists, mathematicians, engineers, technicians and draftsmen, Arna had unerringly replied to endless queries as fast as she could speak. Sy had translated equations, converted values, integrated, correlated and directed. Subtly, he had inserted certain innocent equations of his own bit by bit, fed his results into the basic plans and disguised the all-important device with the cloak of dual function—one of which was vital to ship performance, the other of which was vulnerable to his psychokinetic ability to move objects of small mass by mental concentration alone.

But all things are subject to the vagaries of pure chance. Commandant Rilth, as chief of the project, continually prowled the immense planning rooms, workshops and assembly areas, giving of his not-inconsiderable technical knowledge where needed. And one day he came upon Sy delicately checking the tiny installation which would spell doom to Alliance schemes of conquest.

"You have found a flaw, perhaps?" demanded the Sur-Malic officer. He squatted and peered through the maze of ducts and cables at the shielded mechanism.

Sy crawled back out of the metallic web. "Not yet," he grunted. "I was just testing my brainstorm—works like a charm."

"To me," sneered Rilth, "it looks clumsy and inefficient. Could not your addled brain devise an electronic circuit, instead of a mechanical device subject to frictional wear?"

Sy wiped the perspiration from a dripping brow and spoke boldly. "This simplifies the master controls for your stupid crewmen. See those little plates on the shaft—like a butterfly's wings? When they fold up, the ship revolves; the closer together they get, the greater the artificial gravity. When they touch, you've got normal gravity in the ship. They function perfectly—and if you don't like them, rip them out of every boat and design your own G control!"

Rilth smiled coldly. "I suppose we must accept some of the more imbecilic aspects of your warped genius." He turned on his heel and left.

Sy whispered at his retreating back. "You'll never know *how* warped until that butterfly folds its wings *down*—and they kiss like little angels."

As the gigantic task of installation hummed and whined and boiled its way to completion, Sy and Arna found time to slip away into sprawling, dirty Dirik, where war-feverish activity catered to the whims and desires of teeming, pleasure-seeking officers and common warriors. In the boisterous cafes the Earth couple sat close together and whispered freely, relaxing from their grueling pace. They watched the dull, surging masses of characteristically thin Sur-Malic commoners ebb and flow along the dim, moonless, star-canopied streets, seeking surcease from the demands of their cruel and exacting lords. Under the sting of stimulants, listless, drab women became as gay as their noisy companions. There was endless bicker and chatter.

Frequently the Earth pair walked along winding country lanes, hand in hand, inhaling deeply of cool, sweet air beneath the everlasting ebon arch of the heavens. On one such evening Sy turned in to a farmer's dimly lit cottage, almost concealed in a stygian grove of fruit trees, and called its occupant to the door. He introduced Arna to a lean, toothless, grinning man.

"This is Loor, darling, our loyal Venusian agent—our contact with young Tel and the League."

Loor served them with simple wine. He showed Arna the delicate telepathic amplifier which carried his mental transmissions across the dust-voids of space, to be received by the unaided mind of a youthful Unique. Afterward, he returned the apparatus to its place of concealment beneath the floor.

It was but a few days before the scheduled space trials of the fleet when Arna brought Sy disquieting news.

"I overheard Rilth say he was going to investigate the ships' G mechanism," she whispered rapidly. "He seems to be suspicious of—"

"Poor kid," Sy said loudly. "You can't work when you feel like that. You go on home and sleep." He added casually, "I may be late tonight—lots of work to do." He located Rilth in a great noisy hangar and piloted him away from a crowd of noisy engineers. "Filthy vermin," he said by way of greeting, "you look like you need an airing." He lowered his voice. "Let's dodge our females tonight and slice up Dirik a bit—it'd do us both good."

Rilth grimaced. "It is unfortunate, gutter-born, that Ruza wants to celebrate tonight. Some miserable party or other."

"You can always work late, can't you, son of cattle? We'll snag a couple of lively young peasants from one of the pleasure dens."

Rilth's cold eye glittered. "Your vile mouth speaks temptingly."

"I'll meet you at a sidewalk table of the Wild Snake, on the Street of Delight. We'll blast the town!"

It was completely dark when the two met at the cafe. They finished a goblet of wine, and Sy suggested they move on to a place he knew. They threaded their way through jostling crowds and walked along side streets which led away from the city's riotous heart. Pedestrians became fewer. Rilth cursed Sy for not thinking to use a vehicle.

"It's just around the next corner, slimehead," Sy assured him. "And I've already made arrangements."

But there was a narrow, lightless alleyway a few steps ahead. Had Arna been following them, instead of at home worrying, she would have seen Sy stumble sideways at the mouth of the alley, bumping hard against his companion. She would have seen them both disappear into the blackness for an instant, and then would have seen Sy emerge from the shadows and reel onward alone, obviously drunk. Had she then rushed into the alley, she would have found Rilth's corpse sprawled on a pile of rubbish, still oozing gore from death wounds in throat and heart, and she might have noticed that his needle gun was gone, and that his empty money pouch lay on another wet stain of his uniform where a blade had been wiped clean.

By the time Sy returned to the Street of Delight his staggering gait had almost disappeared, and by the time he located a group of technicians whom he knew, dicing in a gambling establishment, it was gone entirely. He was welcomed with hearty curses into the group—and he began to play....

It is not known how far the story eventually traveled—and certainly it did not penetrate even all of the city for many hours, or every gambling den would have bolted its doors—but by morning a goodly sector of Pronuleon II was buzzing with the tale. It seemed that a certain group of Fleet Technicians, led by a High Technician—an Earth renegade—known as Sykin Supcel, had broken the hearts and some of the furniture of every gambling proprietor in Dirik. Each player had made good every cast of the dice in a run of luck unequalled in the known universe, and had returned to their quarters in groaning ground vehicles only when there was no more gold coin to be found on the Street of Delight, the Avenue of Pleasure or the Way of Joy.

But Sy's exuberance was dulled the next day when he heard of the brutal robbery-assassination of his friend, Commandant Rilth. "Not that I bore any love for the reptile," he said sorrowfully to Lord Krut, thus spreading a counter-irritant for possible suspicion, "but he had a good head—a keen and valuable mind we would have missed sorely a month ago. As it is...." He straightened resignedly and accepted the responsibility of Acting Commandant of Fleet Construction Technicians.

A week later, in the midst of official excitement at the gratifyingly successful fleet trials,

Sy and Arna slipped away by fast ground vehicle to the tiny isolated cottage of old Loor. Hurriedly they set up the ampli-tel apparatus. Loor reclined on his rude cot with his long, narrow head in the mesh helmet, and Sy taped down contacts and checked adjustments. He and Arna huddled over the Venusian for half an hour, until he finally opened his eyes and smiled toothlessly.

"Contact with Tel. He says hello."

Sy's face was strained. "Okay. Give him this: Start—all—in. A nail and a corncob, a book and a button. No nail, no corncob, no book, no button. You can strum a zither. End—all—out."

Loor was silent in concentration. Finally he spoke. "Start—all—in. You need a drink. End—all—out."

"Good work, Loor!" Sy began to untape the contacts. "Your job here is now fin—"

The door creaked viciously wide. Arna gasped. A Sur-Malic officer behind a needle gun moved into the small room. Five others crowded in behind him, similarly armed.

The leader smiled venomously. "Very convenient, Sykin Supcel, for you to leave your vehicle in the open. We have been watching your purulent friend for days, but we didn't suspect tele—"

Even Arna, who knew what to expect, could detect only a blur of motion. Loor jumped nervously as a pistol stuttered four times and four tiny needles exploded in the floor; he blinked and finally managed to focus his eyes on Sy only as the last Sur-Malic crumpled lifelessly.

"Solar Mother!" he muttered. "What happened?" He tore the helmet from his head and leaped spryly to his feet.

Arna answered while Sy wiped his long knife on one of the bodies and returned it to a sheath under his jacket. "Sy is able to move pretty fast," she explained. "It's one of his lab-developed abilities. The normal eye can't keep up with him when he puts on a spurt."

Loor continued to blink while Sy reduced the amplifier to jumbled scrap, and then the old man found his voice again. "Why," he asked Sy, "didn't you use your pistol on them? Wouldn't that be easier?"

Sy dragged the dead officers out of the doorway. "Can't depend on mechanical things," he said briefly. He mopped perspiration from his forehead and neck. "It's a matter of timing; I size up a situation, sort of estimate distances and positions, and kind of *see* myself carrying out the actions—and then I go into high gear. It's hard to see, hear, or even consciously think while I'm speeded up. At that speed triggers just don't pull fast enough."

"If those men had been able to move aside fast enough," said Arna, "Sy might have missed them entirely and not even known it until he slowed down again." She looked with distaste at the bodies, but without repugnance or fear.

Sy hurriedly thrust a bulging pouch of gold into Loor's hand. "Lock this place up," he directed, "and start walking immediately for Haldane. We've got to assume we're all known to Sur-Malic Intelligence. Arna and I will remove the outside evidence. All we need now is a little chunk of time!"

He walked out warily and soon pulled away in the dead officers' vehicle. Arna followed close behind.

Having driven slowly back to Dirik, Sy parked beside a row of similar vehicles to the rear of a city food market in the merchandise district. He walked to where Arna waited and climbed into his own conveyance. "Head for our little love-nest, slave," he directed. "You'll want your toothbrush, and it would be a shame to leave my hard-won gold behind."

Arna breathed excitedly. "Are we leaving the planet, Sy? Is our work completed? Was that what your message meant?"

"My, what a curiosity!" he taunted. He placed an arm about her shoulders. "We're going into seclusion," he leered. "I'll have you all to myself for days and days! Won't that be fun?"

Arna squirmed. "Stop it, Sy—I almost hit that old woman! And stop making those pebbles jump up in the road!" She glanced at him bitingly. "I suppose you've got things all arranged so we'll have to hide in a single room!"

"The choice is yours, love." He waved expansively. "Either we steal a scoutship or—how's the *Needle* for speed?"

"Oh, Sy! Can we actually get the *Needle*? She'll outstrip any warship! *And* she has a nice private compartment, with a good solid deck outside it for you. I'll loan you a pillow, maybe."

They took from the apartment only what would fit into small shoulder bags that were matched to their uniforms. Sy briefed Arna while they sped to the vast enclosure which walled off hundreds of impounded alien ships.

His towering rage was very evident even as he climbed from the ground vehicle. A callow sentry straightened at the approach of his glittering insignia. Sy fixed him with a malific eye. The youth's mouth began to twitch.

"Where," shouted Sy furiously, "is the moronic officer-in-charge?"

The sentry tried to speak.

"Never mind, you brainless rodent!" Sy roared. "Why wasn't that accursed League ship delivered to the testing grounds this morning?"

The boy began to stammer.

"Quiet, you miserable lump of offal!" screamed Sy. He turned and brutally cuffed Arna toward the gate. "Get in there, filthy drone, and raise that ship before I kick your belly to pulp!"

The sentry unlocked the high gate frantically. He watched with ashen features as Sy followed Arna across the yard, cursing, striking and reviling her.

Out of the guard's sight, Sy quickly located the *Needle* and broke the port seal. Arna clambered in, adjusted controls to planetary drive, wakened the powerful engines to a sighing song of readiness and then ran to her bunk to strap herself down. Sy sealed the port and dived into the soft, deep clutches of the pilot's gimbaled throne. Within seconds the craft darted for the horizon, veered, and streaked out from the planet on a straight drive for the blinding orb of Pronuleon.

A hundred miles or more from the blue world behind, the *Needle* shot through the detector field of a Sur-Malic scoutship. Sy didn't bother to switch on audio for a challenge. Grimly, he located the scoutship's relative position by the pip on his detector screen and stabbed a pattern of buttons to spew quickly-congealing clouds of magnetized dust into automatically calculated trajectory paths. He smiled with relief as pips sparked into life, indicating the interception of homing missiles. Out of the pursuer's range, he set an erratic course for the sun and called to Arna.

For three clock periods they hugged blazing, searing Pronuleon in an orbit that was almost too close for safety. Refrigeration units strained far beyond specified tolerances. Twice, tail toward the inferno for minimum radiation absorption, they barely fought clear of stupendous, surging tentacles of the shifting, agonized gravitational fields of Pronuleon. But they could not be detected so close to a raging sun.

Arna, wretched and exhausted, the thin fabric of a single garment clinging wetly to her body, leaned wearily against the throne. "Isn't it possible they think we took a fast course for Sol?" she sighed.

"Very probable," Sy whispered gauntly. Only an hour before he had revealed what the girl already suspected—that his code message had been the long-awaited signal for the entire Interstellar League fleet to ring the void about Pronuleon II. "But on this mission we can't take chances."

Arna laughed feebly. "Can't take chances!" she echoed, and shook her head.

Sy attempted a smile, sopped the streaming sweat from his eyes and studied a chronometer. He clamped a drinking tube, then let it fall from his mouth. "Get on some clothes and G-shoes, woman. We're going to keep an appointment."

The *Needle's* rotation slowly died; the vessel turned, lined up with Pronuleon's orbit, burst her bonds with a tangential spurt and then arced away from the seething fury behind.

Free of the obliterating sea of sun static, Sy threw open all detection and reception circuits and flung his detector field to its farthest reaches, dimming its accuracy but increasing its range. Immediately he stared in consternation at the activity in the three-dimensional depths of his screen. "Arna!" he called hoarsely. "Arna!" The girl ran clinkingly to him on jointed shoe-plates. "We're damn near too late," he groaned. "Look, the fleets are approaching each other!" The tiny red screen dot which indicated their position showed them to be on a course that would slice directly between both fleets. Sy leaped from the throne and fairly threw Arna into its confines. He braced his metal-shod feet on the deck and seized a ring cleat beside the control panel. "Steady as you go!" he gritted. "This is it—and we've got to make it!"

"Sy! Can you control the gadgets from this distance?"

"Yeah—but we've got to stay in planetary range. *Don't leave the Pronuleon system.*" His fingers sped along a row of knobs. "I've got to call our fleet."

"Contact the fleet *now*? But Sy—"

"Quiet, honey!" He glanced at her once, quickly. "I rigged those gadgets like I intended to."

"Sy!" It was almost a scream. "What have you—"

"Shut up!" he snapped. "And that's an order!" Ignoring secrecy, code and even special wavelength, he signaled the League flagship on an open channel. He arranged a three-way video hook-up between the *Needle*, Admiral Grimes on the *Forward Star* and Dr. Horace Wilton on the *Mars Moon*. "No time," he ground out. "Operation set up as scheduled—but *you won't have to fire*. In five minutes all enemy crews will be flat under eight G's; when ships stop, grapple and board. Out!" He broke contact and turned to Arna. "Skitter and spit dust—use it all, but keep us clear for three minutes!" He locked both hands on the cleat and closed his eyes in concentration.

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In the deep recesses of his mind, he created a clear picture of a typical, prototype butterfly gimmick. He imagined it in the approximate position it would be to keep a ship spinning slowly on its longitudinal axis—to exert the mild centrifugal force permitted for battle alert and preliminary maneuver. Then he *willed* the little wings to bend downward—slowly—past the null-G setting—to fold—down ... to kiss ... to *close*....

After a seeming century, and from a great distance, Arna's voice reached him, dragged him up from autohypnotic depths. "Sy! Sy! They've stopped firing! The League's closing in! Sy!"

He straightened, relaxed his bloodless grip on the cleat, drew a deep, shuddering breath, shook his head to clear it. Throbbing pains began to course from his arms and shoulders, where they had been buffeted against the panel housing during Arna's wild, skillful gyrations. He looked at the screen, adjusted it for close range.

Mote beside mote, League ships had paired off with the furiously whirling Alliance craft, attending all the major vessels and as many smaller ones as their fewer numbers could cover. Sy smiled tiredly. He could almost see the Sur-Malic crewmen, unconscious, lying pinned to their decks by their own terrible weight. Briefly, he closed his eyes again....

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"I couldn't actually test the gadget's reverse setting, of course," Sy explained to Dr. Wilton, "but I knew Arna's calc would check out to infinity." He glanced through a window at the celebrating throngs below, in the streets of Dirik. "And now, sir," he

turned to the girl at his side, "I think she—uh—I mean we—or rather I have something to say to you, sir. Uh...." He flushed and hesitated.

Arna took over competently. "I guess I'll simply have to marry this bumbling hero, Dad. Not that I want to," she added, with a mischievous glance at Sy, "though his psychokinetics aren't much of a problem—but I just can't do a thing against that darn Superior Celerity he's been using on me!"

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