

## Choke Chain (1956)

It was the busy month of February, 1956. I was four months away from graduation at Columbia, but by now I was selling stories all over the place, and I was going to classes only when absolutely necessary, spending most of my time holed up in my little room on West 114th St. turning out new material, singly or in collaboration with Randall Garrett. We had sold a second and then a third "Robert Randall" novelet in our series to John Campbell, I had placed stories of my own with Campbell, Bob Lowndes, Larry Shaw, and several other editors, and there was the monthly task of meeting my quota for Howard Browne's two magazines.

Hardly had I finished "Guardian of the Crystal Gate" for Howard and sold him the "Ralph Burke" story "Stay Out of My Grave," but I was at work on an 8000-worder that I called "The Price of Air" for him. It saw print in the December, 1956 issue of Fantastic. By then Howard Browne had resigned from Ziff-Davis so he could return to writing mystery novels, and the new editor was Howard's former associate, Paul Fairman, a much less jovial man with whom I never attained much of a rapport. Fairman kept me on as a staff writer, but it was strictly a business matter, whereas I think the amiable Howard Browne had regarded me as something of an office mascot.

When he published "The Price of Air," Fairman changed the title to "Choke Chain," which puzzled me, because I didn't know what the term meant. Later I discovered that it's a dog-owner thing. I am a cat-owning sort of person. It is, I suppose, an appropriate enough title for this story, and I have left it in place this time around.

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Callisto was supposed to have been just a lark for me, a pleasant stopoff where I could kill time and work up the courage to tackle the big task—Jupiter. I felt that exploring the big, heavy planet was, well, maybe not so grand a thing as my destiny, but yet something I had to do.

There was only one trouble: the immenseness of Jupiter's unknown wastes scared me. Fear was a new sensation for me. I got as far as Jupiter's moon Ganymede, a thriving world bigger than Mercury, and suddenly, with great Jupiter looming overhead in the sky like a bloated overripe tomato, I knew I wasn't ready for it. I've been to a lot of places and done a lot of things, and this was the first time I'd ever drawn back from an adventure.

I dallied on Ganymede for a couple of days, not knowing quite where to turn. Then one night in a bar someone hinted to me that something funny might be going on on Jupiter's largest moon, Callisto, and I set my sights there.

It seemed Callisto had recently clamped down on tourists, had booted out a couple of newspapermen, and had done some other mighty peculiar things, and rumors were spreading wildly about what might be taking place there.

It looked like a fine idea, at the time: go to Callisto, find out what the trouble was, spend a few days putting things in order. It was the kind of jaunt I thrive on, the sort of thing that's been my specialty since I began roaming the spaceways. By the time I was through on Callisto, I thought I'd have the blood flowing smoothly in my veins again, and I'd feel more like tackling the Big Project: Jupiter.

Only Callisto wasn't the picnic I thought it would be. It turned out to be something more than a refresher for weary adventurers. I found that out as soon as I got there.

It had been rough to get a passport, but I finally signed on a slow tug as a mechanic, and that was good enough to get me a landing permit for Callisto.

I helped pilot a tugload of heavy crates from Ganymede to its nearby twin moon, Callisto. I didn't know what was in the crates, I didn't ask, and I didn't care. The job was getting me to the place I wanted to get to, and that was what counted.

We reached the satellite in a couple of days, and the skipper put the ship down in a vast, windswept desert of blue-white ammonia snow. As soon as we were down, the captain radioed Callisto City to let them know we were here.

Callisto City is a giant dome, a plastine bubble that covers a fair-sized chunk of Callisto and houses several tens of thousands of colonists. We were outside it, in the snow.

I waited impatiently, staring out the port of the ship at the empty swirls of snow, watching a little convoy of trucks come crawling out of Callisto City like so many black bugs and go rolling through the snow to meet us.

Then they arrived. A gong sounded, and I heard the captain yell, "Into your spacesuits, on the double! Let's get the cargo loaded extra quick."

We suited up, and by that time the trucks had arrived. We loaded our cargo aboard them, and one by one they started back to the dome. That was all there was to it. No contact between Callistans and outsiders at all.

When the last crate was swung aboard the last truck, the captain said, "Get back in and let's blast off!"

I turned to him. "I'm not going. I'm resigning, sir."

He looked at me blankly, as if I'd just said, "I'm dead, sir." Finally he said, "You're what?"

I nodded. "I'm quitting? Right here and now. I'm going to grab one of these cargo trucks back to Callisto City."

"You can't leave in the middle of the trip!" he protested. He went on objecting, violently, until I quietly told him he could pocket the rest of my uncollected wages. At that he shut up in a hurry, and gestured for me to get going. These guys are all alike.

I climbed into the rear truck of the convoy, and the startled driver looked at me wide-eyed.

"What the hell are you, buddy? There's nothing about you on my cargo invoice."

"I'm just going along for the ride, friend," I told him softly. "I'm a sightseer. I want to get a look at your fair city."

"But you can't—" he objected. I jabbed him in the ribs, once, in exactly the right place, and he subsided immediately.

"Okay, buddy," he grunted. "Lay off. I'll take you—but remember, it's only because you forced me." He wrinkled his brow in puzzlement. "But it's beyond me why in blazes anyone would want to get to Callisto that bad—when we'd all give our left ears to get away."

"It's my business," I said.

"Sure, sure," he said placatingly, afraid of another poke. "Do whatever you damned please. But it's your funeral—remember that."

I smiled to myself, and watched the shining dome of Callisto City grow nearer. I was wondering what was going on beneath that peaceful-looking arc of plastine. It didn't sound very good.

Finally we reached the city, and the truck edged carefully into the airlock. My helmet-window went foggy as the icy air of outside was replaced by the warm atmosphere of Callisto City, and then I saw my fellow truck-drivers climbing down and getting out of their spacesuits, in obvious relief at being able to

shuck the bulky, uncomfortable things.

As I slid out of mine, I noticed one very strange thing. All the truck-drivers—every last one—wore curious golden collars around their necks. The collars were almost like dog-collars, thick, made of what looked like burnished bronze. They seemed oddly flexible and solid at the same time, and set in the middle of each was a little meter that kept clicking away, recording some kind of data.

I looked around. There were twenty or thirty Callistans near me, and they all wore the collar. And they all wore the same facial expression, too. The best way to describe it is to call it a beaten look. They were all beaten men, spiritless, frightened—of what?

The intense fluorescent lights from above glinted brightly off the collars. Was wearing them some kind of local custom, I wondered? Or a protection against something?

I heard low whispering coming from them as they stowed their spacesuits in dull-green lockers ranged along the side of the airlock, and headed back toward their trucks. They were all looking at me, and obviously they were commenting on the fact that I didn't have any collar. They seemed shocked at that, and very worried.

"What's this collar business?" I asked the driver of my truck, as we moved through the inner lock and into the city proper.

"You'll find out, chum. Just make sure you can run fast when they spot you, though."

"When who spots me?"

"The guards, dope. The Tax Agents. You don't think you can breathe for free on Callisto, do you?"

"You mean they tax your breathing?" I asked, incredulously, and before I could get an answer I saw a cordon of guards forming around our truck.

There were half a dozen of them, burly men in blue uniforms, all of them wearing the ubiquitous metal collar. They had halted our truck, which had been last in the procession. I saw the other trucks in the convoy rolling on toward their destination somewhere in the city.

"Don't make trouble for me," my driver said pleadingly. "I'll be docked if I don't get my cargo back on time."

One of the men in uniform reached up and opened the cab of the truck. "Come on out of there, you."

"Who, me?" I asked innocently. "What for?"

"Don't play games," he snapped. "Get out of that truck." He waved a lethal-looking blaster at me, and I decided not to argue with it. I leaped lightly to the ground, and as I did so the uniformed man signalled to my driver that he could go ahead.

The six men ringed threateningly around me. "Who are you?" the leader demanded. "Where'd you come from?"

"That doesn't matter," I said belligerently. He put his hand on my arm, and I jerked away. "I'm a tourist. Want to see my landing permit?"

"Landing permits don't mean a thing here," he said. "Where's your respirometer?"

"My what?"

"According to statute 1106A, Book Eleven, Civil Code of the Principality of Callisto City," he reeled off, "all inhabitants of the Principality of Callisto City are required by law to wear respirometers at all times, whether they are transients or permanent inhabitants." He finished his spiel and gestured boredly to one of his assistants. "Give him the collar, Mack."

The man named Mack opened a wooden box and revealed one of those metal collars, the kind that seemed to be all the rage in Callisto just then. He held it out invitingly.

"Here you are, dear. The finest model in the house."

I drew back. "I don't want your goddam collar," I snapped hotly.

"You've heard the regulation," the head man said. "Either you put the collar on or you turn around and walk out the way you came."

I turned and looked through the translucent airlock out at the barren wastes of frozen ammonia. "I'm staying here, for the time being. And I don't plan on wearing any collars."

He frowned. I was being particularly troublesome, and he didn't like it. He waved his blaster in an offhand gesture. "Put the collar on him, boys."

Mack and one of the others advanced toward me, holding the gleaming metal circlet. I took one look at it, smiled, and said, "Okay. I know when I'm licked. I can't fight all of you."

They relaxed visibly. "Good to see you cooperate. Put it on him."

I let them come close, and Mack was starting to lower the thing over my head when I went into action. I batted the collar out of his hands and heard it go clanging across the floor, and at the same time I lashed out with my foot and nipped the boss' blaster right out of his amazed hand. The gun went flying thirty feet or more.

Then they were all on me at once. I pounded back savagely, feeling solid flesh beneath my knuckles and occasionally the unyielding coldness of someone's collar as I drove a fist past it into his jaw.

Some picnic, I thought, as I waded gleefully in, flattening Mack with a poke in the stomach and sending another one reeling to the ground with a swift kick. Luckily for me, the head man had been the only one wearing sidearms—and apparently some street urchin had made off with the blaster before he could find it again, because I wasn't getting cooked.

I crashed two of them together, pushed the remaining two aside, and dashed away toward the entrance to the city. I heard them pounding after me in hot pursuit.

It was about a hundred yards to the edge of the city. I made the dash in a dozen seconds and found myself in a crowded thoroughfare, with a number of people watching my fight with evident interest.

I broke into the crowd and kept on running, pushing people aside as I went. Behind me, I could see the six policemen jostling their way along. One of them had found another blaster somewhere, but he didn't dare use it in such a crowd.

I rounded a corner, nearly slipped, and then doubled back and headed for the main thoroughfare again. The cops weren't taken in by my maneuver, though, and as I looked back I saw them following grimly, shouting something at me. There were more of them now.

Suddenly I felt a hand slide into mine, soft and warm, and a gentle voice at my side said, "Come with me."

I didn't argue. I saw the crowd close up into a solid mass behind us, and heard the roaring of my frustrated pursuers, as my unknown rescuer led me away to safety.

As we ran, I glanced down and saw a girl at my side, with her hand grasping mine. She was about twenty-two, wearing a clinging blue tunic that cut off above her knees. She had copper-red hair, and around her neck was that curious collar.

After running a block and a half, we came to a small tenement-house of the kind common in Callisto City. "In here," she whispered, and we ducked inside.

Then up a flight of stairs, around a corridor, down a dimly-lit hallway. We stood for an anxious moment outside her door, while she fumbled nervously in an attempt to touch her thumb to the doorplate, and then finally she managed to impress her print on the sensitive photoelectronic plate and the door slid noiselessly open.

We stepped inside, and with a feeling of relief I watched the heavy door roll back. I was safe—for now.

I turned to the girl. "Who are you? Why'd you bring me here?"

The run had tired her. Her breasts rose and fell as she gasped for breath, and she smiled and held up a hand for time as she struggled to talk. Finally, panting, she managed to say, "I'm June Knight. I saw the whole scene with the guards. You're safe here, for a while. But tell me—why have you come to Callisto?"

"Why does everyone wear these collars?" I countered, ignoring her question.

Her pretty face grew sad. "They make us—the Three, that is. Come on inside, and I'll get together something for you to eat. You must be starved, and we can talk later."

"No," I said quickly. "I'm not hungry. I'm more anxious to find out what's been happening here."

"Well, even if you're not hungry, I am," she said. "Come into the kitchen and I'll tell you the whole story—the story of how this whole city's been enslaved."

She went into the adjoining room of the little flat, and I followed her. She punched keys on the robocook, dialing a small but nutritious meal, and when the food was placed before her on the table she turned to me.

"First," she said, "when's the last time any news came from Callisto to the outside world?"

I shrugged. "I haven't been keeping up with the news. I've been on Mars the last two years, hunting rhuud in the lowlands. The papers don't get there often."

"Oh. You've been out of touch. Well, you haven't missed any news from Callisto, because we've had an efficient news blanket in operation for almost a year and a half. And for a while it was a voluntary one—just about two years ago, when the air started going bad. We didn't want outsiders to know."

I blinked. "The air?" In a dome-city like this, the air supply was, of course, wholly artificial, and its proper maintenance was of vital importance to the entire community. "What happened to the air?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," she said. "None of us are. Suddenly it became impure. People began sickening by the hundreds; some died, and almost everyone else was ill in one way or another. A tremendous investigation was held by the people who were our government then—Cleve Coldridge was our mayor, a fine man—and nothing could be determined about the source of the impurities. And then my father—he's dead now—invented this." She tapped the metal collar she wore around her throat.

"And what, may I ask, is that collar?"

"It's a filter," she said. "When the collar is worn, it counteracts the impurities in the air, through some process I don't understand. My father died shortly after he developed it, and so he didn't get a chance to offer it to the public. He willed the design and the process to three—friends—of his." Her mouth clamped together bitterly, and I saw her struggling to fight back tears. Almost automatically, I put my arm around her.

"I'll be all right," she said. "Every time I think of those three, and what they've done to Dad's invention—"

"Tell me about it later, if you want."

"No. You might as well know the whole story. The three of them—Martin Hawkins, an Earthman, Ku Sui, a Martian, and Kolgar Novin, a Venusian—announced my father's device to the public as if they had discovered it themselves. It was the solution to our air-impurity problem. They started turning out the collars in mass production, and within a month everyone in Callisto City was wearing one."

"Did that stop the sickness?"

She nodded. "Immediately. The hospitals emptied out in no time at all, and there hasn't been a case of that disease since then."

"Is that all?" I asked.

"Hardly. The trouble didn't start until after we were all wearing the collars." She took my hand and guided it along her collar to the back of her neck, where I felt a tiny joint in the metal.

"What's that?" I asked.

"That joint is the weapon those three hold over us at all times. These collars, you see, can be tightened at will by remote control—and my father's three friends operate the controls!"

I whistled. "What a hideous kind of dictatorship! You mean—anyone who makes too much of the wrong kind of noise gets his collar tightened."

"Exactly. As soon as the whole city was wearing the protective collars—the collars that we thought were our salvation—the Three called a public meeting, and announced that they were taking over the government. Mayor Coldridge stood up to protest such a high-handed move—"

"And suddenly felt his collar tightening around his neck!" I concluded. I could picture the scene vividly.

"It was terrible," she said. "Right in the middle of his speech, he clutched at his throat, went red in the face, and sank to his knees. They let him up after a minute or so, and explained what they had done. Then they announced that anyone who protested against what they were doing would get similar treatment. We've been against them ever since."

I stood up, almost overwhelmed with anger. I had come to the right place this time! Maybe giant Jupiter was something I needed to explore someday for my own peace of mind, but this mess on Callisto required immediate attention. I didn't see how I was going to fight it, either, but I swore to myself that I wasn't going to leave here until the last collar had been removed from a Callistan throat.

"What about this breathing-tax?" I asked.

She nodded. "That's the latest thing. They've decided the regular taxes aren't enough for them, and so they're bleeding us white with this new one. They installed meters in all the collars, to measure the amount of air we consume, and—" her voice was choked with hatred—"they tax us. There's even a price of air here. Every Friday, we have to pay a certain amount."

"And if you don't?"

She put her hand to her throat, and made a swift squeezing motion. I shuddered. I'd never come across anything so vicious as this. When I was hunting rhuud on Mars, I thought I was against an ugly beast—but those Martian land-serpents weren't half so cold-blooded as the Three who held Callisto in their iron grip.

I was going to break their hold. I vowed it, as I looked at the red-eyed girl staring solemnly at me.

Suddenly there was a knock on the hall door. I sprang up at once, and June looked at me with alarm.

"Hide in there," she said, pointing to the bedroom. I dashed inside and crouched behind the bed, wondering who was at the door.

I heard a male voice say, "It's me, June. You decent?"

"Come on in," she said, and I heard the door slide open. I peeped out and saw a tall, good-looking young man enter. Around his throat was the inevitable collar. He ran to her, put his arms around her, embraced her. I felt a sour twinge of jealousy, though I had no conceivable right to.

"Hello, Jim," she said warmly.

The newcomer was frowning worriedly. "Have you heard about this new trouble?" he asked without preamble. "They've just announced it from the capitol building."

"What is it?"

"There's a fugitive loose in the city somewhere," the man named Jim said rapidly. "Apparently he broke in by stowing away in a cargo shipment from Ganymede, and he escaped when Hawkins' guards tried to put a collar on him. He's been at large for the past half hour—and Ku Sui and Hawkins have just announced that they're going to start tightening the collars gradually until he turns himself in!"

June gasped. "Everyone's collar?"

"Everyone. There's a gigantic manhunt going on now, with the whole city out trying to find this guy. If we don't get him and turn him in, those three madmen are liable to choke us all as a punitive measure."

As he spoke, he winced and put his hand to his throat. "They're starting now!"

A moment later, June uttered a little cry as the remote-control torturers went to work on her collar as well. I went almost insane with rage at that.

I got off the floor and went inside.

"I'm the man they're looking for," I announced loudly. Jim turned, startled, and flicked a glance from me to June and back to me again.

"Where'd he come from, June?" Jim asked coldly.

"He's the fugitive," she said hesitantly. "He was running from the Tax Guards and practically ran into me. I brought him here."

"Great Scot!" he shouted. "Of all the crazy stunts! Come on—let's turn him in before they choke us all."

He started toward me, but I held up a hand. I'm a big man, and he stopped, giving me the respect my size deserves. "Just one moment, friend. Don't be so quick to turn people in. Suppose you tell me who you are?"

"What does that matter to you?" he snapped.

"Jim's my brother," June said. "Have you heard what they're going to do unless they find you?"

I nodded grimly. "I heard you talking from inside."

"I'm going to call the Guards," Jim said. "We can't let you roam around free while our lives are in danger. It's for the good of the whole city."

He moved toward the phone, but I tripped him and shoved him into a chair. "Hold on a second, buddy."

He popped up almost immediately and came at me with a savage right. I heard June utter a little scream as his fist caught me off-guard and cracked into my jaw; I backed up a step or two, shaking off the grogginess, and hit him carefully just below the heart. He folded up and dropped back into the chair.

"Sorry, June," I said apologetically. "But I have to have this thing done my way."

Jim opened one eye, then another, and sat there without making any further disturbance. "June, get your video on. Find out if what your brother says is true."

"Can't you believe me?" he asked.

"No," I told him bluntly. I wasn't taking any chances.

June was fumbling with the dials of her video, and a moment later a newscaster's face came on the screen. I listened stonily as he proceeded to give my description, or a rough approximation thereof, and repeated "President" Hawkins' bone-chilling threat that the collars would be gradually tightened unless I was turned in.

"Okay," I said. "I've heard enough. Shut that thing off." I whirled and faced them. Both June and her brother were pale-faced and frightened; they wore the same beaten, cowed look I'd noticed on the truckdrivers. This was a city of perpetual terror.

"Look," I told them. "I'm going to turn myself in, as soon as possible."

"But—" June started weakly to say.

"No. There's nothing else I can do. I'm going to turn myself in and let them put a collar around my neck." The words came tumbling out easily, and I was forming my plan even as I spoke.

"Why don't you just escape through the airlock?" June asked. "Go back where you came from. You can still get away, and you won't have to wear the collar."

I shook my head firmly. "No. Two reasons. The first is that your benevolent administrators may take punitive measures against you anyway; the second is that you're suggesting I run away—and I just don't believe in running away. I'm going to stay here till the job is done."

Jim Knight stood up and took my hand. "I'm sorry I got so hotheaded before, fellow. But why'd

you knock me down when I went to the phone?"

"I wanted to tell you some things first, Jim. I'm sorry I had to rough you up, but it was necessary. There was one plan I had to let you know."

"Which is?"

"I'm going to go to the capitol building now to get collared. I want you two to go gather up all your friends and see to it that there's a considerable mob outside the building after I go in. Get the whole populace down, if possible. I don't know if I can carry off what I'm planning, but I'll need help on the follow-through if I do."

"Right. Anything else?"

I rubbed my throat speculatively. "No. Nothing else. How does it feel to wear one of those things?"

I stepped hesitantly into the street, expecting to be grabbed at any moment. The artificial air of Callisto City was warm and mild, and the atomic furnace that heated the domed city was doing a good job. But I detected a curious odor in the air, and my sensitive nostrils told me that whatever had been polluting the air was still present. June had said it wasn't fatal, and with my strength I knew I wouldn't have much to fear for a while, so I didn't worry about it.

I got about four steps down the street, walking by myself. I had insisted that June and her brother keep away from me, for fear they get involved as accomplices. I reached the corner and started up the thoroughfare, and at once a dozen hands grabbed me.

"There he is!" someone said.

"Thank God we've caught him before these collars get any tighter!"

I looked at them. They weren't wearing uniforms; they were just townfolk, honest, worried men who turned into vigilantes only to save their own necks. I pitied them.

"I'm the man you're looking for," I said. "You can let go of me. I won't run away."

The mob was getting bigger by the moment, and I was anxious to calm them down before they started transferring some of their hatred for their three tyrants to me, and ripped me apart in a mob's wild, illogical way.

"I'm going to turn myself in," I assured them hastily. "Where do I go?"

"To the capitol building," someone said. "And you'd better get there in a hurry. You know what they're going to do to us if you're not found?"

"I've heard," I said. "That's why I'm turning myself in. Take me to wherever I'm supposed to go."

A couple of them led me through the streets, with the rest tagging along behind. The poor, timid, frightened people! I was almost ready to explode with indignation; I felt I wanted to tear their unspeakable overlords apart with my bare hands.

And I could do it, too.

Finally we reached the capitol—a lofty affair that towered right up to the highest point of the great dome. I looked up. The dome formed a shining arc that covered the entire city; outside, beyond the dome, all was black, except for the swollen red orb of Jupiter hanging monstrously in the sky.

Jupiter. I wondered if I was ever going to get out of Callisto City to cross the gulf of space to the planet that seemed to beckon to me, the unexplored giant that called to me from afar.

"Here he is," one of my captors said, to a guard at the capitol door.

I recognized him. He was the leader of the group of six who had originally tried to stop me back at the airlock. He gestured with his arm, and a whole host of blue-clad guards came forth and seized me roughly.



"Bring him inside," he said. "Hawkins is waiting to see him."

I was waiting to see Hawkins, too. I wanted to see just what sort of monster was capable of enslaving a whole city this way.

They led me through the richly-appointed lobby, hung with luxurious furnishings from every planet, no doubt imported at fantastic cost with money wrung from the Callistans by the infamous breathing-tax, and hustled me into an elevator. We shot up rapidly to the twelfth floor, where I was shoved out. I submitted as patiently as I could to this sort of treatment; if I wanted to, I could have smashed their faces and escaped with ease, but that kind of answer didn't suit me.

I was taken down a long, well-lit corridor, and pushed into a large room that seemed to be completely lined with machinery. A row of dials and clicking computers ran down one wall, and a giant electronic brain sprawled ominously over the entire back half of the room. Up at the left side were two men, seated in lofty chairs surrounded by metal railings.

One was a Martian, spindly, elongated, with a weirdly-inflated chest and thick, leathery reddish skin. The other was an Earthman, small of stature, balding, totally ordinary-looking. There was something familiar-looking about both of them.

The Earthman, who must have been Hawkins, turned to the other—evidently Ku Sui, the Martian, the second of the triumvirate that ruled Callisto.

"Here's our troublemaker," Hawkins said. "Let's collar him before he can do any damage."

The Martian got off his throne-like chair and came rustling down to examine me at close range. They have notoriously poor eyesight. As he drew near, I recognized him, and a moment later he spotted me.

He turned in surprise to Hawkins. "You know who this is?" he asked sibilantly. "This is our old friend Slade."

Hawkins was up from his chair in a second. "Slade?" I saw him go pale. "Get that collar on him as fast as you can!"

It came back to me now. Hawkins, and Ku Sui, and yes, the Venusian Kolgar Novin. I should have remembered as soon as June told me their names. Yes, we were old friends. Someone who leads the kind of life I do tends to forget some of his earlier adventures; they get blurred under the successive impressions of later encounters. But I recalled these three, now, and how I had foiled them, some ten years ago.

"Now I remember you," I said, as Ku Sui came toward me holding an ominous-looking collar. "Remember the Pluto Mines, and the neat slave-trade you three were running out there? I chased you out of there fast enough!"

"You were a considerable nuisance," Hawkins said. "But I think we have you in a better position now."

I nodded. "This dog-collar racket is the best thing you've come up with yet. And you're just vile enough to be operating something like this. I notice you three don't wear collars."

"The air-pollution does not affect us," Hawkins said. "But I don't intend to stand around discussing things with you." He seemed quite distressed that the two guards who pinioned my arms were overhearing my recollections of the Pluto Mines incident. "Collar him, Ku Sui."

"Here you are," the Martian said, rustling dryly like the remnant of a past age he was. "Extra large, to fit your bull neck." He lifted the collar and brought it down around my throat. At last, I had forfeited my liberty, at least for the time being.

The collar was cold and somehow slimy. I made up my mind not to wear it for long.

"How does it feel, Slade?" Hawkins asked tauntingly.

"It's a good fit," I said.

"You can go now," Hawkins said to the guards. "He's amply under control." They nodded and backed out, and I was free. Just the two of them, and me, in the room with the machines. As they left, the door in the back opened and Kolgar Novin, the Venusian, entered. Now they were all three together.

Hawkins left his throne and crossed the room to a control panel. "Now you're a taxpayer, just like the rest, Slade."

"I hear the price of air's pretty high in these parts," I said wryly, rubbing my finger around the collar.

Hawkins nodded. "We get a good rate for it."

"And what if I don't care to pay?"

Hawkins smiled. "We have methods of persuasion," he said. "I was just about to demonstrate one of our best."

He reached for a switch and nudged it down. Immediately that damnable collar tightened like a deadly hand around my neck. I felt the pressure increase.

"How do you like that, Slade?"

I didn't. But I didn't tell him that. I had decided the time had come for action. I flicked out my hands and drew the startled Martian, Ku Sui, toward me. Apparently the collar was such a foolproof protective device that they had gotten careless, for Ku Sui had been standing within my reach all the time Hawkins was talking.

I sensed the dry alien smell of the Martian, who was gesturing wildly to Hawkins. I got my hands around the Martian's scrawny throat.

"Now I've got a collar on you!" I said, "And it doesn't operate by remote control! How does it feel?"

"Hawkins—increase the pressure," Ku Sui grated brokenly. "Kill him, Hawkins. He's . . . choking . . . me!"

I looked up from the Martian and shouted at Hawkins, "Shut your machine off! Get the pressure down or I'll kill Ku Sui!"

The grip of the collar around my throat was almost unbearable. I flexed my neck muscles and tried to fight the slowly intensifying grip of the collar, but my face was fiery red and I was having trouble breathing. I could hear the sound of my blood pounding through my veins.

"Shut it off, Hawkins! I'll strangle the Martian!"

It was a mistake on my part to assume that Hawkins gave the faintest damn about what happened to his partner in crime. I kept increasing my grip on Ku Sui's throat, and Hawkins up there at his control board kept tightening his grip on mine. Everything was starting to swim around my head, and I didn't know how much longer I could hold out.

"Don't . . . call . . . my . . . bluff," I gasped. I wrung Ku Sui's leathery neck and hurled the corpse across the room at the motionless Venusian standing bewildered in the back. Venusians have a way of freezing up when there's trouble, and I was thankful Kolgar Novin wasn't taking a hand in the action.

I saw Hawkins through a red haze. He was obviously surprised that I still hadn't succumbed to the choking, but he didn't seem very disturbed about Ku Sui. I gasped in as much air as I could and began the slow, leaden-footed climb up the steps to the control panel.

I saw Hawkins go white with fear as I approached. I was moving slowly, deliberately, my head swimming and my eyes popping from my head.

"Why don't you drop?" he asked in terror. "Why don't you choke?"

"I'm too tough for you!" I said. He started to scream for the guards, but I reached up, plucked him away from his control panel, and hurled him over the railing into the middle of the floor. He went flying heels over head like a chubby little basketball, and bounced on the concrete.

He continued to moan loudly for his guards, and Kolgar Novin was still a statue at the far end of the room.

Desperately, I reached for the lever he had been pushing down and I hurled it as far up as it would go. The collar opened immediately, and the air went rushing into my lungs. I reeled against the railing, trying to recover, as the blood left my head and the room tilted crazily around me.

Then I heard footsteps outside, and the door broke open. The Guards! I made up my mind what I was going to do in an instant.

I started smashing my fists into the delicate machinery, raging up and down the room destroying whatever I could. I ripped up the intricate wiring and watched blue sparks lick through the bowels of the giant electronic brain and the smaller computers, watched the whole edifice of terror come crashing down. I pulled out levers and used them as clubs to bash in the dials and vernier gauges, and when I was through I turned to see what the guards were doing.

To my surprise, I saw they were struggling among themselves. They were divided—half of them, the most evil half, were still loyal to Hawkins, while the others, the native Callistans impressed into the guards, were rebelling now that they saw the overlords were destroyed, their machines of coercion in rubble. I saw one guard rip off his collar and hurl it into the ruined machines with a shout of savage glee.

There still was a nucleus of guards clustered around Hawkins and Ku Sui, but their numbers were growing smaller as more and more of them realized the game was up for the three tyrants.

Then the room was suddenly crowded, and I smiled happily. June and her brother had roused the people! They were coming! I leaned against the railing, weak with strain, and watched as the angry, newly-free Callistans swept the remaining guards out of the way and exacted a terrible revenge on Hawkins and Kolgar Novin and even the dead body of Ku Sui.

The lynching was over eventually, and the guards, taking charge in the name of the people, managed to restore some semblance of order. Blankets were thrown over the mutilated bodies on the floor.

Then, with grim methodicality, the Callistans completed the job of wrecking Hawkins' machines. The room was a shambles by the time they were through.

June finally made her way through the confusion to my side. She looked up in concern, and ran her fingers gently over the angry red lines the collar had left on my throat.

"You were wonderful," she said. She was crying from relief and gratitude, and I took her in my arms and held her.

Then I released her. "Let's go downstairs," I said. "I need some fresh air after that battle."

We left the building and I stood in the warm artificial sunlight of Callisto City, recovering my strength.

"I've heard how you overthrew them," June said. "But I don't understand how you survived the choking."

"I'm stubborn," I said simply. I was hiding the truth from her—the bitter truth that I wanted no one to know. "I just wouldn't let them strangle me, that's all." I grinned.

She took a deep breath. "You know, I just thought of something—we're not wearing collars, and yet we don't mind the air! It's not polluted any more!"

I stopped to consider that, and then shook my head in disgust as the obvious answer came to me. "Those worms! You know what was causing the pollution?"

"No," she said.

"It must have been maintained artificially by one of those machines up there! I remember, now—Hawkins was quite a chemist. He must have synthesized some chemical that polluted this air, and then gave your father enough leads so he could develop a filter to counteract it. It was a devilishly well-planned scheme, neatly calculated to reduce Callisto City to a state of servitude!"

We took a few steps away. It was bright midday, but I could see the bulk of Jupiter high in the sky

above the dome. In the great square in front of the capitol building, a huge golden mountain was growing—a heap of discarded collars, getting bigger and bigger by the moment as the Callistans hurled the impotent symbols of their slavery into the junkheap. For the first time, I saw smiling, happy faces on Callisto. The air was pure again, and the time of troubles was over. It didn't cost anything to breathe on Callisto any more.

The happiest face of all was June's. She was beaming radiantly, glowing with pride and happiness. "I'm glad I decided to rescue you," she said. "You looked so brave, and strong, and—lonely. So I took a chance and pulled you away."

I looked at her sadly, not saying anything.

"Where will you stay?" she asked. "There's a flat available next door to mine—"

I shook my head. "No. I'm leaving. I must leave immediately."

The sunshine left her face at once, and she looked at me in surprise and shock. "Leaving?"

I nodded. "I can't stay here, June. I've done my job, and I'm going."

I didn't wait for another word. I strode away, and she took a couple of steps after me and then stopped. I heard her sobbing, but I didn't turn back. How could I tell her that I loved her? How could I dare to love her? Me—an android. A laboratory creation? Sure, I was stronger than a human being—the factor Hawkins didn't figure on. Only an android could have withstood that choking.

I have human drives, human ambitions. When you cut me, I bleed red. You can only tell by microscopic analysis that I'm not human. But resemblance isn't enough. I couldn't fool myself, and I wouldn't fool June. I couldn't allow her to waste herself on something like me. She'd make a good mother, someday.

I turned away, feeling bitter and empty, and made my way through the streets crowded with jubilant Callistans. In my mind's eye I could see June's pale, bewildered face, and my synthetic heart wept for her. She'd never understand why I was leaving.

I looked up through the dome at the black curtain of the skies, at mighty, lonely, unapproachable Jupiter. It was a fitting challenge for me. We had a lot in common, big Jupiter and I. I knew where I was going, now, and I couldn't wait to get there.

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