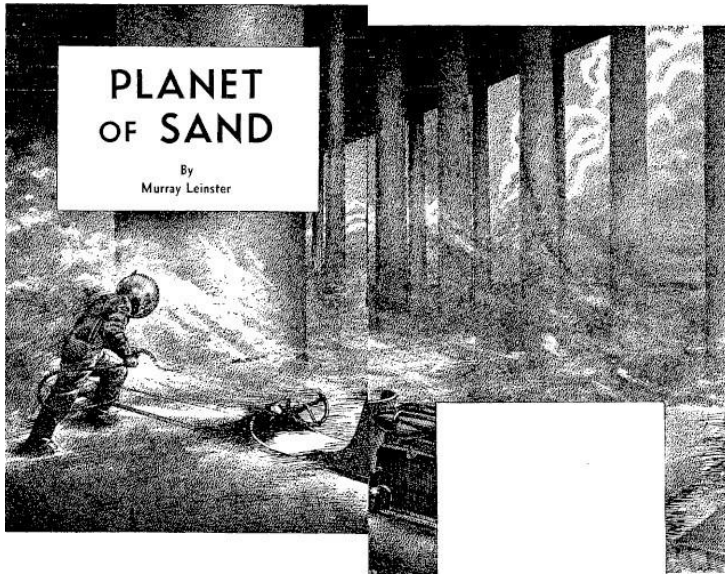


PLANET OF SAND

By Murray Leinster

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Tossed into the trackless Cosmos by his mortal enemy, shipwrecked on an unfriendly star, he determined to defy the dangers of numberless nights, and, hunted turned hunter, keep a tryst with Hate....



He debated straggling farther under the shelter of the monstrous roof...

There was bright, pitiless light in the prison corridor of the *Stallifer*. There was the hum of the air-renewal system. Once in every so

often there was a cushioned thud as some item of the space ship's machinery operated some relay somewhere. But it was very tedious to be in a confinement cell. Stan Buckley—Lieutenant, J.G., Space Guard, under charges and under restraint—found it rather more than tedious.

He should have been upheld, perhaps, by the fact that he was innocent of the charges made against him by Rob Torren, formerly his immediate superior officer. But the feeling of innocence did not help. He sat in his cell, holding himself still with a grim resolution. But a deep, a savage, a corrosive anger grew and grew and grew within him. It had been growing in just this manner for weeks.

The *Stallifer* bored on through space. From her ports the cosmos was not that hostile, immobile curtain of unwinking stars the early interstellar travelers knew. At twelve hundred light-speeds, with the Bowdoin-Hall field collapsing forty times per second for velocity control, the stars moved visibly. Forty glimpses of the galaxy about the ship in every second made it seem that the universe was always in view.

And the stars moved. The nearer ones moved swiftly and the farther ones more slowly, but all moved. And habit made motion give the feeling of perspective, so that the stars appeared to be distributed in three dimensions and from the ship seemed very small, like fireflies. All the cosmos seemed small and almost cosy. The Rim itself appeared no more than a few miles away. But the *Stallifer* headed for Earth from Rhesi II, and she had been days upon her journey, and she had come a distance which it would stagger the imagination to compute.

In his cell, though, Stan Buckley could see only four walls. There was no variation of light; no sign of morning or night or afternoon. At intervals, a guard brought him food. That was all—except that his deep and fierce and terrible anger grew until it seemed that he would go mad with it.

He had no idea of the hour or the day when, quite suddenly, the pitiless light in the corridor dimmed. Then the door he had not seen since his entrance into the prison corridor clanked open. Footsteps came toward his cell. It was not the guard who fed him. He knew that much. It was a variation of routine which should not have varied until his arrival on Earth.

He sat still, his hands clenched. A figure loomed outside the cell door. He looked up coldly. Then fury so great as almost to be frenzy filled him. Rob Torren looked in at him.

There was silence. Stan Buckley's muscles tensed until it seemed that the bones of his body creaked. Then Rob Torren said caustically:

"It's lucky there are bars, or there'd be no chance to talk! Either you'd kill me and be beamed for murder, or I'd kill you and Esther would think me a murderer. I've come to get you out of this if you'll accept my terms."

Stan Buckley made an inarticulate, growling noise.

"Oh, surely!" said Rob Torren. "I denounce you, and I'm the witness against you. At your trial, I'll be believed and you won't. You'll be broken and disgraced. Even Esther wouldn't marry you under such circumstances. Or maybe," he added sardonically, "maybe you wouldn't let her!"

Stan Buckley licked his lips. He longed so terribly to get his hands about his enemy's throat that he could hardly hear his words.

"The trouble is," said Rob Torren, "that she probably wouldn't marry me either, if you were disgraced by my means. So I offer a bargain. I'll help you to escape—I've got it all arranged—on your word of honor to fight me. A duel. To the death." His eyes were hard. His tone was hard. His manner was almost contemptuous. Stan Buckley said hoarsely:

"I'll fight you anywhere, under any conditions!"

"The conditions," Rob Torren told him icily, "are that I will help you to escape. You will then write a letter to Esther, saying that I did so and outlining the conditions of the duel as we agree upon them. I will, in turn, write a letter to the Space Guard brass, withdrawing my charges against you. We will fight. The survivor will destroy his own letter and make use of the other. Do you agree to that?"

"I'll agree to anything," said Stan Buckley fiercely, "that will get my hands about your throat!"

Rob Torren shrugged.

"I've turned off the guard photocells," he said calmly. "I've a key for your cell. I'm going to let you out. I can't afford to kill you except under the conditions I named, or I'll have no chance to win Esther. If you kill me under any other conditions, you'll simply be beamed as a murderer." He paused, and then added, "And I have to come and fight you because a letter from you admitting that I've behaved honorably is the only possible thing that would satisfy

Esther. You give your word to wait until you've escaped and I come for you before you try to kill me?"

Stan Buckley hesitated a long, long time. Then he said in a thick voice, "I give my word."

Without hesitation, Rob Torren put a key in the cell door and turned it. He stood aside. Stan Buckley walked out, his hands clenched. Torren closed the door and re-locked it. He turned his back and walked down the corridor. He opened the door at its end. Again he stood aside. Stan Buckley went through. Torren closed the door, took a bit of cloth from his pocket, wiped off the key, hung it up again on a tiny hook, with the same bit of cloth threw a switch, and put the cloth back in his pocket.

"The photocells are back on," he said in a dry voice. "They say you're still in your cell. When the guard contradicts them, you'll seem to have vanished into thin air."

"I'm doing this," said Stan hoarsely, "to get a chance to kill you. Of course I've no real chance to escape!"

That was obvious. The *Stallifer* was deep in the void of interstellar space. She traveled at twelve hundred times the speed of light. Escape from the ship was impossible. And concealment past discovery when the ship docked was preposterous.

"That remains to be seen," said Torren coldly. "Come this way."

Torren went down a hallway. He slipped into a narrow doorway, unnoticeable unless one was looking for it. Stan followed. He found himself in that narrow, compartmented space between the ship's inner and outer skins. A door; another compartment; another door. Then a tiny air-lock—used for the egress of a single man to

inspect or repair such exterior apparatus as the scanners for the ship's vision screens. There was a heap of assorted apparatus beside the air-lock door.

"I prepared for this," said Torren curtly. "There's a space suit. Put it on. Here's a meteor miner's space skid. There are supplies. I brought this stuff as luggage, in water-tight cases. I'll fill the cases with my bath water and get off the ship with the same weight of luggage I had when I came on. That's my cover-up."

"And I?" asked Stan harshly.

"You'll take this chrono. It's synchronized with the ship's navigating clock. At two-two even you push off from the outside of the ship. The drive field fluctuates. When it collapses, you'll be outside it. When it expands—"

Stan Buckley raised his eyebrows. This was clever! The Bowdoin-Hall field, which permits of faster-than-light travel, is like a pulsating bubble, expanding and contracting at rates ranging from hundreds of thousands of times per second to the forty-per-second of deep-space speed. When the field is expanding, and bars of an artificial allotrope of carbon are acted upon by electrostatic forces in a certain scientific fashion, a ship and all its contents accelerate at a rate so great that it simply has no meaning. As the field contracts, a ship decelerates again. That is the theory, at any rate. There is no proof in sensation or instrument readings that such is the case. But velocity is inversely proportional to the speed of the field's pulsations, and only in deep space does a ship dare slow the pulsations too greatly, for fear of complications.

However, a man in a space suit could detach himself from a space ship traveling by the Bowdoin-Hall field. He could float free at the

instant of the field's collapse, and be left behind when it expanded again. But he would be left alone in illimitable emptiness.

"You'll straddle the space skid," said Torren shortly. "It's full powered—good for some millions of miles. At two-two exactly the *Stallifer* will be as close to Khor Alpha as it will go. Khor Alpha's a dwarf white star that's used as a course marker. It has one planet that the directories say has a breathable atmosphere, and list as a possible landing refuge, but which they also say is unexamined. You'll make for that planet and land. You'll wait for me. I'll come!"

Stan Buckley said in soft ferocity, "I hope so!"

Torren's rage flared.

"Do you think I'm not as anxious to kill you as you are to kill me?"

For an instant the two tensed, as if for a struggle to the death there between the two skins of the space ship. Then Torren turned away.

"Get in your suit," he said curtly. "I'll get a private flyer and come after you as soon as the hearing about your disappearance is over. Push off at two-two even. Make it exact!"

He went angrily away, and Stan Buckley stared after him, hating him, and then grimly turned to the apparatus that lay in an untidy heap beside the air-lock door.

Five minutes later he opened the outer door of the lock. He was clad in space armor and carried with him a small pack of supplies—the standard abandon-ship kit—and the little space-drive unit. The unit was one of those space skids used by meteor miners—merely a shaft which contained the drive and power unit, a seat, and a cross-shaft by which it was steered. It was absurdly

like a hobby-horse for a man in a space suit, and it was totally unsuitable for interplanetary work because it consumed too much power when fighting gravity. For Stan, though, starting in mid-space and with only one landing to make, it should be adequate.

He locked the chrono where he could see it on the steering bar. He strapped the supply kit in place. He closed the air-lock door very softly. He waited, clinging to the outer skin of the ship with magnetic shoes.

The cosmos seemed very small and quite improbable. The specks of light which were suns seemed to crawl here and there. Because of their motion it was impossible to think of them as gigantic balls of unquenchable fire. They moved! To all appearances, the *Stallifer* flowed onward in a cosmos perhaps a dozen miles in diameter, in which many varicolored fireflies moved with a vast deliberation.

The hand of the chrono moved, and moved, and moved. At two-two exactly, Stan pressed the drive stud. At one instant he and his improbable space steed rested firmly against a thousand-foot hill of glistening chrom-steel. The waverings of the Bowdoin-Hall field were imperceptible. The cosmos was small and limited and the *Stallifer* was huge. Then the skid's drive came on. It shot away from the hull—and the ship vanished as utterly as a blown-out candle flame. And the universe was so vast as to produce a cringing sensation in the man who straddled an absurd small device in such emptiness, with one cold white sun—barely near enough to show a disk—and innumerable remote and indifferent stars on every hand.

On the instant when the ship's field contracted and left him outside, Stan had lost the incredible velocity the field imparts. In the infinitesimal fraction of a second required for the field to finish its contraction after leaving him, the ship had traveled literally thousands of miles. In the slightly greater fraction of a second required for it to expand again, it had moved on some millions of miles. By the time Stan's mind had actually grasped the fact that he was alone in space, the ship from which he had separated himself was probably fifty or sixty millions of miles away.

He was absolutely secure against recapture, of course. If his escape went unnoticed for even half a minute, it would take all the ships of all the Space Guard a thousand years to search the volume of space in which one small space-suited figure might be found. And it was unlikely that his escape would be noticed for hours.

He was very terribly alone. A dwarf white sun glowed palely, many, many millions of miles away. Stars gazed at him incuriously, separated by light-centuries of space.

He started the minute gyroscopes that enabled him to steer the skid. He started in toward the sun. He had a planet to find and land on. Of course, Rob Torren could simply have contrived his escape to emptiness so that he might die and shrivel in the void, and never, never, never through all eternity be found again. But somehow, Stan had a vast faith in the hatred which existed between the two of them.

It was two days later when he approached the solitary planet of Khor Alpha. The air in his space suit had acquired that deadly staleness which is proof that good air is more than merely a mixture of oxygen and nitrogen. He felt the sluggish discomfort

which comes of bottled, repurified breathing-mixture. And as the disk of the planet grew large, he saw little or nothing to make him feel more cheerful.

The planet rotated as he drew near, and it seemed to be absolutely featureless. The terminator—the shadow line as sunlight encroached on the planet's night side—was a perfect line. There were, then, no mountains. There were no clouds. There seemed to be no vegetation. There was, though, a tiny polar icecap—so small that at first he did not discover it. It was not even a dazzling white, but a mere whitishness where a polar cap should be, as if it were hoarfrost instead of ice.

He went slanting down to match the planet's ground speed in his approach. Astride the tiny space skid, he looked rather like an improbable witch astride an incredible broomstick. And he was very, very tired.

Coming up in a straight line, half the planet's disk was night. Half the day side was hidden by the planet's bulge. He actually saw no more than a quarter of the surface at this near approach, and that without magnification.

Any large features would have been spotted from far away, but he had given up hope of any variation from monotony when—just as he was about to enter the atmosphere—one dark patch in the planet's uniformly dazzling white surface appeared at the very edge of day. It was at the very border of the dawn belt. He could be sure only of its existence, and that it had sharp, specifically straight edges.

He saw rectangular extensions from the main mass of it. Then he hit atmosphere, and the thin stuff thrust at him violently because of

his velocity, and he blinked and automatically turned his head aside, so that he did not see the dark patch again before his descent put it below the horizon.

Even so near, no features, no natural formations appeared. There was only a vast brightness below him. He could make no guess as to his height nor—after he had slowed until the wind against his body was not detectable through the space suit—of his speed with relation to the ground. It was extraordinary. It occurred to him to drop something to get some idea, even if a vague one, of his altitude above the ground.

He did—an oil-soaked rag from the tool kit. It went fluttering down and down, and abruptly vanished, relatively a short distance below him. It had not landed. It had been blotted out.

Tired as he was, it took him minutes to think of turning on the suit-microphone which would enable him to hear sounds in this extraordinary world. But when he flicked the switch he heard a dull, droning, moaning noise which was unmistakable. Wind. Below him there was a sandstorm. He was riding just above its upper surface. He could not see the actual ground because there was an opaque wall of sand between. There might be five hundred feet between him and solidity, or five thousand, or there might be no actual solid, immovable ground at all. In any case, he could not possibly land.

He rose again and headed for the dark area he had noted. But a space skid is not intended for use in atmosphere. Its power is great, to be sure, when its power unit is filled. But Stan had come a very long way indeed since his departure from the *Stallifer*. And his drive had blown a fuse, once, which cost him some power.

Unquestionably, the blown fuse had been caused by the impinging of a Bowdoin-Hall field upon the skid. Some other space ship than the *Stallifer*, using Khor Alpha as a course guide, had flashed past the one-planet system at many hundred times the speed of light. The pulsations of its drive field had struck the skid and drained its drive of power, and unquestionably had registered the surge. But it was not likely that it would be linked with Stan's disappearance. The other ship might be headed for a star system light-centuries from Earth, and a minute—relatively a minute—joggle of its meters would not be a cause for comment. The real seriousness of the affair was that the skid had drained power before its fuse blew.

That property of a Bowdoin-Hall field, incidentally—its trick of draining power from any drive unit in its range—is the reason that hampers its use save in deep space. Liners have to be elaborately equipped with fuses lest in shorting each other's drives they wreck their own. In interplanetary work, fuses are not even practical because they might be blown a hundred times in a single voyage. Within solar systems high-frequency pulsations are used, so that no short can last more than the hundred-thousandth of a second, in which time not even allotropic graphite can be ruined.

Stan, then, was desperately short of power and had to use it in a gravitational field which was prodigally wasteful of it. He had to rise high above the sandstorm before he saw the black area again at the planet's very rim. He headed for it in the straightest of straight lines. As he drove, the power-gauge needle flickered steadily over toward zero. A meteor miner does not often use as much as one earth-gravity acceleration, and Stan had to use that much merely to stay aloft. The black area, too, was all of a hundred-odd miles away, and after some millions of miles of space travel, the skid was hard put to make it.

He dived for the black thing as it drew near, and on his approach it appeared simply impossible. It was a maze, a grid, of rectangular girders upholding a seemingly infinite number of monstrous dead-black slabs. There was a single layer of those slabs, supported by innumerable spidery slender columns. Here, in the dawn belt, there was no wind and Stan could see clearly. Sloping down, he saw that ten-foot columns of some dark metal rose straight and uncompromising from a floor of sand to a height of three hundred feet or more. At their top were the grid and the slabs, forming a roof some thirty stories above the ground. There were no under-floors, no cross-ways, no structural features of any sort between the sand from which the columns rose and that queer and discontinuous roof.

Stan landed on the ground at the structure's edge. He could see streaks and bars of sky between the slabs. He looked down utterly empty aisles between the columns and saw nothing but the columns and the roof until the shafts merged in the distance. There was utter stillness here. The sand was untroubled and undisturbed. If the structure was a shelter, it sheltered nothing. Yet it stretched for at least a hundred miles in at least one direction, as he had seen from aloft. As nearly as he could tell, there was no reason for its existence and no purpose it could serve. Yet it was not the abandoned skeleton of something no longer used. It was plainly in perfect repair.

The streaks of sky to be seen between its sections were invariably exact in size and alignment. They were absolutely uniform. There was no dilapidation and no defect anywhere. The whole structure was certainly artificial and certainly purposeful, and it implied enormous resources of civilization. But there was no sign of its

makers, and Stan could not even guess at the reason for its construction.

But he was too worn out to guess. On board the *Stallifer*, he'd been so sick with rage that he could not rest. On the space skid, riding in an enormous loneliness about a dwarf sun whose single planet had never been examined by men, he had to be alert. He had to find the system's one planet, and then he had to make a landing with practically no instruments. When he landed at the base of the huge grid, he examined his surroundings wearily, but with the cautious suspicion needful on an unknown world. Then he made the sort of camp the situation seemed to call for. He clamped the space skid and his supplies to his space suit belt, lay down hard by one of the columns, and incontinently fell asleep.

He was wakened by a horrific roaring in his earphones. He lay still for one instant. When he tried to stir, it was only with enormous difficulty that he could move his arms and legs. He felt as if he were gripped by quicksand. Then, suddenly, he was wide awake. He fought himself free of clinging incumbrances. He had been half buried in sand. He was in the center of a roaring, swirling sand-devil which broke upon the nearby column and built up mounds of sand and snatched them away again, and flung great masses of it crazily in every direction.

As the enigmatic structure had moved out of the dawn belt into the morning, howling winds had risen. All the fury of a tornado, all the stifling deadliness of a sandstorm, beat upon the base of the grid. And from what Stan had seen when he first tried to land, this was evidently the normal daily weather of this world. And if this was a sample of merely morning winds, by midday existence would be impossible.

Stan looked at the chrono. He had slept less than three hours. He made a loop of line from the abandon-ship kit and got it about the nearest pillar. He drew himself to that tall column. He tried to find a lee side, but there was none. The wind direction changed continually. He debated struggling farther under the shelter of the monstrous roof. He stared up, estimatingly—

He saw slabs tilt. In a giant section whose limits he could not determine, he saw the rectangular sections of the roof revolve in strict unison. From a position parallel to the ground, they turned until the light of the sky shone down unhindered. Vast masses of sand descended—deposited on the slabs by the wind, and now dumped down about the columns' bases. And then wind struck anew with a concentrated virulence, and the space between the columns became filled with a whirling giant eddy that blotted out everything.

It was a monster whirlwind that spun crazily in its place for minutes, and then roared out to the open again. In its violence it picked Stan up bodily, with the skid and abandon-ship kit still clamped to his space suit. But for the rope about the column he would have been ripped away and tossed insanely into the smother of sand that reached to the horizon.

After a long time, he managed to take up some of the slack of the rope; to bind himself and his possessions more closely to the column which rose into the smother overhead. Later still, he was able to take up more. In an hour, he was bound tightly to the pillar and was no longer flung to and fro by the wind. Then he dozed off again.

It was uneasy slumber. It gave him little rest. Once a swirling sand-devil gouged away the sand beneath him so that he and his gear hung an unguessable distance above solidity, perhaps no more than a yard or so, but perhaps much more. Later he woke to find the sand piling up swiftly about him, so that he had to loosen his rope and climb wearily as tons of fine, abrasive stuff—it would have been strangling had he needed to breathe it direct—were flung upon him. But he did sleep from time to time.

Then night fell. The winds died down from hurricane intensity to no more than gale force. Then to mere frantic gusts. And then—the sun had set on the farther side of the huge structure to which he had tied himself—then there was a period when a fine whitish mist seemed to obscure all the stars, and it gradually faded, and he realized that it was particles of so fine a dust that it hung in the air long after the heavier stuff had settled.

He released himself from the rope about the pillar. He stood, a tiny figure, beside the gargantuan columns of black metal which rose toward the stars. The stars themselves shone down brightly, brittlely, through utterly clear air. There were no traces of cloud formation following the storm of the day.

It was obvious that this was actually the normal weather of this planet. By day, horrific winds and hurricanes. By night, a vast stillness. And the small size and indistinctness of the icecap he had seen was assurance that there was nowhere on the planet any sizeable body of water to moderate the weather. And with such storms, inhabitants were unthinkable. Life of any sort was out of the question. But if there was anything certain in the cosmos, it was that the structure at whose feet he stood was artificial!

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