



**BROOD OF
THE DARK MOON**

(A SEQUEL TO "DARK MOON")

CHARLES WILLARD DIFFIN

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Once more Chet, Walt and Diane are united in a wild ride to the Dark Moon—
but this time they go as prisoners of their deadly enemy Schwartzmann.

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[He landed one blow on the nearest face.](#)
[One, swifter than the rest, dashed upon him.](#)
[The inky waters were ablaze with fire.](#)

With the free hand he shot over a blow.



CHAPTER I

The Message

In a hospital in Vienna, in a room where sunlight flooded through ultraviolet permeable crystal, the warm rays struck upon smooth walls the color of which changed from hot reds to cool yellow or gray or to soothing green, as the Directing Surgeon might order. An elusive blending of tones now seemed pulsing with life; surely even a flickering flame of vitality would be blown into warm livingness in such a place.

Even the chart case in the wall glittered with the same clean, brilliant hues from its glass and metal door. The usual revolving paper disks showed white beyond the glass. They were moving; and the ink lines grew to tell a story of temperature and respiration and of every heart-beat.

On the identification-plate a name appeared and a date: "Chet Bullard—23 years. Admitted: August 10, 1973." And below that the ever-changing present ticked into the past in silent minutes: "August 15, 1973; World Standard Time: 10:38—10:39—10:40—"

For five days the minutes had trickled into a rivulet of time that flowed past a bandaged figure in the bed below—a silent figure and unmoving, as one for whom time has ceased. But the surgeons of the Allied Hospital at Vienna are clever.

10:41—10:42—The bandaged figure stirred uneasily on a snow-white bed....

A nurse was beside him in an instant. Was her patient about to recover consciousness? She examined the bandages that covered a ragged wound in his side, where all seemed satisfactory. To all appearances the man who had moved was unconscious still; the nurse could not know of the thought impressions, blurred at first, then gradually clearing, that were flashing through his mind.

Flashing; yet, to the man who struggled to comprehend them, they passed laggingly in review: one picture followed another with exasperating slowness....

Where was he? What had happened? He was hardly conscious of his own identity....

There was a ship ... he held the controls ... they were flying low.... One hand reached fumblingly beneath the soft coverlet to search for a triple star that should be upon his jacket. A triple star: the insignia of a Master Pilot of the World!—and with the movement there came clearly a realization of himself.

Chet Bullard, Master Pilot; he was Chet Bullard ... and a wall of water was sweeping under him from the ocean to wipe out the great Harkness Terminal buildings.... It was Harkness—Walt Harkness—from whom he had snatched the controls.... To fly to the Dark Moon, of course—

What nonsense was that?... No, it was true: the Dark Moon had raised the devil with things on Earth.... How slowly the thoughts came! Why couldn't he remember?...

Dark Moon!—and they were flying through space.... They had conquered space; they were landing on the Dark Moon that was brilliantly alight. Walt Harkness had set the ship down beautifully—

Then, crowding upon one another in breath-taking haste, came clear recollection of past adventures:

They were upon the Dark Moon—and there was the girl, Diane. They must save Diane. Harkness had gone for the ship. A savage, half-human shape was raising a hairy arm to drive a spear toward Diane, and he, Chet, was leaping before her. He felt again the lancet-pain of that blade....

And now he was dying—yes, he remembered it now—dying in the night on a great, sweeping surface of frozen lava.... It was only a moment before that he had opened his eyes to see Harkness' strained face and the agonized look of Diane as the two leaned above him.... But now he felt stronger. He must see them again....

He opened his eyes for another look at his companions—and, instead of black, star-pricked night on a distant globe, there was dazzling sunlight. No

desolate lava-flow, this; no thousand fires that flared and smoked from their funeroles in the dark. And, instead of Harkness and the girl, Diane, leaning over him there was a nurse who laid one cool hand upon his blond head and who spoke soothingly to him of keeping quiet. He was to take it easy—he would understand later—and everything was all right.... And with this assurance Chet Bullard drifted again into sleep....

The blurring memories had lost their distortions a week later, as he sat before a broad window in his room and looked out over the housetops of Vienna. Again he was himself, Chet Bullard, with a Master Pilot's rating; and he let his eyes follow understandingly the moving picture of the world outside. It was good to be part of a world whose every movement he understood.

Those cylinders with stubby wings that crossed and recrossed the sky; their sterns showed a jet of thin vapor where a continuous explosion of detonite threw them through the air. He knew them all: the pleasure craft, the big, red-bellied freighters, the sleek liners, whose multiple helicopters spun dazzlingly above as they sank down through the shaft of pale-green light that marked a descending area.

That one would be the China Mail. Her under-ports were open before the hold-down clamps had gripped her; the mail would pour out in an avalanche of pouches where smaller mailships waited to distribute the cargo across the land.

And the big fellow taking off, her hull banded with blue, was one of Schwartzmann's liners. He wondered what had become of Schwartzmann, the man who had tried to rob Harkness of his ship; who had brought the patrol ships upon them in an effort to prevent their take-off on that wild trip.

For that matter, what had become of Harkness? Chet Bullard was seriously disturbed at the absence of any word beyond the one message that had been waiting for him when he regained consciousness. He drew that message from a pocket of his dressing gown and read it again:

"Chet, old fellow, lie low. S has vanished. Means mischief. Think best not to see you or reveal your whereabouts until our position firmly established. Have concealed ship. Remember, S will stop at nothing. Trying to discredit us, but the gas I brought will fix all that. Get yourself well. We are planning

to go back, of course. Walt."

Chet returned the folded message to his pocket. He arose and walked about the room to test his returning strength: to remain idle was becoming increasingly difficult. He wanted to see Walter Harkness, talk with him, plan for their return to the wonder-world they had found.

Instead he dropped again into his chair and touched a knob on the newscaster beside him. A voice, hushed to the requirements of these hospital precincts spoke softly of market quotations in the far corners of the earth. He turned the dial irritably and set it on "World News—General." The name of Harkness came from the instrument to focus Chet's attention.

"Harkness makes broad claims," the voice was saying. "Vienna physicists ridicule his pretensions.

"Walter Harkness, formerly of New York, proprietor of Harkness Terminals, whose great buildings near New York were destroyed in the Dark Moon wave, claims to have reached and returned from the Dark Moon.

"Nearly two months have passed since the new satellite crashed into the gravitational field of Earth, its coming manifested by earth shocks and a great tidal wave. The globe, as we know, was invisible. Although still unseen, and only a black circle that blocks out distant stars, it is visible in the telescopes of the astronomers; its distance and its orbital motion have been determined.

"And now this New Yorker claims to have penetrated space; to have landed on the Dark Moon; and to have returned to Earth. Broad claims, indeed, especially so in view of the fact that Harkness refuses to submit his ship for examination by the Stratosphere Control Board. He has filed notice of ownership, thus introducing some novel legal technicalities, but, since space-travel is still a dream of the future, there will be none to dispute his claims.

"Of immediate interest is Harkness' claim to have discovered a gas that is fatal to the serpents of space. The monsters that appeared when the Dark Moon came and that attacked ships above the Repelling Area are still there. All flying is confined to the lower levels; fast world-routes are disorganized.

"Whether or not this gas, of which Harkness has a sample, came from the Dark Moon or from some laboratory on Earth is of no particular importance.

Will it destroy the space-serpents? If it does this, our hats are off to Mr. Walter Harkness; almost will we be inclined to believe the rest of his story—or to laugh with him over one of the greatest hoaxes ever attempted."

Chet had been too intent upon the newscast to heed an opening door at his back....

"How about it, Chet?" a voice was asking. "Would you call it a hoax or the real thing?" And a girl's voice chimed in with exclamations of delight at sight of the patient, so evidently recovering.

"Diane!" Chet exulted, "—and Walt!—you old son-of-a-gun!" He found himself clinging to a girl's soft hand with one of his, while with the other he reached for that of her companion. But Walt Harkness' arm went about his shoulders instead.

"I'd like to hammer you plenty," Harkness was saying, "and I don't even dare give you a friendly slam on the back. How's the side where they got you with the spear?—and how are you? How soon will you be ready to start back? What about—"

Diane Delacouer raised her one free hand to stop the flood of questions. "My dear," she protested, "give Chet a chance. He must be dying for information."

"I was dying for another reason the last time I saw you," Chet reminded her, "—up on the Dark Moon. But it seems that you got me back here in time for repairs. And now what?" His nurse came into the room with extra chairs; Chet waited till she was gone before he repeated: "Now what? When do we go back?"

Harkness did not answer at once. Instead he crossed to the newscaster in its compact, metal case. The voice was still speaking softly; at a touch of a switch it ceased, and in the silence came the soft rush of sound that meant the telautotype had taken up its work. Beneath a glass a paper moved, and words came upon it from a hurricane of type-bars underneath. The instrument was printing the news story as rapidly as any voice could speak it.

Harkness read the words for an instant, then let the paper pass on to wind itself upon a spool. It had still been telling of the gigantic hoax that this eccentric American had attempted and Harkness repeated the words.

"A hoax!" he exclaimed, and his eyes, for a moment, flashed angrily beneath the dark hair that one hand had disarranged. "I would like to take that facetious bird out about a thousand miles and let him play around with the serpents we met. But, why get excited? This is all Schwartzmann's doing. The tentacles of that man's influence reach out like those of an octopus."

Chet ranged himself alongside. Tall and slim and blond, he contrasted strongly with this other man, particularly in his own quiet self-control as against Harkness' quick-flaring anger.

"Take it easy, Walt," he advised. "We'll show them. But I judge that you have been razed a bit. It's a pretty big story for them to swallow without proof. Why didn't you show them the ship? Or why didn't you let Diane and me back up your yarn? And you haven't answered my other questions: when do we go back?"

Harkness took the queries in turn.

"I didn't show the old boat," he explained, "because I'm not ready for that yet. I want it kept dark—dark as the Dark Moon. I want to do my preliminary work there before Schwartzmann and his experts see our ship. He would duplicate it in a hurry and be on our trail.

"And now for our plans. Well, out there in space the Dark Moon is waiting. Have you realized, Chet, that we own that world—you and Diane and I? Small—only half the size of our old moon—but what a place! And it's ours!

"Back in history—you remember?—an ambitious lad named Alexander sighed for more worlds to conquer. Well, we're going Alexander one better—we've found the world. We're the first ever to go out into space and return again.

"We'll go back there, the three of us. We will take no others along—not yet. We will explore and make our plans for development; and we will keep it to ourselves until we are ready to hold it against any opposition.

"And now, how soon can you go? Your injury—how soon will you be well enough?"

"Right now," Chet told him laconically; "today, if you say the word. They've got me welded together so I'll hold, I reckon. But where's the ship? What

have you done—" He broke off abruptly to listen—

To all three came a muffled, booming roar. The windows beside them shivered with the thud of the distant explosion; they had not ceased their trembling before Harkness had switched on the news broadcast. And it was a minute only until the news-gathering system was on the air.

"Explosion at the Institute of Physical Science!" it stated. "This is Vienna broadcasting. An explosion has just occurred. We are giving a preliminary announcement only. The laboratories of the Scientific Institute of this city are destroyed. A number of lives have been lost. The cause has not been determined. It is reported that the laboratories were beginning analytical work, on the so-called Harkness Dark Moon gas—

"Confirmation has just been radioed to this station. Dark Moon gas exploded on contact with air. The American, Harkness, is either a criminal or a madman; he will be apprehended at once. This confirmation comes from Herr Schwartzmann of Vienna who left the Institute only a few minutes before the explosion occurred—"

And, in the quiet of a hospital room, Walter Harkness drew a long breath and whispered; "Schwartzmann! His hand is everywhere.... And that sample was all I had.... I must leave at once—go back to America."

He was halfway to the door—he was almost carrying Diane Delacouer with him—when Chet's quiet tones brought him up short.

"I've never seen you afraid," said Chet; and his eyes were regarding the other man curiously; "but you seem to have the wind up, as the old flyers used to say, when it comes to Schwartzmann."

Harkness looked at the girl he held so tightly, then grinned boyishly at Chet. "I've someone else to be afraid for now," he said.

His smile faded and was replaced by a look of deep concern. "I haven't told you about Schwartzmann," he said; "haven't had time. But he's poison, Chet. And he's after our ship."

"Where is the ship; where have you hidden it? Tell me—where?"

Harkness looked about him before he whispered sharply: "Our old shop—up

north!"

He seemed to feel that some explanation was due Chet. "In this day it seems absurd to say such things," he added; "but this Schwartzmann is a throw-back—a conscienceless scoundrel. He would put all three of us out of the way in a minute if he could get the ship. *He* knows we have been to the Dark Moon—no question about that—and he wants the wealth he can imagine is there.

"We'll all plan to leave; I'll radio you later. We'll go back to the Dark Moon—" He broke off abruptly as the door opened to admit the nurse. "You'll hear from me later," he repeated; and hurried Diane Delacouer from the room.

But he returned in a moment to stand again at the door—the nurse was still in the room. "In case you feel like going for a hop," he told Chet casually, "Diane's leaving her ship here for you. You'll find it up above—private landing stage on the roof."

Chet answered promptly, "Fine; that will go good one of these days." All this for the benefit of listening ears. Yet even Chet would have been astonished to know that he would be using that ship within an hour....

He was standing at the window, and his mind was filled, not with thoughts of any complications that had developed for his friend Harkness, but only of the adventures that lay ahead of them both. The Dark Moon!—they had reached it, indeed; but they had barely scratched the surface of that world of mystery and adventure. He was wild with eagerness to return—to see again that new world, blazing brightly beneath the sun; to see the valley of fires—and he had a score to settle with the tribe of ape-men, unless Harkness had finished them off while he, himself, lay unconscious.... Yes, there seemed little doubt of that; Walt would have paid the score for all of them.... He seemed actually back in that world to which his thoughts went winging across the depths of space. The buzz of a telephone recalled him.

It was the hospital office, he found, when he answered. There was a message—would Mr. Bullard kindly receive it on the telautotype—lever number four, and dial fifteen-point-two—thanks.... And Chet depressed a key and adjusted the instrument that had been printing the newscast.

The paper moved on beneath the glass, and the type-bars clicked more slowly now. From some distant station that might be anywhere on or above the earth,

there was coming a message.

The frequency of that sending current was changed at some central office; it was stepped down to suit the instrument beside him. And the type was spelling out words that made the watching man breathless and intent—until he tore off the paper and leaped for the call signal that would summon the nurse. Through her he would get his own clothes, his uniform, the triple star that showed his rating and his authority in every air-level of the world.

That badge would have got him immediate attention on any landing field. Now, on the flat roof, with steady, gray eyes and a voice whose very quietness accentuated its imperative commands, Chet had the staff of the hospital hangars as alert as if their alarm had sounded a general ambulance call.

Straight into the sky a red beacon made a rigid column of light; a radio sender was crackling a warning and a demand for "clear air." From the forty level, a patrol ship that had caught the signal came corkscrewing down the red shaft to stand by for emergency work.... Chet called her commander from the cabin of Diane's ship. A word of thanks—Chet's number—and a dismissal of the craft. Then the white lights signaled "all clear" and the hold-down levers let go with a soft hiss—

The feel of the controls was good to his hands; the ship roared into life. A beautiful little cruiser, this ship of Diane's; her twin helicopters lifted her gracefully into the air. The column of red light had changed to blue, the mark of an ascending area; Chet touched a switch. A muffled roar came from the stern and the blast drove him straight out for a mile; then he swung and returned. He was nosing up as he touched the blue—straight up—and he held the vertical climb till the altimeter before him registered sixty thousand.

Traffic is north-bound only on the sixty-level, and Chet set his ship on a course for the frozen wastes of the Arctic; then he gave her the gun and nodded in tight-lipped satisfaction at the mounting thunder that answered from the stern.

Only then did he read again the message on a torn fragment of telautotype paper. "Harkness," was the signature; and above, a brief warning and a call—"Danger—must leave at once. You get ship and stand by. I will meet you

there." And, for the first time, Chet found time to wonder at this danger that had set the hard-headed, hard-hitting Walt Harkness into a flutter of nerves.

What danger could there be in this well-guarded world? A patrol-ship passed below him as he asked himself the question. It was symbolic of a world at peace; a world too busy with its own tremendous development to find time for wars or makers of war. What trouble could this man Schwartzmann threaten that a word to the Peace Enforcement Commission would not quell? Where could he go to elude the inescapable patrols?

And suddenly Chet saw the answer to that question—saw plainly where Schwartzmann could go. Those vast reaches of black space! If Schwartzmann had their ship he could go where they had gone—go out to the Dark Moon.... And Harkness had warned Chet to get their ship and stand by.

Had Walt learned of some plan of Schwartzmann's? Chet could not answer the question, but he moved the control rheostat over to the last notch.

From the body of the craft came an unending roar of a generator where nothing moved; where only the terrific, explosive impact of bursting detonite drove out from the stern to throw them forward. "A good little ship," Chet had said of this cruiser of Diane's; and he nodded approval now of a ground-speed detector whose quivering needle had left the 500 mark. It touched 600, crept on, and trembled at 700 miles an hour with the top speed of the ship.

There was a position-finder in the little control-room, and Chet's gaze returned to it often to see the pinpoint of light that crept slowly across the surface of a globe. It marked their ever-changing location, and it moved unerringly toward a predetermined goal.

It was a place of ice and snow and bleak outcropping of half-covered rocks where he descended. Lost from the world, a place where even the high levels seldom echoed to the roar of passing ships, it had been a perfect location for their "shop." Here he and Walt had assembled their mystery ship.

He had to search intently over the icy waste to find the exact location; a dim red glow from a hidden sun shone like pale fire across distant black hills. But the hills gave him a bearing, and he landed at last beside a vaguely outlined structure, half hidden in drifting snow.

The dual fans dropped him softly upon the snow ground and Chet, as he walked toward the great locked doors, was trembling from other causes than the cold. Would the ship be there? He was suddenly a-quiver with excitement at the thought of what this ship meant—the adventure, the exploration that lay ahead.

The doors swung back. In the warm and lighted room was a cylinder of silvery white. Its bow ended in a gaping port where a mighty exhaust could roar forth to check the ship's forward speed; there were other ports ranged about the gleaming body. Above the hull a control-room projected flatly; its lookouts shone in the brilliance of the nitron illuminator that flooded the room with light....

Chet Bullard was breathless as he moved on and into the room. His wild experiences that had seemed but a weird dream were real again. The Dark Moon was real! And they would be going back to it!

The muffled beating of great helicopters was sounding in his ears; outside, a ship was landing. This would be Harkness coming to join him; yet, even as the thought flashed through his mind, it was countered by a quick denial. To the experienced hearing of the Master Pilot this sound of many fans meant no little craft. It was a big ship that was landing, and it was coming down fast. The blue-striped monster looming large in the glow of the midnight sun was not entirely a surprise to Chet's staring eyes.

But—blue-striped! The markings of the Schwartzmann line!—He had hardly sensed the danger when it was upon him.

A man, heavy and broad of frame, was giving orders. Only once had Chet seen this Herr Schwartzmann, but there was no mistaking him now. And he was sending a squad of rushing figures toward the man who struggled to close a great door.

Chet crouched to meet the attack. He was outnumbered; he could never win out. But the knowledge of his own helplessness was nothing beside that other conviction that flooded him with sickening certainty—

A hoax!—that was what they had called Walt's story; Schwartzmann had so named it, and now Schwartzmann had been the one to fool them; the message was a fake—a bait to draw him out; and he, Chet, had taken the bait. He had

led Schwartzmann here; had delivered their ship into his hands— He landed one blow on the nearest face; he had one glimpse of a clubbed weapon swinging above him—and the world went dark.



He landed one blow on the nearest face.

CHAPTER II

Into Space

A pulsing pain that stabbed through his head was Chet's first conscious impression. Then, as objects came slowly into focus before his eyes, he knew that above him a ray of light was striking slantingly through the thick glass of a control-room lookout.

Other lookouts were black, the dead black of empty space. Through them, sparkling points of fire showed here and there—suns, sending their light across millions of years to strike at last on a speeding ship. But, from the one port that caught the brighter light, came that straight ray to illumine the room.

"Space," thought Chet vaguely. "That is the sunlight of space!"

He was trying to arrange his thoughts in some sensible sequence. His head!—what had happened to his head?... And then he remembered. Again he saw a clubbed weapon descending, while the face of Schwartzmann stared at him through bulbous eyes....

And this control-room where he lay—he knew in an instant where he was. It was his own ship that was roaring and trembling beneath him—his and Walt Harkness'—it was flying through space! And, with the sudden realization of what this meant, he struggled to arise. Only then did he see the figure at the controls.

The man was leaning above an instrument board; he straightened to stare from a rear port while he spoke to someone Chet could not see.

"There's more of 'em coming!" he said in a choked voice. "*Mein Gott!* Neffer can we get away!"

He fumbled with shaking hands at instruments and controls; and now Chet saw his chalk-white face and read plainly the terror that was written there. But the cords that cut into his own wrists and ankles reminded him that he

was bound; he settled back upon the floor. Why struggle? If this other pilot was having trouble let him get out of it by himself—let him kill his own snakes!

That the man was having trouble there was no doubt. He looked once more behind him as if at something that pursued; then swung the ball-control to throw the ship off her course.

The craft answered sluggishly, and Chet Bullard grinned where he lay helpless upon the floor; for he knew that his ship should have been thrown crashingly aside with such a motion as that. The answer was plain: the flask of super-detonite was exhausted; here was the last feeble explosion of the final atoms of the terrible explosive that was being admitted to the generator. And to cut in another flask meant the opening of a hidden valve.

Chet forgot the pain of his swelling hands to shake with suppressed mirth. This was going to be good! He forgot it until, through a lookout, he saw a writhing, circling fire that wrapped itself about the ship and jarred them to a halt.

The serpents!—those horrors from space that had come with the coming of the Dark Moon! They had disrupted the high-level traffic of the world; had seized great liners; torn their way in; stripped them of every living thing, and let the empty shells crash back to earth. Chet had forgotten or he had failed to realize the height at which this new pilot was flying. Only speed could save them; the monsters, with their snouts that were great suction-cups, could wrench off a metal door—tear out the glass from a port!

He saw the luminous mass crush itself against a forward lookout and felt the jar of its body against their ship. Soft and vaporous, these cloud-like serpents seemed as they drifted through space; yet the impact, when they struck, proved that this new matter had mass.

Chet saw the figure at the controls stagger back and cower in fear; the man's bullet-shaped head was covered by his upraised arms: there was some horror outside those windows that his eyes had no wish to see. Beside him the towering figure of Schwartzmann appeared; he had sprung into Chet's view, and he screamed orders at the fear-stricken pilot.

"Fool! Swine!" Schwartzmann was shouting. "Do something! You said you

could fly this ship!" In desperation he leaped forward and reached for the controls himself.

Chet's blurred faculties snapped sharply to attention. That yellow glow against the port—the jarring of their ship—it meant instant destruction once that searching snout found some place where it could secure a hold. If the air-pressure within the ship were released; if even a crack were opened!—

"Here, you!" he shouted to the frantic Schwartzmann who was jerking frenziedly at the controls that no longer gave response. "Cut these ropes!—leave those instruments alone, you fool!" He was suddenly vibrant with hate as he realized what this man had done: he had struck him, Chet, down as he would have felled an animal for butchery; he had stolen their ship; and now he was losing it. Chet hardly thought of his own desperate plight in his rage at this threat to their ship, and at Schwartzmann's inability to help himself.

"Cut these ropes!" he repeated. "Damn it all, turn me loose; I can fly us out!" He added his frank opinion of Schwartzmann and all his men. And Schwartzmann, though his dark face flushed angrily red for one instant, leaped to Chet's side and slashed at the cords with a knife.

The room swam before Chet's dizzy eyes as he came to his feet. He half fell, half drew himself full length toward the valve that he alone knew. Then again he was on his feet, and he gripped at the ball-control with one hand while he opened a master throttle that cut in this new supply of explosive.

The room had been silent with the silence of empty space, save only for the scraping of a horrid body across the ship's outer shell. The silence was shattered now as if by the thunder of many guns. There was no time for easing themselves into gradual flight. Chet thrust forward on the ball-control, and the blast from their stern threw the ship as if it had been fired from a giant cannon.

The self-compensating floor swung back and up; Chet's weight was almost unbearable as the ship beneath him leaped out and on, and the terrific blast that screamed and thundered urged this speeding shell to greater and still greater speed. And then, with the facility that that speed gave, Chet's careful hands moved a tiny metal ball within its magnetic cage, and the great ship bellowed from many ports as it followed the motion of that ball.

Could an eye have seen the wild, twisting flight, it must have seemed as if pilot and ship had gone suddenly mad. The craft corkscrewed and whirled; it leaped upward and aside; and, as the glowing mass was thrown clear of the lookout, Chet's hand moved again to that maximum forward position, and again the titanic blast from astern drove them on and out.

There were other shapes ahead, glowing lines of fire, luminous masses like streamers of cloud that looped themselves into contorted forms and writhed vividly until they straightened into sharp lines of speed that bore down upon the fleeing craft and the human food that was escaping these hungry snouts.

Chet saw them dead ahead; he saw the outthrust heads, each ending in a great suction-cup, the row of disks that were eyes blazing above, and the gaping maw below. He altered their course not a hair's breadth as he bore down upon them, while the monsters swelled prodigiously before his eyes. And the thunderous roar from astern came with never a break, while the ship itself ceased its trembling protest against the sudden blast and drove smoothly on and into the waiting beasts.

There was a hardly perceptible thudding jar. They were free! And the forward lookouts showed only the brilliant fires of distant suns and one more glorious than the rest that meant a planet.

Chet turned at last to face Schwartzmann and his pilot where they had clung helplessly to a metal stanchion. Four or five others crept in from the cabin aft; their blanched faces told of the fear that had gripped them—fear of the serpents; fear, too, of the terrific plunges into which the ship had been thrown. Chet Bullard drew the metal control-ball back into neutral and permitted himself the luxury of a laugh.

"You're a fine bunch of highwaymen," he told Schwartzmann; "you'll steal a ship you can't fly; then come up here above the R. A. level and get mixed up with those brutes. What's the idea? Did you think you would just hop over to the Dark Moon? Some little plan like that in your mind?"

Again the dark, heavy face of Schwartzmann flushed deeply; but it was his own men upon whom he turned.

"You," he told the pilot—"you were so clever; you would knock this man senseless! You would insist that you could fly the ship!"

The pilot's eyes still bulged with the fear he had just experienced. "But, Herr Schwartzmann, it was you who told me—"

A barrage of unintelligible words cut his protest short. Schwartzmann poured forth imprecations in an unknown tongue, then turned to the others.

"Back!" he ordered. "Bah!—such men! The danger it iss over—yess! This pilot, he will take us back safely."

He turned his attention now to the waiting Chet. "Herr Bullard, iss it not—yess?"

He launched into extended apologies—he had wanted a look at this so marvelous ship—he had spied upon it; he admitted it. But this murderous attack was none of his doing; his men had got out of hand; and then he had thought it best to take Chet, unconscious as he was and return with him where he could have care.

And Chet Bullard kept his eyes steadily upon the protesting man and said nothing, but he was thinking of a number of things. There was Walt's warning, "this Schwartzmann means mischief," and the faked message that had brought him from the hospital to get the ship from its hiding place; no, it was too much to believe. But Chet's eyes were unchanging, and he nodded shortly in agreement as the other concluded.

"You will take us back?" Schwartzmann was asking. "I will repay you well for what inconvenience we have caused. The ship, you will return it safely to the place where it was?"

And Chet, after making and discarding a score of plans, knew there was nothing else he could do. He swung the little metal ball into a sharply-banked turn. The straight ray of light from an impossibly brilliant sun struck now on a forward lookout; it shone across the shoulder of a great globe to make a white, shining crescent as of a giant moon. It was Earth; and Chet brought the bow-sights to bear on that far-off target, while again the thunderous blast was built up to drive them back along the trackless path on which they had come. But he wondered, as he pressed forward on the control, what the real plan of this man, Schwartzmann, might be....

Less than half an hour brought them to the Repelling Area, and Chet felt the upward surge as he approached it. Here, above this magnetic field where gravitation's pull was nullified, had been the air-lanes for fast liners. Empty lanes they were now; for the R. A., as the flying fraternity knew it—the Heaviside Layer of an earlier day—marked the danger line above which the mysterious serpents lay in wait. Only the speed of Chet's ship saved them; more than one of the luminous monsters was in sight as he plunged through the invisible R. A. and threw on their bow-blast strongly to check their fall.

Then, as he set a course that would take them to that section of the Arctic waste where the ship had been, he pondered once more upon the subject of this Schwartzmann of the shifty eyes and the glib tongue and of his men who had "got out of hand" and had captured this ship.

"Why in thunder are we back here?" Chet asked himself in perplexity. "This big boy means to keep the ship; and, whatever his plans may have been before, he will never stop short of the Dark Moon now that he has seen the old boat perform. Then why didn't he keep on when he was started? Had the serpents frightened him back?"

He was still mentally proposing questions to which there seemed no answer when he felt the pressure of a metal tube against his back. The voice of Schwartzmann was in his ears.

"This is a detonite pistol"—that voice was no longer unctuous and self-deprecating—"one move and I'll plant a charge inside you that will smash you to a jelly!"

There were hands that gripped Chet before he could turn; his arms were wrenched backward; he was helpless in the grip of Schwartzmann's men. The former pilot sprang forward.

"Take control, Max!" Schwartzmann snapped; but he followed it with a question while the pilot was reaching for the ball. "You can fly it for sure, Max?"

The man called Max answered confidently.

"*Ja wohl!*" he said with eager assurance. "Up top there would have been no trouble yet for that *verdammt, verloren* valve. That one experimental trip is

enough—I fly it!"

Those who held Chet were binding his wrists. He was thrown to the floor while his feet were tied, and, as a last precaution, a gag was forced into his mouth. Schwartzmann left this work to his men. He paid no attention to Chet; he was busy at the radio.

He placed the sending-levers in strange positions that would effect a blending of wave lengths which only one receiving instrument could pick up. He spoke cryptic words into the microphone, then dropped into a language that was unfamiliar to Chet. Yet, even then, it was plain that he was giving instructions, and he repeated familiar words.

"Harkness," Chet heard him say, and, "—Delacouer—*ja!*—Mam'selle Delacouer!"

Then, leaving the radio, he said, "Put my ship inside the hangar;" and the pilot, Max, grounded their own ship to allow the men to leap out and float into the big building the big aircraft in which Schwartzmann had come.

"Now close the doors!" their leader ordered. "Leave everything as it was!" And to the pilot he gave added instructions: "There iss no air traffic here. You will to forty thousand ascend, und you will wait over this spot." Contemptuously he kicked aside the legs of the bound man that he might walk back into the cabin.

The take-off was not as smooth as it would have been had Chet's slim hands been on the controls; this burly one who handled them now was not accustomed to such sensitivity. But Chet felt the ship lift and lurch, then settle down to a swift, spiralling ascent. Now he lay still as he tried to ponder the situation.

"Now what dirty work are they up to?" he asked himself. He had seen a sullen fury on the dark face of Herr Schwartzmann as he spoke the names of Walt and Diane into the radio. Chet remembered the look now, and he struggled vainly with the cords about his wrists. Even a detonite pistol with its tiny grain of explosive in the end of each bullet would not check him—not when Walt and Diane were endangered. And the expression on that heavy, scowling face had told him all too clearly that some real danger threatened.