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# Squadron of the Dammed

by DAVID WRIGHT O'BRIEN

Is it a good idea to join the fightingest outfit in space, even to clear your brother's good name?

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It was a dingy, dirty interspacial tramp freighter that carried the quiet, expensively attired, serious expressioned young man to Barkay—that nethermost outpost of the civilized interplanetary belt—and deposited him, ornate luggage and all, on the filthy space wharf that was Barkay's only welcome mat to visitors.

Ricky Werts joined the Space Patrol to clear his brother of a murder charge—and found himself assigned to hell itself.

The serious, expensively tuniced young man, had then inquired of an unkempt and somewhat besotted Martian wharf stevedore, the way to the nearest and least louse infested hotel. The stevedore appraised the young man's rich blue tunic, determined gray eyes, and costly trappings and grinningly gave him the information.

At the hotel, a drab, *duralloy*, rusted structure of ancient origin, the wrinkled little clerk at the *alumnoid* desk, subjected the gray-eyed young man to the same scrutiny, and ended with the same knowing grin.

"Name?" said the wrinkled clerk in a tone of voice that indicated any name would do.

The gray-eyed young traveler thought a moment, while the wrinkled little clerk waited without impatience. It was generally like this. Most of them intended to use names other than their own. Some of them had them glibly prepared, and others—like this young fellow—found it hard to remember them.

"Richard Werts," he said hesitantly.

"From?" the clerk inquired, not looking up from his ledger.

"Earth," the young man said. "Western continent." There was the ring of truth to this. They generally didn't try to conceal the location from which they had come.

"A day and a night?" the clerk asked.

The young man nodded. "Yes, that should be sufficient."

"It generally is," the clerk agreed.

The young man gave him a sharp glance, but said nothing. He picked up his expensive luggage, took the room slip the clerk had handed him, and turned away.

The young man took three strides then stopped abruptly, turning back to the desk. The clerk raised his wrinkled brows.

"In the past four or five months," said the young man, "was there another chap, about my height, a little heavier, and with red hair and blue eyes, registered here?"

The clerk shrugged. "Four or five months is a long time."

The young man's straight mouth set impatiently. He dropped his luggage, secured his wallet, and peeled off several Martian *Klekas*. He folded them into a ball and hurled them to the top of the alumnoid desk. The clerk picked up the ball

casually, smoothed out the currency and put it in his pocket.

"Yes," he said. "There was a young fellow, little older than you, maybe three years older. Registered four months ago. Day and a night. Gave the same last name as you did."

The young man looked up. "Same as I?"

The clerk nodded. "Werts," he said. "Funny, ain't it?"

The young man considered this unsmilingly. "What first name?" he asked.

The clerk bent down behind his battered desk. He came up with the musty ledger in which he'd recently entered this young stranger. He thumbed back through its greasy pages. Then his thumb was running down a column. He looked up.

"Clark," he said. "Clark Werts."

The young man looked satisfied. "Thanks," he said. He turned away again, picking up his luggage.

"Have to take the stairs," the clerk shouted after him. "The elevator ain't worked in ten years."

The young man crossed the small, decrepit lobby and turned to the staircase. He didn't look back ...

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In the gray bare surroundings of his room, the young man who had registered as Richard Werts placed his expensive luggage in a corner and sat down on the edge of an ancient duralloy bed. He removed his tunic coat and carefully took from it a small, worn envelope.

He opened the envelope and removed a letter.

For what was probably the sixtieth time he had examined the message, he began to read it again. It was short, terse, and penned in a strongly masculine hand.

"Dear Ricky:

This is it, kid. This is the fare-the-well. Don't try to follow me. By now you'll probably know I was the guilty devil. Understand me, when you find I've taken the easy way out. Stick to your guns, 'Commander,' and don't let this throw you.

Best,

Clark."

The young man folded the letter, eyes blurring, and put it back in the envelope. Then he placed the envelope carefully back in his rich blue tunic coat. He rose to his feet then, and began pacing back and forth beside the bed.

"Clark didn't do it," he said. "I know he didn't do it." He was muttering the words, half aloud, as if the sound of his own voice should reassure him.

"My brother would never have done it," he muttered again. "He was decent, too damned decent. Clark wasn't the sort. Even if he'd been desperate—the way they tried to tell me he was—he'd never had been that sort. Commander," he said more softly, "I'll never forget that by-word of ours."

The young man was thinking, and the years were falling away. Five, ten of them. He was eleven years old. Young Ricky Stevens, hanging around the Spaceport, waiting for his brother, Clark, to come in from school. Six years older than he, Clark had been all of seventeen then. That seemed like a ripe old age to the kid who stood waiting for his older brother. Young Ricky had always looked on Clark as sort of a god. And when Clark, big-shouldered, red-headed, and grinning in that flashing way of his, stepped out of the ship at Spaceport, young Ricky Stevens almost broke his neck dashing across the space landing platform to his side.

"Hello, Commander," Clark had grinned. "Glad you're here to meet me!"

That had been a special sort of title with them. When they'd been even younger, and played around the vast family estate—the war games that kids always played—Ricky had been Clark's army. An army of one kid, commanded by his older brother. It was Clark who made his younger brother call him Commander at first, and young Ricky had been happy to do so. Neither of them had thought the family name, Stevens, was military enough in its ring. So Clark had devised another—Werts.

Ricky had called his older brother Commander Werts from then on. And when Clark had grown out of the war game stage, Ricky had still affectionately called him Commander. It had been one of the proudest days in young Ricky's life when Clark passed on the coveted title to him.

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Clark had been going to school, leaving for four years, and Ricky, a lump in his throat, had watched his idol packing. The two of them, with that understanding sensed only by brothers, had felt the significance of the parting.

"I'll be back, kid," Clark had said a little huskily, patting young Ricky on the arm. "And in the meantime it'll be up to you to keep things running here."

Ricky had gulped and nodded, his eyes filmed by tears which he was much too proud to shed.

"Tell you what, kid," Clark had said suddenly. "The army is yours. I pass my command over to you. From now on you're Commander Werts."

Ricky's eyes shone through the film. "Gee, Clark," he'd gasped. "Gee!" The accolade left him breathless.

And from that time on, Clark had called his brother by the title he'd passed on. He'd used it less, as the years marched on, but whenever there was cause for unspoken praise, Clark called him Commander Werts. Ricky always understood.

Clark had gone on to college, then, and Ricky entered prep school a year or so later. When Clark had finished college, and came back to the New York estate of the family, Ricky was in his second year at another university. They'd kept in touch constantly, and there were vacations that gave Ricky a chance to see his brother for a few days.

Clark had set up an Interspatial Export firm of his own—in characteristic fashion disdaining the family business and wanting to make his own way in the world—and he offered Ricky a place in it when the younger brother graduated from college. But as much as Ricky would have wanted to be with his brother, he, too, showed characteristic family independence and entered law on his own.

"I know how you feel about it, Commander," Clark had grinned. "As much as I'd like to have you in my outfit, I must admit I'd have been a little disappointed if you'd leaned on me to get a start."

Ricky had been glad of his decision, then, even if it meant he'd see much less of Clark now that they were both out on their own. Clark's export business took him on constant space tours, and Ricky was more or less confined to New York where he had his law practice.

Clark's business had prospered. At least that was the way it had seemed. And then there'd been that disastrous affair.

There was a murder. Clark's greatest competitor was brutally slain. Everything pointed to Clark—who couldn't be found.

It was shown in court that the murdered man had been too tough a competitor for Clark's export firm. It was also shown that Clark's firm was on the brink of bankruptcy. There was a confusing inter-contract deal between Clark's firm and that of the murdered competitor. It showed a perfect motive for the ghastly crime. Clark's mysterious disappearance was taken as conclusive proof of his guilt.

And then the letter from Clark had arrived at Ricky's law office. The same letter which he had just reread for the sixtieth time. It had been a genuine letter, Ricky was certain of that. But as for the so-called "confession" contained in it, Ricky hadn't been able to believe as much.

But the authorities believed it. Ricky hadn't wanted to take the letter to them, but a friend of Clark's—a chap named Paul Ebbing, who'd been in the export game with him—had seen the note and convinced Ricky that they should turn it over to the interplanetary police.

They found Clark not so long after that. Found, at least, the charred body of a person they identified as Clark. A charred body in the wreck of Clark's private sports space ship. Self destruction, they said in their reports. Suicide, proving beyond a doubt that Clark had been guilty.

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Clark's body had been identified by the clothes, or what was left of them, and general markings. But Ricky hadn't found his class ring. And this, plus several other suspicious details of the horrible incident, had made him certain that the charred corpse found in the wreckage of his brother's space ship was not Clark.

Ricky let the identification stand, with the realization that he could reopen the case later when he proved his conclusions correct. He had then set out to find Clark.

And now he had found him.

Here in the most forlorn and desolate outer reaches of space, at the very border of the interplanetary badlands, Ricky had picked up the first substantial clue leading to confirmation of his belief that Clark was not dead.

For Clark had registered in this same hotel. And Clark had kept his true given name and used—for obviously sentimental reasons—a last name that had been a by-word with them when they were kids.

The same name that Ricky had chosen to use in registering—Werts.

Ricky stopped his pacing. He fished into the pocket of his discarded tunic coat for a venusian cigarette. His hands trembled slightly as he lit it.

He exhaled a cloud of smoke.

Tomorrow he would draw even closer to Clark. Tomorrow he would register with the Outer Space Patrol Legions.<sup>[1]</sup> Clark was already in their ranks, Ricky was certain. People didn't come here to Barkay for the scenic advantages. There were none of those on this god forsaken little asteroid. People came here with one purpose—the same purpose that had drawn Clark here, and now had brought Ricky. They came to bury their past in the dangerous future of the Outer Space Patrol Legions, whose central headquarters were, appropriately, located on this desolate little sphere called Barkay...

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## CHAPTER II

### A Man in the Making

The Recruiting Officer of the Outer Space Patrol Legion faced Ricky the following morning. He sat behind a small, clean, unpretentious desk in a white, bare, severe office. He wore the deep blue tunic of the Legion. On his chest were miniatures of many campaign medals, and on his left arm were six gold seniority stripes. He was a short man, dark haired and wide shouldered, and a rugged, granite like expression chisled on his rocky features.

His eyes fixed Ricky's unsmilingly.

"We never accept a man who isn't absolutely aware of what he's getting in for," the Recruiting Officer declared. His voice was deep and somewhat harsh.

"I know that," Ricky answered.

The officer's eyes traveled over Ricky's expensive attire.

"There is no story book glory connected with the men of our patrols. Not of the sort that legend leads people to believe, at any rate. The pay amounts almost to nothing. Promotion can only be attained by the hard way. It's long in coming, if you live to deserve it."

"I understand that also," Ricky said.

"Most of the men who enter this office," the officer went on, ignoring Ricky's last remark, "are running away from something or someone in their past. We don't delude ourselves that they're coming to us because of any appeal service in our ranks might have. We are not interested in what they are escaping from, nor what they might have been before they joined us. Most of them are misfits, for any of a hundred reasons, from society. We don't care about that, either. If they are cowards, we find that out shortly enough and before their cowardice can cost us the lives of any others in our ranks."

Ricky looked at the hard, gnarled hands of the officer as he drummed his fingers on the desk while he spoke.

"Your enlistment in our ranks is for seven years," the officer went on. "Quite frankly, four out of every ten men who join our ranks never live to be mustered out of service at the end of that time. I'd like you to consider this very carefully. Take a day to do it, if you like. It's obvious from the words you use, from the clothes you wear, from your very manner of standing here before my desk, that the life you've left behind you is a lot softer than the life you wish to enter. Think that part over very carefully. If you're running away from something back in that life—and I repeat we don't care if you are—I just want you to realize you're running away straight into the arms of a buzz saw when you come to us. Do I make myself clear?"

Ricky nodded slowly. "I understand perfectly. I shan't need any additional time to consider this. I've thought it out carefully long ago."

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The officer considered Ricky's expression for a moment. Then he shrugged, smiled, and reached for a sheaf of papers beside his elbow. He placed them before Ricky.

"The enlistment is seven years. The penalty for desertion is, at all times, death. Sign these," he instructed.

Ricky leafed casually through the papers, seeming to examine them carefully yet swiftly. Then he bent over them and affixed his signature to the bottom of each paper. When he straightened up he seemed to have relaxed.

The officer pressed a microtube button on his desk and spoke into a tiny box. "A recruit, Richard Werts. My office. Supplies."

He flicked off the button and turned back to Ricky.

"My luggage," Ricky began, indicating the expensive baggage behind him. "Will I be permitted to—"

The officer anticipated his question, shook his head. "It will be returned to you seven years from now—when you're mustered out. Don't worry about it."

Ricky smiled for the first time. "I wasn't worrying. I was just wondering."

At the corner of the little office a door opened. The officer stood up behind his desk, clearing his throat. He held out a gnarled right hand.

"Goodbye, Legionaire Richard Werts," he said, "and good luck!"

Ricky took his hand, felt the hard, strong, reassuring grasp and was grateful for it. He grinned once, and the officer returned the grin. Then he turned on his heel, after executing a somewhat makeshift salute. An orderly stood waiting for him, his expression noncommittal.

"Follow me, Legionaire," he said....

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If Ricky had felt that he would soon be beside his brother Clark, and that the arrival of that long awaited moment would be but a matter of days, he was doomed to disappointment. Exactly one month after he had left the small recruiting office in Barkay, he was still on that god forsaken little asteroid, undergoing the rigid training service at the military barracks there.

It was hard going. The thick shouldered recruiting officer hadn't been guilty of understatement when he'd warned Ricky of that. There was drill, endless and fatiguing. There was instruction in military maneuver that seemed endlessly wearisome.

The barracks were cold and prison like in their atmosphere. The other recruits with whom Ricky trained, some fifty of them, were for the most part cynical riff-raff from the interplanetary gutters. But they were tough, and apparently fearless. Only a few of them were stupid. And in the attitudes of all of them there was complete and almost happy acceptance of their new lives. They seemed, all of them, like men glad to have left the rest of the world behind them, happy in the awareness that their past was buried completely for the next seven years.

The days were long, and even the constant attention to drill and detail, drill and detail, didn't lessen their aching endlessness to Ricky. But with the passing of each of these days, Ricky was confident in the knowledge that he was getting harder, swifter, keener—tapering down into the vicious human fighting machine that symbolized the Legionaire of the Outer Space Patrol.

At the end of a month there was strength and steel and sinew in his very bearing. His muscles were flat and hard, his eyes alive and restless. He was beginning to wear the swashbuckling blue tunic of the Legionaire as if it were a part of him, and he eagerly awaited the day that would send him off to his first patrol station.

And finally there was that day when the Instructing Officer stood before the fifty monthlings on the parade ground and read the order that tingled every last man of them to his heels.

"Forty out of fifty of you," the Instructing Officer had announced, "have been judged as ready for preliminary patrol training. The rest of you will remain here at the barracks for two more weeks extensive training in fundamentals. Those forty of you who have been judged fit for further work will be sent to the Outer Space Patrol Legion Base at Tromar.<sup>[2]</sup> The other ten, if they don't show considerable improvement within the next two weeks, will receive unimportant detail assignments at the home bases."

Standing there at attention, Ricky felt the tingling surge of excitement and suspense that comes only to a soldier at such moments. The Instructing Officer began to read the names of the favored forty—

"Yjaka, Carroll, Masters, Revwa, Nougak, *Werts*, Sommers" and his voice went on naming the other thirty-three, while Ricky stood there elatedly, hearing only his own name ringing in his ears. He'd made it. He was closer, now, to Clark!

When, finally, the Instructing Officer had dismissed the monthlings, Ricky was joined by a tall, hard, sleek earth-man named Carroll. He had bunked in the same dormitory as Ricky, and although they had spent occasional leisure moments together, Ricky had always felt a subconscious distrust of the chap.

"Congratulations, Werts," Carroll said, in his soft, too cultured voice. "I see we'll both be heading toward inevitable glory now, eh?" There was, as always, the slightest amused contempt in his voice. Barrack rumor had it that Carroll was a jewel thief hiding from the interplanetary police. Ricky neither believed nor doubted this, for he had already taken the Legion attitude of accepting a man on present value rather than past renown or notoriety.

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But there was something in Carroll's attitude that Ricky instinctively resented; a camaraderie that intimated common bonds, not only of having lived well and fully in their respective past lives, but equally uncleanly.

Carroll didn't seem to notice the fact that Ricky didn't answer him, however, for he continued to stride along beside him as they made their way across the parade ground to the canteen.

"There's a rumor around that we're going to be trained damned fast," Carroll went on. "Seems there's been more than an average ratio of trouble running along the outer space borders. The grapevine has it that a small asteroid garrison of the Outer Space Patrol Legion was completely wiped out a few days back. There was nothing but their charred corpses left lying around when the checking Patrol arrived on the scene."

Ricky felt a sudden chill. Perhaps Clark had been one of that annihilated garrison!

He forced himself to reply casually. "Is that so? What post?"

Carroll shook his head. "Don't know. One of the bad spots. They think the *Malyas* did it, however. Little doubt of that angle."

Ricky shuddered mentally. The *Malyas* were a vicious, weird tribe of Outer Space brigands. Creatures from another universe, their periodic raids and constant guerilla warfare along the interplanetary borderlands, had been the greatest problem faced since the formation of the Interplanetary Federation. Cruel, cunning, inhuman, the threat of these creatures was a constant danger to the civilized sections of space.

"Was the garrison comprised of new men or veterans?" Ricky asked.

Carroll shrugged. "Veterans, or so I understand."

Ricky sighed in relief. Clark was probably not among them. Carroll noted this sudden change in expression, and his brown eyes narrowed. They entered the canteen, and Carroll bought a bottle of Venusian wine.

"Share it, won't you, old boy?" Carroll invited, indicating a small table.

Ricky shrugged ungraciously. "Very well."

They were seated, and Carroll filled the glasses, when he said casually, "You're a funny duck, Werts. Can't seem to dope you out. You aren't like the rest." His tone indicated that Ricky was like himself, and that the comparison was meant as a compliment.

Ricky shrugged, sipping the cheap, bitter wine. He fished into his tunic pocket and found a cigarette. They were a harsh Junovian brand, the best he could afford on his meager pay allowances.

Carroll's tone was cloying, confidential. "Myself, for an example," he said, dropping his voice, "I'm not like the rest of our comrades, either. We're both used to better things. Neither of us were thugs. I, well, I don't mind admitting, had a rather slick thing before I came here." He laughed apologetically. "I was able to do quite nicely for myself with it, until it suddenly became a matter of immediate urgency that I remove my handsome hide to a quick hideout. This seemed to be my best move."

Ricky took a deep draught on his cigarette and raised his eyebrows noncommittally. He said nothing.



Carroll pushed his uniform cap back on his slick blonde hair and refilled his glass. He was driving at something, that much was obvious. And it was also certain that he didn't quite know how to go after what he sought. Ricky wasn't being helpful. Suddenly Carroll leaned forward and his tone became sickeningly friendly.

"What was your racket?" he asked.

Ricky's gray eyes clouded with frost.

Carroll had the grace to turn crimson. "I mean," he said swiftly, "I wasn't trying to pry into your background, old boy."

"What were you doing, then?" Ricky asked frigidly.

"I, ah, I was just comparing notes, so to speak. I didn't think you'd be touchy. We could save ourselves a lot of grief in this present set-up if we got together. One for all, all for one, that sort of thing, you know." Carroll said in an explanatory torrent.

"I see," Ricky said noncommittally. "And what's your background, Carroll?"

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Carroll became suddenly more at ease. He grinned and bent forward once more. "Ice," he said. "Valuable jewelry. Flick!" He waved one long fingered, gracefully tapered hand to show the theft of an object from thin air. He sat back and grinned.

"Society background, pinch the pearls stuff, eh?" asked Ricky.

Carroll nodded. "Right. It was a cinch. Society chap myself, you know. Made it easy. Had lots of friends. No one suspected."

"Then why are you here?" Ricky asked in the same toneless voice.

Carroll frowned, then laughed. "I see what you mean. If no one was wise, why am I here. Good question. They got wise, eventually, under rather messy circumstances. There was a person murdered. Ghastly thing, ruined my trade. I had to scoot."

"So you joined the Outer Space Patrol Legion until things died down and you could come back in seven years or so, eh?" Ricky said.

Carroll smirked. "Seven years is a long time. Too long for one of my, ah, impatient traits."

"The penalty for desertion is death," Ricky reminded him flatly.

"So is the penalty for murder," Carroll smiled.

"Then you have an angle," Ricky said. "I see."

Carroll smiled smugly. "You might say I have many angles, old man. All of them right angles." He snickered at his play on words.

"And I take it that these angles need two men to properly develop them, eh?" Ricky asked.

Carroll nodded. "That's it exactly," he admitted. "I knew from the minute I set eyes on you that you were the man to take in on my plans. You have brains, old boy, and background."

Ricky nodded sarcastically. "How flattering of you," he murmured.

The look Carroll gave him was suddenly sharp. "I'm not trying to be flattering," he said, the purr leaving his voice and his eyes growing hard. "I'm trying to let you in on some angles—smart angles—that can make this forced concealment in these uniforms," he indicated his plain blue tunic distastefully, "a little bit more pleasant and a little less permanent. What do you say?"

Ricky met his cold stare evenly. He held out his empty glass, and Carroll filled it.

"I say," Ricky declared with measured distaste, "that your wine is much better than your ideas. And I can't say that I enjoyed the wine too much!"

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# CHAPTER III

## Carroll's Second Bid

The Outer Patrol Space Legion Base at Tromar was much larger than the preliminary training quarters at the enlistment base on Barkay. And it was two days later that Ricky, with the forty men from the primary training garrison, arrived at the new location.

The first sight that met his eyes when he entered the huge walled garrison was the broad, glistening sheen of silver metal that served as the space landing platform for the fortress.

As Ricky followed the others from Barkay out the door of the space transport ship and onto the ever extending platform of the landing runway, his jaw fell open in amazement at the vast array of variously designed orange and blue space fighting craft.

Their leader, one of the Officers from the base at Barkay, saw the open mouthed astonishment on the faces of the men he led, and smilingly explained, "These are the space birds of war. When you learn to fly 'em and fight 'em, you'll be ready for patrol duty."

And on that note, the month's training at Tromar began. A month that made the grueling sessions of training on Barkay seem like child's play by comparison. But Ricky was hardened now, by his first month in the Legion, and it was that hardness that enabled him to survive the rigors of the month that followed.

They learned to handle the space fighters during the morning sessions. They learned to put them through maneuvers in the afternoon grinds. They learned to use the deadly crafts in mimic combat in practice night patrols.

And there was more than that. Navigation, ray gunnery, fleet flying, the intricacies of mass out-in-space boarding party raiding, and countless other drills.

This month moved more swiftly for Ricky, however, for he had at last caught up on a link or two in Clark's recent movements. There was a little old Junovian who worked in the garrison canteen, for example, who remembered Clark as having been at the Tromar base four months before.

With this information on hand, Ricky went cautiously about gathering additional information concerning his brother's whereabouts from others at the garrison—men stationed permanently there—who were able to recall Clark.

Officially, however, Ricky was able to gain no information. A solid wall of secrecy surrounded the movements of Outer Space Patrol Legions and the men in them. This was understandable, of course, for that very cloak of mystery aided in concealing troop and military maneuvers from possible enemy spies.

As the end of the final month's preparatory training drew to a close, but twenty-five men remained of the original forty recruits who had come from the base at Barkay.

Ten of the fifteen had been too slow in night maneuvers. They had died for their navigational inaccuracies, paid for minor miscalculations with their lives. Crack-ups in outer space, especially at the utterly phenomenal speeds with which the space war ships hurtled through the void, were inevitably fatal.

Two of the fifteen had killed one another in a bloody brawl during a drunken argument. The other three had been shot for attempted desertion. Their court martials had been but formalities.

And through it all Ricky had remained unscathed. Sheer nerve, indomitable hardness of muscle, had saved his life twice. The Ricky of four months before would not have lived, but this was a different person who strode to the Garrison Commander's Office, three days before the expiration of the month at Tromar, to receive his orders.

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An orderly in the outer office gave Ricky his sealed orders. Gave him his orders in exactly the same manner as he did the

other twenty-four men who'd finished their preliminary training. A crisp salute, a folded white envelope, a brief smile, and Ricky walked back past the line formed along the corridor outside the offices.

"We get same base. Don't you hope? Don't you like?" asked Yenka, the burly Martian recruit who'd joined in the same batch with Ricky, back at Barkay. Ricky grinned and nodded. He liked the purple thatched Yenka. The fellow had been a strong arm robber, according to the camp grapevine. But his very frankness about his background, and lack of hypocrisy, made him much more tolerable to Ricky than, say, Carroll.

Back in his quarters. Ricky opened his envelope. The white, teletyped sheet, was terse, officially cold.

OUTER SPACE PATROL  
LEGIONNAIRE RICHARD WERTS:

PRIMARY—BARKAY

ADDITIONAL PRIMARY—TROMAR

ULTIMATE STATION TO WHICH YOU ARE TO PROCEED IMMEDIATELY, HAS BEEN DESIGNATED AS  
CEPANI. ASSIGNMENT TO SPACE PATROL SERVICE AT THAT POST HAS BEEN ARRANGED.

COMMANDER USLANKY.

Ricky felt his hands shaking as he held the white sheet tightly in his fingers. His heart hammered with excited expectancy. This was what he had been waiting for. Active assignment. The chance to find Clark!

He stuffed the envelope into the pocket of his blue uniform tunic and lighted a cigarette. Immediate assignment. That would mean this very night, no doubt.

Ricky sat down on the edge of his hard cot and wondered how far Cepani was from Tromar, how far it was from Barkay.

Footsteps sounded on the duralloy floor. Ricky looked up and saw Carroll. The tall, sleek, lithely muscled blonde jewel thief had avoided Ricky for the most part, since their arrival at Tromar, and Ricky was certain that he'd been nourishing hatred toward him ever since their last afternoon in Barkay.

His expression now, as he approached Ricky, surprisingly contained no malice. The big, wide shouldered blonde was even smiling ingratiatingly.

"Well, we're together again, I understand," Carroll said, by way of greeting.

"I don't know what you understand," Ricky said, "or where you get your information. I just opened my assignment envelope a few moments ago."

Carroll smiled. "I told you once a person could play things the right way in this outfit. You get to have the right angles and you find out things. I knew we'd both be assigned to Cepani yesterday. If you'd asked me I could have told you as much."

"Look," Ricky said with cold politeness, "will you kindly get the hell out of here?"

Carroll smirked. "As you like it, Werts. You're being a damned fool, however. I can also tell you, right now, that Cepani is the outpost garrison that was wiped out by *Malyas* a little while back. Remember that bit of grapevine information I got? Cepani, my friend, is going to be a tough place to stay alive in. It's a nasty post. A man'll need a lot of angles to keep his hide there. Think that over, old man, and any time you're willing to get wise, let me know."

Carroll turned away, then, and strode jauntily down the row of barrack cots and out the door. Ricky watched him leave, frowning meditatively. There was something screwy about Carroll, something aside from the naturally repulsive oiliness of the man, that was distastefully ominous, menacing.

"How," Ricky wondered aloud, "does he know so damned much official information in advance? And where does he have this rumor source of his?"

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Ricky shook his head in bewilderment. It was too hard to understand. Just as it was hard to understand why Carroll would have returned with his "angles and ideas" today, after having been so coldly and emphatically rebuffed by Ricky on the first occasion.

Ricky shook his head again. It was strange, too damned strange. He shrugged. However, there was no time to think of that now. There was gear to check, and supplies. He felt almost positive that his departure for the active duty post was scheduled officially for tonight.

The burly, purple haired Martian, Yenka, came bursting into the barrack quarters just as Ricky set about cleaning his equipment. His face was beaming, his yellow teeth savage in a grin of glee.

"We get same base!" he chortled. "We get same base! Good, is not? Fine, isn't?"

Ricky grinned, then the grin left his face and his eyes narrowed. Yenka, too, was aware that he was assigned to the same base as Ricky. What in the hell was this?

"Look," said Ricky quietly, "how do you know we're assigned together?"

Yenka slapped Ricky thumpingly on the back with his huge paw. "Carroll is outside when I am come in. Carroll is tell me, after I am tell Carroll what base I am being sending to. Is fine, no?"

The frown left Ricky's features. That explained Yenka's knowledge. He rubbed a faint stubble of beard on his chin reflectively a moment, then addressed Yenka abruptly.

"When did Carroll join the outfit?"

Yenka looked bewildered. "Carroll, when he come to Barkay?"

Ricky nodded. "It was about the same time you showed up in our ranks, wasn't it?"

Yenka thought a moment. "Is so," he decided emphatically. "He is join Legion at same day I am. We almost join same time."

"That's what I thought," Ricky muttered reflectively.

"Why is good to know?" Yenka demanded puzzledly.

Ricky grinned disarmingly. "No reason, Yenka. Just wondering, that's all."

"That Carroll a bad one," Yenka warned dourly. "Don't make term with that Carroll, Reeky."

Ricky nodded. "Never in a million light years, Yenka. Don't worry about that."

Yenka grinned at this reassurance. "Is good. Worry Yenka to see Carroll-snake slink around you, Reeky. You good fella. No place with Carroll."

Ricky patted the Martian Legionaire's burly shoulder somewhat affectionately. "Don't worry, Yenka. You'd better start getting your gear in shape, else you'll get caught with a lot of last minute preparations. I've a hunch we'll be saying goodbye to Tromar sometime tonight."

Yenka raised bushy purple eyebrows. "This night, you think, eh, Reeky?"

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Ricky nodded. Yenka made a whistling noise to indicate both surprise and delight, and shuffled down the line of barrack cots to the far end of the room where his own quarters were located.

Ricky set about the task of polishing his leather holsters, equipment sacks, beltings, and space boots and gauntlets. As he

worked he went back over Carroll's actions from the first day he'd seen the jewel thief at Barkay. Meditatively, as he worked, he endeavored to find some chink in the armor of that Legionaire's actions that would explain some of the mysterious knowledge he seemed to have access to.

By the time he'd set about polishing the glass turret on his space helmet, Ricky had covered and recovered the ground he'd mapped on Carroll's actions. There were plenty of suspicious movements, but not one of them indicated anything.

Ricky gave it up, and sighingly forgot the matter.

As Ricky had expected, the call to leave for active duty came that night. The eerie sound of the siren bugle shrilled forth the signal to the twenty men concerned, and the barracks quarter in which the men had been lying in open-eyed anticipation, suddenly came to life ...



# CHAPTER IV

## The *Malyas* Attack

Ricky was the first man out on the parade ground. Yenka followed not so far behind them. Trotting, dragging their compact full fighting equipment with them, they trotted across the parade ground to the vast, wide stretch of the space landing platform shimmering in the pale half light of the silvered darkness.

There was a sergeant waiting for them, standing just off from a large, fifty-rocketed space transport ship. The sergeant had a white sheet of paper in his hand. The muffled warming-up vibrations of the rockets in the large troop spaceship were throbbingly exciting to Ricky, who felt his heart trying to keep tempo.

The others were arriving now, taking their places at attention beside Ricky and Yenka. Carroll was among the last of the stragglers to arrive, and Ricky wondered, fleetingly, if the lithe blonde giant hadn't known of this embarkation. It seemed unlikely that he wouldn't have known in advance, especially in view of the fact that he seemed to have private sources of information constantly on tap.

Then Ricky shoved the problem from his mind. The sergeant was calling the role, and the Legionaires were accounting themselves as on hand and ready.

The sergeant, Marlow, a red necked, bull voiced man, then donned his own glass turreted space helmet, drew on his space gauntlets, slid into the zippered, electrically heated space suit he'd had ready, and the others followed suit.

Sergeant Marlow held up three fingers of his right gauntlet. That indicated that their receptor gauges should be set at third volume intake, to permit complete and unhampered communication with one another and their superior officer during the journey through space.

The throbbing of the rockets on the big troop transport had grown in volume to an almost deafening staccato.

The side hatchways on the ship were rolled back, a gangplank let down. Turning in formation drill, the Legionaires picked up their gear, shifted their electra-rifles to their left shoulders in unison, and marched up into the side of the ship.

Ricky was the first inside the troop carrier, and he made his way to the front of the big spaceship, taking his place on the right of the aisle in a small, comfortable seat that was fashioned so as to provide the utmost space for fighting equipment while at the same time affording bodily comfort as well as could be expected.

Yenka took the seat across the aisle from Ricky. Behind them, in straight two-across formation, the others took their places. Then Ricky heard the doors at the side of the ship rolling back into place. A moment later Sergeant Marlow marched down the aisle, inspecting the proper placement of equipment on the part of his charges.

Up ahead of him, Ricky knew, behind the heavy duralloy doors that blocked their compartments off from the troops they carried, were the pilots of the space craft.

Sergeant Marlow's red face beneath the glass turret of his space helmet was grim and unsmiling. Around the training grounds of Tromar he had been a bluff, jovial, almost raucously humorous chap. His attitude now was in complete contrast.

Marlow looked like what he was. A tough Sergeant in a tough outfit in a tough situation which he was determined to carry through with professional hardness.

And then Marlow was moving to the rear of the spaceship troop transport, and from the sudden, almost imperceptible lessening in the rocket vibrations of the craft, Ricky was certain that the pilots were easing rocket throttles toward the first open blasts that would send them screaming spaceward.

He was hurled back against his seat in the next instant, and from the porthole on his right, Ricky caught only the flickering swirl of the night's starstream shooting past them.

They were out in space moments later. Out in space and headed for Cepani.

---

The minutes that followed stretched themselves into interminable hours, and finally, on instructions from Sergeant Marlow, the contingent of space Legionaires dug into haversacks for their concentrated rations. After this there was a brief exercise period, a period in which the men moved up and down the confinements of the spaceship in squads of four for ten minutes at a time.

Later Ricky slept, and when he woke again he was startled to realize that a day had passed and that they were into another night and another meal on concentrated pill rations. There was more exercise after this, and more sluggishly plodding hours of silence as the sleek craft roared through the space lanes.

Ricky must have dozed off a little later, for suddenly he was blinking his eyes and looking startledly about as the voice of Sergeant Marlow rang through the receptor of his space helmet.

"Discard all but fighting gear!" the voice thundered. "Prepare to repulse attack. *Malyas* are closing in on the transport!"

Ricky was on his feet then, pushing haversack equipment to the side of the seat, reaching for his electra-rifle. His heart began to pound furiously in excitement. On every side of him other Legionaires were discarding their unnecessary equipment and lining themselves in formation along the aisle of the transport.

Ricky took a quick glance out the transport porthole. All he saw was the blackness of space around him. Then he was out in the center aisle of the ship, lining up with his comrades. Yenka was directly on his right, the pug-faced Martian's features grinning delightedly behind the turret of his space helmet.

Sergeant Marlow moved swiftly up the line to the front of the ship. He stepped through the heavy bulkhead that led to the pilot's compartments. A moment later he reappeared.

Ricky noticed that he had strapped two atomic pistols to his sides.

"All right," Marlow barked. "There's exactly three *Malya* ships heading toward us. They haven't opened fire yet. They haven't the range. I've a hunch they'll try to board us. We'll need two gun crews to man the atomic cannon on our top turret." His eyes swept along the line of Legionaires.

"Carroll," Marlow snapped, and from the far end of the line the tall blonde stepped forward.

"Yenka," Marlow barked in the next breath. Almost chortling with glee, the Martian stepped forward.

Marlow hesitated an instant. "Werts!" he snapped. Ricky stepped forward.

"You three will man the fore gun turret," he said. "Leave your electra-rifles in the cabin, take your atomic pistols along."

Then Ricky was dumping his rifle to the top of his equipment, making fast the notches in his holster belt as he strapped an atomic pistol to his waist. Even though he'd removed his space gauntlets, his fingers all felt like thumbs. His mouth was dry.

"All right," Marlow ordered. Then he barked three more names, instructed those Legionaires to man the rear gun turrets, and declared he would arrange the porthole defense with electra-rifles in another moment.

Ricky, Yenka, and Carroll passed Marlow on the way to the forward hatch that led to the upper gun turret.

"Don't forget what we've burned into your thick skulls," he snapped. "Good luck."

---

Carroll was first up the hatchway ladder, Ricky followed behind him, and then Yenka. Then they were on the smooth "bubble" of glasscade atop the space transport, and Yenka was tugging the hatch cover back in place.

Ricky saw that Carroll had already dashed to the firing position behind a round snouted atomic cannon, and he paused a minute, to look up through the sheen of glasscade around them.



And then he saw the *Malyas*.

There were, as Marlow had said, three of their ships following the troop transport through space at a distance of several miles. They were incredibly slim, sleek ships, and Ricky recalled that they were reputed to have tremendous powers of speed, but very little maneuverability.

He settled himself behind the second atomic cannon.

Yenka had left the hatch, now, and took the third post.

Ricky dragged on his space gauntlets and seized the trigger bars of the atomic cannon. He swung the gun around in a swift circular motion, making certain that it wasn't jammed. Carroll and Yenka were making the same tests on their guns.

Carroll caught Ricky's eye and grinned, waving his gauntleted hand in a nonchalant gesture. As much as he despised the man, Ricky had to admire his coolness and eclat under danger.

There were covers, partitions, over each of the three atomic gun positions. Ricky pressed the button which rolled back the glasscade cover around and above his cannon. It worked smoothly. Ricky turned the current higher on his electrically heated space suit, as the cold swept in through the sudden vent, and signalled Carroll and Yenka to do the same. He saw their hands turning the switches on their chest panels and nodded in satisfaction.

Ricky pointed to his opened cover partition, indicating that he thought it wise that the others swing theirs free for action now rather than later.

The *Malya* ships were creeping up closer now, and Ricky was certain that the pilots of the transport, knowing they couldn't outrace the enemy, were slowing somewhat to permit a better defense of their ship.

Ricky's gun faced the tail of the ship, Yenka's gun the nose, and Carroll's the center. And then the slim, sleek craft of the *Malyas* were driving upward for altitude, getting ready for dive attacks.

Ricky's gauntleted finger released the stop catch on the side of his trigger bars. His head was craned back, and he peered upward at the *Malya* ships climbing high behind the tail of the transport.

Any instant now, and they would start diving—

They dove!

Ricky's fingers pulled tight on the trigger bars and his atomic cannon belched orange flame upward into space. He fired too soon with his first blasts, missing the first diving *Malya* ship. The *Malya* craft took advantage of this, and red fire coughed from its nose as it hurled death and destruction toward the transport.

Ricky's cannon work, although it hadn't accounted for a *Malya* ship, had diverted its fire, and the red spurts of flame went wide of the transport as the first diving ship continued onward under the quarry.

Ricky held his fire on the second ship until it was less than a few hundred yards away. He didn't miss this time, and the orange blasts that coughed from his cannon caught the *Malya* craft squarely on the nose, setting it immediately aflame!

With fierce satisfaction, Ricky watched the *Malya* raider roll over, down, then away. By now it was nothing more than a blazing ball of flame dropping wildly through space. First blood.

The third *Malya* ship cut its dive short, rather than risk the same fate, and zoomed up quickly out of range, climbing for safety. Ricky relaxed and wished to God that he could get inside his space helmet to wipe the streaming perspiration from his face. He turned and grinned at Yenka who was waving clasped hands above his head. Carroll was smiling also, and nodding his compliments.

Ricky waited there while moments ticked sluggishly onward. But the *Malya* spacecraft which had climbed upward to safety didn't appear again. Neither did the first ship that had dived on them. Ricky's spine began to ache.

Finally, when it seemed as if an hour must have passed, Ricky saw the hatch cover to the cabin below slide back and Marlow's turreted head thrust through.

He signalled them to leave their posts and his head disappeared back into the cabin. Ricky pressed the button that rolled the glasscade partition back over his gun position. The others did likewise. He set the stop catch on the trigger bars of his atomic cannon and climbed wearily to his feet.

The attack was over. The *Malyas* had been beaten off.

Ricky was last down the hatch ladder into the cabin. Yenka was jabbering excitedly to Marlow and pointing at Ricky. Marlow met Ricky's eyes.

"Nice work," his voice came to Ricky. "They got Fleck, one of our men in the underside turret." His face was tired.

Ricky felt suddenly utterly weary. The triumph drained from him leaving only aching fatigue. Fleck had been a good man. A Legionaire hates to see a good man go from his outfit. Ricky realized that had he been in the under turret rather than Fleck, it might be Fleck who had the honor, and Ricky who was dead. That was the Outer Space Legion. That was war in space ...



# CHAPTER V

## Death Strikes the Patrol

Cepani was as desolate an asteroid garrison as Ricky had ever laid eyes on. And when the large transport ship slid onto the space landing platform at Cepani hours later, Ricky looked out the porthole with a mixture of wonder and disgust on his features.

The fortress on Cepani was apparently all that the asteroid contained. It was a military outpost, nothing more, nothing less.

Yenka, standing at Ricky's shoulder, expressed the emotions of all the newly arriving men.

"It bad," he declared sincerely. "A place for a Legionaire to go crazy."

Sergeant Marlow, moving up and down the aisle to make certain that his charges would be ready to disembark with a flourish, looked none too happy about his new assignment. Neither did the small knot of Legionaires who waited curiously out on the landing platform.

But Ricky's excitement returned when he saw those men waiting for them, for this was the garrison at which Clark might be stationed. This might be the end of his search!

Marlow lined them up before they were ready to step out down the gangplank to their new quarters.

"Step out there like Legionaires," he barked. "Move like you've a brass band tooting at your heels. You've had your first taste of action already, men; now act like it!"

And then he led them down the gangplank and onto the platform.

Ricky's heart was pounding furiously as he peered eagerly at the faces of the men who apathetically watched the disembarkment. There were perhaps ten of them. Three were officers, Ricky knew instantly from the gold braid on their blue tunics.

None of the other seven was Clark.

Ricky felt a swift surge of bitter disappointment. But, he realized, an instant later, this certainly wasn't the Cepani Legion garrison in its entirety. Clark might be anywhere around the place. He might even be out on patrol duty. There was still certainly hope of finding him here.

They were on the landing platform, lined before the space transport ship, and Sergeant Marlow was stepping forward to greet the three officers of the Cepani garrison.

Even the Officers of the garrison looked weary and somewhat disgusted, Ricky realized as he saw their expressions. But all of them were clean shaven and turned out with military shine. They hadn't let their weariness or disgust send them to seed.

Then Ricky saw that all their space boots, those of the officers and seven men alike, were covered with a thick, chalky, gray substance. He frowned at this.

Marlow came back from the officers, then. "You men are already assigned to quarters. Break formation and hustle over to the barracks. Your new Commanding Officers will look you over later. If you hurry with your cleanups we'll be in time to join mess."

The weary contingent of newly arrived Legionaires broke ranks immediately, some removing their space helmets and gauntlets, others leaving them on as they trotted toward the end of the landing platform toward the barracks at the other side of the fortress.

Ricky walked wearily behind them. He had removed his space helmet and for the first time had a chance to thoroughly scratch his neck and wipe the perspiration and grime from his features. He was one of the last to the edge of the landing

platform, and when he arrived there and looked down the ladder that led to the parade ground his jaws fell open in thick dismay.

The newly arrived Legionaires who were already off the platform and down on the parade ground were stamping around with hoarse curses of bitter disgust. Stamping around in chalky, gray dust that lay at least four inches thick over the entire terrain!

Yenka came up behind Ricky and looked down. He too stared with disgusted disappointment.

"It's awful!" he cursed. "Damn dust! Damn place! Choke damn men to death!"

Another voice sounded behind them, and they turned to see Carroll staring cynically down at the parade ground.

"This, my friends," he said sarcastically, "is the lovely rich soil of that most charming of asteroids, Cepani!"

Ricky merely stared at him wordlessly....



Ricky and the others of his contingent had washed and changed to crimson fatigue tunics some thirty minutes later. And in the small mess hall of the Cepani garrison they had their first meeting with their new comrades, some twenty of them.

It was learned in the course of the meal that two patrols of five men each were out on duty and would be in shortly after mess. On the right of Ricky at the long mess table was Carroll, who seemed more talkative than ever before.

"The food is at least passable," Carroll declared. "And if we don't have to slough around in that damned dust too much none of us will choke to death. I'd much rather die with my boots on than by dust strangulation."

Ricky still felt no closer to Carroll, and still considered him worthy of suspicion. But the fact that they had been together through a brief conflict with the *Malyas* seemed to give him a little more reason to ignore the ex-jewel thief less.

"I thought you were averse to dying with your boots on," Ricky observed.

Carroll laughed. "So I am, old boy. So I am. And I still don't intend to do so."

Ricky ate on in silence.

"You're pretty anxious about something or other, aren't you?" Carroll observed a moment later. "I've noticed that your eyes can't stay in one place longer than a second."

Ricky flushed. "You're too damned observant to suit me."

Carroll shrugged, went on eating, then paused once more. "You expect, or hope, to find someone here, don't you?" he asked.

Ricky looked at him levelly. "Perhaps," he said.

"Friend?"

"You'd like to know every last bit you can ferret, wouldn't you?" Ricky blazed. "Why in the hell don't you concentrate on your food, Carroll?"

Carroll shrugged his wide shoulders again. "Sorry if I was prying, old boy. I just thought I could be of some help. There's a chap named Werts at this garrison—a Werts other than yourself, I should say. That your man?"

Ricky almost choked on the liquid he was drinking. He was flooded with mingled emotions, rage at Carroll for having learned so much, and wild relief to realize that he had at last found Clark. For it must have been Clark!

He held back his fury at Carroll. "He's not in this mess hall," he said evenly. "How do you know he's here?"

"Out on patrol duty," Carroll said, his eyes watching Ricky's expression carefully. "I saw his name posted on the board

in front of the Commander's Office here—the Patrol Assignment Board. Your name was the same as his. So I imagined from that and your other rather strange anxiety in actions, that you were looking for someone and that this other Werts chap was the man."

"Very clever deduction," Ricky said. "I'm thankful for your information, but I don't particularly like the curiosity that prompted you to get it."

Carroll smiled in what he imagined to be a disarming manner. "I still insist, old boy, and this should be further proof, that it would never hurt the situation any if you were to throw in with me. We could work very well together."

Ricky disregarded this and went on with the motions of eating. But he didn't actually touch his food after this, for his mind was too filled with the elation of having at last found his brother. The waiting for the signal that mess was over was almost more than he could stand, so great was his eagerness to get out to the landing platform to wait for Clark's patrol to return.

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When the signal came, Ricky was first on his feet. He almost ran from the mess room. A quick glance across the parade ground and up at the landing platform showed him that no patrols were in as yet. The big space transport ship that had carried him here from Tromar was still there, however, and engineers were working over its rocket tubes to get it in shape for its return voyage.

Ricky then raced to the office of the Commanding Officer. On a Patrol Assignment Board, just outside the door of the office, Ricky found what Carroll had said he'd seen there. Clark's name on the list of men on patrol duty.

Ricky lighted a cigarette and stalked nervously up and down the corridors of the barracks for the next ten or fifteen minutes. He knew that Clark's patrol wouldn't be in until another patrol had readied itself to take off in place of it, and when he finally heard the throbbing of atomic motors out on the landing platform, he almost shouted with relief. It meant that a patrol was getting ready to go out, and what was more important, was waiting for Clark's patrol to come in.

Ricky moved out of the barracks and onto the dusty parade ground. Quickly, he trotted over to the landing platform and ascended the ladder that brought him up to its shining surface.

One space patrol fighter was being warmed up, and beside it—at the far end of the platform, away from the big transport—stood five Legionaires, veterans of this garrison, who were clambering into their space gear.

On the platform behind the space patrol fighter, a mechanic was checking over a swivel mounted steamgun before placing it in the gun turret of the ship which was being readied.

Ricky walked over to the group, and the five men getting ready for patrol looked curiously at him, almost appraisingly, as if trying to judge from his walk and actions what sort of replacements they'd been given this day.

Flicking his cigarette over the side of the landing platform Ricky addressed the nearest of the Legionaires who was slipping into extra insulated space boots.

"Patrol should be in pretty soon, eh?" Ricky asked.

The Legionaire nodded. "Any minute. It's already overdue. We've been here too long already."

"See plenty of action here, I imagine," Ricky said casually.

The Legionaire gave him a swift glance and then broke into hoarse laughter. "Hell, buddy. Action is an understatement at Cepani. Wait'll you *really* get a taste of those *Malya* devils!"

Ricky flushed at the Legionaire's scoffing reference to the attack on the transport. Evidently these men, veterans by comparison, were skeptically doubtful about the staying powers of the new replacements to their garrison.

"Tough babies, eh?" Ricky asked. He peered upward into the dusk. The Legionaire followed his gaze. Ricky saw nothing, but the Legionaire was suddenly waving his arms.

"There's our patrol coming in!" he shouted to the others.

Ricky blinked, and then he saw it, a small dot high in the murky heavens.

One of the mechanics was on his feet. "Hell," he shouted. "That ship is in trouble!"

The Legionaire nodded excitedly, grimly. "You're right. She's limping in!"

Then the men on the platform were cursing and moving swiftly around him. How they had discerned that the patrol fighter was coming in in bad shape was more than Ricky could guess, but he wasn't concerned with that nearly as much as he was with the awful premonition that assailed him.

For that was Clark's patrol, and if it was in bad shape that meant that something might have happened to Clark!

The dot was growing larger and larger now, and the men on the platform had stopped running excitedly around and were waiting stolidly watching it draw closer and closer.

The next minutes that passed seemed like an eternity to Ricky. He wasn't aware of how long he stood there before the trim blue space fighter patrol ship finally settled sluggishly to a landing on the lower end of the platform.

---

Ricky was with the rest of them as they dashed across the platform to the side of the badly disabled craft. He was, in fact, the first one to the door of the cabin, and even as he tugged it open a charred, unpleasant odor assailed his nostrils.

Three men lay dead, their bodies gruesomely burned, in the cabin of the fighting craft. Ricky was pushed aside as other Legionaires clambered into the ship. Then he was forcing himself to follow them inside, forcing himself to look closely at the baked features of what had been Legionaires to find that none of them was Clark.

Then they were tearing open the bulkhead door that led to the compartments where the two space pilots sat. They dragged out a limp body that Ricky knew immediately to be dead. It was all he could do to peer at the face. Not Clark—it wasn't Clark!

Sobbingly, praying and cursing in the same breath, Ricky forced his way through the bulkhead into the forward pilots' compartment. Two Legionaires were lifting a third gently from behind the controls of the craft, a third was removing the man's space helmet.

Ricky saw the familiar red thatch of hair that was his brother's trademark. Red hair on a head that rolled limply from side to side as they carried the body from the compartment.

"I don't know how in the hell he got back," one of the Legionaires was repeating over and over again. "I don't know how in the hell he got back!"

Ricky crowded close to them, gazing down at the man they held in their arms. Clark's handsome face looked up at him. But those laughing eyes were closed, and the strong mouth was twisted, frozen, in anguish, while his head continued to roll limply from side to side....

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# CHAPTER V

## Brothers in Hell

"God," Ricky cried, "Oh, God!" His mind was a blaze of searing grief and anguish and he followed dumbly, like a man in a trance, as the still form of his brother was carried from the scarred space fighting craft.

There were others outside the disabled ship when they stepped out onto the landing platform. Legionaires who had dashed to the platform the moment the news of the disaster had reached the barracks. And in front of the press of men around the ship, Ricky saw vaguely the stern, tired face of the Commanding Officer.

He was directing the situation calmly, any emotions he might have had cloaked behind his efficient handling of the disaster. His voice came to Ricky foggily, as if from a great distance.

"Take that man," his finger was pointing at Clark, "to our emergency ward immediately. There might be a chance."

"I don't think so, sir," one of the Legionaires was saying. "I think he's already dead."

"Take him to the emergency ward!" the Commanding Officer's voice lashed out like a whip.

A path was cleared in the press of bodies, and Clark, lifted to a stretcher, was carried through this by two Legionaires. Ricky followed dully behind. A hand reached out and caught his shoulder.

"Stand back from there, buddy. You're not a mascot for that cot!"

Ricky looked up and saw the face of a noncom unknown to him. His fist snapped into a crashing blow before he was conscious of willing it. The noncom, mouth red with blood, staggered back. Ricky turned dully, scarcely conscious of what he'd done, and started after the stretcher.

Sergeant Marlow loomed up before him.

"What's wrong with you, Werts?" he shouted redly. "Have you lost your mind?"

Ricky looked at him dully, shaking his head puzzledly like a man under hypnosis. "No," he said thickly, slowly, "no, that man, that man on the stretcher is my brother."

Marlow looked at him in amazement. He gulped once. Then his hand touched Ricky's arm. "Follow along, Werts," he said simply.

Ricky turned away and followed after the stretcher....

---

Later, it must have been three or four hours later, Ricky slumped dully on a bare bench before the door of the emergency hospital of the garrison. He had been that way, staring blankly at the corridor walls, scarcely moving a muscle, for what had seemed to be eternity.

Inside the ward there had been sounds, murmuring voices. And Ricky had bleakly tried to learn from these scant sounds what was going on in there.

Yenka, on hearing the news that was flying through the barracks, had come to Ricky to do what he could. Stumblingly, he had tried to express his sympathy, his best wishes, and tried to press on Ricky a carton of cheap cigarettes, Yenka's most priceless possession. He had left eventually, however, realizing that there was little he could do until word was learned of Clark's chances.

Ricky still waited for that word even now.

And suddenly the door of the emergency room opened. A young Lieutenant Physician appeared in his white tunic. He looked at Ricky an instant, while time hung breathless, then asked, "You are his brother?"

Ricky was already on his feet, shaking his head affirmatively, too choked inside to say a word, utter a sound.

"Better get back to your barracks," the young lieutenant medico said kindly. "The corporal, your brother, has pulled through splendidly. He'll be in shape to talk to you tomorrow possibly."

Ricky's knees suddenly felt weaker than tissue. He held to the corridor wall for support. Cold sweat stood out on his forehead, but he was grinning, grinning like an idiot.

"Thank God," he said insanely, over and over again, "Thank God!"

The Lieutenant Physician smiled understandingly. "Get back to your barracks, Legionaire," he said. "That's an order."

---

Ricky went back to his barracks. But he did little sleeping that night, for all he could think of was the almost tragic circumstances under which he'd finally reached Clark.

And when the siren bugle sounded that following morning, Ricky was the first man to dash from the barracks. Back outside the door of the emergency ward once more, he found himself sympathetically sent away by an orderly who assured him that Clark had improved through the night vigil.

At mess, Carroll was the most vocally inquisitive member of Ricky's contingent.

"So it was your brother you were looking for, eh?" Carroll asked smilingly.

Ricky nodded. "Yes. I suppose it's barracks conversation by now." He wasn't any more inclined to chatter with Carroll on this occasion than any other.

"Odd, a brother combination in the Outer Space Patrol Legion," Carroll mused aloud.

Ricky's glance was glacial. "Odd, the fun you have prying into things that are none of your damned business!"

But as usual, Carroll seemed quite impervious to insult. "Sorry," he grinned, "I guess I'm too fascinated by thinking of angles. A brother combination in a set-up like this certainly points to the possibility of a lot of angles in the background."

Ricky's eyes narrowed. Again he had the feeling of uncertainty as to how much the blond Legionaire really knew. But it seemed too impossible to consider that the ex-jewel thief would know anything about the reasons that brought Clark and himself into the Legion. Reasoning this way, Ricky dismissed the suspicion.

"He's greatly improved, your brother, I understand," Carroll said a moment later.

Ricky nodded coldly and continued eating. Yenka, who sat on the other side of him, muttered something into his plate about Carroll, and when the mess was concluded, Ricky was on his feet and out of the hall before Carroll could pick up a conversation again.

Once more Ricky returned to the emergency ward. The orderly was still in front of the door, and Ricky waited around in the corridor, finishing a cigarette until the Lieutenant Physician arrived.

The young medical officer smiled and nodded to Ricky and went inside the ward. Impatiently, Ricky made another march down the corridor and, by the time he returned to the door of the emergency ward, the Lieutenant Physician was poking his head out of the door. He beckoned silently to Ricky.

"He's able to see you for a few minutes now," the medical officer declared. "But I wouldn't advise you to talk about anything that might excite him. I'd also advise you to do most of the talking yourself."

Ricky nodded eagerly. The medico opened the door wider and Ricky stepped into the large, light, spotlessly white emergency ward room. Only one bed was occupied, and that was by a window. Clark lay in this bed, his head propped up slightly by pillows.

He had a few minor bandages on his chin, several more patched on his cheek, and his eyes were completely covered by



bandages.

"There's a visitor for you, Corporal Werts," the young medical officer told Clark.

Ricky saw his brother's head turn in the direction of the young medico's voice.

Ricky turned to the Physician Lieutenant, asking a question with his eyes. The young officer nodded and smiled.

"Certainly, I'll step out of the room."

The door closed behind the medico and Ricky walked quietly over to the side of Clark's bed.

"Hello, Commander," he said. "You've had a hell of a scrape, but you seem to be as tough as ever." His voice was husky, blurred with emotion.

Clark's head turned toward him, as if he were trying to see through the bandages that covered his eyes. For a moment his jaw was slack in wordless astonishment.

"Ricky!" he gasped, after an instant. His voice shook. "Good God, it's you, Rick!"

Ricky placed a hand on his brother's arm. "Yeah, it's Ricky, Commander. Just as always I never catch you when you're not involved in some slam bang situation."

"But Rick," there was bewilderment as well as sheer elation in Clark's excited voice. "Rick, boy, what are you doing here?"

"It's a long story, Commander," Ricky declared. "It begins with my refusal to let a grand guy make a sap out of himself by heroic self-accusations."

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Clark's expression suddenly changed, his face going grave. "I'll tell you about that, kid. I'm guilty as hell, just as I insisted I was at first. Sorry to shame you this way, Rick, but it's true." There was a stubborn ridge to the muscles of his jaw.

Ricky's fingers dug into his brother's shoulders. "We'll hash that out later, Clark. In the meantime you be a topnotch patient. At least you'll have your kid brother around to look out for you from now on in, you big hulking oaf."

The shadows left Clark's cheeks and he smiled. "Commander, eh? I passed that title on to you, Rick, remember?"

Ricky's voice was husky again. "Yes, I remember. And that's what you need from now on, Clark, a Commander to push you around."

Clark's expression became grave again. "I told you, Rick, on the other thing, I'm guilty as—"

"Ah, ah," Ricky placed his hand gently over his brother's mouth. "We'll talk about that later. Tomorrow, if you're well enough. But now I'd better duck out of here. You'll need your rest."

Clark raised his hand, caught Ricky's. "Thanks, kid. Thanks for everything. I, I, aw, hell, Commander, I should have known you'd track me down. I should have known you'd follow me."

"I stick," Ricky said simply. "Just the way I know you'd stick. Keep a stiff upper, Clark." He withdrew his hand from his brother's. "I'll be in to see you tomorrow."

"So-long, Commander," Clark said softly.

"No grin?" Ricky asked. "Long lost brother and no grin?"

Clark grinned.

Ricky laughed. "That's better, oaf. Until tomorrow."

Ricky turned at the door before he stepped out of the room. Clark was still grinning.

Out on the parade ground Ricky found Yenka waiting eagerly for him.

"How is brother?" Yenka asked earnestly.

"Swell, Yenk," Ricky said, patting the burly Martian's arm. "What seems to be eating you? You look worried."

"*Malyas*," Yenka bit off the word distastefully.

Ricky's face went grim. "*Malyas*?"

"Last night," Yenka said, pointing skyward. "*Malyas* catch transport ship on way back Tromar. Khhhhheech!" He made a gesture that showed a knife slitting a throat.

"They got the transport on the way back to Tromar?" Ricky gasped in horror.

Yenka nodded. "Night patrol pick up sight wreckage of transport ship drifting in space on way in with dawn."

Ricky considered this in horror. He hadn't known the transport was going to attempt a return voyage to Tromar last night. Neither had any of the others, for that matter. It was generally understood that they'd wait until daylight to leave Cepani. Obviously the night departure had been meant to avoid trouble with the *Malyas*. Obviously, too, that trouble hadn't been avoided.

Ricky recalled the charred bodies he'd seen in the space patrol ship his brother brought in, and promptly felt a little sick at the realization of what had undoubtedly happened to the pilots of the space troopship.

Instinctively he shuddered. "Anything else popping?"

"Along same trouble," Yenka answered. "Is rumor made that *Malyas* plan circle Cepani, wipe out garrison like before."

Ricky frowned. "Where'd you hear that? Certainly the officers would be aware of it."

Yenka shrugged. "Dunno where hear. Is around barracks. Tell that communications to Tromar, ev'vyplace else, cut off. No get word through for help. Officers try. No do."

Sergeant Marlow came around the corner of the barracks building, saw Ricky and Yenka, and hurried in their direction.

"Yenka," Marlow snapped. "Get to your quarters and get your gear ready. We might need you on a scout patrol job."

Yenka saluted happily and hurried away. Marlow turned to Ricky. The lines of worry on his face were too plain to ignore. Ricky had a hunch that this might indicate the authenticity of the rumors Yenka picked up around the barracks.

"Sorry about your brother, Werts," Sergeant Marlow said.

Ricky smiled. "It's all right now. He's pulled through. Just left him a little while ago."

Sergeant Marlow's face became embarrassedly troubled. "You didn't talk to the Lieutenant Physician?"

Ricky had a sudden, horrible sinking sensation.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I did, for a moment before I went in to see Clark. Why?"

Marlow was plainly wishing he had bitten off his tongue. His face was flushed. Ricky forgot the other's ranking, grabbing him by the sleeve urgently, desperately.

"What do you mean, sergeant?" Ricky demanded. "For God's sake let me in on whatever's wrong!"

Marlow said softly, "I'm sorry, Werts, I thought you'd been told. Your brother's fine. That is, he'll be up and around in no time. But he's blind, kid. He'll never see again!"

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# CHAPTER VI

## The Siren Shrieks

For a moment Ricky stood there, too sickly stunned to say a word. His face was drained of blood, his senses reeled in horror. Clark blind—blind!

Marlow's hand was on Ricky's shoulder, shaking him gently. "Easy, kid. It's not as if he'd died. You still have your brother alive and almost in one piece. He was lucky, kid. Lucky as hell. He'll be around in almost no time."

Ricky looked up wordlessly at Marlow. He shook his head slowly from side to side.

"No." Ricky said. "No." He passed his hand tremblingly across his eyes, and the significance of the gesture made him recoil as if from his own thoughts.

Marlow's fingers dug deep into Ricky's shoulders now. "Snap out of it. He's alive. He's perfectly intact. His eyesight is all he's lost. Snap out of it, Werts!"

"Yeah," Ricky said, suddenly sickly resigned. "Yeah, that's all he's lost—just his sight!" There was no mistaking the bitterness that shook his voice.

Marlow said very softly, "Have your gear ready inside of an hour, Werts. You may be assigned to scout patrol duty also."

Ricky nodded, saluted mechanically. Marlow slouched away in the thick gray dust of the parade ground.

Unconsciously Ricky turned back toward the building which housed the emergency ward. Clark was there—living in darkness from which he'd never emerge.

Behind him, across the parade ground and up on the landing platforms, Ricky heard the muffled throb of space patrol fighting ships being warmed up for duty. Still plodding onward through the deep layers of gray dust, Ricky continued toward the emergency ward building. He was less than forty feet from the entrance when he saw a tall, wide shouldered, lithe-hipped blond Legionaire emerge and look somewhat furtively around.

It was Carroll.

Somehow seeing him coming from that building filled Ricky with an instant's swift surprise and suspicion. This was gone when Carroll saw him and grinned.

"Hello there, Werts," Carroll greeted him. "Glad to hear your brother's pulled through so well."

Ricky's lips went tight. Obviously Carroll hadn't heard that Clark was blind yet. Ricky nodded and tried to smile. No matter how much you despised a man, you couldn't freeze him when he was offering friendly greeting of that sort.

"Thanks," Ricky said briefly.

Carroll paused. "Came over to the ward to see if the Lieutenant Physician was around. Had a message to give him from one of the noncoms."

"Find him?" Ricky asked.

The question was innocuous enough, but Carroll seemed to hesitate for a fraction before answering. "No," he said after an instant in which he flushed slightly. "No, he wasn't around there anywhere." Then he added quickly, "Nasty rumors flying around, aren't there?"

Ricky nodded grimly. "The *Malyas*, you mean of course."

Carroll nodded. "Yes. Our communications are supposed to have been cut off completely, too, I understand."

"Bad," Ricky said tersely.

"Very," Carroll agreed. "Walking back to the barracks?"

Ricky shook his head. "Just going to drop back to peek in on my brother for an instant. Then I've got to get back to the barracks and haul out my gear. Might be assigned to a scout patrol sometime within the next hour or so."

---

Carroll looked disappointed, started to say something, changed his mind, grinned, and strode away. Ricky watched him trudge through the thick gray dust of the parade ground for an instant, then turned again toward the entrance to the emergency ward.

As Ricky stepped into the building he almost collided with the young Lieutenant Physician. Then he stepped back and saluted. The young medical officer put out an arm to halt him.

"Werts," he said quietly, "there's something I have to tell you."

"I know," said Ricky evenly, fighting back any emotional recurrence. "I just heard about Clark's blindness."

The young Lieutenant Physician swore softly in condemnation of himself. "I'm sorry, Werts. I meant to tell you before you entered the room, then I decided to let you know after you'd seen him. I was called away momentarily, and you'd left by the time I returned."

"That's quite all right, sir," Ricky said huskily, his voice betraying his emotions for the first time. "I understand."

"Otherwise he's doing splendidly," the young medico said in quick assurance, as if trying to negate his other words. "He has the recuperative powers of an ox. It wouldn't surprise me to see him walking around tomorrow."

"Thank you, sir," Ricky said. He started to move away, then hesitated. "Legionaire Carroll was here a moment ago looking for you, sir. Said you weren't around. He had a message from a noncom."

"Carroll?" The young lieutenant frowned. "The tall, blond chap? The one with the wide shoulders?"

Ricky nodded.

"Why, that's odd," the young medico declared, sincerely bewildered. "I met him as he was coming out of your brother's room. Your brother was sleeping at the time, and Carroll had persuaded the orderly to let him in for an instant to sort of silently pay his respects. When he passed me coming out of the room he didn't say a word about it—just saluted and went off."

Ricky frowned. "He was in to have a look at Clark, you say?" There was something distinctly suspicious about Carroll now, Ricky was certain. Something ominously suspicious.

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The young lieutenant nodded. "And you said he told you he'd been looking for me. He must have forgotten it, which would be quite impossible under the circumstances in which we passed one another. That's really very odd."

Ricky's jaw was hard. "It is more than odd, sir," he said very softly. "It's damned strange." He paused. "You say my brother was sleeping?"

"He still is," said the lieutenant. "The orderly didn't let Carroll go much beyond the door because of the fear that he'd wake your brother. The orderly was in the room all the time, or I should say, during the very brief time Carroll was there."

Ricky shook his head. "I don't quite understand his interest; unless it was prompted by knowing me."

"Perhaps that was it," said the medical officer vaguely.

Ricky saluted and started to turn away once more.

It was then that the silence was torn by the low, terrifying scream of the bugle siren.

The lieutenant went rigid, as did Ricky. The siren stopped, then began again. The same low, screaming whine pierced the air.

The young lieutenant's face went white. He turned to Ricky.

"Better get to the barracks immediately, Werts, that's the alarm siren. This garrison is about to be attacked!"

But Ricky had already started toward the door. He'd learned his alarm signals in primary training. And hearing the "attack" siren sounded under these circumstances brought him immediately back into the harness of the Legion. He turned once, as he started through the dust of the parade ground, to satisfy himself that the medico would be taking care of Clark. Then he bent his head and raced for the barracks ...

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# CHAPTER VII

## Attack Alarm

At the barracks Ricky found a scene of frenzied activity. Legionaires, dashing up and down the aisles of cots, were shouting to one another and hurriedly climbing into space boots, and bringing forth fighting gear.

Ricky had no time, now, to think about the strange actions of Carroll; and even the thought of Clark's tragedy was pushed to the back of his mind as he struggled into space boots and strapped atomic pistol holsters to his sides. This was action. This was space warfare. This was what he and the rest of the Legionaires had been toughened and hammered into. Ricky was a unit, a cog, of a fighting machine now. There was no time for him to be anything else.

The siren bugle was picking up the alarm call again and again, sending it wailing over the garrison. The sound of it quickened heartbeats, sent pulses hammering and fighting blood pounding in the flesh of all these Legionaires.

Yenka appeared briefly beside Ricky.

"*Malyas*," he said. "Like I hear rumor—*Malyas*!" The burly Martian's white grin flashed happily as though this hour was what he had been living for.

Ricky nodded, grabbing his electro-rifle and his space helmet.

"Parade ground?" he asked.

Yenka nodded. The Martian carried his space helmet under one arm, his electro-rifle was slung over his massive shoulder. Two atomic pistols were strapped to his sides, the duralloy butts of them gleaming like twin death rays.

Ricky paused to throw his equipment momentarily on the cot while he drew on his space gauntlets. Then Yenka was helping him sling the electro-rifle over his shoulder, shoving his space helmet under his arm.

Legionaires were already dashing from the barracks and out to the parade ground where they quickly formed ranks. Ricky and Yenka ran behind a group of these, sprinting through the thick dust of the parade ground to the half-formed platoon commanded by Sergeant Marlow. Breathlessly, they took their places.

The alarm siren bugle was still wailing the attack signal.

Legionaires continued to dash from the barracks to the formations on the parade ground, taking their places, grim, tense, expectant. The ranks were at last filled, and suddenly the attack alarm siren stopped. The silence became loud.

From his quarters, the Commanding Officer of the Cepani garrison suddenly appeared, followed by his staff. Moments later he stood before the ranks of his under-officers and men, his eyes sweeping across the formations in grim satisfaction.

Then he spoke, his voice harsh and commanding.

"This comes sooner than we had reason to believe it would, men," the CO declared. "The *Malyas* are moving in on us, you all know that much by now. The patrols we have out there at the moment are doing a valiant job of standing them off—but the ring will break at any moment and the devils will be swarming in on us." He paused, his cold eyes sweeping once more along the ranks.

"The garrison before us was wiped out—slaughtered—completely by these same devils. This very rotten dust you stand on, rank and nauseous, is the scorched hell their attack left behind them on that occasion. The garrison that so valiantly perished defending Cepani before us was completely surprised. The *Malyas* had never penetrated this territory before that." The Commanding Officer coughed. "We are not unprepared. Those of you who have been here for more than a month are well trained in the defense of this fortress. Those of you who have but recently arrived here as replacements," he paused to look at Sergeant Marlow's outfit, "are the best men from our primary training centers. We haven't had time to train you in the garrison defense of Cepani—you last arrivals. But you are trained in space warfare, and all of you have had your first taste of its actuality during your voyage here."

Ricky wondered what the CO was leading to.

"As a consequence," he went on, "you will be given the task of relieving our defending patrols in space. The veterans of this garrison—those who have been thoroughly trained to its personal defense—will remain to man the very walls of the garrison. We have decided this the most logical move. That is all. Your superior officers will give you your instructions. I need not remind you that the honor of the Outer Space Patrol Legion demands the avenging of the last massacre of the Cepani garrison. Good luck, Legionnaires!"

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The Commanding Officer turned on his heel, and strode swiftly through the heavy dust back to the headquarters building. Three of his under officers followed behind him.

There was a momentary silence, then the voices of the subaltern officers were barking commands to the ranks. Ricky heard Marlow's husky voice.

"That's our assignment, men. You know its importance. Due to the scarcity of our numbers, the patrols will be divided into five groups of four men each. Each of the patrols will have a leader, with the exception of the squadron fighter which will be commanded by me." He paused a moment. "Step forward, those men whose names I call, and receive from me the lists of the men in your patrols. You men are to lead your individual space fighter craft. You will keep in constant communication with my squadron fighter."

Sergeant Marlow took off one of his space gauntlets and dug a beefy hand inside his tunic pocket. He brought forth four white slips of paper.

"Higgins," Marlow barked. A short, wiry Legionaire stepped forward and the sergeant handed him one of these slips.

"You're in charge of the first space fighter craft," he said. "The men to be with you are on this list."

Higgins turned, read three names, and three more Legionaires stepped from the ranks.

"Proceed to the space landing platform," Marlow said. "Your craft has been assigned to you. Wait there for further instructions." Higgins saluted and led the three men of his crew at a brisk trot to the landing platform.

Marlow looked at one of the slips in his hand an instant, then raised his head. Ricky saw the sergeant's eyes meet his.

"Werts," Marlow said.

Ricky stepped forward, heart pounding, and took the slip Marlow, extended to him. Ricky saluted, turned, and looked down at the list.

"Yenka," Ricky read aloud, "Carroll, and Mepha!"

Yenka, beaming happily stepped from the ranks and joined Ricky. Carroll, smiling faintly, sauntered from his position also. Mepha, the third man in Ricky's patrol, a fat, round, little Junovian with a bald head and a hairless face, stepped forward also. Mepha was a topnotch man with an atomic cannon.

"Landing platform," Ricky said. Then he saluted Marlow once more and started in a trot through the heavy dust of the parade ground toward the landing platform some eighty yards away. He could hear the others running behind him, and then he was ascending the duralloy ladder to the landing platform, while the throb of atomic motors and the spluttering of preliminary rocket bursts filled his ears.

On the platform, Ricky was met by a perspiring mechanic who asked, "Second patrol?"

Ricky nodded. "Werts in command," he answered. The words sounded strangely reminiscent, and then for a fleeting instant he recalled the games that he and Clark had played as kids.

The mechanic jerked his thumb to a sleek, blue, bullet nosed space fighter craft at the far end of the platform.

"Your ship," he said. "She's well warmed. Guns've been checked, everything set."

Ricky turned to Yenka, Carroll, and Mepha. "That's our baby," he pointed. "You three get over there, and I'll stand by here to get any last instructions from Sergeant Marlow."

Yenka and Mepha nodded and started over to the craft. Carroll, grinning annoyingly, lingered to say, "Sure thing, chief." There was amused mockery in his words.

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The third group of Legionaire was on the platform, now, and Higgins, in charge of the first group, had joined Ricky to wait for Marlow's final instructions. The leader of the third group took his place beside them, as did the leader of the fourth patrol who appeared on the platform minutes later.

Then, at last, Marlow stood before them. "Ships will leave the platform in the order of patrol number originally designated," he barked above the now deafening roar of rockets and motors. "We'll meet at the edge of the first zone defense belt, and I'll give each ship its assignment by communication," he said. "Good luck."

Marlow turned then, and trotted toward the squadron fighter—the central command of the group—a larger, fatter, more heavily armed craft.

Ricky wheeled and trotted down to the far end of the platform where Yenka, Carroll, and Mepha waited beside their ship.

"All set!" Ricky shouted. "Let's go!"

They climbed in before him, slipping on their space helmets as they did so. When Ricky followed them into the cabin of the space fighter craft, he held up a gauntleted hand, showing four fingers. The three nodded, adjusting the receptor buttons on their space suits to the band he'd indicated.

Ricky adjusted his glass turreted helmet, set the ban receptor on his own space suit.

"Mepha will take the rear atomic cannon bubble," Ricky announced into the micropanel of his helmet. Inside his own glass turret, Mepha's bald, round head nodded and grinned. The little Junovian went back to his post.

"Yenka will cover the electraguns on our under bubble," Ricky announced then. "And you, Carroll, take care of the port and starboard porthole defense."

Yenka pushed back a section of the flooring in the space craft which revealed a small compartment just large enough for him to fit into. It was a veritable tiny fortress from which he could—by use of the deadly electraguns placed there—successfully cover the ship from any attack from beneath.

Carroll grinningly took his seat along the starboard porthole of the ship, stacking the electric-rifles of the others in order beside him for sniping use. Ricky waved a gauntleted hand, and opened the door leading to the pilot compartment in the fore of the ship.

And then Ricky was behind the instrument panel of the craft, checking navigational dials and inspecting the trigger releases on the brace of small atomic cannon which were his to command in flight.

The pilot compartment was basically designed for the use of two men. The co-pilot generally being responsible for the gunnery while the pilot handled the ship itself. With the skeleton crew system, however, it was Ricky's duty to be both gunner and pilot.

Ricky checked the instruments a second time, and flicked the switch that connected him with Marlow's larger squadron fighter.

"Werts, in command of second patrol," Ricky announced. "Coming in, sergeant."

Ricky spoke into the same micropanel of his space helmet as he used to address the crew. The exception was that he had flicked a second receptor button which would send his voice through the communication panel on instrument board before him. He waited a moment.



Marlow's voice came in. "Second patrol, stand by. Second patrol, stand by. First patrol leaving, first patrol leaving."

Ricky waited, tensely, gauntleted hand on the throttle that would throw the atomic motors into full speed.

Seconds seemed to trickle by. Ricky's heart pounded. Out there in space the *Malyas* waited. Even at this moment they were trying to break through the ring of patrol ships standing them off from Cepani.

Then Marlow's voice came in again. "Second patrol—second patrol—second patrol!"

"Second patrol standing by!" Ricky announced.

"Up and at 'em, Werts," Marlow's voice came in. "We meet at the first zone defense belt. Don't engage in combat under any circumstances until you receive your assignment."

Ricky leaned forward, giving the first pressure to the atomic motor throttle.

"Second patrol—leaving," Ricky announced. He shoved hard on the throttle, the ship shuddered for a fleeting second. Ricky eased the power an instant, then the back of his seat was pressing hard against his spine and they were hurtling out into space.

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The blackness of the night flashed by, silvered by starstream as the space fighter ship climbed farther and farther out to meet the void. Ricky's fingers were tense on the controls, his face anxious, his forehead beaded with tiny drops of sweat.

Minutes flicked by, and Ricky checked his instruments once more, altering the course of the ship several degrees, sliding the nose more directly toward the rendezvous agreed on with Marlow.

More minutes flew by, while Ricky, preoccupied by his calculations, continued to check his instrument panel. Then finally he leveled the space craft out, sending it in a wide, wheeling arc. Through his vizascreen he could see the nose of the ship of the first patrol down below them, circling lazily in the same waiting maneuver. This was the place of rendezvous with Marlow's squadron fighter.

Ten minutes later Ricky saw the third patrol space ship wheel into vision on the vizascreen, higher than his own ship, and begin the same wheeling maneuver. Ten minutes after that, the fourth patrol ship appeared, still higher, and swung wide in identically the same tactical waiting maneuver.

Marlow's squadron fighter appeared at last, taking a position higher than them all. Ricky flicked the switch that connected communications with the larger ship once again.

"All four patrol ships!" Marlow's voice sounded. "Come in on the connection."

Ricky announced his ship after Higgins had chimed in. The leaders of the other patrols followed in order.

"Higgins' fighter is assigned to my patrol," Marlow's voice declared. "We are to relieve those patrols already on duty and in action against the *Malyas*."

Ricky frowned impatiently. Higgins was assigned to duty with Marlow, and if Ricky knew the sergeant well enough, he realized that the red necked Legionaire would select the fightingest, most dangerous spot for himself.

"Patrol two, Werts in charge," Marlow's voice came in again, "will proceed immediately to—" and then he gave the navigational directions to the spatial location, "where it will be expected to destroy the *Malyan* forces established there to cut off Cepani Garrison communication with Tromar."

Ricky felt a swift chilling thrill along his spine. This was action. This was an assignment equally as dangerous as that which Marlow had selected for himself.

"When this has been accomplished," Marlow's voice went on, "the second patrol is to return immediately to Cepani for further instructions if it is possible." The last four words had an ominous ring to them.

"I repeat my navigational directions to patrol two," Marlow picked up again. And then, while Ricky made rapid chart notations on the table by his instrument panels, Marlow repeated his navigational instructions.

"That is all, patrol two. Proceed immediately—as instructed. Good luck!"

Ricky cut himself back in. "Second patrol," he said, "proceeding at once as directed." He snapped off the switch, checked his instruments with his navigational readings, allied them swiftly, and threw the space fighter craft over and down in a rolling dive, picking up tremendous velocity and straightening out after the outline of the first patrol ship had blurred by them.

"On the way!" Ricky muttered tightly to himself. Then he settled down to following his navigational directions.

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Ricky had a fair idea of what he could expect to encounter on his assignment. The *Malyas* had a particular method of ambush attack, and it seemed to be this same method that they were now employing.

It depended first on superior strength, second on a cunningly unexpected attack. They had both advantages in this present attack on Cepani. Thirdly, their mode of ambush included the complete severance of communications between the garrison under attack and any other posts that might rush them aid. In this instance they had blanketed Cepani in silence, making it impossible for the post there to communicate with Tromar, the nearest and largest Legion replacement center.

And it was up to Ricky, and Ricky alone, to destroy this blanket of silence that had been thrown around the Cepani Garrison by the *Malya* attackers.

Yenka appeared at the bulkhead door to Ricky's forward compartment somewhat later. He held up four fingers to indicate that he had something to say. Ricky flicked the receptor button on his own space suit and nodded.

"We have assignment?" Yenka asked.

"Right," Ricky answered. "I was waiting for one of you to stick your nose in here. We're to break up the communications jam the *Malyas* have belted around Cepani."

Yenka grinned, tremendously pleased by this information. He nodded happily, enthusiastically.

"Pass it on to Carroll and Mepha," Ricky instructed.

Yenka nodded and disappeared, slamming the bulkhead door behind him. Ricky settled back once again to a careful rechecking of his chart and instrument panel. It would take several more hours to arrive at his dangerous destination.

Those hours were not long in passing....

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# CHAPTER VIII

## Battle in the Void

Ricky saw the long, sleek, silver outline of the *Malyan* engineering vessel in his vizascreen when he was still several space miles away from it. It was almost the size of a space battleship, but was lower and more heavily turreted.

Beneath some of those turrets, Ricky knew, were concealed heavy guns to repulse attack, and beneath the others were the vital machines which were this moment sapping all space-radio power from the belt that had been thrown around Cepani. Sapping that communication power from the void, so that the Cepani garrison's frantic signals of appeal would never get through to Tromar.

And then, but the fraction of a minute later, the *Malyans* aboard the long engineering space craft realized his approach. He could see small dots, figures that must have been *Malyans*, rushing swiftly along the open deck spaces of the craft. Then, it seemed scant seconds later, three silver bullets streaked out into the void from hidden catapults.

Fighting craft, *Malyan* scout fighters, sent forth to intercept the attack on the engineering vessel!

Ricky reached forward swiftly and flicked the button on his instrument panel which connected him with the gun positions on his own craft.

"Action!" he barked. "Three enemy fighter ships just launched from engineering vessel. Bearing in on us soon, stand by your posts!"

He flicked the switch back and turned his attention to the controls of his craft, throwing the ship into a nose-up climb. Running his tongue over dry lips, Ricky kept his eyes alternately moving from his instrument panel to the vizascreen. The enemy craft were deploying in a wide formation, each obviously preparing to take a section of Ricky's craft in their attack on it.

The *Malyan* fighters, however, couldn't outclimb him. Ricky smiled in satisfaction as he realized this, and made swift plans accordingly as they followed him upward, dropping behind with every passing second. From the center of his vizascreen, Ricky could see the foremost *Malyan* ship.

If they couldn't outclimb him, then they couldn't outdive him.

The *Malyan* ships were faster than his own on straight stretches. Ricky knew this and had already resolved to keep the hell off straight stretch maneuvering.

His target selected, Ricky set himself for his maneuver. He flicked the communication switch to his gun positions. "Hang on tight," he shouted. "Hang on tight and prepare to fire as we dive. Center *Malyan* ship will be your target!"

Ricky pulled back on the control levers, flipping the ship over on its back and down swiftly in a straight dive. Directly in the center of his vizascreen, rushing at him with incredible speed, was the center *Malyan* craft.

Ricky's gauntleted fingers found the trigger bars controlling the brace of atomic cannon in the nose of his craft. He was fighting back the physical nausea accompanied by the dizzying force of his terrific dive.

And then the nose of the silver *Malyan* craft was less than two hundred yards away, and already the pilot was trying desperately to veer off from Ricky's ship, which, if it followed its dive, would surely crash headlong into the other craft.

But on either side of the *Malyan* craft were companion fighters. And any veering to either side would inevitably be at the cost of both the veering craft and the ship it collided with on its side.

The *Malyan* craft was trapped. Its pilot elected to take the only other course, just as Ricky had prayed to God he would. The silver space fighter pulled up and over, in a frantic effort to dive back and out of the way. The broad silver outline of its belly gleamed in Ricky's trigger sights for as long as he needed.

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His fingers pressed the firing bars. Bolts of orange flame spat forth from the nose of his ship, blasting the silver *Malyan* craft into splashing thousands of searing red fragments!

The two companion ships to the annihilated *Malyan* fighter passed in twin flashes of silver on either side of Ricky, still climbing as he dove, unable to check their speed in time to turn and pursue him.

Ricky grinned grimly. One out of the way.

But the others would be in pursuit at any moment. He began to pull slowly out of his dive, careful not to black himself out with any too sudden maneuver.

Now, suddenly, in his vizascreen he saw the outline of the momentarily unprotected engineering craft of the *Malyas*, and just as suddenly remembered the vital importance of his mission. The downing of the defending space fighters was incidental to the destruction of this craft that had blotted out all communication.

Ricky's hand found the electra-bomb releases below his instrument panel. He leveled off slightly, then threw his ship into another dive. In the vizascreen, the engineering craft of the *Malyas* loomed swiftly larger, wider. Some of the silver turrets on the deck of the long slim craft rolled back and black snouts of cannon appeared.

Ricky gritted his teeth. The craft had more to protect it than its fighter ships. But this was his chance. He continued the dive. The vizascreen showed the engineering craft vastly larger now, and Ricky pulled back slowly out of his dive, releasing electra-bombs as he did so.

Hell broke loose beneath him. Two of the electra-bombs found their marks and exploded aft and amidships on the silver craft. And at the same instant, red flashes of flame puffed from the snouts of the defending cannon, the blasts from the bolts rocking Ricky's ship like a leaf in a gale.

Ricky climbed, then. Climbed as swiftly as he could. The two silver fighter scouts of the *Malyas* would be somewhere up above him, he knew. But he had to climb out of range of the guns on the deck of the engineering craft.

And as he climbed, the first of the remaining two silver *Malya* space fighters dove down on him in attack.

Ricky rolled over hard to the right, and as he did so, felt the vibration of Mepha's rear atomic cannon shaking the ship as the little Junovian gunner opened fire.

There was a blinding burst of flame somewhere on the tail of his ship, and Ricky instinctively realized what had happened. The superb little Junovian gunner had spied the second *Malyan* fighter diving in on the rear flank and had destroyed it with an incredibly accurate burst of fire.

Ricky felt a fierce flame of pride. The Legion trained men to fight like the very devils of hell!

Two down—one to go!

But that one was accounting for itself with a deadly hail of *neonfire*, blue bolts of streaming death, working on the top of Ricky's ship from an uncovered position as it relentlessly continued its dive. Ricky continued to roll his craft hard to the right, instinctively waiting for the vibration that would signal Yenka had opened fire from the belly of the ship, which was now up toward the diving *Malyan* craft.

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There was no thudding vibration from Yenka's electraguns. Time hung in hell while Ricky waited for that vibration. Desperately, he flicked the communication-to-gun-bubble switch.

"Yenka!" Ricky screamed. "For the love of God, Yenka, Fire!"

Yenka's voice, tight and despairing, came back.

"Guns jammed. Guns jammed to hell, Reeky—s, soooreee!"

Ricky's eyes went wide in horror. Yenka, there in the gun bubble, belly up to the diving *Malyan* craft, with his guns

jammed. Wildly, Ricky tried to throw the ship back on its stomach to give his burly Martian comrade cover. But it was too late—grim seconds too late.

"Agggghhheee!"

Yenka's scream gurgled to Ricky's ears, along with the *snicking* hail of *neonfire* shattering the bubble covering in which the Martian gunner had been covered.

Ricky continued his roll-over, sickeningly aware that he had heard the happy-go-lucky, hard-fighting Martian's voice for the last time—in a death scream!

But there was no time to think of that now. Every second was precious, every twisting gyration through which he put his ship meant the ultimate difference between life and death.

And then the *Malyan* fighter had streaked past, veering down to the right as it did so, to keep out of range of Ricky's fore guns in counterfire.

Ricky jammed the nose of his ship upward, then, climbing for every last millimeter's advantage he could get, a new scheme in mind. Below him lay the partially disabled engineering craft of the *Malyas*. Below his right beam the silver streak of the *Malyan* fighter ship was leveling out of its dive and beginning a counter climb.

Deliberately, Ricky slowed the power of his climb, giving the silver enemy ship to the far right of him a chance to gain in the twin maneuver.

The remaining *Malyan* ship would try to outclimb him, Ricky knew, for height was a precious advantage in space combat. But this time Ricky was willing to sacrifice that advantage. This time he wanted to get the *Malyan* ship on his tail.

And his enemy continued to climb, continued to gain greater height. Ricky was leveling off now, watching his vizascreen intently. The *Malyan* ship had noticed his new maneuver, and now that it had a height advantage was also leveling. Ricky flicked the communication switch on his instrument panel.

"Mepha!" he barked. "Get ready to fire. There'll be a silver streak on our tail pretty quickly."

"Not for long," Mepha's voice came back confidently. "All set, Ricky."

Ricky snapped the switch. In the vizascreen he could see the engineering ship directly below him. In the upper corner of the screen he was able to see the *Malyan* fighter ship wheeling around to get on his tail. He waited tensely, giving the silver ship its chance to complete this maneuver. Then he waited for a fraction of a second longer, while the *Malyan* craft, picking up the incredible speed it possessed on straight stretches, dashed toward him.

Then Ricky threw the controls forward, pointing the nose of his ship directly down at the engineering vessel. Behind him, now, less than a hundred yards away, was the *Malyan* space fighter. Ricky saw its nose drop as it followed him down in his dive, sticking to his tail.

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The back of Ricky's seat was pressing hard against his spine, and dizziness was assailing him again. The engineering craft was looming larger and larger on his screen. The *Malyan* fighter was still on his tail. But Ricky wasn't utilizing full power for his dive. He was giving his pursuer a chance to draw closer. Close enough so that it would be directly within the same firing range that Ricky was. Close enough so that the engineering ship below would have to withhold its own defensive fire for fear of downing the silver *Malyan* fighter along with Ricky's ship.

The *Malyan* pilot was realizing the trap he'd fallen into, realizing that he'd formed a protective shield for Ricky's craft unwittingly. But it was too late. He was already in a peak velocity dive. He couldn't pull out of it and away from Ricky's tail without tearing his ship to shreds.

And the engineering ship below was forced to withhold its fire!

Ricky's gauntleted hand found the electra-bomb release. They caught the engineering craft in five sections, shattering it from stem to stern in belching explosions of hellish fury, accomplishing his mission as ordered!

Slowly, still staring into the vizascreen at the smouldering ruins that remained of the engineering craft, Ricky pulled out of his dive. Momentarily, in the wild surge of elation he felt, he had forgotten the remaining *Malyan* space fighter.

And that momentary forgetfulness was almost enough to cost Ricky his life and the lives of his command.

A whirring streak of silver shot past the nose of his craft. In leveling off after pulling out of the dive, Ricky had forgotten that the *Malyan* ship was still on his tail, and that in a level stretch he could be easily overtaken by it. He felt the vibration of the *Malyan* craft's *neonfire* lacing along the sides of his ship, felt a second jarring thud on the nose of his craft, and looking startledly through the forward porthole of his compartment gasped in astonishment.

A *Malyan*, space suited and carrying a ray weapon, had boarded his ship and was even now advancing cautiously along the nose of the craft toward Ricky's compartment!

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Swiftly Ricky cursed, recalling that this daring boarding stunt was a favorite trick of the *Malyas*. One *Malyan* would disable an enemy craft at the expense of his own life if need be!

Ricky's hand flew to the communication switch. He flicked it swiftly.

"Carroll!" Ricky shouted. "*Malyan's* boarded us. Coming along the nose!"

Carroll's voice came back, almost nonchalantly. "Rightho, I'll greet the devil!"

Ricky watched the strange, space suited creature advancing slowly, laboriously, along the nose of the ship, cursing his own inability to remedy the situation. The creature could not be reached by Ricky's cannon fire, and there were no other weapons within the compartment which would be of use against him.

Then Ricky was aware that the weapon the *Malyan* carried was spitting flame. And he was also suddenly conscious of the fact that the creature was crumpling, twisting, under the fire of Carroll's electra-rifle!

The creature pitched sideways then, and for an instant fought for balance before pitching off the nose of the ship. Ricky flicked the communication switch again.

"Nice work, Carroll," he shouted.

"Picking off ducks," Carroll's voice came smugly back to him.

Ricky cut the switch, turned to the navigational chart and made calculations which would take them back to Cepani. For the job was done. The silver *Malyan* ship, after seeing the disaster that overtook their boarding stunt, was dashing off, unwilling to continue the combat further. *Malyans* stayed to fight only when the odds were in their favor, never when the odds were even.

Ricky swung the nose of his ship around, feeling suddenly weary. The appeals to Tromar would get through, now, the interference in the communications was eliminated. And Yenka lay dead in the lower gun bubble. Minutes later the bulkhead door of his compartment swung open and Carroll stepped in, grinning. He pointed to his receptor button.

"Next move?" Carroll asked.

"Back to Cepani," Ricky said, turning his head slightly. "We're to get further instructions there."

Carroll nodded. "That's what I thought," he said.

Ricky didn't see the heavy wrench Carroll held in his hand. He didn't see it until it had swung high and started to descend on his helmet in a vicious arc. Then it was too late, for the jarring concussion of the blow on his shatter proof helmet knocked him senseless. Blackness, warm and sticky, settled in on him ...



# CHAPTER IX

## Carroll Pegged

Foggily, Ricky could hear the throbbing of rockets and motors against the blanket of pain that dulled his senses. He was conscious of moving his arms and legs, trying to turn himself. And then he opened his eyes.

He was on the landing platform of the Cepani Garrison. A round, bare face was bending over him. Mepha's face.

Ricky sat up, dazedly trying to wipe the cobwebs from his mind. There was a nausea in the pit of his stomach and he felt like vomiting. Vaguely he began to remember what had happened.

"Better now?" Mepha grinned.

Ricky felt his head. His helmet had been removed. And now full recollection hit him. His expression was one of tight anxiety. He grabbed Mepha by the arm.

"Carroll, where's Carroll?" he demanded, fingers biting deep.

Mepha grinned. "Carroll all right. Carroll bring in ship after you knock head on bulkhead."

Ricky was trying to rise, and Mepha was helping him to his feet.

"You mean," Ricky grated, "Carroll told you I'd had an accident, was knocked out?"

Mepha nodded. "I came up to forward compartment. Saw Carroll kneeling over you. He saw you have accident. He take ship back."

Ricky realized now why he was still alive. Carroll had been interrupted by Mepha after he'd knocked Ricky out. He didn't dare do away with him while the Junovian looked on.

"I drag you back into compartment, main compartment, leave Carroll up front to take in ship," Mepha explained. "No think you come around so soon. Accident like that usually keep man unconscious many hour."

"Yes," Ricky nodded grimly. "Evidently Carroll thought so, too. Where in the hell is that skunk?"

Mepha was faintly puzzled. "He back at barracks," he declared. "Help coming in from Tromar, now. Garrison sitting pretty. *Malyans* going 'way—fast." He grinned.

Ricky took a few tentative steps, found he could maneuver under his own steam. He started for the ladder leading down to the parade ground.

"Where you go?" Mepha cried anxiously. "You weak, you too sick yet to try run around."

"I've got a nasty puzzle to clean up," Ricky shouted. Then he was scrambling down the ladder and his feet were hitting the thick dust of the parade ground. Seconds later he was racing toward the barracks. He found them deserted, save for one Legionaire.

"Seen Carroll?" Ricky demanded.

The Legionaire nodded. "He just left. Said something about an assignment. But he headed toward the emergency ward first."

Ricky wheeled and dashed from the barracks. The emergency ward! Clark was there, and Carroll had gone there just before the *Malyan* attack had started. Gone there, for some mysterious reason, to see Clark. And now, after knocking Ricky out, and wanting for some mysterious reason to kill him, Carroll was heading for Clark once more!

There was no one in the corridor of the emergency ward building when Ricky arrived there. There was no sentry posted outside Clark's door. Ricky heard the sounds, then, sounds coming from behind that door. Sounds of struggle, muffled, desperate!



The door was locked from the inside. Ricky stepped back four paces and crashed into it with his shoulder. It tore slightly. Ricky stepped back again. The sounds of struggle were louder inside the room. Ricky heard muffled curses.

He crashed his shoulder into the door again. This time the lock tore through the jamb and sent Ricky sprawling into the room and against someone's legs.

It was pitch dark in the room, and Ricky's groping hands felt that the legs were clad in space boots. They wouldn't be Clark's. He wrapped his arms around them, pulled backward. There was a loud curse as a body crashed down on Ricky—Carroll's voice!

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Then Ricky was rolling out from under the body, his fists smashing again and again into a face. The body suddenly went limp beneath him. Ricky leaped to his feet, sought the wall switch, and flooded the room with light. There at his feet, his face a bloody mess from the effect of Ricky's fists, lay Carroll!

"Ricky!" a voice in the corner gasped.

Ricky wheeled, and for the first time saw Clark, swaying in the corner of the room with a heavy duralloy chair raised in his massive arms.

"Clark!" Ricky sobbed. "Clark, old rock, he didn't get you!"

Clark's bandage was torn from his head, and there was a fresh cut on the side of it, next to the half healed wound already there. The fresh slash was bleeding.

"He tried to, God knows," Clark said weakly. "He entered in the darkness—that was his mistake. We were on even terms that way. I could tell where he was by his breathing. When I called out and he didn't answer, I knew something was fishy. I grabbed everything I could get my hands on, made a dive for him, and started pounding. I—" Clark had crossed the room to Ricky's side, and was staring down at Carroll, his mouth open.

"My God," Clark gasped. "It's Lebanc!"

But Ricky, too, was staring in open mouthed astonishment. Staring, however, at Clark. His face was a mixture of emotions. "Clark," he shouted wildly, "Clark—you can see!"

His brother looked up at him blankly. "Why not—" he began.

But Ricky had grabbed him by both shoulders. "You can see!" he repeated again and again. "A blow of Carroll's must have jarred your vision back!"

Ricky was laughing and sobbing and pounding his brother on the arm ecstatically. "You were supposed to be blind, Clark! Blind for life! They didn't tell you, and I couldn't bring myself to it. But a blow gave us a miracle. Your sight is back!"

Clark was grinning now. "And that isn't all that's back, Rick. That isn't all that's back by a long shot. The person you see sprawled on the floor before you, the person you called Carroll, is really a chap named Lebanc. A lousy skunk I searched through hell to find. The murderer of my competitor. The guy who committed the crime I was tagged for."

Lebanc, alias Carroll, stirred slightly and groaned. Ricky, still grinning like an idiot, resisted the savage impulse to kick him in the head....

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When sanity returned to the little garrison on Cepani some few hours later, and the replacements from Tromar—after sweeping the space lanes clear of the attacking *Malyas*—took over the patrols to give the men of Cepani's gallant garrison a much needed rest, Carroll, or Lebanc, confessed in full to the Divisional Commanding Officer.

Clark and Ricky were at the murderer's side during the proceedings to see that he told his story correctly. And by fitting the pieces together, the thing became clear.

"I was certain Lebanc, alias Carroll, had taken refuge in the ranks of the Outer Space Patrol Legion," Clark had stated. "I joined to find him."

"But you were slightly ahead of him," the Divisional Commander observed. "He joined after you did."

Clark nodded. "That's right. But he did join, as I'd had a hunch he would, thank God."

"Never imagining that you were already in the Legion," Ricky added, "until he found out by mistake while going through the Divisional Reports on the sly. Your electraphoto was there, and he recognized it. That's when he began to get ideas about escape. He knew he'd need a confederate and picked out me as his foil."

Clark nodded. "Never suspecting you were my brother," he said.

"Then it wasn't until his arrival at Cepani, where fate threw the three of you together, that he knew something had to be done fast," the Divisional Commander declared.

Ricky nodded this time. "But fate played into his hands. Clark came in from patrol that day, badly wounded and blind as far as anyone knew. That's when Lebanc, or Carroll if you will, had to visit you to make certain you were the man he feared. Fortunately, he didn't know you were thought to be blinded for life. He merely presumed your eyes were bandaged and that you'd be up and around shortly to identify him."

Clark grinned ruefully. "And I would have been killed then and there by our chum, if a sentry hadn't been with him when he peeked in on me. As it was, when the attack alarm sounded, he had to postpone his plans until return. By then, however, he was wondering how much Ricky knew about the situation. That's why he tried to kill Ricky on the way back to Cepani after the destruction of the *Malyan* engineering base."

"Mepha prevented him from doing that," Ricky broke in. "But he figured I was out for quite a spell, and when he brought the ship in he headed for Clark, intending to kill him, then escape on his own in one of the patrol fighters."

The Divisional Commander smiled faintly. "But you broke in in time to save your brother's neck, in true Legion pattern, eh, Werts?"

Ricky clenched and unclenched his fists subconsciously. "I was ready to kill Carroll," he admitted.

The Divisional Commander grinned frankly this time. "Sometimes," he observed, "I'm inclined to believe we plant the killing instinct too strongly in you men. However, I'll admit you had a natural reaction."

Ricky turned to Clark. "What about the note you left me, and the body that was found in your wrecked sports spaceship?"

Clark shook his head. "Some poor devil about my size and weight that Carroll, alias Lebanc, killed and planted after I'd left. And just part of that note was mine. The confession stuff was forged in by our blonde comrade."

The Divisional Commander sat back. "Lebanc, or Carroll, is being shipped back for trial and punishment on Earth," he said. "Under the circumstances, the Legion can make one of its rare exceptions and release you two from service. You can return to Earth at any time you like."

The two brothers looked at one another. Clark, bloody and weary; Ricky ragged and battle grimed. They exchanged grins.

Outside, the siren bugle, cool in the silence around Cepani, sounded the mellow notes of "All Clear."

The Divisional Commander looked back at them.

"Hell, Sir," Clark and Ricky declared in one voice, "we're just beginning to enjoy our enlistments!"

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*Outer Space Patrol Legions* were formed by the conference of Universe Peace in 2032 A.D. to keep and maintain the freedom of the void for Universe commerce. Attending the conference were heads of the departments of state from Mars, Earth, Jupiter, Venus, Mercury, Saturn, Neptune, and Pluto. At that time the suspicious, crafty *Malyas* from the planets of Messier 31 refused to participate in the conference. Since they were considered outlaw brigands their coöperation was never expected or trusted. In reality the conference was instigated by the Interplanetary Federation for the express purpose of bringing law and order to the space frontier—a frontier that had often been violated by the *Malyas* from their bases on their planet in Messier 31.—ED.

*Tromar* is a frontier space port comparable to the outpost of Cheyenne in the year 1840. Tromar, in the year 2038 A.D., was subjected to constant raids and life there is as perilous as it was for those brave Americans and Filipinos who fought with MacArthur of the Philippines in the year of the Great War, 1942.—ED.

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[The end of *Squadron of the Dammed* by David Wright O'Brien]