

SCIENCE FICTION

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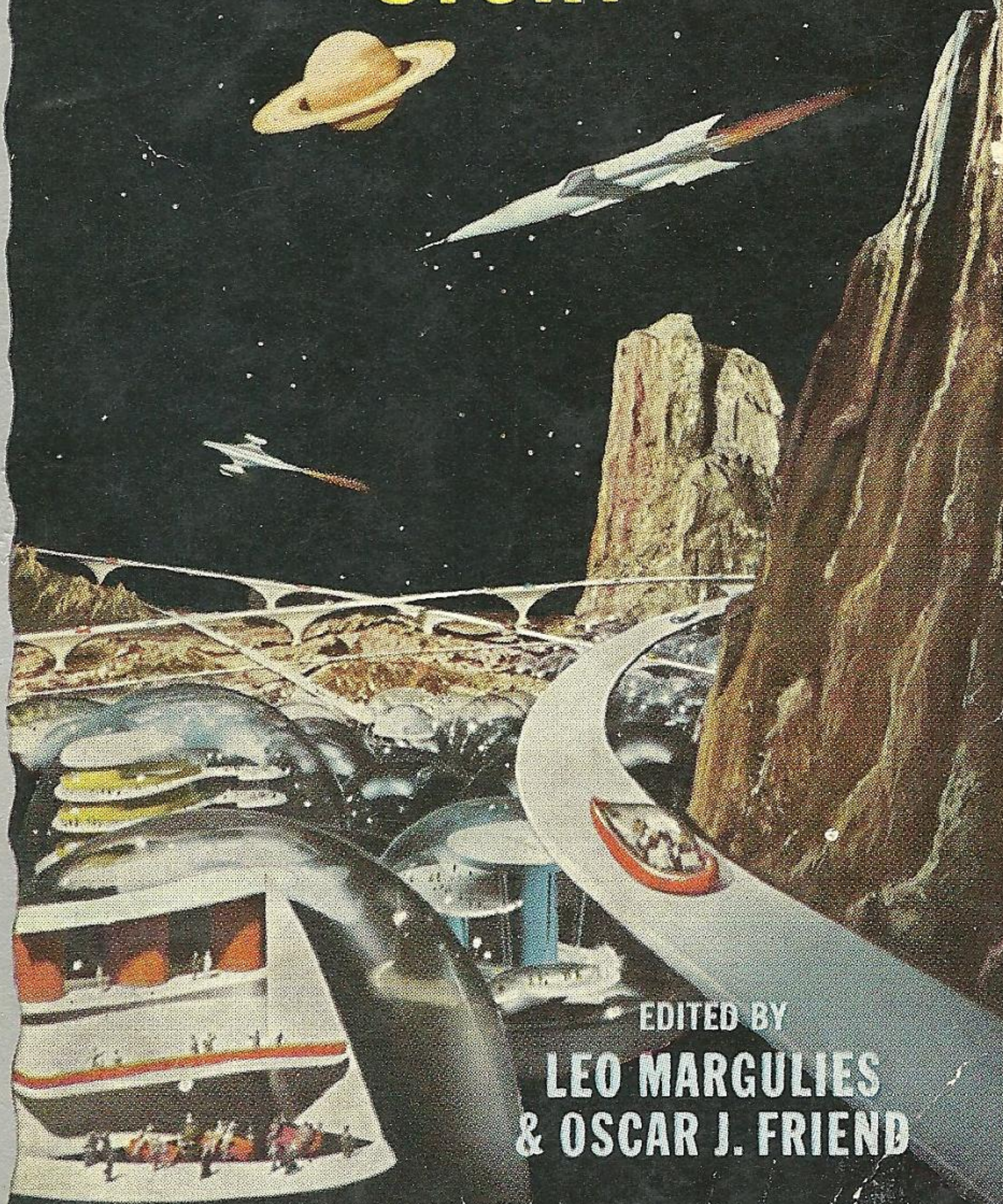
The top science fiction authors choose the best stories they ever wrote

1007

MY BEST SCIENCE FICTION STORY



MY BEST SCIENCE FICTION STORY



EDITED BY
**LEO MARGULIES
& OSCAR J. FRIEND**

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———— MY BEST ————
SCIENCE FICTION
———— STORY ————

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As selected by

12

OUTSTANDING AUTHORS

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Edited by

LEO MARGULIES and OSCAR J. FRIEND



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WHY I SELECTED

SPACE STATION NO. 1

When I wrote this story in 1938, I did myself the luxury of feeling that I had scored a minor point in the science fiction game I was playing.

Most of the hundred or so stories of the future I have written fit into an overall imagined picture of what life might be like in the thirtieth century. Without making them sequels, yet I give them a setting that is constant—the same cities on various planets, the same peoples and governments and customs on Mars, Venus, Earth and the Jovian moons, the same principles governing fashions, tools, transportation and morals of a thousand years hence. It was a special kind of fun to fit various stories into the pattern, like jigsaw pieces, and it impelled me to consider numberless aspects of that possible life of our remote descendants.

Such life wouldn't always glitter or delight. I thought a great deal about the commonplaces and drudgeries, and several times I wrote about them. SPACE STATION NO. 1, I thought then and still think, came out fairly well in the drab colors of an undesirable job in a corner of space's nowhere.

The brief adventure at the utilitarian artificial planetoid is simple and small, compared to what adventure could be in the thirtieth century, but it deals rather decisively with the fates of several persons; and not the least of them is a Martian of the Martians I have written about so often that I have almost

convinced myself and a number of readers that they are what Martians truly are. This time, more than ever before or since, my Martian surprised and deceived everyone, including me, his chronicler. He is the real central character in SPACE STATION NO. 1.

MANLY WADE WELLMAN

MANLY WADE WELLMAN
SPACE STATION NO. 1

**Zeoui Writes a New Chapter in
the Story of Martian Conquest.**

IN ITS time Space Station No. 1 was unique in the solar system and probably the universe, for, of all the worlds that swung around the sun, it alone was a creation of mortal engineers and mechanics, built of materials artificially prepared, shaped and joined, for civilized purposes and profit.

Without it the Martio-Terrestrial League's Jovian colonies might well have failed at the start. Jupiter's moons abounded in valuable minerals, offered broad lands for development and settlement by emigrants, but they were almost too far away. Only once in two years were Mars and Jupiter in conjunction, close enough for liners and freighters to ply between. A few days thus, then the planets drifted apart on their orbits, the gap widening to an impossible distance for two years more.

Wherefore the League's experts planned and built Space Station No. 1, to circle the sun along Mars' orbit, but on the far side of the sun from Mars. Old Sol's gravity carried the synthetic planetoid in approximate position, as the current of a whirlpool carries a chip of wood in an endless circle. Occasional rocket blasts kept the station exactly where it should be. Thus, when the planet was in opposition and at its farthest from Jupiter, the station was at its closest, a half-way house for the refueling of Jupiter-bound ships from Earth and Mars. Supplies and other relief could reach the colonists once each year instead of once each two years.

Viewed from afar against the star-dusted black of space, the station looked like an exaggerated mimicry of ringed

Saturn. The spherical center was an outmoded and awkward space-hulk two hundred meters in diameter. Construction ships had towed it into position, then clamped great girders all around its equator to extend like spokes from a hub. These in turn were braced with smaller crosswise girders and cables and the whole decked over with metal plates to make a circular plane a mile across, extending collar-like from and around the ball-shaped center. This deck was the landing port. The hulk in the middle did duty as administration building, storehouse, and living quarters.

For men lived there. And though the League and the colonies found Space Station No. 1 practical and valuable, its attendants found it all but unendurable.

There were two of them, standing just now on the outer rim of the deck, clad in space-overalls of insulated fabric, magnetized boots that held them to the almost gravityless plating, and bell-like glass helmets, slightly clouded against the sun's unimpeded glare. The taller was Lane Everitt, a tough-bodied young Terrestrial, who was glaring as fiercely as the sun itself. He had had enough of Space Station No. 1, this cramped corner where he must live in dingy cabins, corridors and holds, and swaddle himself in glass and fabric whenever he ventured out for exercise.

A full year of this prison-like boredom, and why? Because he, a simple navigator of Spaceways, Inc., had loved and been loved by Fortuna Sidney, daughter of the corporation's director-general. Now he was out here, doomed to the most deadly routine job in the universe, while she was shut up in the strictest schools with instructions to forget him.

"Rats!" he growled aloud, and his own voice, echoing inside the helmet, startled him. He must stop mumbling to himself—yes, and lying awake, and cheating at solitaire—or he'd go crazy, like that chap Ropakihn he had relieved out here. And if he went crazy, he, too, would be clapped in an asylum. No job, no freedom. No Fortuna. He gazed down from the deck's verge into the endlessness of space, found no comfort there, then turned his head inside the transparent helmet to glance back along the level expanse of deck. He felt like a very small

fly on the rim of a very big tray, with the hulk for an apple in its center. And Earth and the solar system valued him at less than a fly.

"Did you mention rats, Ev? You require rodents for some purpose?"

It was the mechanically expressionless voice of Zeoui, his Martian associate, who stood beside him. Zeoui's chrysanthemum-like face—if face it really was—tilted toward him questioningly.

Zeoui was one of those Martians destined from birth and before to live and work with Terrestrials. Eugenic breeding and medical alteration had brought his shape to approximate that of an Earth man. His soft, bladder-like body had been elongated, stiffened with artificial spine, and raised erect upon two slender limbs. Its upper corners were even shaped into shoulders, and bore in lieu of arms two tentacles with sensitive tips, just now concealed in his space-mittens. At the top, under the helmet, was his large and fragile braincase, shaggy all over with the petal-like fronds and tags of tissue housing his Martian awareness of conditions that approximated the five Terrestrial senses. Thus developed and equipped, Zeoui could walk and work with Earth's mankind, could talk—he favored ultra-pedantic and exact polysyllables—by stirring air through an artificial larynx. He was more at home among Terrestrials than among the jelly-like bodies and feeler-appendages of his fellow-Martians.

He spoke again: "A rocket vessel, swift and small, approaches."

"Coming here? Already?" Everitt glanced up. "They aren't due, not for hours yet."

The thought of ships depressed him. For five days they would be passing him, heading for Jupiter, and in a few weeks the craft from the colonies would be stopping off on the inner trail—worse than no company at all. He and Zeoui would mix liquid oxygen and other ingredients into fuel and operate the pumps, but there would be no chatting or fraternizing. Skip-pers might transmit formal orders, receive reports, no more. No word from home or friends, no mail. . . .

"Observe. It is approaching rapidly." Zeoui pointed a tentacle. In the blackness far above circled a tiny gray dart of a space-craft, cutting speed, and preparing to land. Everitt scowled in perplexity, lifting a hand to his helmet as if to rumple his bright hair inside.

"That's not a Spaceways job," he said in mystified tones. "It looks like a war craft. What—"

The lead-colored cigar burst into a dazzling flare at the nose, and the gush of the forward rockets braked it sharply. As the two watchers stood at gaze, it fell to a swaying crawl directly overhead. Then it curved in, around, and down to the deck not a hundred yards away.

Almost before its rocket blasts had subsided a panel sprang open in its side and a helmeted head popped out.

"Someone disembarks," commented Zeoui's maddeningly dry voice. "Yes, and makes significant motions of the hand."

The first figure to reach the deck was small and slight, even in space-overall.

"Ev!" came a soft, trembling cry to Everitt's earphones, and his heart stirred. He had never expected to hear that voice again.

"Ev, dear!" The little figure was running toward him, and he found his own voice.

"Fortuna!" he cried back, and sped to meet her. A moment later he had clutched the newcomer in his arms, was pressing her close to him and gazing at a dear white face through two thicknesses of clouded glass. Her big, storm-dark eyes swam with tears of mingled joy and concern, her full lips trembled.

Then more motion from the direction of the ship caught Everitt's eye. A towering form in full space-armor stepped into view. Then another, then four more in a group. They bore arms in their hands or belts—the big leader an electro-automatic rifle, his stunted neighbor a lantern-like rust-ray, the others pistols. Everitt stiffened in startled wonder.

"It's all right, they're my men," came Fortuna's voice to his ears. "Let's go somewhere and talk, Ev. It's important."

"Right, Fortuna," he agreed, making his voice steady. To

Zeoui he spoke crisply. "Stay on deck, will you? I'm taking her inside."

Zeoui's face-petals stirred and curled against his helmet-glass, as if in worried fidgets. "These individuals," he ventured. "Is it to be understood that—"

"Steady, old man," cautioned Everitt quickly. "You aren't supposed to speak to visitors."

"The same restriction applies to yourself," reminded Zeoui.

"But I must speak," Everitt said flatly. "I'll handle this situation alone, though. No need for you to be involved."

It was half a warning, half a snub, and Zeoui fell silent. Taking Fortuna's arm, Everitt led her toward the hulk. Their eyes were ever upon each other, and their emotion was too deep for smiles. Behind them came the armed half dozen companions of the girl.

The lock-panel in the hulk slid back at Everitt's touch and first he and Fortuna, then the others, stepped into the little airlock chamber. A moment later they had passed the inner panel. Inside the old control room that, stripped of instruments and fitted with a desk, chairs and cabinets, served as an office, they felt the comforting pull of the artificial gravity that the outer deck lacked.

All began to unship their helmets. Everitt and Fortuna freed their faces first and at once kissed with hungry violence. Everitt thought that the biggest of Fortuna's companions chuckled derisively under his half-doffed headpiece, but was too happy to resent it.

"And now," Fortuna murmured, freeing her lips, "I'll tell you how we are working your escape."

"Escape?" repeated Everitt sharply. "You don't mean—"

"I tried to get you relieved," the girl said, with a serious wag of her dark, curly head, "but Daddy turned obdurate. Said he'd keep you here until you rotted. And so, in desperation, I went at it another way." Half turning in Everitt's embrace, she nodded to the big man. "Tell him, Ropakihn."

"Ropakihn?" said Everitt. "Are you—?" He paused.

The giant's head was out of the helmet now. It showed huge, heavy-jowled, with bright, piggy eyes, a mighty blade

of a nose and a crimson complexion. The coarse, well-combed thatch of hair was a good six feet six above the office floor, and the armored body was heavy, even for that height. A loose smile crossed the big, red countenance as a raspy voice answered Everitt's half-voiced question.

"Yes, I'm Ropakihn, the man who played—well, eccentric—to get away from here." The lips grew looser, writhing a bit. "They shut me up in a comfortable but boresome asylum, until Miss Fortuna here came to visit me. She arranged for a leave of absence for me and these other inmates. You see," and his rasp grew smug, "I knew about the new type of warcraft and their MS-ray. Knew it from a retired officer—also eccentric enough to be shut up. He babbled out the location of a hangar where an ultra-fast experimental ship was kept."

Everitt puzzled over this information. "MS-ray—metal-solvent? I heard it was being developed, an advance on the rust-ray principle."

"Since you were exiled it became a reality," Ropakihn informed him. "There's one on that super-speed ship out there—the one we took a few nights ago from its hangar."

He paused, grinning in a self-congratulatory manner, while Fortuna took up the tale. "I guessed," she said, "that Ropakihn wasn't as afflicted as they thought. I also guessed that he would be miffed enough at the people who had exiled and imprisoned him to be an ally. He was good enough to listen and to pick these other friends."

For the first time Everitt looked at Ropakihn's five companions, almost helmetless by now. And he was genuinely shocked.

Not one of them was normal. The man with the rust-ray was a hunched and twisted dwarf with the face of a cunning weasel. Two of the others were well set up, but they wore expressions of brutal stupidity. The remaining two were patently imbecilic, fidgety and grimacing. No wonder both Fortuna and Ropakihn had avoided saying "crazy"—had employed such words as "eccentric" and "afflicted." The other expression would have been too pointed to use in this company.

Ropakihn continued, amusedly:

"In any case, Everitt, Miss Fortuna got us out. Now she wants us to try to get you out."

"Exactly," added Fortuna in happy triumph. "What with our extra speed, we have a start of hours on the rest of the ships. Have you any baggage? We'll head back to Earth at once."

"I can't go," said Everitt.

There was silence for a moment, and they all looked at him—Fortuna uncomprehending, Ropakihn somewhat scornful, the others foolishly querulous. Then Fortuna began to argue.

"You don't understand, darling. It isn't as though they were out patrolling the space-lanes for you. Why, they won't even know you've deserted until we're safely landed and lost, in Africa or Brazil or—"

"I can't go," said Everitt again.

Ropakihn chuckled, as he had when Fortuna and Everitt had kissed each other.

"Do I read you rightly?" he inquired with the hint of a sneer. "Do you feel that your duty lies here?"

"Duty!" snapped Fortuna heatedly. "This routine job? Why, Ev, darling, a child could do it, mixing fuel and filling tanks."

"Without me the Jovian route will be broken in two," he reminded her. "Zeoui couldn't handle things alone."

Fortuna clenched her little fists in despair. "Don't you want me? Don't I love you, and didn't Spaceways do you a shabby trick? Your every instinct—"

"There are many instincts," he interrupted gently. "One is for love, and heaven knows that it's strong in me. But another's for honor and loyalty. That keeps me at my post."

Another silence, with all eyes on Everitt. Finally Fortuna shrugged, though not in complete resignation.

"Maybe you're right," she said slowly.

"I know I am," Everitt rejoined. "You can go home, dear, and wait for the thing to work out properly."

"That," growled Ropakihn in a new, grim voice, "is where you are wrong."

He took a step forward. The five grouped behind him sud-

denly brought their weapons to the ready. Ropakihn himself shifted his right hand to the trigger-switch of his rifle.

"Corby," he said crisply to the twisted man with the rust-ray, "go out on deck and bring that Martian in here."

"Yop." The man called Corby made a sloppy gesture of salute and turned to enter the air-lock, putting on his helmet as he did so.

Everitt tightened his muscles as if to spring, but Ropakihn lifted his weapon warningly. "Steady," said the giant. "You're my prisoners."

"Ropakihn!" called Fortuna. "I'm giving orders here."

"Not now." The heavy, red face crinkled in a broader grin. "You think I'll go back to that asylum? Think again, lady. We're going to go to Jupiter instead."

Everitt had not shrunk back from the menace of the guns. "You're outlaws, then?" he demanded accusingly. "You mean to defy Earth and Mars together?"

"Outlaws—for today," agreed Ropakihn in high good humor. "But in a few weeks we'll be conquerors. That MS-ray will blow the defenses loose from the whole Jovian colonial setup. They'll have to surrender to us. Instead of outlaws—rulers!" He grew exultant. "And Earth and Mars will have to treat with us."

Then he grew blustery. "Get ready to mix us some fuel, Everitt. Enough for the jump to Jupiter."

Everitt shook his head. "I serve no ship without a voucher from the Interplanetary Commerce Commission," he said flatly.

"Here's my voucher," and Ropakihn twiddled his rifle. "It's electric-powered, but bored for lead-and-powder cartridges—fifty—just like the guns of the ancients. A novelty piece." His grin grew cruel. "No merciful death by shock, Everitt. How would you like me to start shooting your toes off, one at a time?"

Everitt was disdainfully silent.

"Or Miss Fortuna's toes, perhaps? Does that intrigue you?"

Everitt felt a chill creep along his spine. Fortuna tortured! . . .

"There's no fuel mixed as yet," he announced. "We didn't expect a ship so soon."

"No? Then we'll start the machinery going. And when we've fueled ourselves, we'll try out our MS-ray—wash this station clear out of the universe."

One or two of Ropakihn's followers giggled inanely at the thought, and Fortuna shivered. The sense of her danger and his own helplessness infuriated Everitt. "You'll destroy the station!" he cried.

"Of course," Ropakihn's face turned harsh. "It doesn't fill me with affectionate memories. And with it gone, police craft can't refuel and follow."

"Next year Mars will be in the halfway station spot," Everitt reminded him. "There'll be plenty of trouble flying out to Jupiter after you."

"When we're holding all the colonies as hostage?" laughed Ropakihn. "Don't be absurd. They'll be glad to meet whatever terms we make. Freedom, money, recognition as governors even."

Everitt said nothing. The scheme was as practicable as it was daring. Such a weapon as the MS-ray, unknown as yet on the Jovian moons, would spell victory for this handful of insane adventurers. What fantastic rulers for the unlucky settlers!

The air-lock opened and two figures entered—Zeoui and Corby, taking off their helmets. The Martian's chrysanthemum face turned toward Ropakihn.

"Your lieutenant has been explaining to me your stratagem for the invasion and conquest of Jupiter's satellites," he volunteered in his precise manner. "Have you accommodations in your ship for a recruit?"

Everitt gasped. Was Zeoui, the pedant, inflamed by dreams of piracy? Ropakihn grinned welcome.

"Certainly we have room, for several recruits. But how about the fuel? You, Martian—what's your name?"

"Zeoui," was the reply. "You want fuel? Expediently? Give me two men to help."

Ropakihn waved forward the two brutal-faced outlaws.

Zeoui led them through the inner door of the office and down the passage toward the fuel-mixing chamber. Everitt watched with rage-darkened face, much to Ropakihn's amusement.

"Your partner seems to be reasonable," he commented. "How about you two?"

Everitt shook his head. "You want somebody normal to leaven your crazy crew." He exulted at the flinch that the word "crazy" wrung from his captors, and went on. "Nothing doing, Ropakihn. If you're destroying the space station, destroy me with it. You won't have long to enjoy the sensation."

Ropakihn turned toward Fortuna, but she shook her head. "It's unnecessary to ask me," she said.

The big man chuckled, his gaze feasting on her trim lines which the collapsed space-overall could not disguise. "I'm not asking," he replied. "You're coming along—to help shorten the journey . . ." His greedy eyes never left her. "You'll be queen of my new Jovian empire. . . ."

Everitt could stand no more. He made a lunge at his towering foe. But the magnetism in his shoes, augmented by the floor's artificial gravity, slowed his charge for a second. In that second Ropakihn was on guard, fending him off with the rifle barrel across his chest, while Corby and the two others had fallen upon him.

For full half a minute Everitt battled, his angry strength almost a match for his three assailants, but then they forced him down and began to bind his limbs with a belt from his own overall. Fortuna, seeing his defeat, made a dash as if to help him. Ropakihn, laughing, clutched at her, and she swerved away, then ran for the door that led to the hulk's interior.

A form popped into view on the threshold, barring her retreat. It was Zeoui. A quick clutch with a tentacle-tip, and he had her by the wrist. "Was she endeavoring to depart?" he enunciated dryly.

"She tried to fight," growled Ropakihn. "I'll take the fight out of her before we've been aboard a quarter of an hour. How's the fuel job?"

"Going expeditiously," retorted the Martian. "The assistants

you placed at my disposal are supervising the mixing-pumps. May I be assigned others to aid in extending the feed conduits to your vessel?"

"Right." Ropakihn turned his eyes to his three remaining henchmen. "Corby, stay here to keep an eye on Everitt. You others, on with your helmets and go with Zeoui."

Zeoui still held Fortuna, who had quieted, but still glared angrily. "It would be well," he suggested, "to confine this person likewise."

He himself assisted in tying her arms and ankles. Then he bustled about, helping his two new companions to put on their helmets. Finally he led them out upon the deck.

Time passed. Everitt and Fortuna, helpless in their bonds, lay propped against a bulkhead under Corby's guard. Ropakihn, lolling on the deck, talked. He throve on his own boasting, telling enthusiastically of his enterprise in planning the theft of the speed-craft with its new ray equipment, his courage and resource in executing that theft, of his daring in conceiving the idea of conquering Jupiter's moons.

Half an hour was gone before he wearied at the sound of his voice. Breaking his stream of self-praise then, he moved to a port and looked out.

"Where's Zeoui?" he demanded, half aloud. "I don't see him or the others. They must be in the cruiser itself."

Again he studied the deck outside. "They've got the pipe drawn out to the ship," he continued after a moment, "but it's limp—there can't be a very big stream of fuel. Probably none at all."

Swinging around, he glared at the prisoners and at Corby. "Say," he blustered at the universe in general, "are those lazy limpets soldiering on their mixing jobs? I'll show them how!" He started to tramp across the floor, but the loud clang of his magnetized boots halted him. Lifting one foot, then the other, he pulled the metal footgear away. "No need for them to know I'm coming," he commented. "Corby, you're in charge until I get back."

He was gone into the inner passage. Corby, his slow mind groping after the reason for his chief's ire, took a step as if to

follow, then stared stupidly in Ropakihn's wake. For the moment he was not watching Everitt or Fortuna.

Everitt felt a tug at his bonds. A hand was freeing him—Fortuna's hand. She had won loose! He wasted no time in pondering now, but as his own arms felt the strap draw away, sprang to his feet.

Corby heard the motion and turned, but before he lifted his ray-tube Everitt's hard fist connected with the loose-hung jaw. The hunchback went hurtling backward, his skull ringing on the floor before his weapon fell with a shattering sound. He lay still.

Everitt caught up the ray-tube, saw that it was jammed, and dropped it with an exclamation of impatience. From the desk he seized his helmet.

"What are you going to do?" he asked Fortuna breathlessly, sitting up to untie her ankles.

"Stay where you are," he cautioned her hastily. "Leave your feet tied and your hands behind you. Then Ropakihn and his men will think you're still helpless, and leave you alone for a minute." He poised the helmet above his head. "I'm making a dash for the ship outside. Zeoui and his playmates may not recognize me at once. If I get in among them and smash them, I'll have the MS-ray. Give me a moment to learn how to work it, and it'll be our saving."

Clamping his helmet in place, he stepped to the inner lock-panel. Behind him rose the panicky roar of Ropakihn, hurrying back from his inspection. The bellowed words penetrated even the helmet-glass.

"Corby!" the giant was shouting. "Look alive! The fuel-mixer went wrong somehow—liquid oxygen escaped, and both the boys are frozen stiff as boards!"

He came into view, and saw Everitt.

"You loose?" he bawled, but his erstwhile captive was into the air-lock, then through it and upon the deck.

No motion, no life met Everitt's eyes outside. The outlaw ship was where it had been, half the radius of the deck away, and to it extended the jointed metal pipe that carried fuel.

Ropakihn was right, no liquid was coursing through that

flaccid conduit. Everitt started at a half-run for the cruiser.

But a savage voice rang in his earphones: "Stand still, or I'll plug you!"

Everitt whirled around. Ropakihn had come out, helmet hastily donned and rifle poised. His huge body almost fell at the outer threshold of the lock, and only a clutch at a port-rim saved it.

The outlaw, in his haste to pursue, had left off his magnetic boots. Outside the hulk he had only the tiny gravity-pull of the deck to govern him, and his huge body weighed but a few ounces. An unconsidered touch of toe-pressure was enough to unbalance him, even hurl him clear of the deck.

"Take off your shoes and throw them to me!" he yelled at Everitt.

The smaller man stood still, making no motion to obey.

Ropakihn's beaked face darkened with rage. "Off with them, or—"

Steadying himself with his left hand on the port-rim, Ropakihn pointed his rifle with the other. Everitt ducked out of the line of fire, himself slipping to one knee. At once Ropakihn floundered forward and upon him, clutching one foot and fairly ripping the shoe from it. "I'll do the walking, you do the stumbling," he taunted.

Everitt lay still beneath the outlaw, but not in submission. He was analyzing the situation—so logical, though he had never thought of it before. Inside the hulk you had weight and never stopped to realize that out here you needed magnets to hold you down lest—

Ropakihn had tucked his rifle under an elbow and was pulling off the other shoe. That vast mass of flesh, sprawling upon Everitt, was no heavier than a silk handkerchief. Even as the second shoe fell to the deck, Everitt summoned his strength and surged upward, thrusting his enemy along and traveling with him. Next instant they floundered in emptiness, the deck dropping from beneath them as if snatched by the hand of a prank-playing Titan.

They wrestled wildly in space, weightless as swimmers and clumsy as dreamers. It was like a dream at that, a horrible

nightmare in which one strikes or grapples but encounters no resistance. Arms around Ropakihn's body, Everitt stared over the crag of the giant's shoulder at Space Station No. 1—dwindling, falling down and away, shrinking to a lump-centered shield on a starry curtain of black. The very heave of Everitt's body had been enough to send them both flying like stones from a sling, unfettered by gravity, unimpeded by air, hundreds of yards, a mile.

They wrenched and tore at each other's throats for a time, baffled by the folds of fabric. Then Ropakihn, letting go, struck Everitt clumsily on the breast-bone. The buffet dashed them violently apart.

Everitt saw the jetty sky and its stars whirl, saw the disk that was the station whip from underfoot to overhead, then back out of sight to appear underfoot again. He was somersaulting in space. Ropakihn, too, was flying backward, head over heels over head, shrinking to the apparent size of a squirming doll.

Everitt gave vent to a hysterical laugh over their ridiculous plight. Strong as lions but light as feathers they were losing themselves in nothingness by their own undirectible exertions. Even now they had no power to come together or to return to the deck after they had left. He had a mental picture of himself falling to an orbit, circling the man-made planetoid like a satellite. Ropakihn, caught in another orbit, might make the same circuit at a slower or faster pace. Drawing into conjunction, perhaps they would be close enough to resume hostilities.

Everitt laughed again more wildly.

A shout assailed his earphones. Ropakihn, far away, was doing something with the rifle. Yes, firing it, not at Everitt, but into space behind himself. Flash after flash of detonation and Ropakihn seemed to grow in size.

Oh, that was it. The weapon carried explosive charges and its recoil, though barely enough to stir a proper weight, could propel the few ounces that its operator scaled just now. The rocket was definitely approaching. He grew bigger, bigger, like a rubber figure swelling with gas.

Now he was aiming the gun at Everitt, firing once. The bullet missed, and the recoil slowed Ropakihn. Again they collided and grappled.

The smaller, more agile Everitt managed to seize and clamp his enemy's massive rifle arm. Ropakihn tried to shove him loose, but Everitt wrung the wrist he held with desperate vigor. He heard the giant's involuntary grunt of pain, saw the huge, mittened hand sag open. The weapon swam slowly out of it.

Darting out his own hand, Everitt clutched the receding barrel. He had no time to find trigger or grip, but struck as with a club.

The shock of the blow, falling on Ropakihn's shoulder, almost drove them apart again, but they clung somehow as the giant tried to snatch back his rifle. Everitt threw his legs up and forward, clamping them around his foe's great waist as around a wild horse. He took a rib-buckling punch over the heart, but next moment had struck once more with the rifle-butt, this time full on the front of Ropakihn's helmet.

The clouded glass splintered, and suddenly the outlaw's red visage showed plain and monstrous in the unfiltered sunlight. A breath's space, then the red turned blue, the great mouth gaped after the fleeting air. Bulging eyes fixed Everitt with dire hate and abruptly fell blank and dull as pebbles. The blueness deserted the face in turn, and went tallow-pale. The heaving cask-like body between Everitt's clamping knees gave a final convulsive shudder and relaxed.

Everitt had won.

He did not feel elated, only weary. Kicking loose from the senseless, dying Ropakihn, he stared frantically around to locate the station. It was behind his shoulder. Pointing the rifle into space before him, he fired it again and again. The recoil made itself felt. Again and again he fired.

A full minute elapsed before he approached the deck of the little island in space. His sense of direction changed—the station was no longer before or behind, but beneath. He glanced upward once. Afar he saw the silhouette of Ropakihn, quite motionless and limp in the sky. Then he drifted

down like a leaf from a tree. An overalled figure dashed across the deck-plates to meet him.

"An outstanding exhibition of valor and physical prowess, Evl"

No mistaking that affected voice. It was the traitor Zeoui. Did he think to mock and sneer? Everitt clutched his rifle to fire. But the Martian stood still beneath him, holding up something. A weapon? Everitt's magnetic shoes!

Zeoui was trying to help him then! Puzzled, unable to comprehend the Martian's sudden change of front, still Everitt held his fire as he floated slowly down.

A moment later the Terrestrial had landed, and Zeoui was steadying him with a careful tentacle.

"Once more assume your metal footgear," came the dry accents of advice. "As I have already observed, it was a splendid and satisfactory encounter, not lacking in scientific interest. I dared hope that, when I left Miss Fortuna's encircling cords somewhat loose, she would find opportunity to set you at liberty."

Everitt was beginning to realize. "The other outlaws—" he began.

"They have been dealt with decisively," Zeoui reassured him. "I profited by the patent stupidity of the first contingent in the mixing-shop. Catching them off guard, I released upon them a flood of liquid oxygen. The sudden drop in temperature accomplished their demise.

"The others, who accompanied me out here, suffocated for want of air. I, affecting to assist them in donning their helmets, fastened only half the clamps. The air gradually but completely departed."

"And Corby?" asked Everitt. "The man I knocked out?"

"The charming and capable young object of your admiration, Miss Fortuna Sidney, has locked him up."

Once more in the office together, Zeoui, Everitt and Fortuna seated themselves around the desk. From the ventilator of the locker-closet where the madman Corby was imprisoned came the occasional grumpy pleas for freedom.

"And in that manner," the Martian finished his story, "I

found it extremely simple. So simple, in truth, that Ropakihn, who considered himself the only astute person in the situation, was disposed to trust me. My pretense at helping to capture Miss Fortuna clinched it. Thereafter he thought nothing of counter-treachery on my part, but allowed me to conduct his unfortunate lunatic associates to their destruction."

Everitt made a rueful grimace. "You had me fooled, too," he confessed humbly.

Again Corby pleaded from his prison: "Who shut me up here? What happened?"

"He seems dazed by Ev's blow," explained Fortuna. "Claims not to remember coming here, or anything about Ropakihn's attempt."

Zeoui nodded sagely. "Such mental derangements frequently follow head injuries," he said weightily. "Perhaps he is only feigning amnesia, to obtain mercy. In that case, however, he would not dare amend my report to the police ship."

"Police ship?" gasped Everitt. "Is one coming?"

"I took opportunity to broadcast an emergency message with the radio in the war-craft. Immediately thereafter I was in receipt of a reply from a patrol ship. At the request of Director-General Sidney himself—he was aboard—I told the story."

"He must have been furious at me," cried Fortuna.

"Let me amend my statement," went on Zeoui. "I told only a portion of the story. I led them to believe that the theft and flight were Ropakihn's idea exclusively, and that the outlaws kidnaped Miss Fortuna from her school on Earth. The director-general expressed great satisfaction in your activities, Ev, and intimated that he would release you from exile. He will also cease his objections to your marriage—"

"Zeoui, you flower-faced sap!" exploded Everitt. "You've given me all the credit."

Again Zeoui nodded gravely.

"But what about you?" Fortuna demanded.

"Yes, you're screwier than Ropakihn's whole mob put together," Everitt chimed in. "If you take no credit, they'll keep you on duty here."

The Martian nodded.

“That is eminently correct.” Both Everitt and Fortuna could have sworn that the petals of Zeoui’s weird visage were wreathed into something like a grin of satisfaction. “To be sure I shall remain on duty here. I enjoy it.”