

Renegade

by J. Harvey Haggard

THE lower corridors of the *V. S. Pelledaria* were empty. Ellord Trant became aware of this fact by cautiously peering down the rampway from the low deck quarters, and he chuckled to himself. He had just heard the chief purser muttering perplexedly:

"I can't understand it, at all. We came down over the trapdoors of the Arachnidias here on the 42XY Planetoid, and our Y-beams failed. They've built a barrier down there, from a knowledge of our weapons that could only have leaked from our own ranks, but I hate to think of a terrestrial as a—a renegade."

Renegade! What would the purser have thought if he could have known that his assistant, Ellord Trant, was the renegade of whom he had spoken!

For four Earth hours the *V. S. Pelledaria* had rested on that invisible barrier, a bare two hundred feet above the rocky asteroid. Men dared not go down on the barren surface, where trapdoors would swing up from the seemingly unbroken expanse, leaving them helpless before the barbarous, chitin garbed Arachnidias, whose nightmare fighting fangs and talons would tear into the flesh of defenseless Earthmen whose ray dissemblers had been rendered useless.

Renegade! But they could not know of those Core Dwellers within the asteroid, whom the Arachnida warriors served, or of the amaranth eyes of Her, fairest of the Core Dwellers. Ellord Trant chuckled again as he thought of her, and scanned the low deck. He would not go unrewarded if this merchant vessel of space was delivered as a prize to the Core Dwellers, as others had been in similar

coups. That message over the ether phones to his captain had seemed simple enough, an emergency call from desperate captives on a satellite world. There was no possibility that anyone would suspect a trap.

Those bubble capped trap nests of the natives had retained all of the appearance of innocence, until the first barrage from ambush had melted the outer gravity sheaths white hot, and then ran dripping down the hull. From that moment the *V. S. Pelledaria* had rested on an invisible barrier, unable to loose the pent-up energies that sought to drive downward at the rugged surface.

From where Trant stood, he could see disc spaceports, beyond whose transparency were auras of noxious purple, a protonic emanation that clung to the scarred hull of the old space dog ship like a battered armor. Occasionally he saw brilliant crimson flashes as the rays flashed upward from the entrenched warriors, of Planetoid 42XY.

HE was in luck. Perhaps it wasn't so strange that the low deck was empty. Up in the midmain, the gunners were manning the Y-beams that circled the *V. S. Pelledaria's* hull, hoping against hope that the barrier would vanish and the destructive energies be loosed again. There were no men to spare.

Ellord Trant made his way to the space toggings compartment, and suddenly cursed. It was locked securely. A metallic footfall obtruded in the quiet, ringing from the ramp way. He looked up then, for another figure was coming down, and his eyes narrowed as he saw that the newcomer was clad in space suiting. Now the other was so close that he

could feel the vibration of heavily shod feet clumping on the beryllium floor.

"Ellord Trant! What are—" came startled, questioning words from the helmet.

"Curtiss!" He saw quick suspicion twinge across bland, whitened features. The words stopped then, for Trant's clenched fist had ripped across the intervening space. Curtiss seemed paralyzed with surprise. Trant had struck quickly, his fist passing the opened visor and thumping a telling blow against the bared chin. The man in the space suit flailed out awkwardly, unable to escape the swift succession of blows rained on his unprotected face by his more agile adversary.

Presently he slumped to the floor, unconscious, and Ellord Trant breathed heavily as he stripped the body and donned the space suiting. Turning oxygen from the shoulder compressors into the helmet, he breathed deeply, crept to an airlock, and stared through the sheathed glassite scanner at one side.

Trant's pulse was throbbing; for a moment he wondered if his jaded emotions were entertaining some small sympathy for these terrestrials he had betrayed. It had been an accident that he, of all Earthmen, had seen the faces of the Core Dwellers, and continued to live, despite the ferocious Arachnidas that lay embedded in trap embankments over the entire surface sphere of Planetoid 42XY, emerging merely to prey upon and ravage the smaller of passing space vessels that were lured to their rocky world.

Yet it seemed a long time since that day he had first shared the confidences of Her. His searing glance razed space; he saw the lower bulging surface of the space ship hovering over the grey planetoid and glimpsed futile rays flashing harmlessly down at the blistering embankments of the garrisoned Arachnidas.

Queer, this dazed sensation that swept over him; he could remember his entire life,

not distinctly, but vaguely, and the battered face of the man he had just overpowered kept creeping into his consciousness. Then he was cursing, shouting, coughing against the transparent cowl of his helmet, for he had seen a reflection of a man crawling close to the floor, and the bruised face was that of Curtiss. He wheeled, but found the compartment empty.

"Ellord Trant!" whispered the space phones in his toggings accusingly. "You are the renegade. We didn't know."

ELLORD leaped forward swiftly, for that Eionic communication had seemed to have emanated from other headsets than his own. He was reasonably certain that Curtiss could not have recovered in this short length of time. His body was tingling numbly; he wondered all at once if he had heard anything at all. If it hadn't all been just his conscience. He was quite alone. Even his shouts had aroused none of the crew that usually loitered about low deck.

No time to lose now. Trant turned and whirled the tumblers of the airlock. His pulse jerked like a triphammer. Every pore of his body was exuding perspiration. He stood in the cubicle and let the inner door fasten. In the momentary darkness a hysterical elation seized upon him. He recalled every delineation of Her, as she would be in the subterranean sanctuary, waiting.

Oddly enough he could not feel triumph over the cul-de-sac into which he had betrayed the terrestrial ship. That counterfeit ether message had played upon their softer sentiments, had taken advantage of the fact that they were—Earthmen.

A bare two hundred feet of vacuum, empty beneath the undiffused yellow sun of space, separated the *V. S. Pelledaria* from the corrugated terrain. With the gravity belt, Trant could make the intervening distance in a clean driving dive, decelerating his speed near the

surface to alight softly on his feet near one of the apertures beyond which lay safety. Then the Arachnidas would ascend and pillage the helpless vessel.

He stood in the orifice now. His breath came fast as he prepared to leap. His gauntlet rasped against the metal hull, and he felt the air in the lock cubicle rush past into the vacuum. The sound that rattled from his mouth was not pleasant to hear. He thought fleetingly of Curtiss again, and kicked out as he fell downward.

For a moment he plummeted headlong; his universe was clouded with a strange settling pallor, like the tawny down of Her lustrous hair. A million stars enveloped it; something wrenched at every fiber of his being. He was enveloped in a flaming conflagration that materialized almost too suddenly to register the pain that tore deeply.

High up in the bridge tower of the space ship, Captain Kurdley stood nervously over his visor screen.

"I had the low deck cleared, except for Curtiss," he said. "It's in a dangerous area. We tested the static charge of the asteroid three hours ago, and have been building up an opposite charge ever since. If it wasn't for the vacuum it would tear across the barrier, destroy it. Yet a perfect vacuum will not carry an electrical discharge."

"Perhaps something is wrong," suggested an under officer, staring at a space chronometer. "Two minutes have passed since Curtiss went below. The gunners are ready to man the Y-beams if he succeeds."

For some time the photon rotors had been trying to do the impossible, to generate a spark of searing electricity that would span the two hundred foot void below. Captain Kurdley's chin was trembling. Muscles knotted in his cheeks as he leaned uncertainly against a control stanchion. He hated to see a man go willingly to sure death, even though the sacrifice would not be in vain.

A THUNDEROUS concussion rang through the vessel from stem to stern. Through the prow visors they saw the space toggled man dive downward, saw the blinding flash of unleashed electrical fury that leaped out and followed. At the same time, the *V. S. Pelledaria* lurched aside, unguided but freed of its shackles. From the midmain came the exultant shouting of the crew.

Captain Kurdley frowned to hide his emotion.

"Someone had to leave a path of tenuous air, mushrooming in his wake from an airlock, to enable the discharge to leap across the vacuum. It worked. Now let them attack. Poor Curtiss!"