

**CITADEL OF THE STAR
LORDS**

By Edmond Hamilton

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Out of the dark vastness of the void came a conquering horde, incredible and invincible, with Earth's only weapon—a man from the past!

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As he gunned his plane northward through the night, Price thought of the roller-coaster when he'd been a kid, of how you went faster and faster until you hit the big plunge.

Well, he was on the big plunge now. And what would end this roller-coaster ride—prison, or escape, or a crash? It had to be one of those.

He was to remember that, later. He was to think later that it was well he didn't dream the fantastic fate he was really racing toward....

He looked down, and there was only blackness. The deserts of California and Nevada are dark and wide, and he was keeping well away from the airways beacons and the main highways.

He kept the Beechcraft as high as he could. He was flying without lights, but with what they already had against him, that minor infraction wasn't important. He kept looking back, expecting every minute to see the red-and-green winglights of Border Patrol planes coming up on his tail.

If he was lucky, if he slipped them long enough, if he crossed north without being sighted by the passenger planes that shuttled between Las Vegas and Los Angeles, he might just make it to Bill Willerman's and get the Beechcraft under cover. If—if—if—

There was another if, Price thought bitterly. If he'd had any brains, he wouldn't be in this spot at all.

He turned on the radio. He flipped the dial around, getting loud music from a Vegas hotel, then a political speech, then more music—and then a news broadcast. As he'd expected, he was at the top of the news.

"—so that even while Arnolfo Ruiz, firebrand revolutionary exile, is under arrest by Mexican police, United States authorities are conducting an intensive air-dragnet search for the American pilot who smuggled Ruiz across the border. That unknown pilot is known to have returned across the border an hour ago, and police of three states have been alerted.

"The AEC announces that its next test will be that of an experimental small new H-bomb whose effects will be studied for—"

Price savagely cut the radio. He damned the announcer, and Ruiz, and himself. Most of all, himself.

He'd acted like a halfwit. Because a smooth talker had given him a phony story about a secret business trip, he had smuggled the most dangerous trouble-maker in the hemisphere down into a friendly republic. Who would believe he hadn't known? He *had* done it, and pressure from Washington would make sure that he got full pay for his folly.

He might as well look the truth in the face. If it hadn't been this, it would have been something else. He'd been playing the fool for years, ever since Korea. Other fliers had come home from there and taken up their jobs again, but a job had been too dull for him; he'd drifted along with the fast-buck fly-boys out for fun and excitement, hauling hunting and fishing parties, spending the profits in bordertown bars, going broke and starting over again—and now finally this. His roller-coaster ride was about over.

It would be over for good if he didn't reach Willerman's ranch before daylight. Bill would hide the plane for him. He'd saved Bill's neck a couple of times in the old days, and he could depend on him. But he had to reach him, first.

He saw the glow in the sky that came from the lights of Las Vegas, and he kept warily wide of it. He looked back again. No Patrol planes yet. As he rushed on, Price began to feel that he was going to make it.

Then, suddenly and disastrously, everything happened at once.

He saw lights on the ground ahead—an oddly scattered pattern of lights too thin to be a town, too wide-spread to be a ranch.

At the same moment, two fast jets screamed down from the upper darkness and nearly tore his wings off. They curved around for another pass at him.

"Air Force planes!" thought Price. "Hell, that tears it—"

It seemed crazy that the government was *that* hot to catch him. But the jets were making another lightning pass to him, trying to scare him, to force him down.

He had less than a chance in a million to lose them, and he knew it. But he was going to be a long time in jail, and he might as well give them a run for it. Just possibly, the slower Beechcraft could get away in the dark the next time they overshot him.

He gunned the plane wide open, rushing high over the scattered lights. And then, incredibly, he was free of his pursuers. He looked over his shoulder and saw them drawing back.

It didn't make sense. Why would they suddenly draw back? Anyway, with those jets off his tail, he still had a chance.

Price looked down. Among the lights down there he saw lights on a queer steel tower. He'd seen pictures of a tower like that somewhere. It wasn't an oil-rig, but something he couldn't remember.

And then, suddenly, he remembered, and a terrible coldness choked him and his flesh flinched as he saw a door into nightmare opening.

That tower, and the announcement of a new H-bomb test, and the distance he was from Vegas, and the way those frantic jets had drawn back....

"Oh, no," said Price. "Oh, no, oh no, oh no—"

He was still saying it when the bomb went off and the universe cracked wide open under his racing plane.

CHAPTER II

The cataclysm that hit Price was without light or sound. That, when he thought of it later, was the most awful feature of it.

He felt a shock, but not the shock of ultimate annihilation he expected. This was a shuddering impact as of the plane, himself, hitting some barrier and forcing through, a rending, tearing, dizzying thing that was like no sensation he had ever experienced.

He yelled, naked terror forcing the air from his lungs. His weight flung against the straps, and he knew from that that the plane was in a spin. Mechanically, his hands reached to the controls. He levelled off...

But he wasn't dead. He was alive, undestroyed, and how could that be if the raving energies of a hydrogen bomb had been unloosed beneath him?

Price's mind was a mad turmoil. What had happened?

He had blundered right over the bomb test-area, right over the bomb-tower. And the jets guarding the area had tried to stop him. Probably, if his radio hadn't been off, he would have heard them screaming frantic warnings to him.

But had the bomb really gone off? If it had, he would surely have been instantly annihilated.

He hadn't been. He was alive. The plane was ticking along through the night. The instruments functioned.

But *something* terrific had happened. That ghastly, wrenching shock that had seemed to outrage the very atoms of his body—his flesh still crawled with the memory of it. Something had happened. But what?

Price couldn't think. The mind just could not grapple with a thing like this. He sat, mechanically touching the controls, and the Beechcraft roared on and on.

Gradually, his mind came alive. He shakily swung the plane around. He was going back to Las Vegas. Right now, arrest and prison looked good to him compared to what had happened, or nearly happened.

If he hadn't been so tensely trying to escape, he thought, he would have remembered about the bomb-tests coming up. There had been newspaper stories. Guarded stories about a radical physical effect detected during explosions of the new-type H-bombs, and mention of elaborate preparations being made to study these unusual effects.

Price's thoughts leaped suddenly. He recalled a scientist's statement that the center of explosion of the new-type bomb might be like the eye of a hurricane, a focus of inconceivable forces but affected in a radically different way by those forces.

Had the bomb gone off under him, then? Had his plane and himself, at the "eye" of the tremendous explosion, been hurled somehow through spatial barriers into safety before the light and sound and destruction could even reach him?

It seemed an insane speculation. Yet everything about this was insane. He would be himself, if he didn't get down to Earth soon.

He could not see the glow of Las Vegas anywhere in the night. He cut his radio in and spoke hoarsely into it.

"Beechcraft 4556 calling Las Vegas Airport! Come in, Las Vegas!"

There was no answer. The radio seemed operative—but when he turned the receiver dials, not a sound came out.

"Knocked out," Price muttered. "And no wonder, if—"

He couldn't finish the thought, it was too soul-shaking a thing to speculate on, the thing that might have happened to him.

He curved the plane around, looking for highway lights, for an airways beacon, anything.

Nothing. Nothing but the darkness and the stars.

A little frantically, he swung the plane around and started eastward again. He must have missed Las Vegas. But if he kept going east, he'd surely cut the main highways. There were always lots of cars on them at night, in the summer.

He flew on and on. And the darkness continued. No lights at all, not even the glimmer from a lonely ranch.

Nothing.

He would have landed, gladly now, but he did not know where he was or what was under him. The Beechcraft was equipped with extra fuel tanks for long flights away from any source of supply, and they had been full when he started. He could fly a long time yet.

He flew.

After a while he began to think that there was only one explanation. He was dead, and flying in limbo.

And limbo, it seemed, went on forever.

Finally, after many hours there began to be a light in the blackness ahead of him, and his heart leaped up, thinking that at last he had raised the glow of a big town. But it was only the dawn. He watched it creep cold and gray across the world, and now he understood that he was alive. But he was not cheered. Now he could see what was underneath him.

Forest. Rolling like a dark green sea from north to south, from east to west. He had left the desert far behind. He figured that he was over Missouri now, and there should have been towns, villages, farms, cultivated fields.

There was forest.

The light turned rosy, then golden. The sun sprang up and it was day. Far ahead the Mississippi gleamed. Price sent the Beechcraft at full throttle, toward St. Louis. He could not see any smoke from the great complex of city and industry that sprawled there over both banks of the river, and he could not see any bridges. But St. Louis had to be there.

It was. But it had changed since he saw it last. The high buildings were brought low, and the low buildings were mounds, shells covered with brush and fox-grape, and trees grew in the public streets and through the broken windows. The river, vast and placid, was empty except for a floating log. Obstructions along the shores

might once have been docks, but were so no longer. And there was a great stillness.

For one wild moment Price thought, *The bomb did it last night, the new-type bomb with energies they didn't even dream about.* Then he realized that that was hardly possible. You can destroy a city with an H-bomb in a matter of seconds, but you can't grow an oak tree sixty feet high in the rubble of the City Hall in much under a century.

Time had passed since last night.

This was too much to take in all at once. Price didn't even try. He looked for a place to land, but there wasn't any, so he kept on flying, eastward across the river.

Time had passed, and he had passed with it. Slowly it began to come to Price, the dreadful and incredible truth of what had happened. The wrenching, tearing shock he had felt in the eye of the blast was not physical but temporal. The uncomprehended powers of the bomb had been mightier than anyone had guessed. They warped the ordered fabric of the space-time continuum itself, and acting on the matter of himself and his plane at the "eye" of the explosion, had warped them too—into the future.

The Beechcraft went droning through the empty sky. Price looked down on desolation, green and peaceful and as unproductive as it had been before men ever came with axe and plow to tame it.

How far in the future?

He did not know.

Were there still men, surviving somewhere in this wilderness? Or had humanity destroyed itself in a final act of atomic madness? Were all the cities dead and dust?

He did not know that either.

He only knew that he was too numb and exhausted to go much farther. He had to have water and food and sleep. He had to have a place to land.

He found it well beyond the river, a natural prairie in the midst of trees. He tried to gauge the way the wind was blowing by the ripple of the grass, and then he circled in a long curve to the north to head it. As he did so he thought he saw an iron glinting to the northeast, something very vast and strange as of the sun reflecting from a face of metal mountain-high and wide. Then he dropped low over the tree-tops, and whatever the glinting was he could not see it any more.

The Beechcraft bumped and bounded to a stop. Price sat for a moment watching his hands shake on the controls, and then some last measure of caution made him taxi the plane back, to the extreme edge of the prairie and nose it into the wind, ready to take off again with no delay.

He had a sporting rifle and revolver in the plane. He buckled on the revolver, stuffed his pockets full of cartridges for the rifle, and climbed down to the ground. He stood for several minutes in the shelter of the plane's wing, looking around, but he could not see any signs of life except a pair of crows flapping over his head with rusty cawing. It was late summer, and the wind was dry and hot. He began to walk toward the woods.

He looked a little dazedly, as he walked, toward the northeast. What was it, the incredible iron vastness he had glimpsed far away there?

About thirty yards from the plane Price stopped suddenly, his heart pounding and a sudden sweat breaking on his skin. The grass was trampled here in an irregular circle, with scars of bare earth ripped in the ground. There was a large quantity of blood, scarcely dry. A wide flattened track led to the woods. Something had been killed here, something big, like a horse or a cow, and the carcass dragged in among the trees.

Men. Hunters. An animal would have devoured its kill where it lay.

But what kind of men?

Price stood half crouched over the bloody ground, his rifle ready, looking this way and that and seeing nothing. The hot wind went running over the prairie and the encircling trees bowed to it and tossed their branches, but there was no other motion, no other sound. Even the crows had gone.

Price shouted. "Hello! Hello! Is anybody there? I'm lost. I need help. Hello!"

His voice was shocking in the stillness, loud and impolite.

There was no answer.

He went on down the flattened track toward the trees. He was afraid, and desperately tired.

"Hello?" he said, and now his voice was pleading. "Please. Where are you? Help me—"

Help me, you men of an unknown future, you hunters in impossibility, you lurkers in nightmare. Help me, or I die.

The shadows were heavy under the trees. The prairie grass did not grow here, but there were briars and other things to show a crushed trail. It was not a long one. He saw the carcass lying in a little glade. It was a black-and-white cow, already partially butchered. He moved toward it, and then from the branches overhead and the underbrush on either side short ropes of braided leather came flying, weighted at their ends with stones. Price fell down helpless and floundering, painfully bruised, his arms and legs wrapped in the tough bolo-like ropes, and one around his neck cutting off his breath so he could not even cry out.

In a swift and furious rush six men sprang from among the trees and stood about him. One snatched his rifle, another his revolver. They wore sketchy garments of tanned leather, and they were as dark and wild as the Shawnees and Wyandots who had hunted these woodland prairies long ago, except that some of them had light hair and all of them were bearded.

One of them, a tall lean wide-shouldered man with a shock of sun-bleached brown hair and eyes more blue, more blazing and filled with hate than any Price could remember seeing in his life, crouched beside him and tore the strangling rope ungentle from his neck. Price tried to speak, but before he could do more than gasp for breath the brown-haired man whipped out a knife and drove the point of it straight for Price's throat.

"Now," he said, "you star-spawn—we'll see if your blood is any redder than the kind we breed on Earth!"

The steel bit hard. Price screamed.

CHAPTER III

The brown-haired man withdrew the knife with a nice dexterity, its tip reddened for perhaps a quarter of an inch. Price looked at it and at him in dumb horror. The six wolfish faces collected in a close circle above him and peered down, smiling.

"It's the same color, Burr. Who'd have thought it?"

"Just blood. Hah! And I always thought they'd bleed hard and shiny, like quicksilver."

"Stick him again, Burr."

"I wish we had time," said Burr, and licked his lips with a red tongue. "But they know where we are." He sighed and raised the knife again. "We got to get out of here. Fast."

Price found his voice. "For God's sake," he cried. "For God's sake, what are you doing? I ask you for help, and you—" He struggled furiously against the ropes. "You haven't any right to kill me. I haven't done you any harm."

"Star-spawn," said Burr softly, using that word for the second time. He prodded Price above the belt with the knife-point. "If I had time I'd do this slowly, very slowly. Be glad we don't have time."

"But why?" Price shouted. "What for?" He glared up at the circle of hairy faces. "I only got here today. I couldn't have done anything to you. I came from—"

From yesterday? A hundred years ago? Through time? Tell them, and ask them to believe it. Maybe they will. I don't.

"—from the West," he said. "From Nevada. I haven't anything to do with stars."

Burr laughed. He raised the knife. But another man, with a shrewd dark eye and gray hairs in his beard, caught his wrist.

"Wait a minute. Look at his hair. It's as dark as mine."

"Dyed," said Burr. "Look at his clothes. Look at the flier he came in, at his weapons. Look where he is—in the Forbidden Belt. If he isn't from the Citadel—don't be a foolish man, Twist. Let go."

"Why would he dye his hair to look like a human and then come to us in a flier? Is that reasonable? Now hold on, Burr. You hear me? There's a way to tell."

Burr grumbled, but he relaxed, and Twist let him go. He caught Price by the collar and dragged him into the glade by the butchered cow, where the sunlight fell in strong shafts. Then he rolled Price's head back and forth, studying it with intense interest. The others looked over his shoulder.

"His eyes are dark too," said Twist. "You can't dye eyeballs. And look here. See that, Burr? Feel it. He's got the sproutings of a beard. Now we all know the Starlords don't grow hair on their lovely faces."

"Hey," said the others. "That's right. Twist is right."

"Of course he's right," said Price. "I'm human." He knew that much. The rest of the talk was a mystery, but that didn't matter. Not right now. "I come from the West. I'm a friend."

Burr looked sullen. "Humans don't fly. Only Starlords do that."

"Maybe he's a collaborator?" said a yellow-haired boy, all bright and eager, and Burr smiled again.

"Maybe. Anyway, he's none of us. Stand by, Twist."

But Twist did not stand by. He faced the others in fatherly anger at their stupidity.

"You're almighty anxious for a killing Burr. Now what's the Chief going to say when we come back and tell him that a human man came in an airplane, and asked us for help, and we stuck him like a pig and left the plane for the Star Lords?"



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