

HYPERCOSMOS • An Astronomical Feature By C. P. MASON

THRILLING

WONDER

STORIES

15¢

DEC.

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

IN THIS ISSUE:

TIDAL MOON

An Interplanetary Story
By **STANLEY G.** and
HELEN WEINBAUM

THE LOOT OF TIME

A Prehistoric Novelet
By **CLIFFORD D. SIMAK**

15¢

Thrilling
WONDER
Stories

DEC. 1938



*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: Hands Across the Void

Date of first publication: 1938

Author: Henry Kuttner (as Will Garth) (1914-1958)

Date first posted: Mar. 21, 2021

Date last updated: Mar. 21, 2021

Faded Page eBook #20210353

This eBook was produced by: Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

This file was produced from images generously made available by Internet Archive/American Libraries.

HANDS ACROSS the VOID

By
Henry Kuttner
Writing under the pseudonym
Will Garth

Author of "The Great Illusion," "Rays of Blindness," etc.

First published in *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, December 1938.

*The World of Titan Was So Advanced in Scientific Achievement that Even Space Ships
Were Obsolete!*



Man and ant were in a death-struggle

On the summit of Titan's highest mountain was the glittering metal observatory where Glathnor spent much of his time. Through the thick chlorine-impregnated atmosphere only the chill splendor of Saturn blazed gloriously, a cosmic jewel of wonder for the children of the satellite to gaze upon—as the children of the Earth gazed upon the moon.

Astronomy was an old science to the Titans; even space navigation was obsolete—for good reasons. Nevertheless, Glathnor spent most of his time studying the planets of the Solar System. With the special lenses and electronic rays of Titan telescopes, developed because of the heavy, green atmosphere, Glathnor watched the Sun swinging on in the great galactic drift, studied each planet and charted its course through the years.

Especially did he study the planet Earth through his great telescope. To him there was a curiously poignant fascination about that silvery green world floating so far away in the void. And that pull, Glathnor knew, was common origin of life ancestry. Titan science had proved that thousands of years ago. In fact, Glathnor knew all of the history of all the planets as the great libraries of Titan had recorded it.

Glathnor was a man such as no dweller on Earth had seen for more than ten thousand years. In general outline there was little difference, but a man of Titan had lungs that breathed chlorine instead of oxygen, flesh with more of the pallor of marble than warm and blood-tinted. And the eyes were vastly different. A Titan's eyes were many-faceted, and could perceive beyond the threshold of ultra-violet and infra-red. Even the life cycle was thrice that of Earthlings.

Life evolution on Titan was old, measured by man's clumsy invention of that intangible essence he called time. Tonight, as Glathnor stood quietly on the observatory balcony overlooking a gulf that fell away thousands of feet through the jagged crags to the floor of a Titanian valley, a great idea and urge came to him. Helas, a fellow astronomer, came to stand beside him, a question in his gray-white face.

"You watch Earth again?" Helas asked. "But then you always do. What is there about that little planet which fascinates you so, Glathnor?"

Glathnor did not immediately answer. Helas went on.

"Is it because of the basic tie of kindred life—carbonaceous organisms that exist nowhere else in our System save on these two worlds?"

Glathnor sighed. "Isn't that thought enough to give you pause, Helas! Even the marshes and seas of Venus have not so much as microscopic spores of life like ours. The igneous plains of Mercury's surface remain barren of animate life."

"True." Helas nodded. "But Mars once had its inhabitants."

"Ten thousand years ago our ancestors went there," Glathnor said. "They found ruins. Crumbling cities and inscriptions on rose-marble walls—"

"Well, those inscriptions saved Titan, Glathnor. They gave us the clue to the plague that had wiped out the Martians. That was the only thing that saved us when space expeditions brought back the virus with them."

A wry smile touched the Titan's lips. In the Archives he had seen photographic records of the centuries in which the scanty remnants of a mighty civilization had battled desperately to remain alive. Only after three hundred years did the Titans succeed in destroying the virus, and then they were faced with the prospect of rebuilding a world.

It took not years nor generations, but many centuries. In that time something had been lost; a change had taken place in the Titans' minds. They were no longer touched by the transfiguring fires of wonder; no more did they watch the stars and question what lay beyond. Travel outside the Solar System was impossible, and the System itself had been explored. Any Titan who felt the tug of curiosity could easily satisfy himself at the Archives.

Glancing sideward at his companion, Glathnor felt an amusement that was not wholly free from sorrow. What could he say that the other man might understand? Of what use to speak of the long days spent in the Archives watching three-dimensional, naturally-colored films of Earth, taken ten thousand years before when the Titans had explored the System.

Earthmen had reached the summit of their evolution then, in 2100 A. D., terrestrial calendar, and their cities dotted the continents. But Glathnor preferred to watch other things:

the delicate flame of dawn brightening over a green and forested plain, or the hot, angry sunset upon the oceans of Earth. Cities were not new to him, for on Titan mighty metropolises have towered since earliest times, carved out of the bleak, rocky surface of the satellite by Herculean efforts.

The saga of Titan is one of heroes, men mighty and harsh as their own grim world; it can be painted in strong oils or engraved in steel. But for the soft glow of pastels one looks in vain; on Earth, and Earth alone, can one find escape from the primordial savagery spawned in the interstellar abysses and let loose on the world.

To an Earthman Glathnor would have seemed weirdly strange, though much more familiar than anything else on Titan. The Cyclopean architecture of that world has a beauty of its own, but one almost terrifying in its implication. In the colossal rise of the great towers, and in the sweep of the metallic ramps and levels one senses a relentless strength, the attitude of a race that has battled a hostile universe, and stands grimly awaiting new menace.

Cities reflect the souls and minds of the builders, but living flesh is bound by more conventional shackles. And on both Earth and Titan life had sprung from identical spores that had drifted for ages, borne through the void by the pressure of light. So, through the millenniums, evolution has followed its course on both worlds, though adaptation to environment had played its part. A Titan can breathe his chlorinated atmosphere without discomfort, where an Earthman would die swiftly and in agony.

Now, looking up at the stars, an overwhelming longing shook the Titan's heavy, muscular body. It was, perhaps, strange to find a dreamer's mind in the brute body of this being—a man who might have sprung from the loins of the ancient Earth-god Vulcan. But only an immensely resistant physique could have existed on Titan in the old days when the race had fought the passionless savagery of its environment, and the heritage had come down through the generations.

Few Titans were content to remain always in the artificially-heated cities. There was something deep within them that could only be satisfied by striding through the frigid blasts and drifted snow outside; great-thewed shadows towering against the night, filled with an inexplicable, primitive exultation as they matched their bodies against a cold hell.

The idea came to Glathnor suddenly. His companion had mentioned the ancient interplanetary expeditions. Well—why could not he himself set out across space and see with his own eyes the world that had become dearer than his own? True, no space ship existed on Titan, but there was no reason why one could not be built.

Without a word Glathnor turned and left the astronomer. Only one man on Titan could give him the aid he sought. And so, within a few hours, Glathnor faced the administrator in a vaulted, huge hall oddly reminiscent of the Gothic, and equally lacking in human warmth. The administrator listened, no hint of expression in his cold, faceted eyes, and at last he spoke, in a voice so soft as to be incongruous with his blacksmith's body.

"This is your right, Glathnor. As long as your wishes interfere with the happiness of no other man, you may do as you will. A space ship can be constructed, though for thousands of years we have felt no need of such a vessel. We shall take precautions against danger. There will be peril on Earth, naturally. You cannot breathe the oxygenated atmosphere. Yet you will not be at peace until you have made the journey. That I see."

"I am tired of Titan," Glathnor said. "I am, perhaps, a mutant. An anachronism—"

"You have stayed too long in the Archives. Earth is a weakling's planet."

“Weaklings, perhaps. But their dangers are as deadly to them as ours were to us. I think I am a little tired of—strength.”

“You seek beauty?” the administrator asked quietly. “You find no beauty on Titan?”

“The beauty of power and strength. Yes. But I have seen something far different in the Archives. I have seen a room, softly tapestried and brightened by the flickering glow of firelight . . . we have no fires on Titan. There is only the beauty of a jewel, and of metal cities. Green plains and forests, mists hanging over swampy spaces—even the sky is different there.”

“You may find Earth changed,” the administrator warned. “Nearly ten thousand terrestrial years have passed since we went there.”

No human could have seen a change of expression on Glathnor’s face, but the administrator read there a somber apprehension.

“True. But that only draws me more powerfully. We of Titan are older than Earthmen, and stronger. I have studied and analyzed the data in the Archives, and I read there a certain warning. Have you ever seen those tiny, chitin-covered insects that made their nests beneath Earth’s surface? Creatures with segmented bodies, strong mandibles, and antenna for telepathic communication?”

“No. What of them?”

Glathnor drew a deep breath.

“I saw death in them. Death for the human race on Earth. In those insects lie the seeds of power, an emotionless and relentless capacity for intelligence that can easily develop. In ten thousand years that development may have taken place. If Earthmen kept pace, well and good. But we, too, had our eclipse after the Martian plague. I believe that a war between humans and these insects is inevitable—it may have already occurred.”

“Earthmen had no suspicion of this?”

“None. Several specimens were brought back to Titan. They died, however, and their brains were probed with the thought-readers. The results are in the Archives; I have studied them. When we visited Earth mankind had no conception of the menace of these insects.”

The administrator closed his eyes. “Well?”

Glathnor hesitated. How could he explain the strange, indefinable bonds that held him to Earth, that made him feel a kinship for an alien race across the void? What could the men of Titan understand of this attitude toward—weaklings?

Yet he said, “If I find that the insects have become a threat to terrestrial beings, I believe we should destroy them.”

The administrator stared up into the shadowed vaults of the hall’s roof.

“All are satisfied on Titan. Why seek change? Yet—yet—there would be war again. We could test our strength against these insects. If indeed they have attained the intelligence you suggest. By the Suns!” the Titan whispered. “To wage war again! To feel the glory of fighting as we fought ages ago! I am of a mind to agree, Glathnor—”

“You will, then?”

“Glathnor,” the other said gently. “I must rule a world. And sometimes it is not easy for me to know the best course. My people must have happiness. I think we have attained that. You are the first Titan in thousands of years who has felt discontent.”

“Then why do men leave the cities to war with the snows? They could not tell you, except that they feel a hunger inside that cannot be satisfied by the life they live. Something is lacking—and I do not think it is war. It is something that exists only on Earth.”

“We have gone far into science, but the souls of men we cannot probe. I cannot understand your feelings, Glathnor, but when you speak of Earth and I feel the vibrations of your emotion, there is a question in my mind that I have never felt before. I do not think I would like Earth. I do not think any Titan would. But I shall do this for you, Glathnor: you may have a space ship built, and you may go to Earth.

“Learn what conditions exist there. You must return, for no signals will penetrate beyond the barriers above the atmosphere. Bring back proofs, and if the human race on Earth is in danger, we of Titan shall remove that peril. But I will not risk the happiness of my people on an idea of yours, an idea I think is mad. Bring back proofs, or I shall do nothing. I am conceding much as it is, balancing the welfare of a planet against your theories.”

“My theories—and my dreams,” Glathnor said.

“Dreams?” the administrator questioned. “Dreams? What are they?”

A few months later Glathnor’s automatically-controlled space ship fled sunward through the inconceivable emptiness of space. Saturn and its moons grew small and pale, and the monstrous bulk of Jupiter loomed in its immensity, and then receded among the stars.

Through the asteroid belt, past the orbit of Mars, and toward Earth flashed the vessel, Glathnor resting quietly in a pneumatic cradle within, cataleptic and scarcely breathing. Robot apparatus took hold as the presence of an atmosphere signaled the nearness of Earth. Thus, for the first time in ten thousand years, an interplanetary voyage was completed. . . .

On Earth, Rondar of Hawk Valley sheathed his thermal pistol and grinned happily. A dozen yards away lay the convulsively twitching carcass of a tigon, striped body twitching, tusks gleaming in the sunlight. The baleful green eyes glared at Rondar; and then glazed as the powerful form stiffened and suddenly went limp.

The speed, ferocity, and immense cunning of the tigon made it dangerous indeed, and generally it took a dozen men, armed with thermal guns, to subdue the creature. Only Rondar’s accuracy in probing a vital spot with the narrow focal beam of the weapon had saved him from death.

Of course, it would have been easy to have escaped and summoned aid. The silver whistle that hung at Rondar’s throat would have served to bring one of the great ants racing at express-train speed across the great plain.

But Rondar was young; the pulse of courage was strong within him, and now his triumph over the tigon was almost intoxicatingly pleasant. It was good to be alive, he thought. True, life was becoming almost too easy with the great ants as servants, but one could always go on a hunting expedition into the forests. Or spend a pleasant day in the libraries, though lately the records had become oddly depleted.

The most significant books had disappeared without trace—particularly volumes of science, and those dealing with practical warfare. Rondar wasn’t sure whether anyone knew today how to make the thermal pistols. They were antiques, losing their efficacy.

It didn’t matter. One could always turn to the ants in time of need. Passionless, sexless machines, they were coldly efficient, so much so that a less hardy race than Earthmen would have relapsed into decadence under their attentions. In fact, a subtle degeneration had begun, especially among the scientists. The ants were so much more efficient—and tireless—that biologists, physicists, chemists, and the others were more and more content to delegate their work to the giant insects.

Sometimes Rondar wondered what went on in the minds of the ants. They lived in a secret, mysterious world of their own, a city far underground, emerging at need to aid the humans on Earth's surface. And their actions were often inexplicable, so much so that if man had not been allied to the ants for thousands of years friction would have been inevitable.

Rondar looked up at the sound of a hissing rush of displaced air. Something was descending, perhaps a mile away, a square block of black metal. It dropped into the forest out of sight.

Under the circumstances, there was only one thing to do. Rondar thought briefly of summoning an ant, but dismissed the impulse. He plunged into the forest, his woodsmanship easily enabling him to keep his direction.

So the Earthman came in view of the space ship as Glathnor emerged, a bulky, weirdly alien figure in his protective suit. A chill of superstitious fear shook Rondar.

In face and form Glathnor was not totally unlike an Earthman, but there were subtle differences. His flesh seemed made of pale marble, harsh and strong and powerful in its chiseled grimness. From the faceted eyes two beams of light crept out, rays scarcely visible in Titan's atmosphere, but made startlingly brilliant by refraction with the dust-notes and invisible particles suspended in the air of Earth.

A gun, based on an electric principle, hung at Glathnor's side, but he made no move to use it. In the Titan's mind a little breath of laughter rose; his colleagues had taken so many precautions! He glanced at a metallic ring on his finger, a ring in which a tiny chip of radioactive substance was set. What had the administrator said?

"When you leave your ship, a barrier of invisible force will automatically be created to guard the port. With this ring you can enter the ship, but no other creature can do so. And, since you may be wounded or weak, you will not need to guide the ship back to Titan. The moment you enter the ship, the robots will rechlorinate the atmosphere, close the port, and bring the space ship home."

The administrator had been cautious, and at his command a robot had been built, an efficient, metallic machine that resembled Glathnor in every way, even to the twin beams of light glaring from the faceted eyes, even to a duplicate of the Titan's spacesuit.

"You will remain safely in the ship," the administrator explained. "Send out the robot to explore this alien world. It has sufficient intelligence to obey simple orders you may give it; and, with the devices within the ship, you can control the robot with precision by beam energy. When you are certain there is no danger, recall the robot and take its place yourself, if you wish. Since it resembles you in every way, no Earthman will guess the trick or suspect that we feared danger."

Perhaps Glathnor had at first intended to obey, but by the time the space ship reached its destination, the Titan knew that he could not remain prisoned in the vessel and send a robot out in his place. So he emerged alone, and saw Rondar, man of Earth.

A diaphragm in Glathnor's helmet vibrated to the deep thunder of his voice. Startled, the Earthman drew back. He made unintelligible sounds.

"Naturally he cannot understand me," Glathnor thought. "I learned English in the Archives. But in ten thousand years the language has changed entirely. Perhaps telepathy—"

On Titan telepathic communication was seldom used, since the strain on the minds en rapport was severe. Nevertheless Glathnor projected a message at the other. There was no response. The Earthman's brain was not fitted for telepathic understanding, apparently.

The two stood silent for a time, each wondering and puzzling. At last Rondar pointed, and made a beckoning gesture. His meaning was plain, and Glathnor followed the Earthman through the green forest.

The ground rose steadily. In ten minutes they stood on a high, windswept plain, from which the black cube of the space ship could be seen below. A queer, poignant happiness was deep within the Titan as he stared around at the broad expanse of Hawk Valley, a golden, sunlit land ringed by snow-white peaks in three directions. Toward the west lay the ocean, sapphire-blue, sparkling on the horizon. From Glathnor's feet the ground fell away to the gleaming spires and domes of a mighty city in the far distance.

Rondar touched the Titan's metal-sheathed arm. His face was questioning. And Glathnor, knowing the impossibility of communication as yet, swept out his hand in a wide gesture. Rondar's gaze followed the motion; perhaps he understood something of the other's feelings. His eyes met the Titan's, and a curious spark of comradeship kindled between the two men.

They went on toward the city. As they approached, Glathnor noticed great mounds, featureless save for black tunnel-mouths, growing more numerous on the plain. A flicker of movement attracted his attention. A man, astride a giant, hideous insect, was racing toward them.

Glathnor recognized that insect. He had seen miniature replicas of it in the Archives on Titan; the tiny, chitinous creatures in which he had read the seeds of doom. A doubt came to him. The insects were subjugated, seemingly, steeds of the Earthmen. Had he been wrong?

The rider halted before the two men. In a language unintelligible to Glathnor he questioned Rondar. There was a cryptic exchange of comment. The Titan, however, was watching the giant ant. Its passionless, glittering eyes were intent upon him; the thing stood motionless as a statue. Abruptly its mandibles quivered, snapped, and a metallic series of clickings and raspings sounded.

A language, unquestionably—and one which the Earthmen understood. They listened, and on Rondar's face a doubting question grew. He answered the ant in clicking consonants.

The insect spoke again, peremptorily. Rondar's brows came together. He pointed at the Titan, shook his head stubbornly, and, Glathnor thought, argued. But the other Earthman joined his arguments to those of the ant, and presently Rondar, shrugging wryly, turned to the Titan. Some message seemed to be in his gaze, but what it was Glathnor could not understand.

The Earthman began to hurry toward the distant city. The ant's rider drew his weapon and gestured to one of the nearby mounds. Glathnor obeyed the unspoken command.

Why not? Armed, the child of a race of giants, he felt no fear. And it was necessary to learn what conditions existed on Earth. So he preceded the man and the ant toward one of the black tunnel-mouths at the foot of a towering knoll, and entered it.

He realized that subtle thought-vibrations stirred in the air all about him. Inexplicable ideas came to him. For example, he felt oddly certain that the Earthman had intended to remove his captive's electric gun, but that the ant had forbidden it. Suddenly Glathnor decided that the insects were telepaths.

The tunnel slanted down sharply. There was an abrupt turn, another long descent, and then a cavern lay before the three. It was of bare rock, empty save for a dozen huge ants. From other passages more insects came hurrying, until scores of them were lined in regular rows, facing Glathnor.

Chitinous mandibles clicked a command. The guarding Earthman turned and vanished into the depths of the tunnel. The Titan was alone among the great insects. A very vague glow pervaded the cavern, but to Glathnor's alien eyes every inch of it was clearly visible. He became conscious of a thought striving to reach his mind.

He threw open the barriers of his consciousness. Suddenly, with a breath of relief, he realized that though the ants utilized telepathy, their minds were undeveloped as compared with the Titans. No man of Titan can read another's mind unless the subject is willing. But Glathnor read the secret thoughts of the ants—and a black and terrible rage sprang up within him.

This was not the civilization of the insects, not this bare and chilly nest far underground. Beneath it, at a depth to which Earthmen had never penetrated, lay a vast kingdom of science. There the ants had their secret life, hiding it always from Earthmen. Thought-pictures flashed through Glathnor's brain, unwittingly revealed by the ants.

An insect raced forward on its multiple legs, mandibles clicking. It paused before Glathnor. Its mind sent forth a question.

“Who are you? From what world do you come?”

A shudder shook the serried ranks of the ants. From Glathnor's brain a telepathic wave had leaped, battering down the insect's defenses, probing mercilessly, questioning, tearing out the answers from the secret abysses of the monster's consciousness. Taken by surprise, the ant had no defense. And swiftly Glathnor questioned, swiftly he demanded his answers, for he knew that he had little time.

“What is this Day of Killing I read in the minds of all of you?”

Unwillingly came the ant's response: “The day when we shall arise and wipe out mankind.”

“When do you plan this?”

Of the time-period in the insects's thoughts Glathnor could make nothing. He repeated the question more forcibly.

“It will be soon—soon!” came the answer.

“Does humanity know of your plan? Tell me of this!”

The hordes of monsters surged forward, swung back on the pulse of Glathnor's thought-command. The answer came.

“Men know nothing. We are their servants. So they think. For ages upon ages intelligence has developed in the ants. Even when we were tiny beings that could be crushed underfoot. We planned, then, for the future. We determined to wipe out humans. There is room for but one ruling race on a planet. So we made our plan.”

Glathnor's thought-control was breaking. He sent the mighty vibrations of his mind smashing into the ant's brain.

“What was this plan? Tell me!”

“We . . . we were small. If we had risen then, mankind would have crushed us. So we made ourselves servants. We aided humans, we bred ourselves larger and larger, slowly growing in size through the ages. To keep men from annihilating us, from seeing danger in our growth, we served them. We worked for them; we were their slaves. Their allies, they think.

“We aided them to conquer other forms of life. And then, when man finally trusted us completely, we set out to rob humanity of its power. Their leaders were killed secretly. Their strongest weapons, their books of power and science—we took. They suspect nothing. They have grown to depend on us completely. They do not realize that we have taken all that

enabled man to conquer Earth. So, when the Day of Killing comes, we shall easily destroy humanity. Some we shall save and breed for food.”

The thought-thread broke. The ants had at last mastered the alien vibration of the Titan’s mind, and were able to throw up mental barriers. Glathnor realized this. His hand went stealthily to the electric gun at his side.

The insect whose brain the Titan had read stilled the rising clamor of clicking mandibles. He sent a telepathic message to Glathnor:

“You have learned much from us. It will not help you. A little—a very little—I read in your mind, man of Titan. I know you seek to aid Earthmen. But you forget you cannot communicate with them until you learn their language—and they trust us.

“Already our messengers are on their way to the City. They shall tell Earthmen that you are a scout from another world, a spy sent to investigate this planet in advance of a horde of your fellows who plan to conquer Earth and enslave Earthmen.”

“They will not believe you,” Glathnor responded, but he was far from sure.

“They will believe. Why should they not? They trust us, man of Titan. And Earthmen fear the unknown. To them, you are the unknown, an alien being come out of the mystery of space. To them, your shape is more strange than our own. They know us, and they trust us. So you will die, and no other Titan will ever come to Earth to menace us. That I read in your mind.”

With a cold, sardonic inner laughter Glathnor realized that his racial heritage—the love of war and death—pulsed strongly in his veins. It was ironic that one who had mocked this heritage should welcome now the red tide of fury that blazed up within him.

Glathnor drew his electric gun.

“Shall I fear vermin? By the Suns! I tell you this—your Day of Killing will never come.”

He turned, seemingly ignoring the peril of the insect swarm. He took a step into the tunnel-mouth—

And whirled with flashing speed. The ants were flowing toward him, silently, dreadful menace in their huge mandibles. The foremost creature was not six feet away when a ravaging thunderbolt blasted out from Glathnor’s gun, lighting the cavern with electric brilliance. The concussion of split air was deafening.

Then silence, and the ant lay motionless, a seared and blackened heap, its antenna burned stubs, its eyes covered with a white glaze. The others halted momentarily, taking stock of this danger, and Glathnor whirled and raced along the passage.

He gained a slight breathing-spell, and that was enough. When he turned again the ants were pouring into the passage after him. The Titan, smiling grimly, directed his electric blast at the roof. He had picked the spot carefully, and with a thundering crash great rocks and slabs came sliding down, completely blocking the tunnel.

Through blinding dust Glathnor’s eyes sent out weirdly brilliant beams. On the other side of the barrier he could hear the ants already at work breaking through. Turning, he sprinted toward the open air.

Two ants he killed, and then he was out of the tunnel. The sun was low, painting the Earthmen’s city with light. Glathnor had already made his decision, and, his giant muscles straining, he fled toward his space ship.

No use to wait, now. One man could not destroy the multitude of ants that dwelt in their subterranean caverns, and no doubt they possessed powerful weapons that had been carefully

kept hidden from Earthmen. But when Glathnor reached Titan, the administrator would keep his promise.

A fleet of space ships would set out across space; there would be red war over Earth; and the ants would perish. For their science could not compare with that of Titan; in fifty years—perhaps much less—the last ant-monster would be slaughtered mercilessly as it fled through its burrow.

A spasm of disgust shook Glathnor; these vermin ruling Earth! The planet he had come to think of as home, the world where soft beauty of green fields and forests, and the warm glow of firelight existed in all the Solar System. . . .

A shout sounded in the distance. Glathnor looked back, saw racing figures larger on the plain. Earthmen, riding the giant ants, seeking to kill the being they now regarded as an invader threatening the peace of their world.

Glathnor remembered the robot—his twin—within the space ship. Although a beam energy projector was necessary to control such robots over long distances and periods, they could be directed by telepathy under favorable conditions. Knowing that the ship was not far away, Glathnor sent forth a soundless summons, peremptory and urgent, as he ran.

The Titan had no wish to kill the men of Earth. He fled faster, until even his iron muscles felt fatigue. When, at last, he reached the flat slope that went down to the forest, and saw the space ship in the distance, he knew that he would have to fight. A bulky, gleaming figure was marching effortlessly toward him—the robot—but the pursuers were too close.

And now the two stood side by side, Titan and robot, identical superficially, the right hand of each figure gripping a gun in a metal-sheathed hand. They waited, and death rode swiftly toward them.

One man, astride a giant ant, was in the lead. The insect swept along with a smooth, mechanical rush; its rider drew his thermal pistol. A beam of hot light flared out.

An Earthman would have died under that deadly attack, but Glathnor's body was curiously constructed, extremely resistant to heat and cold. Moreover, the spacesuit protected him to some extent. But, seeing the other ants with their riders inexorably drawing near, and feeling the slow increase of heat in the suit's metal, the Titan realized that he could not escape unless he killed his enemies. Somehow he knew it would be useless to attempt to frighten them away; the high, mad courage of Earthmen was too strong for that.

So Glathnor fired, and killed his attacker. Man and ant fused into a smoking black heap. The Titan sent forth a peremptory thought-command to the silent robot, turned, and gained twenty long strides down the slope before he glanced around.

The robot was battling, with mechanical, deadly accuracy, holding back Earthmen and ants for a brief eternity of hissing rays, harsh breathing, and sharp clicking of mandibles. To Glathnor it was strange indeed to see his twin standing there, fighting with a ray-gun that was soon exhausted, and then warring in primitive fashion dragging down a giant ant and crushing the monster's thorax between metal hands that were reddening and dripping in hot incandescence.

Over the broken, ruined figure of the robot the pursuers came surging. Glathnor was caught midway down the slope. A hot ray flamed on the spacesuit; grimly the Titan turned, his gun ready; in murderous silence the horde came thundering down upon him.

Then it was a flaming maelstrom of scarlet battle, a gleaming, metallic figure, with inhuman rays of light blazing from its eyes, standing widelegged in the center of an inferno of

raging heat, slaughtering with passionless, deadly accuracy. Glathnor lost count of those he killed. The battle-lust in his blood fought with the keen sorrow of destroying those whom he had sought to save.

At last, it was over. Still erect, but swaying half-blindly, the Titan towered over a smoking holocaust of burned things. Very far away, close to the City, he could dimly make out a movement that told of additional enemies. But it would be long before they arrived, and by that time Glathnor would be in space.

But much closer the Titan could make out an ant and its rider approaching. He did not wait; there had been enough of killing. Unsteadily Glathnor went down the slope and into the forest.

The electric gun was almost exhausted. Well, that did not matter now. But through innumerable tiny leaks in the spacesuit, oxygen, deadly to the Titan, was entering. Glathnor increased the flow of chlorine vapor, and his breath came less laboriously.

He plunged through a hedge of brush and, down a shadowed avenue of columnar trees, he saw the space ship thirty feet away. Then a voice shouted nearby, and Glathnor paused, lifting his weapon.

An Earthman astride a giant ant rode into sight, a man Glathnor recognized as the youth he had first encountered. Rondar's face was flushed and bleeding, but the Titan could not know of dissension in the City, of one man who stood against a race—an Earthman who had read friendship and a kindred spirit in the eyes of a Titan, and who had refused to believe the message of the ants. Rondar had set out to warn Glathnor, and to aid him if possible. The ant was his own, and Rondar's fatal mistake was in believing he could control the creature who had obeyed him for more than twenty years.

Rondar leaped down from the ant; he clicked a dismissal. But the creature disobeyed. It charged forward straight for the Titan, bowling over Rondar, who was in its path, like a tenpin.

The struggle did not last long. Glathnor had defeated more than a score of his enemies already, but then the Titan had been unwearied, and his gun unexhausted. The weapon blazed out—and swiftly the flame died. The giant insect, its eyes seared white by the blast, reached Glathnor. Its great mandibles closed on the spacesuit—and clamped tight.

One groan of abysmal agony came from Glathnor as his ribs and chest were crushed. Deadly oxygen flooded into the suit. He and the ant went down together and lay still.

Both were dying. The insect was nearly unable to move, but when Rondar tried to pry open the mandibles they only ground together more viciously. Glathnor stopped the Earthman's endeavor with a weak gesture.

He turned the stopcock of his chlorine-tank, and felt stronger, though the pain grew, too, in intensity. He lay quietly, looking up at the Earthman.

One thought hammered at his brain: proof must reach Titan! Otherwise his journey would have been in vain, and the Day of Killing would mean the end of Earthmen. Suddenly Glathnor realized what he must do.

Rondar was trying to ease the Titan's twisted position, but Glathnor, with an effort, caught the other's hand. He took the radioactive ring from his gloved finger and gave it to Rondar, who eyed it, puzzled and at a loss.

Then Glathnor pointed to the space ship.

His meaning was unmistakable. Perhaps Rondar thought there were other Titans within the craft; perhaps he thought there was aid waiting there. He did not know, as Glathnor did, that

death lay silently in the space ship. But, half-running, he hurried along the dim forest corridor.

A flickering veil of hazy light spun itself like a web over the open port. This died as the radioactive ring Rondar clutched affected delicate mechanisms. In the depths of the ship robot machinery began to work. Levers slid silently along lubricated grooves. Pistons hesitated before plunging down.

The Earthman stepped over the threshold. Behind him the port closed silently. And at that moment a choking, blinding pain stiffened Rondar's body. Powerful pumps sent chlorine hissing into the sealed space ship.

Thirty feet distant Glathnor watched. Through the transparent substance of the port he saw the Earthman become rigid, whirl, and claw at the barrier in a frantic effort at escape. Through Glathnor's agony a sharper pain lanced; though these men of different worlds had met but twice, a queer comradeship had grown between them. Now Glathnor had killed the Earthman, so that a message might reach Titan.

Slowly, and with ever-increasing speed, the spaceship lifted. It fled into the clouds of sunset and was gone. Perhaps, feeling that surge of movement, some hint of Glathnor's purpose came to the dying Rondar. Perhaps he realized that at the end of his journey there would be men of an alien planet who would probe his brain with thought-readers, and who would learn there the proof they sought. So the metal coffin rushed on into the void. . . .

And to Glathnor, held motionless in the crushing jaws of the giant ant, there came a vision of Armageddon. He saw the skies of Earth darkened with ships from Titan; he saw the insects battling desperately, hopelessly, and at last going down to an oblivion from which there would be no return.

And, at the last, Glathnor painfully turned his head to the west, and his strange, faceted eyes looked into the burning splendor of sunset clouds motionless above the green expanse of forest. So the Titan remained, unmoving, until in a little while he died.

[The end of *Hands Across the Void* by Henry Kuttner (as Will Garth)]