

# RIP FOSTER

Rides the Gray Planet



# **Rip Foster Rides the Gray Planet**

**by Blake Savage**

Illustrated by E. Deane Cate



"Foster, Lieutenant, R. I. P.," blared the voice horn, and five minutes later Rip Foster was off into space on an assignment more exciting than any he had ever imagined. He could hardly believe his ears. Could a green young Planeteer, just through his training, possibly carry out orders like these? Sunny space, what a trick it would be!

From the moment Rip boards the space ship *Scorpius* there is a thrill a minute. He and his nine daring Planeteers must cope with the merciless hazing of the spacemen commanding the ship, and they must outwit the desperate Connies, who threaten to plunge all of space into war. There are a thousand dangers to be faced in high vacuum—and all of this while carrying out an assignment that will take every reader's breath away.



**Major Barris Faced Rip and the New Planetees**

## Chapter One - SCN Scorpius, Spacebound

A thousand miles above earth's surface the great space platform sped from daylight into darkness. Once each two hours it circled the earth completely, spinning along through space like a mighty wheel of steel and plastic.

Through a telescope from earth the platform seemed a lifeless, lonely disk, but within it, hundreds of spacemen and Planeteers went about their work.

In a ready-room at the outer edge of the platform, a Planeteer officer faced a dozen slim, blackclad young men who wore the single golden orbits of lieutenants. This was a graduating class, already commissioned, having a final, informal get-together.

The officer, who wore the three-orbit insignia of a major, was lean and trim. His hair was cropped short, like a gray fur skull cap. One cheek was marked with the crisp whiteness of an old radiation burn.

"Stand easy," he ordered briskly. "The general instructions of the Special Order Squadrons say that it's my duty as senior officer to make a farewell speech. I intend to make a speech if it kills me—and you, too."

The dozen new officers facing him broke into grins. Major Joe Barris had been their friend, teacher, and senior officer during six long years of training on the space platform. He could no more make a formal speech than he could breathe high vacuum, and they all knew it.

Lieutenant Richard Ingalls Peter Foster, whose initials had given him the nickname of "Rip," asked, "Why don't you sing us a song instead, Joe?"

Major Barris fixed Rip with a cold eye. "Foster, three orbital turns, then front and center."

Rip obediently spun around three times, then walked forward and stood at

attention, trying to conceal his grin.

"Foster, what does SOS mean?"

"Special Order Squadrons, sir."

"Right. And what else does it mean?"

"It means, 'Help!' sir."

"Right. And what else does it mean?"

"Superman or simp, sir."

This was a ceremony in which questions and answers never changed. It was supposed to make Planeteer cadets and junior officers feel properly humble, but it didn't work. By tradition, the Planeteers were the cockiest gang that ever blasted through high vacuum.

Major Barris shook his head sadly. "You admit you're a simp, Foster. The rest of you are simps, too. But you don't believe it. You've finished six years on the platform. You've made a few little trips out into space. You've landed on the moon a couple times. So now you think you're seasoned space spooks. Well, you're not. You're simps."

Rip stopped grinning. He had heard this before. It was part of the routine. But he sensed that this time Joe Barris wasn't kidding.

The major rubbed the radiation scar on his cheek absently as he looked them over. They were like twelve chicks out of the same nest. They were all about the same size, a compact five-foot-eleven inches, 175 pounds. They wore loose black tunics, belted over full trousers which gathered into white cruiser boots. The comfortable uniforms concealed any slight differences in build. The twelve were all lean of face, with hair cropped to the regulation half inch. Rip was the only redhead among them.

"Sit down," Barris commanded. "I'm going to make a farewell speech."

Rip pulled a plastic stool toward him. The others did the same. Major Barris remained standing.

"Well," he began soberly, "you are now officers of the Special Order Squadrons. You're Planeteers. You are lieutenants by order of the Space Council, Federation of Free Governments. And—space protect you!—to yourselves, you're supermen. But never forget this: to ordinary spacemen, you're just plain simps. You're trouble in a black tunic. They have about as much use for you as they have for leaks in their air locks. Some of the spacemen have been high-vacking for twenty years or more, and they're tough. They're as nasty as a Callistan *teekal*. They like to eat Planeteer junior officers for breakfast."

Lieutenant Felipe "Flip" Villa asked, "With salt, Joe?"

Major Barris sighed. "No use trying to tell you space-chicks anything. You're lieutenants now, and a lieutenant has the thickest skull of any rank, no matter what service he belongs to."

Rip realized that Barris had not been joking, no matter how flippant his speech. "Go ahead," he urged. "Finish what you were going to say."

"Okay. I'll make it short. Then you can catch the Terra rocket and take your eight earth-weeks leave. You won't really know what I'm talking about until you've batted around space for a while. All I have to say adds up to one thing. You won't like it, because it doesn't sound scientific. That doesn't mean it isn't good science, because it is. Just remember this: when you're in a jam, trust your hunch and not your head."

The twelve stared at him, open-mouthed. For six years they had been taught to rely on scientific methods. Now their best instructor and senior officer was telling them just the opposite!

Rip started to object, then he caught a glimmer of meaning. He stuck out his hand. "Thanks, Joe. I hope we'll meet again."

Barris grinned. "We will, Rip. I'll ask for you as a platoon commander when they assign me to cleaning up the goopies on Ganymede." This was the major's idea of the worst Planeteer job in the Solar System.

The group shook hands all around; then the young officers broke for the door

on the run. The Terra rocket was blasting off in five minutes, and they were due to be on it.

Rip joined Flip Villa and they jumped on the high speed track that would whisk them to Valve Two on the other side of the platform. Their gear was already loaded. They had only to take seats on the rocket and their six years on the space platform would be at an end.

"I wonder what it will be like to get back to high gravity?" Rip mused. The centrifugal force of the spinning platform acted as artificial gravity, but it was considerably less than earth's.

"We probably won't be able to walk straight until we get our earth-legs back," Flip answered. "I wish I could stay in Colorado with you instead of going back to Mexico City, Rip. We could have a lot of fun in eight weeks."

Rip nodded. "Tough luck, Flip. But anyway, we have the same assignment."

Both Planeteers had been assigned to Special Order Squadron Four, which was attached to the cruiser *Bolide*. The cruiser was in high space, beyond the orbits of Jupiter and Saturn doing comet research.

They got off the track at Valve Two and stepped through into the rocket's interior. Two seats just ahead of the fins were vacant and they slid into them. Rip looked through the thick port beside him and saw the distinctive blue glow of a nuclear drive cruiser sliding sternward toward the platform.

"Wave your eye stalks at that job," Flip said admiringly. "Wonder what it's doing here?"

The space platform was a refueling depot where conventional chemical fuel rockets topped off their tanks before flaming for space. The newer nuclear drive cruisers had no need to stop. Their atomic piles needed new neutron sources only once in a few years.

The voice horn in the rocket cabin sounded. "The SCN *Scorpius* is passing Valve Two, landing at Valve Eight."



"I thought that ship was with Squadron One on Mercury," Rip recalled. "Wonder why they pulled it back here?"

Flip had no chance to reply because the chief rocket officer took up his station at the valve and began to call the roll. Rip answered to his name.

The rocket officer finished the roll, then announced: "Buttoning up in twenty seconds. Blast off in forty-five. Don't bother with acceleration harness. We'll fall free, with just enough flame going for control."

The ten-second warning bell sounded, and, before the bell had ceased, the voice horn blasted. "Get it! Foster, R.I.P., Lieutenant. Report to the platform commander. Show an exhaust!"

Rip leaped to his feet. "Hold on, Flip. I'll see what the old man wants and be right back."

"Get flaming," the rocket officer called. "Show an exhaust like the man said. This bucket leaves on time, and we're sealing the port."

Rip hesitated. The rocket would leave without him!

Flip said urgently, "You better ram it, Rip."

He knew he had no choice. "Tell my folks I'll make the next rocket," he called, and ran. He leaped through the valve, jumped for the high speed track and was whisked around the rim of the space platform.

He ran a hand through his short red hair, a gesture of bewilderment. His records had cleared. So far as he knew, all his papers were in order, and he had his next assignment. He couldn't figure why the platform commander would want to see him. But the horn had called "show an exhaust," which meant to get there in a hurry.

He jumped off the track at the main crossrun and hurried toward the center of the platform. In a moment he stood before the platform commander's door, waiting to be identified.

The door swung open and a junior officer in the blue tunic and trousers of a

spaceman motioned him to the inner room. "Go in, Lieutenant."

"Thank you." He hurried into the commander's room and stood at attention.

Commander Jennsen, the Norwegian spaceman who had commanded the platform since before Rip's arrival as a raw cadet, was dictating into his command relay circuit. As he spoke, printed copies were being received in the platform personnel office, Special Order Squadron headquarters on earth, aboard the cruiser *Bolide* in high space, and aboard the newly landed cruiser *Scorpius*.

Rip listened, spellbound.

"Foster, R.I.P., Lieutenant, SOS. Serial seven-nine-four-three. Assigned SOS Four. Change orders, effective this date-time. Cancel earth-leave. Subject officer will report to commander, SCN *Scorpius* with detachment of nine men. Senior non-commissioned officer and second in command, Koa, A.P., Sergeant-major, SOS. Serial two-nine-four-one. Commander *Scorpius* will transport detachment to coordinates given in basic cruiser astrocourse, delivering orders to detachment enroute. Take full steps for maximum security. This is Federation priority A, Space Council security procedures."

Rip swallowed hard. The highest possible priority, given by the Federation itself, had cancelled his leave. Not only that, but the cruiser to which he was assigned was instructed to follow Space Council security procedures, which meant the job, whatever it was, was rated even more urgent than secret!

Commander Jennsen looked up and saw Rip. He snapped, "Did you get all of that?"

"Y-Yessir."

"You'll get written copies on the cruiser. Now flame out of here. Collect your men and get aboard. The *Scorpius* leaves in five minutes."

Rip ran. The realization hit him that the big nuclear cruiser had stopped at the platform for the sole purpose of collecting him and nine enlisted Planeteers.

The low gravity helped him cover the hundred yards to the personnel office

in five leaps. He swung to a stop by grabbing the push bar of the office door. He yelled at the enlisted spaceman on duty, "Where do I find nine men?"

The spaceman looked at him vacantly. "What for? You got a requisition, Lieutenant?"

"Never mind requisitions," Rip snapped. "I've got to find nine Planeteers and get them on the *Scorpius* before it flames off."

The spaceman's face cleared. "Oh. You mean Koa's detachment. They left a few minutes ago."

"Where? Where did they go?"

The spaceman shrugged. The doings of Planeteers were no concern of his. His shrug said so.

Rip realized there was no use talking further. He ran down the long corridor toward the outer edge of the platform. The enlisted men's squadrooms were near Valve Ten. So was the supply department. His gear had departed on the Terra rocket, and he couldn't go to space with only the tunic on his back. He swung to the high speed track and braced himself as it sped him along the platform's rim.

There was no moving track inward to the enlisted Planeteers' squadrooms. He legged it down the corridor in long leaps, muttering apologies as blue-clad spacemen and cadets moved to the wall to let him pass.

The squadrooms were on two levels. He looked in the upper ones and found them deserted. The squads were on duty somewhere. He ran for the ladder to the lower level, took the wrong one, and ended up in a snapper-boat port. He had trained in the deadly little fighting rockets, and they never failed to interest him. But there wasn't time to admire them now. He went back up the ladder with two strong heaves, found the right ladder, and dropped down without touching. His knees flexed to take up the shock. He came out of the crouch facing a black-clad Planeteer sergeant who snapped to rigid attention.

"Koa," Rip barked. "Where can I find him?"

"He's not here, sir. He and eight men left fifteen minutes ago. I don't know where they went, sir."

Rip shot a worried glance at his wrist chronometer. He had two minutes left, before the cruiser departed. No more time now to search for his men. He hoped the sergeant-major had sense enough to be waiting at some sensible place. He went up the ladder hand over hand and sped down the corridor to the supply room.

The spaceman first class in charge of supplies was turning an audio-mag through a hand viewer, chuckling at the cartoons. At the sight of Rip's flushed, anxious face he dropped the machine. "Yessir?"

"I need a spack. Full gear including bubble."

"Yessir." The spaceman looked him over with a practiced eye. "One full space pack. That would be medium-large, right, sir?"

"Correct." Rip took the counter stylus and inscribed his name, serial number, and signature on the blank plastic sheet. Gears whirred as the data was recorded.

The spaceman vanished into an inner room and reappeared in a moment lugging a plastic case called a space pack, or "spack" for short. It contained complete personal equipment for space travel. Rip grabbed it. "Fast service. Thanks, Rocky." All spacemen were called "Rocky" if you didn't know their names. It was an abbreviation for rocketeer, a title all of them had once carried.

Valve Eight was some distance away. Rip decided a cross ramp would be faster than the moving track. He swung the spack to his shoulder and made his legs go. Seconds were ticking off, and he had an idea the *Scorpius* would make space on time, whether or not he arrived. He lengthened his stride and rounded a turn by going right up on the wall, using a powerful leg thrust against a ventilator tube for momentum.

He passed an observation port as he reached the platform rim and caught a glimpse of ruddy rocket exhaust flames outlined against the dark curve of

earth. That would be the Terra rocket making its controlled fall to home with Flip aboard. Without slowing, he leaped across the high speed track, narrowly missing a senior space officer. He shouted his apologies, and gained the entrance to Valve Eight just as the high buzz of the radiation warning sounded, signaling a nuclear drive cruiser preparing to take off.

Nine faces of assorted colors and expressions turned to him. He had a quick impression of black tunics and trousers. He had found his detachment! Without slowing, he called, "Follow me!"

The cruiser's safety officer had been keeping an eye on the clock, his forehead creased in a frown as he saw that only a few seconds remained to departure time. He walked to the valve opening and looked out. If his passengers were not in sight, he would have to reset the clock.

Rip went through the valve opening at top speed. He crashed head-on into the safety officer.

The safety officer was driven across the deck, his arms pumping for balance. He grabbed at the nearest thing, which happened to be the deputy cruiser commander.

The pre-set control clock reached firing time. The valve slid shut and the take-off bell reverberated through the ship.

And so it happened that the spacemen of the SCN *Scorpius* turned their valves, threw their controls and disengaged their boron control rods, and the great cruiser flashed into space, while the deputy commander and the safety officer were completely tangled with a very flustered and unhappy new Planeteer lieutenant.

Sergeant-major Koa and his men had made it before the valve closed. Koa, a seven-foot Hawaiian, took in the situation and said crisply in a voice all could hear, "I'll bust the bubble of any son of a space sausage who laughs!"



## **Chapter Two - Rake That Radiation!**

The deputy commander and the safety officer got untangled and hurried to their posts with no more than black looks at Rip. He got to his feet, his face crimson with embarrassment. A fine entrance for a Planeteer officer, especially one on his first orders!

Around him, the spacemen were settling in their acceleration seats or snapping belts to safety hooks. From the direction of the stern came a rising roar as liquid methane dropped into the blast tubes, flaming into pure carbon and hydrogen under the terrible heat of the atomic drive.

Rip had to lean against the acceleration. Fighting for balance, he picked up his spack and made his way to the nine enlisted Planeteers. They had braced against the ship's drive by sitting with backs against bulkheads, or by lying flat on the magnesium deck. Sergeant-major Koa was seated against a vertical brace, his brown face wreathed in a grin as he waited for his new officer.

Rip looked him over carefully. There was a saying among the Planeteers that an officer was only as good as his senior sergeant. Koa's looks were reassuring. His face was good-humored, but he had a solid jaw and a mouth that could get tough when necessary. Rip wondered a little at his size. Big men usually didn't go to space; they were too subject to space sickness. Koa must be a special case.

Rip slid to the floor next to the sergeant-major and stuck out his hand. He sensed the strength in Koa's big fist as it closed over his.

Koa said, "Sir, that was the best *fleedle* I've ever seen an earthling make. You been on Venus?"

Rip eyed him suspiciously, wondering if the big Planeteer was laughing at him. Koa was grinning, but it was a friendly grin. "What is a *fleedle*?" Rip demanded. "I've never been on Venus."

"It's the way the water-hole people fight," Koa explained. "They're like a bunch of rubber balls when they get to fighting. They ram each other with their heads."

Rip searched his memory for data on Venus. He couldn't recall any mention of *fleedling*. Venusians, if his memory was right, had a sort of blowgun as a main weapon. He told Koa so.

The sergeant-major nodded. "That's when they mean business, Lieutenant. *Fleedling* is more like us fighting with our fists. Sort of a sport. Great Cosmos! The way they dive at each other is something to see."

Rip grinned. "I didn't know I was going to *fleedle* those officers. It isn't the way I usually enter a cruiser." He hadn't entered many. He added, "I suppose I ought to report to someone."

Koa shook his head. "No use, sir. You can't walk around very well until the ship reaches brennschluss. Besides, you won't find any space officers who'll talk to you."

Rip stared. "Why not?"

"Because we're Planeteers. They'll give us the treatment. They always do. When the commander of this bucket gets good and ready, he'll send for you. Until then, we might as well take it easy." He pulled a bar of Venusian *chru* from his pocket. "Have some. It will make breathing easier."

The terrific acceleration made breathing a little uncomfortable, but it was not too bad. The chief effect was to make Rip feel as though a ton of invisible feathers were crushing him against the vertical brace. He accepted a bite of the bittersweet vegetable candy and munched thoughtfully. Koa seemed to take it for granted that the spacemen would give them a rough time.

He asked, "Aren't there any spacemen who get along with the Special Order Squadrons?"

"Never met one." Koa chewed *chru*. "And I was on the *Icarus* when the whole thing started."

Rip looked at him in surprise. Koa didn't seem that old. The bad feeling between spacemen and the Special Order Squadrons had started about 18 years ago when the cruiser *Icarus* had taken the first Planeteers to Mercury.

He reviewed the history of the expedition. The spacemen's job had been to land the newly created Special Order Squadron on the hot planet. The job of the squadron was to explore it. Somehow, confusion developed and the spacemen, including the officers, later reported that the squadron had instructed them to land on the sun side of Mercury, which would have destroyed the spaceship and its crew, or so they believed at the time.

The commanding officer of the squadron denied issuing such an order. He said his instructions were to land as close to the sun side as possible, but not on it. Whatever the truth—and Rip believed the SOS version, of course—the crew of the *Icarus* mutinied, or tried to. They made the landing on Mercury with squadron guns pointed at their heads. Of course, they found that a sun-side landing wouldn't have hurt the ship. The whole affair was pretty well hushed up, but it produced bad feeling between the Special Order Squadrons and the spacemen. "Trigger happy space bums," the spacemen called them, and much worse besides.

The men of the Special Order Squadrons, searching for a handy nickname, had called themselves Planeteers, because most of their work was on the planets. As Major Joe Barris had told the officers of Rip's class, "You might say that the spacemen own space, but we Planeteers own everything solid that's found in it."

The Planeteers were the specialists—in science, exploration, colonization, and fighting. The spacemen carried them back and forth, kept them supplied,

and handled their message traffic. The Planeteers did the hard work and the important work. Or so they believed.

To become a Planeteer, a recruit had to pass rigid intelligence, physical, aptitude, and psychological tests. Less than 15 out of each 100 who applied were chosen. Then there were two years of hard training on the space platform and the moon before a recruit was finally accepted as a Planeteer private. Out of each 15 who started training, an average of five fell by the wayside.

For Planeteer officers, the requirements were even tougher. Only one out of each 500 applicants finally received a commission. Six years of training made them proficient in the techniques of exploration, fighting, rocketeering, and both navigation and astrogation. In addition, each became a full-fledged specialist in one field of science. Rip's specialty was astrophysics.

Sergeant-major Koa continued, "That business on the *Icarus* started the war, but both sides have been feeding it ever since. I have to admit that we Planeteers lord it over the spacemen like we were old man Cosmos himself. So they get back at us with dirty little tricks while we're on their ships. We command on the planets, but they command in space. And they sure get a great big nuclear charge out of commanding us to do the dirty work!"

"We'll take whatever they hand us," Rip assured him, "and pretend we like it fine." He gestured at the other Planeteers. "Tell me about the men, Koa."

"They're a fine bunch, sir. I hand-picked them myself. The one with the white hair is Corporal Nels Pederson. He's a Swede. I served with him at Marsport, and he's a real rough space spickaroo in a fight. The other corporal is little Paulo Santos. He's a Filipino, and the best snapper-boat gunner you ever saw."

He pointed out the six privates. Kemp and Dowst were Americans. Bradshaw was an Englishman, Trudeau a Frenchman, Dominico an Italian, and Nunez a Brazilian.

Rip liked their looks. They were as relaxed as acceleration would allow, but you got the impression that they would leap into action in a microsecond if

the word were given. He couldn't imagine what kind of assignment was waiting, but he was satisfied with his Planeteers. They looked capable of anything.

He made himself as comfortable as possible, and encouraged Koa to talk about his service in the Special Order Squadrons. Koa had plenty to tell, and he talked interestingly. Rip learned that the big Hawaiian had been to every planet in the system, had fought the Venusians on the central desert, and had mined nuclite with SOS One on Mercury. He also found that Koa was one of the 17 pure-blooded Hawaiians left. During the three hours that acceleration kept them from moving around the ship, Rip got a new view of space and of service with the SOS—it was the view of a Planeteer who had spent years around the Solar System.

"I'm glad they assigned you to me," Rip told Koa frankly. "This is my first job, and I'll be pretty green, no matter what it is. I'll depend on you for a lot of things."

To his surprise, Koa thrust out his hand. "Shake, Lieutenant." His grin showed strong white teeth. "You're the first junior officer I ever met who admitted he didn't know everything about everything. You can depend on me, sir. I won't steer you into any meteor swarms."

Koa had half turned to shake hands. Suddenly he spun on around, his head banging against the deck. Rip felt a surge of loosened muscles that had been braced against acceleration. At the same time, silence flooded in on them with an almost physical shock. He murmured, "brennschluss," and the murmur was like a trumpet blast.

The *Scorpius* had reached velocity and the nuclear drive had cut out. From terrific acceleration they had dropped to zero. The ship was making high speed, but velocity cannot be felt. For the moment, the men were weightless.

A near-by spaceman had heard Rip's comment. He spoke in an undertone to the man nearest. His voice was pitched low enough so Rip couldn't object officially, but loud enough to be heard.

"Get this, gang. The Planeteer officer knows what brennschluss is. He doesn't



look old enough to know which end his bubble goes on."

Rip started to his feet, but Koa's hand on his arm restrained him. With a violent kick the big sergeant-major shot through the air. His line of flight took him by the spaceman, and somehow their arms got linked. The spaceman was jerked from his post and the two came to a stop against the ceiling.

Koa's voice echoed through the ship. "Sorry. I'm not used to no-weight. Didn't mean to grab you. Here, I'll help you back to your post."

He whirled the helpless spaceman like a bag of feathers and slung him through the air. The force of the action only flattened Koa against the ceiling, but the hapless spaceman shot forward head first and landed with a clang against the bulkhead. He didn't hit hard enough to break any bones, but he would carry a bump around on his head for a day or two.

Koa's voice floated after him. "Great Cosmos! I sure am sorry, spaceman. I guess I don't know my own strength." He kicked away from the ceiling, landing accurately at Rip's side. He added in a hard voice all could hear, "They sure are a nice gang, these spacemen. They never say anything about Planeteers."

No spaceman answered, but Koa's meaning was clear. No spaceman had better say anything about the Planeteers! Rip saw that the deputy commander and the safety officer had appeared not to notice the incident. Technically, there was no reason for an officer to take action. It had all been an "accident." He smiled. There was a lot he had to learn about dealing with spacemen, a lot Koa evidently knew very well indeed.

Suddenly he began to feel weight. The ship was going into rotation. The feeling increased until he felt normally heavy again. There was no other sensation, even though the space cruiser now was spinning on its axis through space at unaltered speed. The centrifugal force produced by the spinning gave them an artificial gravity.

Now that he thought about it, Brennschluss had come pretty early. The trip apparently was going to be a short one. Brennschluss ... funny, he thought,

how words stay on in a language even after their original meaning is changed. Brennschluss was German for "burn out." It was rocket talk, and it meant the moment when all the fuel in a rocket burned out. It had come into common use because the English "burn out" also could mean that the engine itself had burned out. The German word meant only the one thing. Now, in nuclear drive ships, the same word was used for the moment when power was cut off.

Words interested him. He started to mention it to Koa just as the telescreen lit up. An officer's face appeared. "Send that Planeteer officer to the commander," the face said. "Tell him to show an exhaust."

Rip called instantly to the safety officer. "Where's his office?"

The safety officer motioned to a spaceman. "Show him, Nelson."

Rip followed the spaceman through a maze of passages, growing more weightless with each step. The closer to the center of the ship they went, the less he weighed. He was pulling himself along by plastic pull cords when they finally reached the door marked "Commander."

The spaceman left without a word or a salute. Rip pushed the lock bar and pulled himself in by grabbing the door frame. He couldn't help thinking it was a rather undignified way to make an entrance.

Seated in an acceleration chair, a safety belt across his middle, was Space Commander Keven O'Brine, an Irishman out of Dublin. He was short, as compact as a deto-rocket, and obviously unfriendly. He had a mathematically square jaw, a lopsided nose, green eyes, and sandy hair. He spoke with a pronounced Irish brogue.

Rip started to announce his name, rank, and the fact that he was reporting as ordered. Commander O'Brine brushed his words aside and stated flatly, "You're a Planeteer. I don't like Planetees."

Rip didn't know what to say, so he kept still. But sharp anger was rising inside of him.