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He sought an empire in the stars

DESTINY'S ORBIT

David Grinnell



Complete & Unabridged

INTERPLANETARY NO-MAN'S-LAND

Though Ajax Calkins was wealthy enough to buy anything on Earth his heart desired, the one thing he wanted most was strictly forbidden. That was a world of his own—a planet, however small, which would be his private kingdom in the sky. The Earth-Mars Space Administration stood in his path. They would tolerate no such Eighteenth Century derring-do in the commercial and workaday interplanetary channels of the Twenty-First Century. Empire-building was out.

But when an offer from a bearded stranger opened the way to just such an adventure, Ajax leapt at the chance. In his luxury spacecraft *Destiny* he shot out through the inner planets to the tiny world that waited a king—and, unwittingly to a monster outer-planet empire that waited a detonator for cosmic war.

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Ajax Calkins

A man with a destiny and no place to put it.

The Third Least Wuj

This loyal subject put all of his eight hairy arms to work for his master.

Emily Hackenschmidt

A spunky gal who stuck by her guns—even when they were taken away from her.

Anton Smallways

Beneath his hard exterior, there beat the heart of a traitor.

Brother Augustus

An advocate of peaceful repose of the soul, whose past boasted of disturbing the peace.

DESTINY'S ORBIT

by

DAVID GRINNELL

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David Grinnell is the author of

ACROSS TIME (D-286)
EDGE OF TIME (D-362)
THE MARTIAN MISSILE (D-465)

By order of his majesty, Ajax I, this history
is gratefully dedicated to his most loyal and
faithful of Terrestrial advocates:

Elsie W. and Hannes B.

TIMES WITHOUT NUMBER

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CHAPTER ONE

FROM WHERE he sat, he could look over the wide waters of the Great Slave Lake, stretching as far as the eye could see like a small estuary. Any other man so fortunate as to have such an estate and such a view would have been content to remain there, resting his eyes on the clear untraveled northern waters during the few months they were free of the chill and ice of the long Canadian winters. But not Ajax Calkins.

Ajax sat there and his eyes may have roved over the magnificent view from the wide wall-length window of his study, but his thoughts were not on the splendors of the known and possessed. He owned many acres along that distant frigid shore, landscaped, warmed by electronic mirrors set at discreetly hidden positions among the wide banks of slender young evergreens; he owned the vast sprawling mansion whose many rooms were his. He owned the artfully concealed airport, and the water-skimming fleet of air-cushion boats now hangared in the low plastic building along the lake front.

He was just about master of all he surveyed, about as much master as any single man could be in that year of world peace and prosperity, 2080. He was among the world's several great billionaires, men whose fortunes had been derived from the basic discoveries of the space age,

DESTINY'S ORBIT

now in its second century, settling down to routine and commerce and stability.

And he was unhappy.

He held a book in his lap and, glancing down once again at the printed page, let his eyes rove; he shut the book with an impatient sigh, and reaching out, flicked his hand over a radiosensitive globe resting beside his wide form-fitting contour chair.

There was a shuffling noise behind him, a discreet cough, and a voice said, "You rang, sir?"

Ajax looked up, though he was quite familiar with the butler's bland visage. He looked over the tranquil, expressionless features, designed to instill confidence and calm. The butler's countenance had been designed by a master roboticist to duplicate exactly the basic features of the famous butler types of Queen Victoria's golden reign of centuries past.

"Jenkins," Ajax said in a soft, musing voice. "I am bored. I long for more worlds to conquer."

"Yes, sir," replied the robotic servant in respectful tones. "Yours is a laudable ambition. If it were in my power, I should give you the information you need in order to discover and conquer more worlds."

"True, true," said Ajax, perfectly well aware that the butler was specifically designed always to agree with him. Though, in this case, he thought to himself, enthusiastic agreement was the only course that a truly intelligent mind could possibly take.

"In this book," said Ajax, "I have been reading once again of the great Pizarro and his courageous followers. Singlehanded, practically alone, they took for themselves an entire nation, a mighty empire. Ah, yes, those were the days. Bravery and daring were rewarded. What is there now for such a man?"

The butler nodded his head, issued the expected sympathetic sigh.

Ajax went on, stroking his thin mustache thoughtfully. For a young man of twenty-five, he was fairly good look-

DESTINY'S ORBIT

ing, though his pale blue eyes could have stood some deepening of color and his rather medium brown hair was less than distinctive. Ajax gritted his teeth, moved his frame—he was something short of six feet tall—another disappointment to him.

“I tell you, in those days there were rewards for men of daring. A man could found his own kingdom, raise his own standard. Thrones were toppled, new thrones established. I am such a man—and my tragedy is that I live in the wrong time.”

The butler clicked again sympathetically. “I am sure you will find your own kingdom, sir. You are brilliant, clever, kind, wise, daring, courageous. . . .”

“Yes, yes,” said Ajax waving a hand. “But such quests are illegal; all the worlds to be taken are already had. Do you realize how hampered I am? I the Calkins, heir of the *Calkans* fortunes, benefactor of the whole space world, and yet held back here by lack of a world. Had I been born fifty years ago, or a hundred, I could reach out and seize myself a land. But now . . .”

“It’s sad, sir, that the Earth-Mars Space Administration has claimed jurisdiction over all within our borders—and that there is nothing outside worth the having,” said the butler.

“Yes,” said Ajax. “Do you realize what men have done in the past? Think of Captain Cook, who found Australia; Cortez and the taking of Peru; even the White Rajah of Sarawak—now there was an adventurer on the old scale. But for me—what island remains to be found? What new continent to claim? What throne to seize? Nothing, I tell you, nothing. I have advertised. I have offered support to discoverers and adventurers, from Mercury clear to the asteroids; no takers.

“I have a first class spaceship at my disposal, my splendid yacht the *Destiny*. I have a flag, my own, folded and stowed away in the cabin, waiting for the day it can be unfurled above that land which will be mine, the kingdom of Ajax. And here I sit, with the money and its potential power that a world gives me—tied hand and foot by pointless, soul-

DESTINY'S ORBIT

killing laws. A lesser man would have long since despaired, Jenkins."

Ajax jumped up, began to stride back and forth across the room. As he spoke he orated, recounting the days of centuries past, when valiant men set sail in little ships to find new islands, to wrest old empires from primitive hands, to explore and dare, to trek the frozen Antarctic, to battle the jungles and swamps. "Rhodesia!" shouted Ajax, raising himself to the fine full frenzy of his dream. "The very name rings of one man's glory. Rhodesia!

"And where is Ajaxia? Where?"

The robot butler, the very figure of a faithful family retainer, stood silent, unable constitutionally to disagree, but unable equally to offer any help. As Ajax waved a hand to the window, pointing to the north, and yelling despairingly, "Where?" there was a discreet buzzing in the room.

The butler shuffled over to the paneled cabinet, clicked it open and removed a rolled sheet of yellow paper which had just materialized in the teleprinter. He brought it over to the young man, who snatched it from him, thrust one foot ahead of him, struck a commander's pose, and started to scan the message.

His eyes suddenly bulged. He gulped. He turned pale, then red. Losing his pose, he jumped, waved the message, and dashed over to the radio cabinet. "It's come!" he shouted in a voice strangely high-pitched from excitement. "Look," he cried. "Read this!" He waved the message at the butler, but that official merely shook its head. It was not possible yet to construct a robot that could read and still be portable or ambulatory.

Ajax read it aloud. One of his ads had been answered. The message was from an official of the Martian branch offices of *Calkans*. A person had answered the ad for a new world to conquer. If Ajax would communicate with him, he would give Calkins all the details.

Ajax rang up the official, dialing in the number. There was a wait of several minutes while the connections were made.

DESTINY'S ORBIT

The branch manager's face appeared rather mistily, blanking out several times, until Ajax wiped out the telecast, realizing that interplanetary distances made connections of that type unsatisfactory, even on his top-priced top-range equipment.

But the voice connection was good.

"There is a party who has come here," said the branch manager after parrying Ajax's excited barrage of questions. "He gave his name as one Anton Smallways and says he represents a group of asteroid prospectors and miners. He states that they have an airtight claim to the independence of certain areas under their control and that he wishes to make a deal with you, as they need funds to assist in the areas' development. His claim seems to be authentic, Mr. Calkins, though he would not give full details unless he sees you."

"When?" shouted Ajax. "When can he come to Earth and discuss it with me here?"

"Sir," said the Martian branch officer, "he says he cannot undertake that trip. He requests that you come to Mars. Meet him in Syrtis Major Prime City as soon as you can and he will prove his point."

"Set up the date!" said Ajax quickly. "I'll leave at once! I'll be on Mars as soon as the *Destiny* can make it—and it's the fastest yacht private money can buy!"

"Very good, sir," said the man on Mars, "I'll advise you as quickly as it can be arranged." His voice faded out as the connection was broken.

Ajax stood still. His heart was beating. "Butler!" he said. "I think this is it! Ajaxia . . . you're waiting!"

There was a faint ring somewhere in the distant halls of the sprawling building. The butler shuffled rapidly out.

Ajax eased himself down in his great chair and leaned forward, stared out the window, his eyes rapt with thought. He heard the shuffling sounds of the butler coming back. He heard a sharp quick tread behind him, but his thoughts were far away and he had forgotten that there was someone until the butler coughed.

"There's a lady here to see you, sir," the butler announced.

DESTINY'S ORBIT

"Tell her I can't be bothered," Ajax said dreamily. "I have more weighty matters on my mind."

"Exactly," snapped a new voice, sharp, feminine, and stern. "And that's why I'm here, young man. The Earth-Mars Space Administration wants to have a talk with you. Right here and now!"

Ajax dropped his feet to the ground from their air-cushion rest and the chair wheeled around bringing him face-to-face with his visitor. Two pairs of determined eyes met.

Somewhere there ought to have been thunder.

CHAPTER TWO

LIKE MANY young men in all ages, Ajax Calkins did not appreciate the element of good fortune in his situation. His father had married late in life, and Ajax was the only child of a union which no one had expected to last long. But the newsmen who had made cynical wagers among themselves at the time of the Calkins-O'Neill nuptials had underestimated Miss Margaret O'Neill, orphan and night-club entertainer. Miss O'Neill was not after the elder Calkins' money.

An incurably romantic child, Margaret sought both husband and father, and found both in Ajax's sire. The library of the Calkins estate was crammed with the sort of books that Margaret had always wanted to read—romantic tales of great adventurers of history. Ajax was fed this heady diet from the time he was able to turn the pages of a picture book; and the Calkins fortune made it possible for him to be educated as his mother desired. Contact with the real world and with the undelightful realities behind, or side-by-side with, the glamorous aspects of Pizzaro, Rhodes, etc., barely existed. Margaret would skim such portions of the glowing tales which touched upon the crimes of the great heroes and merely say that sometimes they did bad things, and Ajax should remember that all human beings were precious and no one should be exploited unfairly. A truly great conqueror was gentle and considerate to those whom he ruled, though firm with lawlessness.

After the death of his parents in a storm which foundered the old-fashioned sailing craft that Margaret loved, young Ajax Calkins got to read the skimmed-over parts of his favorite books, and found that his heroes were not entirely faultless. However, his mother's teaching preserved him

DESTINY'S ORBIT

from too-great shock; he could piece out the hints she had made and decide that such unpalatable behavior was due to the lower moral consciousness of bygone days. He would avoid such folly.

It never occurred to him to wonder what might have happened had there been any other heirs or relatives to contest the Calkins legacy. The possibility that he might have found himself in a sanitarium, declared incompetent, also never occurred to him. He knew, of course, that the times were out of joint—but then, sometimes his idols of the past had had to suffer from general stupidity and tiresome laws, too. He would persevere.

And now, his dream was about to come true. Destiny was finally opening the way for him. Whoever this caller was, she would not be allowed to interfere. He drew himself up and looked at her. Facing Ajax was a pretty young woman, perhaps his age, but more likely a year or two younger. She might have presented a pleasant picture to that young man's eyes some other time or some other place—such as seated across a table at an exotic pleasure satellite over beakers of delicately scented intoxicants—but right now her deep blue eyes were lowered in a determined frown, her lips were tightly drawn, and her arms were jutting outwards from her hips angrily.

He noted subconsciously the details of her face, which beneath a mop of short black hair arranged in bangs like those of a poodle dog, he would have enjoyed seeing. But right now he was in a mood to match hers—which was angry.

"Who are you and who do you think you are, young lady!" Ajax barked at her. "What do you mean by . . ."

"Don't bellow at me, Mr. Calkins of *Calkans!*" she snapped back just as sharply. "You may be the smart-aleck spoiled young man I've heard of, but even you can't talk back to the EMSA! And that's who I am! I am Emily Hackenschmidt, field investigator for the North American sector, and I mean to have a talk with you!"

Ajax leaned back in his chair, swallowing the sharp words.

DESTINY'S ORBIT

The EMSA was still nothing to challenge. Now what had he done to deserve this inquiry?

The Earth-Mars Space Administration had been set up some fifty years ago by high treaty between the United Nations of Earth and the United Beings of Mars. The two inhabited planets agreed to establish law and order over all the territory covered by the established interplanetary trade routes. The Martians were a compliant group of intelligent types, and none of them were martial despite their planet's name. They had given up exploration somewhere in their prehistoric pasts. But they were quite willing to work with the two-legged humans of Earth, once the Earthlings had made their way out to the fourth planet's orbit. They were used to co-operating with other intelligent species, for their world had always harbored more than one such type.

And if the bipeds of Terra wanted to poke around in space, that was all right with the Martians. So there was peaceful co-operation, joint space government, and harmony among the inner planets. It was the devout wish of every EMSA worker to continue this.

"My dear young lady," began Ajax cautiously. "I rather believe you must be very new to your work. Your enthusiasm for EMSA is very commendable but really I cannot imagine what is on your mind. You must have the wrong party."

"Humph!" snorted Emily. "You're Ajax Calkins, and you're the one whose been advertising around the planets for adventurers?"

"Well," Ajax nodded, "I am that one. There is no other. And I did place a few advertisements."

The girl nodded, still standing and staring down at him with her penetrating eyes. Ajax, fidgeted, then beckoned to his faithful robot butler. Silently the robot brought over a chair, and the girl sat down.

"We have been investigating your curiosity concerning unclaimed places and new possibilities for conquest. We do not approve of such ambitions, Mr. Calkins. This is the Twenty-first Century, and there is no place for such Eighteenth Century high-jinks. There are no more islands to be

DESTINY'S ORBIT

discovered, and all the asteroids are covered by our laws. You are only encouraging charlatans and frauds." She delivered her lecture with firmness.

Ajax stared back at her. "What I do is none of your business. And if by any chance I find a place not covered by your laws, that will also be none of your business. I have no intention of interfering with anyone's peace or trade. I merely insist on following the precepts of such glorious heroes and benefactors of mankind as Pizarro, Rhodes, Clive of India, and William Walker."

The girl frowned, shook her head angrily. "You are a most obstinate person, Ajax Calkins. Let me warn you *officially* to cease and desist in these efforts. You must be aware of the danger now looming from the newly contacted Saturnians. Those creatures represent trouble outside our frontiers, and we don't want anyone poking into their bailiwick."

"I've no such plans, miss," said Ajax, crossing one knee over the other. "I seek only what is still available. It is unthinkable that there remain no new frontiers. Unthinkable!"

"Then don't think it!" she snapped back. "Just stay here and enjoy your riches. You're lucky your grandfather had brains, anyway!"

Ajax sat bolt upright, almost forgetting he'd crossed his knees and for a moment he tottered out of balance. He regained his control, while Emily sat back with the suggestion of a laugh on her face. Inflamed, Ajax burst out:

"My grandfather was a pioneer in his own way! He knew that the spaceships needed to conserve shipping room, that space was at a premium in space, and he worked in new fields to invent the great *Calkans* process. He forced matter to eliminate the space between molecules until a square yard could be compressed into a square inch of space. The weight might be the same but the space saved infinitely benefits commerce between planets. I might say that your whole EMSA would be an impossibility without the practical use of *Calkans* for space shipments. And this was his way of finding new frontiers, of making his mark.

DESTINY'S ORBIT

"I expect nothing more than the same privilege in my own way!"

"Piffle," said Emily. "Your grandfather was a scientist, and he surely never expected the fortune he made to end in the control of a young do-nothing like yourself. Your father's death in that storm was certainly a sad thing for the Calkins clan."

Ajax jumped to his feet, loomed over the defiant girl. He waved a finger in her face. "Young lady! I don't like your way of talking! I am not a child to be chided and I object to your insults. I am Ajax Calkins, a name that will some day make history, the father of my country—when I find it—and you can tell your confounded EMSA to go back to their customs offices and licensing commissions and mind their own business!"

She drew back, grasped her handbag as if to throw it at him in self-defense.

"And as for you, Miss Hackensmack, or whatever your name is," he continued, "when I get back from Mars I shall see to it that your superior knows of your threats. I think you will be sorry to threaten me!"

She drew herself up. "Are you through with your dramatic gestures?" she asked with a supercilious smile. Then she got up. "I repeat my warning. This is official. Keep out of trouble. Forget your little passion to have a silly little flag of your own. The EMSA has its eye on you."

She abruptly turned her back on him, and marched off down the aerocarpeted room, through the automatic door, head held high, and disappeared with a twitch of her tweedy skirt.

Ajax stared after her, his face drawn in anger. He launched a kick at the chair she had been sitting in, knocking it across the room. The butler padded over, silently picked it up and stood it upright.

"Did you hear what she said?" shouted Ajax. "She dared me to stop!"

"Of course, sir, you are not going to," said the butler. "You are right in your course. She must be wrong."

DESTINY'S ORBIT

Ajax forgot at the moment that the butler was a robot with built-in agreement coils. He nodded. "It's good that someone has sense around here," he said more slowly.

He turned, glanced out the window, looked at the clock on the wall. "There's no time to lose," he said. "Call the *Destiny's* launching complex. I want to take off for Mars as soon as possible."

The butler padded away. Ajax turned, walked rapidly to a wall cabinet, opened it with a touch of his thumbprint. He took a long pole from it, and gently unrolled the flag attached to it. On duraloid dacron, in gorgeous purple, there was a crown over a crimson "A." Ajax waved it softly back and forth, admiring its swish through the air.

"Soon," he murmured, eyes aglaze, "soon."

The butler shuffled back. "The *Destiny* is being stocked now; the orbit is being registered; you may expect to take off at 2230. Five hours sir. May I suggest an early supper?"

"Yes, yes," said Ajax, following the butler out. "Anything to take the taste of that crazy girl out of my mouth."

In the distance, a small blue single-seater jet slid out of the private rack and whirling around over the waters of the Great Slave Lake, turned and raced back towards the headquarters of the North American sector of EMSA.

There was a very determined young woman at its controls. This was her first assignment as an EMSA operative, and she'd be blasted if it wasn't going to be carried through to the bitter end.

There was a peal of thunder as her jet broke the sound barrier on its fast acceleration. There ought to have been lightning as well.

CHAPTER THREE

THE PRIVATE space yacht *Destiny* was one of the finest and most modern spaceships in non-commercial hands. Few were the individuals who could afford to own a space-going vehicle of their own, but Ajax Calkins was one of them; into the *Destiny* he had put everything his money could buy.

For one thing it was fully automationed; there was no crew. The entire ship could be and was controlled from one point, and that point itself had only to have certain co-ordinates punched to set the entire vessel on its course. The figures themselves could be obtained by setting up specific destination requests on the automatic calculators with which the control room was amply equipped.

So, though the *Destiny* was no tiny vessel—it could carry a dozen passengers with ease and in luxury—it was easily driven by a single person. Ajax, a lonely soul who liked to commune with the stars by himself the better to envision his glorious future, was in the habit of traveling alone.

Promptly at the set hour, after a good evening meal, Ajax gave his robot butler specific instructions as to the conduct of his estate, reverently took the wrapped roll of his personally designed flag from its case, and strolled down to the outer terrace. There he stepped aboard his ground carpet, spoke the correct words, and allowed the skimming flat oblong of the airflow-platform to waft off gently, flow across the several acres of space, and down along the cleared area beside the lake. It deposited him softly at the door to his space yacht's hangar.

The *Destiny* was trim, neatly streamlined, painted in gleaming purple trimmed with gold. Ajax went up the incline; the main lock opened for him, and he stepped through.

He wasted no time getting ready. Once in his control

DESTINY'S ORBIT

room, reclining in a comfortable form-fitting seat, he punched out the configuration for a direct, highest speed flight to Mars. The machines clicked, growled a little, hissed steadily for a few minutes, and then the tapes came out.

Feeding them into his main control panel, Ajax waited until the lights on his board lit their ready signals. He punched down the starter and leaned back.

The *Destiny* slid gently upward, rose in the air as the hangar roof slid back, and then shot into the evening sky, heading low and fast for the North Pole.

As it rose into the darkness of the upper stratosphere, another series of lights lit on the main board and the radio clicked on. "Calling *Destiny*. Calling private yacht *Destiny*," said a mechanical voice.

Ajax sat up sharply, leaned forward.

"*Destiny* here," he said. "Who calls?"

"This is the traffic control officer at Boothia takeoff center. We have a routine check to make of you. Please proceed to Earth Satellite Six, hold, and stand by for boarding."

The voice snapped off. Ajax furrowed his brow angrily. That wasn't normal procedure. His ship had perfect clearance, was A-1 in condition. He decided not to argue with a machine; instead he depressed a lever, thereby clearing his automatic pilot, and then reset it for the new destination.

Earth Satellite Six was a huge mile-wide platform rotating around the Earth in sequence with eight other similar platforms. They were regular clearing posts and loading stations for interplanetary commerce, and often used for observatories and space hospitals.

The *Destiny* came alongside in time, matching its speed with that of the huge flying disc, like a pancake-shaped world moving through the blackness of airless space. It locked into a magnetic holding crane and shut off its engines.

Ajax was on the radio at once. "Explain the meaning of this outrage," he snapped. "What's holding me up? I have urgent business on Mars."

"Sorry," said a voice. "An inspector is coming aboard right away."

DESTINY'S ORBIT

In a few minutes there was the click of magnetic clamps, and a small barge snapped alongside. With suction the air-lock opened, and in a moment a man stepped inside. Ajax met him at the lock door.

The man, a slender balding type with spectacles, wore the maroon coveralls of the Earth-Mars Space Administration work team. He was rather apologetic.

"I'm awfully sorry for the delay, sir, but we have a holding call for you directly from the Ottawa office. The claim is made that your ship is infested with . . . uh, umm . . . tit-mice, the report said. And you must understand, sir, that the importation of rodents of any kind to Mars is strictly taboo. We must inspect the ship."

"What!" Ajax screamed. "What in heaven's name are you talking about! How could this ship be infested? How, I ask you?"

"Well, sir," said the official moving past him with a shrug. "I can't say, sir. The report said something about this vessel having been kept in wilderness conditions, without sealed garaging facilities. It will take some time to make the inspections."

"Something's definitely fishy," grumbled Ajax. "There's no such report. Who could have made it? Who could say? My hangar area is absolutely clear and my ship is always in perfectly sterile condition."

"Yes, sir," said the official. "That may be right, sir, and so you have nothing to worry about but the delay of several days while we recheck it. We have to obey orders, you know. There was a charge. We must hold the ship for the next rodent inspection, and that may take a while."

Ajax stood a minute, white with consternation, then shoved past the inspector in the passageway, hurried ahead of him to the control room. The official was about to clamp a lock on the controls, but Ajax brushed his hand down.

"Now you just wait a minute until I can get to the bottom of this!" yelled Ajax. "Just wait until I call my lawyers!"

"Well . . ." said the inspector, but Ajax pushed him into

DESTINY'S ORBIT

a seat, and sitting down at his own controls, shot in a call to the *Calkans* offices in Toronto.

In a few minutes he was in touch with the director of the corporation's legal staff in his home territory. That person was equally puzzled, but announced he would get on the matter without delay.

The next half hour was a period of tension and annoyance. The two men sat glaring at each other without saying anything. Ajax was angry, but it was hard to take his fury out on the other who was only a minor official obeying orders from elsewhere.

Finally the call came in and the legal wizard was back on. He seemed puzzled now judging from the expression on his plump elderly features as they phased into the video mirror.

"A charge was put in against the *Destiny* late this afternoon," he said. "It was made by an EMSA field operative, a party named Hackenschmidt. This inspector claimed to have seen nesting titmice in close proximity to the vessel and to have expressed the belief that in consequence the craft should be re-inspected. The order was okayed in view of the rodent prohibition law, which is one of the oldest in our relations with Mars.

"I'm afraid that you will have to hold up your trip for the time it will take to have the extermination crew survey your vessel."

Ajax sat back, fingering his mustache. "Hackenschmidt, eh? I see her game. Delay at all costs. That woman—she threatened to queer my game. Interfere with me, will she?" He was thinking aloud.

The face of his legal adviser in Toronto was also frowning in thought. "I am rather surprised. I am sure your ship must be in order. This seems a most unusual sort of charge."

The man from the Earth Satellite was also deep in thought. "Exactly what are titmice like—sir?" he asked. "It seems to me that someone is in error. I have a feeling there is a confusion of definitions here."

DESTINY'S ORBIT

Ajax glanced at him and simultaneously the Toronto lawyer's face changed—both gave a start.

"She goofed!" shouted Ajax. "The charge is invalid. Even if there are titmice aboard—and I know there are not—it is not legal to hold me. Titmice are not rodents; they're birds!"

"Why, so they are!" said the inspector getting up and looking around. "And I'm sure there are no birds in evidence around here. Even if there were, there's nothing in the regulations about them."

"Right!" shouted Ajax gleefully, "so clear off at once, and I shall be on my way."

"Titmice?" said the inspector, heading for the airlock. "What a curious mistake . . ."

"Titmice," replied the Toronto legalist smiling. "That Hackenschmidt must have garbled the report. Perhaps the complainant meant field mice . . ."

"Hey, whose side are you on?" said Ajax. "Titmice she said, and that's where it stands. This ship is cleared." He snapped off the connection with the Canadian office.

The outer lock snicked shut as the inspector left; the magnetic clamps clicked loose, and the *Destiny* found itself adrift in orbit, alongside the huge platform satellite.

Ajax leaped to his seat, recalculated the coordinates in accord with his time, direction, velocity, and position, reset his pilot. In a few minutes, the *Destiny* came under power, turned, and headed outward.

Ajax leaned back, realizing he had lost only an hour.

But that Hackenschmidt, he thought. That was a nasty trick she pulled, but thank heavens he'd seen the last of her. She could sit around and stew in her own home office, file all the complaints she wanted from here on in; he was out of her control.

As the *Destiny* flashed past the moon's orbit, Ajax retired for his first sleep of the trip.

But he dreamed uneasily of a black-haired girl with flashing blue eyes. What was it they said about a woman scorned?

CHAPTER FOUR

SIX DAYS LATER Ajax was on Mars, a fast trip for an automatically directed, non-crew operated, privately owned space yacht. He went alone, for Ajax wasn't one to depend closely on others. It had always been a principle of his life, ever since he had read the romantic volumes in the Calkins library, which indicated that great men, mainly explorers, almost invariably had pioneered in the face of obstacles and the skepticism of others.

So he preferred to travel alone. It was hard to trust other humans, who did not have the advantage of the wealth that was his by birth, or share his dreams. Most people kept on insisting that kings and crowns and private flags were out-of-date, childish symbols in a world that had gone long past them. Needless to say, Ajax did not agree. Space, to him, was infinite; and in an expanding space frontier, there would always be a fringe awaiting the hand of a powerful man.

"History passes through phases," Ajax once explained to his complacent robot butler, "in which the old frontier is tamed and in which the new frontiers waiting beyond the new horizon are not yet assaulted. A period of assimilation, of digestion, apparently must ensue before the new borders are crossed. And today, we are in such a period. We have expanded up to the orbit of Jupiter. We are trying to organize and utilize what we have taken and so there is a period of consolidation, of conservatism in human growth.

"Besides, we have now encountered evidence of the Saturnians' existence and behavior; and we are pausing to see what that means. But I say we must redouble our efforts to attack the frontiers just because of that. For if we do not, the Saturnians will!"

DESTINY'S ORBIT

The robot butler had agreed of course. In his student days, some of the tutors to whom young Calkins had first outlined his thesis, did not. They regarded the whole thing as romanticism—a word which Ajax had come to loathe.

Ajax, on arriving, had gone to the headquarters of the *Calkins* company. Here he received the message waiting for his arrival, and found in strictest confidence the name and address of the place where Anton Smallways would meet him. And then, after carefully confusing his trail to prevent any from following him, Ajax boarded a local Martian omnibus in order to reach his destination. Earthlings practically never rode in these unusual Martian contrivances, and that, reasoned Ajax, would help to throw off any pursuit—not that he had seen any, but a world conqueror could not afford to take chances.

The Martian idea of an omnibus was a huge and rather startling vehicle looking for all the world like a huge single wheel rolling along by itself. The thing, in fact, *was* a wheel, for the tread ran along the outside of the carrier, and the omnibus literally rolled along the spidery walkways that spanned the city. Gyroscopically stabilized, the passengers were jammed together in a large ball-like area in the hub of the wheel.

Ajax clung to a trapeze-like set of bars, holding tight as the spherical carriage swayed and vibrated alarmingly in the manner of all those Martian vehicles. He tried hard to keep from being seasick, and it took all his attention to hang on to the bars swinging on their pivots. All around him clung the various citizens of Mars, the half dozen or so different types of non-vertebrates that made up the ruling races of the Fourth Planet.

Brushing against him was the back of a large centipede-like creature, holding easily to the trapeze-seat and reading a book held in one of his hairy forearms. Just beneath him, rolled a lobsterback sort of thing with oystery undertones, which was conversing in sharp clicks with a similar creature on the next trapeze. An old eight-legged giant spider holding a cluster of five or six unhatched eggs on her back was

DESTINY'S ORBIT

knitting something just behind Calkins, and the ends of her needles occasionally poked into Ajax's spine.

But he was willing to endure it all for the sake of his crown. Even the curious snail-like being, suctioned up against the bottom wall, did not disturb him, despite its rather penetrating odor. Martians themselves have no sense of smell; possibly this goes a long way to explain how these assorted beings managed to find unity in the first place.

The wheel was rolling along and Ajax, clinging to his bar, was watching the unreeling narrow roadway over the shoulder of the spider-type driving the omniwheel, when suddenly he saw another large wheel rolling swiftly towards them on a crosswise track.

He stared at it, and thought, *Surely we will crash!* Then he thought, *Surely the driver must know.* Then he yelled suddenly, "Look out!"

The spider at the controls jammed on something. There was a grating, jarring noise, and the two vehicles slid together, bounced off each other. The omniwheel with Ajax in it skittered off the road; bounced onto the tops of the flat houses bordering the path; caromed off a mushroom-topped tower, and plopped into the street alongside the elevated roadway. It whirled around, the flopped on its side, amid the screams and yowls of the assorted riders.

"Sabotage!" muttered Ajax, climbing off the rounded side of the carriage. "It was planned." He had no grounds for such thoughts, but surely it had to be so. The inside was a scramble of bodies trying to get out of the rounded portal which had opened in the side. Ajax was about to shove his own way into the mass of hairy, shelly, slimy, and spiny bodies when he noticed the driver hunched up over his seat, unmoving.

He made his way back, got hold of the Martian's rounded middle part, and heaved. The driver came up—he was surprisingly light—and as he came to the ground, the Martian's two big compound eyes popped open.

"Hurt?" Ajax queried anxiously, feeling somehow that, as

DESTINY'S ORBIT

his presence was probably responsible for the accident, he ought to take care of the injured.

The Martian got to his feet, all eight of them, and limped to the door, with Ajax steadying him by a hand on his round furry central body, slung on the eight legs. "Easy, boy," said Ajax and the two of them were the last ones out.

There was a scurrying and worrying around the wrecked vehicle; but with surprisingly little time, the thing was righted, worked back on the road by a series of cranelike machines. The passengers piled back with a different driver and the omniwheel rolled off, leaving Ajax and the ex-driver alone in the street.

"Come in and get something to sustain yourself," said Ajax and led the spidery Martian into a food-dispensary. There Ajax squatted on one of the mushroom-like stools that dotted the floor while the spider took a grasp of an overhead bar and hung head down from that, in the manner of his kind.

"Thank you for saving me," said the spider, "but you might just as well have scrapped me. I have failed in my first profession. I shall be disowned and my eggs will be addled."

"Oh, no," protested Ajax. "Don't say that. It wasn't your fault. I saw that other wheel coming into us. It was their fault."

"It may be," replied the ex-driver, "but I have lost my web and cannot show my face again in my family spinnery. There is nothing left for me. And I was so willing to work and to make my way in the world."

"Never mind," said Ajax, "perhaps you can come along with me and assist me. I can use a good adjutant, and I feel sure that you couldn't be a spy—you are the least . . ."

"Me a spy? What is that? If you really want such an outcast as I shall be, I will go with you." The spider's curious face, which resembled that of a Pekinese dog, with unusually large greenish eyes, set on a rather furry reddish basketball, in turn perched upon eight long many-jointed legs—he used the front two for hands when not walking—wrinkled in pleasure. "I have found a new web!"

DESTINY'S ORBIT

"Yes," Ajax nodded. "I can use a faithful follower. Do you have a name?"

"I am the Third Least Wuj, of the Spinnery of the Northern Panel, and the Eggery of the Silvery Downs," said the spider-being.

"And I am Ajax Calkins, who has a place in destiny," remarked the young man modestly.

"Good," said the Wuj. "I do not know the town, but perhaps we should be on our way. I am curious to see it."

Ajax smiled, rose to his feet, wrapped his electronically warmed Marscloak about him, adjusted his oxygen blower closer to his face, and strode out, followed by the Wuj on skittering legs.

"We must be close now to my address," he said, and read it off to the Wuj.

The Martian's nose wrinkled. "We can walk it easily," was his advice. "Let me show you."

The odd pair walked off down the narrow street. Martians of assorted types and sizes went about their business; and such is the courtesy of the United Beings, none stared rudely after the odd couple.

CHAPTER FIVE

AENEAS HAD HIS Achates; Sherlock Holmes had his Watson; and Ajax Calkins now had his own faithful follower, he thought, as he and the Third Least Wuj proceeded along the Martian street. Was it not fitting, he thought, that a man destined to accomplish deeds beyond the imagining of the greatest conquerors and explorers of olden times should have a follower unlike that given to any pioneer before?

Yes, destiny was opening the way for him. If ever he had had any doubts—and he remembered some unpleasant moments with his tutors during college courses—this sign surely put them to rest, once and for all. The universe was his oyster, and he would find a way now to open it. Their destination proved to be a rather third-rate roost in one of those indefinite corner districts where the indefinable elements of the population tend to accumulate, like the fuzz in a pocket. On the edge of one of the spider-folk residential districts, over the line from a centipede factory area, with a branch of *squidge* collective housing penetrating nearby, the roost housed many types, and among them were a scattering of down-and-out Earthmen, hangers on, the poorer class of asteroid miners.

Anton Smallways, among these people was no odder and no stranger than any of them. Possibly had Ajax met him on Earth he would have turned up his nose. But here, the little man—he was under five feet tall and rather stocky—seemed just another oddball amid oddballs.

Smallways wore a typical asteroid miner's coverall—metallic, airtight, self-heating, and dirty. His eyes were dark and red-rimmed; his hair was rather long in the manner of one who hasn't time to keep up appearances, and it was of a

DESTINY'S ORBIT

rather unusual color. As was also the short beard that covered the lower part of his face.

Specifically they were of a blackish green coloring. To a man of the Twentieth Century this might have been amusing or strange, but Ajax recalled the fad of women of his time for dyeing their hair odd colors and remembered that occasionally their beaux would go along with the show and escort their lady friends with beards and mustache or hair dyed the latest fashionable chartreuse or rose-violet. So to Ajax a man with a greenish tint in his hair wasn't strange—even though on close inspection it appeared that the green was the true color and the black was—just the result of a space miner's usually unkempt appearance.

Smallways looked at the Wuj without expression, and Ajax explained, "This Martian is a loyal follower and personal attendant. You can talk freely with him."

The Wuj jumped up, seized an overhanging bar, and clung to it, listening to their talk upside down. It seemed to disconcert Smallways but Ajax carried it off with the aplomb due to one to the manner born.

Smallways, after satisfying himself as to Ajax's identity—though one could hardly doubt it, seeing the purple cloak and the expensive space captain's uniform he wore, even though his ship the *Destiny* was crewless, began to explain his situation.

"You want to lay claim to a country not under the rule of any planet or regime? You seek a place never put beneath another's flag? You want a real guarantee of independence? Then listen to me."

Ajax leaned forward, eyes agleam, waiting. The little man looked at him, reaching into his shoulder bag, and withdrew a few papers, which he spread out.

"The Earth-Mars Space Administration," he began, "lays claim to sovereignty over all the planets from Mercury to Mars, and also the asteroids. They do not lay claim to Jupiter or its satellites, because these have never been colonized and because they remain a buffer between the inner planets and the rest of the universe so far mainly un-

DESTINY'S ORBIT

explored. However the Administration bars the raising of banners there or any colonization.

"The official EMSA definition of an asteroid is a small planetary mass whose orbit lies between that of Mars and Jupiter. No matter how lopsided or elongated the orbits of these thousands of bodies, they all come inside the orbit of Jupiter and outside that of Mars at some point. That is their reasoning.

"Now . . . it so happens that the planetoids that I and my friends represent are exceptions to this definition. True, absolute, indisputable exceptions—by definition outside of the bounds of the asteroids."

He stopped, and Ajax Calkins sucked in his breath. The Wuj, hanging overhead, said nothing.

Smallways spread out a sheet of paper marked with orbital lines. "My friends have staked out mining claims in the orbit of Jupiter. Our asteroids never depart from that orbit, remain permanently and *undeviatingly* in the exact track of Jupiter. They are known in the astronomy books as the Fore-Trojan Asteroids."

Ajax frowned. "I do not know them, but go on."

"Jupiter, besides being the largest planet," Smallways continued, "has the largest family of bodies attracted to it; but two groups of asteroids are unique in their relation to it. Following Jupiter in its orbit, exactly a third of its orbital distance behind it, is a group of several asteroid-sized worlds. They revolve around a common point in the orbit of Jupiter. Traveling ahead of Jupiter, also a third of the distance ahead, and at the same velocity, is the other group of asteroids, similarly revolving around a central point in the orbit. Together, these two sets of asteroids and Jupiter form a practical application of the famous gravitational problem of the three bodies.

"I represent a group of miners who have established our base on the group of asteroids which precede Jupiter. There are valuable mining claims there. The two sets of asteroids are named after the heroes and warriors of the Trojan War epics. The names of the worlds I offer to you for your

DESTINY'S ORBIT

kingdom are Achilles, Hector, Nestor, Agamemnon, Odysseus," here the greenbearded man paused dramatically, "and Ajax!"

Ajax Calkins stood up, eyes gleaming, and pounded the table in excitement. "That's it! I knew destiny was waiting for me! You're right. Ajax is it!"

Anton Smallways sat back, nodding. The Wuj looked down at them, and said suddenly, "But what does the man of little ways want of you? Why does he need Ajax, and what is the price of the crown?"

Ajax glanced up at him and sat down. "Yes, my faithful follower has put the matter. What will this cost me, and why do you make me this offer?"

Smallways folded his hands. "We need money and aid in building up our claims. We are very short of supplies; you can obtain them for us. We need the opportunity to buy space freighters and blasters for mining. In exchange for your financial assistance and your connections, we offer to make you our king, to supply you with a throne, and to stand behind you in establishing your own independence."

"Fair enough," stated Ajax firmly, striking the table dramatically. "It's a deal!"

They discussed the details of their bargain for an hour; then Ajax and the Wuj took their leave. They returned together to Ajax's suite in the best Earth hotel in the city. The Wuj suspended himself from the chandelier and went quietly to sleep, while Ajax got busy on the communchannels and began placing the orders which Smallways had turned over to him. A huge load of food in *Calkans*; a small mountain of blasting equipment; a series of housing bubbles, neatly folded and compressed; several crates of the latest atomiguns and handbomb tossers, and a number of space scooters.

It was two Mars days later when the *Destiny* took off for the next lap of its course. Ajax Calkins stood at the helm of his space yacht, setting the orbital directions on the panel (although they had previously been impressed on the robot

DESTINY'S ORBIT

tapes which actually ran the automatic space yacht, Ajax liked to play captain in the old-fashioned way), watching the sleek, streamlined, glistening yacht leave the ruddy globe of Mars behind in the black sky to venture on the long jump over the mass of the asteroids.

It would be a twelve-day flight at fast acceleration, made a little clumsy by the long train of space barges which they had picked up in orbit. The cargo to be taken to the Fore-Trojans was packed in tanklike containers, attached one to the other like a string of sausages, sent into orbit, and then attached to the *Destiny* to be pulled like a tug towing barges. It might not have looked elegant from space, but it was certainly practical.

Anton Smallways was a strange man, not at all talkative. He spent most of his time in his cabin, apparently reading or sleeping. As for the Third Least Wuj, after a momentary spell of space sickness, he made himself at home aboard the yacht.

Of all the Martian races, it is only the spider-like one that is able to take to space flight with any equanimity. The other species all seem to suffer from acute spacesickness. None of the Martian races ever fly or ever had developed flying, and it is quite an unMartian thing. Still, Ajax had managed to buy a space suit made for the Wuj's type, and the Wuj had tried it on with glee.

The Wuj spent most of his time in the control room, watching the stars; watching the tiny dots of the asteroids move slowly past; seeing the disc of his native planet diminish in size; reading space manuals, and listening to Ajax declaim on glory, honor and the grandeur of fame.

They had been out three days when the space radio began to beep the *Destiny's* call signal.

Ajax tripped open the general heeding signal but kept the viewer off. As soon as he had indicated the open transmitter, the general message came in:

"Calling *Destiny*. Calling space-yacht *Destiny*, Calkins captain. You are requested to return at once to port on

DESTINY'S ORBIT

Mars. This is a general broadcast. If the *Destiny* hears this, please call in at once and confirm."

Ajax stood a moment in thought. At that instant, the sounds of the transmitter must have reached Smallways for he came padding into the room. "I wouldn't answer that," he said to Ajax. "They only want to make trouble."

"I suspect as much," said Ajax. "I can't see any legitimate reason."

"Of course," said Smallways. "You must first establish yourself with us, then speak to them. Until then, silence is wisdom."

They ignored the call. After a day, the automatic transmission from Mars faded out.

On the seventh day, the Wuj was perched as usual in the control room, this time on one of the walls. He saw a blinking light on the otherwise unchanging control board. "Ajax," he called. "What's that?"

Calkins, who had been reading a book about Alexander the Great, put the volume down and went over. "It's another ship," he said, and hastily punched the tracer board analog.

In a few seconds, a series of lights blinked on. Ajax pursed his lips. "We're apparently being followed," he said at last.

"No," said Smallways again appearing on the scene. "I think we're being overtaken." He pointed to the signals on the board. "That ship is coming up along our orbit and coming faster than us. It's a pursuit."

"But who?" said Ajax, "and why?"

Anton Smallways stroked his green beard. "I greatly fear it is not good," he said slowly. "I believe it must be a Saturnian raider."

CHAPTER SIX

"SATURNIANS!" exclaimed Ajax, springing to attention and leaning over the rearward viewer plate. "Coming from that direction? From inward?"

"Why not?" asked Anton slowly. "It is probably a scouting raider returning from an espionage expedition. If it overtakes us . . ."

"And why are we worried about Saturnians?" inquired the Wuj, reaching up with his sixth leg and scratching his flat pugdog nose thoughtfully.

"Don't you read the papers? Don't you know the situation in space?" asked Ajax. Then he answered himself, "But of course you don't. You Martians are most unworldly people—and as a young apprentice bus driver, I suppose you didn't bother with such great affairs."

"I leave that to such leadership types as yourself, dear leader," said the Wuj.

Ajax threw him a glance, but could detect no evidence of sarcasm in the comment. "Let's get this ship moving, first, and I'll explain."

He threw in the full power switches; and while he was rapidly directing the powerful space yacht by hand, Anton Smallways worked the computers and redrafted their higher speed orbit to their goal.

Anxiously, Ajax watched the viewplates and the radar indicator. The spot which revealed their pursuer was definitely being outdistanced now. Anton finished his calculations, and they fed the result into the robot controls. The ship swerved a bit, altered its angle to the stars, roared a bit closer to the ecliptic, and shot ahead. "More risky," said Ajax, "but necessary."

DESTINY'S ORBIT

"This is a good ship," said Anton slowly. "I am amazed at the speed."

"The best money could buy," said Ajax modestly. "I had it secretly fitted out with extras only the EMSA Navy could afford and a few they couldn't."

He reached over, threw on the radio switch. Instantly a faint voice could be heard; it was too faint to be audible, but every now and then they could hear the call signals of their ship, the *Destiny*, and a word or two strongly hinting at a demand for them to stop.

"Not on your life," said Ajax, watching the board with one hand in his chest like a certain conqueror he had read about in European history.

A half hour later, the pursuer was off the board and they were flashing on through space, a trim, neatly purring luxury yacht, followed by a long train of container sausages.

"What's wrong with the Saturnians?" asked the Wuj. "I am just ignorant, but I have a curiosity . . ."

Ajax seated himself in the padded form-fitting pilot's chair—a conceit for this kind of automatic ship—but it looked good. Anton Smallways grunted, then left the control room and slammed the door of his own cabin. He evidently wasn't interested.

"When the first manned expedition from Earth reached Saturn, some thirty years ago, they found that the surface of that planet harbored a form of life entirely different from those of the inner planets. Saturn was cold, its gravity greater—though not as much as you might think when you realize that the solid surface of Saturn is actually only a small hard core within a huge gaseous globe—and is altogether inimical to the protoplasmic life as we know it on Earth and Mars and in the jungles of Venus.

"Among the beings on Saturn there was one that was intelligent, clever, and organized on highly evolved social lines. This life was highly flexible, rubbery in nature, able to adjust itself to many shapes and sizes, using temporary pseudopodal limbs when necessary.

"The Saturnians at first were friendly to us, very curious

DESTINY'S ORBIT

about us, and bent themselves to learn all they could from us. We did our best to teach them, hoping to make them an ally in the exploration of the rest of our system. But they proved to be too good as students.

"They built spaceships on our models; they studied our histories; they set up a synthetic culture based on the worst elements of Terrestrial history—in short after thirty years of careful imitation, they then announced a Saturnian Empire, claimed it extended to and included the asteroids, and began to interfere with our shipping.

"The EMSA has tried to avoid open warfare, while reasoning with these creatures, but such efforts only increased their cockiness and self-assurance. There have been increasing clashes with the Saturnians. Raiders, calling themselves Saturn police ships, have attacked asteroid shipping.

"It looks as if war might break out at any moment."

The Wuj listened to all this with interest. "Very strange," he commented. "I don't understand all you say, and this sort of thing is all very unMartian. However, I guess it is a happy thing we did not wait to meet that raider."

He put three legs over his head and proceeded to go to sleep. Ajax sat staring out at the black starscape, thinking of glory.

Several days later, with pursuit a forgotten thing, the *Destiny* and her cargo circled over the little group of asteroids which were the Fore-Trojans. Far off in the sky, Jupiter was a glowing ball accompanied by four of his larger visible moons. Saturn was a yellowish ringed disc, tiny in the black heavens. The sun was small, but still brightly glaring, and the six little worldlets were varied discs of gray and white in the sky about them.

Carefully Ajax Calkins brought the *Destiny* and its awkward cargo closer and closer to the rocky airless surface of the asteroid Ajax. Fixing an orbit close to it, he cut loose the cargo containers to continue the orbit until the miners could go out and unload them. Then, with a graceful swoop, he brought the *Destiny* down to the surface of the asteroid.

Ajax was a surprisingly level little world. Covered by a

DESTINY'S ORBIT

layer of rock and cosmic dust, it had virtually no out-thrusts or precipitous clefts such as usually marked asteroids. "A fine world for a space colony," said Ajax to the Wuj who was awake and watching. "Unusually good surface for spaceships. Someday it shall be a mighty and busy trading center, the hub of the middle system."

"If you say so, dear leader," commented the spider.

"And I do," said Ajax, and the ship touched the surface, glided along, and came to a gentle stop. Whatever Calkins' pretensions, there was no doubt he was a fine pilot.

"And now . . ." said Ajax, stepping to a closet and taking from it a furled banner. "Now I shall plant my flag."

"First you better put on a spacesuit," said Anton Smallways dryly, emerging from his compartment already dressed in his space clothes.

Ajax nodded, and without wasting more time, he and the Martian got into their space equipment. While Ajax wore the familiar spacesuit like a cumbersome suit of clothes, with impervious skin, and self-contained temperature, humidity, and air-renewal apparatus, the Wuj's outfit was rather different.

The Wuj's outfit was more in the nature of a robot Martian, a metal globe into which the Wuj fitted himself, folding his many legs under him, and sealing it from inside. The globe was mounted on eight artificial metal limbs, and looked simply like a huge metal spider. The Wuj, seated inside, worked the legs from buttons, and drove it as if he were driving a monowheel on his native world.

Then the three of them disembarked. The main portal of the *Destiny* was thrown open, and Ajax descended carrying his banner, limply unwavering in the airless surface of the tiny world. Anton followed, and the Wuj waddled down after him.

A small group of spacesuited miners stood silently watching, a safe distance away from the ship. They waved their hands as Ajax stopped, planted his banner, and announced on his helmet radio:

"I, Ajax the First, proclaim this planet independent and a

DESTINY'S ORBIT

kingdom under my protection, as the sovereign capital of the worlds of the Fore-Trojan Union!"

He stuck the flag limply into the surface. It hit a rock and twisted, but he agilely rescued it, poked around until he found a layer of dust and shoved it in.

"And now to work," he said. Whereupon the miners simply scattered and walked off again.

"This way," said Anton Smallways, and led the two others off to a small raised ridge. "Our headquarters is over here, underground."

And thus Ajax entered into his kingdom.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AJAX CALKINS HAD entered his kingdom, small though it was, and it now seemed to him that destiny had arranged for this moment. He was not entirely cut off from his fellow men; he had seen that other young men of fortune had different ideals than he and was tolerant enough to allow them their opinions so long as they did not try to interfere with him.

For what else could it be but destiny? Wealthy men often married young women when they were well along in years, and it often happened that such unions were unfortunate, to say the least. He was aware that his own father had been much giped at when he married Miss Margaret O'Neill. But destiny had decreed that the elder Calkins should choose a young woman with just the right mixture of charm and romantic idealism to appeal to a wealthy man who would gratify her every desire about the manner in which their only son should be raised.

When he compared his mother to Emily Hackenschmidt, Ajax Calkins shuddered. It is true that Emily did resemble, however faintly, photographs of Margaret O'Neill—but temperamentally, she couldn't have been more different. A thoroughly unpleasant young woman, and Ajax wondered why he kept on thinking about her at odd moments. He had far better things to do. . . .

A low ridge housed the largest of the underground shelters on Ajax. It had been hollowed out, its sides airproofed, sealed with voidall fluid, and fitted out with airtemp controls. Once you passed through the double airlock, it managed to be fairly comfortable—a low-ceilinged series of chambers.

Ajax declared it his headquarters, and took over the largest of the vacant living quarters. Smallways had his bunk

DESTINY'S ORBIT

in another chamber, the Wuj appropriated one, and besides them there were several other miners who stayed there, though they were absent at work the greater part of the time.

The bulk of the miners—there were about thirty of them all told, though Ajax never did get to count them all—stayed in a set of bubble-camp tents spread out for half a mile beyond the central ridge. And at half a mile, they already dipped below the horizon of this tiny airless world, where the stars shone perpetually in a black sky and the other five worldlets moved steadily across the firmament like constant moons.

For the next two Earth-length days—as time was measured on Ajax—the miners unloaded the cargo Ajax had brought. They scooted up into the orbit of the satelliting containers in their small mining rocketships, and brought the contents back to the surface. There they transported them into supply depots carved out of the rocky surface.

The miners apparently were pleased at the deal their leader Smallways had made, for Ajax heard no sign of disapproval. In fact, as he remarked to the Wuj a day later, it was rather remarkable that he heard no sign of anything from them. They seemed to ignore him, to take their orders from Smallways—in Ajax's name of course—and Ajax virtually never saw the greater part of the miners at all outside of their spacesuits.

The pile of *Calkanned* food was most welcome, and Ajax personally supervised the setting up of a *dekanning* system. This was a rather compact complex atomic device into which the can of compacted food was inserted. By adjusting a vibratory note to the proper note of the can, and then feeding in great quantities of nuclear energy along that note, the cans would slowly swell and expand, so that in about an hour's time, they would be sometimes as much as fifty or a hundred times their compacted size. Their contents would thus resume their normal appearance and density.

There were many other items in the cargo—improved atomic diggers, smelters, cargo rocket motors, several stubby but powerful atomic artillery pieces, a crate of handcannon,

DESTINY'S ORBIT

more bubble-houses and the apparatus for a very powerful space radio station.

Ajax and the Wuj were sorting out the crates containing their radio station parts when Anton Smallways appeared on the scene in his space suit. Waving violently to Ajax, he called: "Return at once to the palace, your majesty. There is a strange ship approaching. It may be the raider that was pursuing us!"

Ajax and the Martian raced back in the very slight gravity to the ridge, pushed through the airlock as fast as possible, and gathered around the regional radar and radio detector in their main living room. Smallways was seated before it, and as they came in, he pointed to a spot on their radar.

It was the shape of a small spacecraft, a swift little scout-type ship, and Ajax judged it to be already within their system and heading for a comedown orbit on Ajax. He tripped the radio switch:

"Calling intruder! Calling intruding ship! Ajax port requests identification. You are forbidden to land without permission. Identify please!"

They waited. The little ship continued its orbit, coming in closer; there was no reply. Ajax twisted in his seat, Smallways watching him intensely. He repeated his message, adding, "Reply at once or we fire!" He switched his sender off, turned to Smallways.

"Is any of our artillery set up?" The green-bearded man slowly shook his head. "It's still in crates," he replied.

"Have any miners who are in the vicinity stand by with hand weapons," he ordered. "I will meet this ship myself."

Smallways turned on the general area signal, sent a general order command. Ajax, buckling a hand gun around his suit, fixed his helmet again, and with the Wuj carrying the flag, left the palace.

The small intruder ship was now visible, coming in for a landing near the place where the *Destiny* was resting on the dusty surface.

As they watched, it swooped lower, then slid along the

DESTINY'S ORBIT

ground in a cloud of meteoric dust, and came to a halt next to the *Destiny*. It was a great many times smaller—plainly a single passenger craft—and it was not Saturnian. It bore the red and green circle insignia of EMSA and its code numbers in large letters on its glistening yellow-painted sides.

"You are under arrest, intruder," called Ajax sternly on his helmet radio. "This is not EMSA territory. This is the Fore-Trojan Union, Kingdom of Ajax. Throw down your weapons and emergel"

The lock door opened and a figure emerged in a yellow EMSA official space suit. It came towards Ajax with a light bouncy stride. As it came, the figure spoke:

"Oh, come off it, Ajax Calkins. You've given me quite a chase and I'm good and fed up with it. Now you listen to me . . ."

"Oh, what in the name of muddy meteors have I done to deserve this!" blurted Ajax. "It's that wild woman from EMSA, that Emily Hackensack or something!"

"I heard that, Calkins. Hackenschmidt is the name, special investigator Emily Hackenschmidt, and the wild one is you," snapped back the approaching person.

"Who is she?" asked Smallways in a petulant voice. "Shall I beam her down?"

"No, I'm afraid not," sighed Ajax. "It wouldn't be gentlemanly. But have one of our men occupy her ship and seal its control board. She is our prisoner."

"Hmmpf," called the young lady's voice. "Prisoner or not, you'd better come with me and have a talk. Besides," she added, "if you're a gentleman, you'll offer a lady some refreshments. I've come a long way on ship's rations."

Ajax led their uninvited guest back to his headquarters in silence, gritting his teeth. The Wuj ambled along behind and Smallways strode last, perturbed and sullen.

Back in the "palace," divested of their bulky space suits, Emily plopped herself down in one of the comfortable chairs Ajax had taken from the *Destiny* and stared angrily about her. She was wearing the maroon service uniform of EMSA's woman's division, with the knee-length culottes of the latest

DESTINY'S ORBIT

regulation fashion with slit outer seams displaying tantalizing glimpses of lace-edged satinelle pettipants whenever she crossed her booted legs. Her waist was cinched tight with a wide belt, whose attached holster was now empty; Ajax had snatched the handcannon from it the moment he had spotted it.

She pulled a pouch from her belt, and taking out a mirror and comb, began to brush her tangled hair and arrange her black bangs. This was a woman's way of regaining her confidence and breath; and of course it helped, as the EMSA regulations had indicated, to keep your prey distracted.

Ajax had dumped himself angrily in the seat by the radio. Smallways stood quietly against the wall, and the Wuj curled up in a corner, folding his eight legs under him like a collapsible chair.

They sat in silence for a while, and then one of the other miners wheeled in a cart with steaming hot coffee and food on it. The girl took a cup, Ajax another, but the other two declined.

After she had taken her own good time, Emily looked at Ajax. "I ordered you not to leave Mars. Why did you disobey?"

"I heard no such orders," Ajax snapped back, "and I know of no reason why I should heed them in any event."

"I then went after you and tried to call you by space radio, and you only got away from me on the disguised cruiser you pretend is a space yacht. Why?"

"The *Destiny* is not a cruiser, but is a private yacht, madame," Ajax replied haughtily. "And we pay no attention to pirates, interlopers, nuisances, or Saturnian raiders."

"I, sir," she snapped back, pausing to bit a chunk from a piece of cake, "am none of these. I am the representative of the law of the mother planets. As a Canadian citizen, you are a member of the United Nations of Earth and a subject to the Earth-Mars Administration. When I order you back, you are required by law to heed."

"I, Miss Hackenwhacken, am the king of a sovereign

DESTINY'S ORBIT

world outside the spheres of the EMSA or any other planet. You have no business here and you will remain a prisoner here until I have determined the proper diplomatic exchange for you. And that will be after the signing of a treaty between my Fore-Trojan Union and your government," Ajax replied calmly, fingering the embroidered crown and emblem on his purple uniform jacket.

"My name is Hackenschmidt," the girl replied, her blue eyes sparkling, "and will you stop this pretense! This is an asteroid and it is part of the asteroid belt and under EMSA!"

Ajax leaned back, smiling. There was something about this girl that he found highly teasable. "My dear young lady, whatever your name is, you are in error. You are outside the asteroid belt and this is not within your province. Let me explain."

Twirling her handcannon, which he had been holding since he had taken it, he carefully explained the astronomical status of the Fore-Trojans using a manner one would use to explain to a very backward child.

As he talked, Emily gritted her teeth, grimaced, shook her head, tried to butt in. Finally, when he stopped, she jumped up and advanced on him, with her finger shaking. Negligently he righted the handcannon, having adjusted it to its slightest level of blast, and pointed it at her.

She stopped short, and waving her finger under his nose, she said:

"Now, you listen to me, Ajax Calkins. Don't try to split legal hairs with the whole of two great planets while the solar system is in danger. Do you understand that the Saturnians are trying to undermine our whole system and that your high-jinks are aiding and abetting them? Do you know that you are diverting important elements of our defense to your nonsense? With Saturn about to launch a full scale war, you will be snuffed out like a wink, legalisms or not! Now will you stop this, or will you wait until you become mince-meat to the Saturnian monsters?"

Ajax frowned. He sat up straight. "We will set up our

DESTINY'S ORBIT

radio station and announce our independence. Then let us see which side of space respects law and order."

Emily turned, glanced at Smallways and the Wuj, and waved her hands angrily in the air. But they merely returned her unspoken appeal with blank expressions. Wearily, she sank back into her seat.

Ajax stood up. "Young lady, will you give me your word of honor not to try to escape, or shall we have to lock you up in one of our rooms?"

"Lock me up? Ajax Calkins, just you dare put a hand on me! I have no intention of escaping. My business is you—and after having come all this distance, if you think you can get rid of me that easily, you have another think coming. I am here to stay!"

"Very well, madame," said Ajax grimacing. "In that case you can assist us in assembling Radio Ajax. The crates are outside. I hope you are handy with a screwdriver and crowbar. Hard work, I am told, is good for the soul."

CHAPTER EIGHT

PUTTING TOGETHER Radio Ajax proved a task of hours out on the airless surface of the worldlet. While the extremely low gravity made moving the crates light work, there was still the matter of density and judgment of motion to overcome. There was a good deal of delicate equipment which must not be tipped too easily nor allowed to float unimpeded into a rock.

Further, working in a spacesuit is not something that one can simply take to without training. Despite controls of air and humidity, it still gives a feeling of being encumbered and encased—and work requires constant breaks if it is not to leave one with muscles aching from unexpected overstrains and misjudgments.

So the work which might have taken an hour or so on Earth or Mars took several times as long. Add to that the fact that it was being done by amateurs—one of them a prisoner, and none too willing—and it was a wonder that the station was set up at all.

But Radio Ajax was ready for operation in due course the next day, a sleeping period later. It stood in the open, high on the ridge, and the generators and wires were open and exposed so that it looked quite odd to a landbound eye. Its antenna was directional—a large wire basket-shaped device, many feet in diameter, directed inward towards the solar planets.

"There should be no leakage at all outward towards the orbits of Saturn. Uranus and the others on the far rim," said Ajax. "You see, Emily," he went on to the girl as they stood surveying their finished work, "in spite of our differences I am giving EMSA the first opportunity to make its peace with me."

DESTINY'S ORBIT

"You'd better," she replied. "And they'll make peace with you—little pieces, you bet."

"Hummmph," said Ajax. "Anyway, let us go inside to the palace, and there I shall formally initiate the station."

They returned to the ridge chambers and doffed their spacesuits. The mike and the controls of the huge station had been installed in the central living room—the throne room, Ajax insisted on calling it.

"Where's the Wuj?" asked Ajax.

"Your eight-legged henchman has discovered the delights of exploration," Emily replied. "He has gone out hunting artifacts with Anton. It seems that the miners found several bits in the dirt excavated for some of their dugouts. It looks as if broken clay and some pitted fragments of worked metal, if the Fore-Trojans may be one of the best sources of the great pre-explosion culture in the whole asteroid belt."

"If it's my kingdom, it stands to reason that it will naturally have the lead in everything that's good," replied Ajax dead seriously. He ignored the sarcastic glance Emily threw at him in answer.

Ajax seated himself before the transmitter. He opened the switches, listened to the powerful hum of the atomic generator, and when the dials registered the carrier beam full on, he switched on the mike.

"Radio Ajax calling all stations," he spoke proudly and clearly. "Radio Ajax now opening transmission daily from the capital city of the Fore-Trojan Union."

After repeating this three times, he read out a carefully prepared proclamation of independence, defining his basis for sovereignty, and offering the inner planets a treaty of peace and commerce on equal grounds.

Emily sat in a corner of the room, one shapely foot crossed over the other, shaking her head and making exasperated expressions as Calkins spoke. When Ajax completed his reading, he switched the transmitter to automatic sending. It would repeat his taped message regularly for the next six hours.

There was no reply the next day. "We may have to wait

DESTINY'S ORBIT

quite a while," decided Ajax on scanning the tape and finding it blank. "Doubtless, they will have to relay our message to the governments of Earth and Mars, who will then have to sit in solemn session and decide how to exchange diplomatic missions."

"Ha!" snorted Emily. "You should live that long. You'll have a wait before that happens. In fact, it might last a lifetime—if you don't get blown out of here in the next week."

"That's enough out of you!" snapped Ajax. He had been hoping for a prompt and cordial answer. "I have work to do. I am planning to draft my laws and regulations for the kingdom, and I shall have to take consultation with my prime minister, Anton Smallways. I plan to erect several sealed cities on these worlds, and begin the creation of a true wonder community."

"Well," asked Emily, "what do you want me to do—applaud? Or maybe work out a system of lampposts and sewers? . . . Since you're going to be so busy, do you mind if I go out and look these worlds over?"

Ajax looked at her. "You may go exploring if you will, but you must be accompanied by the Wuj. He will keep an eye on you, and keep you out of mischief. Besides, he wants to go exploring, too."

"Good," said Emily. "It will be a pleasure to get into the company of something that's sane."

She found her spacesuit and got into it, while the Wuj climbed into his complex space stroller. Soon the two of them were outside the ridge, beginning their day of exploration.

The two oddly assorted creatures—the Earth-girl in her official EMSA outfit and the weird figure of the arachnoid Martian—moved across the narrow landscape together, and found conversation of interest.

Emily Hackenschmidt was a recent graduate of the EMSA training academy. She had studied Martians, but this was the first time she had ever really met a Martian on speaking terms. There was something that seemed to spark interest

DESTINY'S ORBIT

between the two. The Wuj was not without his curiosity about humanity.

So, as they wandered, they talked and found much that was quaint between them. The Wuj explained something of the system of his clan on Mars; and, as he pointed out, "I owe Ajax a debt of loyalty such as you cannot understand on Earth. Among our people, I am in a special tribal testing period—a time in which all that I do must be perfect, and nothing must be allowed to go wrong. This trial does not allow for accidents or anything else which may be beyond my control. The terms with which I must comply are unyielding. This is rigid. This is fact. And if I cannot immediately find a new commitment upon the occurrence of any disaster, then I become Webless, and must go back years in my life in order to start again.

"When Ajax rescued me from my failure as a buswheel operator, it gave me the one chance I had. I will serve out the full term of my trial with him, and when I return it will be with fulfillment instead of shame. The Web will vibrate for me."

Emily nodded to herself. "As for me," she said, "I, too, am going through a trial. This is the first assignment in my career, and my career is devoted to keeping the peace between the worlds, to serving intelligence and civilization, and to patrolling the spaceways. There weren't many women in my graduating class at the academy, and most of them were going on to desk jobs.

"All my life I have dreamed of space and adventure. EMSA was my path to it. And when they assigned me to patrol this spoiled young man with too much money, they thought it was just an easy job—one they could safely pass off on a girl. But it turned out to be a real poser.

"You know, they wanted to take it away from me when Ajax actually took off for Mars, but I stood on my rights. We of the Canadian branch of EMSA have taken for our motto the ancient, traditional rallying cry: *we always get our man!* I absolutely refused to turn over my file to that stuffy branch chief, Pierre MacHeath. And he had to give in."

DESTINY'S ORBIT

The Wuj stopped by a pile of loosely jumbled meteoric rocks and began to poke around in them with a crowbar. "I understand. You know, that makes us opponents—for we of Mars never let our man down."

Emily watched the crowbar idly. "I know. It's too bad in a way. I find you rather interesting, and your loyalty admirable; but as for that Calkins—he needs a taking down."

She sighed. "But let us be friends for the moment," she added. "What's this?" She pointed at something the crowbar had revealed.

The Wuj shot down a spidery implement and picked up a piece of carved metal out of the rocks. He held it up, and they both looked at it.

"It's a synthetic manufacture," the girl said.

"Pre-explosion artifact," decided the Wuj matter-of-factly. "The asteroid is crawling with them." He shoved the piece into the pack he was carrying.

In another couple of hours, they had assembled quite a collection of such items.

The planetoid was not as rugged as most of these chunks of planetary debris. In fact, they found that it was quite symmetrically smooth, allowing for the pitmarks of meteor craters here and there.

Emily remarked, "I wonder whether this world is a hollow shell. They have found several asteroids with large, shell-like interiors. They seal these in, fill them with air, and make very satisfactory habitations out of them. Radio Pallas is established in such a bubble under the surface of the asteroid."

The Wuj remarked, "I have heard Anton Smallways say that the miners have radar-probed the interior briefly and believe it to have a metallic core. But the weight of this asteroid is not sufficient to be solid metal, so they think that Ajax must have hollow spaces beneath the surface. My great leader, Ajax, is going to look into the possibility of establishing a better colony underground."

Emily shrugged. "The only underground he's going to

DESTINY'S ORBIT

see is the basement cells in Deimos Prison. Just wait until the EMSA catches him."

The Wuj made no reply to this. They went on, and the two commandeered a small mining spaceship at one of the workings. The sullen miners made no objection to this when they learned that the two planned to visit a neighboring worldlet that was now passing overhead in the ebon sky.

On Achilles—which was the neighboring world of the Fore-Trojans they landed on—they found something more like the typical asteroid formation. Achilles was a chunk of a world, more like a hunk of coal than a rounded sphere. As they walked over its weird, pitted, burned surface, they could feel the pull of its gravity altering, for they were never strolling on a level with the gravitational center. It was uphill against that center—and up what would look like the sheer cliff of a huge mountain—until suddenly, as they reached the top, their viewpoint would shift, dip, and they would see themselves atop a flat and level plain.

The effects of walking on such a non-spherical world were most odd, and the next few hours went by with great interest to the explorers.

In one place, they seemed to be perched upon a point of land with the world dropping out from under them into a towering abyss of empty space, with the stars reeling almost beneath their feet. At another spot, near the center of gravity, it was like being in a vast bowl, with curving walls rising all about them and shutting the stars away from them.

They searched for artifacts, but on this world they found none.

"This is just as it was when it was ripped apart by the great explosion," said Emily softly, as they climbed the edges of that illusory bowl. "This little world was ripped from a chunk of the inner shell. We'll find no artifacts or fragments of them here, for no living beings ever dwelled here when the planet was whole."

"It's depressing," said the Wuj. "I like to think that I walk where the ancestors of my race first dwelt."

DESTINY'S ORBIT

"Not on Achilles," said Emily. "This place, named after a famous warrior of Earth, never saw a war. It's a frightening place."

They returned at last to the spot where they had left their miner's spaceship, and sent it back to Ajax again. Navigation between such closely connected worldlets was not difficult. It required no elaborate data and calculations, and could be done by hand and eye.

The day was done at headquarters on Ajax, and there had been no reply to Calkins' message. Ajax himself had been busy turning out sheafs of careful notes for laws, and plans for cities. The next day, Emily did not accompany the spidery Martian outside, but let the Wuj go exploring alone.

The Wuj came back from his trips across the surface of the small world elated with discoveries. He had brought back quite a mass of chunks of things manufactured before the great explosion, and Ajax thumbed through this junk with a certain amount of interest.

It was known that the thousands of tiny worlds making up the asteroids were the results of a cosmic calamity that had taken place for unknown reasons some five or six million years before. A few artifacts had been found on the main asteroids, but it seemed that Ajax was indeed one of the most amazing sources of all. The planetoid itself was sort of egg-shaped—in fact remarkably so—and in the crust of dried dust, meteoric debris, scaly rock, and cement hard mud, were a multiplicity of remnants.

The Wuj had taken a fancy to one piece of shiny metal—a sort of triangle of bluish-green alloy with a hole in its sharp end—and had hung it about its upper first arm as an ornament. This had occasioned some comment as to the vanity and decoration of the spider-type Martians.

"Isn't decorating yourself a rather feminine thing to do?" inquired Emily curiously during one meal. "I thought only the female of the species did that."

"Not so," said the Wuj. "In our pre-connubial years we

DESTINY'S ORBIT

all do it occasionally. Only when we know positively whether we are eggers or spinners do we specialize."

"And don't you know?" asked Ajax, surprised. "Why I took it for granted you were a male—a spinner."

"Why?" For once the Third Least Wuj looked startled, and its big eyes opened their thousands of tiny eyelids in full amazement. "Of course I don't know. It doesn't concern me now, and it will be a dozen years or more before I have achieved status sufficiently to go to the Main Web and proclaim myself. I haven't the faintest idea of my sexual status. Personally I don't understand how you Earth people ever got anywhere, having to know your own sex from the very start. I should think it very distracting."

"It is," said Ajax, glancing over at Emily. "It certainly is."

Emily, for once, said nothing, but a faint blush tinged her face.

Fortunately at that moment a buzz from the board called their attention away. Ajax went over, flipped on the receiver. There was a squawking sound, and then a voice came on:

"Radio Juno calling Radio Ajax. Come in please, we have a message for you."

The three jumped to their feet in excitement. From another room, Anton Smallways came quietly in also.

Ajax slipped into the seat before the mike, switched it on. "Radio Ajax acknowledges your call. Come in Radio Juno."

He waited. Radio Juno, the huge station operated by EMSA on the large planetoid Juno, was one of the four major EMSA control points in the asteroid belt. The other three stations—Radio Ceres, Radio Vesta, and Radio Pallas—were far away at that time, probably half an orbit away. There was need for four such stations so that at almost all times one such major station would be in hearing of any of the asteroids.

Radio Juno, obviously, was the one nearest them now.

It took about twenty minutes for Radio Juno to return the call, so great was the distance from Ajax. In that period,

DESTINY'S ORBIT

the four in the room said nothing, but waited in tension to see what the reply would be.

There was a buzz, then the call came in. "Radio Juno calling Radio Ajax. Here is an announcement directed to Ajax Calkins. Here is an official announcement. Stand by."

They tensed. Then a voice began to speak, a voice of authority, speaking in a tone of command. The speech was short but to the point. The Earth-Mars Space Administration could not and would not recognize any claims to independence. Its authority extended to all asteroids regardless of orbital quibblings, and Ajax Calkins was ordered to cease and desist, to turn over his administration to the nearest EMSA official, and to return at once to headquarters at Juno and account for himself.

When the voice ceased, Ajax, angry, sat down, and barked out defiance of the order; he repeated his own declaration, and demanded recognition. When he shut down the transmitter, he turned around, and banged his hand down.

"They have their nerve! They'd better recognize me, or I'll sue 'em through every court on two planets!"

Emily stood up, looked at Anton Smallways and the Wuj. "You heard the words of Radio Juno," she said, "and if you are law-abiding beings you will obey them. As the nearest EMSA official, I am in command here."

The Wuj looked at her, then looked at Ajax. Anton merely stroked his green beard, then shook his head. "Sit down, Hackenschmidt," he said. "Ajax the First is king here and you are still our prisoner."

Emily began excitedly to argue with them, but she gave it up after encountering their stony refusals to heed her.

They sat around in silence for a while, wondering whether Radio Juno would reply to them once again. An hour passed and still there was no incoming call. Then the buzzer sounded.

The four of them turned once again, and Ajax snapped on the speaker. There was the whistling sound of a carrier wave. Then a voice came on, a thin, high-pitched voice carefully sounding out its words:

DESTINY'S ORBIT

"Calling Radio Ajax. Calling Radio Ajax. This is the Imperial Transmitter, Voice of Saturn, speaking. We acknowledge your broadcast and we welcome you to the family of fraternal nations. We transmit greetings from the Imperial Collegium of Saturn and extend our recognition to the free banner of the Fore-Trojan Union. Hail to King Ajax the First. Hail to the free and independent people of the six worlds of the Jovian Orbit!

"We are sending an ambassador and an Imperial escort of honor to your capital to draw up treaties and cement our friendship. Hail to Ajax! This is the Voice of Saturn speaking. Your friends on Saturn congratulate you."

Ajax sat, white-faced, as the curious clipped words rolled out of his speaker. Emily held a hand to her mouth, wide-eyed in horror. Anton Smallways was inscrutable as usual, and the Wuj was once again wide-eyed.

"But . . . but . . ." stammered Ajax, for once caught off base. "How did they know? How could they have heard our directional broadcast? It was beamed inward. They couldn't, they couldn't have picked it up!"

"And what are we going to do about that ambassador and his escort of honor," shrieked Emily. "Ajax Calkins, what have you done!"

CHAPTER NINE

THERE WAS A heated discussion, and for once Ajax Calkins was nonplussed. He was quite prepared to be neutral with Saturn and the EMSA, but he was not prepared as it were to be "neutral on Saturn's side." He realized suddenly that he was now facing the same difficulty that had beset many of the famous men he so lionized and hoped to follow—the position of a small and weak ruler caught between two mighty empires.

"You must give up your claim at once, call on our EMSA forces to take over and hold these asteroids!" urged Emily. "The Fore-Trojans are too important a base and in too strategic an orbit for them to fall into Saturnian hands!"

The Third Least Wuj asked slowly, "Can you trust the Saturnians? If you can, then you can play one against the other. Urge them to keep hands off, or you will call in EMSA."

"That's pretty sound advice," agreed Ajax, "but can we trust the Saturnians? I am told they are very treacherous. They learned our ways of civilization too fast to know how to temporize or compromise."

"I think you can trust them," said Anton Smallways slowly, stroking his green beard. "I have never met any of them but I have met miners who know them, and they have always spoken highly of the Saturnian mind. In my opinion, the things you have heard of them from the EMSA authorities can be discounted as propaganda."

"There may be something in that," replied Ajax thoughtfully. "History does indeed show that war and the clash of interests are always accompanied by one-sided viewpoints."

"I tell you it isn't so." Emily Hackenschmidt jumped up, and walked back and forth. "I tell you that I studied the

DESTINY'S ORBIT

accounts of our experiences with the Saturnians back at training school, and the conclusion is indisputable. They're out for no good. We tried everything to win their confidence and we were dealt with viciously and dishonestly. You can't trust them. Besides, the Earth people are your own people!"

"Maybe they are—and maybe I'd be doing them a service by blocking this war with determined neutrality. Perhaps we can show both sides the folly of their ways," said Calkins. "Then Ajax the First will have fairly won the regard of all."

The Wuj nodded slowly, and Anton Smallways also signified his approval. Emily found herself a shrill and helplessly indignant minority.

Gravely Ajax sat down to the transmitter, opened the beam, and called Radio Juno. Carefully he composed and transmitted a message, repeating his demand for recognition of independence. In return he would offer to act as a neutral meeting ground for the Saturnians, whose delegation he said he would welcome only when a similar delegation from EMSA arrived.

Emily sat disconsolate, watching while he was transmitting. They sat back, awaiting a reply. But the rest of that day there was only an ominous radio silence.

They went to bed ill at ease, uncertain. Once more a transmission came in from Saturn, just before they retired. It was a short message saying their ambassador and his escort had set out, and would arrive in seven days' time. Ajax slept uneasily, lying awake for stretches in his little cubby hole, staring up at the plastitight ceiling, thinking. He dozed a bit, then came awake in the darkness suddenly; he sat up and listened.

Somewhere there was a faint humming which was not the sound of the air-conditioners. He got up, opened the door of his cubicle, and heard a whispering in the main hall, his "throne room-radio room."

He grabbed a handcannon, dashed the short distance and rushed in.

Hunched over the transmitter, whispering, was the figure

DESTINY'S ORBIT

of Emily Hackenschmidt, black hair down, in nightgown and slippers, sending a message. She turned as he came in, stuck her tongue out, and switched off. "I told Radio Juno to hurry up and get here," she said triumphantly. "Earth isn't going to take this lying down!"

"You . . ." Ajax was tongue-tied with rage. He sputtered, trying to remember he was a gentleman and a king, then sat down, holding the gun. "From now on we're going to have to lock you up at night."

"It won't do you a bit of good," she snapped back. "The dirty work is done; now you've got to be saved in spite of yourself. Just wait for the acknowledgment." She switched on the receiver and they waited, glaring at each other.

In a few minutes, the whistling call came in, and a crisp voice said, "Radio Juno to Agent Hackenschmidt. Very well done. We are preparing an expeditionary force immediately. Please urge the immediate evacuation of all personnel on these worlds. We cannot be responsible for them if a battle follows."

Emily stood, brushed a hand over her hair, a fine figure of a young girl in a pink nightie, and swayed, head held high, back to her room. "Don't forget the key, Ajax Calkins. It's on the inside of the door now. I'll throw it out to you. Or would you prefer a padlock and chain?"

She slammed the door, and left Calkins staring after her, his mind seething with furious thoughts.

"She ought to be tied up and whipped!" he muttered, going back to his own room for a thoroughly restless night.

When Ajax informed Anton Smallways, at the next breakfast period, of what the girl had done, the bearded miner was greatly disturbed. "This is very serious," he said. "We must take steps to foil both sides, to prevent any landings by either side until we can secure our position."

Ajax nodded. "And I have an idea," Smallways continued. "Come outside."

The two donned spacesuits, emerged from the ridge, and stood under the black sky of airless space, on the surface of the close-horized little world, and Smallways pointed up

DESTINY'S ORBIT

at the stars. "Do you see," he said, "where now moves our companion worlds? You can see Nestor and Achilles now, two half moons, moving swiftly across our sky. In a moment another of our worlds will appear.

"These six worlds are forever swinging back and forth from a central point. They perform an eternal dance, complex and wonderful to chart, as they swing back and forth, twining in and out of each other's paths. To land a space fleet here is not easy. But if we can make it even harder, then it might be impossible for either fleet to ever land."

"And how do we do this?" asked Ajax.

"If we have enough explosives, or atomic rocket engines, to mount on each world a source of energy, so that at our command, each worldlet would speed up on its swings outward, then we will radically change the pattern of their rotations. They will swing wider and farther, perform more complex routines, until no fleet can chart them without endless delay and endless risk."

Ajax narrowed his eyes; yes, he could see it. "But how do we do this? Surely we do not have enough such sources of power, nor supplies to keep such blasts going?"

Anton Smallways did not reply. Instead he spread his hands in a negative gesture. This was it. Ajax pondered it, watching the parade of the stars as he did so. His eyes fell on a stack of concentrated food and water, in *Calkans*. For a moment, he looked at the storage depot, then gave a start.

"I have it," he said. "I have it. The secret of the *Calkans*! We can use them for explosives, for rocket fuels!"

The green-bearded man looked at him through the glassine of his helmet. "How? These things do not explode."

Ajax shook his head violently. "It's a secret of my grandfather. When he first managed to compress elements molecularly, his problem was how to decompress them. We do this by means of slow injection of energy. But there was an alternate way my grandfather discovered, the knowledge of which he immediately made a top secret. By an adjustment of the decompressor machines, these cans can be made to re-

DESTINY'S ORBIT

establish their normal molecular space instantaneously! The result is a terrific explosion, of nearly atomic magnitude. I can adjust the decompressor for that—using it on the cans and setting a time for the sudden rapid transition.”

“You mean,” said Anton Smallways, “that if we dig a pit on each worldlet, set up our pile of treated *Calkans*, and await the time, that they will go off, one after another, in a chain atomic reaction, that will act as a powerful rocket jet capable of moving an asteroid?”

“Precisely!” said Ajax. “And we have seven days to do it!”

Anton Smallways pressed a stud on his suit. Immediately an emergency call was sent out to all the miners of his group. Men came from everywhere, and hastily the work was started.

Ajax, his purple cloak swinging limply from the shoulders of his spacesuit, was directing the process of energizing the *Calkans*. Speedy rocket sleds went out to the other Fore-Trojans, and under Smallways’ direction, the launching pits were being dug.

Day after day went by, the radio continuing to carry ominous news of the oncoming fleets of ultimatums, and “greetings from your friends of Saturn.”

The Wuj was delegated to guard Emily, who was released from her room, but not allowed to go anywhere without the spidery Martian accompanying her. She was chastened now, seeing the wild activity, realizing that her words had gone unheeded. She and the Wuj spent their time wandering the surface of Ajax, looking for artifacts.

Ajax had ordered her small yellow EMSA scout ship to be taken into the *Destiny’s* cargo hold, so that she could not steal it for a getaway.

Then came the final day. They gathered once more in the “palace” and there Ajax gave the command to fire the *Calkans*.

They listened, while from Achilles and Nestor, Hector and Agamemnon, Odysseus and the north pole of Ajax itself, came the toneless voices of the miners announcing the blasting of the first of the long chain of *Calkans*.

DESTINY'S ORBIT

They felt the shock as the ones on Ajax started off. The room shook and quivered in the repeated hammerblows, and the stars as seen through the thick transparent windows reeled and swirled.

"We are taking a bad pounding," said Ajax, "but we shall win."

The Wuj and Emily sat silent. They clung to their posts as the tiny world vibrated to a series of tremendous earthquakes.

"Where is Smallways?" asked Emily. The little man was missing. She got up, started down the long hallway that ran down beneath the ridge; the Wuj silently followed her.

She looked into their rooms, but Smallways was not there. She went on, past the kitchen, past the conditioner room, through a storage chamber, and into the long darkish hallway beyond, where other miners had their quarters. She stopped; there was a clicking and whispering sound somewhere in the deserted ridge.

The Wuj listened, pointed to a closed door marked "Storage." Emily ran quickly to it and threw it open.

CHAPTER TEN

ANTON SMALLWAYS was seated at a narrow table in the small room, hunched over a radio transmitter, speaking rapidly in a curious series of squeaks, grunts, and whistling sounds. He threw them a quick glance, and then slammed a hand down on his switch, and twisted his directional dials wildly. Curiously, his face retained its usual impassivity.

Emily shouted excitedly, "He's the one tipping off the Saturnians! That's the transmitter he's been using!"

Smallways wheeled around, jumped up, but the room was narrow and Emily blocked it. He hit her, pushed her outside, and turned toward the long dark hallways leading into the farther end of the ridge. But he found the Wuj blocking his way and before he could push by the huge creature's waving legs, Emily got a grip on his arm and twisted.

Smallways gave an odd yelp, twisted around and tried to push past her. "Oh no, you don't," she gasped. "You're dealing with a trained judo expert, bud!" Still grasping his arm she swung sharply in a twist that should have brought the little man headlong into the wall. But there was a click, and somehow he was not carried with her; instead, he was still on his feet, running madly down the hall now in the direction of the throne-radio room.

Emily stood there a second, still holding Anton's arm. She looked at it; she looked at the fleeing little man, running armless down the hall, and she shook her head in bewilderment. The Wuj peered over her shoulder, arched his eyes, and said, "How curious. I didn't know you Earth types came apart so easily."

"We . . . don't . . ." Emily gasped, looked at the

DESTINY'S ORBIT

arm, turning it and looking at the torn-off shoulder end. "He's . . . he's a fake! The thing's a hollow shell!"

The arm she was holding was a synthetic creation, a carefully simulated shell of plastic, inside of which could be seen neat little mechanisms for working the surface muscles. With a gasp of disgust, she dropped it, and then gasped, "Hurry, Wuj; get him before he gets to Ajax!"

Together the two raced after the figure of Smallways, charging as fast as they could to catch up with him. Emily ran and the Wuj scooted even faster, passed her, by rising to the ceiling and running along it. He closed in on Smallways just as the little man entered the main radio room.

Ajax was rising to his feet, wondering at the sudden clamor, when the Wuj shot in overhead, dropped on the little prime minister and bore him to the floor, imprisoning him with his eight strong lets.

Ajax was peering down at Smallways when Emily came running in. "He's a fake!" she cried. "He's a Saturnian!" And poising herself over the recumbent little man, she demanded, "Come out of there, you, and let's see your real self!"

Ajax stepped back, drew his handcannon and pointed it at the staring face of Anton Smallways. "Go ahead," he said. "Come out or I'll shoot."

Now the body of the little man split down the middle and out of the hollow shell emerged a curious thing not quite like anything seen on the inner worlds. It was like a snail removed from its shell, something like an oyster, and also like a rather pulpy caterpillar.

It was slippery and it was grayish-white; it was cold, and it had two oily eyes and a sucking mouthlike vent in one end of its not quite substantial body. The thing stood up, on a short set of pseudopod masses and out of its sucking mouth came the voice of Smallways. "You're too late, my friends. The Saturnian fleet will arrive here tomorrow, but by that time your asteroids will have gone their separate ways. Operation Swing is a success, but not for you."

"What do you mean?" Ajax asked, an unpleasant suspicion in his mind. "Operation Swing will prevent landings."

DESTINY'S ORBIT

Another earthquake series rocked the room for a moment. The thing from Saturn went on, "Operation Swing will shatter the Fore-Trojans totally. Most of the asteroids will swing off, will fly away from their old orbits, fly away from the central balancing point and outward where the Saturnians can use them for advanced bases. Thank you for giving us the means of doing this."

Several sharp jolts rocked the room then. The humans grabbed at things to hold their balance, and in the confusion the Saturnian slithered quickly toward the door. Ajax shouted; and as it was going out in a desperate effort to escape, he brought up his weapon and fired.

There was a blast and where the thing had been there was a splash of grayish juices and a chunk torn out of the wall. They felt a rush of air about them, and a whistling sound penetrated their ears.

"Spacesuits!" shouted Ajax and the three ran to the lock and hastily dressed for outer space, even as the air was escaping through the hole in the wall, widening now as cracks radiated from it, from the weakened structure of the quake-racked ridge.

The three got out of the space lock in time. Outside they faced a scene of chaos. There there had been structures, the vibrations had collapsed them. There were several of the miners in sight, heading for the ridge and when these saw the three emerge they started to run toward them.

"They must all be Saturnian agents!" cried Emily. "We've got to escape."

"To the *Destiny*!" shouted Ajax and the three ran across the landscape to where his trim space yacht was berthed.

The miners seemed at first directionless, for there was no pursuit as their spacesuited figures poked into the ridge. The three had almost reached the *Destiny* when the miners began to boil out of the ridge and charge after them. By that time, Ajax had opened the outer lock and the three pushed in.

The lock slammed shut, and the inner lock activated by

DESTINY'S ORBIT

the time the miners had reached the *Destiny*. They could hear pounding on the door.

Ajax ran into the control room, hastily punched the buttons. Emily slid to a stop, found herself sitting on the floor suddenly as the beautifully automatic spacecraft lifted swiftly and shot upwards into the airless sky. The Wuj had hold of a bar and wasn't disturbed.

The ship shot on, and Ajax staggered over to a viewing port. "Look," he gasped and Emily got to her feet, rubbing her posterior, and got over to look too.

Below them the planetoid Ajax was breaking up. Its surface of dried mud and rock was cracking wide; huge crevices and gaping wounds were appearing from pole to pole.

"It's leaving its orbit; it's falling apart from the strain," murmured Ajax tearfully. "It was mine, all mine, and now it's gone. I'm Ajax the First and Last."

Even Emily felt constrained to silence as they watched the tiny world begin to disintegrate. A glance showed that the other six worldlets had already vanished, presumably hurtling off on outward trails that would take them eventually into new orbits farther out between Saturn and Jupiter. But Ajax was the one destined to go the other way; it was heading sunward, shedding huge megaton blocks of rock and dirt as it was going.

They followed it, trailing it through space, Ajax watching, wondering where among the asteroids it would now establish a new orbit—if any part of it survived.

"There may be a hard core," said the Wuj suddenly. "If so, there will still be a world for you."

Emily grunted. "A world among the asteroids inside the orbit of Jupiter definitely. Even legally you'll have no case now."

The little world was a shining disc in the distance of the starstrewn depths of space, a disc marked by a thin tail like that of a comet as it shredded apart. And just then there was a burst of blazing light like a tiny sun off to another part of the sky.

DESTINY'S ORBIT

"What's that?" said Emily, pointing. Ajax followed her finger, stared at it.

"We're under fire!" he yelled. "It's the Saturnians! Their escort fleet is here!"

He jumped back to the controls, while Emily and the Wuj watched tensely at the viewplates. Another little sun flared, seemingly closer.

Then the *Destiny* darted forward, a sharp acceleration that had the two viewers grasping for aid. Again Emily Hackenschmidt came down on the floor with a thump. "Oww!" she gasped. "Oh, I'm going to be black and blue."

"Serves you right," said Ajax. "Only got what was coming to you for butting in." He sat at the board, manually directing the speedy yacht.

The Wuj scrambled to his feet, looked again outside. "They're not firing at us any longer," he said. "There seems to be a battle going on."

Emily got on her feet, limped over for a look. "Yes," she said, "EMSA has arrived and they're taking on the Saturnians."

"Good," muttered Ajax. "Gives us a chance to get away and follow the destiny of my kingdom."

He took the space yacht out of the vicinity in a flash and set out to follow the last charted orbit of the dislocated worldlet. In seconds they had left the scene of the battle behind.

"You know, this is the first actual battle in what is likely to prove a terrible war," said Emily. "And in a way it's all your fault."

"Nonsense," said Ajax, peering through the front port. "It would have started some other way, anyway. Besides, I'm a neutral."

Emily threw him a look of scorn, then winced again as she reached for a seat. "See the silly world yet? What's left of it, that is?"

Ajax was silent for a while, then uttered a whistle. "I've got it back on course, and I see Ajax again. It's different; it's strange."

DESTINY'S ORBIT

The Wuj at the viewplate said slowly, "It had a hard core after all."

"Yes," said Ajax, "a hard core—in fact, a polished, tooled metal core. What is left of Ajax is a huge metallic construction, almost as big as the original planetoid. The surface, the mud and rock, were debris or camouflage. Ajax underneath was an artificial world. Look at it. I'm going to try for a landing."

Even Emily forgot her aching rump to get up and look.

In their forward viewplates they could see the former world of the now dissolved Fore-Trojan Union. It shone brightly in the sky as they neared it—a gleaming, metallic surface like a huge oval egg, several miles in length along its longitudinal axis. The rocky outer shell had vanished, shredded into dust and scattered into space.

They were coming to a landing on a new Ajax, a metal-shelled Pandora's Box containing no one knew what wonders of a lost pre-asteroid civilization.

"And it's all mine," said Ajax complacently.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

DEFTLY AJAX CALKINS slid the *Destiny* across the surface of the newly revealed metallic world. Here and there dirty streaks of mud and rock still clung to the surface, but they could clearly see the seams that marked the construction of the ancient shell. Amazingly it seemed to be in perfect shape, possibly because the protective layer of surface had sheltered it from the damage of cosmic dust and meteors throughout the aeons that had passed.

Now the *Destiny* slid to a stop on the shining surface, at a point where there seemed to be a large circular line of demarcation. "It may be an opening, a lock of some sort," said Emily as she watched.

"We'll see," said Ajax as the space yacht came to a stop. He threw a switch which magnetized pads on the underside of the vessel and which would make it cling firmly to the metal surface. Such pads were standard equipment for small craft and for asteroid operations, since many of the smaller asteroids were chunks of meteoric metal or seamed with metal.

They got into their spacesuits and emerged from the yacht. They found themselves standing on a plain of shining metal, sloping off onto a close horizon. "It's tremendous," said Emily after a moment's silence. "It's like the biggest space liner ever dreamed of."

Ajax started forward toward the circular marking. "It may have been intended as such, but I suspect it was a refuge. Perhaps the people of the lost planet had some warning of coming destruction and built it underground as a treasure house and refuge."

They came to the suspect area, walked around it studying

DESTINY'S ORBIT

it. "It surely was an entryway," said Ajax. "Large enough to admit small aircraft or landcraft. But how does it open?"

The Third Least Wuj scuttled across it, began to track around the circle. "There are indentations here," the Martian said.

They crossed to the spot, and saw a series of indentations alongside the tight crack. Ajax waved them to stand clear, and bent down and began to probe the indentations. His fingers definitely pushed something down.

Something clicked in their feet, a vibration as sound did not travel through space. They felt a grinding tremor; then the area within the circular crack began slowly to rise, unscrewing steadily. It turned, creakily, stopping, starting, fighting at invisible clogging elements. The three stood and watched it. Finally about a foot of the surface was risen above it, and then this detached itself and began to slide aside.

Now a wide opening was revealed to them; and as they looked into it, they saw a short series of ledges, and saw that another surface of metal could be reached about thirty feet below.

Gingerly they descended the ledges, as if they were stairs. At the bottom, were several indentations in the floor similar to those above. "Do you think we should chance . . ." began Emily, but Ajax simply bent down and pressed into those.

The surface began to sink under their feet, carrying them with it, and above them the cover began to slide back over their heads. "Like an air lock," said Ajax.

"We're taking an awful chance," said Emily, holding on, but gritting her teeth.

Ajax shrugged. They descended farther, and now found themselves in open space; the disc beneath them swung to one side and they stepped out onto a wide balcony-like ledge.

"What's holding us up?" asked Emily. "I feel light-headed; there must be no gravity here, yet we're sticking."

"Our magnetized shoes are holding us to the metal surfaces," said Ajax. "This place is without gravity."

DESTINY'S ORBIT

The only light was the built-in beams in their suits. They stood, a little group of three lights, and looked into an area of darkness. But as they watched, there was a humming sound, then a whistling sound, and they felt movement rush past their helmets.

"What's that?" whispered Emily.

"It's air," said the Wuj. "The place is filling up with air from somewhere. And see—there are lights coming on."

They stood and watched as the interior of the mysterious world came to life. Here and there faint blue lights came into being like stars breaking through clouds. More and more lights, some blue, some reddish, now a few yellow and whites appeared. Gradually the view was cleared as the lights cut through the interior. They stood silent with wonder and awe as their view extended.

Now it was ablaze with lights; the air was beginning to be thick about them, and they could feel the first faint hummings of warmth ascending from the surface. They stood on a narrow balcony and overlooked a huge floor of a great many layers that must have filled the huge egg.

From floor to curved ceiling the height may have been fifty feet. And this mighty floor was banked with long rows of cylinders, each resting in its own cradle, each marked in cabalistic symbols. And there were other enclosed objects, suggesting crates, and areas of plain floor. This huge store-room ran as far as they could see. Around the wall ran the balcony on which they stood, and there were doors breaking the walls regularly.

They stood near one, so they went over and looked into it. It was a small chamber, with what might have been a sleeping pallet, circular and a little off balance for a human form. "This place was built for habitation," said Emily, "but where are the inhabitants?"

"Gone," said Ajax, "millions of years gone. They may never have had time to man this vault. Or they may have tired of hiding out and left it. Or . . ."

DESTINY'S ORBIT

"Who knows?" said the Wuj. "They may even have gone to Mars and become the ancestors of one of our beings."

"True," said Ajax. "Let's explore."

They spent several hours wandering around the balcony, descending to the floor to examine the cylinders, looking into other crates, studying the unusual shapes of the things in receptacles aligned along the wall.

Finally they found, not too far from the entry port, a large chamber which gave the appearance of being a command headquarters. It was large, and lined with what seemed like a form of viewplate; there were controls, indicators marked in esoteric calibrations, large cushions scattered around, and other elements indicative of its nature.

They sat around in there, their helmets open, and talked it over. Ajax summed up. "Plainly, on our entry on the disc, automatic relays started the air and heating systems. The lighting system followed. We may assume that the entire world is now warm, habitable, and waiting for use. Somewhere below us there must be a kitchen setup and food storage, though whether that will prove of any use is unlikely.

"The cylinders on this upper floor, nearest the surface and the presumable surface ports, are obviously rocket craft—small, robotically directed rocket missiles. The Wuj thought they would be message carriers. In my opinion they were ships of war: robot miniature rockets with some kind of armament built in.

"This place was built to sustain a fight, but what and why it did not we shall never know. The question is: How do we motivate anything?"

"There must be robot machines. There must be walking devices, floor cars. Probably cookers and dishwashers and driers and sewers and manufacturing devices," said Emily, "but we can't seem to find any way to start them running. I believe they must have been motivated from some central point, like this room. But how to start it all off. . . . Nothing responds here."

Ajax looked around, his brow in thought. "I'd say it

needs a key, like any central plant. It's locked, that's all; nothing will operate until we unlock the main control."

"And how do we find the key?" said the Wuj.

"Search," said Ajax. "We will simply have to set up shop here, near the *Destiny* up on the surface, where our supplies are, and institute a search. My world will live again and my flag will fly triumphantly."

"Anyway," said the Wuj, "hadn't we better set up our bedding places? Personally I'm ready to sleep."

"Yes," said Ajax. "Who's going up to the surface and bring down some sleeping equipment and some cans of food?"

"I'll go," said Emily Hackenschmidt. She got up, fastened her space helmet on, adjusted her air flow, and went down the balcony to the disc. The two others stood in the doorway and watched her.

She got on the disc, and pressed the indentations. They saw it slowly swing back, rise up carrying her like an elevator and plug itself back into the ceiling, until she had disappeared.

They wandered about the main control hall for what may have been an hour, looking at the banks of controls and indicators and wondering what they would master. After a while, the Wuj squatted down and simply watched Ajax.

Finally, Ajax looked at the spidery creature in impatience. "Shouldn't she be back by now?"

The Wuj nodded. "I hate to question your wisdom, kind leader," he said softly, "but was it entirely wise to send Emily instead of going yourself?"

Ajax replied without thinking. "Of course. She knows what she needs in change of clothing and nightgowns and such, and I can't pick it out for her from her little scout cruiser. That's why . . ."

His face changed, turned white. "Her scout cruiser! She may have made her getaway! Ohmigosh, I've got to get out!"

He ran out the door and down the balcony. Swiftly he pressed the indentations in the wall that would bring the disc down. He tightened his helmet, gritting his teeth at the delay. When it came down, he jumped on, started the as-

DESTINY'S ORBIT

cent. Down the balcony the Wuj watched him with big, sad pugdog eyes.

He reached the surface, jumped out. The *Destiny* was still there, held tight to the surface, safe, intact.

He dashed across to it, and then he saw that the cargo door was open. The yellow EMSA scout ship was gone.

CHAPTER TWELVE

CURSING SILENTLY to himself at his moment of bone-headedness in allowing his antagonist to get away with such an escape, Ajax wasted no time in getting into the *Destiny*. And yet, he thought, *who else could have gone? As king, it would have been beneath my dignity. The Wu! couldn't be expected to pick out clothes and bedding for humans. Hence . . . it just had to be Emily.*

He jumped into the open cargo door hatch and activated it shut; when it was sealed, he ran air into the chamber, opened the inner door leading to the cargo section, went through it and got to the control room that way. Seating himself at the control console, he punched the buttons that would put all in readiness.

He studied the radar scanner which he had activated first. Meteors, a shadow or two—obviously distant asteroid shadows—but no sign of the characteristic blotch that would be a moving spacecraft. "Damn," he whispered, "she must have almost an hour's start."

He demagnetized the pads, started the engines; the trim space yacht slipped easily from the surface of the new Ajax and spiralled up into space. *She'll be heading for Juno*, he thought. *That is the nearest probable EMSA control station. I'll follow her. Surely I can catch up with her little ship. I outdistanced it easily once.*

So he punched out the co-ordinates for the large planetoid Juno on the robot controls, and sat back, with the indicators set for maximum practical speed. He watched the radar, hoping to see her craft caught in its radiation.

But speeding outside the plane of the ecliptic was one thing, and accelerating in the heart and center of the crowded asteroid belt was quite another problem. The ship kept slow-

ing, twisting, turning to alter its course as one or another object crossed its projective orbit. An hour went past; two; then three—and still there was no sign of the vessel he pursued.

Ajax Calkins sat tensely at his controls, wondering how long he dared pursue, and how close to Juno he dared bring his ship. But the decision was suddenly taken out of his hands.

He saw a bright flash on his radar and leaned forward. Was that Emily now? For the flash was ahead of him, inward to the sun, in the direction where Juno would be, and farther than that of Mars and Earth and Mercury. But immediately another dot appeared and another and still another; and they were not traveling away from him—they were coming toward him and fast.

Some sort of patrol ships, he realized in an instant. Four of them, in file, coming full tilt for him!

He snapped off the robot controls, grabbed the manuals and spun the ship. It swung around in a wide swing—not too wide, for the momentum could not allow a quick twist. In space at space speeds, a quick turn might encompass thousands of miles.

He didn't attempt a full turn; instead he twisted the ship off at a wide angle, and hoped to slide past the oncoming ships before they could turn after him. Once in a straight race, Ajax Calkins was confident he could outrun them. But the four foe started turning almost as fast as the *Destiny*.

He switched his ship's radio on. At once, he caught commands directed at him.

"Swing to and identify yourself. Swing about and land at the nearest asteroid. This is EMSA officia. Swing to or we fire!"

Ajax opened his mike. "This is the space yacht *Destiny* out of Canada, Earth, on a pleasure cruise. May we proceed?"

There was a crackling of the radio, and the EMSA ship's voice came on, harshly, "*Destiny*, shut down your engines! You're under arrest for harboring the enemy, and interfering with an EMSA agent. You are ordered to surrender at once!"

DESTINY'S ORBIT

"Oh, no, I don't," gritted out Ajax, and switched the radio com off. "You'll have to catch me."

He slammed on speed, disregarding the danger in the crowded space. But the EMSA ships were already closer to him than was comfortable.

A nova of white fire suddenly came into being close to his line of movement. Then another on the other side. "They're firing," muttered Ajax, "at me!"

He pushed his speed throttle down harder, raced past the two dying bursts of atomic flame. Another one blossomed a little behind him. "I'll show them."

He reached up on his console, flipped open a board revealing another set of buttons. He pushed one, glanced into his rear-view telescreen.

Where there should have been a blossom of fire from his rear gun, there was nothing. The oncoming EMSA ships, now falling back as the *Destiny* pursued its reckless acceleration, fired in unison.

A blast of blinding flame obscured Ajax's vision for a moment as the burst flared all over his telescreen. *Close*, he thought, *close*. The mad acceleration continued.

He fired all his other guns—strictly illegal as they were—and found that none of them worked. "Sabotaged," he muttered. "That blasted Smallways must have put them all out of commission!"

There was nothing for it but to try to outrun the four pursuit cruises. He switched on the radio receiver again, and he could hear the calls of the cruisers to each other.

"Box him in and hurry your fire," said one voice. And another said, "That so-and-so is a real renegade. I understand the Saturnians call him friend and ally." "Boy," said a third voice, "I'd like to get my hands on him!" "You can't," replied the first voice, "but we can blow him to hell and gone, and we will!"

Now a veritable curtain of fire blossomed all around the *Destiny* as all the ships fired at once. The *Destiny* suddenly tossed and twisted. More and more flares blinded

DESTINY'S ORBIT

Ajax from every side as the EMSA ships blasted away, seeing their fast quarry getting farther from them.

There was a sudden crash somewhere and the *Destiny's* lights blinked out, to be replaced by a couple of weak auxiliary glimmers. Ajax clung to his seat, leaning over the controls.

Another sudden slam and the ship seemed to somersault, then righted itself. But somewhere there was air escaping; Ajax pulled his helmet down, sealed his spacesuit. He had hardly done this, when two more shots registered on the ship.

He held on as the *Destiny* suddenly twirled around like a kicked soccer ball and the rush of air past his helmet indicated that the ship was sieved thoroughly. Glancing back, he noticed that he could see the stars shining where once had been a solid wall of his cabins.

"Time to git," he gasped to himself, and stood up. He half ran, half crawled down the main passageway, avoiding the fearful gap where the stars shone through. He clung to a stanchion as another terrible blow struck the ship and the last lights went out. The engine had gone dead and he was alone in silence, nothing but the stars reeling and whirling as the ship was crumbing about him.

He reached his lifeboat—a tiny shell of a rocket—slid open the side of it in the light of his helmet lamp, dropped in prone, slid the top shut, and blasted off.

The little rocket, designed for carrying one man, a minimum of supplies, attached to a tiny atomic jet, shot out of the wreck like a lone torpedo. Away into the blackness he drove and hoped the pursuers would not see his tiny jet in the glares of their shooting.

He twisted back for an instant and was in time to see a direct hit score on the riddled *Destiny*. The once fine ship simply disintegrated; it flew apart in a brilliant, flowerlike fire display. Then there was darkness in space, and he hurled on, his own jet off, hoping he had not been detected.

In a few minutes, he knew he had not. There was no more activity in the void. Nothing moved, save the same slow

DESTINY'S ORBIT

interchange that marked a few visible asteroids moving with apparent indolence on their endless orbits. No sign of ship, no sign of pursuit.

He was alone in space, in a shell of metal as snug as a coffin, with enough supplies for perhaps seven days, a radio that could broadcast only a set S. O. S. pattern, and a jet good for about a day's acceleration at low power.

He was heading sunward. The brilliant sphere of the sun was ahead of him, wreathed in its fantastic ring of corona and fire. The ruddy disc of Mars was off to one side, far from the direction he was headed. Earth was not even in sight.

He rested and stared out at the stars. He could not turn back, for though he could turn the little shell, his power would not be sufficient to completely overcome the momentum imparted by the *Destiny*. He would have to keep on heading inward and hope to sight some rescuing craft before his food ran out.

Unfortunately, if the conversation he overheard was widespread, any rescuer would probably lock him up and hand him over for trial and summary execution.

He lay on his stomach, in the thin padded interior of the shell, and looked silently into the emptiness of space. The tiny rocket lifeboat raced on, carrying with it the man who would be king.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

FOR ALL THE romantic slant of the histories he had studied and pored over, Ajax Calkins was not entirely unaware that the men who set out to found their own empires ran certain unpleasant risks. They were all subjects of particular nations, originally, and their own governments took dim views of such activities; it was one thing for an enterprising subject to do mighty deeds which brought new lands and glory to his ruler—it was another to set himself up as a king in his own right. If he failed to make his own rule stick, his end could be a rather sticky one.

Calkins thought for a while of some of the heroes who had failed to bring it off and admitted to himself, for a moment, that this could be his fate, too. If he were captured by EMSA, he most certainly would not be given safe conduct back to his kingdom. The best he could hope for was confinement in some institution from which he might eventually be able to escape, or eventually be released by convincing them he was "cured."

He decided not to worry about the worst, or, in fact, any of these contingencies. He was Ajax the First, man of destiny, and he would play his part as well as he could, come what may. Alone he traveled on through space, seeing no sign of other life, seeing nothing but the far lights of distant stars, the glow of the sun, and the almost changeless crescent of Mars. The vastness of space is so great that though a thousand thousand space ships might be *en route*, he might travel on forever and see none of them.

He lay on his stomach, in his spacesuit, within the tiny shell and pondered on the wisest course to pursue. There was little choice.

If he sent out his S.O.S. too soon, while within the mass

DESTINY'S ORBIT

of the asteroid belt, his only chance would be that an EMSA ship would find him—or worse a Saturnian sneak raider. Either prospect wouldn't be very pleasing.

If he held up his S.O.S. until he was crossing Mars' orbit, he might then hope to encounter some vessel on peaceful transport duty between the two inhabited worlds. But the distances then were such that few ships might be within hearing and those vessels not capable of much interference with their routes.

Besides, should he cross the orbit of Mars at his present speed, no such transport would be likely to be able to stop him. So the thing to do would be to decelerate as much as possible, so that as he crossed the main interplanetary routes he would be drifting—or as near to a drifting speed as any object in free space under the influence of the sun's pull could hope for.

He worked out an approximation of his speed and what he could do with his slight jet power. He then began the long wait.

He rested; he slept; he reviewed his life; he recited to himself all the poems he could remember, and made up verses. He listened to his ship's tiny radio, but could get nothing; its range was too limited.

He thought of the Third Least Wuj, stranded alone in the mysterious metal planetoid, with lifeless machinery, and things unimaginable. Could the Wuj ever piece together anything? Would he want to? Ajax reflected on the curious timelessness of the United Beings. They had established a level of civilization back when on Earth only cavemen and mammoths roamed the surface; then they had seemed to say, *this is good, this is enough*. And there the Martians had stayed: No advance; no decline; no interest in any further change, and not much curiosity. Individually they could be moved to investigate, but collectively they seemed content to stay pat.

Could the Wuj, who often reflected so much the strange stoicism of his ancient civilization, so change his nature as to master the machines of that world? For he had better, or

DESTINY'S ORBIT

else he would starve to death. How long did it take Martians to starve? Ajax wasn't sure—he had an idea that the spidery types could hibernate if necessary.

And that Emily Hackenschmidt! He thought about her with mingled periods of anger and fury and other periods when he found stranger emotions moving him. She was a pretty girl, and a spunky one, too; he could, he realized, almost learn to like her. She was certainly a girl for an adventurer. If only she wasn't so blasted obstinate! He wondered what had happened to her. Had the EMSA given her a medal and a raise in rank?

Time passed. He turned the shell around, fired his little rocket and watched as the tiny shell slowly retarded its fall sunward. Past the orbit of Mars now, the crescent having widened out, until now Mars was an orb, a tiny disc of ruddy color off to his side.

He watched the gauge of his limited fuel supply, and when it was three-quarters empty, he shut off his engine. The rest might yet save his life.

Now he watched and scanned the sky. How many days passed, he couldn't tell. A week, perhaps two weeks. . . . He did not know. He had cut his food intake, limited his meals to drag out the stores. And he became slowly worried. Another meal or two left, and then slow starvation.

He switched on his automatic S.O.S. sender broadcasting a general call. Was anything near?

Slowly the hours passed, and he watched and waited and saw nothing. He ate his last meal, lingeringly, and it became a memory. His water supply, constantly renewing itself in a closed cycle would continue indefinitely. How long could a man go without food? Thirty days, he remembered from somewhere.

He watched and lay on his stomach and wondered how weak he would be. He saw the stars, tiny cold points of white in the deep blackness. He noticed one that seemed to move among the others. It moved slightly, but it moved.

Was it a ship?

It had to be, he thought. What else could move? He knew

DESTINY'S ORBIT

there were asteroids—like Eros and Anteros, and Apollo—that cut deep within the orbit of Mars, went on almost to Venus. But there were also spaceships.

He watched the tiny point of moving light, headed his shell that way, and started his engine. He began to move across the thousands of miles of space that separated him from the object between Mars and Earth.

He watched it slowly grow brighter, and he could see that it was moving. It was moving in an orbit that would take it outward from that of Earth into that of Mars. But it moved so slowly, so strangely unlike the passenger liners and the space yachts, that he wondered what it could be. It would cut the orbit of Mars . . . but not for a terribly long time.

It came closer, and he swung his shell towards it, and drew nearer. Nothing replied to his S.O.S. What spaceship would not answer such a call at this narrowing distance? What spaceship would not have a robotic tape, recording all the time, that would sound an automatic alarm at the receipt of his signal?

The ship took shape, and the answers became clear. He saw at first not a slim gleaming metal liner, not a familiar tubular craft, but a wide sweep of white, reflecting starlight and sunlight. He saw emerge a pattern of four huge expanses of metallic surface, and he saw that they were paper-thin sails spread out into the void.

He watched as it drew closer, and he recognized it from his studies. He saw the four huge sails, spreading over hundreds of square miles of void, and in the center, he saw the tiny doughnut dotting the hub of these four incredibly vast sails. He drew toward it, swung his ship in the rear and ran up on it, matching his speed with that of the unusual vessel.

As he drew closer, the vast sails obscured the stars on all sides, cut out the view of space and left only a curious impression of flickering opacity across the sky.

He came up to the doughnut and found it even odder. It was a wheel, the hub of which was a flat disc several

DESTINY'S ORBIT

hundred feet across. On the edge of this circular disc, exactly like a tire fitted on a wheel, was a tube. A metallic tube perhaps thirty feet in width, fitted onto the rim of the disc, and rotating. It was a tire running around the edge of the disc steadily, at a fairly fast rate.

He knew what it was. It was a cosmic ion-driven space freighter. It was literally a sailing vessel of the sky, the cheapest and most economical means of transportation ever devised between worlds. Put together in orbit, outside the grasp of Earth's gravity, it was set on its way by the infinitesimal pressure of the cosmic rays, of the sun's rays, of the ions generated in little force patches along the frames of the wings. Between the rocket-like drive of the ions and the steady pressure of the light of the sun and stars on its tremendous wing surfaces, it moved across space. Its orbit was a slow, long, leisurely one.

But it was a refuge; it was life and safety. Ajax swung close to it, circled over the gleaming disc of the central freight compartment, then seeing the unmistakable hatchway of a loading compartment right up near the moving tube at the rim, set his shell down.

It clung magnetically to the surface. Ajax fastened his helmet, swung back the top of his shell, climbed out.

He swayed dizzily, fell to his hands and knees for a moment and hung on. He was weak, weaker than he'd feared. Only the fact that there was no gravity kept him from being entirely helpless.

He caught his breath, staggered to his feet, and shuffled across on his magnetic shoes to the hatchway. He looked for a means of opening it from the outside, but there was none. He clung to it, pounded with his fist on the outside.

Surely someone must have noticed his arrival. Surely there must be someone who would hear the pounding on the outer hatch, even in the cargo nub. Surely there was a crewman detailed to watch the cargo who would hear.

Time passed. Nothing seemed to stir inside. What sort of ship was this? Ajax wondered wearily, if he was doomed to die hanging to the outside of salvation?

DESTINY'S ORBIT

He pounded more. Beyond him he could see the sweep of the vast sails, moored to the body of the cargo hold by powerful metal stanchions. He could see now and then the tremor and shift of one of the miles of expanse as the invisible currents of space wafted here and there against those colossal sails.

Still he clung. Was the ship deserted, dead? Was it all robot, no crewmen? He pounded again, felt his strength diminishing.

The ionic freighter sailed slowly on.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

AJAX CALKINS clung there for what seemed like hours, but which was more likely minutes in the timelessness of anxiety, when at long last he felt a tremor in the metal disc of the loading port. He got to his feet, stepped aside, and waited as the outer disc slowly unscrewed and then swung open.

He looked into the wide maw of the cargo airlock, and then stepped inside. He saw the automatic buttons that would close the lock from inside, punched them, waited. With that built-in slowness that seems characteristic of cargo holds, the outer disc swung shut, sealed. There was a hissing of air; gauges on the wall registered the rise of atmosphere inside the chamber, and when it reached parity, Ajax went over and unbolted the inner door.

He stepped through to a narrow catwalk which threaded its way across a vast area of shrouded masses, undoubtedly the payload of this ship, deposited in the gravityless central hull. A man was standing before him, lit by the dim glow of the permalites in the hold.

"Calmness, brother," said this individual in a soft whispering tone. "All is serene in the Retreat of the Nirvanists. I am Brother Augustus. How call you yourself?"

Ajax opened his space helmet, gulped in a few breaths of air. It tasted fresh to him who had been living in the limited and not-well-laundered air of the emergency shell, though doubtless it was stale and oil-laden.

"I am . . . uh . . . Jack Callans . . ." he began, making up a name on the spur of the moment, realizing the danger that his real name might have been broadcast as a wanted criminal, ". . . uh . . . my ship was wrecked by disaster . . . thanks for saving me."

DESTINY'S ORBIT

Brother Augustus looked at him from deep eyes, stroked the trim black beard that decorated the chin of his rather round and plump face, and nodded slowly. "You look in need of sustenance and rest," he said in his soft, breathy tones. "Come with me to the rim quarters."

He turned and began to walk the catwalk, and Ajax followed him, his magnetic shoes clinging to the metal walk, his body floating free in the weightlessness of the unrotating hull. They came to a door, which Brother Augustus opened outwards.

There was a gap of a yard here, and beyond that yard of space a smooth metal wall moved past rapidly. It was the inner wall of the rim-tube which rushed past, running, Ajax could see, on an endless series of ball-bearings and wheels that raced along a track inside the outer edge of the central hull.

Brother Augustus beckoned to Ajax to come to the doorway, and when Ajax had done so, the bearded individual deftly stepped behind him. "When the door comes past, I will push you. Grab for the handles, and pull yourself into it."

"Whaaa . . ." Ajax began to question bewilderedly when suddenly a wide circular opening appeared, with a plastic door set into it. There was a shove and Ajax flew across the yard of space and slammed into the moving wall. Clutching out wildly, his hand closed on a metal handle and he clung to it, being dragged swiftly along the moving wall. In a second he was in near darkness, clinging to the moving wall, with only a dim greenish light over the closed door a few feet from him to show the other wall rushing past in the opposite direction.

Weakly Ajax clung to it; then, as his eyes adjusted, he saw that there were a series of such handles and he moved himself to the door by pulling himself along. Once at the door, he pushed on it, and found it would slide aside. He got it open, pushed himself through, and fell across a narrow room as the door slid automatically shut over his head.

Over his head? Ajax sat up. Sure enough, from where he was, the door he had entered by was in the ceiling of a low

room. There was a ladder running down from it, which he presumably should have groped for.

He sat a moment and then got his orientation. Of course he should have realized he would have weight; the purpose of the revolving tube area was to provide an artificial gravity for the crew of the ship by means of centrifugal force. The rotation exerted a pressure on the outside of the rim and everything within would feel a sense of gravitational weight. Ajax groggily stood up, only to sit down as his knees gave way under him. He was weak from his experiences, from hunger, and from lack of gravity.

This ship was obviously based upon an economy of power. The centrifugal system for spaceship gravity had been replaced in faster ships by the new techniques of artificial gravity creation; but those techniques required power. The centrifugal system, once started, required but little to maintain it in space.

He sat there until, after a few minutes, the door opened in the little room, and Brother Augustus looked in. "Ah," he said softly, "I see you are weak."

He came in, and another man came with him. Now Ajax had the chance to examine the two more closely. Both were garbed alike, in rough brown smocks, reaching to their ankles. An emblem, that of a script letter X, was embroidered on the front of each man's smock. Their hair was long and both wore short beards.

The two lifted Ajax to his feet and helped him to leave the chamber. He found himself in a long narrow hallway and they walked him down until they came to a long narrow chamber with bunks lining the wall. They lifted Ajax into one.

"Rest," said Brother Augustus. "We will bring you food. You must regain your strength; then we shall talk."

It was perhaps two days later that Ajax Calkins was strong enough to leave his bed and have the promised talk with Brother Augustus. Meantime he had learned a good deal about the vessel he was on, through conversation with a patient, gray-bearded man who had been assigned to attend him.

DESTINY'S ORBIT

The ship was one of a number of such in service between Earth and Mars. It utilized the minimum of energy to carry its cargo back and forth; and sailing as it did, its relation to space flight was curiously like that of an old sailing ship of the *Mayflower* class compared to a fast jet airliner of the Twentieth Century. The *Mayflower* type took three months to cross the Atlantic; the jet plane six hours.

This vessel took about three years to cross from Earth to Mars. It never docked on either planet, hovering in orbit while its cargo was unloaded by rocket tenders, and then beginning the slow sail back again. Because of their slowness, because of the endless tedium of the passage, such ships were given over to very special types of crews, crews that would devote the idle hours of the passage—and they were about ninety per cent of the hours involved—into pursuits of the mind and soul.

There were several such ionic freighters that were true convents—vessels on which the foot of a male had never trod, while saintly women went about their meditations and prayers in an isolation never achieved on Earth. There were monasteries. There was one that was an academy of deep philosophy and abstract mathematics.

This one was the Retreat of the Nirvanists. It was a sort of cult—a cult run by the man known as Brother Augustus—and its brotherhood were but temporary devotees, paying a good sum for the privilege of the long trip away from the tensions and troubles of Earth. In short it was a retreat of tired businessmen, men who wanted to overcome their ulcers, get away from nagging wives, escape other mental problems, or simply get away from it all for a half-dozen years.

They spent many hours in meditation, and in the contemplation of music and poetry. They manufactured some items, doing handwork, while not checking the cargo.

"At least," said Ajax to the man who was explaining all this, "I didn't land on a convent ship!"

The man smiled and agreed. It would have been a rather embarrassing predicament all around. "But, still, you are here away from the world . . ."

DESTINY'S ORBIT

Ajax sat up. "I want to talk to Brother Augustus about getting away from here. Has he a radio? What's happening in the space war?"

The man shook his head. "There is no radio here, brother. We are totally isolated from all news. And none may leave here until we reach Mars. You still have a year to go. Rest, take it easy, think, delve into your true self."

"What do you mean?" Ajax asked. "I have to get away. Surely I can borrow a ship's tender. You must have a couple of fast rocket craft for emergencies and landings."

The man shook his head. "There may be such, but only Brother Augustus has access to them, and he will never permit it."

"I must speak to him," said Ajax, getting to the floor. "Right away!"

He slipped into the brown smock that had been given him while his own clothes were being laundered, and strode along the narrow passages to find the master of the Nirvanists.

But Brother Augustus, whom he found supervising some work in a long workroom, where men toiled with hand tools at narrow benches, merely smiled sadly.

"You must remain our guest," he said. "Until we return to Earth."

"I've got to be here for four years!" yelped Ajax.

"Four blessed, peaceful, soulful years of unchanging bliss. It's Nirvana!" intoned Brother Augustus, rolling his eyes.

"It's Gehenna!" exclaimed Ajax.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

BROTHER AUGUSTUS arched his eyebrows at Ajax and slowly shook his head. "You will find the peace and calm of our retreat very beneficial. Soon you will lose the tension of your Earthly desires, and find the harmonies of our work beneficial."

"Oh, no," said Ajax. "I've got to get going! Isn't there some way you can lend me an escape rocket, a landing yacht, or something? Surely I can make it worth your while. Whatever it costs . . ."

The master of the Nirvanists merely shook his head. "Absolutely not. Abide with us, friend Jack, abide with us in patience."

Calkins stamped a foot impatiently, but held back from another angry retort. He would have to find some way to get what he wanted. Meanwhile . . . He found himself curious about what the brothers were doing in that work-room.

In spite of himself, he noticed the odd similarity of their work to old electrical light bulbs, not quite completed—but surely that man was twisting tiny filaments; and that one blowing fragile glass bulbs; and down there, several men were delicately inserting the filaments, twisting and cleverly winding and binding.

Brother Augustus followed his eyes, smiled. "Yes, they are indeed making light bulbs. We find that there is a great demand back on Earth for old-fashioned bulbs, made by the loving care of devoted hands, and filled with the blessed vacuum of outer space itself.

"We sell these bulbs to light the altars of lamaseries in distant Tibet and in modern Shasta. Students of the mystic lore find them soothing, with their perfect clear vacuum

DESTINY'S ORBIT

unspoiled by the contamination of machinery and planetary atmospheres."

Ajax looked at him, but the deep eyes of the man betrayed no emotion. Surely he could not be sincere; then vaguely Calkins recalled an ad here and there in journals for such bulbs as these. Well, he thought, there are crackpots and there are those who fatten on them.

Which was Brother Augustus? The answer to his problem might well lie in that question.

For several more days, Ajax found himself unable to do anything but follow the routine of the Nirvanists. It was a monotonous one, one designed to lull the mind and nerves. Several work hours, several hours devoted to quiet meditation, periods of listening to deep music, or listening to taped lectures on peace of mind.

There was not a hint of the problems of mundane worlds. No newspaper, no news bulletin, no communication to be found anywhere, no books dealing with anything more substantial than philosophy. Ajax wandered the rim of the ionic sailcraft, was allowed everywhere, and learned that the control room was not in the rim, but in the core of the cargo hub—a locked area inaccessible to all save Brother Augustus.

He went one morning to talk to Brother Augustus and found that worthy sitting quietly in his meditation room listening to a tape of an ancient symphony. As he entered, the bearded master raised a warning finger. Ajax sat down and listened. The tunes of the old instruments ran on, to Ajax's ears, monotonously, but the Brother seemed entranced. Suddenly he flicked a finger in the middle of a bar. The music stopped. Ajax was about to talk, but the tape was run back, and instantly began again where it had been several minutes before.

They waited. Then the music switched off. Brother Augustus looked up. "Did you hear it? The second violin? It was off, definitely off in the seventh beat of that movement. I have been suspecting this for many months. Finally I have traced it down. And now . . ." He looked at Ajax expectantly.

Ajax jumped up and dashed angrily out. How could you

DESTINY'S ORBIT

argue with such an abstract man? He stamped down the long hall, past rooms and workchambers, ignoring the disapproving glances of the brothers.

He came to a series of bedrooms, and realized suddenly that he was in front of Brother Augustus' own private sleeping quarters. In a flash of fury, he tried the door, found it open, slipped in.

Maybe he could find out something about that bearded man who kept him prisoner so efficiently. There must be a means to cajole him into renting one of the ship's auxiliary rocketcraft!

It was hardly an ethical act to go through his host's private effects, but Ajax recalled to himself that few of the empire builders of the past would have worried about such a minor detail. In the establishment of a crown, these things were excusable.

He glanced around the narrow quarters. The bed, the bureau, no. There was a cabinet. He tried it; it was locked. He pressed on it, and found that it was not too tight. Taking his pocketknife out, Ajax went to work with the tip of the blade. In a few seconds, he had the cabinet open, for the lock was not one of the magnetic modern ones. Brother Augustus went in for the old-fashioned too often at the wrong spots.

There were notebooks, ledgers, piles of papers, some flat boxes. Quickly Ajax thumbed through them. Bills of lading, sailing orders, ledgers of sales, lists of the brothers on this voyage, profits and losses (that was an interesting one—Brother Augustus had acquired quite a neat bank account in the three trips he had already made).

On the bottom of the pile, Ajax came to a single flat leather folder, worn and old. He slipped it out, unstrapped it, looked in.

He sat down on the bed with a thud, eyes agleam. Quickly he took out several clippings, some old photos, a worn spaceman's notebook. He skimmed through them rapidly and whistled to himself. Carefully extracting one of the old docu-

DESTINY'S ORBIT

ments, he put the rest back, replaced the folder, closed the cabinet, and left the room.

As he walked back to Brother Augustus' music room, he was whistling. He nodded politely to the various recluses he met, and when he reached the music room, he knocked, then opened the door and went in.

Augustus was still listening to tapes. It sounded to Ajax's ears like the same tape, and the same composition. He sat down and waited.

Augustus was beating time with one hand and leaning forward. His eyes flickered, he held up a finger, and smiled deeply. He shut the tape off. "It's that beat," he said.

"Definitely, absolutely. I've got him now. Oh, what an article I'll write when I get back to Earth. This'll be a discovery!"

"Yes, I venture to say it will be," said Ajax smiling, "and I made a little discovery of my own just now also."

"Indeed," said the master of Nirvana, "I am pleased for you."

"Perhaps you won't be so pleased," said Ajax in a deceptively calm tone. "And I don't think that the tired businessmen and student philosophers who signed up on this cruise will be too pleased either, *Scat Ward!*"

Brother Augustus stopped rubbing his hands and stared at Ajax, motionless, silent. Then he said slowly, "What did you say?"

"I said *Scat Ward*," repeated Ajax. "Surely your piratical ears have not lost their keenness for the delicate nuance so suddenly?"

Brother Augustus lowered his hands to his lap, stared at him with narrowed eyes. "And what does that mean to me, young man?" he whispered.

"Perhaps it means the loan of an auxiliary rocket, eh, *Scat*, you old buccaneer?" Ajax pursued his query.

The man known as Brother Augustus looked at him in silence. "How do you know?" he said. In answer, Ajax took the old document from his pocket and passed it in front of the other's eyes. "One good bit of skulduggery deserves an-

DESTINY'S ORBIT

other," he remarked. "I think the contents of this little 'wanted' notice, issued by the EMSA police, would un-stabilize this heavenly retreat of yours. Shall I post it on the meditation board, or shall I be leaving shortly by rocket?"

Brother Augustus' eyes flickered. "The space pirate known as Scat Ward is a thing of the past. I have found true peace in my work here. There is no need for the introduction of turbulent thoughts in our serene atmosphere," he said solemnly. "I am now inclined to feel that your departure from our Retreat would contribute to the general harmony."

"Ah," said Ajax, "I felt sure that you would see the light, Captain Scat . . . uh, Brother Augustus."

Not two hours later, Ajax closed the tiny airlock of the trim little landing rocket tender, housed in its snug berth in the gravityless depths of the cargo hub, signaled a grateful farewell to the spacesuited figure of Augustus Ward, ex-space pirate, captain of the ionic freighter *Nirvana*, and Master of the Order of the Nirvanists, pushed the button for his exiting catapult, shot in his rocket engines, and headed outwards from the sun towards the asteroid belt.

In a remarkably short time, the huge sailing vessel of space had dwindled to a spot of white, then finally vanished. Behind Ajax was the sun, ahead of him the stars, the faint white spots of larger asteroids, and visible in the clarity of outer space, the planet Saturn, its rings neatly edgewise.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

DESIGNED AS IT was to be used primarily in landing operations from orbit to planet, the small rocketship was a manually operated vehicle. It did however have the proper computers for making long distance flights, and Ajax was able to fit out the coordinates from the standard texts that are operational equipment on all such craft.

He did not know the exact coordinates for Ajax in its new orbit, but he did have a clear idea of where it had been when he had left it; and he was able to set up and work out an approximate new directional for it on the basis of its previous location and what had happened to it.

This took time, but the trip back would last a goodly number of days and there would be plenty of time. Once he had set his directions, he would perforce have to spend a good deal of time at the controls himself to watch for the close approach of asteroids not included in his limited calculations.

The little ship was compact, with but the one living chamber which doubled as control room. He rigged himself a hammock from which he could reach out and grasp the controls should the meteor alarm ring while he was asleep. The ship had a supply of victuals, though it lacked a *Calkans* system.

It was therefore about forty or more hours later before Ajax thought to try the general radio receiver in the craft. During the whole time he had been an involuntary guest aboard the ionic freighter he had been utterly out of touch with the news of the solar system. If there was a radio aboard that slow vessel, Scat Ward had it hidden quite thoroughly away.

DESTINY'S ORBIT

So now, at last, he tuned in on the news of the inner planets.

The news was bad.

The general outlanes system station at the Martian North Pole was still within range and on it he heard of the open war that was now raging between the Saturnians and the Earth-Mars coalition.

There was a battle shaping up in space somewhere just outside the orbit of Jupiter. There had been preliminary skirmishes of scout ships; there had been some sort of an initial battle between two small forces which had clashed at a point in the Jovian orbit, culminating in the destruction of certain asteroids there.

Ajax grimaced at that. Indeed, he had supplied the spark; that much he had to concede to Emily Hackenschmidt.

But now the main EMSA battle fleet in the asteroid region, aided by several vessels released from the docks on Mars, were racing to a rendezvous with what was believed to be the spearhead of a large flotilla from the Ringed Planet. When they met—and the meeting was expected soon—that would be the payoff.

But such a meeting is not easily arranged, and it was still several days before news began to arrive, this time from Radio Juno, that the two fleets had sighted each other.

The place was now outside the Jovian orbit, a half-million miles towards Saturn.

By then Ajax was beginning to cross the orbits of the innermost asteroids. He now spent most of his time seated at the controls, altering and shifting course to account for the new tiny discs and globes of light which were among the thousands of tiny worlds that made up this vast belt of planetary wreckage.

What, he wondered, had happened to the Wuj, abandoned in an artificial world, without power to turn on the full controls? Had he found food? Somewhere there must be some stores, yet could the Wuj find them without a major power control over the robotic planetoid? How long could a Martian spider-type go without food?

DESTINY'S ORBIT

And what of Emily, that trouble-making girl? Ajax scowled at the thought of how she had put it over on him; yet, at the same time, he found himself troubled by curious feelings of pleasure about her. Something about that girl . . . well, dammit, if she wasn't on the opposite side, he'd take to her. He wondered what she was up to now. If she had returned to Ajax to find him gone, perhaps that would be the end of it. Her story would go down in some EMSA file, there to gather dust and be forgotten.

Or would it?

EMSA had its hands full now, anyway. The two fleets had clashed. The battle was on, somewhere out there in the blackness of space. Reports coming in were sketchy. Propaganda claims from Radio Juno, indicating victory, muffling details, no damage reports that could be pinned down specifically. No word from the Saturnians, but that was not surprising.

The battle apparently raged on. A day, two days passed, without claims becoming any more definite. It didn't look good, although Ajax, as a student of history, realized that in outer space it must be difficult to gather the details of the outcome of a battle that must be fought over a field which might encompass a million cubic miles of trackless emptiness. In it ships might pass each other unseen; ships might go to their doom unnoticed; ships might hunt around looking for an enemy that never could be found. It was only by dint of a vast radar and radio network that such fleets could operate—and with scramblers, atomic explosion static, bits of burst vessels, and so on, the confusion would accumulate tremendously as the struggle went on.

Ajax bent to his controls as the time came when he must be drawing closer to the planetoid that was Ajax. He should now, he thought, be somewhere in the vicinity of it. He ran readings on the visible planetoids around him, identified them, traced back their orbits to the time he had left Ajax, and thereby tried to line up the whereabouts of his own little kingdom.

Now, he clung to the controls, checking his radar, watch-

DESTINY'S ORBIT

ing the slowly changing scene of the stars and worldlets, and tracing down the errant metal world.

The radio blatted in his ear and most of the time he paid it no attention. The same vagaries, the same guesswork.

A new glint in the heavens, another asteroid ahead of him. He beamed in on it, and detected the mirrory color of metal. He closed in, trailed after it, catching up. Yes, it was a metallic world, a world of polished silvery metal streaked here and there with traces of black where dirt and rock had once been.

"Ajax," he whispered, "here I come. The king returns to his kingdom."

Somewhere inside there, on a metal floor near the outer skin, must be lying his flag, his royal flag, brought with him from the old *Destiny*. And . . . was somewhere there also . . . a body? That of his loyal follower, his first true subject?

He came in for a landing near the point where the outer lock of the hollow planetoid must be. And as he came in, the radio shifted.

"Radio Juno, to all asteroid stations and listeners. Attention! You are immediately to prepare to abandon all posts and return to regrouping stations previously assigned. Women and children, if any, are to return without delay to Mars.

"Radio Juno, calling all listeners. General emergency. Our fleet is withdrawing to a new line of defense at the central perimeter of the asteroids. You are warned, the Saturnians are coming! The Saturn fleet is coming! The Saturn fleet is coming!"

Ajax almost forgot the landing he was about to make; he felt himself chill a moment, EMSA had been defeated; the Earth-Mars forces had been broken, and were fleeing. He could read between the lines. No such emergency signal would be given if the situation were not the worst.

He twisted the dials, listening; and as he caught a humming, he brought the little rocket down closer and closer, skimmed the surface of the all-metal world that had been hidden from the universe for so long, and finally landed

DESTINY'S ORBIT

very nearly in the same spot that the *Destiny* had once occupied.

He let out the magnetic grippers, secured the ship, and turned again to the radio. The humming increased, a carrier wave. He put on the power. There was a clicking sound, then, faintly, distant, a voice. It was a voice surprisingly like that of Anton Smallways, though it could not be he, but that of some mechanical voice box similar to what Anton must have used.

"Your friends from Saturn are on their way. Liberty for all. Rejoice, for your friends from Saturn are coming to rescue you of the asteroids from your oppressors . . ."

Ajax swore, turned off the receiver. He got up, found the spacesuit cabinet, took out his old suit, which he had taken with him when he left *Nirvana*, and buckled it on. He adjusted his helmet, then opened the lock.

He set foot once again on the surface of the world he had called his kingdom. He padded forward, on magnetic grips, to find the great circular entrance.

He made an entry into the metal world in the same way that he and his companions had on their first landing. He descended into the depths, the huge airlock operating as before; but this time when he stood in the vast area of the highest level inside, it was already lit and filled with air.

Ajax slid open his helmet, looked around. Nothing otherwise seemed changed. He saw no sign of life. The Wuj, if he was still alive, was not in sight and there seemed no evidence of any disturbance in the shrouded array of cylinders and crates that would indicate his ever having been there.

"My kingdom," mused Ajax softly. "Empty, helpless, and awaiting a quick end from the invading Saturnians before anyone ever knew of it."

He felt sad and lonely. Then, resolutely, he shrugged his shoulders, and started out to find the door that led to the inoperative control chamber. He'd make his base there, and set out to explore the rest of the planetoid Ajax anyway.

DESTINY'S ORBIT

"While there's life, there's hope," he said to himself philosophically.

He trudged along the metal ledge, light-headed, his shoes sticking to the floor, step by step. He came to the rounded opening of the doorway to the headquarters chamber.

Bending his head slightly, for it seemed a bit lower than Terrestrial doors, he stepped through the doorway.

Instantly he felt himself enveloped in something frighteningly strange and sticky. Strands of grayish cord snapped down from somewhere above and around the doorway, snapping onto him, clinging with mucilaginous urgency.

He whirled, tried to turn, struck out, but his arms and legs entangled with the resilient and cohesive strands, he only managed to entangle himself worse.

"Help!" he shouted involuntarily, and in a moment was a tangled mass, thrashing about the floor, hands and legs hopelessly entwined.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

FROM SOMEWHERE in one corner of the ceiling of the chamber something moved. The thing dropped down to the floor, unfolded a mass of long arms and legs, and scurried across.

Ajax, twisting to face it, saw what it was and gasped out, "Wuj! Get me out of this!"

The Third Least Wuj, for that was the being's identity, came to a halt over Ajax. "Oh, great leader," he said softly, "I am glad to see you back. And I'm sorry you got caught in my trap."

"Well, get me clear," answered Ajax. "What's all this?"

The spidery Martian set to work to clear away the thick strands. Exuding some kind of liquid from his mouth, he brushed his arms across the strands and they parted and broke easily. "I set a trap, my king," said the Wuj as he worked. "I spun a web to catch our foe. I thought when it worked that you were she."

Ajax sat up, trying to brush away the last messy strings of the web. "You spun this stuff, yourself," he exclaimed. "I didn't know you could do that except when building an eggweb."

"Oh, it is an art we practice in school," said the Wuj. "Of course we haven't hunted in this fashion since before the dawn of civilization, but we still do it."

Ajax got to his feet. "But who's the foe? Emily? Is she back?"

The Wuj walked slowly around the spacesuited figure and flicked off a few hanging particles. "Yes, your majesty, she came back. She returned a few days after you left, and she brought some supplies, of which I have still my share. She announced that she has been appointed EMSA governor of

DESTINY'S ORBIT

this planetoid until the regular surveyors and authorities can arrive.

"Naturally," said the Wuj modestly, "I took steps to counter her claim. I knew you would not agree to it, for this is your kingdom and you are my king. So I trapped her and tied her up, but she got away during one of my sleeps. She is forted up somewhere among the lower levels and we are in a state of siege."

"EMSA governor!" exclaimed Ajax. "Man, what a nerve!" He walked around the control chamber again, looking at the inactive instruments.

The Wuj squatted down, listening and watching him. One of his hands was absently twirling and turning the green metallic ornament he had picked up on the dirt surface of the old Ajax. He was still wearing the adornment.

"Do you know where she is now, or could you find her?" asked Ajax.

"Oh, yes, I could track her," said the Wuj, "but she is armed. She hasn't got her ship, because the EMSA cruiser that dropped her off, took it with them for some quick repairs. But they never returned."

"That follows," said Ajax. "She's in a bit of a spot, too, you know. You see, the Saturnians . . ."

Quickly he outlined to the Wuj what had been going on in the space war. "So I think that cruiser has been called to active duty and it may never return. Emily is stranded here."

"Perhaps," said the Wuj, "if we pointed it out to her, she might be reasonable and accept your leadership."

"Emily reasonable!" snorted Ajax. "I can see you don't know much about women and men!"

He sat down on one of the cushions scattered around the chamber and talked the situation over. It wasn't very hopeful.

From somewhere in the space outside they heard a voice. They both stood up, went to the door. "Hello . . ." the voice called, from far away.

Ajax raised his voice in reply. "Who's there?"

There was silence, and then he saw a figure in a metal spacesuit far away, across the great floor of shrouded ob-

DESTINY'S ORBIT

jects, hundreds of yards distance. The voice came faint but clear across the chamber.

"It's I, governor of this place," came Emily's voice. "Ajax, are you ready to quit your wild claims and act sensibly?"

Ajax Calkins drew himself up. "Give up," he called back. "Accede to me or you'll never get away from here alive. The EMSA fleet is in retreat. They've forgotten about you!"

There was a period of silence, then Emily's voice. "I'm armed and I have most of the food," she called back. "I can hold out here longer. You give up!"

Ajax shook his head. "I order you to surrender! You're under arrest in the name of the Independent Kingdom of Ajax," he called back.

The sound that came in reply wasn't the sort of thing ladies are supposed to say in polite society. Ajax stomped a foot, turned and went back into the control chamber.

The Wuj squatted down again. "I have spun a number of webs in various spots," he said. "Sooner or later she'll stumble into one."

"Yes, and blast her way out again," said Ajax. "We can't afford to wait."

He wandered around lost in thought. "What this place needs is some way to activate the whole robotic set-up. There must be controls here for everything. This is a headquarters room, but the trouble is that it's locked and we don't have a key. There must be keys around; now the question is where would they have hidden them?"

The spider-type Martian clucked in agreement. "I found some spots that might be the keyholes or locks," he said softly. Rising to his many feet, he scurried over and pointed out several triangular panels set under each of the major banks of indicators. "You see, something would fit over here, slide into this panel, and this projecting point would fit into the object."

Ajax examined the spot. It seemed reasonable. "Maybe we could fabricate a key," he said.

The Wuj nodded. The two prowled around looking for something that might do, but loose objects didn't exist around

DESTINY'S ORBIT

the control room, and their own impedimenta didn't seem suitable. Ajax's eyes fell on the ornament dangling from the Wuj's wrist like a charm bracelet. "Maybe we can work that into shape," he said. "Let's see it."

A little reluctantly, the Wuj unwound the object and handed it to him. Ajax looked at the bluish-green bit of worked metal with interest. "It's triangular," he remarked, "and it even has a hole in it in the right place. It's too much to believe . . ."

He walked over to one of the panels, looked at it. "It could be a pretty amazing coincidence," he began to mutter excitedly. "It certainly looks right."

"We found it on the surface of this world," said the Wuj quickly. "It could have been dropped by one of the original inhabitants when making their exit."

"Hmmm," said Ajax, trembling a little bit, "here goes."

He reached out with the triangular ornament. It seemed to fit. It did fit. It closed into the panel as if it had been tooled for it, and the projection and the indentation slid together with a definite click.

The ornament clung to the panel now, tightly, like a key in a keyhole. Ajax and the Wuj looked at each other, and then the man reached out again, turned the ancient key.

The dials on the wall jumped; a series of colored panels lit up, and there was a humming noise in the wall and floor. A blank white panel suddenly darkened, flickered, and cleared and Ajax saw that he was looking out on a wide space, from a point somewhere high in the ceiling.

"It's a television viewplate panel, and it overlooks the storage cavern outside," he said excitedly. "Look, I can see all the crates and cylinders." He reached out, touched one of the great series of tiny squares. Instantly one of the shrouds on one of the cylinders snapped off, and the cylinder itself rose into the air, hung suspended.

"It controls the things," said the Wuj. Their eyes were caught at once by another motion in the viewplate. Something was running across the far end of the cavern, racing for the dark opening of what was probably a door.

DESTINY'S ORBIT

"It's Emily," said Ajax. He pressed on the square, twisting it unconsciously. The hanging cylinder, swung around, pointed at Emily and darted across the chamber.

"Look out!" said the Wuj.

Ajax changed his pressure and the cylinder which had almost caught the running girl and seemed about to smash into her like a deadly projectile swung aside and whooshed away. Ajax deftly manipulated the square.

Again the cylinder turned, raced back to where the tiny figure of the girl could be seen trying to take refuge behind one of the crates.

This time Ajax brought the thing to a stop just before her. She turned and ran back into the center of the vast area.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE MAN and the Martian went to work to obtain full mastery of the many controls in that great headquarters room. It was evident that the systems were a very advanced type, for they responded most remarkably—almost with a correctness that hinted somewhere of some sort of telepathic control. Almost as if, thought Ajax, the squares acted as a continuation of the nerve current from brain to fingertip. I press, I push, I twist, I will that which I am watching to do something, and it seems to follow my will exactly.

As a result of this, it was perhaps a matter of an hour or two before both of them had acquired an amazing skill at manipulating the scene. They could, from the visual plates that opened before them, cause doors to close and open; cause lights to go higher or darker; cause the long cylinders to rise, to move singly or in packs, to stand guard at openings. They caused other crates to open, saw many unusual devices come briefly into action—though what purposes lay behind them could not at once be ascertained.

Through it all, Emily Hackenschmidt remained corralled in the center of the chamber, her efforts to flee to a doorway always countered agilely.

Other panels opened onto vistas of lower levels in the egg-shaped metal asteroid. Here were many things that would require exploration, but one among them clearly seemed a commissary. Whether it could still supply anything edible would have to be looked into later.

One among the many controls proved to open an auditory channel to the outside chamber, and by its means, Ajax called out, "Emily! Come in and surrender!" They heard her reply clearly over their communications channel. "Never!"

Then ensued a little game of cat and mouse as Ajax worked

DESTINY'S ORBIT

to drive her out of her hiding place and into their hands. Cylinders darted down at her, forcing her to jump from their frightening onrush. Several low cartlike vehicles were activated and began to chase her, always hedging her away from escape vents and always closer to the central headquarters chamber. It took about fifteen minutes of artful dodging before finally a bedraggled and panting girl popped through their open doorway, the pointed nose of a hovering cylinder a few inches behind her. The Wuj dropped on her from the ceiling as she entered and grasping her hands, quickly withdrew her handcannon from its holster.

"Let me go!" she yelled trying to pull her hands free, and kicking futilely. At a nod from Ajax, the spidery creature freed her.

"You . . . beasts!" she gasped, sinking onto a nearby cushion and rubbing her hands. "You might have killed me!"

"Sorry," said Ajax, "but you wouldn't come peacefully. Hungry?" he added, offering her some rations from an opened can from the small stock of the Wuj.

She shook her head angrily, so Ajax sat down opposite her and began eating. While he was doing so, he explained what he had heard of the space war.

Emily, after staring at him coldly for a while, finally agreed to join in a little lunch. She spooned the stuff down and listened. Finally putting the can aside, she said, "I knew the battle was going against us, but I hadn't heard how badly. No wonder they didn't return for me."

Ajax nodded. "And of course they have no authority here anyway. This is my own realm, independent of Earth and Mars. You, at the moment, are my prisoner."

Emily shrugged. "The Saturnians will make short shrift of you too. This planetoid is a treasure trove of inventions. Those cylinders you used—they're plainly some kind of robot space vehicles. If they fall into the wrong hands, they could do great damage to our fleet."

Ajax considered that. "It seems to me," he said, "that this whole planetoid was an armory and a fortress in some combat the ancient inhabitants of the shattered planet were

DESTINY'S ORBIT

engaged in. If so, these cylinders are weapons—space weapons. I had the feeling when handling them that I could make them explode on contact if I had so willed it.”

The girl shuddered. “Thanks . . . and you were using me as your target!”

Ajax nodded, then went on, “But if that is so, then let me make a suggestion to you, officially, as the king of Ajax to a representative of EMSA.” He paused, but Emily merely arched her eyes and said nothing.

“The Saturnian fleet is approaching. I will utilize the hundreds and probably thousands of space cylinders stored here to fight them. I believe they can be launched into space, can be directed through space, and can be used to attack the Imperial Fleet. If I agree to use Ajax’s resources, will EMSA agree to accept me as an ally and as a sovereign power?”

Emily leaned forward, eyes suddenly asparkle, a trim figure in her maroon blouse and culottes, even though ruffled and smudged. “That’s a bargain that EMSA may be willing to make now that the situation is so urgent. I can’t speak for the top authorities, but if I were you, I’d take the chance. I’ll speak up for it, if you do it.”

She jumped to her feet, clapped her hands, as the idea grew in her mind. “Ajax,” she said, “that’s a great thing. Do it, do it anyway! It may save the day!”

Ajax got up, held out his hand. “Friends, Emily, for the truce?”

She flushed suddenly, a little embarrassed at her outbreak. Then she reached out and gravely shook hands. “Truce, Ajax Calkins.”

The Wuj, who had been testing more of the innumerable panels, now unstuck himself from the wall where he had been pushing squares, and announced, “I’ve found what seems to be a radio sender and television spotter. Perhaps we can raise Radio Juno.”

At the nods of assent, the Wuj began to flick his manual digits over the squares in that sector. It was becoming apparent that the builders of the planetoid must have had

DESTINY'S ORBIT

some resemblance to the Wuj's kind, for it was clear that four digits could achieve some far more accurate results along certain lines than two.

There was a humming; the panel showed the black of space, then was quartered on one sector, and the humming broke to let in the routine voice of the Radio Juno announcer. Ajax motioned to the Wuj to connect him, and let him open two-way communications.

When the recognition was achieved, though Radio Juno was plainly piqued at being bothered, Ajax announced himself: "This is Radio Ajax, broadcasting from the Independent Kingdom of Ajax, with an offer of alliance and assistance to EMSA in their moment of peril. We are prepared to place our military resources onto the field of combat to meet and destroy the Saturnians. We ask for confirmation of our role as equal and ally."

Radio Juno wasted no words. "Get off the air, Radio Ajax. We have top-rated priority military and evacuation communications. Get off the air. You are ordered to evacuate at once. We will not send a second order. Keep out of our line of fire!"

Ajax fumed, but at a look from Emily, patiently repeated his broadcast. Radio Juno refused to answer or to acknowledge further communications.

"Damn!" Ajax shouted in anger. "I'm blasted if I'll do anything. I'll make a deal with the Saturnians, I will!"

"Don't forget what Smallways did to you," said Emily softly. "You can't deal with them. Go ahead, launch your space cylinders. The EMSA will recognize you after the event. You'll be the hero of the day!"

Ajax looked at her. It was true that Anton Smallways and his fellow Saturnian agents had managed to make something of a fool out of him. He remembered what Smallways had looked like outside of his humanoid shell and shuddered.

"How do we get the space cylinders into space?" he asked finally.

The three set to work to find out. In another hour, they had solved that, and, shortly afterward, the three were watch-

DESTINY'S ORBIT

ing through telepanels the assembling of a fabulous miniature fleet in space hanging alongside the planetoid Ajax.

There must have been ten thousand space cylinders in all before the seven upper layers where they had been stored were exhausted. Now, all of them shining in the distant rays of the sun like a vast swarm of silvery bees in the blackness of space, Ajax found the master fleet-commander square. Manipulating it, he drew the cloud of deadly cylinders up, sent it around in orbit, and shot it off outward, away from the sun, in the direction of the ringed world.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

SPACE BEING VAST and time being mundane, it was some three Terrestrial days before the fleet of robotic war-splinters met the oncoming Saturnian fleet. If the flight had been made by manned craft it would have taken two or three times as long; but the cylinders, utilizing nobody as yet knew what source of power, apparently could accelerate indefinitely.

Ajax Calkins did not try to do that, for then he might have his weapons moving so fast he could not stop them in time. So it was a matter of watching their flight (each of the splinters registered on the central dial), estimating their reaching a halfway mark, and decelerating them so that when they made their target, they would be going slow enough to be directed.

For three days, therefore, the three inhabitants of the planetoid remained together in the central headquarters chamber. Emily Hackenschmidt and the Third Least Wuj went down to the level below where she had been hiding, and with the aid of the many machines now available brought back the rest of the food supply and her other equipment.

Emily made her bed in one of the side chambers, which had been used in ancient times for such a purpose. Ajax bedded down in the control room so as to watch the progress of his fleet at all times. The Wuj resumed his usual course.

The man and the girl maintained a wary casualness, bantering with each other, avoiding treading on each other's diplomatic toes, although Ajax was sorely tired. He said to the Wuj at one time, while Emily was sleeping, "You know I wish I had met her back on Earth before she joined

DESTINY'S ORBIT

EMSA. There's something about that girl I find really . . . well, exciting."

The Wuj looked at him solemnly. "It must be hard to have to beat down sex-polarity impulses while trying to do serious work," he announced sibilantly. "You Earth people are poorly constructed."

Ajax flushed guiltily. "Now . . . you're jumping to conclusions, Wuj. It's clear to see that you don't understand."

The Wuj stared back. "Poorly constructed in some ways just the same," he said, and hastened to add, "Meaning nothing personal, your majesty."

At last came the moment when the Ajaxian splinter fleet came into contact with the Saturnians. They could see the flecks on their screen, radar apparently, that marked the enemy. It was indeed a large fleet, for manned spaceships. There may have been a couple of hundred craft there, victors of the first battle with EMSA, and probably outnumbering all EMSA battlecraft clear back to the atmospheric rim of Mars.

Approaching it, the little swarm of splinters hardly seemed to register on the visual plate.

Some of the Saturnians' ships seemed to be altering course slightly, doubtless to avoid what they would be assuming to be a cloud of meteors. Now Ajax and the Wuj were at the panel, fingers and digits pressed against the squares.

"Ready," said Ajax. "Let's go!"

Emily stood by, calling off the standing of the fleets.

They pressed, they directed. The swarm of splinters spread out, became a cloudlike mass, then a shell. Deftly the bulk of the robotic splinters passed between the first ships of the Saturnians, avoiding contact, until the swarm of splinters occupied the same space as the huge fleet of battlecraft. They infiltrated from the first ships to the last ships, whirling alongside each great Saturnian battleship.

Then, at a call, the splinters closed contact. They hurled themselves suicidally at the nearest target; and as they hit, they exploded.

DESTINY'S ORBIT

Within a matter of seconds, where the flecks of radar points had filled the visual screen, there were only flares of light, exploding clouds of atomic energy newly released.

The Saturnian fleet dissolved into fire and fury. Then but minutes later there was a small violently brilliant nebula hanging out there, on the edge of the asteroid belt. The invading fleet from Saturn was no more.

The three in the headquarters room on Ajax uttered a concerted gasp. They drew away from the panels, stared at each other, sat down.

"It's over," said Ajax. "We licked 'em."

Emily nodded, her eyes shining. "You've done it, Ajax, you've done it!"

"Yes," said the Wuj, in his whispering voice, "but where do we go from here, great leader?"

Ajax slowly stroked his jaw. "I don't know," he said slowly. "I expect the EMSA to recognize me now."

"And if they don't," said the Wuj, "what then? What will you fight them with? You have nothing left."

Emily went to the radio, brought in the voice of Radio Juno. The announcer was excitedly exclaiming over the destruction of the Saturnians. He described rather accurately what had happened, and as he was speaking, he was being interrupted by bulletins. One came in that traced back the path of the mysterious meteor cloud to the new orbit of the planetoid Ajax.

"An announcement has just come in," said Radio Juno excitedly. "The swarm came from Ajax, where our agent, Emily Hackenschmidt is in possession. We are trying to contact Agent Hackenschmidt now."

Ajax groaned. "I have exhausted my means of defense. I guess you win, Emily. I shall have to seek my kingdom elsewhere."

Emily looked at him, then went to the radio panel. "Calling Radio Juno," she said. "This is Agent Hackenschmidt on Ajax."

The contact was made. Emily asked for transmission of an official message to EMSA asteroid headquarters. When it

DESTINY'S ORBIT

was announced as open, she glanced once again at Ajax, and catching that young man's despondent eye, she unexpectedly winked.

"Agent Hackenschmidt on the Kingdom of Ajax," she started. "I must advise the Earth-Mars Space Administration that the weapons that destroyed the Saturnians were under the orders and banner of King Ajax the First of this planet. I must advise all in authority that King Ajax has many such weapons in reserve and will use them to assert and defend his sovereignty.

"I have the honor to transmit a message from his sovereign majesty. He offers the governments of Earth and Mars a pact of alliance and mutual respect, in exchange for which he will place the scientific treasures of his world at the disposal of the scientific minds of both major planets.

"As the sole official agent and emissary for Earth and Mars on Ajax, I urge you to agree to his offer and to consolidate a pact of trade and mutual defense along with the recognition of independence and sovereignty."

She switched off.

Ajax was on his feet, staring at her with beaming smile and wide eyes. She turned, caught his admiring glance, and suddenly blushed. She put a hand to her lips. "Wait," she said softly.

They waited in silence, staring at each other as if they had never seen each other before and could not take their eyes away.

It took thirty minutes, and to them it was like a second, before Radio Juno replied. They heard it but vaguely through the turmoil of their heartbeats. "Offer accepted . . . trade and mutual alliance . . . congratulations to his majesty . . . welcome to the community of worlds . . ."

Then Ajax stood up and Emily stood up too. The Wuj scurried to a corner of the room, jumped to the ceiling and hung there, staring at them in round-eyed wonder.

The two touched, and then they were in each other's arms.

"The Earth-Mars Space Administration confirms the appointment of Emily Hackenschmidt as Ambassador Pleni-

DESTINY'S ORBIT

potentiary to the King and Kingdom of Ajax . . ." came the crisp tones of the radio announcer.

"My envoy," said Ajax, breaking off a kiss to catch his breath.

"My sovereign," said Emily, gluing her lips to his once again.

"My stars!" said the Wuj, closing his eyes to the horrid sight.

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