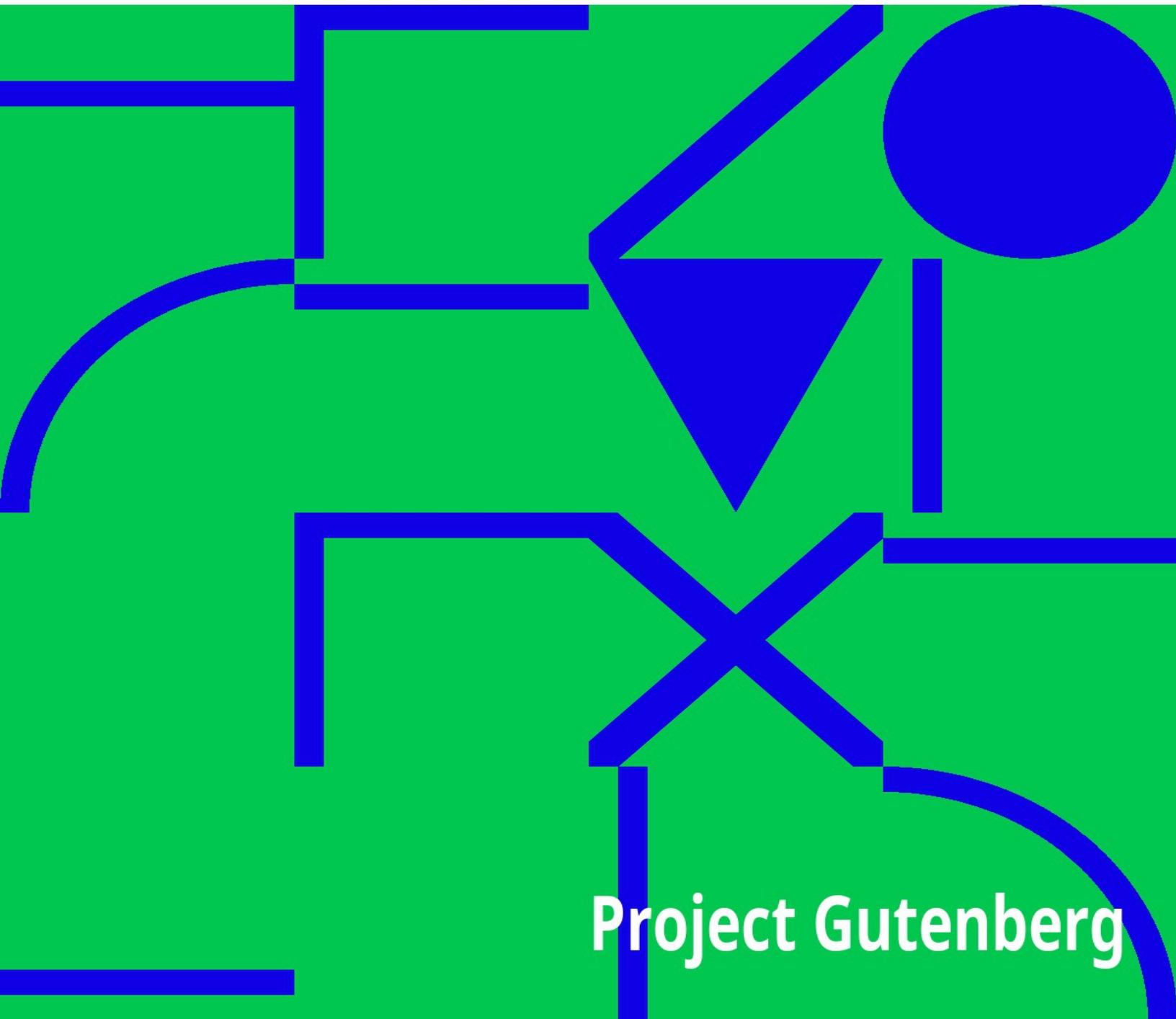


Conquest Over Time

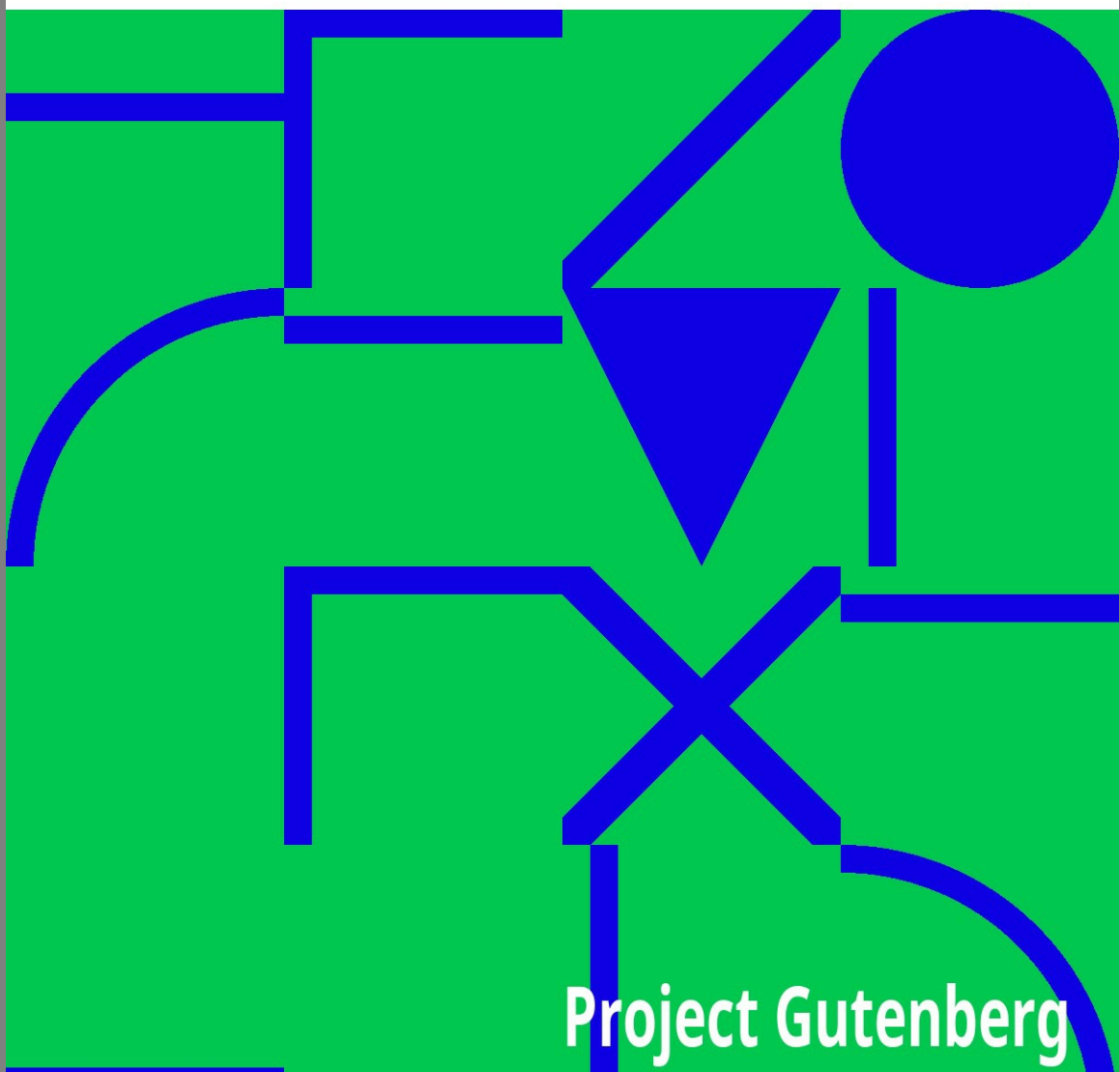
Michael Shaara



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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CONQUEST
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"Now this here planet," he said cautiously, "is whacky in a lot of ways. First of all they call it Mert. Just plain Mert. And they live in houses strictly from Dickens, all carriages, no sewers, narrow streets, stuff like that." But that wasn't all.... Travis, in reaching Diomed III before any others, found himself waging a one-man fight against more than this; he was bucking the strangest way of life you have ever heard of!

conquest over time

by ... Michael Shaara

What was the startling secret of Diomed III that almost caused Travis to lose his life?
And who was Lappy?...

When the radiogram came in it was 10:28 ship's time and old 29 was exactly 3.4 light years away from Diomed III. Travis threw her wide open and hoped for the best. By 4:10 that same afternoon, minus three burned out generators and fronting a warped ion screen, old 29 touched the atmosphere and began homing down. It was a very tense moment. Somewhere down in that great blue disc below a Mapping Command ship sat in an open field, sending up the beam which was guiding them down. But it was not the Mapping Command that was important. The Mapping Command was always first. What mattered now was to come in second, any kind of second, close or wide, mile or eyelash, but second come hell or high water.

The clouds peeled away. Travis staring anxiously down could see nothing but mist and heavy cloud. He could not help sniffing the air and groaning inwardly. There is no smell quite as expensive as that of burned generators. He could hear the Old Man repeating over and over again—as if Allspace was not one of the richest companies in existence—"burned generators, boy, is burned *money*, and don't you forget it!" Fat chance me forgetting it, Travis thought gloomily, twitching his nostrils. But a moment later he did.

For Diomed III was below him.

And Diomed III was an Open Planet.

It happened less often, nowadays, that the Mapping Command ran across intelligent life, and it was even less often that the intelligent life was

humanoid. But when it happened it was an event to remember. For space travel had brought with it two great problems. The first was Contact, the second was Trade. For many years Man had prohibited contact with intelligent humanoids who did not yet have space travel, on the grounds of the much-discussed Maturity Theory. As time went by, however, and humanoid races were discovered which were biologically identical with Man, and as great swarms of completely alien, often hostile races were also discovered, the Maturity Theory went into discard. A human being, ran the new slogan, is a Human Being, and so came the first great Contact Law, which stated that any humanoid race, regardless of its place on the evolutionary scale, was to be contacted. To be accepted, "yea, welcomed," as the phrase went, into the human community. And following this, of course, there came Trade. For it was the businessmen who had started the whole thing in the first place.

Hence the day of the Open Planet. A humanoid race was discovered by the Mapping Command, the M.C. made its investigation, and then sent out the Word. And every company in the Galaxy, be it monstrous huge or piddling small, made a mad rush to be first on the scene. The Government was very strict about the whole business, the idea being that planets should make their contracts with companies rather than the government itself, so that if any shady business arose the company at fault could be kicked out, and there would be no chance of a general war. Also, went the reasoning, under this system there would be no favorites. Whichever company, no matter its resources, had a ship closest at the time of the call, was the one to get first bargaining rights. Under this setup it was very difficult for any one company to grow too large, or to freeze any of the others out, and quite often a single contract on a single planet was enough to transform a fly-by-night outfit into a major concern.

So that was the basis of the Open Planet, but there the real story has only begun. Winning the race did not always mean winning the contract. It was what you found when you got down that made the job of a Contact Man one of the most hazardous occupations in history. Each new planet was wholly and completely new, there were no rules, and what you learned on all the rest meant nothing. You went from a matriarchy which refused absolutely to deal with men (the tenth ship to arrive had a lady doctor and therefore got the contract) to a planet where the earth was sacred and you couldn't dig a hole in

it so mining was out, to a planet which considered your visit the end of the world and promptly committed mass suicide. The result of this was that a successful Contact Man had to be a remarkable man to begin with: a combined speed demon, sociologist, financier, diplomat and geologist, all in one. It was a job in which successful men not only made fortunes, they made legends. It was that way with Pat Travis.

Sitting at the viewscreen, watching the clouds whip by and the first dark clots of towns beginning to shape below, Travis thought about the legend. He was a tall, frail, remarkably undernourished looking man with large soft brown eyes. He did not look like a legend and he knew it, and, being a man of great pride, it bothered him. More and more, as the years went by, his competitors blamed his success on luck. It was not Pat Travis that was the legend, it was the luck of Pat Travis. Over the years he had learned not to argue about it, and it was only during these past few months, when his luck had begun to slip, that he mentioned it at all.

Luck no more makes a legend, he knew, than raw courage makes a fighter. But legends die quick in deep space, and his own had been a-dying for a good long while now, while other lesser men, the luck all theirs, plucked planet after planet from under his nose. Now at the viewscreen he glanced dolefully across the room at his crew: the curly-headed young Dahlinger and the profound Mr. Trippe. In contrast to his own weary relaxation, both of the young men were tensed and anxious, peering into the screen. They had come to learn under the great Pat Travis, but in the last few months what they seemed to have learned most was Luck: if you happened to be close you were lucky and if you weren't you weren't. But if they were to get anywhere in this business, Travis knew, they had to learn that luck, more often than not, follows the man who burns his generators....



He stopped thinking abruptly as a long yellow field came into view. He saw silver flashing in the sun, and his heart jumped into his throat. Old 29 settled fast. One ship or two? In the distance he could see the gray jumbled shapes of a low-lying city. The sun was shining warmly, it was spring on Diomed III, and across the field a blue river sparkled, but Travis paid no attention. There

was only one silver gleam. Still he waited, not thinking. But when they were close enough he saw that he was right. The Mapping Command ship was alone. Old 29, burned generators and all, had won the race.

"My boys," he said gravely, turning to the crew, "Pat Travis rides again!" But they were already around him, pounding him on the back. He turned happily back to the screen, for the first time beginning to admire the view. By jing, he thought, what a lovely day!

That was his first mistake.

It was not a lovely day.

It was absolutely miserable.



Travis had his first pang of doubt when he stepped out of the ship.

The field was empty, not a native in sight. But Dahlinger was out before him, standing waist high in the grass and heaving deep lungfuls of the flower-scented air. He yelled that he could already smell the gold.

"I say, Trav," Trippe said thoughtfully from behind him, "where's the fatted calf?"

"In this life," Travis said warily, "one is often disappointed." A figure climbed out of a port over at the Mapping Command ship and came walking slowly toward them. Travis recognized him and grinned.

"Hey, Hort."

"Hey Trav," Horton replied from a distance. But he did not say anything else. He came forward with an odd look on his face. Travis did not understand. Ed Horton was an old buddy and Ed Horton should be happy to see him. Travis felt his second pang. This one went deep.

"Anybody beat us here?"

"No. You're the first, Trav."

Dahlinger whooped. Travis relaxed slightly and even the glacial Trippe could not control a silly grin.

Horton caught a whiff of air from the open lock.

"Burned generators? You must've come like hell." His face showed his respect. Between burning a generator and blowing one entirely there is only a microscopic distance, and it takes a very steady pilot indeed to get the absolute most out of his generators without also spreading himself and his ship over several cubic miles of exploded space.

"Like a striped-tailed ape," Dahlinger chortled. "Man, you should see the boss handle a ship. I thought every second we were going to explode in technicolor."

"Well," Horton said feebly. "Burned generators. Shame."

He lowered his eyes and began toeing the ground. Travis felt suddenly ill.

"What's the matter, Hort?"

Horton shrugged. "I hate like heck to be the one to tell you, Trav, but seein' as I know you, they sent me—"

"Tell me what?" Now Dahlinger and Trippe both realized it and were suddenly silent.

"Well, if only you'd taken a little more time. But not you, not old Pat Travis. By damn, Pat, you came in here like a downhill locomotive, it ain't my fault —"

"Hort, straighten it out. What's not your fault?"

Horton sighed.

"Listen, it's a long story. I've got a buggy over here to take you into town. They're puttin' you up at a hotel so you can look the place over. I'll tell you on the way in."

"The heck with that," Dahlinger said indignantly, "we want to see the *man*."

"You're not goin' to see the man, sonny," Horton said patiently, "You are, as a

matter of fact, the last people on the planet the man wants to see right now."

Dahlinger started to say something but Travis shut him up. He told Trippe to stay with the ship and took Dahlinger with him. At the end of the field was a carriage straight out of Seventeenth Century England. And the things that drew it—if you closed your eyes—looked reasonably similar to horses. The three men climbed aboard. There was no driver. Horton explained that the 'horses' would head straight for the hotel.

"Well all right," Travis said, "what's the story?"

"Don't turn those baby browns on me," Horton said gloomily, "I would have warned you if I could, but you know the law says we can't show favoritism...."

Travis decided the best thing to do was wait with as much patience as possible. After a while Horton had apologized thoroughly and completely, although what had happened was certainly not his fault, and finally got on with the tale.

"Now this here planet," he said cautiously, "is whacky in a lot of ways. First off they call it Mert. Mert. Fine name for a planet. Just plain Mert. And they live in houses strictly from Dickens, all carriages, no sewers, narrow streets, stuff like that. With technology roughly equivalent to seventeenth century. But now—see there, see that building over there?"

Travis followed his pointing finger through the trees. A large white building of blinding marble was coming slowly into view. Travis' eyes widened.

"You see? Just like the blinkin' Parthenon, or Acropolis, whichever it is. All columns and frescoes. In the middle of a town looks just like London. Makes no sense, but there it is. And that's not all. Their government is Grecian too, complete with Senate and Citizens. No slaves though. Well not exactly. You couldn't call them slaves. Or could you? Heck of a question, that—" He paused to brood. Travis nudged him.

"Yes. Well, all that is minor, next to the big thing. This is one of two major countries on the planet. There's a few hill tribes but these make up about 90 percent of the population, so you have to deal with these. They never go to war, well maybe once in a while, but not very often. So no trouble there. The

big trouble is one you'd never guess, not in a million years."

He stared at Travis unhappily.

"The whole planet's run on astrology."

He waited for a reaction. Travis said nothing.

"It ain't funny," Horton said. "When I say run on astrology I mean really run. Wait'll you hear."

"I'm not laughing," Travis said. "But is that all? In this business you learn to respect the native customs, so if all we have to do—"

"I ain't finished yet," Horton said ominously, "you don't get the point. *Everything* these people do is based on astrology. And that means business too, lad, business too. Every event that happens on this cockeyed world, from a picnic to a wedding to a company merger or a war, it's all based on astrology. They have it down so exact they even tell you when to sneeze. You ought to see the daily paper. Half of it's solid astrological guidance. All the Senators not only have astrologers, they *are* astrologers. And get this: every man and woman and child alive on this planet was catalogued the day he was born. His horoscope was drawn up by the public astrologer—a highly honored office—and his future laid out according to what the horoscope said. If his horoscope indicates a man of stature and responsibility, he *becomes*, by God, a man of stature and responsibility. You have to see it to believe it. Kids with good horoscopes are sent to the best schools, people fight to give them jobs. Well, take the courts, for example. When they're trying a case, do they talk about evidence? They do not. They call in a legal astrologer—there's all kinds of branches in the profession—and this joker all by himself determines the guilt or innocence of the accused. By checking the aspects. Take a wedding. Boy meets girl. Boy likes girl. Does boy go see girl? No. He heads straight for an astrologer. The girl's horoscope is on file in the local city hall, just like everybody else. The astrologer compares the charts and determines whether the marriage will be a good one. He is, naturally, a marital astrologer. He gives the word. If he says no they don't marry.

"I could go on for hours. But you really have to see it. Take the case of people who want to have children. They want them born, naturally, at the time of the best possible aspects, so they consult an astrologer and he gives

them a list of the best times for a baby to be conceived. These times are not always convenient, sometimes it's 4:18 in the morning and sometimes it's 2:03 Monday afternoon. Yet this is a legitimate excuse for getting out of work. A man goes in, tells his boss it's breeding time, and off he goes without a penny docked. Build a better race, they say. Of course the gestation period is variable, and they never do hit it right on the nose, and also there are still the natural accidents, so quite a few are born with terrible horoscopes—"

"Holy smoke!" Travis muttered. The possibilities of it blossomed in his mind. He began to understand what was coming.

"Now you begin to see?" Horton went on gloomily. "Look what an Earthman represents to these people. We are the unknown, the completely capital U Unknown. Everybody else is a certain definite quantity, his horoscope is on file and every man on Mert has access to all his potentialities, be they good, bad or indifferent. But not us. They don't know when we were born, or where, and even if they did it it wouldn't do them any good, because they haven't got any system covering Mars and Jupiter, the planets at home. Everybody else is catalogued, but not us."

"And just because they believe so thoroughly in their own astrology they've gotten used to the idea that a man is what his horoscope says he is."

"But us? What are we? They haven't the vaguest idea, and it scares hell out of them. The only thing they can do is check with one of the branches, what they call Horary Astrology, and make a horoscope of the day we landed. Even if that tells them nothing about us in particular at least it tells them, or so they believe, all about our mission to Mert. Because the moment our ship touched the ground was the birth date of our business here."

He paused and regarded Travis with woeful sympathy.

"With us, luckily, it was all right. The Mapping Command just happened to hit here on a good day. But you? Trav, old buddy, for once you came just too damn fast—"

"Oh my God," Travis breathed. "We landed on a bad day."

"Bad?" Horton sighed. "Man, it's *terrible*."

"You see," Horton said as they drove into the town, "not a soul on the streets. This is not only a bad day, this is one for the books. To-morrow, you see, there is an eclipse. And to these people there is nothing more frightening than an eclipse. During the entire week preceding one they won't do a darn thing. No business, no weddings, no anything. The height of it will be reached about tomorrow noon. Their moon—which is a tiny little thing not much bigger than our first space station—is called Felda. It is very important in their astrology. And for all practical purposes the eclipse is already in force. I knew you were riding in down the base so I checked it out. It not only applies to you, other things cinch it."

He pulled a coarse sheet of paper from his pocket and read from it in a wishful voice: "With Huck, planet of necessity, transiting the 12th house of endings and things hidden, squaring Bonken, planet of gain, in the ninth house of travellers and distant places, it is unquestionable that the visit of these—uh—persons bodes ill for Mert. If further proof is needed, one need only examine the position of Diomed, which is conjunct Huck, and closely square to Lyndal, in the third house of commerce, etc, etc. You see what I mean? On top of this yet an eclipse. Trav, you haven't got a prayer. If only you hadn't been so close. Two days from now would have been great. Once the eclipse ends—"

"Well, listen," Travis said desperately, "couldn't we just see the guy?"

"Take my advice. Don't. He has expressed alarm at the thought that you might come near him. Also his guards are armed with blunderbusses. They may be a riot to look at, but those boys can shoot, believe me. Give you a contract? Trav, he wouldn't give you a broom to sweep out his cellar."

At that moment they drew up before an enormous marble building vaguely reminiscent of a Theban palace. It turned out to be the local hotel. Horton stopped on the threshold and handed them two of the tiny Langkits, the little black memory banks in which the language of Mert had been transcribed for their use by the Mapping Command. Travis slipped his automatically into position behind his ear, but he felt no need to know the language. This one was going to be tough. He glanced at Dahlinger. The kid was wearing a stunned expression, too dulled even to notice the pantalooned customer—first

Merts they'd seen—eyeing them fearfully from behind pillars as they passed.

Smell that gold, Travis remembered wistfully. Then, smell those generators. Oh, he thought sinkingly, smell those generators. They went silently on up to the room.

Travis stopped at the door as a thought struck him.

"Listen," he said cautiously, taking Horton by the arm, "haven't you thought of this? Why don't we just take off and start all over, orbit around for a couple of days, pick a good hour, and then come back down. That way we'll be starting all—"

But Horton was gazing at him reproachfully.

"They have a word for that, Trav," he said ominously, "they call it *vetching*. Worst crime a man can commit. Attempt to evade his stars. Equivalent almost to falsifying a horoscope. No siree, boy, for that they burn you very slowly. The first horoscope stands. All your subsequent actions, according to them, date from the original. You'll just be bearing out the first diagnosis. You'll be a vetcher."

"Um," Travis said. "If they feel that way, why the heck do they even let us stay?"

"Shows you the way the system works. This is a bad day for everything. Coming as well as going. They'd never think of asking you to start a trip on a day like this. No matter who you are."

Travis collapsed into an old, vaguely Chippendale chair. His position was not that of a man sitting, it was that of a man dropped from a great height.

"Well," Horton said. "So it goes. And listen, Trav, there was nothing I could do."

"Sure, Hort."

"I just want you to know I'm sorry. I know they've been kickin' you around lately, and don't think I don't feel I owe you something. After all, if you hadn't—"

"Easy," Travis said, glancing at Dahlinger. But the kid's ears perked.

"Well," Horton murmured, "just so's you know. Anyways I still got faith in you. And Unico will be in the same boat. If they get here tonight. So think about it. Let me see the old Pat Travis. Your luck has to change sometime."

He clenched a fist, then left.

Travis sat for a long while in the chair. Dahlinger muttered something very bitter about luck. Travis thought of telling him that it was not luck that had put them so close to Mert, but a very grim and expensive liaison with a ferociously ugly Mapping Command secretary at Aldebaran. She had told him that there was a ship in this area. But this news was not for Dahlinger's ears. And neither did he think it wise to explain to Dahlinger the thing he had done for Horton some years ago. Young Dolly was not yet ripe. Travis sighed and looked around for a bed. To his amusement he noted a four poster in the adjoining room. He went in and lay down.

Gradually the dullness began to wear off. There was a resiliency in Travis unequalled, some said, by spring steel. He began to ponder ways and means.

There was always a way. There had to be a way. Somewhere in the customs of this planet there was a key—but he did not have the time. Unico would be in tonight, others would be down before the week was out. And the one to land in two days, on the *good* day, would get the contract.

He twisted on the bed. Luck, luck, the hell with luck. If you were born with sense you were lucky and if a meteor fell on you, you were unlucky, but most of the rest of it was even from there on out. So if the legend was to continue....

He became gradually aware of the clock in the ceiling.

In the ceiling?

He stared at it. The symbols and the time meant nothing, but the clock was embedded flat in the ceiling above the bed, facing directly down.

He pondered that for a moment. Then he exploded with laughter. By jing, of course. They would have to know what time the baby was conceived. So all over Mert, in thousands of homes, there were clocks in the bedrooms, clocks

in the ceilings, and wives peering anxiously upward murmured sweetly in their husbands' ears: 4:17, darling, 4:17 and a half....

The roar of his mirth brought Dolly floundering in from the other room. Travis sprang from the bed.

"Listen, son," he bellowed, "luck be damned! You get back to the ship. Get Mapping Command to let you look at its files, find out everything you can about Mert. There's a key somewhere, boy, there's an out in there someplace, if we look hard enough. Luck! Hah! Work, boy, work, there's a key!"

He shooed Dahlinger out of the room. The young man left dazedly, but he had caught some of Travis' enthusiasm. Travis turned back to the bed feeling unreasonably optimistic. No way out, eh? Well by jingo, old Pat Travis would ride again, he could feel it in his bones.

A few moments later he had another feeling in his bones. This one was much less delightful. He was pacing past a heavy drapery when something very hard and moving very fast struck him on the head.



The first thing Travis saw when he awoke was, unmistakably, the behind of a young woman.

His head was lying flat on the floor and the girl was sitting next to him, her back toward him very close to his face. He stared at it for a long while without thinking. The pain in his head was enormous, and he was not used to pain, not any kind of pain. The whiskey men drank nowadays left no hangovers, and for a normal headache there were instantaneously acting pills, so Travis on the floor was unused to pain. And though he was by nature a courageous man it took him a while to be able to think at all, much less clearly.

Eventually he realized that he was lying on a very hard floor. His arms and legs were tightly bound. He investigated the floor. It was brick. It was wet. The dark ceiling dripped water in the flickering light from some source beyond the girl. The brick, the dripping water, the girl, all combined to make it completely unbelievable. If it wasn't for the pain he would have rolled over

and gone to sleep. But the pain. Yes the pain. He closed his eyes and lay still, hurting.

When he opened his eyes again he was better. By jing, this was ridiculous. Not a full day yet on Mert and in addition to his other troubles, now this. He did not feel alarmed, only downright angry. This business of the flickering light and being tied hand and foot was too impossible to be dangerous. He grunted feebly at the back of the girl.

"Ho," he said. "Now what in the sweet name of Billy H. Culpepper is this?"

The girl turned and looked down at him. She swiveled around on her hips and a rag-bound foot kicked him unconcernedly in the side. For the first time he saw the other two men behind her. There were two of them. The look of them was ridiculous.

The girl said something. It was a moment before he realized she was speaking in Mert, which he had to translate out of the Langkit behind his ear.

"The scourge awakes," one of the men said.

"A joy. It was my thought that in the conjunction was done perhaps murder."

"Poot. One overworries. And if death comes to this one, observe, will the money be paid? Of a surety. But this is bizarre."

"Truly bizarre," the girl nodded. Then to make her point, "also curious, unique, unusual. My thought: from what land he comes?"

"The cloth is rare," one of the men said, "observe with tight eyes the object on his wrist. A many-symboled engine—"

"My engine," the girl said positively. She reached down for his watch.

Travis jerked back. "Lay off there," he bawled in English, "you hipless—" The girl recoiled. He could not see her face but her tone was puzzled.

"What language is this? He speaks with liquid."

The larger of the two men arose and came over to him.

"Speak again scourge. But first empty the mouth."

Travis glared at the man's feet, which were wrapped in dirty cloth and smelt like the breezes blowing softly over fresh manure.

"Speak again? Speak again? Untie my hands, you maggoty slob, and I'll speak your bloody—" he went on at great length, but the man ignored him.

"Truly, he speaks as with a full mouth. But this is not Bilken talk."

"Nor is he, of clarity and also profundity, a hill man," the girl observed.

"Poot. Pootpoot," the young man stuttered, "the light! He is of *Them!*"

It took the other two a moment to understand what he meant, but Travis caught on immediately. May the Saints preserve us, he thought, they figured I was from Mert. He chuckled happily to himself. A natural mistake. Only one Earthman on this whole blinking planet, puts up at a good hotel, best in town, these boys put the snatch on me thinking I'm a visiting VIP, loaded, have no idea I'm just poor common trash like the rest of us Earthmen. Haw! His face split in a wide grin. He gathered his words from the Langkit and began to speak in Mert.

"Exactly, friends. With clarity one sees that you have been misled. I am not of Mert. I am from a far world, come here to deal with your Senate in peace. Untie me, then, and let us erase this sad but erasable mistake with a good handshake all around, and a speedy farewell."

It did not have the effect he desired. The girl stepped back from him, a dark frown on her face, and the large man above him spoke mournfully.

"Where now is the ransom?"

"And the risk," the girl said. "Was not there great risk?"

"Unhappily," the tall man observed. "One risks. One should be repaid. It is in the nature of things that one is repaid."

"Well now, boys," Travis put in from the floor, "you see it yourselves. I'm flat as a—" he paused. Apparently the Merts had no word for pancake. "My pockets are—windy. No money is held therein."

"Still," the tall man mused absently, "this must have friends. On the great

ships lie things of value. Doubt?"

"Not," the girl said firmly. "But I see over the hills coming a problem."

"How does it appear?"

"In the shape of disposal. See thee. Such as will come from the great ships, of value though it be, can it not be clarifiably identified by such pootian authorities as presently seek our intestines?"

"Ha!" the tall man snorted in anger. "So. Truth shapes itself."

"Will we not, then," continued the girl, "risk sunlight on our intestines in pursuing this affair?"

"We will," the young man spoke up emphatically. "We will of inevitability. Navel. Our risk is unpaid. So passes the cloud."

"But in freedom for this," the girl warily indicated Travis, "lies risk in great measure. Which way lie his ribs? Can we with profit slice his binds? He is of Them. What coils in his head? What strikes?"

They were all silent. Travis, having caught but not deciphered most of the conversation, glanced quickly from face to face. The girl had backed out into the light and he could see her now clearly, and his mouth fell open. She was thickly coated with dirt but she was absolutely beautiful. The features were perfect, lovely, the mouth was promising and full. Under the ragged skirt and the torn sooty blouse roamed surfaces of imaginable perfection. He had difficulty getting back to the question at hand. All the while he was thinking other voices inside him were whispering. "By jing, by jing, she's absolutely...."

The two men were completely unlike. One was huge, from this angle he was enormous. He had what looked like a dirty scarf on his head, madonna-like, which would have been ridiculous except for the mountainous shoulders below it and the glittering knife stuck in his wide leather belt. The shaft of the knife flickered wickedly in the light. It was the only clean thing about him.

The other man was young, probably still in his teens. Curly-haired and blond and much cleaner than the other two, with a softness in his face the others lacked. But in his belt he carried what appeared to be—what was, a well-

oiled and yawning barreled blunderbuss.

So they sat for a long moment of silence. He had time to observe that what they were sitting in was in all likelihood a sewer. It ran off into darkness but there was a dim light in the distance and other voices far away, and he gathered that this was not all of the—gang—that had abducted him. But it was beginning to penetrate, now, as he began to understand their words, that they were unhappy about letting him go. He was about to argue the point when the big man stepped suddenly forward and knelt beside him. He shut out the light, Travis could not see. The last thing he heard was the big man grunting as he threw the blow, like a rooting pig.



When he awoke this time the pain had moved over to the side of his neck. There was no light at all and he lay wearily for a long while in the blackness. He had no idea how much time had passed. He could tell from the brick wet below him that he was still in the sewer, or at least some other part of it, and, considering the last turn of the conversation, he thought he could call himself lucky to be alive.

But as his strength returned so did his anger. He began to struggle with his bonds. There was still the problem of the contract. He regarded that bitterly. He could just possibly die down here, but his main worry was still the contract. Allspace would be proud of him—but Allspace might never know.

He did nothing with the bonds, which he discovered unhappily were raw leather thongs. Eventually he saw a light coming down the corridor. He saw with a thrill of real pleasure that it was the girl. The young man was tagging along behind her but the big man was absent. The girl knelt down by him and regarded him quizically.

"Do you possess pain?"

"Maiden, I possess and possess unto the limits of capacity."

"My thought is sorrow. But this passes. Consider: your blood remains wet."

Travis caught her meaning. He swore feebly.

"It was very nearly let dry," the girl said. "But solutions conjoined. It was noted at the last, even as the blade descended, that such friends as yours could no doubt barter for Mertian coin, untraceable, thus restoring your value."

"Clever, clever. Oh, clever," Travis said drily.

To his surprise, the girl blushed.

"Overgracious. Overkind. Speed thanks awry of this windy head, aim at yon Lappy"—she indicated the boy who stood smiling shyly behind her—"it was he who thought you alive, he my brother."

"Ah," Travis said. "Well, bless you, boy." He nodded at the boy, who very nearly collapsed with embarrassment. Travis wondered about this 'brother' bit. Brother in crime? The Langkit did not clarify. But the girl turned back on him a smile as glowing as a tiny nova. He gazed cheerfully back.

"Tude and the others sit now composing your note. A matter of weight, confounded in darkness." She lowered her eyes becomingly. "Few of us," she apologized, "have facility in letters."

"A ransom note," Travis growled. "Great Gods and Little—Tude? Who is Tude?"

"The large man who, admittedly hastening before the horse, did plant pain in your head."

"Ah," Travis said, smiling grimly. "We shall presently plow his field—"

"Ho!" the girl cried, agitated. "Speak not in darkness. Tude extends both north and south, a man of dimension as well as choler. He boasts Fors in the tenth in good aspect to Bonken, giving prowess at combat, and Lyndal in the fourth bespeaks a fair ending. Avoid, odd man, foreordained disaster."

In his urge to say a great many things Travis stammered. The girl laid a cool grimy hand lightly on his arm and tried to soothe him.

"With passivity and endurance. The night shall see you free. Tude comes in close moment with the note. Quarrel not at the price, sign, and there will be a conclusion to the matter. We are not retrograde here. As we set our tongues,

so lie our deeds."

"Yes, well, all right," Travis grumbled. "But there will come—all right all right. My name shall be inscribed, let your note contain what it will. But I would have speed. There are matters of gravity lying heavily ahead."

The girl cocked her head oddly to one side.

"You sit on points. A rare thing. Lies your horoscope in such confusion that you know not the drift of the coming hours?"

Travis blinked.

"Horoscope?" he said.

"Surely," the girl said, "the astrologers of your planet did preach warning to you of the danger of this day, and whether, in the motions of your system, lay success or failure. Or is it a question of varying interpretations? Did one say you good while the other—"

Travis grinned broadly. Then he sobered. It would quite logically follow that these people, primitive as they were, might not be able to conceive of a land where astrology was not Lord over all. A human trait. But he saw dangerous ground ahead. He began very cautiously and diplomatically to explain himself, saying that while astrology was practiced among his own people, it had not yet become as exact an art as it was on Mert, and only a few had as yet learned to trust it.

The effect on the girl was startling. She seemed for a moment actually terrified when it was finally made clear to her. She abruptly retreated into a corner with her brother and mumbled low frantic sounds. Travis grinned to himself but kept his face stoically calm. But now the girl was out in the light and he could examine her clearly for the first time, and he forgot about astrology entirely.

She was probably in her early twenties. She was dirtier than a well-digger's shoes. She ran with a pack of cutthroats and thieves in what was undoubtedly the lowest possible level of Mertian society. But there was something about her, something Travis responded to very strongly, which he could not define. Possibly something about the set of her hair, which was dark and very long,

or perhaps in the mouth—yes the mouth, now observe the mouth—and also maybe in the figure.... But he could not puzzle it out. A girl from the gutter. But—perhaps that was it, there seemed to be no gutter about her. There was real grace in her movements, a definite style in the way she held her head, something gentle and very fine.

Now watch that, Travis boy, he told himself sharply, watch that. A psychological thing, certainly. She probably reminds you of a long forgotten view of your mother.

The girl arose and came back, followed this time by the young man. She had become suddenly and intensely interested in his world—she had apparently taken it for granted that it was exactly like hers, only with space ships—and Travis obliged her by giving a brief sketch of selected subjects: speeds, wonders, what women wore, and so on. Gradually he worked the conversation back around to her, and she began to tell him about herself.

Her name was, euphonically, Navel. This was not particularly startling to Travis. Navel is a pretty word and the people of Mert had chosen another, uglier sound for use when they meant 'belly button,' which was their right. Travis accepted it, and then listened to her story.

She had not always been a criminal, run with the sewer packs. She had come, as a matter of proud record, from an extremely well-to-do family which featured two Senators, one Horary Astrologer, and a mercantile tycoon—which accounted, Travis thought, for her air of breeding. The great tragedy of her life, however, the thing that had brought her to her present pass, was her abysmally foul horoscope. She had not been a planned baby. Her parents felt great guilt about it, but the deed was done and there was no help for it. She had been born with Huck retrograde in the tenth house, opposing Fors retrograde in the fourth, and so on, and so on, so that even the most amateur astrologer could see right at her birth that she was born for no good, destined for some shameful end.

She told about it with an air of resigned cheerfulness, saying that after all her parents had really done more than could be expected of them. Both with her and her similarly accidental brother Lappy—now *there*, Travis thought, was a careless couple—whose horoscope, she said dolefully, was even worse than her own. The parents had sent her off to school up through the first few years,

and had given her a handsome dowry when they disowned her, and they did the same with Lappy a few years later.

But Navel held no bitterness. She was a girl born inevitably for trouble—her horoscope forecast that she would be a shame to her parents, would spend much of her life in obscure, dangerous places, and would reflect no credit on anyone who befriended her. So, for a child like this, what reasonable citizen would waste time and money and love, when it was certain beforehand that the child grown up would be as likely as not to end up a murderess? No, the schools were reserved for the children of promise, as were the jobs and the parties and the respect later on. The only logical course, the habitual custom, was for the parents to disown their evilly aspected children, hoping only that such tragedies as lay in the future would not be too severe, and at least would not be connected with the family name.

And Navel was not bitter. But there was only one place for her, following her exile from her parents' home. A career in business was of course impossible. Prospective employers took one look at your horoscope and—zoom, the door. The only work she could find was menial in the extreme—dishwashing, street cleaning, and so on. So she turned, and Lappy turned, as thousands of their ill-starred kind had turned before them for generations, to the wild gangs of the sewers.

And it was not nearly so bad as it might have seemed. The sewer gangs were composed of thousands of people just like herself, homeless, cast out, and they came from all levels of society to found a society of their own. They offered each other what none of them could have found anywhere else on Mert: appreciation, companionship, and even if life in the sewers was filthy, it was also tolerable, and many even married and had children—the luckiest of whom quickly disowned their parents and were adopted by wealthy families.

But the thing which impressed Travis most of all was that none of these people were bitter at their fate. Navel could not recall ever hearing of any organized attempt at rebellion. Indeed, most of the sewer people believed more strongly in the astrology of Mert than did the business men on the outside. For each day every one of them could look at the dirt of himself, at the disease of his surroundings, and could see that the message of his

horoscope was true: he was born to no good end. And since it had been drummed into these people from their earliest childhood that only the worst could be expected of them, they gave in, quite humanly, to the predictions, and went philosophically forth to live up to them. They watched the daily horoscopes intently for the Bad Days, realizing that what was bad for the normal people must be a field day for themselves, and they issued out of the sewers periodically on binges of robbery, kidnapping, and worse. In this way they lived up to the promise of their stars, fulfilled themselves, and also managed to eat. And few if any ever questioned the justice of their position.

Travis sat listening, stunned. For a long while the contract and how to get out of here and all the rest of it was forgotten. He sat watching the girl and her shy brother as they spoke self-consciously to him, and began to understand what they must be feeling. Travis was from outside the sewers, he had stayed at the grand hotel—his horoscope, whether he believed it or not, must be very fine. And so they did him unconscious homage, much in the manner of low caste Hindus speaking to a Bramin. It was unnerving.

Gradually the boy Lappy began to speak also, and Travis realized with surprise that the boy was in many ways remarkable. As Navel's brother—Navel, Travis gathered with a twinge of deep regret, was the big Tude's 'friend', and Tude was the leader of this particular gang—young Lappy had a restful position. He was kept out of most of the rough work and allowed to pursue what he shamelessly called his 'studies', and he guessed proudly that he must have stolen nearly every book in the Consul's library. His particular hobbies, it turned out, were math and physics. He had a startling command of both, and some of the questions he asked Travis were embarrassing. But the boy was leaning forward, breathlessly drinking in the answers, when Tude came back.

The big man loomed over them suddenly on his quiet rag-bound feet, frightening the boy and causing the girl to flinch. He made a number of singularly impolite remarks, but Travis said nothing and bided his time. He regarded the big man with patient joy, considering with delight such bloodthirsty effects as judo could produce on this one—Fors and Bonken be damned—if they ever untied his hands.

Eventually, unable to get a rise out of him, the big man shoved a paper down

before his nose and told him to sign it. He pulled out that wickedly clean knife and freed Travis' hand just enough for him to move his wrist. Hoping for the best, Travis signed. Tude chuckled, said something nastily to the girl, the girl said something chilling in return, and the big man cuffed her playfully on the shoulder. Then he lumbered away.

Travis sat glaring after him. The contract, the need to escape flooded back into his mind. The eclipse might be ending even now. Unico would already be here, probably one or two others as well. And this ransom business might take a week. He swore to himself. Pat Travis, the terror of the skies, held captive by a bunch of third rate musical comedy pirates while millions lay in wait in the city above. And oh my Lord, he thought, stricken, what will people say when they hear—he had to get out.

He glanced cautiously at the girl and the boy, who were gazing at him ingenuously. He saw instantly that the way, if there was a way, lay through them. But the plan had not yet formed when the boy leaned forward and spoke.

"I have an odd thing in my head," Lappy said bashfully, "that nevertheless radiates joy to my mind. In my reading I have seen things leap together from many books, forming a whole, and the whole is rare. Can you, in your wisdom, confirm or deny what I have seen? It is this—"

He spoke a short series of sentences. Navel tried to shush him, embarrassed, but he doggedly went on. And Travis, stricken, found himself suddenly paying close attention.

For the words Lappy said, with minor variations, were Isaac Newton's Laws of Motion.



"There are the seven planets," Navel was saying gravely, "and the two lights—that is, the sun and the moon. The first planet, that nearest the sun, is called Rym. Rym is the planet of intellect, of the ordinary mind. Second, is Lyndal, the planet of love, beauty, parties, marriage, and things of a gentle nature. Third is Fors, planet of action, strife. Fourth is Bonken, planet of beneficence,

of gain, money, health. Next comes Huck, orb of necessity, the Greater Infortune, which brings men most trouble of all. Then Weepen, planet of illusion, of dreamers and poets and, poorly aspected, liars and cheats. And finally there is Sharb, planet of genius, of sudden cataclysms."

"I see," Travis murmured.

"But it is not only these planets and their aspects which is important, it is also to be considered such houses and signs as through which these planets transit...."

She went on, but Travis was having difficulty following her. He could not help but return to Newton's Laws. It was incredible. Here on this backward planet, mired in an era roughly equivalent to the time of the Renaissance, an event was taking place almost exactly at the same time as it had happened, long ago, on Earth. It had been Isaac Newton, then. It was, incredibly, this frail young man named Lappy now. For unless Travis was greatly mistaken, Navel's kid brother was an authentic genius. And such a genius as comes once in a hundred years.

So, naturally, Lappy would have to come home with Travis. The boy was hardly college age as yet. Sent to school by Allspace, given a place in the great Allspace laboratories at Aldebaran, young Lappy might eventually make the loss of the contract at Mert seem puny in comparison to the things that head of his could produce. For Lappy was a natural resource, just as certainly as any mine on Mert, and since the advent of Earth science meant Mert would no longer be needing him, Lappy could go along with Travis and still leave him a clear conscience.

But the question still remained: how? He could not even get himself out, yet, let alone Lappy. And the girl. What about the girl?

He brooded, groping for an out. But in the meanwhile he listened while the girl outlined Mert's system of astrology. He had realized finally that the key to the business lay there. Astrology was these people's most powerful motivating force. If he could somehow turn it to his advantage—He listened to the girl. And eventually found his plan.

"Ho!" he said abruptly. Startled, the girl stared at him.

"Lightning in the brain," Travis grinned, "solutions effervesce. Attend. Of surety, are not *places* on Mert also ruled by the stars? Is it not true that towns and villages do also have horoscopes?"

Navel blinked.

"Why, see thee, it is in the nature of things, odd man, that all matter is governed by the planets. How else come explanations, for example, of natural catastrophes, fires, plagues, which affect whole cities and not others? And consider war, does not one country win, and the other lose? Of a surety different aspects obtain...."

"Joy then," Travis said. "But do further observe. Is it not so, in your astrology, that a man's horoscope may often conflict with that of the place wherein he dwells? Is it not so that, often, a man is promised greater success in other regions, where the ruling stars more closely and friendlily conjoin his own?"

"Your mind leaps obstacles and homes to the truth," Navel said approvingly. "Many times has it been made clear that a man's fortune lies best in places ruled by his Ascendant, as witness, for example, those who are advised to take to the sea, or to southern lands...."

"Intoxication!" Travis cried out happily, "then is our goal made known. Consider: from your poor natal horoscope, in this city, this land, no fortune arises. You doom yourself, with Lappy, by remaining here. But what business is this? Seek you not better times? Could you not go forth to another place, and so become people of gravity, of substance, of moment?"

The girl regarded for a moment, puzzled, then caught his point and shook her head sadly.

"Odd man, without profit. You misconstrue. Such as we, my brother and I, are not condemned by place, but by twistings of the character. My natal Huck, retrograde in the tenth, gives an untrustworthy, criminous person. It would be so here, there, anywhere. My pattern is set. Such travels as you describe are for those who conflict only with place. I, and my brother, it is our sad fortune to conflict with *all*."

"But this is the core," Travis insisted. "The conflict is with *Mert*! Consider,

such travail as is yours stems from the radiations of Huck, of Weepen, of Scharb. But should you remove yourself beyond their reach, across great vastnesses of space to where other planets subtend—and in their alien radiation extinguish and nullify those of Huck—what fortune comes then? What rises, what leaps in joy?"

The girl sat speechless, staring at Travis with great soft eyes. The boy Lappy, who until that moment had been grinning happily over the news that his laws were true, suddenly understood what Travis was saying and let his mouth fall open.

But the girl sat without expression. Then, to Travis' dismay, a slow dark look of disgust came over her face.

"This," she said ominously, "this smacks of *vetching*."

The word fell like a sudden fog. Lappy, who had begun to smile, cut it sharply off. Travis, remembering what vetching meant to these people, gathered his forces.

"Woman," he said bitingly, "you speak in offense, but with patience and kindness I heal your insult. I control my choler, but my blood flows hot, therefore fasten your tongue. Tell me not that I have overvalued you, for your brain is clear, your courage thick. Wherefore speak of vetch? What vetch is there in travel? He vetches who leaves a certainty for another certainty, who attempts to avoid his starry fate. But you go from a certain end to an end not certain at all, to places of dark mystery, of grim foreboding. It may be that you perish, or pain in the extreme, as well as gain fortune. The end is not clear. This then is not vetching. Now retreat your words, and reply to me as one does to a friend, a companion, one who seeks your good."

He sat tautly while the girl thought it out. Eventually she dropped her eyes in submission and he sighed inwardly with relief. It was accomplished. He would have to shore it up perhaps with a little elaboration, but it was accomplished.

Ten minutes later he was standing free and unbound in the passageway. It was just barely in time. Down the round dark tunnel two men came.



Navel stopped gingerly over the bodies and gazed at Travis with awestruck admiration.

"A rare skill," she murmured, "they did flip and gyrate as dry leaves in the wind."

"Observe then," Travis said ominously, inspecting meanwhile the long slash down his arm with which Tude had nearly gotten him "and learn. And in the future receive my words with planetary respect."

"I will."

"And I," added Lappy, shaken.

"Fair. Bright. Now attend. How lies the path?"

"Through more such as these, I fear. This place in which we trouble lies at a dead end. We must proceed through great halls where many sit waiting, ere we arrive at the light."

"No other way? Think now."

"None."

Travis sighed.

"And they talk about luck. Well boy," he turned to Lappy, "give me your blunderbuss. Obtain that one's knife"—he indicated the sleeping Tude—"and let us carve our way out into the sunshine."

But as it turned out, the getting free was much easier than he had anticipated. There was only one band, the girl's own, between them and the opening, and these had fortunately just finished their evening meal when Travis stalked, black, gaunt and murderous, out of the tunnel into their large round room. Part of it was the surprise, part of it was the sudden knowledge that big Tude and the other man had already tried to stop him, but most of it was simply the look of him. He was infinitely ready. They were not, had no reason to be, and they took it automatically for granted that a man this confident must have the stars behind him. They regarded him thoughtfully as he went on by. No one moved. They were a philosophical people. When he had gone, taking the boy and girl with him, they discussed it thoroughly.

Out under the sky at last it was pitch black and the stars were shining. Travis realized that he had been in the sewer almost a full 24 hours. That meant that the eclipse was done, tomorrow would be a good day. There was not much time.

He commandeered the first carriage to come by, routing three elegantly dressed but unwarlike young men who fled in terror. He saw with relief that they thought him only another sewer rat, for if word of an Earthman robbing the local citizens ever got out there would be hell to pay, and in addition to his other troubles he could not abide that. He told Navel to head for the field where old 29 rested. Thoroughly bushed and beginning now to feel a woeful hunger, he sat back to brood.

At the ship young Trippe greeted him with haggard astonishment. He jumped forward joyfully.

"Trav! By jig, Trav, I thought we'd lost you. Old Dolly's over at the local police sta—" He stopped abruptly and stood slack-jawed as Navel and Lappy clambered fearfully through the lock. Travis glanced back. No spectators. Good.

"Now what in the sweet silly name—" Trippe began, but Travis stopped him.

"Russ, be a good kid. See if you can get me something to eat. Haven't had a bite in 24 hours."

"Sure, Trav, sure, only—what's with the Lower Depths here?"

"You might show them the showers," Travis grinned. "Or at least turn on the air conditioning. But listen, anything new on the contract?"

Trippe's face fell. "Not a thing. Even worse. Let me tell you. But ho, the food." He dashed off. Travis collapsed into a chair. A few moments later Trippe came back bearing food, but his eyes by now had begun to penetrate the dirt of the girl, and he stood watching her, bemused. Then suddenly he began to look happier than he had in several days. Travis told him briefly what had happened in the sewer, also about the brains of Lappy. Trippe was impressed. But he continued to regard the girl.

"Well," Travis said, munching, "fill me in on what's been going on. The

eclipse come off?"

Trippe jerked. He focussed on Travis unhappily.

"Oh boy, did it come off. Wait'll you hear. Listen, you know the way it is now, I think they're going to kick *all* Earthmen off this planet. The M.C. says we may have to leave and come back a hundred years from now. Not anybody going to get a contract now."

"What happened?"

"Well, you wouldn't believe it. You have to understand these people's astrology. You know the little moon these people have—Felda, they call it—it's only a tiny thing, really only a few hundred yards wide. Well, when the Mapping Command first came by here they set down on that Moon and set up a listening post before landing, you know, the way they always do, to size up the situation through telescopes, radio, all that. Mostly they just orbit but this time they landed. God knows why. And took off again, naturally, throwing in the star drive. So today the eclipse comes off all right, but it comes off late."

He could not help smiling.

"You see what happened. A star drive is a hell of a force. It altered the orbit of the moon. Not enough to make any real difference, just a few hours a year, only minutes a day, but boy, you want to hear these people howl. And I guess you can see their point. Every movement that damn moon makes is important to them, they know where it should be to the inch. And now not only is it slightly off course, but so is every ephemeris printed on Mert. And they have them printed up, I understand, for the next thousand years. Which runs into money. We offered to pay, of course, but paying isn't going to help. It seems we've also messed up interpretations, predictions, the whole doggone philosophy. Oh it's a real ding dong. But contract? Not in a million years."

Travis sighed. That seemed to put the cap on it, all right. After all, when you start pushing people's moons around, where will it end? He brooded, his appetite gone. But he made a last effort.

"Did you discover anything at all we could use?"

"Nope. Not a thing. I finally figured the only thing to do was work on the astrology end of it, you know, maybe we could argue about interpretations. These people love to argue about interpretations. But no soap. It's too complicated. To learn enough even to argue would take a couple of years. And besides Unico is here, and also Randall, and they all have the same idea. Anyway, I don't think it would work. The eclipse is too definite. You can't argue the eclipse."

"Well," Travis said with approval, "you were on the right track. You did what you could. At least we got *something* out of the deal." He indicated Lappy, who was at that moment fervidly examining the interior of the viewscreen.

Trippe nodded, but his eyes were on Navel.

"By jing," he said suddenly, "your luck holds good, no matter what. I never saw the beat of it—"

"Luck?" Travis fumed, "what luck?"

"Look, Trav, what else could you call it? You fall in a sewer, you come up with Isaac Newton and a gorgeous doll. It's uncanny, that's what it is, uncanny."

Travis lapsed into wordless musing on Navel, planets, people.

Come to think of it, he thought, it *is* uncanny.

At that moment there was a pounding on the lock. Travis quickly shooed Navel and Lappy into hiding, then cautiously went to the door. He relaxed. It was Ed Horton.

"I saw you come back, Trav. Mighty glad. But I knew you'd make it. Old Pat Travis always comes through. Aint that right, Pat?"

He tottered in the doorway. Travis caught the sweet scent of strong brew. He stepped forward to help him but Horton stood up grandly, waving him away. His mouth creased in an amiable grin.

"Diomed," he announced proudly, "is a nine planet system."

After which he fell backwards out of the door.

Trav ran to the door, stared down into the dark. Horton sat upright at the foot of the ladder.

"Sall right ole buddy. Dint mean to stay. Only thought you'd like to know natural sci-yen-tiffy fack. Diomed is nine plan' system."

He rose on wobbly but cheerful legs.

"No favoritism there, hey? Science. I just tell you a fack, you take it from there. No favoritism tall."

He lurched away mumbling cheerily, his obligation fulfilled.

Travis stared after him, wheels turning in his brain. Fack? A nine planet system. It jelled slowly, then broke.

Nine planets.

The key.

He turned slowly on Trippe, his eyes swivelling like twin dark cannon.

"What's he say?" Trippe said, half-smiling. "Boy, he was sure—"

"Did you know this was a nine planet system?"

"Why ... sure, Trav. But what—"

"And did you take the trouble to examine their astrology?"

"Certainly. What the heck—"

"And you call it luck." Travis sighed, then broke into a radiant grin. "Why there's your bloomin' answer, you sad silly dreamin'—there's your bloomin' answer!" He sailed over to a drawer, grabbed a batch of fresh contracts, then flashed toward the door.

"Hold the fort," he bawled over his shoulder, "break out a big bottle and small glasses! We got a contract, lad, we got a contract!"

He vanished triumphantly into the night.



Old 29 was homing. Travis felt the great soft peace of deep space close over him. All was right with the world. A clean and sparkling Navel, well-bathed now and almost frighteningly beautiful, sat worshipfully at his feet dressed in a pair of Dahlinger's pajamas. Both Trippe and Dahlinger were regarding him with wonder and delight, and as he sat gazing down at them fondly he recalled with pleasure the outraged faces of the men from Unico, that robber outfit.

"Pat Travis," he chuckled, patting the fat contract in his pocket, "the luckless Pat Travis rides again." He turned an eye on the staring Trippe.

"My boy," he said paternally, "speaks me no speaks about luck, from this day forth. All the material was in your hands, there was no luck involved. All you had to do was use it."

"But Trav, I still don't get it. I've been thinkin' all night, all the while you were gone...."

"The planet Pluto," Travis said evenly, "was discovered by Earthmen, finally, in the year 1930. At that time we were approximately 300 years ahead, technologically, of the people of Mert. A similar case exists for Neptune, which was not discovered, although adequate telescopes had long been in use, until 1846." He paused and gazed happily around. "Does the light dawn?"

"Holy cow!"

"Exactly. Diomed is a nine planet system. For which 'fack' thank old Ed Horton, who returned a favor done many years ago. Luck? Only if doing favors for people is lucky. Which I suppose you could make a case for. But in the astrology of Diomed III—an astrology I took great pains to understand—how many planets are considered? Let us examine. Rym, Fors, Lyndal, Bonken, Huck, Weepen, and Sharb. And then there are also the two 'lights,' that is, the sun and the moon. But how many *planets* are there? Counting Mert as one, add them up. It comes out eight. Not nine. Eight. But Diomed is a nine planet system. Bless Ed Horton. What happened to the missing planet?"

Dahlinger whooped. "They didn't know they had one!"

Travis grinned. "With surety. They didn't know it existed. If they had their astrology would certainly have shown it. So it had obviously, like our own Pluto at a similar time, never been discovered."

He paused once again while Dahlinger and Trippe regarded him with delight.

"And you," Trippe said, "you showed them where it was."

Travis clucked. "I did not. For one thing, I didn't know where it was. I simply told him, very regretfully, that there *was* one, but the situation being what it was, I couldn't allow him to use our telescopes to plot its orbit. Unless, you see, there existed a concrete agreement between us.

"I added that I had heard that Earthmen would shortly be leaving his planet. Very unhappily I told him he could not expect to produce a telescope of the necessary power within at least the next hundred years. And even then, it would be many more years before they actually found it. I was very sorry about the whole business, so I just thought I'd drop by to offer my regrets."

"And he leaped at the chance."

"No. You rush to conclusions. He did not leap at the chance. He sat very quietly thinking about it. It was a gruesome sight. I could sympathize with him. On the one hand he had us, the unknown, moon-moving Us, with which he wanted no traffic whatever. But on the other side there was the knowledge of that planet moving all unwatched out in the black, casting down its radiations, be they harmful or good, and no way to know in what sign the thing was, or what house, or what effect it would have on him, *was having* on him, even as he sat there. Oh he struggled, but I knew I had him. He signed the contract. I think I may say, that it is among the most liberal contracts we have ever signed."

There was a long moment of silence in the ship. The young men sat grinning foolishly.

"So let me hear no more about luck," said Travis firmly. "In the future, sons, put your shoulders to the wheel...."

But the attention of the two was already wandering. They were both beginning to gaze once more upon the lovely Navel, who was quite shyly but

very womanly gazing back. He saw Trippe look at Dahlinger, Dahlinger glare at Trippe, their hackles rising. He looked down at Navel in alarm.

Born to cause trouble?

Oh no, he thought abruptly, seeing a whole new world beginning to open up, oh no, oh no....



*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CONQUEST OVER
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